

Sports

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Wrestling: Four Panthers take home Area championships Union County sends 13 wrestlers to State Sectionals

By Todd Forrest
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Toccoa - Eli Flowers, Paxon Legatt, Payton Legatt and Asa Smith-Foot all collected gold in their respective weight classes during Saturday's Area Tournament at Stephens County.

Jackson Arthur and Aiden Hyatt placed second; Thomas Gary, Kevin Kilpatrick, Ayden Lee and Michael Raines all came in third.

Riley Mortensen earned a spot at this week's sectionals via a fourth place performance.

At 113 lbs, Flowers earned an Area title by way of pinfall victories over Stephens County's Dakota Martinez and East Jackson's Angel Rodriguez.

Paxon Legatt finished first at 157, scoring a 17-0 technical fall over Franklin County's Colton Roberts during the semis before pinning Hart County's Knox Pierce.

Defending State Champion Payton Legatt (165) won his third-straight Area title via pinfalls over Hart County's Champ Blackwell and Franklin County's Hunter Nichols.

Asa Smith-Foot (190) received a bye into the finals, where he pinned East Jackson's Dario Ferizovic.

In the 285-lb division, Arthur scored a 7-4 decision over Hart County's Bryce Durrett, but was pinned by East Jackson's Matthew Streetman in the finals.

Hyatt pinned Hart's Jacaden Wheeler during the 126-lb semifinals before suffering a pin at the hands of East Jackson's Mason Smith.

Gary scored a pin over Stephens' Tucker Fuller in the 132-lb quarters, but fell to



The Union County men qualified 11 wrestlers for this weekend's Class AA State Sectionals. Photo/Jaime Legatt

Hart's Harrison Krause during the semifinal match. He rebounded with a 16-1 technical fall over East Jackson's Robert Hollett in the third-place bout.

Kilpatrick pinned Stephens' Clark Sanders in the 170-lb quarterfinals, but a medical forfeit cost him his semifinal bout vs. Franklin's Zane Puff.

Kilpatrick bounced back in the third-place match via a pin over East Jackson's Evan Reed.

At 215 lbs, Lee dropped his semifinal contest to East Jackson's Emer Jacinto, and then went unchallenged in the third-place match.

Hart County's Keylan Martin defeated Michael Raines to open 120-lb action. Raines didn't face a challenger for third place.

At 138 lbs, Mortensen pinned East Jackson's Roberto

Acevedo in the quarterfinals but suffered a pin to Franklin's Josh Baughcum.

During the third-place bout, Hart County's Ben Westmaas nearly blew a 5-0 advantage, but held on to edge Mortensen via a 7-6 decision.

In the Friday's night girls tournament, Taylor placed third at 155 lbs, starting with a pinfall over Clarke Central's Cameron Mojack.

Chestatee's Kyle Rodgers pinned Taylor in the quarters, but she bounced back with pins over Madison County's Jorga Means and East Hall's Laura Davis.

During the consolation semis, Taylor pinned Stephens County's Dennessa Edmonds, earning a spot in the third-place bout vs. Marilyn Burgos of Cedar Shoals.

With under 30 seconds

remaining and trailing 6-2, Taylor stormed ahead for the win, scoring a 2-point escape, followed by a 3-point takedown with 6 seconds left.

Kraft opened the 140-lb tourney with a pinfall victory vs. North Forsyth's McKenzie Lucas and a medical forfeit win vs. Chestatee's Ivana Munoz.

Joey Byers of Madison County pinned Kraft in the semis, but Kraft picked up her second win over Lucas in the consolation semis.

Jackson County's Amiya Edwards pinned Kraft in the third-place match.

At 135, Charlei Robinson lost her first two matches of the evening.

Other men's wrestlers that missed the cut include Eli Hancock (106 lbs), Ryker Lambert (144) and Andrew Engle (150).



Jada Taylor and Kristyn Kraft both qualified for sectionals during the girls' Area tournament on Friday night. Photo/UCHS

NASCAR 2025

By Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter

ELLIOTT WINS THE CLASH

Chase Elliott drove one of the best short track races of his career on the way to victory in Sunday night's NASCAR Clash.

