

# Sports

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## Basketball: Panthers second at 8-AA tourney, host State on Wednesday

### Seniors deliver in crunch-time, propel Union past Elbert in Region semifinals

By Todd Forrest  
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**Tiger** - The Union County men advanced to the program's first region title game in 21 years with a thrilling 74-71 victory over Elbert County on Thursday, Feb. 17. Unfortunately, the Panthers (12-13) were denied in their bid to end a 41-year region championship drought, suffering a 64-44 loss on Friday to tournament-host Rabun County.

On the heels of last week's region runner-up performance, Union County will host a first-round State playoff game on Wednesday, Feb. 23, facing 6-AA's third-seeded Lovett (16-11) at 6 p.m.

**Panthers 74, Elbert County 71** - With Union County trailing 71-70 during the final half-minute of last Thursday's Region 8-AA semifinal, senior Landon Kight delivered on both ends of the floor to propel the Panthers to victory. First, Kight dropped in a go-ahead layup with 25 seconds on the clock, then he picked off an errant Blue Devils' pass on the defensive end, allowing senior Lake Hughes to sink a pair of free throws and extend the margin to 74-71 with six seconds remaining.

Coming out of a timeout, Elbert County inbounded the ball to its speedy point guard Christian Harris, who weaved through the Panthers' defense and pulled up from 28-feet where his double-clutch shot bounced harmlessly off the front of the rim.

"We're a senior-heavy team and we were determined to host a [state] playoff game, and there was no way we were going to be denied," Kight said after the game.

Pacing Union was a balanced scoring attack that featured four players in double figures. Senior All-Region selection Caleb John scored 14 of his team-high 16 points in the second half, and freshman Jude Ellis had nine of his 13 during the first quarter.

Junior Eli Underwood poured in 10 of his 12 points before halftime, shooting 5 of 6 from the field and 2 of 2 from long distance. Meanwhile, Kight's day ended with a career-high 15 rebounds, 10 points and three assists.

One week removed from a 27-point victory over the Blue Devils to close out the regular season, Union County immediately picked up where they left off, using a 10-0 run to close the first frame and seize control at 24-14.

Underwood checked into the contest and supplied the Panthers with 10 second-quarter points. His first 3-point basket awarded Union its largest lead of the game -- a 29-17 advantage with 5:18 left in the period -- while his second triple extended the margin to 32-21 at the 4:25 mark.

Elbert answered with a pair of 3s, but senior Austin Taylor connected from downtown, pushing the Panthers' lead back to 35-27. Underwood's final basket of the half granted Union County a 39-30 advantage with 1:06 remaining until Elbert County employed a late 6-0 spurt that narrowed the gap to 39-36 at the intermission.

Third-quarter buckets by Kight and John kept the Panthers in front 43-38 when Elbert responded with another six-straight to race ahead 44-43 at the period's midway point. A basket from Hughes followed by John's second 3-pointer of the season and an Underwood putback helped build



Landon Kight dribbles out of traffic after swiping an Elbert pass during the final seconds of Thursday's semifinal victory. Photo/Todd Forrest

a 50-47 Union County lead. Approaching the two-minute mark of the frame, Ellis found John under the basket for a layup and a 52-47 advantage, capping a 7-0 Panthers' run. Still ahead 57-53 following a Hughes 3-pointer, Union County couldn't secure an Elbert County miss to close the quarter, allowing the Blue Devils to convert an offensive board that sliced the margin in half as time expired.

Union County stormed out of the fourth-quarter game, opening up a 64-56 advantage with a pair of dribble drives by John that bookended an Ellis trey. But Elbert had an answer in the form of an 8-0 run that evened the score with 4:22 remaining while drawing a fourth foul on John in the process.

Kight stopped the Blue Devils' run with a bucket in the paint, but Elbert County continued attacking off the dribble to knot things up at the 3:40 mark. John split a pair of free throws 27 seconds later, and freshman Houston Henry turned a steal into a layup on the other end for a 69-66 lead.

Nursing a one-point edge with 1:16 remaining, Union County widened its cushion to 70-68 when Ellis hit 1 of 2 at the charity stripe, but Elbert County split a pair on the other end with a minute left. Following the miss on their second free throw attempt, the Blue Devils pulled down the offensive rebound and eventually grabbed a 71-70 lead with 55 seconds to play.

