

Sports

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Hughes' career-night lifts Panthers over Towns County

John and Ellis combine for 20 second-half points to fend off Indians' late push

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Hiwassee - Losing was completely out of the question for Lake Hughes at Towns County.

Under no circumstance would the Panthers' sharpshooter allow his fellow seniors to close their respective chapter of the Towns-Union rivalry with another defeat. And last Friday night in Hiwassee, he delivered, pouring in career-highs of 29 points and eight 3-pointers while leading Union County (5-7) to a 67-60 victory over the defending State Champions.

"It means a lot to me and the team to go out with a win [over Towns County]," Hughes said after the game. "I just wanted to come out, do my thing and shoot the ball. I felt good tonight, so I kept shooting and [the shots] kept falling."

Hughes connected six times from behind the arc during the first half, and by the midway point of the third frame, he was sitting on eight treys -- one shy of tying the UCHS single-game record.

According to Union County head coach Corey Garrett, there was no change of strategy to get Hughes going after struggling a bit (8 points on 3 of 8 shooting before fouling out) in the Dec. 10 loss to Towns. Garrett's squad simply relaxed and played Union County basketball during the second meeting.

"We didn't do anything different with [Hughes], but obviously, he's a scorer and when he's playing well, we're usually playing well," Garrett said. "We watched a lot of film on [our first Towns game] and realized we had a good gameplan, we just didn't execute."

"That [first meeting] was probably the biggest game that a lot of our guys have ever played in, and I think you could tell in the first half [of the first game] that we were a little too gassed up. In the second half, you started to see us get into a rhythm and that's how we came back [from down 14 points]. So during practice all week, we just hammered on [the positives from the second half of the first game]."

Facing its largest deficit of the contest at 43-36, Towns County (4-4) called a timeout with 4:38 left in the third, where head coach Brian Hunicutt decided to throw the kitchen sink at Union's leading scorer on the defensive end.

Facing double teams and tight coverage on the perimeter, Hughes turned to his teammates, particularly senior Caleb John and freshman Jude Ellis, to supply most of the heavy lifting over the final 12-plus minutes.

"[John and Ellis] stepped up and got the job done late in the game," Hughes said. "They made some big shots for us when



Lake Hughes scores and draws a foul in the fourth quarter at Towns after coming up with a steal on the defensive end. Photo/Todd Forrest [Towns] started trying to slow me down."

turnover, the home team wasted little time going inside to their do-everything senior, Collin Crowder, who posted John on the block before spinning away from the double team and rattling in a short jumper.

Crowder, who recorded his 1,000th career point on Saturday at Social Circle, finishes his two 2021-22 meetings vs. Union with 48 points, 15 rebounds and four steals on 20-for-38 shooting.

After Friday's win, Garrett was not only thrilled with the victory, but grateful he won't need to gameplan for No. 10 anymore.

"It's just his toughness," Garrett said about Crowder. "It wasn't like we weren't guarding him, he just hit some tough shots. He's physical, he's explosive and he's just a tough kid."

"We tried to double-team him in the post but he continued to find a way to score. He's just a tough kid and a tough matchup."

Five-unanswered points by the Indians saw momentum slipping away from Union County as they nursed a 56-54 advantage with under two minutes left. A dribble-drive by Hughes came up empty, but the senior followed his shot, splitting a pair of Indians to rip the loose ball away and maintain possession. Moments later, on a Panthers' inbounds play, Ellis slipped outside where John found the freshman for a clutch corner-trey with 1:45 remaining.

"Towns started running Lake off the [3-point] line in the second half, but other guys stepped up. That was just a complete team win," Garrett said.

Towns County went on the attack and Oakes was fouled on a drive 11 seconds later, sinking 1-of-2 to pull within 59-55. The



Caleb John dishes a no-look pass on the Union break for a corner-3. John finished with career highs in points (17) and rebounds (8) while tasked with guarding Towns' Collin Crowder. Photo/Todd Forrest

Indians blocked a Panthers' shot on the ensuing possession, but John sprinted back to the other end, cutting off Crowder and drawing a charge in the paint.

