

Sports

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Hot-shooting Panthers clobber Towns County, 87-51

Second-half struggles haunt Union in loss to Murphy, NC

By Todd Forrest
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Union County bounced back from Tuesday's home loss to Murphy by scorching the nets at Towns County (6-2) during an 87-51 rout of the Indians -- the series' most decisive win by either squad since Union's 70-29 victory in 2010.

The Panthers will turn their attention to another rival when they return to action Friday night at Fannin County.

"It's just one game, but hopefully [the win at Towns] will spark a little confidence moving forward," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said.

Panthers 87, Towns County 51 - A 15-0 run put the finishing touches on Union County's 32-9 second quarter, opening up a 52-22 halftime advantage en route to the rivalry's most lopsided final in 13 years.

On Friday, Dec. 8, the Panthers (6-2) put their recent shooting woes in the rearview with 14 treys on a night they shot 52% (33-64) from the floor.

Meanwhile, fresh off a loss to Murphy, NC, Union's big three returned to form in Hiwassee. Juniors Jude Ellis, Houston Henry and Hayden Hughes combined for 64 points and 12 triples while tallying 13 assists and 6 steals on 25 of 43 shooting.

The Panthers fired on all cylinders at both ends, committing a season-low 4 turnovers while harassing the Indians into 23 miscues.

And the turnover bug bit Towns County hard and often during the back-breaking second quarter. Already struggling to keep pace, down 20-13 after one, the Indians stumbled into a buzzsaw ahead of the halftime break.

A minute into the second, junior Brayden Hogsd's 3 had Union County up 25-15. A pair of 24-footers by Henry and a trey from Hughes spotted Union County a 34-18 advantage near the period's halfway point.

The Panthers quickly answered a Zane Floyd bucket when sophomore Cade Dockrey's kick-out to Ellis resulted in 3 points. Floyd continued carrying Towns County, rattling home a turnaround jumper at the 3:10 mark, trimming the



Junior Hayden Hughes hit six 3's and scored 24 points with 5 steals in Union County's win at Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest

margin to 37-22. But the Indians wouldn't score again until the third quarter as the Panthers went for the jugular, turning up the heat with a full-court pressure defense that put the game away before halftime.

Henry found freshman Jaxon Totherow underneath for 2 and Ellis dished to Hughes for a corner-3. Hughes scored again on the next trip, crashing the boards to mount a 44-22 advantage.

After Hughes' steal and Henry's dribble drive extended the lead, the Panthers' second-straight takeaway turned into an Ellis pull-up from 10. As the Indians unsuccessfully attempted to crack Union's full-court pressure, Hughes picked off a pass at midcourt and junior Kaden Combs finished things off with a bucket in the paint. Then, during the final seconds, Union's midcourt trap resulted in another steal and Ellis' tip-pass ahead to Hughes for a breakaway layup.

When the halftime buzzer mercifully halted the 15-0 onslaught, the shellshocked Indians were on the short end

of a 30-point deficit.

"The [full-court pressure] is something I've kept in my back pocket since the summer," Garrett said. "But with the shooting issues we've had, [the press] is something we started to consider during the week to try and get some easy buckets. But I think it's definitely something you'll see from time to time."

Ellis opened the third with a triple, but Towns County battled to within a 63-39 margin near the 3-minute mark. Following a Union timeout, Henry's floater, Hughes' trey and a Dockrey free throw had the difference back to 30 less than 90 seconds later.

Henry scored the final 5 points of the period via a trey and a runner in the lane, preserving the 30-point lead at 74-44. Early in the fourth, Hughes' fifth and sixth 3-pointers made it 80-44 before Garrett handed the keys to his reserves.

Junior Holden Payne knocked down a triple during his 5-point fourth, and sophomore Vince Marevka tacked on a late bucket in the 87-51 win.

Stats: Henry finished



Junior Houston Henry had 24 points and matched his career-high with four 3-pointers at Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest

with 24 points, 5 assists, 2 rebounds and a steal on 10-of-15 shooting, including four 3-pointers. Hughes poured in 24 points, 5 steals, 4 assists and 4 rebounds while hitting 6 of 9 from long distance. Ellis had 16 points, 4 assists and 3 boards.

