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

Sports Editor sports@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 sevengame 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 fouryear starting point guard Kennedi 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 Coun-Hill knocked down a pair of like an eternity.



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

point with Cook battling foul midcourt after two missed trouble and eventually picking up her fifth with 4:46 to play in the fourth.

Hill's go-ahead jumper came at the 1:58 mark, but Henson knocked down a pair of free throws 14 seconds later to even the score at 40-40. The score remained deadlocked at 40-40 into the second overtime, when Union's starting center Rebekah Chambers fouled out with 2:55 remaining.

Still, the Lady Panthers struck first at the 1:52 mark when Hunter sank 1-of-2 at the line, drawing the foul on a put-back attempt. After turning it over, Towns County held Hunter away from the ball, sending her back to the charity stripe for a 1-and-1. Once again, the junior split two free throws, keeping the door open for Towns County, who quickly tied it up 25 seconds later.

grabbed the lead for good, taking advantage of a Union turnover and sinking 1-of-2 at the line with 23 seconds remaining. With Hunter drawing double and triple teams all night, freshman reserve Kyra McKechnie, who replaced Chambers, came open at the elbow but could not get the friendly roll on the go-ahead jumper after the ball bounced

free throws by Towns, but the desperation shot came up well 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

After Cook's 3-pointer The Lady Indians 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

A pull-up jumper from Collins kept the Lady Panthers ahead 11-8, but Towns scored the quarter's final points for an

Union struggled with ty sophomore guard Corinne around on the rim for what felt just five second-quarter points but still maintained a 16-13 mid-range jumpers to put her team back in front. Hill, who splits point-guard duties with the mid-range jumpers to put her towns County pulled advantage at the break. The first basket of the second period came at the 4:03 mark, putting



baskets in his Union County debut. Photo/Todd Forrest

top when Turner scored in thers 37 - The new-look Towns the paint, then a Hunter putback 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

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 jumphook kept Union within a point before a couple of rare fastbreak opportunities resulted in consecutive layups by Hunter

The Towns County run the UCHS front office on Monand a 35-32 advantage.

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 eightstraight points before an Underwood basket stopped the bleeding at 28-20. However,

ans drilled a trey at the buzzer

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 Pan-

thers 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

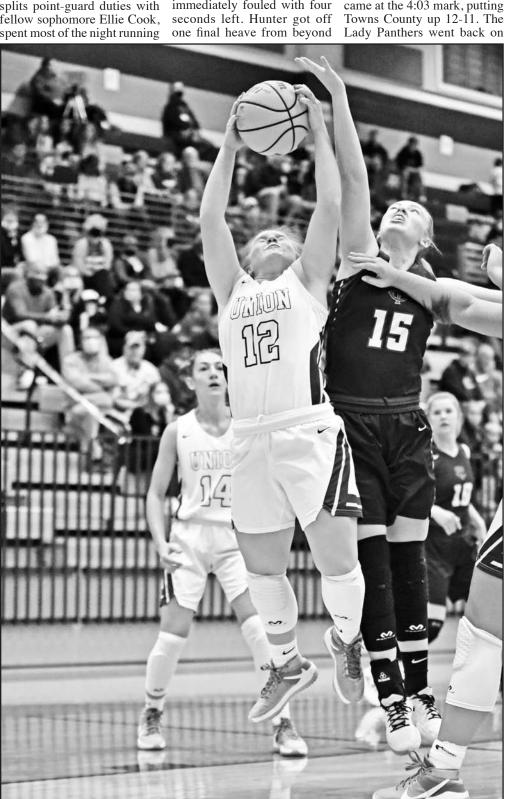
two assists; Hughes scored 2 points to go with two rebounds and Snow added 2 points. Hunter Fleming recorded one rebound and Braylen Rader picked up an assist.

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 outrebounded 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.

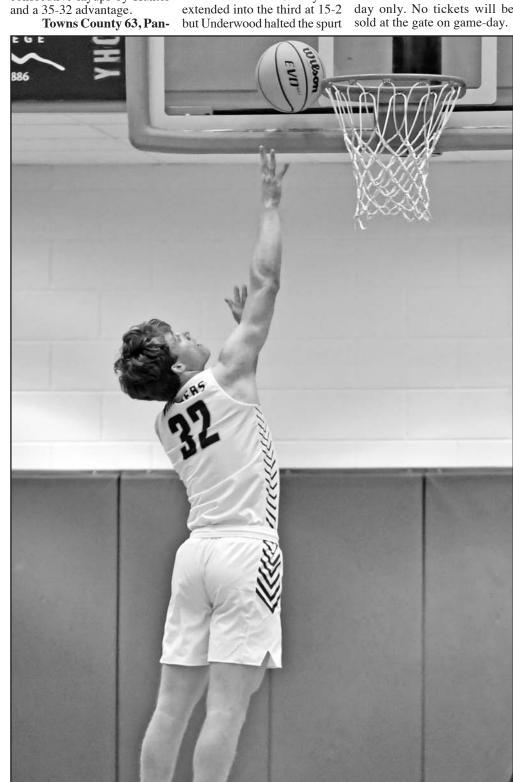
Even with the addition of the Tarheel State all-stars, Towns County's own Kolby Moss poured in a game-high 18 points on 8-of-12 shooting while Aidan Berrong led the Indians with a +25 plus/minus despite not scoring a point or grabbing a rebound.

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 sandysspiel. 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 there would be no momentum season tickets or pre-purchased going into halftime as the Inditickets will be accepted for



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