

Sports

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Wrestling: Union Co. wins back-to-back Area titles

By Todd Forrest
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Nicholson - A year ago, Union County's wrestling program notched its first-ever Area Duals title.

Now they've done it in consecutive seasons.

Originally scheduled for the weekend, the threat of winter weather rescheduled the Area Duals tournament for Wednesday, Jan. 8 at East Jackson High School.

Unlike last year, where Union County entered as the favorite, this time around, the Panthers went into the tournament as the No. 4 seed, forcing them into the play-in dual vs. 5-seed Stephens County.

In the 4 vs. 5 matchup, Union County took care of business 42-27 to set up a clash vs. top-seed Franklin County.

Once again, the Panthers led wire-to-wire in a 49-30 victory over the Lions, setting up a Area championship dual vs. East Jackson.

During the finals, the Panthers were locked in a dead heat with the Eagles, needing a late technical fall (5-point) victory from Payton Legatt and Asa Smith-Foot to secure the 39-36 win.

Legatt, Smith-Foot, Paxton Legatt, Kevin Kilpatrick and Eli Flowers all finished the day 3-0 for Union County.

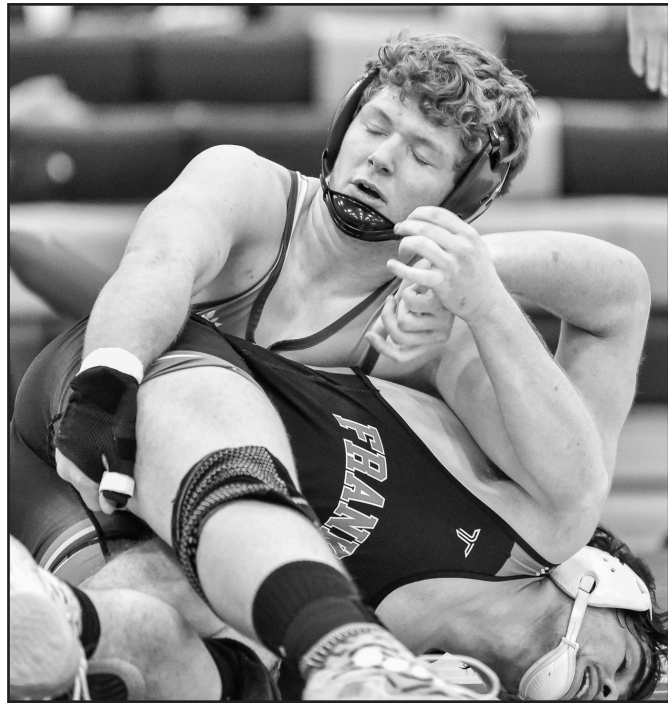
Jackson Arthur, Thomas Gary, Eli Hancock, Ayden Hyatt and Michael Raines ended the Area tourney with a 2-1 record.

Union County will compete for a Class AA State Duals Championship this weekend in Columbus. The action gets underway on Friday, Jan. 17 at the Columbus Convention and Trade Center.

The Individual Area Tournament begins on Jan. 31 at Stephens County. The Class AA State Sectionals are Feb. 7-8 at North Murray. The season concludes Feb. 13-15 in Macon with the Traditional State Championships.



Union County came out on top at East Jackson's Area Duals tournament, defeating Stephens County, Franklin County and East Jackson. Photo/Jaime Legatt



Senior Asa Smith-Foot picks up a win over Franklin County during the Area semifinals on Wednesday. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Payton Legatt scores a pinfall victory over Stephens County. The defending state champion went 3-0 for Union County during Wednesday's Area Duals tournament. Photo/Todd Forrest

Coach Perry departs: 'Union County will always be in my heart'

By Todd Forrest
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Union County head football coach Michael Perry announced his resignation during a Thursday, Jan 9 meeting with the team.

Perry, a Gainesville native, cited family reasons, particularly his parents health, as his primary motive for leaving.