With 1:08 on the clock and Union in the bonus, Towns County attempted to take advantage of John's struggles at the free-throw line, fouling the senior as soon as he touched the ball in the backcourt. Entering the contest, John was shooting only 47% at the charity stripe, and initially, the strategy seemed to pay off as he missed the front-end of the 1-and-1.

Eight seconds later, Towns County moved within 59-56 when Crowder hit 1-of-2 after drawing a foul on a 12-foot jumper. Despite being a one-possession game, the Indians elected to put John back on the line with 55 seconds on the clock, and this time, the senior made them pay by going a perfect 2-for-2.

Leading 61-56 and on the verge of putting Towns County away, the Panthers inflicted a costly foul behind the arc on Floyd's 3-point try. Fortunately, the sophomore sank just 1-of-3 with 40 seconds remaining to keep it a two-possession game at 61-57. After Floyd missed his third free throw try, Ellis pulled down the rebound and looked upcourt, where John slipped behind the defense and Ellis hit him in stride for a layup and a 63-57 score.

Once again, the Panthers were one defensive stop away from securing the win, but Crowder wouldn't allow his team to go down without a fight, scoring on a lob pass into the paint and drawing John's fifth foul in the process.

The old-fashioned 3-point play cut the Union lead to 63-60 with 18 seconds left, and the Indians instantly fouled Houston

Henry, sending the freshman to the foul line with 15 ticks left on the clock. And like a seasoned upperclassman, Henry calmly stepped to the charity stripe and silenced the Bill P. Kendall Gymnasium crowd, hitting nothing but net on both attempts.

The Panthers finally came up with the much-needed stop when Crowder missed from deep and Ellis put the game away with two free throws to open a 67-60 advantage with 8 seconds to play.

"Lake [Hughes] was hitting everything in the first half so my goal was to attract as much attention as I could so Lake could keep on doing his thing," said Ellis, who scored all of his 13 points after halftime. "In the second half, [Towns] started focusing more on [Hughes] and playing off on me and I knew that was my chance to make something happen."

Henry started the contest with a mid-range jumper and Hughes rained down his first trey for a 5-2 lead. Consecutive triples from Hughes and a tip-in from John spotted Union an early 13-7 advantage.

"We knew Towns would come out in a zone and we knew we would get some good looks, but of course it makes things a whole lot easier when your shots are falling," Garrett said.

Towns County scored seven straight to grab the lead but John put his team on top 15-14 after one with a bucket in the paint.

Hughes answered a pair of Indians' baskets with a game-tying 3 from way downtown, and senior Austin Taylor sank a pull-up jumper but the Panthers still found themselves behind 24-20.

John evened the contest at 26-26 with three consecutive

scores in the paint, then Hughes answered an Indians trey with back-to-back 3s that put Union on top 32-29 with under a minute left in the half.

Towns County tied it back up with a 3-point play in the final seconds and the two squads went to the break all even at 32-32.

Ellis got on the board with a 3-pointer to start the second half and Hughes connected from the wing to push the Panthers' margin to 38-34.

Ellis drove the lane for 2 and Hughes sank his eighth trey as Union opened up a 43-36 advantage.

John finished with career highs of 17 points and eight rebounds to go with two assists. Heading into Friday night, Coach Garrett moved John from the perimeter to the high post, and the adjustment paid off on the scoreboard and the stat sheet.

"That's one thing we definitely changed," Garrett said in regards to John's modified offensive role. "That was part of the gameplan and it worked out well. We wanted a playmaker in the middle of the floor and that paid off huge."

"[John] hit some big free throws for us too so I was very happy for him. I'm glad that he was able to come through like that [when Towns kept putting him at the free throw line late in the game]. That was a good boost for his confidence."

Ellis finished with 13 points and four rebounds despite going scoreless in the first half.

