

Sports

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Basketball: Panthers suffer heartbreak in BOTS title game

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Hiawassee - Union County (8-5) ended 2022 with its third runner-up finish at Towns County's 28th Annual Battle of the States Christmas Tournament (BOTS), falling just short of a tournament-record fourth championship.

Appearing in their sixth BOTS title game in 21 tries, the Panthers couldn't protect a late lead against former region-rival Rabun County, surrendering a go-ahead trey with under 20 seconds remaining. Union County's final possession ended in a turnover with 6 seconds left as Rabun escaped with a 54-53 victory.

"Overall, [the tournament] was a great learning experience," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "We're a young team and we came away with two big wins, and we were right there where we needed to be to win the Rabun game. Hats off to [Rabun] they played well and did what they needed to win. But I think I speak for everyone in our program when I say that we let one slip away. I think the size of the moment kind of swallowed us up at times."

Panthers 53, Rabun County 54 - Sophomore Jude Ellis scored Union County's final 7 points during a back-and-forth final frame that saw the Wildcats enter with a 43-40 advantage following a buzzer-beating three ahead of the third-quarter horn.

Rabun capitalized on a Panthers' turnover early in the fourth, stretching its lead to 45-40. But sophomore Houston Henry answered with a dribble-drive for two, and fellow 10th-grader Hayden Hughes knocked down a game-tying triple moment later.

Senior Eli Underwood split two free throws with 5:12 remaining, and Ellis capped an 8-0 run one possession later, getting to the rim for two. The Wildcats responded with a 4-0 spurt to regain the edge at 49-48 inside 4 minutes.

An Ellis 3-pointer at the 3-minute mark made it a 51-49 game, but Union County missed a pair of free throws with 2:12 left, keeping Rabun County within a deuce.

With under 2:15 remaining, Rabun misfired from 22 feet, leading to a long rebound and numbers on the other end for Union, but the Panthers failed to convert, turning it over during the 2-on-1 break.

The Panthers benefited from a lucky bounce (or a potential missed call) on the ensuing possession after an unsuccessful 3-point try caromed high off the rim and appeared to bounce over the top of the backboard. The ball came down into the hands of a Rabun player on the baseline, who secured the board for a quick layup and a 51-51 score.

Ellis immediately went to work on the other end, driving the lane and hitting a clutch floater in the paint for a 53-51 lead with under 45 seconds to play. On their next trip, Rabun County went back on top for good with a trey from the left wing near the 20-second mark.

The game-winner came after the Wildcats missed a pull-up from 15 feet, which resulted in a free-for-all for the loose basketball that eventually ended up in the hands of an open Rabun County shooter on the perimeter.

The Panthers took a timeout in the frontcourt with 13



Sophomore Houston Henry scored in double figures in each of Union's three BOTS games, earning an All-Tournament nod. Photo/Todd Forrest

seconds left, but coming out of the stoppage, Henry slipped at the top of the key, forcing Union to burn its last timeout with 6 seconds left. On their final possession, the Panthers struggled to get the ball in from the sideline, resulting in a high pass that sailed out of bounds.

"We had a play drawn up that we were certain would get us a bucket but that's when Houston slipped," Garrett said. "Because of the way Rabun was defending us, I'm almost certain we would have scored a layup."

"We could have gone back to that play, and maybe that's my mistake, but I don't think we could have executed it in that amount of time. The first play I drew up is about a six-second play, and I didn't think we had enough time, maybe we did, but hindsight is 20/20."

With only two team fouls charged to Union County in the fourth period, the Panthers couldn't send Rabun County to the free-throw line despite committing three fouls in the final six seconds.

Ellis led Union County with 18 points and Henry scored 13. Hughes had eight; freshman Cade Dockrey added seven; sophomore Maddox Young chipped in 4 points and Underwood had three.

Union County missed five of its final six second-half free throw attempts after erasing a 27-23 halftime deficit and building a 36-31 advantage at the midway point of the third.

The Panthers stormed ahead via a 13-4 run, punctuated by consecutive treys courtesy of Henry. Rabun answered with an 8-2 spurt, but Henry and Ellis each drove the lane to nudge Union back in front 40-39.

The Wildcats hit a free throw at the two-minute mark, then sank a 3-pointer for a 43-40 lead.

Rabun County raced ahead 7-0 in the game's opening minutes before Ellis got to the hoop for a 3-point play at the 4:09 mark. Ellis drove the lane on the next possession, then Dockrey scored the final 3 points of the frame for an 11-8 deficit after one.

The Wildcats built a 21-12 margin during the second and held a 25-18 lead with 1:40 left until Hughes' lay-in and Henry's trey narrowed the halftime gap to 27-23.