"I'm still sad about [leaving]," Perry told the North Georgia News. "I loved all four years at Union County, but it came down to family. I'm a father, husband and son first. Both of my parents are dealing with major health issues, and ultimately, it came down to being closer to them."

Perry will take over the head football coaching duties at Flowery Branch High School in 2025.

Perry, a Gainesville High grad, arrived at Union County ahead of the 2021 season, and following a 3-7 campaign and a first-round postseason exit in year one, he led the Panthers to the program's first road playoff win during an 8-4 campaign in 2022.

Perry followed that up with another 8-4 mark in 2023, where Union County won playoff games in consecutive seasons for the first time.

In 2023, the Panthers



Michael Perry (R) and Tyler Perry (L) console senior Braylen Rader at Rockmart in 2023 following Rader's final play as a Panther. Photo/Todd Forrest

came within an eyelash of the program's first region title in nearly 50 years, finishing second in 8-AA and hosting a playoff game for just the fifth time in program history.

Heavy graduation losses and injuries forced Perry rely

on a young, inexperienced squad in 2024 with freshman starters on both sides of the ball. And despite starting 1-3, Union County rebounded to a 4-7 mark and a fourth GHSA Class AA State Tournament berth on Perry's watch.

Union County senior OL/LB Kaden Combs, who played four years under Perry and his brother, offensive line coach Tyler Perry, discussed the brothers' impact on his time at UCHS.

"I will always remem-

ber them and everything they taught me," Combs said. "I couldn't be more thankful for them for coming [to UCHS] when they did. They showed us how to win and taught us life lessons in and out of the game."

"My best memory of

Coach [Michael] Perry was how he would always call me out for talking to the other teams [during games].

"And something I'll never forget about Coach Tyler, was our conversation after our scrimmage at Chestatee my junior year."

Coach Michael Perry departs Union County with a 23-22 overall record.

"I'm thankful to [Union County School Superintendent] John Hill and the Union County administration for giving me this opportunity," Michael Perry said. "I was impacted by a lot of great people in Union County and I hope I was able to have an impact on the kids and everyone I got to know during my time [at UCHS]."

"Union County will always be in my heart and I wish everyone nothing but the best. But I know the program will be successful because of all the great people in Union County. I will always be a Panthers fan."

Prior to UCHS, he previously held head coaching duties at East Hall (2019-2020) and Roswell's Centennial High (2017-2018).

Michael Perry served as offensive coordinator for Gainesville's 2012 state championship squad. Later, he had a stop at Coffee County, reaching the 2016 Elite Eight as the team's as offensive coordinator.

Panthers push win streak to eight with blowouts at NM, Rockmart

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No. 5 Union County cruised to a pair of easy road victories last week at North Murray and Rockmart, improving to 15-2 overall and 7-1 in Region 7-AA ahead of the second half of Union's region slate, which begins Tuesday at Sonorville.

No. 5 Panthers 86, North Murray 59 - Union County outscored North Murray 50-25 during a second half that included a 32-point fourth - the Panthers' sixth consecutive contest featuring a 30-point quarter.

Houston Henry, who topped 500 career assists during the game, logged game-highs of 23 points, 13 assists and four steals to go with eight rebounds.

Maddox Young had 20 points, five boards and a steal; Kaden Combs finished with 15 points, 14 rebounds and two steals.

Union County never trailed on Tuesday night in Eton, sprinting ahead 4-0 and 10-3, eventually closing out the quarter at 17-11 courtesy of Henry's 25-footer to beat the horn.

Another Henry triple started the second, followed by a Hayden Hughes free throw that opened up a 10-point lead. Hughes' 3 at the 3:10 mark built a 31-18 lead but the Mountaineers managed to tread water for the remainder of the half and Union entered the break up 36-24.



Senior Houston Henry surpassed 500 career assists with 13 in Union's win at North Murray on Tuesday, Jan. 7. Photo/Todd Forrest

Young and Vince Marevka put the Panthers up 40-24 early in the third, but North Murray sliced the margin to 41-31 at the midway point of the frame.