Elliott led 171 laps of the 200-lap race, and for most of the race, his car appeared to be running on rails, that's how smooth his driving style was. He started on the pole and led the first 96 laps, before relinquishing the lead to Denny Hamlin four laps before the halfway point. He regained the lead from Hamlin during lap 125 and was never seriously challenged for the remainder of the race.

"It feels great to be back in victory lane," Elliott said. "This is our first Clash win and I really appreciate all the team helping me get this."

"I didn't want to lose control of the race after I got the lead back. It looked like Ryan (Blaney) was running good, and I thought he might be laying back. But we had a good car from the beginning, and it was a great night for all the team and fans."

"I know it's not a points race, but it is nice to win, for sure. Just really proud of our team for just continuing to keep our heads down and push forward, for sure."

"Yeah, fortunately it worked out. Great way to start the season. Huge thanks to everybody at Hendrick Motorsports, a lot of hard work over the off-season. Excited



Elliott Wins The Clash to get to Daytona. It's a great way to start the season."

It looked like Ryan Blaney might have the fastest car on the track as the laps wound down. He had moved up from the tail end of the field to second by lap 147. He was right on Elliott's rear bumper for 15-20 laps, but that was as close as he could get. As the race neared its end, he had dropped back several car lengths, and was not a threat to Elliott, as he approached the checkered flag.

"Tonight's racing was a blast," said Blaney. "We had a car that was really good. I thought I might be able to catch him (Elliott), but we just didn't have what we needed to pass or win."

The remaining top-10 finishers: 3. Denny Hamlin, 4. Joey Logano, 5. Bubba Wallace, 6. Ross Chastain, 7. Austin Cindric, 8. Tyler Reddick, 9. Shane van Gisbergen, 10. Chris Buescher.

Racing on the quarter-mile track was chaos for some drivers.

Kyle Busch started his heat race by lining up on the outside of Row 4. Things wasn't as promising as he might have hoped. The 25-lap heat saw early conflicts that added fuel to the fire. On the sixth lap, Busch found himself caught in an incident alongside drivers Justin Haley and Noah Gragson, prompting a spin and bringing out a caution.

Busch felt like he was deliberately spun out by Haley, and during the caution period, caught up with Haley and spun him around, prompting NASCAR to issue a warning to Busch.

NASCAR ANNOUNCES ELIGIBLE ROOKIE DRIVERS

NASCAR has announced the drivers who have been approved to run for rookie of the year honors in the Cup, Xfinity and Craftsman Truck Series in 2025.

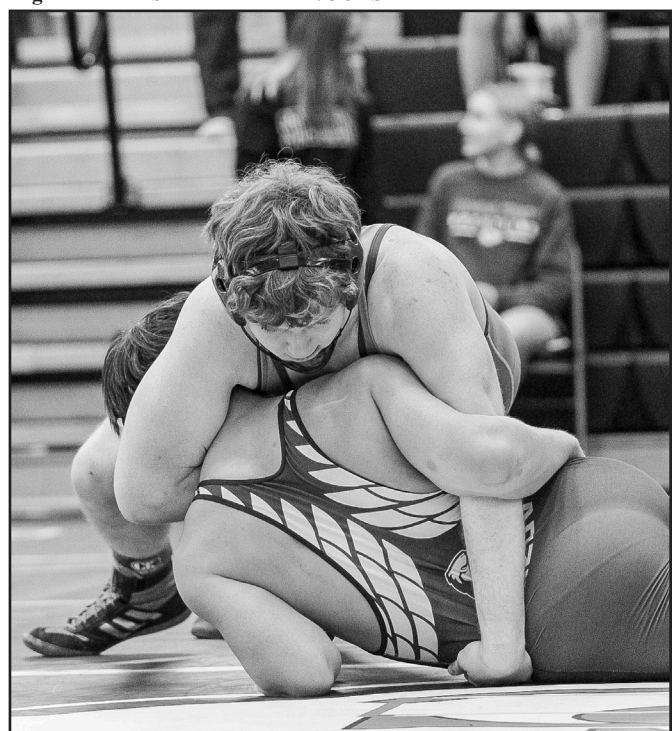
Cup Series: Shane van Gisbergen (No. 88 Trackhouse Racing) and Riley Herbst (No. 35 23XI Racing).