Totherow added 8 points, 3 rebounds and 3 steals; Payne finished with 5 points; Combs had 2 points and a rebound; Hogsd had 3 points, 2 boards and an assist; Marevka had 2 points and a rebound; Dockrey chipped in 1 point, 3 assists and a steal.

Freshman Hayden Price had 3 boards and sophomore Kainen Shirley dished out 2 assists.

Floyd had 16 to lead Towns County. Tanner Cunningham finished with 10 points and 6 rebounds.

The Panthers hit 14 of 34 (41%) from deep and 5 of 9 (56%) at the charity stripe. Towns shot 22 of 44 (50%) for the game, went 4 of 13 (31%) from downtown and 3 of 6 (50%) at the line.

The Indians out-rebounded Union County 29-23 but were outscored 38-26 in the

know what it is."

Trailing 51-40 with 5 minutes remaining, Union County made one final run, beginning with Dockrey's pull-up jumper. Moments later, Hughes' block and a Totherow free throw had the Panthers within eight, and then, two more at the line by Totherow sliced the margin to 51-45 at the 3:41 mark.

Union County pulled within four when Henry knocked down a 14-footer, but Murphy went inside for 2 points and connected from long distance for a 56-47 lead with 2:28 to play.

In the early going, the Bulldogs held a 7-4 advantage before Union raced ahead 17-11 after one. Despite trailing 22-15, Murphy climbed to within a point at 23-22, but Union County pushed its lead back to seven at 29-22.

"I thought we'd broken out of our shooting slump in the first half, but then we came out in the second half and the stats speak for themselves," Garrett said.

Stats: Hughes had 14 points and 5 rebounds to pace Union County. Henry's night ended with 13 points, 5 boards, 5 assists and 2 steals; Dockrey finished with 10 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists and 2 steals.

Totherow added 7 points, 9 rebounds and 2 steals; Ellis scored 3 points, with 3 assists and a rebound; Combs had 2 points and 2 boards; Brayden Hogsd dished out an assist; Ethan Hogsd pulled down one rebound.

Murphy's Dominick Rummel led all scorers with 20 points and 11 rebounds. Zach Skogen had 11 points and 15 boards.

The Bulldogs shot 53% (24 for 45) from the floor, hit 10 of 23 (44%) from 3-point range and 5 for 12 (42%) at the line. Union connected on just 18 of its 63 (29%) attempts, went 8 of 30 (27%) from deep and 5 of 11 (46%) at the line.

Murphy out-rebounded the Panthers 42-30, held a 26-20 scoring edge in the paint and committed 21 turnovers to Union County's nine.

Up next: Union County is off Tuesday but will head west to Fannin County on Friday for the Panthers' fifth-straight border clash.



Junior Jude Ellis scores inside at Towns County, finishing with 16 points and two 3-pointers. Photo/Todd Forrest



Jaxon Totherow, Kaden Combs, Cade Dockrey and the Panthers' bench celebrate the final moments of Union County's third-straight win over Towns County -- its first three-game winning streak in the series since 2018. Photo/Todd Forrest

McCarter, Lady Panthers dismantle Towns County, 68-36

Union pulls away from Murphy, NC behind Turner's 18, Robertson's 17

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The 10th-ranked Lady Panthers (4-4) improved to .500 for the first time this season, collecting a pair of blowout wins over Murphy, NC and Class A's No. 6 Towns County (6-2).

Union County visits Fannin County (4-2) on Friday night, seeking the program's first victory in Blue Ridge since November 2018.

No. 10 Lady Panthers 68, No. 6 Towns County 36 - Union County outscored the Lady Indians 46-21 during the second and third quarters, turning a 15-8 first-quarter advantage into a 61-29 rout entering the fourth on Friday, Dec. 8 in Hiwassee.

Ariel McCarter led all scorers with 23 points, coming within a rebound of a double-double. The junior guard connected twice from downtown, ending the night with 6 assists and 5 steals during the Lady Panthers' eighth consecutive win over Towns.

