

Sports

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Payton Legatt's drive rewarded with State title

Six Panthers among top-four at State Championships; Union second overall

By Todd Forrest
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Macon - Headlined by Payton Legatt's 157-lb state title -- the program's first -- and three runner-up finishes, Union County placed second overall at last weekend's GHSA Class AA State Championships.

Legatt's path to the program's first state title culminated with a 6-0 decision over Berrien County's Matthew Lopez by way of two takedowns in the first four minutes.

"I'd like to thank my dad (assistant coach Jim Legatt) and my teammates for giving me the drive to get here, but most importantly, I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ," Payton Legatt said.

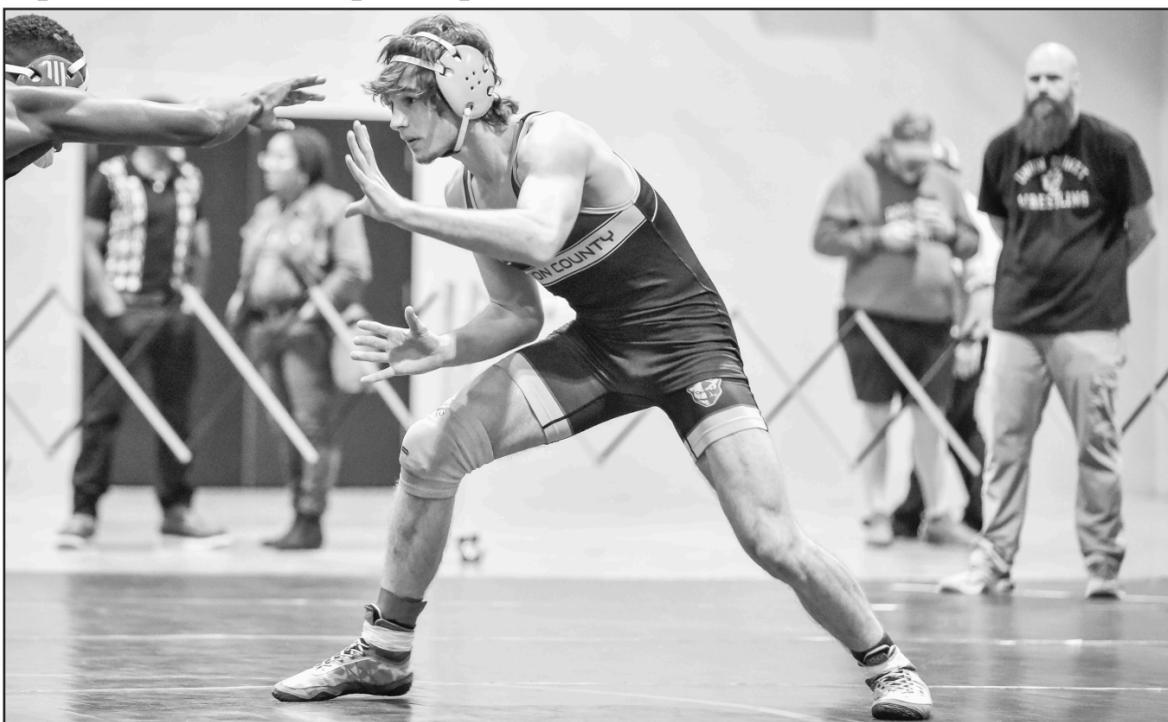
After knocking off Lopez in the Sectional semifinals a week earlier, Payton Legatt believes the familiarity with his opponent worked in his favor.

"We both knew what the other one likes to do, so it could make a match tighter, but it can also benefit one guy or the other," he said. "I studied him so I knew his moves and knew what I could do [against him]."

"It did help that we had to compete in the harder sectional tournament, so that gave me more confidence walking into state."

Payton Legatt, who didn't surrender a point during his three matches in Macon, scored a 9-0 semifinal decision over Westside-Augusta's Jeanarion Kanga. Payton Legatt (52-2) opened the tournament with a pinfall over Haralson County's Zack Sanders after building a 7-0 lead.

Last year, Payton Legatt entered the State Championships as one of the favorites to win it all, but suffered an upset loss in the semis before finishing third. However, the disappointment of his sophomore



Junior Payton Legatt wins his opening bout during Sectionals at Rockmart earlier this month as his father / assistant coach Jim Legatt (black shirt) looks on. Payton Legatt didn't allow a point during his three matches at last weekend's State Championships in Macon. Photo/Todd Forrest

season served as fuel this time around.

