

Sports

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Panthers top Rabun, Habersham to win Piedmont tourney

Henry named MVP; Hughes selected to All-Tournament Team

By Todd Forrest
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Demorest - The Union County men overcame 21 turnovers and a 2-for-21 shooting night from 3-point range to survive a double-overtime thriller vs. Rabun County and take home the Piedmont University Hardwood Classic title on Tuesday, Nov. 21.

Junior point guard Houston Henry picked up tournament MVP honors, averaging 27 points, 8 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 steals and 1 block over the two games. Junior Hayden Hughes collected an all-tournament nod, putting up 18 points, 8 boards and 2 steals a night.

The Panthers (3-1) earned a spot in the finals by leading wire-to-wire in a 73-64 victory over Class 6A Habersham Central on Monday behind Henry's 29 points, 6 assists and 5 rebounds.

Panthers 64, Rabun County 57 (2 OT) - One week removed from their blowout victory over the Wildcats in Tiger, Union County looked well on its way to another one-sided win over Rabun County during Tuesday's title game.

The Panthers, playing without junior Jude Ellis, doubled up Rabun 26-13 during a low-scoring first half before mounting a 36-16 third-quarter advantage. But Rabun, led by sophomore Huey Blaylock and his game-high 27 points, closed the period with an 11-3 run, trimming the gap to 39-27 entering the fourth.

Blaylock, who struggled most of the night, hitting just 9 of his 37 attempts, found his stroke over the final 4 minutes of regulation as the Wildcats quickly erased a 43-35 deficit to storm ahead 49-47 with under a minute remaining. But Union County forced overtime via Henry's dribble-drive lay-in with 30 seconds left and a defensive stop on the other end.

The first overtime session started with Henry's backdoor



The Union County men won the Piedmont University Hardwood Classic last Tuesday night following wins over Rabun County and Habersham Central. The Panthers will host Towns County and White County this week. Photo/Todd Forrest

feed to Hughes for a quick layup, but Blaylock split two free throws and hit a pull-up jumper to move Rabun ahead 52-51 near the 2:30 mark.

Sophomore Cade Dockrey answered by getting to the basket, and Henry knocked down a pair of free throws for a 54-51 Union County edge with 1:40 to play until Rabun's corner-trey knotted the score moments later.

Dockrey and Blaylock swapped point-blank misses before the Panthers turned it over with under 20 seconds left, awarding Rabun one last shot, but Blaylock's step-back 3 came up short as time expired.

Union County took control in the second overtime, outscoring Rabun 9-2 behind 7-straight points to begin the 4-minute extra period. The 7-0 run opened with a Rabun turn-

over, two Henry free throws and a Blaylock miss from 15 feet. Freshman Jaxon Totherow and Henry sank two apiece from the charity stripe, extending the Panthers' margin to 61-55 near the 2-minute mark. Dockrey split a pair with 1:41 remaining to build a 62-55 advantage when Blaylock hit two free throws on the ensuing Wildcats possession. But Henry finally put the game away with just over a minute left, attacking the basket and splitting three defenders in the paint for 2 points.

Stats: Henry finished with a 25-point, 10-rebound double-double, hitting 13 of 16 at the line and dishing out 4 assists. Hughes ended with 15 points and 7 boards. Dockrey pulled down a career-high 13 boards and scored 8 points; sophomore Vince Marevka had 6 points and 8 rebounds;

freshman Ethan Hogsted scored 4 points, grabbed 4 boards and had 3 assists; Totherow ended up with 4 points and 4 rebounds; junior Kaden Combs added 2 points and 4 rebounds.

Junior Brayden Hogsted chipped in 2 rebounds and a steal; junior Holden Payne had one rebound.

Rabun County's Reed Burrell scored 12 points; Hayes Free had 10 points and 12 rebounds.

