

Sports

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Panthers' season ends at No. 6 Rockmart in Class AA Sweet 16

Four turnovers, 21 third-quarter points sink Union County

By Todd Forrest
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Rockmart - A 56-14 loss wrapped up Union County's 2023 season in the GHSA's Class AA Sweet 16 on Friday night behind 49 straight points by the Yellow Jackets, all coming on the heels of Caiden Tanner's game-tying touchdown pass to Jensen Goble.

"Rockmart is a very good team and against a team like that, you can't make mistakes," Union County head coach Michael Perry said. "We were in it during the first half, but then we just fell apart in the second half."

No. 6 Rockmart opened by going 50 yards on five plays to grab a 7-0 lead, but Union answered right back with a 28-yard strike when Goble ran under Tanner's endzone throw at the 5:40 mark of the first.

Led by seniors David Heredia and Lane Lance, the Union County defense forced consecutive punts, keeping the game deadlocked at 7-7 into the second quarter when Rockmart pushed ahead via a 1-yard run with 7:23 remaining in the half.

Still, with the offense sputtering, the defense kept the Panthers within a score until a costly unforced fumble handed possession to the Yellow Jackets at the Union 26 with 1:25 before the break. Rockmart capitalized with a 4-yard touchdown pass with 37 seconds on the clock, sending Union into halftime facing a 21-7 deficit.

"We couldn't get anything going on offense," Perry said. "We had some issues executing basic plays and Rockmart, a very talented team, took advantage of it."

The second frame proved extra costly for Union when the team's leading tackler, junior linebacker Ethan Lester, left with what appeared



Head coach Michael Perry (right), along with assistant Tyler Perry (left), console senior Braylen Rader (34) during the final moments of Union County's loss at Rockmart on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

to be a severe knee injury.

"Ethan getting hurt was a huge loss," Perry said. "We don't really have a backup for everything he does and the communication he does for our defense. I'm just glad he's not a senior and we get him for another year."

The Yellow Jackets received the third quarter's opening kick and proceeded to rattle off three touchdowns over the ensuing 12 minutes. The onslaught included touchdown passes of 31, 44 and 19 yards for a 42-7 lead at the period's 3-minute mark.

The Panthers advanced inside the red zone early in the fourth, but Tanner's second interception led to a lengthy

return that set up another Rockmart score. Union County committed its fourth turnover on its next play from scrimmage, awarding possession to the Yellow Jackets at the 27. From there, Rockmart punched it in with 4:35 to play.

The Panthers found the endzone with under 90 seconds remaining when Tyler Grasty's 61-yard catch-and-run brought the final tally to 56-14.

Stats: Tanner 18-36, 230 yards, 2 TDs, 2 INTs. Braylen Rader 13 car, 47 yds; Connor Schuknecht 4 car, 13 yds; Tanner 7 car, 2 yds. Goble 7 rec, 128 yds, TD; Grasty 2 rec, 63 yds, TD; Cade Dockrey 3 rec, 22 yds; Ethan McBride 1 rec, 7 yds; Rader 4 rec, 6 yds;

Schuknecht 1 rec, 4 yds.

Despite the loss, Union County's 17 seniors can depart with their heads high, becoming the first group in program history to deliver playoff victories in consecutive seasons.

With six playoff games in four years, the Class of 2024 matches last year's group for the most in program history. It's worth noting, however, that the Class of 2023 recorded two appearances as freshmen in 2019.

"I couldn't be prouder of what this senior class has accomplished," Perry said. "I'm extremely proud of all their hard work and leadership."

"These last two senior classes have been amazing.

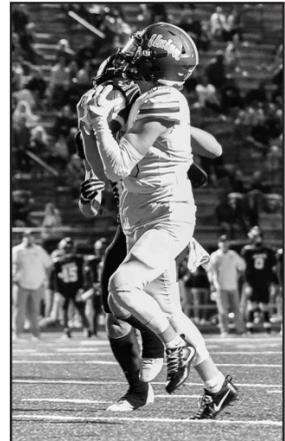
They have Union County football on the right track."

Tanner exits UCHS as the first quarterback to start four playoff games and win two. Goble, who set the single-season receptions record (87) a year ago, leaves as the first Union County receiver in 14 years (Blake Gowder) to notch consecutive 1,000-yard seasons. And despite only playing two seasons, Rader topped 2,000 yards rushing for his career, joining Jonah Daniel (2018-20) and Bo Lynch (2013-16) as the only running backs to reach that milestone in the last 18 years. Furthermore, Rader became the first Panther to rush for 20 scores in a season since 2016 (Cole

Wright). The Class of 2024 also led Union to its first-ever win over a ranked private school - dominating Athens Academy on Senior Night in Blairsville and sending Union into a region title showdown at No. 8 Fellowship Christian.

