

Sports

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Hunter sets program scoring record, lifts Lady Panthers into Sweet 16

Seventh-ranked Laney ousts Union County behind a 50-point second half

By Todd Forrest
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The Union County (13-14) women's season came to a close last week during the second round of the Class AA State Tournament following a 54-49 Tuesday victory at Columbia and an 81-58 Saturday loss to No. 7 Laney.

In the win over Columbia, senior Ava Hunter scored 27 points to become the Lady Panthers' all-time leading scorer, passing 2009 graduate Candace Williams.

Entering the Tuesday, Feb. 22 contest, Hunter needed 26 points to equal Williams' career scoring mark of 1,601 points and she stormed out of the gates with a 19-point first half. The University of North Georgia signee eventually broke the record with a late free throw that helped Union County fend off a furious Columbia rally.

Lady Panthers 54, Columbia 49 - Union County jumped out to a 19-point lead then held on for dear life down the stretch during their 54-49 first-round victory at top-seeded Columbia (21-7) in Decatur.

Ahead 30-17 at halftime, the Lady Panthers opened the third with a 6-0 spurt to build their largest lead of the night at 36-17 with under seven minutes left in the frame. But the Eagles began chipping away, picking up the pressure defensively and narrowing the margin to 42-29 at quarter's end.

"We got out of rhythm and got into a running game [in the second half] which we didn't want to do," Union County head coach Mandy Hunter said. "[Columbia] started picking us up a little higher, making it harder for us to get to the rim."



After winning 54-49 at Columbia in the Class AA first round on Tuesday, Feb. 22, the Union County Lady Panthers were recognized during halftime of the Union County men's opening round contest vs. Lovett on Wednesday, Feb. 23. Photo/Todd Forrest

Ava Hunter hit 1 of 2 at the line to begin the fourth, giving her squad a 43-29 lead while moving the senior post within three points of tying the scoring record. Four straight from the home team made it a single-digit game with 5:16 remaining, but Ava Hunter connected on two more free throws a minute later, extending the margin back to 47-36.

Clinging to a 50-40 advantage with 2:52 left, the Lady Panthers were on the verge of clinching their second Sweet-16 berth in three years when freshman point guard Ariel McCarter picked up her fifth foul, leaving Union County with a shortage of ball-handlers against a physical, attacking defense.

It was so hot in [the gym]," Coach Hunter said. "We pressed

them off and on but we weren't getting the calls at all in the second half. [Columbia was] all over our guards the whole way up the court."

With under 90 seconds remaining, the Eagles claved to within four at 50-46 when Ava Hunter broke the record by hitting two free throws at the 1:20 mark.

Columbia would eventually whittle the Union lead to 52-49 with six seconds left, but that's as close as they would get thanks to timely foul shooting from the Lady Panthers, who hit 10 of 14 down the stretch to secure the victory.

Senior Rebekah Chambers went 2 of 2 at the line over the final frame and ended her night with 10 points. Sophomore Lara Turner added 6 points, and McCarter hit three fourth-quarter free throws to finish with 5 points. Sophomore Kamryn Mull made 1 of 2 at the charity stripe in the fourth and ended with 3 points. Junior Corinne Hill also chipped in 3 points.

Lady Panthers 58, No. 7 Laney 81 - Union County wasn't as fortunate during the second half in Saturday's visit to seventh-ranked Laney (Augusta), surrendering 50 points over the final 16 minutes of its 81-53 Sweet-16 loss.

The Lady Panthers fell into a 22-9 hole after one but

battled their way into contention behind 11 second-quarter from Ava Hunter, moving Union County within five at 31-26 at the break. The Lady Panthers started the second with an 11-3 run as Turner and Chambers got in on the Union rally that ended with the visitors outscoring Laney 17-8 during the frame.

Ava Hunter, Chambers and Turner combined for 16 of the Lady Panthers' 18 third-quarter points but Laney's offense proved too overpowering, eventually pulling away at 60-44 entering the fourth.