Xfinity Series: Carson Kvapil (No. 1 JR Motorsports), Connor Zilisch (No. 88 JR Motorsports), William Sawalich (No. 18 Joe Gibbs Racing), Taylor Gray (No. 54 Joe Gibbs Racing), Daniel Dye (No. 10 Kaulig Racing), Christian Eckes (No. 16 Kaulig Racing), Nick Sanchez (No. 48 Big Machine Racing), Dean Thompson (No. 26 Sam Hunt Racing).

Truck Series: Toni Breidinger (No. 5 Tricon Garage), Gio Ruggiero (No. 17 Tricon Garage), Connor Mosack (No. 81 McAnally-Hilgermann Racing), Andres Perez de Lara (No. 77 Spire Motorsports), Christian Rose (No. 44 Niece Motorsports), Frankie Muniz (No. 33 Reaume Brothers Racing).



Union County wrestling seniors (L-R) Andrew Engle, Ayden Lee, Payton Legatt and Asa Smith-Foot. Photo/UCHS



Senior Asa Smith-Foot will depart UCHS with back-to-back Area Championships at 175 and 190 lbs. Photo/Jaime Legatt

No. 7 Panthers lockup region's 2-seed in two blowout wins

Union hosts North Murray Tuesday; Senior Night Friday vs. Rockmart

By Todd Forreast
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The 7th-ranked Union County men (19-4, 10-3) cruised to easy wins vs. Murray County and at Ringgold, locking up the No. 2 seed in next week's Region 7-AA tournament.

The Panthers conclude the regular season this week with home contests vs. North Murray and Rockmart, where the Union men can secure back-to-back 20-win seasons for the first time since 1998.

Union County's victory at Ringgold on Friday, Jan. 31 marked three straight 19-win campaigns, an accomplishment the program hasn't pulled off since 1980-1982.

No. 7 Panthers 81, Murray County 47 - Union County hit 50% (31-for-62) from the floor and used a 22-8 second quarter to deliver an early knockout blow vs. Murray County on Tuesday, Jan. 28.

The Panthers had five players in double figures, led by 16 apiece from Houston Henry, Hayden Hughes and Vince Marevka. Union County got 15 points from Maddox Young and 10 from Holden Payne.

"We want to get to a place with our program where we don't have to change anything for any [opponent]," head coach Corey Garrett said. "We practice what we do every single day, we make it better, then on game night, we come out and do what we do."

"These seniors have wanted to establish an identity where everyone knows what we're going to do, night in and night out."

Union stormed out to an 18-7 lead and held a 22-15 margin after one before opening the second frame on a 14-1 run, kindled by a Hughes 3-pointer.

Following a Murray free throw, Marevka scored and drew a foul, but Hughes put back Marevka's miss from the line. Henry's right-handed up-and-under lay-in made it 31-16 before Marevka powered his way for two on the next possession. Henry added a free throw and Young drove the baseline to cap the run with his team up 36-16 with 3:10 left in the half.

The Indians trimmed the gap to 36-21, but Young answered with a short jumper and Henry hit from 22 feet, growing the lead back to 20. Later, with time winding down, Hughes



Junior Vince Marevka had 14 points and five boards in Union County's win at Ringgold on Friday, Jan. 31. Photo/Todd Forreast

connected from the corner, sending the Panthers into the break up 44-23.

Consecutive Murray treys started the third, but Union countered with two buckets by Marevka and one from Kaden Combs. Another Marevka deuce, this one at the quarter's 3:30 mark, opened up a 54-31 advantage.

A Hughes triple expanded the margin to 57-33 just over a minute later, and then Henry beat the buzzer by banking in an off-balance 15-footer, sending Union to the fourth up 61-37.

Payne, Young and Hughes bumped the lead to 69-41 early in the fourth before Hughes' trey sealed the outcome with 4:56 remaining.

Combs finished with 8 points and four rebounds. Ethan Hogsed had one rebound and one assist; Jacob Rodriguez chipped in one board and a steal.

Henry recorded a game-high nine assists to go with eight rebounds and five steals. Marevka led everyone with 10 boards while coming up with two steals. Hughes pulled down eight rebounds and had four

steals; Young added five boards and four assists.

