

Garrett hopeful for the No. 2 seed in 8-AA as Panthers cling to third at 3-3

Union County rebounds from blowout loss at Banks with rout of Oglethorpe

By Todd Forrest
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Union County split last week's action, making up for an ugly loss at Banks County with a blowout victory over Oglethorpe County.

Saturday's Fannin County game was canceled due to severe storms that closed Hwy. 515, preventing the Fannin guys from making the trip.

Despite not getting a chance at revenge vs the rival Rebels, the Panthers are 3-3 in region play (8-8 overall) and remain in the hunt for the No. 2 seed in 8-AA.

While the girls' standings are congested at the top, the guys are clogged up in the middle behind Banks (7-0) and Social Circle (6-1). Currently, Union is third at 3-3 but Rabun County, Elbert County and Monticello all sit at 3-4. And right on their heels is Putnam County at 2-4.

"We want the two-seed but we know what that will take," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "It's crazy at this point in the season to keep saying 'we need to get better' but we're still trying to find the right chemistry. But once we do, we know we are capable of winning out."

With Banks County in first place, the fourth or fifth seed would result in a semifinal matchup with the Leopards in the Region 8-AA Tournament. So when asked if he would settle for the No. 3 seed to avoid Banks until the final day, Coach Garrett remained adamant in his quest for the second seed.

"Third isn't a bad spot but you want to finish in the top-two because that's a bye to the (region) semifinals and an automatic bid to state," he said. "Also, third-place will send you on the road for that first round game. And the way it's going, the three-seed could end up playing at Putnam and we want to avoid that."

This week, Union can begin to separate itself from the pack with games vs Elbert, Monticello and Putnam. On Tuesday, they'll visit Elbert before hosting Monticello in a pay-back game on Friday. Last month, the Hurricanes edged a short-handed Union County squad playing without the injured Sawyer Drake.

On Saturday, the Panthers go back on the road to Putnam County. Last year,



Sawyer Drake throws down a one-handed slam vs Oglethorpe County on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union needed two overtimes to hold off the War Eagles. The Panthers finally escaped with the 52-51 victory after Drake scored the go-ahead basket and Putnam missed a short jumper at the buzzer.

Panthers 72, Oglethorpe County 51 - Union County jumped out front 20-7 after one and never looked back during a rout of the last-place Patriots (3-15, 0-7).

The Panthers led wire-to-wire, building an early 7-2 advantage that they stretched to 13-5 with under two minutes left in the first. That's when Union County provided its fans with one of the most thrilling 15-second stretches in recent history.

With Oglethorpe applying full-court pressure, Drake took the inbounds pass and raced down the left sideline before cutting back inside and splitting two defenders at mid-court. As Drake continued to push the ball towards the paint, an Oglethorpe defender stepped over to cut him off but he was too late. From one step inside the foul line, Drake took flight and threw down a one-handed slam as the gymnasium erupted in excitement.

As the Patriots raced back down the floor, Lake Hughes stripped the ball handler and the deflection bounced into the

arms of Bryson Lariscy, who passed ahead to Sawyer Brey for a two-handed, rim-rocking slam at the other end.

Oglethorpe attempted to interrupt the momentum with a timeout as the Panther bench spilled onto the floor in celebration. When play resumed, Hughes continued the offensive onslaught with a triple that opened up a 20-5 Union lead.

Trailing 20-7 after one, the Patriots cut the Union lead in half at 20-10 but the Panthers responded with a 13-3 run to build a 33-13 advantage. Pierson Allison contributed six points to the run, Hughes hit another trey and Cayden Rich and Brey added one basket each.

Union County would take a 35-16 lead into the break behind six points each from Allison, Hemphill, Hughes and Morlock.

The two teams would trade baskets early in the third until a corner-trey from Drake sparked a 14-5 finish to the quarter. The Panthers would open up their largest lead of the night at 57-28 during the opening minute of the fourth.

Oglethorpe County didn't quit, however, despite the result all but guaranteed. The Patriots used an 11-2 run to pull within 20 at 59-39 with 5:44 remaining. But Brey and Morlock quickly pushed the margin back



Sawyer Brey's two-handed stuff resulted in a Patriot timeout and ignited a spirited Union County sideline celebration. Photo/Todd Forrest

to two-dozen at 63-39 with 4:52 on the clock.

The duo of Rich and Allison stretched the lead to 25, then a trey by Landon Cox, who missed the Banks County game due to injury, gave Union County a 72-44 advantage at the 1:33 mark.

"It was a nice win," Garrett said. "We made a few changes going in because we're trying to find a spark. It seems like even in our wins we start slow and that's something we've discussed recently."

"We've got to start faster and find an early spark and I think we saw that with the back-to-back dunks."

Allison finished with 20 points on 7-for-12 shooting and 6-of-8 at the line. He also chipped in four assists, three rebounds and three steals.

Morlock had 10 points, four boards, two assists and a blocked shot; Drake, Brey and Hemphill finished with 9 points each while Hughes added six.

