

Sports

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Both Union basketball squads look to be in the mix for 8-AA crown

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With the departure of Jefferson, two new Region 8-AA Champions will be crowned in February.

Both the men and ladies side have favorites to take the top spot, but last season showed that anything can happen.

The Greene County men and Rabun County Lady Wildcats finished second in Region last season and have high hopes for 2015.

Meanwhile, both Union County squads expect to find themselves in the running for one of the top two spots and home court advantage.

There were three coaching changes in 8-AA this off-season with Union County graduate Mike Townson taking over as the head honcho of the Oglethorpe County Lady Patriots.

Marvin Latham, a State Championship winner from Tennessee is the new head man at Riverside Military, while Timothy Roop is in his first year at Social Circle.

Union County's Region schedule opens on Dec. 20 when they host Coach Townson and Oglethorpe County on Dec. 20.

Following the holidays, Union will travel to Lexington in a rematch with Oglethorpe County on Jan. 2nd.

On Jan. 3rd, Union will host Greene County.

Union County Panthers

Last year's record: 15-14 (1st round of State).

Head Coach: Casey Jones (2nd season).

Returning Starters: 4

Players to watch: Hunter Hughes (Sr), Kyle Hamby (Sr), Ralston Drake (Sr), Tyler Odom (Sr)

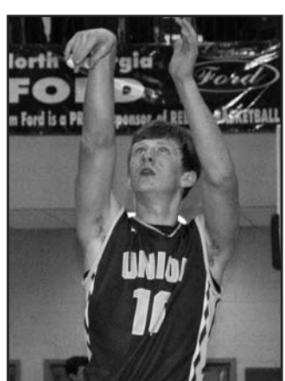
State Tournament Appearances: 15

The Panthers have their sights set on back-to-back trips to the State Tournament for the first time since 2003. Five seniors (four starters) return off last year's squad that ended Union's five year State Tournament drought.

Seniors Hughes, Hamby, Odom, and Lake Arnick will provide the Panthers a potent backcourt that came on strong at the end of last season.

The frontcourt, led by Drake, will need to step up in order to replace Union's do-everything, All-Region forward Dylan Coyne, fellow senior Grant Schuette, and 6-6 Thomas Danek.

Look for junior Chase Shook and senior Jacob Rogers to add some depth in the paint. Shook's showed some positive signs last season and worked his way into the rotation, while Rogers returns to the hardwood after sitting out his junior year.



Hunter Hughes

The Panthers should compete for a top two spot in 8-AA along with Greene County and Rabun County. Although, the Panthers can't afford overlook Washington Wilkes, Oglethorpe, or Riverside who are nipping at their heels.

Union County Lady Panthers

Last year's record: 16-11 (1st round of State).

Head Coach: David Tucker (4th season).

Returning Starters: 3

Players to watch: Brooke Maddox (Sr), Kaitlyn Day (Sr), Lisa Nalasci (Sr), Layne Colwell (Jr)

State Tournament Appearances: 16

The Lady Panthers basketball program has reached the State Tournament in six of the last seven years under three different coaches.

With Coach David Tucker at the helm for his fourth year, Union is looking to make it four-for-four in State Tournaments under Tucker. However, Union would like to improve its positioning coming out of Region where Union hasn't been higher than a No. 3 seed since the Region Championship squad of 2009.

Tucker returns a solid nucleus of seniors to build around. Maddox, Nalasci, and Day have plenty of experience in Tucker's offense and will

be counted on as Union's own 'big three'.

Colwell was solid as a sophomore and bigger and better things are expected for her this season. Unfortunately, the Lady Panthers will feature some inexperience this season, especially in the front court where senior Ariel Maurer transferred, taking the team record for blocked shots with her. Maurer wasn't much of an offensive threat but her presence in the paint will be sorely missed.

Look for Coach Tucker to turn to Madison Larisyc, Jillian Lawn, Bailey Daniel, and others to provide support for the big three.