"It definitely [was motivation]," he said. "I was grateful to compete at that level as a sophomore but I still felt uneasy about my results. I wanted to be atop the podium and that's what drove me."

"Coach (David) Brown, who is one of our many great coaches, told me at a summer camp to leave no regrets on and off the mat. That gave me the confidence knowing that as long as I gave it my all, I would be content with the results."

But after Union County dropped its first three championship bouts on Saturday, Payton Legatt did admit to feeling some pressure knowing he was Union's last shot at a state title.

"It was on my mind, but at the same time it was just an

other match," he said. "I looked at like, all I need to do is win one more match. I just had to punch that ticket one more time."

Looking ahead to next season, Legatt could see himself competing at 157 lbs or 165 lbs. But one thing's for certain, he won't be resting on his laurels as a senior in 2025.

"There's going to be a lot of work and a lot of hours on the mat and in the gym," Payton Legatt said, who was already back in the gym less than 24 hours removed from his state title. "I was thinking about adding some muscle then cutting down some, but I'm hoping to [add some weight] and possibly wrestle at 165."

"I thought about taking a break after the season, but I think I'm just going to keep rolling."

When the dust settles on 2024 and he has time to reflect, the one thing Legatt will remember most is the time he spent with his teammates.

"Before mid-week practices, when we had our 6 a.m. workouts, it was just the guys sitting around cutting up," Payton Legatt said. "We still found time to have fun despite the grind, and that's the beauty of the sport -- the camaraderie. Wrestling isn't just a sport, it's a way of life."

Earlier, senior Anderson Clouse (47-9) placed second at 138 lbs, dropping a 16-7 decision to Rockmart's Garrett Pace (64-1) in the finals. Clouse pinned Jordan's Ethan George in the quarterfinals and recorded a 9-5 decision over Cook's Logan Kennedy in the semis.

Freshman Eli Flowers

(44-8) lost a 6-3 decision to Rockmart's Eli Bowman (58-5) in the finals. Flowers defeated Fellowship Christian's Brice Rasberry during the semis in a 4-0 decision. He earned a 16-6 decision over Cook's Zaire Perry in the quarters and a pinfall over Glenn Hills' Amir Gregory in the opening bout.

Freshman Paxon Legatt (54-7) rounded out Union's runner-up finishes after falling to Toombs County's Dabvn Wadley (35-5) during the 144-lb title match.

Wadley held a 4-3 edge entering the final period but used an escape and a takedown to secure the 7-3 decision.

Paxon Legatt pinned Thawbaan As-Siddiq of Columbia to reach the finals. Earlier, he pinned Rockmart's Jayten Waddell in the quarters.

Junior Asa Smith-Foot (45-9) placed third at 175, scoring a 12-0 decision over Peach County's David Lyons in the consolation finals. Smith-Foot pinned East Jackson's Jaziel Lester in the consolation semis. He dropped to the consols following a 10-7 decision vs. Vidalia's Ronald Pointer in the championship semis.

Smith-Foot advanced to the semifinals with a 99-second pin of Dodge County's Michael Riner.

Senior David Heredia (44-11) lost two matches to Model's Riley Davis to finish fourth at 190 lbs. Davis picked up a 10-2 decision over Heredia in the quarters, followed by a 12-1 decision in the consolation finals.

Heredia scored three wins in the consols, defeating Jordan's Cameron Howard in a 5-0 decision; pinning Toombs County's Hayden Roy and notching a 10-1 decision over ELCA's Melbourne Brown.

Junior Daniel Webster dropped two matches at 285 lbs, the first coming to the eventual state champion, Callaway's Jojo Shuman. During the consols, he fell to Vidalia's Stephen Cheeks, who went on to place fourth.

Union County ended up second in the team standings in Class AA and 13th for all classifications. Rockmart took first in AA with 220 points, Union had 123 and third-place Cook County ended with 113.

While entering a new region with Rockmart, the Panthers have high hopes for 2025, despite the upcoming graduation of Clouse and Heredia.

"It's going to be a change without [Clouse and Heredia], but they've left a good legacy and something we can keep building on with this program," Payton Legatt said. "It's been a blessing to have them in the room."

Lady Panthers second in 8-AA, host Landmark Christian on Wednesday

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Homer - Union County (16-11) finished second in Region 8-AA following a 65-46 semifinal win over Athens Academy and a 49-39 finals loss to Banks County.

The Lady Panthers will host third-seeded Landmark Christian in the Class AA first round on Wednesday at 6 p.m.