Union head coach Corey Garrett took a timeout in the frontcourt, and out of the break, Henry received the inbound pass and proceeded to set up the play from the top of the key. John fielded a pass from Henry on the wing and the senior used a crossover dribble to advance into the paint where he drew a double-team, forcing a kick-out back to Henry. The Panthers' point guard quickly reversed the ball into the left corner where Hughes used a pump fake to get his defender into the air. Hughes attacked the baseline and dribbled left into the paint, weaving past a Blue Devils' low-post defender. As he attempted a left-handed layup, two weak-side help defenders immediately smothered Hughes, knocking the ball away in mid-air. As a result of the attention that Hughes' drive attracted, Kight was left all alone in the backside

post, and the senior scooped up the loose ball and dropped in a right-handed layup, putting Union County ahead for good.

"I saw Lake go up [for the shot] and I thought he was fouled, but somehow, Lord-willing, the ball just ended up in my hands and I knew I had to go up strong with it because we were down [71-70] at that point," Kight said, reflecting on the Panthers' final offensive series.

Garrett, meanwhile, broke down the go-ahead bucket from an x's and o's viewpoint.

"We wanted to get it into the post to Landon but Elbert did a good job being physical and not letting us get him the ball. But I told them, if the play gets blown up, go into our motion offense. We also knew that Elbert is very aggressive [defensively] and we could possibly take advantage of their help defense, and in the end, it worked out. We got a little lucky, but it worked."

Elbert County set up shop with under 18 seconds to play and immediately returned to its bread-and-butter. But this time around, they encountered a Panthers' defense well-prepared for the dribble penetration.

"On that last play, we went into what I call a 'junk defense' because we'd been in a 2-3 (zone) the entire game and I knew [Elbert] would draw something up for the 2-3," Garrett said. "That [junk] defense was something we had worked on before and actually ran earlier in the game but it didn't look very good. But there at the end I thought we should go back to it, and it worked out perfectly because [Elbert] ended up throwing the ball right to us."

Harris took the inbound pass and looked for a lane on the left side of the Union defense, but Hughes stayed in front of the Blue Devils' guard, and when he tried dishing to a teammate in the weak-side post, Kight stepped up from his defensive position under the basket to snag the pass.

"I had a good idea that [Harris] wasn't going to try and finish himself, so I stepped up into the passing lane and he threw the ball right to me," Kight said.

Following the turnover, Kight immediately escaped the congestion in the lane by dribbling to midcourt, where he passed ahead to Hughes for a potential layup. However, an Elbert defender disrupted the play with a hard foul from behind, send-



Senior All-Region selection Lake Hughes hits two free throws with six seconds left, extending Union's lead over Elbert. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing Hughes to the line with six seconds left.

After knocking down the two late free throws, Hughes' day ended with 7 points, four rebounds, one assist and a steal. Henry had a game-high six assists along with 8 points and two steals. Furthermore, Union's freshman point guard would lead all participants with a +11 plus-minus metric despite battling foul trouble and sustaining a bloodied nose during the second half of the physical postseason match.

Taylor rounded out the Panthers' backcourt production with 8 points, two boards and one steal.

Elbert's Trustin Allen led all scorers with 17 points and three steals on 6-of-10 shooting. Jamil Burton added 13 points and five boards; Harris and Anjarius Henderson finished with 10 points apiece.

The Blue Devils shot an impressive 28 of 52 (54%) from the floor while Union County hit a not-too-shabby 26 of 54 (48%). The Panthers made up ground at the foul line and from 3-point range, sinking 14 of 16 (88%) at the charity stripe and 8 of 21 (38%) from long distance. Elbert County hit 12 of 21 (57%) at the line and 3 of 13 (23%) from deep.

Overall, Union County controlled the boards at a 31-22 clip, but Elbert won points-in-the-paint by a 44-36 margin. The Blue Devils turned it over a dozen times compared to Union's 15 miscues.

