

# Sports

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## Lady Panthers stumble late in Sweet 16 at Murray County Union makes quick work of Landmark Christian; McCarter tops 1,000 points

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The Lady Panthers' 2023-24 season closed in heartbreaking fashion following a 46-41 loss at Murray County during the Class AA Sweet 16 on Friday, Feb. 23.

"We just ran out of people and ran out of gas," Union County head coach Thomas Nelson said. "It was easy to see it coming, but there was nothing you could do about it. It was like quicksand."

Earlier in the week, Union County (17-12) dismantled Landmark Christian in Blairsville, 62-35, during Wednesday's first round of State, and advanced to the program's third Sweet 16 in five years. In the victory, junior Ariel McCarter topped 1,000 career points, finishing the evening with 15.

**Lady Panthers 41, Murray County 46** - Union County led most of the night at the Kenneth Ross Gymnasium and held a 37-30 edge near the 4-minute mark courtesy of Hope Taylor's low-post bucket. Unfortunately, the Indians closed the contest with a 16-4 run, beginning with a 3-point play coming off a critical missed Union County layup on the other end that would have pushed the margin to nine.

On the heels of the 5-point swing, Murray County grabbed its first lead of the second half at 41-39 with 1:05 remaining. Following an Indians' free throw, Taylor sank two from the line with 29 seconds left, but that would be the final Union points of the season.

Down 42-41, the Lady Panthers sent Murray to the charity stripe at the 20-second mark, resulting in a 1-for-2



Junior Ariel McCarter records her 1,000th and 1,001st points of her career vs. Landmark Christian. Photo/Todd Forrest

secured the rebound off the missed second attempt, leading to another foul and a pair of game-clinching free throws.

"Offensive rebounds are what really got us and one killed us," Nelson said. "We gave up some real bad offensive rebounds."

Taylor led the Lady Panthers with 15 points, 7 rebounds and 2 blocks. McCarter had 10 points, 4 assists and 3 steals; sophomore Paula Robertson went for 8 points and 4 boards before fouling out.

Robertson sent Union into the break with a 23-18 edge when her 4-point play

capped the first-half scoring. Earlier, the Lady Panthers fell behind but battled to an 11-11 tie after one. And despite early foul trouble on Taylor and Robertson, Union County closed the half on a 7-0 spurt via a Kamryn Mull 3 along with Robertson's trey and free throw.

Mull added another triple in the third as her team built the largest lead by either squad at 28-20 with 2:46 left in the frame. But Murray answered with a 10-2 run that saw Taylor tagged with her fourth foul, sending the game into the fourth quarter tied at 30-30.

Union opened the fourth



Junior Hope Taylor led the way at Murray County with team-highs in points (15), rebounds (7) and blocks (2). Photo/Todd Forrest

quarter with a 7-0 run when McCarter's 3 opened up a 37-30 advantage.

Mull finished with 6 points, an assist and a steal; freshman Regan Trlica had 2 points; junior Katelyn Brown added 7 rebounds, 2 assists and a steal. Junior Sloane Dyer had 3 rebounds and an assist; senior Morgan Warren added a steal.

**Lady Panthers 62, Landmark Christian 35** - Union County put away the War Eagles early, jumping out to early leads of 10-2, 21-5 and 27-7 en route to a 34-10 halftime score.

"That [game] was a situation where we knew they had

two good players that could score, so we turned it into a situation where we weren't going to allow two people to beat five," Nelson said. "But our girls off the bench came in and played well that game. It was one of those balanced-scoring deals where we had 7 or 8 kids that scored and did things to help us win the game."

McCarter came into the night needing 14 points for 1,000 and entered the break with nine following a 6-point second quarter.

With her team up 45-23 through three, McCarter remained 5 points away from the milestone with 8 minutes remaining. But after scoring

two field goals early in the quarter, McCarter topped 1K with a layup off a steal with under 4 minutes remaining.