Union County shot 33% (20-60) from the floor, 10% (2-21) from downtown and 60% (22-37) at the line. Rabun County hit 23% (18-80) from the floor, 27% (9-34) from 3-point range and 75% (12-16) at the line.

The Panthers outscored

Rabun 34-14 in the paint and controlled the boards 56-44 despite the Wildcats out-rebounding Union 18-17 on the offensive end. Rabun County committed 10 turnovers compared to the Panthers' 21.

Panthers 73, Habersham Central 64 - Union County scored the first 8 points and never looked back in the opening round of the Piedmont University Hardwood Classic.

The Panthers held a 24-12 lead after one and took a 63-49 lead into the fourth. The Raiders' slimmest first-half deficits came at 11-7 and 29-25, but they would get no closer than 46-39 after the intermission.

Hughes finished with 20 points, 7 rebounds and 3 steals on 4 of 10 from 3-point range.

Ellis pitched in 11 points, 3 boards and 2 assists.

Marevka had 8 points and 3 rebounds; Combs added 2 points and 6 rebounds; Totherow had 2 points and 5 boards; Dockrey finished with 2 points, 4 rebounds and 2 steals.

Brayden Hogsted had 3 rebounds, an assist and a block.

Union County shot 47% (27-57) from the floor, 29% (7-24) from deep and 65% (13-20) at the line. Habersham shot 38% (23-60), 31% (5-16) from long range and 67% (14-21) at the line.

Union out-rebounded Habersham 33-26; won points in the paint 34-26 and committed 19 turnovers to the Raiders' 17.

Up next: The Panthers will host 4-0 Towns County on Tuesday, Nov. 28 in the 2023-24 home opener; the Lady Panthers tip-off at 6 p.m. with the men to follow.

The Panthers have logged four blowout wins this month -- two apiece over Highlands, NC and Taliaferro County. The Panthers and Indians split their last four meetings dating back to 2021. However, Union hasn't defeated Towns County in Blairsville since December 2019, needing a 20-4 fourth-quarter run to pull away 69-49.

The Panthers host White County on Friday when the action tips at 7 p.m. The Warriors are currently 2-3 with consecutive wins over West Oak, SC and Whitefield Academy. Ahead of its trip to Blairsville, White County visits Habersham Central on Nov. 28. The Warriors defeated Union County in overtime in the last meeting one year ago behind 36 points and 5 assists from then-senior Jadon Yeh.

The Panthers, meanwhile, were led by 27 points and 23 rebounds from senior Eli Underwood, who is now teammates with Yeh at Truett McConnell University.

UCHS finds new home in Region 7-AA

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Thomaston - Union County High School Athletic Director Mandy Hunter filed a successful appeal regarding the school's lateral move from Region 8-AA to Region 7-AA beginning next fall.

During the Nov. 16 meeting at the GHSA office in Thomaston, Hunter delivered a presentation focusing on driving distance and safety for UCHS student-athletes. The argument centered around buses traveling over Blood Mountain for every road contest within 8-AA or by Hwy 515 for the bulk of Union's 7-AA games.

"When the [enrollment] numbers first came out last month, we looked at it and thought we'd be better suited to change regions," Hunter said. "At the [GHSA] meeting, I presented a picture of the State of Georgia that showed the two regions. Then, I presented a picture of Blood Mountain and explained how it can be perfectly good weather when we leave [Blairsville] at 3 p.m., but we have to consider the weather when we come back across at 11 p.m. and how that's forced us to cancel games. But traveling down Hwy 515, we would have a lot less cancellations."

Hunter also added during the meeting that she had spoken with multiple 7-AA ath-



Mandy Hunter

letic directors, and each one had given their blessing on Union County's move.

Before filing the appeal, Hunter discussed the move with the UCHS coaches, and according to the Union AD, they overwhelmingly backed her conclusion.

"We wanted the consensus of the coaches and to make it a group decision and not a choice made by one sole person," Hunter said.