**Panthers 44, Rabun County 64** - Union County's defense held Rabun County to a region-low scoring output and became the first opponent since Dec. 14 to hold the Wildcats under 66 points in Tiger; however, eighth-ranked Rabun delivered a remarkable defensive performance of its own - stymying the Panthers into their lowest offensive production since Dec. 10 (lost to Towns).

"If I could go back and do that [Rabun] game over, I would do things the exact same way," Garrett said. "We held [McKay] to 12 points, it just so happened those other guys, who we knew were capable of hurting us, ended up really hurting us."

During the early going of Friday's Region 8-AA title game, both offenses were clicking, especially from 3-point territory. Ellis and Henry answered a pair of Rabun County treys as Union

remained within a point at 11-10 in the first frame. But John went to the bench with two fouls and Rabun County built an 18-14 advantage after a quarter, eventually pushing its margin to 23-15 early in the second.

Henry sliced the deficit to six with a dribble drive, then Underwood and Taylor came off the bench to provide Union County a lift, beginning with an Underwood putback at the 3:42 mark of the half. Taylor connected from the corner to move the Panthers within one possession at 25-22 as the clock ticked under two-and-a-half minutes. The Wildcats, however, responded with a 7-2 stretch that sent the top-seed into the locker room with a 32-24 advantage.

Kight began the third with a pair of buckets in the post to keep Union within a half-dozen. Later, John answered a Rabun 3 by converting an offensive board and Kight scored down low to slice the deficit to 39-32 with 3:35 left in the quarter. Things started to go south for the upset-minded Panthers when John collected his fourth foul near the three-minute mark. Smelling blood, the Wildcats used an 11-2 run to finish off the period and take control at 50-34.

"We came in running our 2-3 defense and it did what we needed it to do, we just got overzealous at the end, which we had to do," Garrett said. "When we started falling behind, I told the guys to pick up the pressure, and

it seems like the more we picked it up, the more it opened things up for [Rabun]."

"But in that game, it just came down to not shooting the ball well and foul trouble. Those two things really hurt us, but at the same time, [Rabun County] played very well."

Union's last gasp came when Taylor rattled off five straight and John scored on a put-back, trimming the margin to 56-42 inside of four minutes to play. However, Rabun put any comeback hopes to bed with a 7-0 run, resulting in a 63-42 score with a minute remaining.

Kight, an All-Region selection, scored a team-high 15 points, Taylor had eight and John added six. Henry scored all of his 7 points in the first half and Ellis ended his night with 3 points. Underwood chipped in 2 points and Hughes sank one free throw.

**Up next:** Union County will host Lovett at 6 p.m. Wednesday in the first round of the Class AA State Tournament. The Lions are led by University of Michigan-commit Christian Anderson, who enters averaging 29.4 points a game with 109 treys in 267 attempts (41%). The 5-foot-7 sophomore is automatic at the foul line, hitting 137 of 153 (90%) on the year.

Providing head coach Mike Harner a solid No. 2 option is 6-foot-4 wing, Kyle Walters. The Lions' junior averages 16.6 points, 9 rebounds and shoots 36% from 3-point range and 80% at the stripe.

"[Lovett] has three guys that shoot it pretty well and we haven't seen anyone like [Christian Anderson]," said Garrett, summarizing Wednesday's opponent. "We've seen Connor [McKay from Rabun], but he's a big guy and a different type of player, so [Lovett] is going to be very tough."

"I think Lovett is just as good as Rabun, and like I said, a little different. Most of their offense will come from their point guard, but they have some other guys that can shoot it and a little bit of size."

"They're athletic, but that's not what scares me. They're very fundamentally sound and they shoot it very well. They're coming out of a very talented region, but I'm excited about it and that's what I'm telling the guys. We have a high-profile team coming to our place, and it's going to be a tough game, but it's also a very winnable game. These seniors have already cemented their legacy by playing for a region title after coming off an 0-14 season last year, but now they have a chance to take that legacy one step further by beating Lovett."



Senior Caleb John scores inside vs. Rabun County after leading the way with 16 points vs. Elbert County the day before. Photo/Todd Forrest

# Losses to Elbert and Banks drop Lady Panthers to 4-seed at State

## Union County to visit 6-AA champion Columbia in Tuesday's first round

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**Tiger** - The Union County Lady Panthers (12-13) dropped both of its region tourney match-ups last week and will travel to Region 6-AA Champion Columbia (21-6) on Tuesday to open State competition as a No. 4 seed.