Lady Panthers 39, Banks County 49 - Union County erased an early 7-0 deficit with a 9-0 run, but Banks County responded with a 19-1 stretch and wasn't threatened again.

Trailing 26-10 with 2:31 left in the second quarter, the Lady Panthers started chipping away before halftime when an Ariel McCarter free throw and Morgan Warren's bucket made 26-13 at the break.

"We couldn't recover from that second quarter," Union head coach Thomas Nelson said. "We only scored 4 points and that was the difference in the game."

McCarter's dribble drive opened the second-half scoring, and then her putback kept the margin at 11 with 6:00 remaining in the third.

Banks built a 36-20 margin late in the period, but free throws by Aubrie Akins, Kamryn Mull and a Slone Dyer jumper had Union down 38-24



Juniors Ariel McCarter (L) and Katelyn Brown (R) were selected to the 8-AA All-Region team. Honorable mention nods went to seniors Lara Turner, Kamryn Mull, junior Hope Taylor and sophomore Paula Robertson. Photo/Todd Forrest

at quarter's end.

Consecutive Paula Robertson jumpers and a Hope Taylor deuce kept the Lady Panthers within 12 at 42-30 inside of 4 minutes. Katelyn Brown scored on a putback, but a Banks County 3 extended the margin to 47-32 with 2:58 remaining.

Union refused to go away as McCarter knocked down a

3 of her own, and Robertson's runner connected with 1:56 on the clock for a 47-37 score. McCarter knocked down two at the line 22 seconds later, but that's as close as the Lady Panthers would get.

McCarter finished with 17 points and 8 rebounds. Robertson went for 9 points, 9 rebounds and 2 assists. Taylor had



Sophomore Paula Robertson had 25 points and 14 points last week in the two region tournament games. Photo/Todd Forrest

4 points and 6 rebounds; Brown had 3 points, 6 boards, 2 assists and 2 steals; Dyer had 2 points, 5 rebounds and 2 steals; Warren added 2 points and a rebound; Mull had 1 point and 2 steals.

Panthers 65, Athens Academy 46 - Union County jumped out to an 8-2 lead and held a 17-9 advantage after one en route to the program's first

region title game appearance in four years.

Up 19-13 in the second, the Lady Panthers used a 7-0 spurt to mount a 26-13 advantage before Athens closed with an 11-3 run to climb within 29-24 at the intermission.

Union built a 48-37 lead after three and held a 53-39 edge near the 6-minute mark and a

59-44 margin with 2 minutes left.

Robertson had 16 points, 5 rebounds and 3 assists. Taylor finished with a career-high 15 points to go with 8 rebounds.

"Hope has been a surprise for this year, but it all goes back to the work she's put in since the spring," Nelson said.

Brown ended her night with 13 points, 10 rebounds, 3 steals and 2 assists.

"What else can I say about KB (Brown)," Nelson said. "She does everything we ask her and she brings it every night."

McCarter went for 12 points, 3 assists, 2 steals and 2 boards; Mull added 8 points and 6 assists.

Warren had 1 point and 2 rebounds.

Up next: Union County will host Landmark Christian -- the No. 3 seed from Region 5. The War Eagles enter with a 16-5 record and are led by senior guard Melody Painter and her 15 points a game.

"Landmark has a really good guard and they are going to be a handful," Nelson said. "But I think if we do what needs to be done, we have a chance of coming away with a win."

"Our program is headed in the right direction. One of our goals was to pass last year's win total and we've already done that by two wins. I'm just really proud of how hard these girls have worked."

Panthers' rally falls short in Region 8-AA Championship

Union County hosts ELCA on Wednesday in Class AA first round

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Union County (21-6) came up a basket short of its first region title in 43 years, falling 63-61 to Athens Academy in Saturday's 8-AA Championship Game when Houston Henry's off-balance 30-footer missed at the buzzer.

"There were so many things that happened that were within our control and so many that weren't in our control," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "I've gone back and thought about it, and after we made it a 2-point game, we had missed layups and gave up offensive rebounds."

The Panthers never led in Saturday's clash between 8-AA's top-two seeds, trailing 20-8 after a quarter and 36-22 during the second.

Junior Jude Ellis, who topped 1,000 career points during his team-high 23-point performance, sparked the Union rally with four 3-pointers during the second period, trimming the halftime deficit to 38-30.

The Panthers' second-half rally began with a Henry dribble-drive off a hustle rebound, then Ellis surpassed 1K with a corner-3, followed by a pair of free throws for a 40-37 deficit at the 5-minute mark.

