

# Sports

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## Panthers claim fifth Battle of the States tournament title No. 5 Union County starts 2025 with wins over Ringgold, Fannin Co.

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The 5th-ranked Union County men (13-2, 5-1) won a tournament-record fifth Battle of the States Championship with a 79-71 victory over Franklin, North Carolina, giving the Panthers back-to-back titles at the Towns County Christmas tourney on Dec. 30.

Senior guard Houston Henry took home tournament MVP honors for the second straight year, averaging 14 points, 11 assists, 4 rebounds and 4 steals over the three games.

"It feels good," Henry said after the win over Franklin. "It was a team effort tonight. We were able to get everyone going and we played well."

"But we're not going to get to enjoy this very long. We've got Ringgold on Friday and we'll be back at practice on Thursday."

Later that week, Union County resumed Region 7-AA action with an 81-52 rout of Ringgold on Jan. 3 before escaping Fannin County with a 71-63 victory on Jan. 4.

The Panthers continue region play this week with a pair of road games, traveling to North Murray on Tuesday, Jan. 7, and then visiting Rockmart on Friday, Jan. 10.

**No. 5 Panthers 79, Franklin, NC 71** - Union County overcame a 37-31 second-half deficit via a 28-9 run to close the third, capping off a 32-point quarter and giving the Panthers a 49-36 advantage.

"We went to a full-court press late in the first half and it took [Franklin] out of rhythm," Union County head coach Corey Garrett said. "We weren't really trapping them or anything but it forced them to throw it away a few times."

The main thing we wanted to do was just break their rhythm a little bit. Once we got up 13, we dropped back into our 2-3 defense and let them settle for mid-range jumpers."

Hayden Hughes' 3-pointer extended Union's lead to 62-47 early in the fourth as the Panthers held on down the stretch. Franklin sliced the deficit to 64-55 with 5:28 remaining, but Houston Henry and Maddox Young answered with buckets to stretch the lead back to 13 one minute later.

Young, Kaden Combs and Holden Payne made it 74-59 at the 2:55 mark, then Hughes all but secured Union's fifth BOTS title with a trey that



The Union County men's five BOTS titles (2000, 2006, 2010, 2023, 2024) is two more than the next closest team. Photo/Todd Forrest

opened up a 77-61 advantage with 2:21 to play.

"Houston and Hayden got hot in the third and fourth quarters and that was the difference," Garrett said.

Henry finished with 23 points, nine assists and five rebounds. Hughes, who was named to the All-Tournament team, ended his night with 18 points on 6 of 12 from downtown while adding three boards and three assists.

Union's final All-Tournament selection, Vince Marevka, had 8 points, a game-high 12 rebounds and one assist. In a remarkable turnaround, Marevka suffered a head injury on Dec. 17 and didn't know if he'd be available for the Battle of the States.

"This is a great feeling. I wasn't sure if I was going to get to play, but I recovered quickly and feel great," Marevka said.

Payne finished with 10 points and two rebounds; Young had 9 points, three boards and three steals; Combs went for 7 points, five rebounds and a block; Ethan Hogsted added 4 points, a rebound and a steal.

Early on, Union led by scores of 6-0 and 9-2 but Franklin rallied for a 14-13 edge at the quarter's end. Union raced ahead 20-14 early in the second courtesy of Combs, Marevka and Henry, but Franklin answered with 13 straight points to seize a 27-20 lead at the 3-minute mark.

The Panthers, despite battling foul trouble, narrowed the gap to 29-27 at the break by way of 5 points from Payne and two by Hogsted.

"We were in a little foul trouble but those guys, Holden and Ethan, came off the bench and did what they needed to do," Marevka said. "Those boys really showed out for our team today."

Hughes and Marevka had Union within one at 32-31 in the third, but Franklin inched ahead 37-31 near the 5:30 mark. The Panthers answered with 10 straight Henry points, narrowing the gap to 42-41 before Young's 3-on-2 go-ahead layup put Union on top to stay.

Still in front late in the third, triples by Payne and Hughes extended the lead to 55-46. Hogsted's dribble drive made it 57-46, and then two Henry free throws awarded Union a 59-46 advantage entering the fourth.