Meanwhile, Union County senior Ava Hunter earned her second-straight Region 8-AA Co-Player of the Year award following last Friday's title game. Entering the state playoffs, Hunter, who scored 33 and 26 in her two region tournament games, needs 26 points to equal Candace Williams' program record of 1,601 career points.

**Lady Panthers 56, No. 2 Elbert County 76** - In last Thursday's opening round of the Region 8-AA Tournament, hosted by Rabun County, the third-seeded Lady Panthers met 2-seed Elbert County, who entered as the second-ranked team in Class AA. And despite falling into an 11-1 hole, Union County battled back to a 16-10 deficit at quarter's end behind nine-combined points from seniors Ava Hunter (5) and Rebekah Chambers (4).

Hunter cut Union's margin in half with a 3-pointer to start the second frame before Elbert scored six-in-a-row to mount a 22-13 advantage. Fifty seconds later, Hunter connected from deep one more time to keep the Lady Panthers within a half-dozen approaching the five-minute mark.

An offensive board by sophomore Sofia McNabb kept Union within single digits at 27-18 before five straight from the Blue Devils extended the difference to 32-18. After consecutive baskets by Hunter made it a 32-22 contest with 45 seconds left in the half, Elbert County countered with two buckets of its own to push the margin back to 14 entering the break.

The Blue Devils exited halftime on a 14-3 run that produced a 50-25 score at the 4:56 mark of the third. But Hunter answered with five straight, culminating with her third trey of the night, coming with 3:47 left in the period. A 3-pointer from freshman Ariel McCarter and a deuce by McNabb briefly cut the deficit to 54-35, but an Elbert County trey squashed any signs of life from the Lady Panthers.



Ava Hunter was presented with her 8-AA Co-Player of the Year award following the girls' region title game on Friday. Photo/Todd Forrest

Hunter and Chambers paced Union down the stretch, scoring the Lady Panthers' final 8 points; however, they didn't make up any ground and faced a 65-43 hole after three.

Hunter scored 8 points and McCarter added five to account for all of Union's fourth-quarter scoring as Elbert advanced to the region finals with a 76-56 victory. The Blue Devils fell 47-40 to Rabun County in Friday's championship game despite entering the final two minutes locked in a 38-38 tie.

Hunter led all scorers with 33 points, 11 boards, two steals and two blocks vs. Elbert. Chambers added 10 points and three boards; McCarter had 8 points, six rebounds and two steals.

McNabb finished with 4 points, four rebounds and two assists. Junior Corinne Hill had one point to go with a team-high three assists. Sophomore Lara Turner pulled down four rebounds and senior Caley Davis chipped in two assists.

Elbert hit 32 of 63 (51%) from the floor, 10 of 14 (71%) at the line and 5 of 9 (56%) from deep. Union County made 22 of 55 (40%) from the floor, 7 of 11 (64%) at the charity stripe and 5 of 12 (42%) from 3-point territory.

The Blue Devils out-rebounded Union 34-33 and outscored the Lady Panthers 48-30 in the paint. Union County turned it over 26 times, twice as many as Elbert's 13 giveaways.

Chambers earned First

Team All-Region honors. Hill, McCarter, McNabb and Turner each received an honorable mention nod.

**Lady Panthers 46, Banks County 48** - Union County learned the hard way how difficult it can be to defeat a team three times in one season following a consolation game loss to a squad it had previously knocked off by double digits on two separate occasions.

After leading 26-22 at the break, the Lady Panthers found themselves locked in a 36-36 tie entering the fourth. Union County would use a 7-3 spurt to begin the fourth and seize a 43-39 advantage, but the Leopards answered with a 3 to stay within a point near the midway point of the frame. A Hunter basket on the other end provided Union a 45-42 cushion, however, Banks County continued to keep pace, hitting a baseline jumper then pulling down the rebound following a Lady Panthers' missed layup.