McCarter finished with 6 rebounds, 5 assists and 3 steals to go with her 15 points. With 10 points at Murray County, McCarter sits at 1,011 career points -- 618 shy of her cousin's (Ava Hunter) school record of 1,629.

Robertson had 13 points and 9 rebounds in the win over Landmark. Brown had 12 points, 14 rebounds, 5 assists and 3 steals. Taylor went for 9 points and 7 rebounds; Warren added 9 points and 6 rebounds; junior Aubrie Akins had 2 points and 5 boards; Trlica chipped in 2 points and 2 rebounds.

Mull had 3 rebounds, 3 assists and 3 steals; Dyer pulled down 5 boards; junior Hensley Adams finished with a rebound.

Coach Nelson stepped up an inaugural campaign that saw 10 of Union's 12 losses come against teams that were ranked at the time or later in the season. The only unranked losses came to a 19-10 Fanning County squad that also advanced to the Sweet 16.

The team's 17 wins also marks the most since the 2019-20 region championship/Elite Eight season when the Lady Panthers finished 23-7.

"I just want to thank the tip-off club, Ingles, Sam Hogsd and Nelson's Tractor for their support all year," he said. "I also want to thank the FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes). Our girls will continue to be a big part of FCA."

"We'll be back to work and getting ready for next year around the end of March. I'm just so proud of these kids, they worked so hard."

## Slow start dooms Panthers in 66-60 first-round loss to ELCA

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Union County's rally fell short in a 66-60 home loss to Eagles Landing Christian Academy (ELCA) in the first round of the Class AA playoffs on Wednesday, Feb. 21.

On the heels of a gut-wrenching Region 8-AA title game loss to Athens Academy, the Panthers (21-7) came out flat four days later vs. ELCA, falling into a 16-3 hole. Down 26-14 after a quarter, Union made its move in the second behind a stingy defense that limited the Chargers to 6 points. The Panthers outscored ELCA 12-3, climbing within three at 29-26 until the Chargers banked in a 3-pointer at the buzzer to bump the halftime difference to 32-26.

"We bounced back and forth (defensively)," Garrett said. "When their big dude was in, we went man. When he came out, we went back to the 1-3-1."

"The bad thing about running our 1-3-1 with a big guy like that against a small team like ours is, they are always open," Garrett said. "All he has to do is sit on the block, stick his hand up and he's open. And that's pretty much what he did the first few minutes of the game."

"But defensively, in my opinion, I thought we played pretty good. That first few minutes, we just had a few uncharacteristic turnovers against their press."

Sophomore Cade Dockrey opened the third with a running one-hander in the lane,



Junior Jude Ellis led Union County with 17 points in the season-ending loss to ELCA. Photo/Todd Forrest

but consecutive ELCA buckets quickly made it 36-28. Trailing by 6-8 points for much of the third, junior Houston Henry's dribble-drive narrowed the gap to 38-34 near the period's halfway point.

The Chargers extended their lead to 48-41 entering the fourth, where Union drew first blood via junior Hayden Hughes' trey. After Dockrey cut the deficit to 50-46, junior Kaden Combs made it a 2-point game with a low-post basket at

the 5:33 mark.

ELCA answered with a 6-0 spurt but Hughes fired back with a 3 for a 56-51 score with 3:35 to play. Later, a free throw by freshman Jaxon Totherow and a Jude Ellis 3-point play kept Union within five at 60-55 with 1:46 remaining. However, the Panthers failed to convert consecutive ELCA turnovers into points and eventually fell behind 65-57 with 16 seconds left.

"There toward the end,



Junior Maddox Young scored 8 points and grabbed 3 rebounds off the bench vs. ELCA. Photo/Todd Forrest

we had some good looks and just missed them," Garrett said. "They weren't point-blank, but they were some pretty close looks."

Ellis led the Panthers with 17 points. The junior pulled down 3 rebounds, collected 3 steals and blocked 2 shots.