Panthers 69, Murphy, NC 66 (OT) - Union County overcame a 47-40 fourth-quarter deficit to force overtime,

where they held on to survive of 69-66 behind a heroic 18-point second-half performance from Underwood.

"Eli picked up two fouls in the first quarter so we had to sit him, but getting him back after halftime was huge," Garrett said. "We essentially ran the same play over and over, they never adjusted so we kept going to it."

The rally began with a Dockrey putback on the opening possession of the fourth. Following a Murphy turnover, Underwood went to work in the post, cutting the deficit to 47-44 with 6:50 remaining. On Union's next trip, the senior converted a 3-point play, tying the score at 47-47 after splitting a low-post double team.

Murphy senior Dillon Brown quickly answered with his sixth trey of the night, but the Panthers fed their hot hand when Henry found Underwood inside off a pick-and-roll.

"Not many teams play us man-to-man, but when they do we run [the pick-and-roll] a little bit. Teams are starting to play a little more man [defense] against us so I'm sure you'll see it again."

A Henry steal on the other end led to a fast break that sent Dockrey to the line -- hitting 1-of-2 with 5:06 to play. Tied at 50, Murphy split a pair of free throws, but the Panthers countered when Dockrey rebounded his miss and dropped in a spinning layup for Union County's first lead since 11-10.

Underwood awarded Union County a 54-51 edge by stealing a Bulldogs' entry pass in the paint, followed by an up-and-under bucket moments later. The Panthers maintained a three-point advantage at 56-53 when Henry hit Underwood cutting to the hoop for an open lay-in at the 2:30 mark.

A Union miss ushered a Murphy fast break and a 1-on-1 bucket from Brown, but Underwood delivered again for a 58-55 edge just shy of the one-minute mark. Brown and Underwood continued going tit-for-tat, with Brown drilling a game-tying corner-trey after Murphy came up with a loose ball at 40 seconds to play.

The Panthers moved back on top 60-58 when Henry connected on 2-of-2 at the line, and later, a Murphy illegal screen on an inbounds play gave Union the ball with 10 seconds left.

In a sign of things to come later in the tournament, the Panthers struggled to get



Sophomore Jude Ellis averaged more than 16 points a night during last week's BOTS to earn All-Tournament. Photo/Todd Forrest

the ball inbounds, leading to a Murphy steal and a Union foul with 6 seconds on the clock. After hitting both free throws to tie the score, Murphy applied full-court pressure, and the Panthers connected on a full-court pass but dribbled out of bounds with three seconds left.

Murphy tried a baseball pass of its own, but Ellis came down with the jump ball near the free throw line, where his 60-foot desperation shot fell short at the horn.

Murphy scored first in the extra session, taking a 62-60 lead with 3:17 to play, then Union County dodged a bullet after a turnover led to an open three for Murphy. Fortunately, the shot missed everything and Union pushed the pace. Ellis went straight at the rim and missed a contested layup, but a trailing Underwood cleaned things up with a game-tying tip-in.

Trailing 64-62 with 2:10 remaining, Union used a 6-0 spurt to back Murphy into a late corner. Ellis sparked the surge, dribbling around a screen and knocking down a fall-away jumper from 17 feet.

Underwood crashed the offensive glass, drawing a foul after a Murphy traveling violation awarded possession to the Panthers. The senior leader

made them both at the 1:05 mark, then Hughes sank a pair for a 68-64 lead. Underwood went 1-of-2 on the heels of a Bulldogs' deuce, extending the margin to three and forcing Murphy into an unsuccessful last-second heave.

Hughes finished with 12 points; Ellis and Henry added 10 each. Dockrey scored nine and Young had six.

Underwood's night ended with a team-leading 22 points. Brown poured in a game-high 29 points for the Bulldogs on seven 3-point baskets.

Panthers 69, Polk County, TN 59 - Union County closed the contest on a 16-6 run to pull away from a 53-53 tie with four minutes remaining.

Ellis and Underwood scored 21 apiece to pace the Panthers in their first-round victory on Wednesday, Dec. 28.

Union County's late surge began with a 15-footer by Ellis, followed by a 3-point play from Underwood. Polk scored on a putback with 2:51 left, but Ellis answered with a turn-around jumper, then Underwood crashed the boards for a deuce at the 1:50 mark.

Underwood hit two free throws to mount a 64-57 lead with 1:17 to play. Inside one minute, Ellis went 1 of 2, and Underwood sank two more at

43 seconds -- opening up his team's largest lead of the night at 67-57. Henry put the finishing touches on the win, knocking down a pair during Union's next possession.