**No. 5 Panthers 81, Ringgold 52** - Union County's 30-11 third quarter blew open a 35-26 game at the half and propelled the Panthers to an easy region victory. Marevka went for 20 points, a career-high 14 rebounds and two steals. Henry had 20 points on a career-high five 3-pointers. Additionally, he contributed five rebounds, three assists and three steals.

The Panthers raced out to a 17-8 lead after one, but Ringgold (8-6, 3-3) weathered the

storm and stayed within striking distance, battling Union County to an 18-18 stalemate in the second period.

"That was my fault," Garrett said. "I went with some full-court pressure in the second quarter, but at halftime I told the guys that we're going to stick with our 1-3-1. We'll get hot and win by 20-plus."

Garrett's prediction proved to be spot on as Union erased all doubt in the third, outscoring the visiting Tigers 30-11, beginning with a Hughes steal that resulted in two Young free throws. Marevka scored in the paint and Hughes connected from long distance, opening up a 42-26 advantage early in the period.

Henry hit from the corner and converted a turnover into 2 points, capping a 12-0 run to open the third with Union on top 47-26. Following a Ringgold bucket, Henry split two free throws and knocked down a transition 3-pointer to expand the margin to 51-28.

Combs and Hughes eventually pushed the lead to 58-33 before consecutive buckets by Combs

sent the Panthers into the fourth up 65-37.

Marevka's putback to start the fourth built a 30-point advantage. He converted again, awarding Union a 74-43 lead before Coach Garrett handed things off to his reserves.

During the final minutes, Hogsted hit from downtown to build an 81-48 advantage -- his team's largest lead of the night.

During the first, Union secured early leads of 4-0 and 17-6 behind two treys from Hughes, but Ringgold rallied within 18-16 during the opening minutes of the second. Marevka and Young did most of the heavy lifting for Union as they crept ahead 27-20. With his team still up 32-26 and time winding down, Henry connected from 27 feet to beat the horn and award Union a 9-point cushion.

Hughes finished with 17 points, four rebounds and four steals while hitting 5 of 14 from long distance. Young had 8 points, 12 rebounds, four assists and a steal. Combs went for 8 points, five rebounds and a steal. Hogsted had 4 points,

three boards and an assist. Payne added 2 points and two assists.

Jacob Rodriguez had 2 points and a rebound; Hayden Price pulled down five boards; Ryland Chambers had one rebound.

**No. 5 Panthers 71, Fannin County 63** - Union County led wire-to-wire on the heels of a 30-point opening quarter - the team's fifth straight contest with a 30-point frame.

Henry led all scorers with 28 points on 4 of 7 from 3-point range to go with eight assists, five rebounds and a steal. Marevka turned in his third 20-point game in his last four outings, going for 20 points and 11 boards.

When asked how he continues to deliver against larger opponents in the paint, Marevka credited his hook shot as the equalizer.

"I take a lot of pride in my jump hook; I've worked really hard on that shot," Marevka said. "The defender is usually taller than me so I like to go to that shot and try to be physical and push them around a little bit."

Despite Union's hot start, the Rebels refused to go away on their home floor, staying within single digits at 42-34 entering the break.

Fannin closed within 43-38 early in the third, but consecutive buckets by Combs, a Marevka layup and a two Henry 3s had Union on top 55-44 at the quarter's 2:45 mark.

After the Rebels answered with 5 straight, Combs scored on consecutive trips to spot the Panthers a 59-50 advantage after three.

"Combs came up big for us," Garrett said. "It seems like he's quiet for most of the game then makes some big plays when it matters down the stretch."

However, with 3:50 remaining, Fannin closed within 61-56 by using their size advantage to crash the offensive boards.

Henry fired back on Union's next possession and Young rattled off 5-straight to mount a 68-58 lead with under 1:50 to play.

"Not making excuses, but we've played a lot of basketball over the previous week and hadn't got to practice much," Garrett said. "It seemed like we weren't getting those 50/50 balls that we usually get. But anytime you can get a win at Fannin, you'll take it."

Young finished with 12 points, six rebounds and five assists. Combs had 8 points and nine boards; Hughes had 3 points, two rebounds and two steals; Hogsted had a rebound and an assist; Payne added one steal.