No. 7 Panthers 67, Ringgold 53 - Henry delivered a 22-point, six-steal performance and Union County landed another early knockout courtesy of a 31-8 start at Ringgold on Friday, Jan. 31.

"My message before the game was 'we have to start fast,'" Garrett said. "We wanted to take their Senior Night crowd out of it and I think we got the message."

In all, four Panthers scored in double-figures with Hughes going for 15 points, 10 rebounds, six assists and three steals. Marevka had 14 points and five boards; Young finished with 13 points and five assists.

Union's early onslaught began with five straight Maddox Young points. Then the defense cranked up the pressure, forcing consecutive turnovers, resulting in two Henry 3s and an early Tigers timeout.

"Our identity is based on our defense," Garrett said. "Our 1-3-1 (defense), and even our 2-3 to a certain extent, is our press defense. We don't [full court] press a lot so our 1-3-1 is our press, and when it's work-



Senior Houston Henry dribbles through traffic during the second half at Ringgold on a night the point guard went for 22 points on 4 of 10 from long range. Photo/Todd Forreast

ing, we're pretty good. And you saw that vs. Murray and at Ringgold."

The Panthers forced another steal out of the stoppage, leading to a Young layup off a feed from Henry. A Hughes trey grew the lead to 16-2, followed by two Marevka buckets and a fast-break layup by Combs.

Up 24-8 after one, Union County scored the first 7 points of the second, all but putting the contest away before halftime. Marevka began the 7-0 spurt, then Hughes finished off a fast break before knocking down a 3-pointer for a 31-8 lead.

The Panthers cooled off the rest of the way but remained in control at the break, 35-17.

Ringgold closed within 35-21 early in the third, but Henry, Hughes and Young answered Tiger baskets for a 43-27 advantage before Combs split two free throws and Hughes scored off a miss.

Another Combs free throw stretched the lead to 47-27, and later, Young's dribble-drive layup sent his team into the fourth ahead 56-39. With Ringgold still clinging to hope for a Senior Night upset, Henry put those wishes to bed with

a trey that opened up a 62-42 lead.

Henry finished 4 of 10 from behind the arc, to go with four rebounds and four assists. Additionally, the victory marked the Panthers' 70th win with Henry running point.

Combs had 3 points, 10 boards, three steals and two assists. Payne recorded one assist; Hogsed pulled down a rebound.

Up next: Union County wraps up the regular season with a chance to match last year's win total of 21 ahead of the postseason. The Panthers host North Murray on Tuesday, followed by Friday's Senior Night contest vs. Rockmart.

Two wins this week

CLASS 2A				WEEK 13	
BOYS	SCHOOL	RECORD	MOVEMENT		
#1	CARVER-COLUMBUS	18-2	--		
#2	COLUMBIA	18-4	--		
#3	SOUTH ATLANTA	16-7	--		
#4	KIPP ATLANTA	17-5	--		
#5	BUTLER	12-8	+1		
#6	LANEY	16-6	-1		
#7	UNION COUNTY	19-4	--		
#8	TATNALL COUNTY	17-2	--		
#9	MORGAN COUNTY	17-6	--		
#10	BURKE COUNTY	14-3	NR		

McCarter's 28 isn't enough to upset No. 4 Murray County in 2 OTs

First-half struggles sink Union County in Friday trip to Ringgold

By Todd Forreast
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No. 10 Union County (13-10, 6-8) dropped two region contests last week, including a Tuesday night double-overtime heartbreaker to No. 4 Murray County, a contest that saw the Lady Panthers squander a 17-point second-half lead.

The Lady Panthers sit sixth in 7-AA but can rebound this week and finish .500 in region play with wins over North Murray and Rockmart -- two squads Union handled with ease in a pair of January road victories. And while a top-four spot in 7-AA is likely out of reach, Union County only needs a tie with fifth-place Coahulla (7-7), due to a pair of victories over the Colts, awarding Union the tiebreaker.

No. 10 Lady Panthers 72, No. 4 Murray County 75 (2 OTs) - Union County couldn't hang on to a 37-20 third-quarter lead, and then let a 4-point lead slip away in the final 10 seconds of regulation on Tuesday night in Blairsville.