Maddox (12) and Colwell (24) at Social Circle. Photo/Todd Forrest

Rabun County Wildcats

Last year's record: 20-9 (1st round of State)

Head Coach: Jeff Page (9th season)

Returning Starters: 3

Players to watch: Bryce Dillard (Sr), Austin Dinofrio (Sr), Harry Oliver (Jr), Matthew Addis (Jr), Tyler Gibson (Sr)

State Tournament Appearances: 8

Coming off of five straight State Tournament appearances, the Wildcats must replace the graduated 6-4 Jordan Oliver, who was arguably the best player in Region 8-AA over the last two years. As a senior he averaged 19 points-per-game, 9 rebounds per, and 2 blocks-a-game.

Rabun may have lost five seniors including Oliver, but don't feel sorry for Coach Page.

The Wildcats return their top four long distance shooters. Seniors Dillard (48 treys), Dinofrio (46) and juniors Harry Oliver (45) and Addis (39) combined for 178 treys - shooting a combined

40 percent from downtown. While some of their shooting success can be attributed to the attention that Oliver drew inside, this season's Rabun squad could create mismatches by forcing teams to guard the perimeter.

In Rabun's 74-46 victory over Dawson last week, Addis hit six treys and scored 20. Harry Oliver scored 14 points with 7 assists and 4 steals. Dinofrio scored 10 with 8 boards, and senior Tyler Gibson scored 10 with 7 boards.

The Wildcats have high hopes in 2015 and are looking for the program's first State Tournament victory since 1951.

Rabun County Lady Wildcats

Last year's record: 18-10 (State Sweet 16).

Head Coach: Dee Dee Dillard (9th season).

Returning Starters: 4

Players to watch: Riley Chulpacek (Sr), Courtney Reeves (Sr), Savanna Scott (Soph)

State Tournament Appearances: 9

With 11 upperclassmen, Rabun will feature one of its most experienced squads in recent history.

The Lady Wildcats must replace Sally Woerner, the only senior starter on last season's Region Runner Up.

After finishing first in 8-AA during the regular season, Rabun was upset by Jefferson in the Region Champi-

onship.

With Jefferson gone to AAA and the Region's most experienced squad suiting up in the red and white, Coach Dillard's expectations include not only a Region title, but to restore Rabun to its pre-2012 levels where they reached the Elite 8 three straight seasons from 2009-2011.

Oglethorpe County Patriots

Last year's record: 9-11

Head Coach: Tony Derricotte

Returning Starters: 2

Players to watch: Austin Hulin (Sr), Tre Derricotte (Sr)

State Tournament Appearances: 4

Following the 2013-14 season, the Patriots had two players, senior Jay Fleming and junior Austin Hulin, named as Honorable Mention on the Athens Banner-Herald All-Area Team.

Hulin, a 6-3 forward can fill it up in a hurry, just look to his 20 points-per-game scoring average in 2013-14 for proof.

Oglethorpe averaged 60 points-a-game in 2014

but must replace five seniors including Fleming, a 6-2 forward who averaged just under 10 points-a-game, forward Marquis Henderson (12.5 PPG), and guard Tay Watson (11 PPG).

Derricotte and others must help Hulin if the Patriots want to end a 20-year absence from the State Tournament - the longest drought in 8-AA.

Oglethorpe County Lady Patriots

Last year's record: 6-11

Head Coach: Mike Townson (1st season)

Returning Starters: 2

Players to watch: Trenetta Smith (Sr) Rayne Pyfrom (Jr)

State Tournament Appearances: 4

Last spring the Lady Patriots named Mike Townson, a 1995 Union County graduate as the new head coach, where he plans to revive a program that has fallen on hard times of late.

Last season's win total of six marked Oglethorpe's best season since 2005-06. Between 2006 and 2013, the Lady Patriots won a total of 10 games - a stretch that included three winless seasons and a 62-game losing streak.

However, things appear to be headed in the right direction and Townson believes his team could be a dark horse playoff contender.

Smith is a four-year starter at point guard and the

team leader. While matching up with Pyfrom, a transfer and a 6-2 guard, is a coaches worst nightmare.

Townson's team will feature four 6-footers this season but it will be Dec. 9th before he knows what he'll be working with. Another transfer - who lives in-county but played at a private school last year- is awaiting to be approved by the GHSA.