Marevka scored Union's first 7 points as his team raced out to a 7-2 lead. Threes by Henry and Young made it 13-7 before Hughes' only basket of the day built a 22-14 advantage. Henry's triple made it 25-16, and later, his free throw had Union on top 26-16 at the quarter's 1:52 mark.

**Up next:** Union County travels to North Murray on Tuesday, Dec. 7. The girls tip at 6 p.m. On Friday, Union visits Rockmart, where varsity action gets underway at 7 p.m.

"We've got two tough road games this week," Garrett said. "One thing I've noticed about this region is there's a clear homecourt advantage no matter where you're playing."



L-R: Vince Marevka, Houston Henry (MVP) and Hayden Hughes named to the Battle of the States All-Tournament Team. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Kaden Combs came up big down the stretch in Saturday's win at Fannin County. Photo/Todd Forrest

# Lady Panthers win first Battle of the States Christmas tourney

## Union County stumbles late vs Ringgold and No. 3 Fannin Co.

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Union County (9-6, 2-4) won its first Battle of the States Christmas Tournament championship on Monday, Dec. 30 in Hiwassee, knocking off Polk County, Tennessee 56-48 in the title game.

Senior Ariel McCarter claimed tournament MVP honors, scoring 14 of her game-high 16 points during the second half of the win over Polk County. She also contributed seven rebounds and five steals.

Senior All-Tournament Team selection Hope Taylor finished with 5 points and eight boards. Sophomore Nomi Nelson earned an All-Tournament nod following a 15-point, five-rebound, and two-steal performance off the bench.

"It means a lot to me [to win this tournament]," McCarter said. "We finally beat Rabun for the first time that I can remember. We have a bunch of seniors this year and I'm just happy I could win it alongside them."

**Lady Panthers 56, Polk County, TN 48** - Behind 12 first-half points from Nelson, Union County owned a 27-23 halftime edge on the heels of a 13-13 tie after one. In the second half, the Lady Panthers opened up some breathing room at 33-23, starting the third with a basket by Aubrie Akins and two from Regan Trlica.

Union held a 35-27 advantage inside the 2-minute mark of the third when Polk rattled off five straight. And following a Lady Panthers turnover, Polk County misfired and Sloane Dyer's rebound sparked a Union break, culminating in McCarter's triple. Later, with 7 seconds remaining in the period, Nelson's trey followed up a Polk County deuce, spotting Union County a 41-34 lead after three.



The Union County ladies recorded their first Battle of the States Christmas Tournament championship last week. Along with the men's five titles, Union County basketball's six combined titles is the most in tournament history. Photo/Todd Forrest

McCarter's steal early in the fourth led to an Akins layup on the other end, then a McCarter 3-pointer had her team up 46-37 with 5:20 left. Polk County narrowed the gap to 46-42 at the 3:30 mark, but McCarter answered with another trey to maintain the Lady Panthers' cushion.

"Polk County kept on scoring so I knew I needed to step up," McCarter said. "They were double-teaming Hope in the post and Regan [Trlica] has been sick, so that put a lot of pressure on me, Nomi and Slone, and we were able to guide the team to the end."

McCarter delivered again with a traditional 3-point

play with 2:05 to go, putting Union back on top by seven after Polk briefly trimmed the margin to 49-45.

"Ariel's leadership has been amazing," head coach Thomas Nelson said. "She carried us through the tournament. With our injuries, she's had to start doing a lot of the little things that often go unnoticed."

"Last year, after Rabun beat us in the [BOTS] championship, our battle cry has been: Next year we're coming back here to beat Rabun and win this tournament."

Trlica extended the lead to 54-45 by sinking two free throws at the 1:15 mark. She knocked down two more with

30 seconds left, putting the game out of reach at 56-46.

Trlica and Akins finished with 8 points apiece. Trlica added six boards and two assists; Akins pulled down 11 boards. McKenna Hood had 4 points, six rebounds and two assists.

Dyer had three assists, two rebounds and two steals. Mady Adams had two boards; Ragan McCarter added an assist.

"I'm really proud of everyone on this team," Ariel McCarter said. "We put in a lot of work to try and win this tournament. We all stepped up and played the best we could."

**Lady Panthers 52, Ringgold 59** - Union County couldn't protect a double-digit second-half lead as Region 7-AA action resumed in Blairsville on Jan. 3.