Underwood scored six in the opening frame as Polk led 14-12 entering the second. Following a scoreless first, Ellis poured in Union County's first 12 points of the second and the Panthers led 24-22 at the two-minute mark. Later, a tip-in from Underwood awarded the Panthers a 29-24 halftime lead.

A Henry trey kept Union on top 34-29, but Polk County battled back to a 34-34 score with 4:45 left in the third. Hughes broke the tie with a triple, and an Underwood putback kept the Union County advantage at 39-36. Another Hughes 3-pointer extended the Panthers' lead to a half-dozen, but Polk County clawed its way back to within 47-46 at quarter's end.

Polk opened the fourth with a trey and a 49-47 lead, but Ellis fired back with a midrange jumper and two free throws, resulting in a 51-51 tie. Henry's dribble drive evened the score at 53-53 then Young drew an offensive foul to ignite the late surge.

"It's no secret that we're a young team that thrives on instant energy, and Maddox drawing that offensive foul was a very good example of that," Garrett said.

Henry finished with 11 points; Hughes added nine. Braylen Racer had three and Young scored two.

No additional stats were available at Monday's deadline.

Up next: Union County pays a visit to fifth-ranked Providence Christian (9-2) on Tuesday, Jan. 3 in a JV/varsity boys-only contest.

Union's last win over a ranked region opponent came in 2008-09, when the Panthers upset No. 4 Jefferson.

Region 8-AA action continues Friday, Jan 6 at Athens Academy (10-3). Union hosts Lakeview on Saturday.

"[Providence] is going to be tough, but they are beatable," Garrett said. "They are good, but I think we're good enough to beat them. It's going to come down to the little things and attention to detail."



Senior Eli Underwood scored 21 vs. Polk County, TN and 22 against Murphy, NC to propel Union County into the BOTS title game. Photo/Todd Forrest

Basketball: Lady Panthers win two of three, finish third at BOTS

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Hiwassee - The Lady Panthers collected their second straight third-place finish (2019) at Towns County's Battles of the States Christmas Tournament, closing out the three-day event with a 72-46 rout of No. 8 Towns County.

Under the direction of interim head coach Haylie Blalock until at least Jan. 6, Union County hit the court on Wednesday, Dec. 28, securing a 51-42 victory over Polk County, Tennessee. The Lady Panthers came out flat on day two and couldn't overcome an early double-digit deficit during a 57-43 loss to Franklin, North Carolina.

"Overall, we played hard all week and I'm proud of these girls," Blalock said. "There were a few hiccups during the first half vs. Franklin that set us back a little bit, but as a whole, they really played well the entire week."

Lady Panthers 72, Towns County 46 - Sophomore Ariel McCarter scored a career-high 27 points -- all coming in the first three quarters -- as the Lady Panthers put an exclamation point on the season's three-game sweep of the Lady Indians while securing its sixth straight victory in the rivalry.

"We talked about coming out strong tonight," Blalock said after the game. "We understand that we lost to a very good Franklin team yesterday, but we talked about getting out front early tonight to take some of the pressure off us and that's exactly what we did."

Union County led wire-to-wire, racing ahead to early leads of 7-0 and 15-5. A Towns County trey narrowed the gap to 17-15 during the second period, but the Lady Panthers rattled off 10-straight points to take control for good at 27-15.

The 10-0 run began with 3-point baskets from McCarter and junior Kamryn Mull. After a McCarter deuce, the sophomore used a dribble drive to feed junior Morgan Warren inside to mount a 12-point advantage.

Towns County chipped away to within 29-24 until Katelyn Brown, Lara Turner, Corinne Hill and McCarter contributed 2 points apiece during an 8-0 run to close the half.

The Lady Panthers ended



Ariel McCarter
All Tournament Team



The Lady Panthers took home third at the BOTS and have won four of five entering Friday night's Region 8-AA opener at Athens Academy. Photo/Todd Forrest

any chance of potential late-game drama with a 16-0 third-quarter run en route to a 33-point frame. On top 40-28 less than 80 seconds into the second half, the 16-0 outburst finished off the Lady Indians, doubling up the home team at 56-28 near the 2:50 mark.

Warren sparked the third-quarter surge with a 3-point play and a fast-break layup. A McCarter three with 5:06 on the clock built a 20-point lead at 48-28 before Turner finished off another break 20 seconds later.

Hill crashed the boards for two, McCarter split a pair at the charity stripe and knocked down a triple to cap off the run.

McCarter continued to score at will, hitting 3-of-4 over two visits to the line, then sinking a trey to end the third period up 62-35. Warren's putback to start the fourth provided Union its largest lead of the night at 64-35. Hill added a layup with 4:35 remaining, and the Lady Panthers called off the dogs with a 66-40 advantage.

Sophomore Sloane Dyer connected on two long-range field goals, bringing the final tally to 72-46.