Leading 45-34 with 2:37 left in the third, Union County hit its stride, closing the quarter on a 9-1 run, beginning with buckets by Combs and Young.

Marevka's steal-and-score followed a Mountaineer free throw and Young's trey put the finishing touches on the third with the Panthers up 54-35.

North Murray started the fourth with a 6-0 spurt in 36 seconds, prompting a Union timeout. Later, a Mountaineers' 3-pointer trimmed the gap to 60-48 with 5:56 to play, but the



Junior guard Holden Payne sparked Union's blowout at Rockmart with 10 points off the bench in the first half. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers countered with a 10-0 run in under a minute.

Henry scored on a drive to the hoop, Combs converted a second-chance opportunity, then Young and Henry

knocked down consecutive 3s to stretch the lead to 70-48 just inside the 5-minute mark.

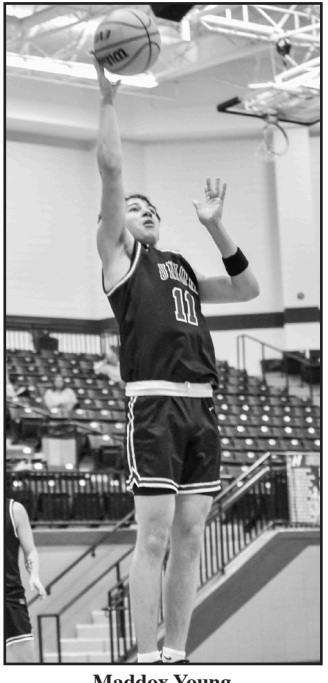
On the heels of a North Murray trey, Combs scored inside and Hughes drilled a transition 3 to put the game away at 75-41 with 3:55 remaining.

Hughes finished with 12 points, two rebounds and a steal. Marevka went for 8 points, four rebounds and a pair of steals. Holden Payne had 8 points, two boards and two assists.

Ethan Hogsed and Ryland Chambers added three rebounds and one assist apiece. Hayden Price had one board; Jackson Nichols had a steal.

North Murray was led by Beau Ellis' 20 points on four 3-pointers. Both squads finished with 10 treys each.

No. 5 Panthers 79, Rockmart 40 - Union County put away 7-AA's last-place Rockmart early on Thursday, Jan. 9, a contest moved up 24 hours due to winter weather. The Panthers jumped out front 20-10 after a quarter and



Maddox Young

CLASS 2A GHSAA WEEK 10			
BOYS	SCHOOL	RECORD	MOVEMENT
#1	CARVER-COLUMBUS	11-2	--
#2	COLUMBIA	12-3	--
#3	KIPP ATLANTA	10-4	--
#4	BUTLER	7-6	--
#5	UNION COUNTY	15-2	--
#6	SOUTH ATLANTA	9-5	--
#7	TATNALL COUNTY	13-2	--
#8	MORGAN COUNTY	12-6	--
#9	SUMTER COUNTY	6-6	NR
#10	HART COUNTY	11-6	-1

No. 9 Lady Panthers end two-game skid with easy wins at NM, Rockmart

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No. 9 Union County (11-6, 4-4) got back on track last week with road wins at North Murray and Rockmart, moving the Lady Panthers into a 3-way tie for fourth in Region 7-AA with Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe (LFO) and No. 10 Coahuilla Creek.

Union visits 7-AA's second-place and 6th-ranked Sonorville on Tuesday, followed by a Friday trip to LFO to conclude five straight road games.

No. 9 Lady Panthers 57, North Murray 25 - The Mountaineers never threatened in last Tuesday's region contest and Union County pulled away from a 29-14 halftime score to lead 47-20 after three.

Ariel McCarter poured in a game-high 18 points with eight rebounds, six assists and four steals. Sloane Dyer went for 10 points, nine boards, two assists and a steal.