McCarter and senior Lara Turner combined for 13 of their team's 15 first-quarter points as Union seized a 7-point edge after one. McCarter continued pacing the Lady Panthers with 11 in the second quarter, while sophomore Paula Robertson heated up with 7 points to build a 35-20 halftime advantage.

Five players cracked the scoring column for Union during its 26-9 third-period surge, led by Robertson's 7 points and five apiece from McCarter and senior Kamryn Mull.

Stats: Robertson finished with 16 points, 3 re-



Junior Ariel McCarter scores inside during Union County's win over Murphy, NC on Tuesday, Dec. 5. Photo/Todd Forrest

bounds, 3 assists and a steal to go with a pair of triples. Turner went for 10 points, 5 rebounds and an assist; Mull had 5 points on one 3-pointer, 7 rebounds, 6 assists and a steal; junior Katelyn Brown added 5 points, 8 boards, an assist and a steal.

Junior Hope Taylor chipped in 4 points and 4 rebounds; freshman Ragan McCarter knocked down a 3-pointer; junior Hensley Adams had 2 points and a rebound.

Senior Morgan Warren secured one board; junior Aubrie Akins had 2 rebounds and a steal; junior Sloane Dyer pulled down a rebound and dished out an assist.

Senior Brelen Sievek-

ing's 14 points led the way for Towns County; junior Kaleigh Beaver had 11 and sophomore Scotlyn Fain added 8 points.

Lady Panthers 65, Murphy, NC 35 - Robertson and Turner combined for 35 points and 18 boards as Union County broke things open with a 16-6 second quarter before putting the Bulldogs away for good via a 19-4 fourth-quarter run on Tuesday, Dec. 5.

The Lady Panthers never trailed, holding a 9-6 lead after one and a 25-12 halftime advantage. But with Murphy still within 15 early in the fourth, Union County's late onslaught finally delivered the knockout blow.



Junior Katelyn Brown gives Union a 60-39 lead during the fourth quarter vs. Murphy, NC. Photo/Todd Forrest

A Bulldogs 3-pointer to start the fourth cut the Union lead to 41-26, but Ariel McCarter found Warren in the paint off an inbounds pass to spark the run. Ariel McCarter's 18-footer, followed by a steal and a layup, pushed the margin to 47-26 at the 6:25 mark.

After two Murphy misses at the line, Brown drove the lane for 2 points, and then a turnover resulted in Mull's corner-3.

With her team up 52-29, Robertson hit a pair at the line before banking in a 15-footer. Warren and Brown added buckets inside on consecutive trips, extending the lead to 60-29 with 2:41 to play.

A Murphy free throw cut the margin in half, but Dyer answered with a triple, awarding the Lady Panthers their largest lead of the night at 63-30 at the 1:47 mark.

Meanwhile, Turner, who finished with a game-high 18 points, did most of her damage during an 11-point second quarter.

Up 11-6 during the second following Dyer's jumper, Turner pulled down a Murphy miss and went coast-to-coast for 2 points. Dyer connected from the corner to push the lead to 16-6, then Turner answered a Murphy 3 with a low-post bucket.

Brown's steal on the

ensuing Bulldogs possession led to Turner's run-out layup and a free throw. Moments later, Turner's offensive board sent her to the line for two and a 23-9 score.

Robertson's pull-up at the 3:04 mark, Union's final points of the half, bumped the margin to 16.

Stats: Turner had 7 rebounds and 2 blocks to go with her 18 points. Robertson added 17 points, 11 rebounds, 3 assists and 3 steals. Dyer scored 8 points on 2 of 5 from long distance; McCarter ended with 6 points and 8 assists; Warren had 6 points, 6 rebounds and 2 steals.

Mull scored 4 points, collected 5 boards and handed out 4 assists. Brown had 4 points, 3 rebounds and 2 steals; sophomore Mady Adams scored 2 points; Taylor grabbed 4 boards; Hensley Adams had 2 rebounds and an assist; Ragan McCarter added a rebound; Akins picked up an assist.

Union County shot 25 for 67 (37%) from the field, 3 for 23 (13%) from deep and 12 for 25 (48%) at the line. Murphy shot 13 for 39 (33%) overall; 4 of 17 (24%) from 3-point range and 5 for 13 (39%) at the line.