Union County would allow 21 points in the final frame as Laney's 50 second-half points marked the most allowed by a Lady Panthers' team during the second half in at least a decade.

Despite leaving seven points at the charity stripe on Saturday, Hunter finished with her second-straight 27-point outing, giving her 113 points in Union's four postseason games.

Turner poured in 13 points -- eight coming after halftime. McCarter scored eight of her 10 points during the second half and Chambers added 8 points before fouling out in the fourth.

The Lady Panthers graduate their top two performers in the post: Chambers and Ava Hunter. However, Union County remains a young program with a freshman, a sophomore and a junior

rounding out its 2021-22 starting five, along with a sophomore guard coming off the bench.

The NGN will discuss the scoring record with Ava Hunter in next week's paper.



Senior Ava Hunter finishes her UCHS with 1,629 points. Both Hunter and the former record-holder, Candace Williams, missed significant portions of their Lady Panther careers (Hunter - COVID-19 cancellations; Williams - knee surgery), preventing them from easily surpassing 1,700 total points. Photo/Todd Forrest



Aubrie Banton with family during Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Rebekah Chambers with family during Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Anasley Collins with family during Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Caley Davis with family during Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Ava Hunter with family during Senior Night. Photo/Todd Forrest

Bass fishing tournament March 12 will benefit conservation

A bass fishing tournament set for Saturday, March 12, 2022 at Lake Chatuge will help support conservation projects protecting clean water and crucial lands in western North Carolina.



Teams are setting off at safe light, estimated to be around 7 a.m. and \$2,000 worth of prizes will be awarded to the top three teams weighing in at 3 p.m. Proceeds will go to Main-spring Conservation Trust, a regional land trust that helps conserve the waters, forests, farms and cultural heritage in the six western-most counties in North Carolina and northern Rabun County, GA.

this group in a fun activity, so they'll learn more about what we're doing in the region that protects what's important to them."

Registration is open until noon on March 11 and is \$100 per boat entry fee. Participants can also register beginning at 5 a.m. at the Ledford Chapel Boat Ramp on Lake Chatuge to receive full instructions before blasting off on a lottery-based system. Absolute cut-off for registration ends at 6:40 a.m. the morning of the tournament.

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"So many people in our service area are passionate about fishing and hunting," says Mainspring Stewardship Associate Alex Jump, also an avid fisherman. "Hunters and fishermen are the original conservationists and we wanted to engage

Sign up online at main-springconserves.org/events or by calling 828-524-2711.

Michigan-commit Christian Anderson drops 44 as Lovett avoids upset

Panthers and Lions' postseason thriller marred by controversial officiating

By Todd Forrest
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The Union County men closed out the 2021-22 season with a spirited homecourt effort, but in the end, they couldn't overcome foul trouble, ejections and a 44-point performance during last Wednesday's 75-62 first-round exit at the hands of private-school power Lovett.

The Panthers scored the game's first six points en route to a 19-8 lead after one quarter. Union County's margin expanded to 24-11 before two fouls apiece on Houston Henry and Caleb John helped the Lions close the half with a 13-3 run, slicing their deficit to 27-24 at the break.

Lovett's first lead of the night came at the 3:06 mark of the third when a Panthers' turnover resulted in a 39-38 score. However, Union raced ahead via an 11-5 stretch that opened up a 49-44 cushion with 7:31 remaining.

But the Lions answered back with a 3-pointer and things quickly turned south for the Panthers as Landon Kight immediately picked up his fourth foul and head coach Corey Garrett was sent to the locker room moments later for disagreeing with an offensive foul.

Following the ensuing four free throws and possession, Lovett took control, up 58-49 at the quarter's midway point. Landon Kight scored Union's next four points, all coming at the charity stripe, keeping his team within seven at 60-53. Another Kight free throw at the 1:33 mark kept hope alive, down 62-54, but Lovett hit eight straight free throws to put the Panthers away for good.