On the heels of a Leopards' timeout, McCarter forced a jump ball on the perimeter, handing possession back to Union County, who turned it over themselves via a traveling violation.

The Leopards quickly attacked the low post, grabbing their first lead of the fourth period while drawing a foul on the made basket. Banks couldn't convert the 3-point play but the Leopards' shooter somehow collected a 1-on-4 offensive board and their coach was granted an immediate timeout.



Coach Mandy Hunter uses a timeout while trailing 11-1 during the first quarter of Thursday's loss to Elbert. Union momentarily regrouped and outscored Elbert 9-5 to close the period. Photo/Todd Forrest

Banks County missed in the paint but drew a foul via another offensive rebound. Luckily for the Panthers, both shots were unsuccessful and McCarter secured the defensive board and advanced up the floor, where Union nearly turned it over on two occasions, forcing Coach Hunter into a timeout to reset the offense.

Union County went down low to Chambers and the senior post drew a Leopards' foul, sending her to the line for a 1-of-2 visit that evened the score at 46-46 with under 30 seconds to play.

After Chambers missed the second shot, the Lady Panthers applied full-court pressure, forcing Banks County to throw the ball out of bounds, but the Leopards stripped the ball away from Union on the perimeter as the clock neared 10 seconds. As Banks dribbled up the floor, the Lady Panthers fouled the ball handler near midcourt, resulting in made two free throws with six seconds to play.

With time running out, Hunter's last-second heave from just inside halfcourt rattled in and out as the horn sounded on the Leopards' 48-46 upset victory.

Hunter finished with 26 points, 12 rebounds and two steals. Chambers just missed a double-double with 8 points, 11 boards and three assists. McCarter scored 7 points, grabbed six boards with three assists; Turner had 3 points and four rebounds. McNabb rounded out the scoring with 2 points and a

steal while Hill added one assist, a block and a steal.

Union County shot 17 of 51 (33%) from the floor and 1 of 10 (10%) from 3-point range. Banks hit 18-of-52 overall for 35% and 3 of 13 (23%) from downtown. The Lady Panthers made 11 of 18 (61%) at the line compared to Banks County's 9-of-15 (60%) day at the charity stripe.

The Leopards out-rebounded Union County 39-36 but were outscored 28-24 in the paint. The Lady Panthers turned it over 17 times; Banks County coughed it up 14 times.

Banks County junior Kamryn Grier had 19 points and 16 rebounds. Addison Hoard finished with 14 points on just 4-of-18 shooting but hit 5 of 6 at the line, including the two game-winners.

**Up next:** Union County travels to Decatur on Tuesday to face Region 6-AA Champion Columbia. The Eagles are led by sophomore guard Nia Anderson and her 14 points, 8 rebounds and 5 steals per game. However, Columbia features a balanced scoring attack with five players averaging at least 8 points a game, including junior guard Tekiarah Jones, who averages 10 points and 4 steals. In the post, sophomore Keamaura Williams averages 9.7 points, 8 rebounds and 2 blocks per contest.

On the year, Columbia forces over 19 steals per game while Union averages 22 turnovers a night, but if the Lady Panthers can turn it into a half-court contest, the Eagles hit

just 51% from the foul line and 23% from 3-point territory. On the boards, Columbia averages 31.5 rebounds a game while Union County pulls down 38.4 per contest.

And after watching film of her team's first round opponent, Union head coach Mandy Hunter concurred with the numbers, admitting that the Lady Panthers don't want to induce a track meet on Tuesday night.

"[Columbia] is a very athletic team that relies heavily on turnovers," she said. "We're going to have to make it a half-court game, make smart passes and limit our turnovers. Defensively, we want to turn them into an outside shooting team, box out and prevent them from using turnovers to get easy baskets."

As for her team's mindset after a heartbreaking loss to close the region playoffs, Coach Hunter is confident that her squad has already put the Banks County game behind them and ready to start the postseason with a clean slate.

"Our girls know that going into the State tournament, everyone's record is essentially 0-0," she said. "We have to go in focused and confident in ourselves, and I believe we can do this."

"This is an exciting opportunity because not every team gets a chance to participate in the State tournament. We're thankful to be here but we're ready to play hard and give it everything that we have on Tuesday night."