Drake was one point shy of a double-double, pulling down 10 rebounds to go with four assists and two steals. Meanwhile, Brey had seven boards and two steals; Hemphill grabbed two rebounds along with a steal; Hughes contributed two rebounds, two assists and a pair of steals.

Cox scored 5 points with

three boards; Rich added four points, two rebounds and two assists. Logan Helcher had four assists and three boards; Landon Knight had two rebounds and a steal; Lariscy finished with a dime and a steal.

Union shot 47% from the floor, 56% at the free throw line and 36% from behind the arc. Oglethorpe hit 44% percent of its shots, 34% from 3-point range and 36% at the line.

The difference was 31 Patriot giveaways that resulted in 39 Panther points off turnovers. Union dominated the paint, outscoring Oglethorpe 48-16 down low. The Panthers also controlled the glass, winning the rebounding battle 40-22 overall and 16-5 on the offensive boards.

Panthers 44, Banks County 79 - Union County had no answer for the first-place Leopards, who came out firing on all cylinders. Especially from long distance.

The Leopards hit 8-for-19 from 3-point territory in the first half and 17-for-34 overall as they took a 54-21 lead into the intermission.

Meanwhile, Union County was 0-for-10 from downtown and 8-for-28 overall in the first half.

After three quarters, Banks County extended its advantage to 72-32 as they

continued to shoot over 50% from the floor and 40% from behind the arc. The Panthers entered the fourth 1-for-17 from three and went on to finish 3-for-22.

"It was kind of a perfect storm for (Banks County)," Coach Garrett said. "They are a good team, they played really well and shot the lights out. We were a step slow and you can't do that against a team like Banks."

Union County would outscore the Leopards 12-7 in the fourth quarter and were led by 13 points, four rebounds, two assists and two steals on 4-for-13 shooting by Drake.

Allison finished 3-of-10 for 6 points, seven boards and three dimes. Hughes knocked down two of Union's three triples for 6 points, Knight added five, Morlock, Hemphill and Helcher scored four each. Rich finished with 2 points, Brey had three rebounds and Lariscy added an assist.

Banks County went on to hit 86% at the line to 71% for Union. The Panthers also committed 21 turnovers and were outscored 41-33 overall and 16-12 offensively.

"Maybe our gameplan going in wasn't good enough, but hopefully we'll play better when they come (to Blairsville) and hopefully they won't shoot like they did," Coach Garrett said.

The Leopards finished with five players in double figures, led by 17 from Region Player of the Year frontrunner Carl Cleveland, who hit 3-of-5 from downtown and 8-of-10 at the charity stripe.

Up next - Union County will travel to a hostile environment at Elbert County on Tuesday. And at this point of the season, every game is a must-win situation for the Panthers.

First, they must take care of business at Elbert, then force a split in the season series by beating Monticello on Friday. After all that, they will take the four-hour bus ride to Putnam County on Saturday.

If Union County can come away with a 3-0 record this week, they'll put themselves in position to force a tie for second place when Social Circle comes to town next week.

Tuesday's girls' game begins at 5 p.m. at Elbert. Friday's action tips at 6 p.m. and Saturday's Putnam game starts at 2 p.m.

Wrestling: Panthers fail to qualify for State at Team Area, turn attention to Traditional Area

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Monticello - Union County placed fifth at last weekend's Team Area meet, three spots shy of the second place finish needed to qualify for State.

The Panthers began the tournament with a 51-30 loss to Banks County despite wins from Cristian Martinez, Eli Smith-Foot, JJ Littles, Brady Guild and Trevor Guild.

After falling to Banks County, the Panthers were matched up with Putnam County and took care of business 52-30.

In the consolation semifinals, the Panthers drew

Oglethorpe County, who is regarded by many as one of the top teams in Class AA. But in the end, the Patriots proved too much and Union County dropped a 52-30 decision.

"We knew going into the (Team Area) tournament that we had a big task at hand," Union County coach Justin Byers said. "We do not have a full lineup, so every time we start a dual we are giving the other team 18 points due to forfeited weight classes."

"All in all, the team wrestled hard. Now we are putting our sights on traditional area in a few weeks."