Beginning in the fall of 2024, Union County will join a region consisting of Coahulla Creek (Dalton), Lakeview-Ft. Oglethorpe, Murray County (Chatsworth), North Cobb Christian (Kennesaw), North Murray (Chatsworth), Ringgold, Rockmart and Sonorville.

Union County's former region, 8-AA, will include East Jackson, Franklin County, Hart County, Hebron Christian (Dac-

ula), Prince Avenue Christian (Athens) and Stephens County.

The new region alignments will continue through the spring of 2026.

The GHSA approved Union County's move by a 12-4 vote. The members of the Re-classification Committee voting no were Jeff Battles (Muscookee County Schools), Lucy Gilbert (Wesleyan), Curt Miller (GHSA vice president - Oconee County) and Kevin Petroski (Athens Academy).

The appeal's approval was motioned by Jesse Crews (Appling County) and seconded by Danny Redshaw (Lowndes County). Others voting yes were Kirk Barton (Norcross), Steve Waters (Glynn County), Steven Craft (Dalton Schools), Garrett Black (Greenbrier), Brian Montgomery (Columbia), Jasper Jewell (Atlanta Public Schools), Reggie Wilkes (Long County), Mike Thompson (Bacon County), Don Norton (Johnson County) and Jim Finch (GHSA President - Monroe County).

In other 7-AA appeals, North Cobb Christian's (NCC) move into 7-AA was approved by a 14-2 vote, with Gilbert and Petroski backing their fellow private school just moments before casting a 'no' vote on Union County's appeal.

One of NCC's motivating factors in the move was to avoid traveling inside I-285 to play Atlanta public schools.



Houston Henry (L) claimed tournament MVP honors and Hayden Hughes (R) was selected to the All-Tournament team at Piedmont. Photo/Todd Forrest

Lady Panthers second at last week's Piedmont Hardwood Classic

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Demorest - The 10th-ranked Lady Panthers picked up their first win under head coach Thomas Nelson in a 62-25 rout of Habersham Central in the opening round of last week's Piedmont University Hardwood Classic. Unfortunately, Union County (1-3) couldn't protect a 20-point third-quarter lead in Tuesday's title game, falling 82-80 to No. 3 Rabun County.

No. 10 Lady Panthers 80, No. 3 Rabun County 82 - Lady Cat seniors Lucy Hood and Ellie Southards combined for 67 points, with Hood pouring in a game-high 41 to overcome a 61-41 deficit.

Sophomore Paula Robertson led Union County with a career-high 23 points and 8 boards; junior Ariel McCarter had 20 points, 13 rebounds and 7 assists; senior Kamryn Mull scored a career-best 17 on four 3-pointers to go with 2 assists and 2 steals.

Robertson scored 13 in the first half as Union County jumped out to leads of 21-19 after one and 41-33 at the break.

The Lady Panthers' third-quarter surge started from the opening possession when senior Lara Turner split two free throws and Katelyn Brown gathered the miss, finding McCarter for a trey and a 45-33 lead less than 25 seconds into the period.

Robertson scored inside on consecutive trips to mount a 49-35 advantage, then Mull's



The Union County Lady Panthers placed second at the Piedmont tournament following a 62-25 win over Habersham Central and an 82-80 loss to No. 3 Rabun County. Senior Lara Turner (30) was selected to the All-Tournament team. Photo/Todd Forrest

trey made it 52-36 at the 6-minute mark.

Robertson extended the margin to 54-36 before Hood answered with five straight points. With her team ahead 54-41, Brown's fast-break layup sparked a 7-0 run that saw Union County push its advantage to 20. Following a Rabun turnover, McCarter led the break and hit Robertson with a bullet pass for a layup. Another turnover resulted in a Turner free throw, then McCarter knocked down a jumper for a 61-41 score with 2:15 left in the third.

Southards scored 13 of her 26 during the fourth frame.