Henry scored 4 points with five boards while notching a career-high five assists and a game-high two steals.

"[Henry] isn't a huge scorer right now, but he's like the keys to our engine," Garrett said. "With Caleb moving to [a different] role, Houston has taken over at [point guard] and I think that's going to pay off for us."

Taylor added 2 points and two assists; Payne had 2 points and two rebounds. Junior Eli Underwood chipped in one rebound and a steal in 11 minutes.

Crowder led the Indians with 23 points and 10 rebounds; Floyd finished with 12 points and seven boards. Oakes' night ended with 11 points, six rebounds and five assists. Cunningham had 8 points, Connor Chastain scored 4 points and Layne Rouse added 2 points.

Union shot 11 for 26 from downtown and 8 for 11 at the line but didn't attempt its first free throw until Hughes' and-one with 6:22 to play. Towns County hit 12 of 19 at the foul line, 4 of 15 from deep and out-rebounded the Panthers 40-29. The Indians won the points-in-the-paint battle 30-20 but shot 43% (22 for 51) overall to Union's 47% clip (24 for 51).

Both teams protected the basketball, combining for just 11 turnovers with Union County committing five.

Ellis scores 11 of his 21 in the fourth as Union rallies at Chestatee

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Murrayville - If anyone wondered how Union County would respond less than 24 hours removed from a physically and mentally taxing victory over the defending State Champions, the Panthers answered those questions with a 57-52 victory on Saturday afternoon at Class AAAA Chestatee.

But the win wasn't without a few bumps in the road as Union County faced a 43-35 fourth-quarter deficit before outscoring the War Eagles 24-9.

"It was a sloppy game and our energy was a little down during the first half," Union head coach Corey Garrett said.

Freshman Jude Ellis scored 11 during the final frame, matching his career-high with 21 points on 4-of-7 shooting from downtown. Senior Lake Hughes finished with 14 points and a game-high four steals on 2 of 4 from long distance.

Trailing by eight early in the fourth, junior Eli Underwood sparked a 9-1 Panthers' run with a pair of free throws, and following a Chestatee miss, Ellis drove to his right and connected on a floater in the paint.

"We struggled really bad in the third quarter, but in the fourth, we threw a 2-3 [zone defense at Chestatee] and they shut down and started taking shots out of their comfort zone," Garrett said. "That slowed their momentum down and we started hitting some shots."



Freshman Jude Ellis equaled a career-high with 21 points at Chestatee and is 18 of 34 from 3 over his last five games. Photo/Todd Forrest

On the next possession, Ellis recorded his lone dime when he pulled down the board and fired ahead for to John for a layup, moving Union within a deuce at 43-41.

After the War Eagles split two free throws, Ellis tied the game with a 23-footer from the top of the circle, then put the Panthers on top 46-44 with a pair of free throws. The freshman delivered again when senior Caleb John grabbed a Chestatee miss and pushed the pace, kicking out to Ellis in transition for another triple that opened a 49-44 Union County advantage.

The War Eagles answered right back with a corner-3, but that would be their only field



An intense Coach Garrett urges his Panthers to dig deep for a critical defensive stop during the fourth quarter at Towns. Photo/Todd Forrest

Two War Eagles misses at the line proved costly as Underwood instantly built a 54-49 lead with a pair of makes from the charity stripe. Following a Chestatee miss, Ellis hit 1-of-2, but Chestatee hit 1-of-2 and drew a foul on the offensive rebound, resulting in two more free throws and a 55-52 score inside of 10 seconds remaining.

Hughes put the game away with a pair on the other end with under 8 seconds to play.

The Panthers held Chestatee to just 32% (16 for 50) shooting while hitting 46% (18 for 39) themselves. Points in the paint were even at 20-20 and the War Eagles held a 33-30 edge on the

boards. Union went 14 for 25 (56%) at the line and Chestatee hit 15 of 21 (71%).