"Athens hadn't been able to figure out our 1-3-1 (defense) in two years but they just attacked us and played downhill," Garrett said. "It was when we switched to man that we made it a ball game."

After a Spartans bucket, Hayden Hughes made it a 2-point game with a triple, but that's as close as Union would get until the fourth quarter.

Athens grew its lead to 49-42 until Kaden Combs' bucket made it a 5-point contest heading to the final frame.

Hughes opened the fourth with a trey, and Ellis tied the game with a fast-break layup



Junior Jude Ellis surpasses 1,000 career points with his fifth 3-pointer vs. Athens Academy on Saturday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

near the 6-minute mark. Ellis answered an Athens basket with a cut to the basket, knotting the score at 51-51.

The Spartans rattled off four straight until Hughes' 3 cut the gap to a point. Later, Ellis' dribble drive kept Union within two until Athens answered with a trey for a 61-56 lead with 2:18 left.

Henry kept the Panthers in the game with a 25-footer from the wing, and then an Athens turnover handed possession back to Union with 53 seconds to play.

After Combs' putback of Henry's miss tied the game, Athens scored a go-ahead, driving layup with 3 seconds remaining.

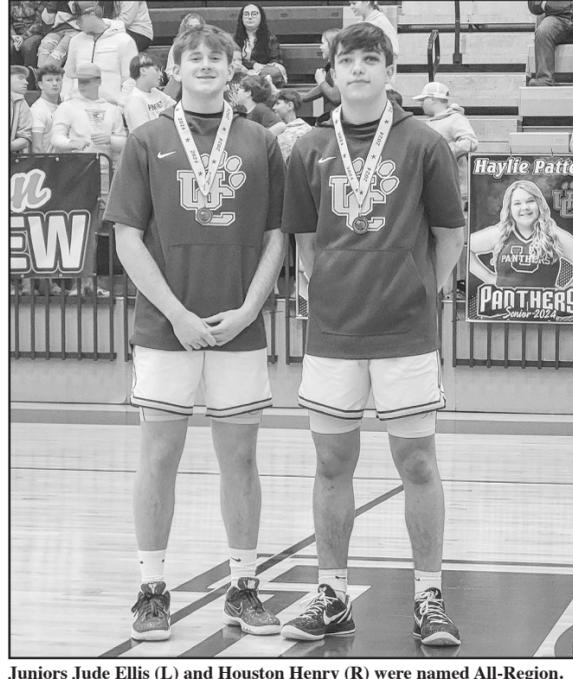
"That was a bad mistake," Garrett said. "I saw the [Athens] kid get loose at the start of the play, and when they threw it in to him I thought he was going to lay it up immediately, which would have probably been bet-

ter cause there was at least 8 seconds left when he caught it right in front of the rim.

"Then he dribbled out and I thought he was going to shoot it, but then he dribbled in for a layup. It was such a bad defensive breakdown. Looking back, [with two fouls to give] we should have probably fouled immediately. But that was something we talked about right before, I said just guard them, but if you get worried or get beat, just foul. I even told Houston, who had 4 fouls, if you get beat, foul them."

"But that was definitely the guy we wanted taking the last shot for [Athens]. We knew that No. 4 or No. 10 couldn't touch it at the end. It's just a rough feeling to lose that way. And I know it's tough on so many people - 43 years is a long time without a region title and the guys played so hard and wanted it so bad."

Coming out of the ensu-



Juniors Jude Ellis (L) and Houston Henry (R) were named All-Region. Junior Hayden Hughes and sophomore Cade Dockrey were selected as honorable mention. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing Union County timeout, Henry took the inbounds pass and raced up the home sideline, but his last-second heave was deflected away as time expired.

Ellis had 23 points on 5 of 9 from 3-point range with 4 rebounds and 3 assists. Henry finished with 12 points, 9 assists and 5 rebounds. Hughes added 12 points, 8 rebounds, 2 assists and a steal on 4 of 9 from downtown.

Combs ended with 8 points and 5 boards; sophomore Cade Dockrey had 5 points, 3 assists, 2 rebounds and 2 steals; Maddox Young had 1 point, a rebound and an assist.

Team stats: Union shot 39% (22-56) from the floor, 67% (6-8) at the line and 42% (11-26) from deep. Athens Academy hit 47% (27-57) overall, 33% at the line (2-6) and 33% (6-18) from long distance.

Athens out-rebounded Union 33-30 and doubled up the Panthers 40-20 in the paint.