Kight led Union County in this final game, notching a team-high 25 points and a game-high seven rebounds while hitting 7 of 11 from the floor and 1 of 3 from 3-point range. Meanwhile, Lovett's Christian Anderson went off following a quiet first quarter that saw the University of Michigan commit score just 2 points during the opening frame. Anderson finished the game with 44 points on 13-of-19 shooting and 17 of 18 at the charity stripe. Kyle Walters added 22 points and six boards on 7-for-15 shooting while the rest of the team combined for 9 points and two assists on 4 of 12 from the floor.

Panthers' freshman Jude Ellis chipped in 12 points, a



Senior Landon Kight gathers one of his game-high seven rebounds to go with a team-leading 25 points vs. Lovett. Photo/Todd Forrest

Ahead 36-35, Kight went back to work in the post for a 38-35 Union advantage with 3:45 left in the period, but Lovett scored on consecutive trips to secure its first lead at 39-38.

John countered by attacking the rim and drawing a foul, resulting in a 3-point play and a 41-39 score. Thirty seconds later, Henry canceled an Anderson go-ahead try with a 3-ball of his own, putting Union up 44-42 at the 2:20 mark.

Although, it's worth noting that Anderson's 3 was originally ruled a 2-point basket before it was overruled by another referee despite video footage later revealing a toe on the line.

Tied at 44-44 after three quarters, Henry opened the fourth quarter with a highlight reel moment via another 3-point basket, this one coming at the expense of the Atlanta private-schooler attempting to shadow the third-generation Panther.

Henry's triple dropped after he crossed up a Lovett guard on the wing, then proceeded to hit a step-back trey with his defender sprawled out on the floor courtesy of the freshman's tight handles.

To add insult to injury, Henry's ankle-breaking crossover took place directly in front of an exhilarated UCHS student section, which resulted in the Lions' defender taking his frustrations out on the nearby official, consequently leading to a Lovett technical foul.

Ellis hit both technical free throws and the Panthers were back on top by five at 49-

points, four rebounds and a steal while Daniel Snow pulled down one rebound.

Lovett hit 24 of 46 (52%) from the floor and 24 of 32 (75%) at the line, but sank just 3 of 15 (20%) from deep. Union County made 20-of-46 (41%) overall, 9 of 23 (39%) from long distance and 13 of 16 (81%) from the charity stripe.

The Panthers won the rebound battle 26-22 but were outscored 30-22 in the paint. Lovett turned it over just seven times while forcing Union into 18 miscues.

Lovett dropped its second-round game, 93-68 at No. 4 Vidalia.

Union County's season

comes to a close at 12-14, but the Panthers ended on a high note after sporting a 3-7 mark in mid-December.

The Panthers will return a pair of all-region honorable mentions in Ellis and Henry, along with a key post contributor in Eli Underwood and bench sparkplug Braylen Rader. Additionally, a deep and skilled freshman class will be another year older in 2022-23 and could make up the bulk of the Panthers' rotation.

Next week's North Georgia News will feature a 2021-22 season recap, including an interview with Coach Garrett and more on the Panthers' first-round loss to Lovett.



Freshman point guard Houston Henry collecting ankles vs. Lovett. Photo/Todd Forrest

44. However, the home crowd would be silenced by Anderson's Herculean performance down the stretch, beginning with a 10-0 run that was punctuated by Garrett's ejection at the 4-minute mark.

After playing it cool all night in the face of an endless string of (what an exceptionally generous person would refer to as) questionable calls, the Union coach finally had enough.

The ejection came as Garrett voiced his frustration on the heels of a spiteful offensive foul as Lovett attempted to get physical with the Union backcourt on the perimeter. And as Garrett pointed out a potential Lovett foul, he was awarded with an immediate whistle.

But it wasn't the call he was looking for.

Instead of a violation against Lovett, the official decided to inflame the situation by hitting Taylor with a ticky-tack push-off after setting a screen away from the ball.

As Garrett voiced his disagreement with the blatantly antagonistic call, he received his first technical foul, followed by another T seconds later.

Lovett used the ensuing four free throws and change of possession to open up a 58-49 lead before going on to win 75-62.