The Panthers held a brief 3-2 lead before the War Eagles led the rest of the first, taking a 16-10 advantage into the second. Henry and Hughes each found their range from deep, tying the score at 16-16; still even at 18-18, Hughes connected from the corner off a kick-out from John.

John and Hughes hooked up once again when John capped off a steal with a no-look pass to Hughes to finish the break and spot Union a 23-18 lead.

21-12 to take a 43-35 advantage into the fourth.

John finished with 8 points and team-highs of seven rebounds and four assists. Henry added 6 points and 3 assists; Underwood scored 4 points and matched John with seven boards. Seniors Austin Taylor and Daniel Snow chipped in 2 points each. Senior Hayden Payne had three rebounds and an assist in 10 minutes.

Union County hosts North Hall on Tuesday coming off back-to-back wins for the first time since January 25, 2020 (Rabun County and Putnam County). The Panthers' last three-game winning streak came earlier that month when they defeated Elbert County, Monticello and Putnam County between January 14-18, 2020.

North Hall is currently 8-2 and has won six of seven, including a 56-47 win over Union on Nov. 30.

The Trojans are coming off an 81-34 rout of Lumpkin County on Friday after falling 69-67 to White County on Tuesday. The Lady Panthers tip-off at 6 p.m. on Tuesday with the men to follow.

"Turnovers are the name of the game [vs. North Hall]," Garrett said. "They're going to press the whole game. They're not going to stop. Last time [at North Hall], we struggled with turnovers and we didn't shoot well. But if we can fix the turnover issue and knock down a few shots, I'm confident we'll be right there with them."

McNabb shines in weekend victories at No. 10 Chestatee and Towns

Union sophomore drops a career-high 17 at Towns, hits game-winner at Chestatee

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Union County (8-5) scored a 63-62 upset victory at Class AAAA's 10th ranked Chestatee (6-2) on Saturday afternoon following a 77-31 blowout win the night before at Towns County.

Lady Panthers 63, Chestatee 62 - Union County survived a red-hot shooting performance from a former teammate on Saturday in Murrayville by outlasting a 21-point outing from Riley Allison (daughter of former Panthers' football coach Brian Allison), courtesy of sophomore Sofia McNabb's game-winning jumper with 12 seconds remaining.

Riley Allison's last-second 3 from the corner bounced short off the iron. Meanwhile, McNabb's winner gifted the Lady Panthers their second, and final, lead of the night, following a brief advantage earlier in the fourth.

Union took its first lead when senior Ava Hunter picked off a Chestatee pass and went coast-to-coast for a layup and a 53-52 advantage. Hunter scored again moments later when she put back her own miss for a 55-52 score with 3:10 remaining.

Riley Allison tied the game with a trey and the Lady Panthers were whistled for a charge, allowing the former Lady Panther to drill another triple that put the War Eagles back on top, 58-55 with 2:33 left.

McCarter answered with a 15-footer but Chestatee extended the margin back to three with a pull-up jumper just shy of the 2-minute mark. On Union's very next trip, Corinne Hill's runner bounced off the rim but Hunter grabbed the offensive board and went back up to cut the deficit to one at 60-59. Riley Allison and McNabb each traded misses but Chestatee was able to push the pace on the board, resulting in a 62-59 lead with a minute to play.

The Lady Panthers went to Hunter, who put the ball on the floor and drew a hard foul from Riley Allison in the paint as the clock approached 45 seconds. The University of North Georgia commit would sink 1 of 2, trimming the Chestatee advantage to 62-60.

Union County used four fouls on the defensive end to



How could sophomore Sofia McNabb top four career-highs (points, rebounds, assists and 3s) on Friday? By hitting a game-winning 18-footer the next day at No. 10 Chestatee with 12 seconds left. Photo/Todd Forrest

put the home team in the bonus, and with 27 seconds remaining, Chestatee missed the front-end of a 1-and-1. After the Hunter rebound, an aggressive Lara Turner attacked the basket, drawing a foul and going to the line where she hit 1 of 2. Hill came up with a loose ball after neither team was able to initially control Turner's miss.