The Lady Panthers destroyed Murphy on the glass 48-28, holding a 25-6 disparity on the offensive boards. Union outscored Murphy 38-10 in the paint; the Bulldogs committed 22 turnovers to Union's nine.

Up next: Union County will battle the Lady Rebels in Blue Ridge at 7 p.m. Friday. Fannin County is fresh off a 52-42 win at Gilmer, where Union picked up a 13-point scrimmage victory last month.

Football: POY Tanner headlines Union County's 17 all-region selections

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The 8-AA All-Region football team featured 17 Panthers, highlighted by senior quarterback Caiden Tanner's Player of the Year nod.

"[This award] is something that never even crossed my mind," Tanner said. "I was surprised when [head coach Micheal Perry] called to tell me. Our region is really good and there are a lot of great players that deserved the award, so I hadn't really given it any thought. But knowing there were so many great athletes that are going on to play big-time college, winning this award feels really good."

Earning first-team selections were junior guard Kaden Combs, sophomore defensive back Cade Dockrey, senior receiver Jensen Goble, senior defensive lineman Lane Lance, senior running back Braylen Rader and senior linebacker Seth Rutan.

Union County's second-team representatives were senior tight end Tyler Grasty, senior defensive lineman David Heredia, junior linebacker Ethan Lester and senior kicker Ethan McBride.

Honorable mentions went to senior linebacker Kooper Ashcraft, senior tackle Mayo Collins-Spiva, senior center Cody Meeks, junior defensive back Braden Plott, junior linebacker Connor Schuknecht and



Senior QB Caiden Tanner cuts up with coaches and teammates during the final moments of Union's win over Armuchee. Photo/Todd Forrest

senior defensive back Taylor Whitehead.

Tanner finished the year with 3,098 yards passing, 28 touchdowns and a 69% completion percentage. He also compiled 629 yards and 8 touchdowns on the ground.

"Coach Perry taught me so much about playcalling and reading coverages," Tanner said. "But I also couldn't have done anything without my receivers and line."

Tanner leaves UCHS as

the first QB to start four playoff games and win two. As a junior, he led Union to its first road playoff win during a 28-14 victory at Model.

But for Tanner, there's a moment that stands out above all the personal stats.

"Beating Athens Academy on Senior Night is what I'll remember," he said. "Everyone thought we were going to lose, but we went out there and blew them out. Everything was working for us that night, it was a lot



Senior D-lineman Lane Lance overcame injuries in 2023 to earn a first-team All-Region nod from the region's coaches. Photo/Todd Forrest

of fun and definitely my favorite game that I've played."

Goble piled up 1,132 receiving yards and 9 touchdowns on 85 catches despite missing 1 1/2 games due to injury. In 2022, Goble set the program's single-season record with 88 receptions.

Rader finished 2023 with 1,272 yards and 20 TDs, making him the first Panther to top 1,000 yards since 2019 (Jonah Daniel) and the first player to reach 20 rushing scores since

2016 (Cole Wright). Through the air, Rader caught 39 passes for 247 yards and 5 touchdowns.

Rutan lost two games to injury but still racked up 114 tackles, 22 for a loss (team-high) and 3 sacks.

Lance battled injuries for much of the year but ended with 51 tackles, 13 TFL and a sack.

Dockrey's team-best 3 picks accounted for half of Union's interceptions in 2023. He finished the year with 46

tackles and 2 TFL.

Lester led the Panthers with 127 tackles to go with 8 TFL and 2 sacks. Heredia had 95 tackles, 16 TFL and a team-leading 7 sacks.

Meanwhile, Grasty's 44 catches, 613 yards and 7 TDs were all good enough for second on the team. McBride connected on 48 PATs and spent two games handling kickoff duties while Union County dealt with midseason injuries.

Ashcraft's senior season included 83 tackles, 7 TFL and 2 fumble recoveries. His first-quarter safety vs. ELCA marked Union County's first defensive score in over a year.

Plott had 24 tackles, 2 TFL and a key interception during the playoff win over ELCA. Schuknecht finished with 74 tackles and a TFL. Whitehead ended with 27 tackles and 2 interceptions.

