

Sports

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Lady Panthers roll 69-40, advance to Sweet 16

Fourth-seeded Therrell no match for Union County in first round of State Tourney

By Todd Forrest
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Three days removed from claiming the program's fifth Region title, the Union County Lady Panthers advanced to the Sweet 16 for the second time in five years with a 69-40 home blowout of Atlanta's Therrell High on Thursday, Feb. 13.

Making its 19th State playoff appearance in program history, Union County was never threatened following an early 8-0 advantage that turned into a 16-7 lead after one and 36-19 at the half.

"You never know what to expect, especially after such a quick turnaround, but I think our girls were focused and ready to go out there and compete," Union head coach Crystal Beach said after her team's first round victory. "It's tough (to avoid a letdown), but this is the most focused that I've seen some of our young women this season and their focus continues to strengthen on each step of the journey, which is always nice to see at this point of the season."

The Lady Panthers' full-court pressure defense caught Therrell off-guard from the opening tip, resulting in a quick timeout, less than 40 seconds into the contest. After weathering the onslaught, the visitors trimmed the margin in half at 10-5, but the frontcourt duo of Ava Hunter and Kait McCarter proved too much for the 4-seed from Region 6-AA.

"Our goal is to always get catches in the paint but we (McCarter and myself) wouldn't be able to do it if we didn't have our guards to get the ball up the court and pass it to us," Hunter said.

Baskets by Hunter, McCarter and two free throws from Andelin Hill allowed Union County to close the quarter with a 6-2 spurt and a 16-7 advantage.

After scoring 10 points in the first frame, Hunter scored two buckets during the Lady



L-R: Sophomore Ava Hunter matched her second-highest point total of the season with 27 vs Therrell. With 12 points and 13 rebounds in the first round, Brenau commit Kait McCarter surpassed 800 career rebounds, and is just three points shy of reaching 900 career points. Photo/Todd Forrest

Panthers' 7-0 run to begin the second to take control at 23-7.

Hunter would finish the first half with 16 points, McCarter added six, freshman Ellie Cook had five and Brooke Dockrey scored four to pace Union County to a 36-19 advantage.

Despite the region tournament's late conclusion on Monday, the Lady Panthers were able to quickly regroup for Thursday's State opener, while not suffering a hangover following the emotional high of winning their first region title in 11 years.

"This has been one of the craziest weeks ever but Coach Beach has prepared us for this," Hunter said. "We also have all of our teammates to keep us focused and we stay together through everything."

Therrell managed to hang around early in the third but were unable to get any closer than a 38-25 deficit with under six

minutes left in the quarter. That's when Union County finally put the contest away with a 13-4 run over the final 4:55 of the third to take a 51-29 lead into the fourth.

McCarter began the run by scoring on an offensive rebound. Hunter followed with two free throws, sophomore Rebekah Chambers scored down low, then Dockrey hit a short jumper for a 46-27 advantage.

Hill knocked down a triple to push the margin to 20 at 49-29, and Dockrey capped off the quarter with a steal and a layup.

The Lady Panthers quickly opened up a 26-point advantage with baskets by Hunter and McCarter to start the fourth. A Hill trey, a Chambers deuce and a coast-to-coast take by Hunter stretched the difference to 62-34 at the 3:45 mark.

A 3-point play by Hunter and a putback by McCarter were the final points from the starters



as Union County led 67-38 with more than two minutes to play.

Hunter finished with a game-high 27 points, McCarter had 12, Hill added nine, Dockrey scored eight, Cook had seven and Chambers chipped in six off the bench.

Following a season-low 37 points vs Banks County in the region title game, Coach Beach was hoping to put some of her team's offensive woes to rest. And while she admits she hasn't cured all of the team's ills, a 69-point outing in the first round, aided by 39 combined points from Hunter and McCarter, is definitely a step in the right direction.

"The plan was to get our offense moving because we didn't execute that well against Banks," Beach said. "We're most successful when the ball is touched in the paint and then kicked back out whenever needed. That's what we did tonight

and I was really proud of Kait and Ava.