Turner opened the period with an 18-footer, but Southards fired back with a 3 on the other end. Mull knocked down two at the charity stripe to bump the lead back to 12 at 70-58, but four Union turnovers saw the margin quickly shrink to 70-67 with 5:40 to play before Robertson's layup stopped the run.

Hood's trey made it 72-70 at the 4:50 mark, but Mull's 22-footer kept Union out front

75-71 with 3:45 remaining.

Southard's pull-up jumper kept Rabun within a deuce, then another Union turnover led to Southard's go-ahead 3 with 2:25 left.

With Robertson and Mull on the bench with 5 fouls, the Lady Panthers trailed 80-76 with under a minute to play until Turner's putback and McCarter's layup brought the final to 82-80.

Turner finished with 10 points, 8 rebounds and 6 as-

sists; Brown had 8 points, 8 rebounds and 3 assists; junior Hensley Adams added 2 points and 2 assists. Junior Stone Dyer had an assist and a steal; junior Hope Taylor recorded one steal.

Lady Panthers 62, Habersham Central 25 - Union County raced ahead 17-2 in the first and 31-9 at the break in last week's opening-round victory of Piedmont's Hardwood Classic on Monday, Nov. 21.

Ten different Lady Panthers cracked the scoring column, paced by Robertson's 15 (10 in the first period) and 12 from Turner.

McCarter had 7 points; Brown and junior Aubrie Akins scored 6 each. Adams, Dyer, Mull and Taylor scored 4 points apiece; junior Morgan Warren added 3 points.

Up next: Union County hosts No. 8 Towns County (3-0) at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 28. The Lady Indians already own two blowouts over Highlands, NC and a 55-47 win over Copper Basin, TN.

The Lady Panthers have won six straight in the series, including a 72-46 rout in the last meeting during the 2022 Battle of the States Christmas Tournament. The Lady Indians' last win over Union County came in November 2020 via a 43-42 double-overtime victory in Blairsville.

The Lady Panthers host White County on Friday, Dec. 1 at 7 p.m. Union County suffered a 69-48 home loss to the Warriors in the last meeting on Nov. 29, 2022.

Gladding chooses Dayton, becomes Union Co. softball's second D1 signee



Gracie Gladding with parents during her Nov. 15 signing at UCHS. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Union County softball's Gracie Gladding will continue her playing career at Division-I Dayton University (Ohio) following three years behind the plate at UCHS.

Gladding, who fielded offers from Reinhardt, Chattanooga State and Georgia Highlands, found her way onto Dayton's radar during a travel softball tournament when she homered off a pitcher from Ohio.

"It was a tough decision [choosing where to sign]," said Gladding, who becomes Union's first D1 signee since 2007 (April Harper - Kennesaw). "To me, it came down to the community at Dayton. I loved the campus and got to meet my future teammates

and coaches, and I felt really comfortable there. They were very supportive and made me feel really welcome.

"I don't think it will be too much of an adjustment [playing in Ohio] because I'm originally from Connecticut, so I'm used to moving and used to the cold."

A member of two Elite Eight squads in 2021 and 2022, Gladding led the Lady Panthers with a .534 batting average in 2023 while sporting team highs in OBP (.604), SLG (.932), OPS (1.536), hits (39), homers (8), RBIs (35) and walks (13).

As a junior on Union County's 2022 region championship squad, Gladding slashed .412 / .540 / .638 for a team-best 1.364 OPS. Her six homers, 33 RBIs and 18 walks were also team highs.

Gladding slashed .367 /

.429 / .600 in 2021 with one home run and 9 RBIs despite only appearing in 15 games. But the shining moment of her sophomore campaign came in the Class AA Sweet 16 when her go-ahead 3-run homer propelled Union County to its first Elite Eight appearance in six years.

During her three years at UCHS, Gladding picked up a pair of first-team all-region selections and a second-team all-state nod.

"I definitely want to thank my parents for their support and for allowing me to play softball from a young age," Gladding said. "I want to thank all my teammates and coaches because I wouldn't be here without them."