The Lady Panthers jumped out to an 18-8 lead after a quarter, then extended their margin during a low-scoring second period. But after North Murray opened the third with a bucket, Union County answered with an 18-4 run, triggered by 10-straight points by McCarter via two drives to the hoop and a pair of 3s.

On the heels of McCarter's 10-0 surge, Regan Trlica's free throw built a 40-16 advantage with 3:29 left in the third. Trlica found Aubrie Akins in the post for a layup, then Trlica knocked down a triple from the corner for a 45-17 score.

Later in the third, McCarter hit two at the charity stripe before the Mountaineers closed the quarter with a trey.

Another McCarter 3-pointer answered a North Murray deuce, and Dyer finished off a fast break to spot Union County a 52-22 lead at the 4:30 mark as Coach Thomas Nelson went to his reserves the rest of the way.

Trlica finished with 10 points, seven boards, three assists, two steals and a block. Akins had 5 points, five rebounds and an assist. Hope Taylor went for 4 points, seven boards and three blocks. Mady Adams had 4 points, a rebound and an assist.

Nomi Nelson scored 3 points and grabbed one rebound.



Senior Ariel McCarter was able to get to the basket at will during Union County's win at North Murray. Photo/Todd Forrest

Livia Haney had 2 points; Ragan McCarter added 1 point and a rebound; McKenna Hood and Ella Akins each had three boards and an assist; Tatum Fisher pulled down a rebound; Samantha Combs had an assist.

No. 9 Lady Panthers 59, Rockmart 27 - The Lady Panthers overcame a slow start during Thursday's trip to Rock-

mart, pulling away via a 22-4 second frame.

Dyer led Union County with 11 points, two rebounds, two assists and a steal. Adams had 10 points, six boards, two steals and an assist.

After falling behind 5-2, Union outscored the Yellow Jackets 11-2 over the final 4:37 of the first. On top 13-7 to



Junior Mady Adams had 10 points and six rebounds in Union County win at Rockmart on Thursday. Photo/Todd Forrest

commence the second quarter, Adams converted a second-chance basket and Nomi Nelson connected from 18 feet.

Adams and Trlica stretched the lead to 21-9 and Akins hit a jumper in the paint before Rockmart's final points of the half made it 23-11 with 3:43 before the break.

Aubrie Akins scored off

an inbounds pass, Ariel McCarter connected from downtown in transition and Hood finished off a fast break for a 30-11 score inside of 2 minutes.

Union County closed the final minute of the quarter with an Adams putback and a Dyer trey, opening up a 35-11 halftime lead. Taylor, Dyer and Trlica grew the lead to 43-14

early in the third, and following a Rockmart trey, Adams and Ariel McCarter made it 47-17 at the 3:15 mark of the frame.

Taylor finished with 7 points, seven rebounds and a block. Trlica had 6 points, six boards, two assists and two steals. Aubrie Akins had 6 points and six boards; Ariel McCarter added 5 points, eight assists, six rebounds and two steals.

Haney went for 4 points and an assist. Amaria Johnson had 3 points, one rebound and one assist. Hood had 2 points, three steals and three boards. Ella Akins had 2 points and two rebounds; Nomi Nelson had 2 points and a rebound; Combs added five boards and a steal; Fisher contributed two rebounds and an assist; Ragan McCarter pulled down two rebounds.

Up next: Union County's trip to No. 6 Sonorville will tip-off at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 14. The Phoenix defeated Union 51-36 on Dec. 6 in a contest that saw the Lady Panthers lose three-year starter and All-Region forward Katelyn Brown to injury during a 2-point game in the third quarter.

The Lady Panthers visit LFO on Friday, Jan. 17 at 7 p.m. in a rematch of Union's 60-44 victory on Dec. 10.

In the first meeting, LFO senior Christen Collins scored 27 of her team's 44 points, while Taylor poured in a career-high 27 to lead the Lady Panthers.



Regan Trlica got back on track with 10 points and seven boards at North Murray. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sloane Dyer led UC with 11 points at Rockmart. Photo/Todd Forrest