"I wouldn't say we solved all (of our scoring issues) but I feel much better. We still have some things we need to tweak, but tonight we saw more movement and more of the things that we like to see."

McCarter led the way with 13 rebounds, Hunter had seven and Dockrey pulled down six boards. Hill grabbed three rebounds, while Riley Allison, Cook and Chambers had two apiece.

Dockrey recorded a team-high four assists. Allison and Cook added two each.

Chambers and Allison led the way with two steals apiece; Hill finished with two blocks, Ansley Collins and Allison also blocked a shot.

Hill accounted for both Union treys as the team shot just 13% (2-for-16) from deep. Overall, Union County was 17-of-47

from the floor for 31%.

In the next round, the Lady Panthers will face a 19-9 Butler squad that is led by 6-foot senior Micha Watson (No. 22), who's averaging 16 points and 8 rebounds per game from the post. She shoots 51% from the field, however, she's not much of a threat from long distance, making only two treys on seven attempts.

Junior wing Brionna Sims (No. 25) comes in averaging 12 points and 3 steals. At 5-foot-7, Sims is second on the team with 24 treys and makes 70% of her free throws.

Others to watch are junior point guard Lauren Brady (No. 1) and 6-foot junior post Jayla Thomas (No. 23).

Brady leads the team with 28 triples and 3.3 steals a game. She averages 7 points per and hits her free throws at a clip of 71%.

As for Thomas, she leads the team with 8.5 rebounds and 1.8 blocks a game. Her 9.6 points per game are third best on the team while shooting 51% from the floor. She can be a liability at the line, however, making only 49% of her tries. Additionally, Thomas has not attempted a 3-pointer all season.

Fans should expect an old school low-post battle when the Lady Bulldogs make the trip to Blairsville. Neither squad is dangerous from long distance with Union making less than three triples per game and shooting 23% from 3. Meanwhile, Butler is averaging less than four made 3s a game and is hitting just 25% from deep.

With a win, the Lady Panthers will match the 2001 State Runner-Up squad with 23 victories -- the most since 1994. Union County is also looking for its seventh victory this season over a Sweet 16 team. They currently own wins over White County and Gilmer (Class AAAA), Fannin County (AAA), Putnam County and Banks County (AA) and Tallulah Falls (A).

Union County and Butler will meet at 7 p.m. Wednesday.

Basketball: Union County ladies claim first Region title since 2009

Defense sparks late run as Lady Panthers surge past Banks County, 37-33

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Tiger - The Union County Lady Panthers outscored Banks County 13-2 over the final 8:19 to secure the program's first Region Championship since 2009 with a 37-33 victory.

"We just focus on intensity, effort and playing together, and you saw that here tonight," Union County coach Crystal Beach said after the game when asked about her team's never-say-die attitude. "When we stay true to Lady Panther basketball, you get results like this."

Trailing 31-24, late in the third quarter, Union County scored 13 of the game's final 15 points to race past the Lady Leopards in the Region 8-AA title game, held on Monday, Feb. 10 at Rabun County High School -- a gym the seniors had previously never won in until the Region semifinal victory over Putnam County.

Senior Kait McCarter sparked the Lady Panthers' run with a putback in the final moments of the third, pulling her team within 31-26 entering the final frame.

"The drive inside of all three of us (seniors Brooke Dockrey, Andelin Hill and McCarter) is always there and never goes away," McCarter said after the game. "(Winning region) has been our goal since the start of the season and it's what keeps us focused. Losing was never an option for us tonight."

Union County opened the fourth with fullcourt pressure, forcing a quick turnover that led to a Hill layup and a Banks County timeout. Less than a minute later, McCarter scored inside to pull the Lady Panthers within a point at 31-30, before both teams entered a three-minute scoring drought that saw the score remain unchanged until the 3:45 mark when Hill gave Union a 32-31 lead with a jumper in the paint.