Gladding is undecided on her major but is leaning toward pursuing a business degree.

Faith and family leads Patton to TMU



Georgia Patton, alongside her parents and TMU coach Dylan Reichenberg (second from left), during her signing day ceremony on Nov. 15 at the UCHS gymnasium. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Georgia Patton inked a scholarship with Cleveland's Truett-McConnell University earlier this month during Union County softball's signing ceremony at the UCHS gymnasium.

"I love that [Truett's] foundation is centered around God," said Patton, who turned down an offer from Young Harris and considered Western Carolina. "I also have an aunt battling cancer, and I want to be close by for her. But mostly, I just wanted to go to a college that shares the same beliefs that I do. They have a

strong heart for the Lord, and who doesn't want to attend a college that believes the same thing as you.

"But I just truly felt it in my heart that Truett is where I needed to be, and I fell in love with it as soon as I [visited the campus]."

Patton departs Union County following a 2023 season that saw the senior shortstop lead the team with 30 runs and 9 stolen bases. She finished second on the team with a .439 average, a .495 OBP, and 36 hits. She was third with a .549 SLG, a 1.044 OPS and one homer.

As a junior in 2022, Patton's .435 average and 30 hits were second on the Lady

Panthers, while her 10 doubles tied for the team lead. She ended the season with a .494 OBP, a .638 SLG, a 1.132 OPS, 21 RBIs, 21 runs and 4 steals.

In 2021, Patton appeared in 18 games - scoring 8 runs and stealing a bag.

Patton is a two-time all-region selection.

"I want to thank God for giving me the ability to do this, my parents for always sacrificing and my aunts and uncles, who are always at my games," Patton said. "I'd also like to thank my coaches for sacrificing their time for me."

Patton plans to pursue a business degree.

Another perfect season for 10U Breakers



Union County's UFA U10 girls' soccer team, the Breakers, just completed another successful undefeated season. The girls played teams from Pickens, Dawson, Fannin and other Union County teams. The team scored a total of 43 goals and had 67 goalie saves. They had a total of 28 assists and only a total of 7 goals scored against them. The members of the team are: coaches - Jared Burdine, Sabrina Jackson and Tom Miller. Players: Justyna Barwick, Charlotte Burdine, Eliza Burdine, Grace Collins, Khloe Craig, Bristol Erwin, Elise Joseph, Haley Livingston, Sutton Miller, Makayla Stinton and Lana Kate Williams.

Massey: Reinhardt 'felt like home'



Jewell Massey with parents during her signing day ceremony on Nov. 15 at UCHS. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Union County softball's Jewell Massey is taking her skills to Waleska as a member of Reinhardt University's incoming freshman class.

Massey connected with Reinhardt through a prospect camp, which eventually led to a scholarship.

"They offered to take me on a tour [of the campus], and then I did a workout for them and that's when they offered me [a scholarship]."

Massey briefly consid-

ered other schools but once she visited Reinhardt, her heart was set.

"It just felt like home," she said. "I loved the campus. It was beautiful. It's in the mountains so it reminds me a lot of home, but I'm still far enough away to experience life on my own."

Massey, a 2023 Region 8-AA honorable mention, slashed .297 / .333 / .359 during her senior season. Additionally, the right fielder collected 4 doubles, a triple, 10 RBIs, 17 runs and 6 stolen bases.

In 2022, Massey ap-

peared in 19 games, logging 5 hits, 4 RBIs, 12 runs, 7 walks and 4 steals.

Massey swiped 8 bags and scored 15 runs in 18 games during her 2021 sophomore season. In 2020, Massey scored 4 runs and stole 2 bases.

"I want to thank my family for always supporting me and taking me to all my games and being my moral support, even when I'm not doing my best," Massey said. "I also want to thank my friends for always being there for me."

Massey plans to major in either sports management or nursing.