Coming out of a timeout down 62-61, the Union inbounds pass went to senior Rebekah Chambers, who couldn't connect on an off-balance shot in the paint. Neither side could haul in the rebound and fortunately, the ball bounced out of bounds off Chestatee with 14 seconds on the clock.

With McCarter inbound from the baseline, McNabb started on the elbow and curled around to the wing off a Hunter screen. McCarter's pass hit McNabb in stride and the sophomore's jumper found nothing but net with a toe on the 3-point line.

Chestatee advanced across halfcourt and called timeout, behind 63-62 with 4.8 seconds to play. Inbounding from the sideline, the pass went to the top of the key, where the War Eagles put the ball on the floor and drove into the paint before kicking out to Riley Allison in the left corner.



Senior Aubrie Banton scored a career-high 10 points during the second half at Towns County on two 3-pointers. She also logged 28 minutes and two steals in the win. Photo/Todd Forrest

gave us the momentum swing that got our offense going.

"In the first half, we had problems knowing who to guard and not pressing in the right spots. So at halftime we had to refocus."

McNabb poured in career-highs of 17 points, nine rebounds and three assists. Additionally, she hit 6-of-7 from the floor and 3-of-4 from downtown -- also a career-best mark for made 3-pointers.

The sophomore came out blazing with two first-quarter treys to lead Union County with 10 points in the opening frame. Chambers added five over the first eight minutes as the Lady Panthers held a 17-9 edge after one.

McCarter and Ava Hunter each went off early in the second to open up a 26-13 advantage. Deuces by Turner, Chambers and Hill made it 32-15, then a McCarter steal-and-score led to Union's largest margin of the period at 34-15 with 2:39 on the clock.

Chambers kept the Lady Panthers on top by 19 with two free throws, but Towns wouldn't go away, answering with a 10-3 spurt that sliced the Union lead to 39-25 with 13 seconds before halftime, but Ava Hunter beat the buzzer with a low-post bucket, providing her squad a 41-25 cushion at the break.

The Lady Panthers pulled no punches in the second half, delivering a 16-0 knockout blow over the first four-and-a-half

minutes of the third. An Indians' jumper at the 3:15 mark accounted for Towns' only points in the frame as Union built a 66-27 advantage with nine unanswered.

Six different Lady Panthers scored in the third quarter, led by 7 points from McNabb. Senior Aubrie Banton scored five of her career-high 10 points in the third quarter while Chambers and Turner added 4 points each.

"[Getting production] from as many players as possible is huge and something we're going to need in region play," Mandy Hunter said. "We're trying to get everyone feeling comfortable and get everyone doing their job, and tonight we did that and it was huge."

Banton's 5 points led the way in the mercy-rule shortened fourth frame. Sophomores Kamryn Mull and Katie Byers chipped in 4 points apiece.

Ava Hunter had 12 points and three steals in just 14 minutes of work. Chambers scored 12 points with eight boards and McCarter had 9 points and five steals, giving the freshman 12 steals in her two meetings with Towns.

Banton picked up two steals to go with her 10 points. Turner scored 6 points and dished out three assists. Hill finished with 4 points and three boards; Mull added 4 points and two steals.

Senior Caley Davis had 2 points and two steals. Senior Ansley Collins scored 1 point and pulled down one rebound. Sophomores Morgan Warren and Byers grabbed two boards each. Freshmen Aubrie Akins and Sloane Dyer logged 4 and 3 minutes, respectively.

Sophomore Emma Lallement led the Lady Indians with 8 points and six rebounds. Freshman Kaleigh Beaver added 5 points and five boards.

Union County forced 36 turnovers and limited Towns to just 29% (10 for 34) from the floor. The Lady Panthers hit 41% (30 for 73) overall and 30% (6 for 20) from downtown. Union dominated the paint, outscoring the home team 44-12 and out-rebounding them 19-9 on the offensive glass (36-31 overall).

