

Sports

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'Young and hungry' Lady Panthers seek back-to-back 8-AA titles

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The Union County Lady Panthers' Region 8-AA title defense gets underway this week when they host rival Towns County on Tuesday evening.

Under the direction of second-year head coach Crystal Beach, the Lady Panthers will not feature a senior on the 2020-21 roster. As a result, Union County will rely heavily on a talented crop of 9th and 10th graders to complement its two returning starters, sophomore Ellie Cook and junior Ava Hunter. Despite its youth, Union enters the new season with an abundance of momentum following a red-hot finish to its 2019-20 campaign.

Although, things didn't appear quite as promising for the Lady Panthers entering the final week of the aforementioned 2019-20 regular season. While sporting a 17-6 overall record, Union was fresh off two double-digit weekend losses to Rabun County and Putnam County and needed a Tuesday victory over Banks County to maintain its grip on third place in Region 8-AA.

The Lady Panthers would prevail over Banks County 55-47, securing the No. 3 seed in the upcoming region tournament. But more importantly, the win over the Leopards sparked a six-game winning streak that spurred Union County to its first region title in 11 years and its first Elite 8 appearance in 19 years.

The Lady Panthers' post-



L-R: Sophomore Ellie Cook and junior Ava Hunter are Union's two returning starters from last year's Region 8-AA title squad. Photos/Todd Forrest

season run finally came to a halt via a heartstopping 60-58 loss to perennial powerhouse Early County. But with a 23-7 record, Union County matched the 2001 State Runner-Up squad for the second-most wins in program history while falling one victory shy of matching the program record (24 in 1987).

Big shoes to fill
As Union enters a new season, the experience, confidence and momentum acquired during the 2020 postseason will likely pay dividends.

However, Coach Beach must still replace three valuable senior starters (two received

college scholarships) who all delivered in a big way down the stretch. Brooke Dockrey, Andelin Hill and Kait McCarter started for three seasons at UCHS and contributed significantly as freshmen.

Dockrey was the defensive sparkplug during her three seasons as the Lady Panthers' fearless starting point guard. Hill provided Union County with a viable No. 2 scoring option on the wing, but her versatility on both ends of the floor is what makes her difficult to replace.

Last but not least, Mc-



Carter, who received an honorable mention nod on the 7-AAA All-Region team as a freshman, was the defensive anchor and a rebounding machine in the post under three different coaches.

"I think we're going to be a much faster team defensively this year," Beach said regarding the differences between this year and last. "The score doesn't always tell the entire story and there were some very positive things that we saw from a very young team against an athletic Pickens team. We're not changing anything and our young girls are stepping up nicely. It's just

a matter of getting them game-time experience so they can continue to hone their skills."

The returners
Despite the loss of three valuable starters, Union County returns one of the top post players in the state in Hunter. The 6-foot-10 is on pace to reach 1,000 career points by midseason, which would make her one of the quickest to 1,000 points in school history - men or women.

As a sophomore, Hunter averaged 16.3 points, 9.1 rebounds, 1.8 steals and 1 blocked shot per game. She also fin-

ished with 13 double-doubles in 30 games, including a 25-point, 14-board performance in Union's upset victory of Putnam County in the Region 8-AA Semifinals.

"Ava continues to develop her game and find new ways to score, which is definitely an exciting option," Beach said when asked about Hunter's improved jump shot. "We're looking to take advantage of any way that we can find to score. Coaches all have different philosophies, but mine has always been that solid defense will provide you with better opportunities to score. That will always be our bread and butter. We will continue to attack the basket and look for the short-range shots but take the 3 when it's there. So we're just looking for a wide-range of opportunities for everyone."

Hunter also turned in a 19-point, 13-rebound outing in the Class AA Elite 8 loss to Early County while matched up against 4-star Florida State commit Makayla Timpson. At 6-foot-2, Timpson is the 11th ranked forward in the nation, according to ESPN.

Cook, Union's other returning starter, spent most of her freshman season at the two-guard spot but could slide over to handle the point guard duties in 2021.

Last year, Cook's 2.4 steals per game led the team while scoring just under 7 points a night. This season, Beach expects the sophomore guard to increase her offensive production, providing a No. 2 scoring option behind Hunter.

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Garrett, Panthers to reshuffle deck following graduation of six seniors

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Union County head coach Corey Garrett will face one of the toughest challenges of his young career this winter when the Panthers trot out a brand new starting-five following the graduation of six vital contributors from last year's 15-win State playoff squad.

Among the losses were a pair of 1,000-point scorers and multiple All-Region selections in Pierson Allison and Sawyer Drake. Also gone is 6-foot-6 center Kyle Morlock, the team's leading defensive rebounder in Sawyer Brey, plus a two-year starter and charge-taking extraordinaire Cayden Rich.

The Panthers also said goodbye to backup point guard Bryson Lariscy, who provided Garrett with 11 minutes a game off the bench.

