

Union County varsity suffers first home sweep to Towns since 1995-96

Regular season gets underway this week with three games in five days

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
tforrest@nganews.com

For the first time in 25 years, Towns County exited Blairsville with the varsity sweep following a pair of victories at Union County last Tuesday, Nov. 24.

In the girls' meeting, the Lady Indians halted a seven-game skid in Blairsville, escaping with a 43-42, double-overtime victory. Towns County would limit a Union squad that scored 67 points at Class AAAA Pickens 12 days earlier to just 36 points in regulation and without a field goal for the final 5:58 of the two overtime periods.

Approximately 24 hours before tip-off, Towns County received a boost when four-year starting point guard Kennedy Henson, who underwent a second ACL surgery on her left knee nine months earlier, was cleared to practice for the first time since late-January. As a freshman, Henson tore her ACL during the Battle of the States Christmas Tournament. Roughly 25 months later, she suffered another tear to the same ligament in January of her junior season.

Not expecting to see game action until December, Henson got the start at Union County. And while fatigue was a factor, her experience and ball-handling proved vital against a Union County defense that thrives on turnovers and transition buckets.

Still, the Lady Panthers had plenty of opportunities to put the visitors away, but turnovers and missed free throws proved costly down the stretch and in overtime. Trailing 32-29 with under 4 minutes to play, Hunter accounted for six-straight Union points to take a 35-32 lead with under 90 seconds to play.

Still ahead 35-34 at the one-minute mark, Hunter split a pair of free throws, keeping Towns County within two. And on their ensuing possession, the Lady Indians evened the score at 36-36 with 42 seconds left.

Henson forced a jump ball, tying up Hunter in the paint, awarding one final possession to Towns County. Despite two timeouts over the final 30 seconds from Towns head coach Brian Hunnicutt, the Lady Panthers defense forced a tough, off-balance jumper at the buzzer, sending the contest into overtime.

Trailing 38-36 early in the extra session, Union County sophomore guard Corinne Hill knocked down a pair of mid-range jumpers to put her team back in front. Hill, who splits point-guard duties with fellow sophomore Ellie Cook, spent most of the night running



Junior Ava Hunter scores two of her 11 fourth-quarter points in Union County's double-overtime loss to Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest

midcourt after two missed free throws by Towns, but the desperation shot came up well short.

Hunter led the way with 17 points and accounted for all 11 of Union's fourth-quarter points. She finished 5-of-8 at the line, going 3-of-6 over the final nine minutes.

Junior reserve Ansley Collins helped pick up the slack for Cook, scoring 7 points - five coming in the first half. Hill added 6 points after ending regulation with two. Meanwhile, Cook scored 5 points after opening the game with a trey, but she picked up two first-quarter fouls before collecting her third less than 40 seconds into the second.

Freshman Lara Turner scored 4 points, Chambers had two and McKechnie added a free throw. After Cook's 3-pointer less than 35 seconds in, Towns answered with consecutive triples for a 6-3 advantage. Union raced ahead 9-6 with six-unanswered thanks to baskets from Chambers, Hunter and Collins.

A pull-up jumper from Collins kept the Lady Panthers ahead 11-8, but Towns scored the quarter's final points for an 11-10 score. Union struggled with just five second-quarter points but still maintained a 16-13 advantage at the break. The first basket of the second period came at the 4:03 mark, putting Towns County up 12-11. The Lady Panthers went back on



Junior point guard Caleb John scored nine points with a pair of 3-point baskets in his Union County debut. Photo/Todd Forrest

top when Turner scored in the paint, then a Hunter put-back and a Collins free throw stretched the advantage to three - matching the largest lead of the contest for both squads.

Chambers was charged with her third foul less than 10 seconds into the third frame but a Cook jumper kept Union in front 18-15. A Towns County 3, followed by a free throw at the 6:59 mark, put the Lady Panthers in a 19-18 deficit.

McKechnie split two free throws to even the score, but another Lady Indians trey made it 22-19. An offensive rebound by Hill led to a short jumper, then a Collins steal-and-score put Union ahead 23-22.

After a Towns basket at the 2:39 mark, both offenses went quiet for the remainder of the period. Turner hit two free throws and the Lady Indians went 1-for-2, knotting the score at 25-25 after three.