The Lady Panthers opened up an early 26-18 lead and held a 31-24 advantage at the intermission, eventually building a 38-28 margin in the third before Ringgold made its move.

The Tigers closed the quarter with a 16-3 run, and despite a late Union push, never trailed again in the 59-52 final.

With their team trailing by 11 in the fourth, McCarter and Nomi Nelson hit late 3s and Taylor scored inside to move Union within a possession at 54-51 with under a minute left. But Ringgold knocked down five of its last six free throws to put the Lady Panthers away.

Dyer led Union County

with 11 points, six rebounds, four assists and a steal. McCarter had 9 points, five steals, four boards and three assists. Akins finished with 9 points, seven boards and a steal. Taylor had 8 points and 11 rebounds.

Nomi Nelson scored 6 points. Trlica had 4 points, six rebounds, four blocks and a rebound. Hood added 4 points, a rebound, an assist and a steal. Ragan McCarter pulled down one rebound.

**Lady Panthers 44, No. 3 Fannin County 48** - Union County squandered a late double-digit lead for the second time in under 24 hours, giving up a 22-8 run to close the contest on Saturday in Blue Ridge.

"We shot 3 for 24 within 3 feet of the basket," Coach Nelson said. "When I saw that stat, it blew my mind. We finished 13 of 63 from the floor overall. I know you're going to have off nights, but when you only turn it over eight times against a tough defense like Fannin, you should probably win the game."

The Rebels started off by grabbing a 10-1 lead but Trlica's 8 first-quarter points sparked a Union rally that ended the first with an 11-10 advantage.

A Fannin technical in the second allowed the Lady Panthers to extend their lead to 15-10 before the Rebels stormed back to even things up 19-19 at the half.

The backcourt duo of Trlica and McCarter combined for 12 of Union's 18 third-quarter points, helping their

team build a 36-26 advantage when Dyer hit two free throws at the 1:40 mark. Later, McCarter split two free throws, sending the Lady Panthers into the fourth up 37-28.

Fannin opened the final frame on a 5-0 spurt until Hood's bucket made it 39-33 near the 5:30 mark. With Fannin chipping away, McCarter's 17-footer put Union on top 41-38, then an Akins free throw stretched the gap to 42-38 with 2:18 left.

The Rebels answered with a quick trey, followed by a deuce to regain the lead at 43-42. Union's final lead came at 44-43 when Adams scored off an inbounds play with 1:22 remaining.

Fannin knocked down two free throws on the ensuing possession and Union County turned it over with 37 seconds to play. The Rebels split two free throws to lead 46-44, but Akins' turnaround jumper came up short with under 15 seconds left and Fannin put the game away with two more at the charity stripe.

Trlica led the way with 15 points, four rebounds and three steals. Ariel McCarter had 11 points, seven steals, two rebounds and two assists. Akins scored 6 points and pulled down nine boards. Taylor had 4 points, 12 boards, four blocks and an assist.