Like Byers said, the focus now shifts to the Traditional Area tournament in two-and-a-half weeks. Last year, Union

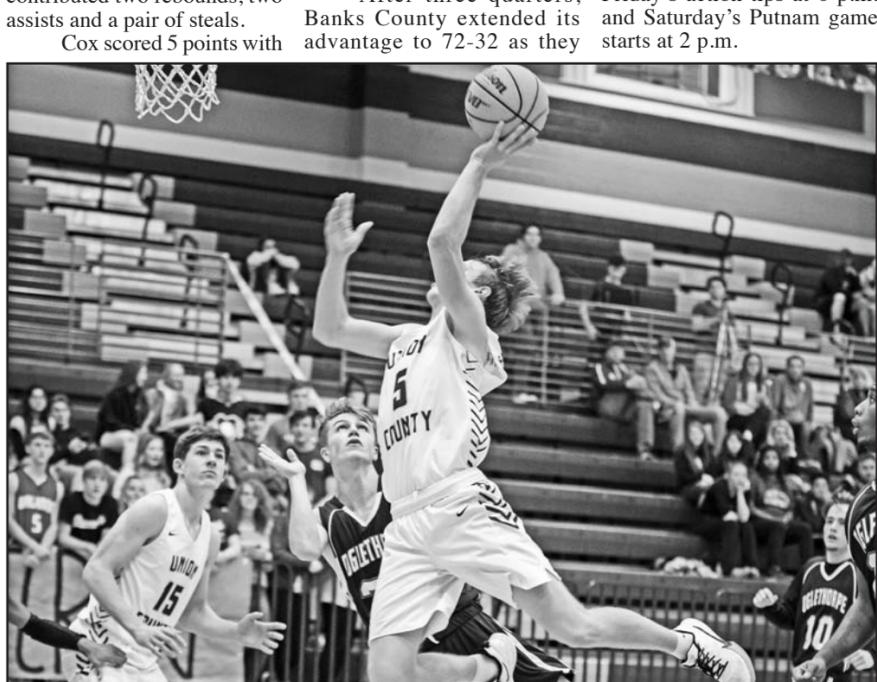
County qualified four wrestlers for sectionals in the Traditional Area Tournament.

The Panthers also featured six wrestlers that served as alternates, despite none getting the call.

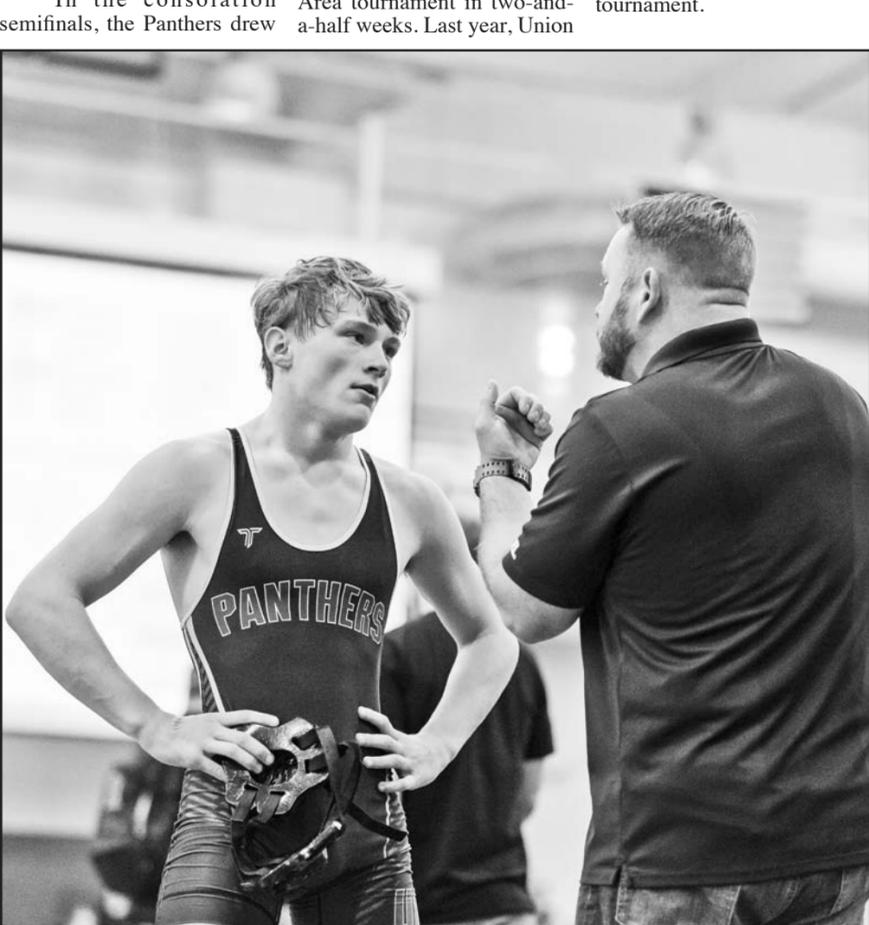
This year's Area Tournament will be Friday, Jan. 31 and Saturday, Feb. 1. Should Union County qualify, the State Sectionals will be the following weekend on Feb. 7 and 8.

The State Tournament gets underway in Macon on Feb. 12.

In preparation for the postseason, Union will compete at Marietta on Wednesday before visiting Elbert County on Jan. 25 for the Elbert Inferno tournament.



Pierson Allison glides to the hoop for two of his game-high 20 points vs Oglethorpe. Photo/Todd Forrest



Coach Justin Byers and Union County Wrestling have one more opportunity to qualify for next month's Class AA State Sectionals. Photo/Todd Forrest



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