Union committed 7 turnovers and forced 11.

Panthers 76, East Jackson 70 - Union County held off an upset-minded East Jackson squad during the 8-AA semifinals on Wednesday, Feb. 14.

Ellis and Hughes scored 19 points each, Henry had 15 and freshman Jaxon Totherow turned in a 10-point, 10-rebound double-double. Union County raced in front 34-17 before East Jackson stormed ahead with 18-straight points. The Panthers scored the last 4 points of the half to take a 38-35 edge into the break.

Union County held a 55-48 lead after three, but the Eagles moved within 60-57 near the 5-minute mark when Ellis knocked down a pair at the line.

Following another East Jackson bucket, Dockrey's floater kept the margin at five, then the sophomore's steal and score kept the Panthers up

66-61 with 3:15 remaining. A Totherow putback on the ensuing possession grew the lead to seven, but the Eagles answered with a quick bucket with 2:31 on the clock.

Union grew the margin to 71-63 with two Ellis free throws and one by Totherow, but two East Jackson baskets made it a 4-point game just shy of a minute.

After a Hughes' miss from long distance, East Jackson sent Totherow to the line following the freshman's offensive board. After splitting two free throws, Union led 72-67 with 54 seconds on the clock. Totherow scored again 30 seconds later to put the game away at 74-67.

Dockrey finished with 6 points, 6 rebounds and 3 assists; Combs had 5 points and 5 boards; Young added 2 points, 2 rebounds and an assist.

Team stats: Union County shot 45% (26-58) overall, 65% (17-26) at the line and 33% (7-21) from 3-point range. East Jackson hit 48% (28-58) from the floor, 70% (7-10) at the line and 47% (7-15) from deep.

Union out-rebounded the Eagles 36-26 and outscored the visitors 38-30 in the paint. East Jackson committed 16 turnovers to Union's 14.

Up next: Union hosts ELCA (21-5) on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. ELCA spent much of the year ranked in the top-5 but were upset by Callaway in the Region 5-AA semifinals and dropped to the third seed.

"They are big and athletic but they are beatable," Garrett said. "We just have to get our heads on straight after the loss. By no means is the season over."

"After the Athens loss, I told the guys that I don't have any magic words that's going to fix everything, it's going to come down to getting our heads right as soon as possible. We wanted that region championship, but it ain't over."

Soccer: Coach Hunter wins 300th as Union Co. men blank Gilmer, Pickens

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Union County head coach Tim Hunter picked up his 300th career victory during the 3rd-ranked Panthers' 8-0 rout at Pickens County on Tuesday, Feb. 13.

Later in the week, Hunter made it 301 wins with a 2-0 victory at Gilmer.

The shorthanded Lady

Panthers dropped both road contests last week with Maggie Delatte scoring her team's the first goal of the year at Pickens.

During the Panthers (3-1) win at Pickens, senior Evan Bohms recorded a hat trick and junior Antonio Solario added two goals.

Seniors Kooper Ashcraft, Seth Rutan and sophomore Salvador Morales tacked on one goal each.

Assists went to Zach

Depalma (2), Ashcraft, Zuriel Mancillas, Matthew Ortiz and Solario.

At Gilmer, Bohms and Solario provided all the offense in Union's second straight shutout.

Union County traveled to Class AAAA Chestatee on Monday before hosting Fannin County on Wednesday.

Region play begins Feb. 29 vs. Athens Academy.



Coach Tim Hunter, who started coaching during the 1999-00 season, celebrates his 300th win.

UCRD: 10U girls, 14U boys bring home District basketball championships



The 10U girls District champs coached by Haley Dyer and Ashley Davis. Players: Brylie Davis, Taylor Helton, Sammie Herrera, Taylor Jamison, Ada Jones, Gracie Montgomery, Katherine Queen, Avery Tobert and Gianna Tercero.



Union County's 14U boys District champion. The team is coached by Greg Wilson and Daniel Shumaker. Players are Jacob Brown, Bryson Brooks, Parker Deal, Oliver Hillman, Christian Mullin, Easton Shumaker, Grant Smith, Brayden Torres, Parker Vinez and Charlie Wilson.

Baseball: Panthers at .500 through first two games under Coach Robbins

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The Chris Robbins era got underway last week at Union County High School with a 10-6 loss at Northwest Whitfield and a 9-5 win at Rabun County.

The Panthers' home opener is scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 21 vs. Rabun Gap. Union County will host Murphy, NC on Thursday, Feb. 22.