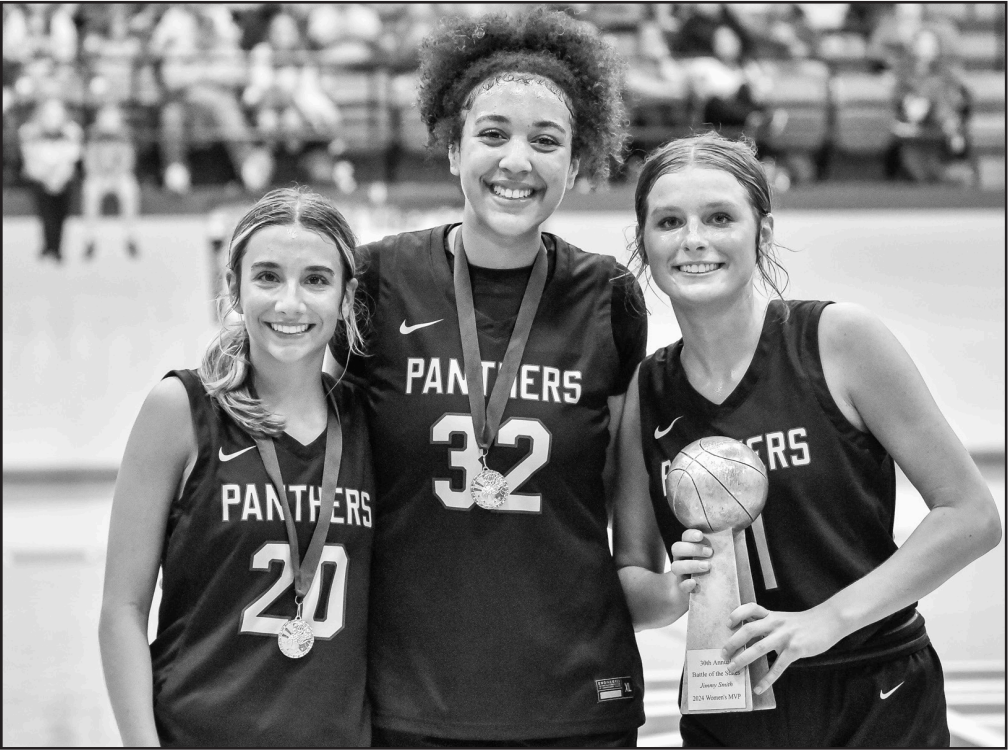
Adams finished with 4 points and four boards. Dyer had 2 points and six rebounds. Hood added 2 points and one board. Nomi Nelson and freshman Samantha Combs had two rebounds; Tatum Fisher grabbed one board.

**Up next:** At 2-4 in region play, Union County has an excellent opportunity to bounce back and end the week at .500 as they travel to North Murray on Tuesday and Rockmart on Friday -- two squads that are a combined 0-11 in 7-AA.

"We've definitely played all the harder teams in the region, so hopefully we can get two wins this week and that gets us prepared for the stretch run," Coach Nelson said.

Tuesday's trip to North Murray tips off at 6 p.m. against a Mountaineers team coming off a 62-19 loss to Coahulla Creek. Union County and Rockmart get underway at 7 p.m. Friday. The Yellowjackets are 0-13 overall and recently suffered a 95-25 loss to Sonorville.

"We just need to do the things we know our kids are capable of, and hopefully restore the belief that they're capable of winning," Coach Nelson said. "It's been a roller coaster this last week. One minute you're on an emotional high after winning the Battle of the States, and the next you're really down after not playing well for two games. Hopefully we can balance that out a little bit."



L-R: Nomi Nelson, Hope Taylor and Ariel McCarter (MVP) were Union's selections to the All-Tournament team. McCarter averaged 13 points, 6 rebounds and 4 steals over the three games. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County celebrates its BOTS championship on Monday, Dec. 30. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior Sloane Dyer led Union County with 11 points in Friday's loss to Ringgold. Photo/Todd Forrest

## Hope Taylor, Travis Tracy crowned Friday at UCHS Basketball Homecoming



Seniors Travis Tracy and Hope Taylor were selected as UCHS basketball Homecoming king and queen before Friday night's game vs. Ringgold. Photo/Todd Forrest

Seniors Travis Tracy and Hope Taylor took home the crown during Union County High School's basketball homecoming festivities on Friday, Jan. 3.

Taylor, a star on the Lady Panthers basketball team, and Tracy, a standout on the baseball diamond, were the top vote-getters by their UCHS classmates from a court that included seniors Ariel McCarter, Aubrie Akins, Lydia Wagner, Houston Henry, Isaac

Hyde and Maddox Young.

The junior representatives were Avery Frechette, Georgia Hanes, Kendall Dayton, Vince Marevka, Matthew Ekeberg and Trent Webster.

The sophomore representatives were Isabella Anthros, Naomi Nelson, Jaxon Totherow and Ethan Hogged.

The freshman representatives were Claire Milam, Samantha Combs, Hudson Collins and Mikey Davis.

Last year's basketball

homecoming king and queen, Caiden Tanner and Kamryn Mull, were on hand to pass their crown to Taylor and Tracy.

UCHS restarted its basketball homecoming in 2021-22 following a near-20-year hiatus.

Seniors Eli Underwood and Jaycee Seabolt took home the honors in 2022-23.

Seniors Caleb John and Emily Byers earned the crown in 2021-22.