As for Union's offensive linemen selections (Collins-Spiva, Combs and Meeks), Tanner offered high praise for those three young men tasked with keeping his uniform clean.

"I couldn't have done anything without those guys," Tanner said. "Those three guys know more about football than almost anyone on the team. Cody was responsible for calling most of the pass protections and all three of them always did their job. It was awesome having those guys blocking for me. [The POY award] would have been impossible without those guys."

Swim: UCHS second at Murphy; UCMS third at Tallulah Falls



UCHS Candy Cane Top 10 Finishes		
Overall Results Combined 2nd Place		
200 Free 1st - Nicholas Nushtayev 2nd - Lily Helon	100 Fly 3rd - Nicholas Nushtayev 4th - Wyatt Chandler	100 Back 2nd - Lily Helton 4th - Lilly Collins
200 IM 4th - Sophia Licavoli	100 Free 2nd - Reese Jones 2nd - Andrew Nushtayev 3rd - Cole Orlando 4th - Wyatt Chandler	100 Breast 4th - Isabel Hoover 8th - Pedro DeGalles 10th - Delilah Hernandez
50 Free 2nd - Reese Jones 3rd - Andrew Nushtayev 4th - Isabel Hoover 6th - Cole Orlando 7th - Lilly Collins		
200 Medley Relay 2nd - Lilly Collins, Reese Jones, Lily Helton, Isabel Hoover 3rd - Cole Orlando, Andrew Nushtayev, Wyatt Chandler, Pedro DeGalles		
200 Free Relay 2nd - Andrew Nushtayev, Wyatt Chandler, Cole Orlando, Nicholas Nushtayev		
400 Free Relay 2nd - Reese Jones, Sophia Licavoli, Isabel Hoover, Lily Helton		

UCMS Holiday Invite Meet Highlights		
Overall Results Combined 3rd place		
100 IM 4th - Genevieve Conley 4th - Ian Lander 5th - Bree Galloway	50 Free 6th Isabella Reuter 7th Logan Tercero 8th Genevieve Conley 8th Grayson Shadden 9th Christiaan Jordaan 9th Scarlett Queen 10th Aliyah Gwynn 11th Grace McCollum	50 Breast 2nd - John Tippens 3rd - Mckynlee Simpson 7th - Logan Tercero
100 Free 2nd - Kimberly Simpson 2nd - Wyatt Yancey 3rd - Ella Fisk 4th - Ian Lander 6th - Mckynlee Simpson 7th - Chloe Iler 9th - Eddie Richardson	500 Free 5th - John Tippens	50 Back 1st - Kimberly Simpson (UCMS Record) 1st - Wyatt Yancey 4th - Chloe Iler 8th - Aliyah Gwynn 9th - Scarlett Queen 10th - Isabella Reuter 11th - Grace McCollum 13th - Corbin Swor 14th - Grayson Shadden
50 Fly 4th - Ella Fisk 6th - Bree Galloway 6th - Eddie Richardson	200 Medley Relay 3rd - Ella Fisk, Mckynlee Simpson, Kimberly Simpson, Bree Galloway 4th - Logan Tercero, John Tippens, Wyatt Yancey, Ian Lander 7th - Eddie Richardson, Christiaan Jordaan, Grayson Shadden, Corbin Swor	
200 Free Relay 2nd - Ian Lander, Logan Tercero, John Tippens, Wyatt Yancey 3rd - Mckynlee Simpson, Scarlett Queen, Ella Fisk, Kimberly Simpson 4th - Chloe Iler, Isabella Reuter, Aliyah Gwynn, Bree Galloway 7th - Grayson Shadden, Corbin Swor, Eddie Richardson, Christiaan Jordaan		

Wrestling: Payton Legatt notches 100th win on Saturday



Junior Payton Legatt recorded his 100th career victory over the weekend at the Robbinsville, NC tournament. Battling illness, the shorthanded Panthers finished the event 3-2 with wins over Hayesville, NC, Murphy, NC and Notre Dame (NC). Earlier in the week, Union County placed second at Pickens in the Hwy. 515 Classic, earning wins over Fannin County, Pickens and Towns County. Union County hosts Senior Night on Tuesday at the UCHS gym.