"We had seven turnovers in the fourth quarter and that really hurt us," head coach Thomas Nelson said. "I was really proud of our effort, but when it came down to the big moments, we couldn't handle the pressure and that's what got us."

Ariel McCarter did her best to deliver Union County a massive upset, scoring 28 points on 16-of-18 at the line, but it wasn't enough to overcome 35 points from Murray County's Callan Ledford.

"[Ledford] is probably the best player in the league and she really took off in the fourth quarter," Nelson said. "Our girls were already putting out everything they had, then when Ledford turned it on, that proved a little too much for us."

With Murray (21-1, 13-1) trailing by 17, Ledford heated up late in the third, slicing the deficit to 45-36 entering the fourth, where the Indians moved within seven during



Ariel McCarter takes a hard foul from Murray's Callan Ledford. The duo combined for 63 points in Tuesday's game. Photo/Todd Forreast

the opening minute. McCarter countered with five straight points, building a 50-38 lead inside of 5:30.

However, within 70 seconds, the Indians cut the margin in half, narrowing the gap to 52-46. Following a scoring drought by both squads, Union's lead was trimmed to 52-48 with 2:55 remaining, but Dyer fired right back with a corner-trey and McCarter split two free throws for a 56-48 advantage near the 2-minute mark.

Still an 8-point game with 1:15 left, the Indians connected from long-range and Union turned it over on the ensuing possession. Two missed free throws allowed Murray to move within 56-54 with 17 seconds left, but McCarter hit from the charity stripe, handing her team a 4-point cushion.

Panthers couldn't get the ball inbounds, resulting in a 5-second violation. Murray quickly tied it up off the inbounds pass, sending the contest to overtime.

Taylor picked up her fifth foul early in the first OT session and Murray grabbed a 60-58 lead off the resulting free throws. McCarter tied things up at the foul line but Murray scored the next 4 points before an Aubrie Akins free throw made it 64-61 at the 2:10 mark of overtime.

Two McCarter free throws had Union within a point a minute later, then Murray hit 1 of 2 at the line allowing Akins' bucket with 27 seconds left to force a second OT.

Akins hit a go-ahead bucket in the second overtime session but Murray answered to go up 70-69 inside of two minutes.

All tied up at 70-70 following a McCarter free throw at the 1:33 mark, Murray



Hope Taylor had 13 points and 13 rebounds before fouling out in overtime during Union's loss to Murray County. Photo/Todd Forreast

scored the next 5 points to put the game away.

"Outside of Ariel, we shot 3 for 12 at the free throw line," Nelson said. "Like I said, the moment was just too big for some of us."

McCarter had five rebounds, four steals, three assists and a blocked shot to go with her team-high 28 points.

"Ariel's best games are when she's loading up the stat column," Nelson said. "She can get you 30 points, 8-10 rebounds, 8-10 assists and a lot of steals. We're going to miss her. I wish we could duplicate her before she leaves."

"She's so nonchalant about everything, but when it's game time, you can see her face change and know that she's about to get serious."

Taylor finished with 13 points and 13 boards; Akins had 12 points, six rebounds and a block.

of two Ariel McCarter treys and one from Dyer, but Ringgold stretched its advantage to 47-35 at quarter's end. The Tigers continued pulling away, scoring the first 6 points of the fourth while holding the visitors to two fourth-quarter field goals.

Trlica led the Lady Panthers with 11 points, five rebounds, two assists and two steals. McCarter finished with 8 points, five rebounds, four assists and two steals. Taylor had 7 points, nine boards and four blocks. Brown had 5 points, six rebounds, three steals and two assists.

McKenna Hood scored 4 points with one steal; Dyer ended her night with 3 points, three rebounds and two assists. Akins had 2 points, four rebounds and a steal. Nomi Nelson added a free throw and two steals.

Up next: Union County hosts North Murray at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 4. UCHS will hold its Senior Night celebration on Friday night during the regular season finale vs. Rockmart.

Union County defeated both squads in blowout fashion in the first meetings.

"We have Senior Night this week," Coach Nelson said. "They are a group that we're not only going to miss on the court, but we'll miss in the classroom and community. They are a great group of girls."

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