"We play our best of-



The 2019-20 Union County Lady Panthers ended the program's two-game skid in region championship games. Photo/Todd Forrest

fense when we're playing our best defense," Beach said. "We had great senior leadership that stepped up tonight and demanded excellence."

Banks answered with its only points of the period - a basket by 2:56 to play - to briefly regain control at 33-32. But Hunter responded by going to work down low, putting the Lady Panthers on top to stay at 34-33 and 2:16 on the clock.

Following a Banks County turnover, Union County missed the front-end of a 1-and-1 attempt with 35 seconds left. Still leading by a point with 20 seconds to play, Dockrey came up with the first of two game-saving steals when she dropped down from the perimeter to strip the ball away from a Lady Leopard in the low post.

"Honestly, I don't even know what happened," Dockrey said, admitting it was own her decision to provide the strongside help that resulted in a turnover. "Next thing I know, I have the ball. It wasn't designed, it just happened. Maybe it was the adrenaline. All I remember was taking the ball away and I just started

dribbling."

After drawing a foul and hitting 1-of-2 to stretch the lead to 35-33 with 14 seconds left, Dockrey picked the pocket of the Banks point guard as she crossed half court. Dockrey then proceeded to avoid defenders until she was sent to the line with 3.3 seconds to play.

"I had so much adrenaline flowing in that moment and I just had my mind made up that I wasn't going to let that girl score on me," Dockrey said when asked what made her gamble for the steal with a region title on the line. "I wasn't worried about committing a foul, I just wanted the ball and I took it."

Dockrey erased any fears of Union County losing another region title on a last-second prayer (see Union vs Rabun - 2015 Region 8-AA Championship Game) by sinking both of her attempts from the stripe, opening up a 37-33 lead and clinching the Lady Panthers' third region title since 1994.

"Ever since our freshman year, this has been our goal and I think we had it set in our minds that, no matter what, we were going to get (a region

title)," Dockrey said.

Union County's 37-point output was their lowest of the year, but it was enough to get the job done despite finishing just 1-for-11 from long distance and 11-for-41 (27%) overall.

Hunter led the way with 11 points on just 3-of-13 from the floor, but the sophomore hit 5-of-6 at the line, pulled down four rebounds and picked up three steals.

Dockrey, Hill and McCarter finished with 8 points apiece with McCarter hitting 4-of-8 from the field - the only Lady Panther to shoot 50%. She also led her team with six rebounds -- three on the offensive end -- and one steal.

Dockrey ended up with five steals and four assists; Hill chipped in three steals, two dimes and one rebound.

Freshman Ellie Cook rounded out the Union County scoring with two free throws to go with three steals. Sophomore Riley Allison added four boards and a steal; junior Kyla Locklear pulled down one rebound.

"The bench and our teammates are always there to pick us up whenever we're having an off night," Hill said.

"We can always count on them and we know they'll have our backs."

The Lady Panthers' lone 3-pointer came on the game's opening possession when Dock-

rey spotted her team a 3-0 lead, less than 20 seconds in.

Points were at a premium the rest of the way as Union County missed its next 10 tries from behind the arc. Leading 6-4 after one, Union remained in control as a basket by McCarter and a Dockrey steal-and-score led to a 10-6 advantage, less than two minutes into the second.

Banks County would seize momentum by outscoring the Lady Panthers 12-6 over the final 4:53 of the second to take an 18-16 lead into the break.

Three minutes into the second half, Union County jumped back in front at 21-20 with two baskets by Hunter and another free throw from Cook. The Lady Leopards, however, would outscore Union 11-3 to open up a 31-24 lead with under a minute left in the third.

"We want to thank God, our families and our coaches, but we couldn't do this without each other," Hill said of Dockrey and McCarter, who have undergone two coaching changes and a reclassification since arriving at UCHS for the 2016-2017 school year.



Seniors Brooke Dockrey (L) and Kait McCarter (R) celebrate their region title game victory over Banks County. Photo/Todd Forrest