Henry had 15 points, 5 assists and 4 rebounds; Hughes added 11 points and 9 rebounds; junior Maddox Young had 8 points and 3 boards; Dockrey

chipped in 4 points and 2 assists.

Totherow had 3 points and 4 rebounds; Combs added 2 points, 5 rebounds and 2 steals.

**Team stats:** Union County shot 36% (18-50) from the floor, 64% (18-28) at the line and 24% (6-25) from 3-point range. ELCA hit 46% (25-54) overall, 68% (13-19) at the line and 23% (3-13) from deep.

ELCA out-rebounded Union 36-29 and outscored the Panthers 36-24 in the paint.

Union turned it over 19 times and forced 20.

The Panthers' 21 wins marks the program's most since 2006-07. Meanwhile, Union's six-straight State tourney appearances (five under Garrett) adds to a program record set last season.

Union reached the post-season four-straight years on two occasions: The first coming between 1970-73 and the second between 2000-03.

Garrett's fifth playoff appearance leaves him one shy of matching legendary UCHS coach Earl Odom's record of six appearances (70-73, 76, 81).

Garrett also sits at 95 career wins and should top 100 early next season.

While Ellis topped 1,000 points during the region tournament, he has two classmates that should reach the milestone in 2024-25. Henry will enter his senior season just 60 points shy, while Hughes needs 277.

"We just have to start building for next year because that will be our year, we'll have five seniors," Garrett said. "I'm already looking forward to it. We're going to take a break then get back to work. Unlike last year after losing [Eli Underwood], we know what we have. We have seven guys that are ready and hopefully some of the younger guys will step up and push for playing time."

"I just want to thank the community for all their support and I know the guys appreciate it. I have noticed more and more people at the games than I did the year before and we all appreciate that."

# Soccer: No. 3 Panthers crush Fannin, tie No. 9 Chestatee

## Lady Panthers pick up first win at Class AAAA Chestatee

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The 3rd-ranked Union County men finished the last week of non-region play at 1-0-1, dismantling Fannin County 7-0 at home after a scoreless tie at Class AAAA's 9th-ranked Chestatee.

Meanwhile, the Lady Panthers (1-4) picked up their first win of the year on Monday, Feb 19 in a 1-0 final at Chestatee. Union suffered a 3-1 loss to Fannin County on Wednesday, Feb. 21.

Union County will host region-foe Athens Academy on Thursday in the 8-AA opener. The Athens Academy boys enter the week winless, while the Spartan girls are ranked No. 2 in Class AA.

**Panthers 7, Fannin County 0** - The Panthers led 2-0 at the intermission before tacking on five goals over the final 40 minutes.

However, it was Fannin that nearly got on the board first when senior goalkeeper Ethan McBride turned away a Fannin County 1-on-1 in the 20th minute.

The Panthers opened the flood gates over the final 6 minutes of the half, beginning with senior Zuriel Mancillas' goal that snuck inside the left post from 27 yards off a feed from Joel Mendoza. Union made it 2-0 when Antonio Solario's header goal finished off senior Kooper Ashcraft lob pass into



The Union County men celebrate a goal during a recent game. L-R: Benton Gregory, Evan Bohms, Antonio Solario, Kooper Ashcraft, Zach Depalma and Zuriel Mancillas. Photo/Todd Forrest

the box. Mancillas made it 3-0 with a penalty kick in the 47th minute, and 11 minutes later, senior Evan Bohms found Solario for another goal.

Zach Depalma made it 5-0 in the 60th; Ashcraft hit Bohms in the 71st and Bohms added an unassisted score 25 seconds later.

**Panthers 0, Chestatee 0** - Union County (4-1-1) faced a ranked program from a larger classification for the fourth

time this season when they traveled to Chestatee. The Panthers went 2-1-1 vs. those opponents, defeating Gilmer and Lumpkin and falling to Coahulla Creek.

During the girls game, junior Lilly Brookshire scored the lone goal of the night during the second half of last week's victory at Chestatee.