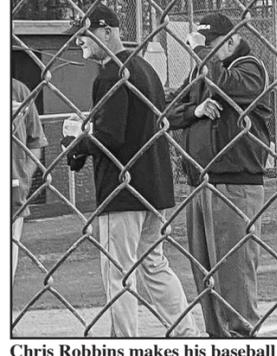
Panthers 9, Rabun County 5 - After giving up one in the first, Union rattled off 5 runs as they pulled away in Tiger on Wednesday, Feb. 14.

Sophomore left-hander Gunnar Akins picked up the win in his first appearance of 2024, punching out nine over 4 innings and allowing one earned.

Junior Tyler Richards tossed 2 innings of relief, giving up an earned run on three walks.

Freshman southpaw Junior Davis closed things out by surrendering 2 unearned runs over an inning.

Colten Gibson and Moses Stephens finished 2 for 4 with an RBI at the dish. Stephens sparked Union's three-run third with an RBI double before



Chris Robbins makes his baseball coaching debut on Feb. 13

scoring on a passed ball. Later, Davis plated Will Doyle via a two-out triple.

Doyle finished 1 for 3 with two runs; Connor Swanson walked twice, scored and knocked in a run; Akins went 1 for 2 with an RBI; Davis and Jonah Licavoli ended their day 1 for 4; Travis Tracy earned two free passes; Eli Sosensky walked and scored.

Panthers 6, Northwest-Whitfield 10 - Union County battled back from a 10-0 deficit after two innings but ran out of bats during the season opener in Dalton on Feb. 13.

Davis finished 1 for

3 with an RBI; Lane Haney knocked in a run during a 1 for 4 day; Tracy scored three times while going 1 for 2; Eli Gwynn finished 1 for 3.

Bo Brown added a run; Akins drove in one.

Sophomore lefty Maddox Patton allowed three runs in the start, giving way to Gwynn, who gave up 8 hits and 6 earned over 4 innings.

Richards worked the final two frames, allowing a hit, a walk and no runs.

Trailing 10-0 through two, Union got on the board when an error off the bat of Haney scored Tracy.

The Panthers added a 3-spot in the fifth when Tracy and Licavoli walked to leadoff the inning and Haney's base hit plated Tracy. Brown's RBI groundout brought in Licavoli and Davis' bases-loaded walk made it a 10-5 game.

Tracy doubled and scored in the sixth and Swanson walked and scored in the seventh. Later in the frame, the Panthers brought the tying run to the plate with two away but Northwest Whitfield slammed the door.

Local FCA developmental youth basketball teams conclude season

On Saturday, January 27th, 2024, the FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) Warriors participated in the TNT Tournament Series in Kingsport, Tennessee.

The FCA Warriors are a new basketball organization based out of Blairsville and conduct practices at Antioch and Faith Baptist churches within Union County.

We would like to thank both of these churches for opening their doors for our players' athletic and spiritual development. The core values of the organization are Integrity, Serving, Teamwork and Excellence.

All Warrior teams started practice on Nov. 1 and just concluded their respective seasons, with the exception of the 6th grade team who have one final tournament.

They have participated in local tournaments such as the Warrior Challenge and FCA Christmas tournament, as well as traveling to Lawrenceville, Homer, Toccoa and Gainesville to engage in competitions.

The 3rd grade team is coached by Matt Gutierrez and Megan Swanson. The



The FCA 3rd grade team, coached by Megan Swanson and Matt Gutierrez in Kingsport, TN.

team consists of Bennett Colbert, Nash Collins, Greyson Gutierrez, Jep Lance, Ransen Swanson, Jonah Underwood and Jonathan Wright.

The 4th grade team is coached by Chris Jackson and Stephen Waggener. Players on the 4th grade team are Wyatt Adams, Maddox Giddens, Christopher Jackson, Chase LaPorte, Gabe Littler, Max Mashburn, River Thompson and Tripp Waggener.

The 5th and 6th grade teams are coached by Jack Lance, Krista Fox, Jimmy

Nichols and Brett Bradshaw. The 5th grade team is composed of Bentley Burgess, Parker Dillinger, Sawyer Fox, Ethan Liberatore, Leyton McKeever, Greyson Nolan, Coltyn Sandler and Owen Swanson.

Members of the 6th grade team are Abel Bass, Zane Helton, Mason Hopper, Brett McWaters, Joe Moses, Jacob Nichols and Jet Picon.

All of these teams performed well above expectations and are ready to kick off again in the fall.