Although the Panthers came out on the wrong end of a 28-21 score, the Thursday night thriller established the program could be competitive in big games against the top teams in the state -- a stark contrast to 2018 and 2019, when undefeated Panther teams faced Rabun County in season-finale region title matchups, falling each time by a combined tally of 105-35. Even in 2001, a 9-0 Union County team stumbled down the stretch in a 56-35 loss at Greater Atlanta Christian.

"Last year's team was great, but I feel like this year's team beating Athens Academy and taking Fellowship down to the wire, I feel like we were much more competitive [this year]," Perry said. "These seniors are a great group of kids with bright futures and I can't wait to see how many go on to play at the next level. I'm just extremely proud of the standard they have set."



Jensen Goble hauls in a TD catch at Rockmart. Photo/Todd Forrest

Wrestling: No. 2 Union County rolls into Thanksgiving unbeaten

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Second-ranked Union County wrestling enters the holiday break with an 8-0 duals mark following last week's wins over Fannin County, White County, Franklin, North Carolina and Enka, North Carolina.

The Panthers opened the week with a 51-24 win over White County, followed by a 60-13 victory vs. Fannin County on Tuesday at UCHS.

Union County traveled to Franklin, NC on Thursday, scoring wins over a top-five Enka, NC (46-30) program and host Franklin, 72-6.

Additionally, the Union County girls team won all of its matches on Thursday. On Tuesday, Jada Taylor and Brooke Kennedy won both of their matches.

Against Franklin, Riley Mortenson, Landen Bell, Connor Oakley, Kevin Kilpatrick, Payton Legatt and Asa Smith-Foot all won by pinfall.

Eli Flowers, Jayden Lee, Ayden Lee and Jackson Arthur won by forfeit.

Against Enka, Flowers, Mortenson, Jayden Lee, Kilpatrick, Anderson Clouse, Paxon Legatt, Smith-Foot all scored pinfall victories.

On the year, Smith-Foot, Payton Legatt, Flowers and Clouse remain undefeated.



Union County senior Anderson Clouse (top) during his pinfall victory vs. White County on Tuesday at the UCHS gymnasium. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County freshman Jada Taylor (black) scores an upset pinfall over a White County state qualifier from a year ago. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Payton Legatt (top) during Union's home victories over White County and Fannin County on Tuesday, Nov. 14. Photo/Todd Forrest

Basketball: Panthers win handily at Rabun, stumble late vs. Putnam

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Union County ended a seven-game slide to Rabun County by leading wire-to-wire in a 74-60 victory in Tiger on Tuesday, Nov. 14.

The Panthers, playing shorthanded due to football, were paced by 57 points from their three returning junior starters. Point guard Houston Henry led all scorers with 26 points on 11-of-16 from the field, 6 rebounds and 6 assists. Hayden Hughes hit 4-of-10 from long distance for 17 points and 6 boards. Jude Ellis added 14 points and 13 rebounds.

The Panthers jumped out to an early 7-3 lead, eventually pushing its margin to 24-14 near the midway point of the second quarter.

Hughes' 3 made it a 29-17 game at the period's 2:25 mark, then two Holden Payne free throws and one by Ellis kept the Union County lead at double digits, 32-22 entering the break.

The Panthers opened the third with 7-straight points, sparked by a Hughes trey and an Ellis putback. Sophomore Vince Marevka's offensive board made it 45-27 before Henry closed Union's third-period scoring, going coast-to-coast for a layup and a 54-36 lead at the 1-minute mark.

Ellis knocked down a turnaround jumper to start the fourth, then split two free throws a minute later. Moments later, Henry finished a break with 2 points, bumping the lead to 59-38.

Six straight from Hughes awarded the Panthers their largest lead at 67-42 with 4:08 to play.

Head coach Corey Garrett turned to his reserves with a 67-45 lead and 3:15 remaining.



Junior Houston Henry is averaging 23 points, 8 assists and 6 rebounds a game through the first two contests. Photo/Todd Forrest

Rabun County trimmed the margin to 69-56 when freshman Hayden Price's 3 at the 1:20 mark, followed by two Price free throws 30 seconds later, capped off the Union scoring.

Stats: Marevka ended with 9 points on 4-of-7 from the field, 12 boards and 2 steals; Price scored 5 points and pulled down an offensive board; Payne chipped in 4 points and a rebound.

Freshman Ethan Hogsted had a rebound and an assist; junior Brayden Hogsted had a steal and a board.