Against Fannin County, Brookshire's second-half goal wasn't enough to keep pace with the Rebels in a 3-1 loss.

Brookshire found the net early in the second half off a feed from Maggie Delatte to spot the Lady Panthers a 1-0 edge.

Fannin's equalizer came in the 47th minute and the go-ahead score came during the 61st. The Rebels added another in the final moments following an unsuccessful Union free kick.

**Up next:** The Lady Panthers and Athens Academy kick off at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday with the men to follow.



Junior Lilly Brookshire (right) scored a goal in each of Union's games last week, including the game-winner vs. Chestatee. Photo/Todd Forrest

## Baseball: Panthers blanked by Rabun Gap, gear up for two vs. Towns County

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Rabun Gap (3-0) used three pitchers in a combined no-hitter during its 4-0 win over Union County (1-2) on Wednesday, Feb. 21.

The Eagles, coming off a 12-1 win over Gainesville, scored three unearned runs off sophomore Eli Gwynn in the second, then added one in the fifth.

Gwynn allowed 3 hits and one earned over 5 innings, striking out four and walking two. Sophomore lefty Gunnar Akins struck out one and walked another during two no-hit innings to close out the game.

Sophomore Jonah Licavoli drew a leadoff walk in the first for Union County. Gwynn was hit by a pitch to start the fifth but was retired on a 4-6-3 double play. Senior Moses Stevens was plunked with two

away in the fourth. The Panthers host Towns County on Tuesday, Feb. 27 at 5:30 p.m. Union County visits the Indians at 5:30 p.m. on Friday, March 1.

The Indians will offer a challenge for the young Panthers. Towns County returns most of its squad from last year's Elite-Eight run that concluded with a 22-13 record.

The Panthers' Feb. 22 contest vs. Murphy, NC was cancelled.



Sophomore Eli Gwynn earned the starting nod and went 5 innings vs. Rabun Gap. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Gunnar Akins worked two shutout innings vs. Rabun Gap. Through 6 innings in 2024, the lefty has fanned 10 batters and allowed 4 hits with one earned run. Photo/Todd Forrest

## Track: Union County opens 2024 with impressive showing at Rabun County

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**Tiger** - Union County's track and field season got underway on Feb. 20 at Rabun County, where the boys' and girls' teams collected 17 gold medals in the two-team meet.

Senior Taylor Whitehead took home first in the 100M and 200M races. Senior Benton Gregory was first in the 800M; Union County swept the three relay events; junior Carter Deal took home gold in the high jump; junior Braden Plott was first in the long jump; senior Tyler Grasty came out on top in the triple jump.

On the girls' side, sophomore Ava Loyd placed first in the 100M; junior Giovanna Salazar was first in the 200M; senior Reagan Covington placed first in the 400M; sophomore Lola Hunter was first in the 800M and 1600M races.

The ladies swept the three relay events and Loyd took home gold in the long jump.

Union County travels to Stephens County on Friday, March 1. Teams participating are Elbert County, Franklin, NC, Habersham Central, North Hall, Oglethorpe County, White County, Stephens and Union.



Senior Jonah Kluth placed third in the shot put at Rabun County last week. Photo/UCHS

## UCRD Basketball: 12U girls in a class of their own at District tourney



Over the weekend, the Union County 12U recreation team won the District Tournament and are going to state on March 1-2. The Lady Panthers played undefeated the entire tournament. On Saturday they played Rabun County, winning 34-12. On Sunday they played Towns County and took a 45-19 victory. During the championship game against Lumpkin County, Union took home the district title behind a 48-25 performance. The team is led by head coach Levi Kendrick, assistant coach Rusty Cox, assistant coach Cody White and assistant coach / bookkeeper CJ Bingham. The players are Hayden Abercrombie, Makaylin Bingham, Laney Cook, Aubrie Cox, Cambrie Cox, Arlene Davis, Cayden Gunter, Piper Hunter, Kinsley Kendrick and Ava Wynn.