The Lady Panthers host North Hall (6-4) on Tuesday at 6 p.m. After momentarily cracking the Class AAA Top-10, the Trojans have lost three of four (Cherokee Bluff, White County and No. 1 Lumpkin County).

Wrestling: Union recognizes seniors, places fourth at Berkmar's 'Gorilla Warfare VIII'



Union County wrestlers honored at Wednesday's Senior Night match: (L-R) Brady Guild, Kanon Abercrombie, Landon Clark and Sean Phillips are joined by coach Justin Byers. Photo/Todd Forrest

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Union County wrestling hosted Senior Night on Wednesday, Dec. 15, paying tribute to four young men and their families ahead of the Panthers' match with Swain County, North Carolina.

Brady Guild, Kanon Abercrombie, Landon Clark and Sean Phillips were joined by their families as they were recognized for their respective roles in the ascension of UCHS wrestling into a perennial State

Tournament qualifier and an Area title contender.

Later in the week, the Panthers traveled to Berkmar (Lilburn) to take part in the Gorilla Warfare VIII tournament, where they came away fourth against a field loaded with Class 6A and 7A competition, despite forfeiting a handful of weight divisions.

Lambert and Walnut Grove took home the top two spots, while third-place Carrollton edged Union by 6 points.

With 112 points, the Panthers held off fifth-place Cambridge (109) and sixth-place

Lanier (108).

Zander Rotko (138 pounds) was Union's lone finalist, coming in second to Lambert's Mason McClung.

Payton Legatt (152), Guild (160) and Phillips (180) each placed fourth. Anderson Clouse (132) and David Heredia (170) both came in sixth place for the Panthers.

Union County dropped Wednesday's match to Swain County by 12 points after the Panthers forfeited three weight classes to start in an 18-0 hole.

UCHS Swimming wraps up 2021 at Adairsville

Adairsville - Union County High School competed in their final swim meet of 2021, representing Panther Nation at the Adairsville "Whoville Invitational."

With school records being broken almost every meet, the future of Union County Swimming is bright, but there's always room for those who want to see if they have what it takes to be a member.

The Adairsville High School hosted the sixth swim meet of the year for our relentless Panther High Swim team, taking place on Dec. 18 at the Adairsville Natatorium. With the slogan of "Keep Calm and Swim On", the UCHS team competed against multiple other schools with these results.

Overall High School (6th) / Overall Men's Team (7th) / Overall Women's Team (6th).

UCHS Men's Results:
200Y Medley Relay (16 Teams) - 5th Place.

200Y Freestyle Relay (22 Teams) - 3rd Place.

100Y Freestyle (57 Competitors) - Nicholas Nushtayev (2nd) / Grayden Cobb (19th) / Michael Leird (29th) / Gabriel Panter (46th).

100Y Breaststroke (27 Competitors) - Hunter White (1st).

100Y Backstroke (17 Competitors) - 9th Place

50Y Freestyle (79 Competitors) - Hunter White (2nd) / Nicholas Nushtayev (8th) / Grayden Cobb (28th) / Preston Perren (39th) / Michael Leird (44th) / Gabriel Panter

(60th).

UCHS Women's Results:

200Y Medley Relay (25 Teams) - 2nd Place.

200Y Individual Medley (15 Competitors) - Lily Helton (4th).

200Y Freestyle Relay (36 Teams) - 6th Place and 18th Place.

200Y Freestyle (26 Competitors) - Rachel Reid (13th)

100Y Breaststroke (39 Competitors) - Rachel Reid (4th) / Courtney Foster (8th) / Meghan Cory (12th) / Olivia Loyd (23rd) / Hannah Kazmierzak (25th).

100Y Backstroke (45 Competitors) - Cassie Flowers (22nd) / Brooklyn Brown (23rd).

UCHS Soccer fundraiser: Santos wins again



Team Santos took home another victory at the UCHS Soccer's December fundraiser tournament.