The Panthers shot 47% (29 for 62) from the floor, 25% (6 of 24) from 3-point range and 50% (10 for 20) at the line. Rabun hit 37% (24 for 65) of its shots, 25% (5 for 20) from deep

and 44% (7 of 16) at the line. Union out-rebounded Rabun 43-35 but lost the turnover battle 13-11.

Tip-ins: Rabun County was also shorthanded due to football, playing without 6-foot-6 post Jack Hood and leading scorer Cooper Welch.

Before their 7-game skid vs. Rabun County, the Panthers won 9-straight in the series between 2017-2020. Union County notched just two wins over the Wildcats between 2009-2016 after going undefeated vs. Rabun from 2001-2008.

Panthers 70, Putnam County 73 - The Panthers couldn't protect a 61-46 fourth-quarter lead despite Henry's 20 points, 10 assists, 6 rebounds, 5 steals and a block during Sat-



Junior forward Hayden Hughes has hit nine 3-point baskets and is averaging 18 points through two games this season. Photo/Todd Forrest

urday's Sandy's Spiel Tip-Off at Chestatee High School. Putnam's Landon Bonner led the late surge with 19 fourth-quarter points to finish with a game-high 34 and three 3-pointers.

But none of those treys did more damage than his pull-up from 25 feet with 40 seconds left, putting the War Eagles on top for good after Union rattled off consecutive buckets to regain the lead inside the 1-minute mark.

The Panthers, who trailed 36-35 at the break following a back-and-forth first half, used a 24-10 third quarter to mount a 59-46 advantage entering the fourth.

Henry knocked down two free throws at the 7:27 mark

to extend the margin to 61-46 before Putnam answered with a 12-2 run to close within 63-58 at the 4-minute mark. Henry grew the Union lead with a dribble-drive for 2, but Bonner immediately answered with a 22-footer to trim the Putnam deficit to 65-61.

Ethan Hogsted split two free throws at the 3:25 mark, but Putnam fired back with two free throws and a game-tying triple by Bonner with 2:10 remaining.

A steal-and-score by Bonner moved Putnam ahead 68-66 at the 1:30 mark, but Henry answered with an off-balance one-hander in the lane. Henry delivered again when he swatted away Bonner's pass near midcourt and chased down the loose ball, somehow finding

Hughes in stride with a behind-the-back pass while falling into the Union bench.

Hughes' layup provided the Panthers their final lead of the night at 70-68 with 53 seconds left.

On the heels of Bonner's go-ahead trey 12 seconds later, Henry missed a runner in the lane, but Putnam turned over the ensuing inbounds pass. Unfortunately, Ellis missed a short jumper with 3 seconds left and the War Eagles sank two free throws on the other end.

Stats: Hughes finished with 19 points and 9 rebounds on 5-of-14 from downtown. Marevka logged 13 points and 13 rebounds on 6-of-10 shooting. Ellis added 11 points and 5 boards; Ethan Hogsted had 9 points, 3 rebounds and 3 assists; Brayden Hogsted ended with 3 points, 7 boards and 3 assists.

Union County shot 38% (25 for 66) from the floor, 31% (10 for 32) from 3-point territory and 63% (10 for 16) at the line. Putnam hit 42% (29 for 69) from the floor; 20% (5 for 25) from three and 56% (10 for 18) at the line.

Despite missing two key post players, the undersized Panthers out-rebounded Putnam 46-40 but committed 20 turnovers to the War Eagles' 13.

Up next: Union County expects to welcome the return of junior Kaden Combs, sophomore Cade Dockrey and freshman Jaxon Totherow when they travel to this week's Piedmont University Thanksgiving tournament.

The Panthers faced Habersham Central on Monday and will play the winner/loser of East Forsyth vs. Rabun County on Tuesday.

Union County will host rival Towns County on Tuesday, Nov. 28 in the 2023-24 home opener.

Basketball: Lady Panthers can't keep pace with Rabun, Athens Christian

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Union County dropped two contests to start the 2023-24 season, falling 60-45 at Rabun County on Tuesday and 59-47 to Athens Christian during Saturday's Sandy's Spiel Tip-Off tourney at Chestatee.

Lady Panthers 45, Rabun County 60 - Union County held their own for one half until the Lady Cats eventually pulled away in the third period, turning a 33-24 halftime score into a 51-28 runaway entering the fourth.

Junior Ariel McCarter led the Lady Panthers with 12 points -- 8 coming in the final frame.

Union County trailed 19-14 after one behind 10 combined points from senior Lara Turner and Hope Taylor.