Turner scored eight of her 12 points in the first frame. Hill added eight; Warren had seven; Dyer scored six. Mull finished with 5 points.

Union's 72 points are the most since last season's 77-31 win at Towns County on Dec. 17, 2021. The Lady Panthers' last road loss in the rivalry came during the 2018 BOTS.

Lady Panthers 51, Polk County, TN 42 - McCarter led the way with 22 points in another contest that saw Union County lead start-to-finish.

McCarter scored five of her team's first nine points as the Lady Panthers built a 9-0 margin out of the gates. Polk County battled to within 15-10

at quarter's end, going 6-for-6 at the charity stripe.

Hill, McCarter and Mull widened the gap to 20-10 at the five-minute mark, but Polk County continued hanging around at the intermission -- trailing 25-17. The Lady Panthers' lead shrunk to a half-dozen at 25-19 and 27-21 until surging ahead 36-21 via a 9-0 run.

Union took a 39-26 advantage into the fourth, where a McCarter triple awarded her team its largest lead at 42-26. Three free throws by McCarter and a Turner jumper maintained a comfortable 47-34 margin at the 3:15 mark. On the heels of a Polk County 3-pointer, Warren scored in transition to keep the lead at 49-37. McCarter's drive at the one-minute mark all but sealed the Union County win at 51-39.

Hill finished with 9 points; Mull and Turner had 8 points each. Brown and Warren scored two apiece.

Lady Panthers 43, Franklin County 57 - Union County couldn't recover from a 15-1 first-quarter run that helped a hot-shooting Franklin squad build leads of 24-12 after one and 36-21 at the break during the BOTS semifinals.

The Lady Panthers still had one final run under their belts, narrowing a 44-30 deficit to 46-39 with 1:27 left in the third. Mull accounted for 6 points during the 9-2 run, knocking down a trey and converting a 3-point play.

But Union went ice cold down the stretch, connecting on only one field goal in the fourth -- a layup by Turner with 7 seconds left.

McCarter scored a team-high 12 points. Turner had nine; Brown added eight and Mull ended her night with 7 points.

Hill added five and Warren scored 2 points.



Sophomore guard Ariel McCarter averaged 20.3 points a game during the BOTS, including a career-high 27 vs. Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest

No additional stats are available from the BOTS.

Up next: Union County begins region play on Friday, Jan. 6 at Athens Academy. The Spartans currently sport an 11-1 record against a soft first-half schedule. According to the Max-Preps power rankings, Athens Academy played the 17th-tough-

est schedule among Class AA's top-20 teams. By contrast, Union County has faced the eighth-toughest schedule among the top-20. Meanwhile, region foe East Jackson's (5-9) strength of schedule is tied with Fitzgerald for first in all of Class AA.

Union will host Lakeview on Saturday.

"I think our last win [vs. Towns] will help get our region schedule off to a good start," Blalock said. "It's not often you beat a good team like Towns County by 30 and have everyone get an opportunity to play and contribute. It was just a great team win and I think we're in a good place going into region."



Kamryn Mull (20) and Corinne Hill (14) can crack a smile knowing there won't be another late Towns County rally during the season's third meeting between the two rivals. Photo/Todd Forrest

Remaining UCHS Basketball Schedule

Tuesday, Jan. 3	@ Providence (boys only)	7:30
Friday, Jan. 6	@ Athens Academy	7:00
Saturday, Jan. 7	Lakeview Academy	2:30
Tuesday, Jan. 10	Banks County	6:00
Friday, Jan. 13	E. Jackson (Military appreciation)	7:00
Saturday, Jan. 14	@ North Hall	7:00
Tuesday, Jan. 17	@ Fellowship Christian	6:00
Friday, Jan. 20	Providence (Homecoming)	7:00
Friday, Jan. 27	Athens Academy (Senior Night)	7:00
Tuesday, Jan. 31	@ Banks County	6:00
Friday, Feb. 3	@ East Jackson	7:00
Tuesday, Feb. 7	Fellowship Christian	7:00
Friday, Feb. 10	Region Tourney Rd. 1 (Girls)*	
Saturday, Feb. 11	Region Tourney Rd. 1 (Boys)*	
Tuesday, Feb. 14	Region Semifinals (Girls)*	
Wednesday, Feb. 15	Region Semifinals (Boys)*	
Thursday, Feb. 16	Region Finals (Girls)*	
Friday, Feb. 17	Region Finals (Boys)*	

* First round boys will be hosted by the boys' #3 seed; first round girls are hosted by the girls' #3 seed. The semifinals will be at the boys #1 seed and the girls #1 seed. The region finals will be at the boys and girls' #1 seed.