Taylor finished with 9 points and two assists; Henry had 6 points and three assists. John scored 5 points with five boards and three assists. Hughes added 5

points, four rebounds and a steal while Daniel Snow pulled down one rebound.

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Senior Caleb John is fired up during Union's hot start. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County spring sports update

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With basketball season at an end, the Union County spring programs will finally enjoy full rosters heading into March.

And the transition to the pitch from the hardwood couldn't come at a better time for Union County soccer, who opens Region 8-AA play vs. Banks County on Tuesday.

The Union County ladies soccer program will benefit the most from the close of basketball, as they've labored through an inconsistent first month at 1-2-1. Last week, the girls picked up their first win, a 2-0 victory over Gilmer, but dropped a 2-1 decision at White County on Friday.

The fourth-ranked Union men are starting to click and ride a five-game winning streak into Tuesday's region opener.

The Panthers collected a 2-1 victory at Dawson County back on Feb. 15, then downed North Hall 2-1 in Clermont a week later.

Last Friday, Union County blanked White County 3-0 in Cleveland to improve to 5-1 overall.

The Lady Panthers and Banks County will get underway at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday with the guys to follow. Region play continues on Friday when Union County hosts Elbert County at 5:30 p.m.

On the diamond, the Panthers welcomed the return of ace southpaw Lake Hughes, but head coach Zach Odum is playing it safe with his senior hurler as he transitions from the basketball court.

On Saturday, Feb. 26, Union County dropped a 10-1 contest at Chestatee, giving up two runs each in the third and fourth as the War Eagles blew open a 3-1 game.

Senior Thomas Dyer finished 2 for 4 with a double and an RBI, while Christopher Fletcher went 1 for 2 with a walk.

Senior Tyler Loyd surrendered 10 hits and five



Senior Thomas Dyer was responsible for two of Union County's three hits and drove in its lone run vs. Chestatee. Photo/Todd Forrest

Parker Grisham also came around to score for the Panthers while giving up four hits and three runs over four innings on the bump.

Will Duncan allowed two hits and three runs in an inning of work; Hughes fanned one and walked one during his 23-pitch outing.

Union County hosts a JV/varsity twin bill vs. Fanning County at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday. The junior varsity will take the field at 4:30 p.m. with the varsity to follow.

The Panthers' varsity return the favor with a Friday visit to Fanning County, also scheduled for 4:30 p.m.

Last but not least, Union County track and field will travel to Chestatee on Thursday, March 3.



An amped up Union County Pit Crew does everything in their power to will their Panthers to victory after the tide started to turn against the home team during the final minutes of last Wednesday's State playoff contest vs. Lovett. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union County Wrestling update



Union County's Shelby Agacinski poses with her fifth-place medal following last month's GHSA State Championships. The Feb. 16 edition of the North Georgia News incorrectly stated that Agacinski placed sixth in the 152-lb. division during the State Championships in Macon. Agacinski actually finished fifth, defeating Lithonia's Tanya Ford to become Union County's first female State placer. Congratulations to Shelby and Union County wrestling on a history-making 2021-22 season.

Benton MacKaye Trail Association March hikes

The current social distancing and health rules are used by hike Leaders.

March 4th (Friday): Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a moderate, 4 mile hike to Buck Bald on the BMT trail from TN Hwy 68 and road walk to Buck Bald & Return. Hike leader Steve Dennison. For more information, contact Hike-leaderSD@bmtamail.org.

March 7th (Monday): Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a strenuous 10 mile hike on the BMT to Walalah Mountain: GA Hwy 60 from Skeenah Creek to Walalah Mountain then intersection with Duncan Ridge Trail & Return. Hike leader Steve Dennison. For more information, contact Hike-leaderSD@bmtamail.org

March 14th (Monday): Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a moderate to strenuous 8.3 mile hike on the BMT Hemp Top, Jacks River trails. We will start hiking from Watson Gap, enter the Cohutta Wilderness on the BMT, Hike leaders Carolyn and Tom Sewell. For more information, contact hikeleaderCS@bmtamail.org.