Senior Kamryn Mull knocked down a 3 in the second to lead a balanced scoring attack that saw five Lady Panthers score during the quarter. However, Union County managed only two third-quarter



Sophomore Paula Robertson's 6 first-quarter points kept things close vs. Athens Christian on Saturday morning at Chestatee. Photo/Todd Forrest

field goals, one apiece from McCarter and freshman Izzy Anthros, as Rabun outscored the visitors 18-4.

Turner ended with 9 points; Mull had 7 points and junior Katelyn Brown added

five. Taylor ended with 4 points, while Anthros, Hensley Adams, Aubrie Akins and Paula Robertson added 2 each.

Lady Panthers 47, Athens Christian 59 - The Golden Eagles pulled away from a



Senior Lara Turner battles in the paint vs. ACS. Photo/Todd Forrest

15-13 first quarter edge by outscoring Union County 38-19 during the second and third periods.

Robertson scored 6 in the opening frame, Taylor added 4 points and McCarter

knocked down a trey as the Lady Panthers kept pace over the first 8 minutes. But four Athens Christian 3s resulted in a 25-point second frame, sending Union County into the break staring up at a 40-

23 deficit. ACS stretched its lead to 53-32 entering the fourth.

The Lady Panthers outscored ACS 15-6 in the fourth behind 4 points each from Adams and Robertson.

Stats: McCarter led Union County with 14 points to go with 6 rebounds, 3 assists and 2 steals. Robertson added 12 points, a team-high 4 assists and 3 boards.

Adams had 6 points and 2 rebounds; Turner finished with 4 points and 2 rebounds; Mull had 4 points, 3 assists, 3 rebounds and a steal.

Taylor's day ended with 4 points; Brown had 2 points, 6 boards, 2 assists and a steal.

Up next: Union County met Habersham Central on Monday in Piedmont University's Thanksgiving tourney. The Lady Panthers will be back in action on Tuesday at Piedmont vs. either Rabun County or East Forsyth.

Union County will be at home on Tuesday, Nov. 28 when they host Towns County at 6 p.m.

Union County Swimmers collect 23 top-10 finishes at Habersham

UCMS SWIM TEAM TOP 10 FINISHES
PIRATE PLUNGE MEET | NOV. 17 | CLARKESVILLE

<p>200 Medley Relay Boys A: 4th</p> <p>100 IM Wyatt Yancey: 4th John Tippens: 6th</p> <p>50 Free Ian Lander: 3rd</p> <p>50 Breast John Tippens: 2nd</p>	<p>200 Free Relay Boys A: 4th</p> <p>50 Fly Wyatt Yancey: 3rd Kimberly Simpson: 8th</p> <p>50 Back Chloe Iler: 6th</p>
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Softball: Three Lady Panthers ink college scholarships

Union County softball seniors Gracie Gladding, Jewell Massey and Georgia Patton signed scholarships on Wednesday, Nov. 15 at the UCHS gymnasium.

Gladding will continue her playing career at Division-I Dayton University (Ohio). Massey will attend Reinhardt University in Waleska, while Patton is off to Cleveland to become a Truett-McConnell Bear.

Additional info and full interviews will be included in next week's edition of the newspaper.

The *North Georgia News* would like to congratulate these three young ladies and wish them the best as they begin their next chapter.



L-R: Georgia Patton, Gracie Gladding and Jewell Massey. Photo/Todd Forrest

UCHS Swim Team Top 10 Finishes

Pirate Plunge Meet | Nov. 17 | Clarkesville

<p>200 Medley Relay Boys A: 4th Girls A: 7th</p> <p>50 Free Nicholas Nushtayev: 2nd</p> <p>100 Free Nicholas Nushtayev: 2nd Cole Orlando: 9th Reese Jones: 6th</p> <p>100 Breast Cole Orlando: 9th</p>	<p>200 Free Relay Boys A: 6th Girls A: 8th</p> <p>100 Back Andrew Nushtayev: 3rd Reese Jones: 8th</p> <p>100 Fly Wyatt Chandler: 5th</p> <p>200 Free Andrew Nushtayev: 6th Lily Helton: 2nd</p>
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The Georgia High School Association (GHSA) approved Union County's appeal to move west into Region 7-AA last Thursday, Nov. 16. The decision came on the heels of Banks County's departure to Class A and the arrival of Franklin County, Hebron Christian, Prince Avenue Christian and Stephens County into 8-AA. UCHS' lateral move to Region 7 will put the school alongside Coahulla Creek, Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe, Murray County, North Murray, North Cobb Christian, Ringgold, Rockmart and Sonoraville. More to come on this story next week.