# Baseball: Panthers open 2022 with losses to Rabun Gap, White County

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Union County baseball's 2022 campaign got underway last with a pair of one-sided home losses to Rabun Gap and White County.

Still without the services of senior ace and leadoff hitter Lake Hughes due to the basketball postseason, the Panthers hit the field on Tuesday, Feb. 15, where they came out on the wrong end of an 18-3 decision to Rabun Gap.

Logan Anderson and Christopher Fletcher accounted for Union's only two hits of the evening while scoring one run apiece. Caleb Towe walked and drove in a run, Bailey Brown plated a run and Hunter Fleming scored once for the Panthers.

Tyler Loyd started off on the bump and worked a 1-2-3 first before running into trouble in the second. The senior right-hander gave way to Jace Vinez with two away in the second, despite not allowing a hit. However, Loyd issued seven walks and departed with his team trailing 6-0.

Anderson and Fletcher reached to start the bottom of the second, then Brayden Sweat drew a two-out walk to load the bases. A hit by pitch to Brown put Union on the board before a Towe walk made it a 6-2 game. Sweat's courtesy runner, Fleming, came around to score on a balk, trimming the deficit in half at 6-3.

The Eagles would answer with a two-run single in the third before opening the flood gates during a seven-run fourth. They would tack on three more in the fifth, bringing the contest to a close following the Panthers' half of the inning.

Vinez, who allowed two runs in 1/3 of an inning, handed the ball to Will Duncan in the third. After four hits and six unearned runs, Duncan gave way to James McPherson, who surrendered three unearned over one inning of work.



Senior Tyler Loyd takes the mound vs. Rabun Gap on Tuesday, Feb. 15 as Union County baseball's 2022 opening day starter. Photo/Todd Forrest

sued 13 walks while being victimized by four fielding errors.

During Friday's 18-6 loss to White County, the Panthers grabbed an early 3-0 lead in the bottom of the first before allowing four Warriors to cross in the second.

Trailing 5-3 later in the

game, Union tied things up with one in the fourth and another in the fifth, but White exploded for six in the sixth and seven in the seventh.

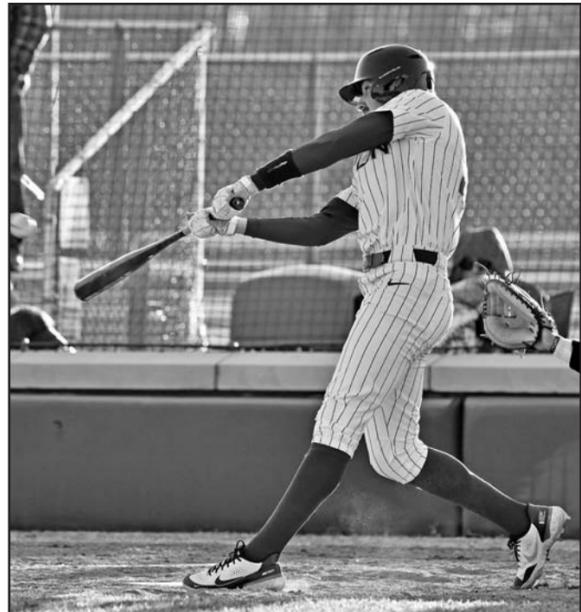
Fletcher finished 2 for 4 with a double and 2 RBIs; Loyd doubled and knocked in one during a 2-for-4 outing.

Thomas Dyer went 1

for 3 with a run and an RBI. Sweat finished 1 for 2 with a base on balls.

Connor Shields and Duncan each drew two walks and scored a run. Towe and Anderson also scored for Union County; Brown reached on a walk.

Parker Grisham got the



Senior Logan Anderson strokes Union County's first hit of 2022 - an opposite-field single to right-center. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Bailey Brown records Union's first RBI of 2022 when he was plunked with the bases loaded vs. Rabun Gap. Photo/Todd Forrest

during his 1/3 of an inning. As of this writing, the Panthers are still scheduled to host Gilmer on Wednesday, but that game could be canceled due to the basketball playoffs.

Union County will visit Chestatee at noon on Saturday, Feb. 26.