Hunter opened the fourth with two free throws for a 27-25 advantage. She knocked down an elbow jumper for a 29-27 lead before a Towns County triple put the visitors back on top 30-29 with 5:56 to play.

Cook fouled out 70 seconds later, but the Lady Indians missed both of the ensuing free throws. Trailing 32-29 with 3:20 remaining, a Hunter jump-hook kept Union within a point before a couple of rare fast-break opportunities resulted in consecutive layups by Hunter and a 35-32 advantage.

Towns County 63, Pan-

thers 37 - The new-look Towns County Indians proved too much for the shorthanded Panthers, pulling away 43-17 over the final 19:35.

While Union County was still without the services of its football players, the Indians were at full-strength with all three of its Smoky Mountain Conference (SMC) transfers available for action on Tuesday.

The Panthers kept it close early on behind juniors Landon Kight and Caleb John, who combined for all eight of Union's first-quarter points. With Kight accounting for the team's first five points, John beat the buzzer with a trey to tie the game at 8-8 after one.

The Indians scored the first four points of the second, but Austin Taylor connected from long range, and a Daniel Snow reverse layup kept Union within a point at 15-14.

Still trailing 17-14, John drove to the basket for two and then dished to sophomore Eli Underwood for a layup. But it was all Towns County the rest of the way, turning a 20-18 lead at the 3:30 mark into a 31-20 halftime advantage.

Turnovers sparked eight-straight points before an Underwood basket stopped the bleeding at 28-20. However, there would be no momentum going into halftime as the Indians drilled a trey at the buzzer for its largest lead of the half.

The Towns County run extended into the third at 15-2 but Underwood halted the spurt

to keep the Panthers in contention. Sophomore Trent Baker scored at the midway point of the period to trim the deficit to 38-24, sparking one final attempt at making it a game.

Consecutive treys from Underwood and John capped an 8-2 stretch that pulled Union within 10 at 40-30 as the clock approached 2 minutes left in the third. Unfortunately for the home crowd, no rally was in the works as Towns County rattled off six straight to take a 46-30 lead into the fourth.

The Indians outscored Union 17-7 over the final 8 minutes with junior Lake Hughes scoring inside, Sean Donohue hitting a three and Underwood adding two free throws for the Purple and Gold.

Underwood led the Panthers with 11 points to go with four rebounds and an assist. John had 9 points, two assists, a steal and a block; Kight scored 5 points while pulling down a team-high five boards. Taylor added 3 points, four rebounds and two assists; Donohue chipped in 3 points in three minutes of action.

Baker had 2 points and two assists; Hughes scored 2 points to go with two rebounds and Snow added 2 points. Hunter Fleming recorded one rebound and Braylen Rader picked up an assist.

While not officially an AAU squad, Towns County put up travel-ball like numbers, shooting 54% from the floor and 40% from long distance. Led by the largest member of the SMC Big Three, 6-foot-8 Hayesville, NC-transfer Jake McTaggart, the Indians out-rebounded Union County 26-19 and outscored them 38-14 in the paint. Towns County also forced 18 turnovers - leading to 22 points on the other end.

Even with the addition of the Tarheel State all-stars, Towns County's own Kolby Moss poured in a game-high 18 points on 8-of-12 shooting while Aidan Berrong led the Indians with a +25 plus/minus despite not scoring a point or grabbing a rebound.

If the weather cooperates, Union is scheduled to host Gilmer at 6 p.m. Tuesday. On Friday, the Panthers visit Towns County at 7 p.m. before traveling to Stephens County at 5:30 p.m. Saturday. The Stephens County girls opened the year sixth in the sandyspiel.com Class AAA rankings.

UCHS basketball tickets and game admission update - UCHS is decreasing gym capacity from 600 to 450, and due to the limited seating, only season tickets or pre-purchased tickets will be accepted for admission.

Tickets are available at the UCHS front office on Monday only. No tickets will be sold at the gate on game-day.



Junior Ansley Collins (12) skies for a defensive rebound during last week's season-opening loss to Towns County. Collins finished with 7 points and provided a defensive spark with her teammates battling foul trouble. The 43-42 Lady Indians' victory handed Union its first loss in a home-opener since 2015. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore Eli Underwood led the Panthers with 11 points in his first varsity start. He shot 4 for 7 from the field, went 1 for 2 from downtown and 2 for 3 at the free throw line while pulling down four rebounds vs. Towns County last week. Photo/Todd Forrest