The roster
Headlining the returning players is junior sharpshooter Lake Hughes, who suffered a season-ending injury on Jan. 21. Until that point, Hughes averaged 7.5 points a game on just under 40% shooting from long distance.

Hughes hit 6 for 13 from deep in the season opener at Towns County, then connected on 7 of 8 behind the arc vs. Gilmer a month later. Six days removed from one of the great shooting performances in program history, Hughes made 4 of 7 to hold off a frantic Lumpkin County rally at the Battle of the States Christmas Tournament. The plus-minus statistic only backed up his clutch play with Union County finishing +15 during the fourth quarter with Hughes on the floor.

Furthermore, Hughes shot just 11 for 43 (26%) from long distance during the first half. After halftime, he heated up, making 25 of 49 (51%) from 3-point range.



L-R: Juniors Lake Hughes and Landon Kight were both key contributors on Union County's State playoff team last season. Photos/Todd Forrest

Junior post Landon Kight is another reserve that made significant contributions a year ago and expects to take on a larger role in 2021.

In 11 minutes a game, Kight provided 3 points and 2 rebounds off the bench while knocking down 62% at the line.

"Landon started to play a little more for us toward the end of the season last year, but he and Lake will be two of our focal points on offense, not counting the football players," Garrett said. "Landon also broke his thumb, so he hasn't been able to practice until the last two weeks."

The Panthers have added a starting point guard in junior Caleb John, who is new to the program this year. Despite the loss of summer camps and limited practice time due to COVID-19, Garrett expects John to make an

immediate impact, then improve as he gels with his new teammates.

"To lose six seniors on top of not having a summer, it's really hurt us," Garrett said. "It's hurt everyone, no one had a summer, but for us to have all these guys who haven't been on the floor, then add a point guard that's never played with any of those guys, it's definitely been something we've had to adjust to. We've got all these roles we've had to fill, but we still can't be certain because we don't know what [the football players] will bring to the table."

After the football season wraps up, Garrett expects to add 6-foot-6 Kaston Hemphill to the starting-five. The Panthers' lone senior, Hemphill scored 4 points a night while pulling down 3.5 rebounds in 16 minutes last season.



"[John] will start at point guard and is a very solid player," Garrett said. "I would say once the football guys get back, it will be Landon, Lake, Kaston and Caleb; we're just not quite sure about the fifth guy. There are three or four guys that could fill that fifth spot; then we're looking at two or three others that could come off the bench."

According to Garrett, another football player who could contribute on the hardwood is 6-3 junior Keyton Chitwood.

"[Chitwood] played JV last year but he could have probably been at the tail-end of the varsity group," Garrett said. "He didn't play basketball as a freshman, so he was a little behind, but physically and athletically, he can do it. [The main thing is], he just needs some time on the basketball court."

Sophomore Griffin Young also has the potential to see varsity action after the football season.

"Keyton and Kaston will for sure be varsity guys, Griffin has a chance to play varsity, but he'll probably be one of those tweeners," Garrett said.

Others to watch are Trent Baker, Hunter Fleming, Hayden Payne, Braylen Rader, Seth Rutan, Austin Taylor and Eli Underwood.

"Obviously, it's been a very crazy time, but we've got a bunch of juniors coming back," Garrett said. "It's a huge junior group, it's just not a group that's played a whole lot of minutes. So to call them young isn't really true, but inexperienced is probably how I would describe [this team]."

Garrett doesn't expect any notable changes from an X's and O's standpoint despite the turn-

over in personnel. The Panthers will continue to utilize a dribble-drive motion offense. However, with last year being Garrett's first with the program, he implemented a few plays familiar to the returning players. But this season, Garrett plans to dive a bit deeper into his own playbook.

Garrett will continue to rely heavily upon a 1-3-1 zone on the defensive end but admitted that the Panthers would man-up a bit more frequently this winter.

"We'll still play 1-3-1 but we'll see a little more man-to-man, just because I like to play a little more man defense," he said. "We ran [man-to-man] some last year and we'll probably use it a little more this year, but I don't expect any drastic changes on either end."

The competition

The Panthers open with a Towns County squad that Garrett believes could be the best team in program history. With North Carolina reducing its number of basketball games due to COVID-19, the Indians picked up three all-region caliber players from the Tarheel State, led by 6-8 post Jake McTaggart from Hayesville, NC.

Former Yellow Jackets teammate Hayden McClure will also make the jump across Lake Chatuge to join McTaggart in Hiwassee. Rounding out the new additions is Andrews, NC starting point guard Kabe Ellis. Led by Kolby Moss' 23 points a game, the Indians were already returning five starters and most of its bench from an 18-win squad. Towns County also returns former Union County starter Colton Day, who joined the Indians last January after a semester at Robbinsville, NC.

The Panthers' remaining non-region schedule includes Fannin County, Gilmer, North Hall, Stephens County, Tallulah Falls and White County.

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