Townson brings a change of culture and appears to have the talent to turn things around in Oglethorpe County. While the Lady Patriots may not be ready to compete with the Region's elite, the days of being their doormat appear to be numbered.

Social Circle Lady Redskins

Last year's record: 4-22

Head Coach: Timothy Roop (1st season)

Returning Starters: 2

Players to watch: Sierra Ross (Jr), Jalencia Myricks(Jr), Alexis Griffin (Jr)

State Tournament Appearances: 15

Social Circle didn't have a senior on last year's roster that included six freshmen and two juniors. However it was the four sophomores that were called upon to carry the program.

Ross, who averaged 12 points-per-game, led the team in scoring, assists, and was second steals. Myricks was second in points, third in rebounding, and first in steals, while Griffin was first in boards and tied for third in points.

Haley Barnes, the fourth

sophomore finished tied for third in scoring and freshman Adoris Gibbs led the team in blocked shots and was second in rebounding.

The Lady Redskins will need to find some scoring help for Ross as they were last in 8-AA - averaging 27 points a contest. They were also last in scoring defense - allowing 54 points in Region games.

The Lady Redskins will be under the helm of new head coach Timothy Roop.

Social Circle Redskins

Last year's record: 3-23

Head Coach: Ken Aldridge

Returning Starters: 2

Players to watch: Jeremy Elder (Sr), Jordan Scott (Sr), Tommy Johnson (Jr)

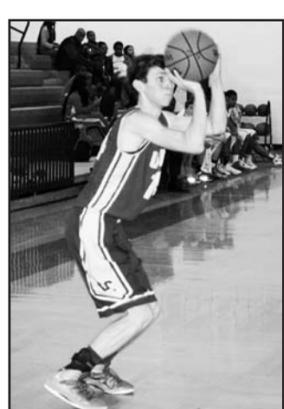
State Tournament Appearances: 15

Region 8-AA hasn't been kind to the Redskins since they made the jump in 2012.

Last season, Social Circle finished 0-11 in Region play but may have found a silver lining in the play of its underclassmen. Social Circle will suit up just two seniors and three juniors while sophomores and freshmen dominate the roster.

But don't expect things to immediately turn around as the Redskins must replace five seniors, including their leader on the boards, Jai Walker, along with second leading scorer and rebounder Stephan Chaney. Destin Norman (6 PPG, 3 RPG), MJ Hester (6 PPG, 2 APG), and Erik Dickerson have also graduated.

Senior Jeremy Elder averaged 6 points and 3 boards as a junior and will be joined by senior Jordan Scott, and junior Tommy Johnson as players that must step up or the Redskins could put up another goose egg in the Region win column this season.



Tyler Odom at Social Circle

Social Circle enters the season as a long shot to reach State - but that wasn't always the case. From 2000-2003 the Redskins didn't miss a Class A State Tournament but have struggled with only two appearances (2008 and 2010) since. Their last State Tournament win came in 2000 - which was their first since 1974.

Washington Wilkes Lady Tigers

Last year's record: 14-11

Head Coach: Nakia Brinson

Returning Starters: 2

Players to watch: T'Alexus Cullars (Sr), Destiny Reed (Jr), O'Kinya Gordon (Jr)

State Tournament Appearances: 5

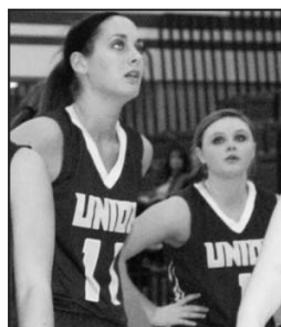
The Lady Tigers are looking to replicate the momentum that the program was building before it was forced to make the jump to Class AA in 2006, and again in 2012.

As a Class A school, Washington Wilkes recorded back-to-back State playoff appearances in 2005 and 2006 but reclassification sent them to a loaded Region 8-AA where they struggled - winning three region games in two years. Wilkes returned to Class A and reached State in 2010 and 2012. Coming off a 20-8 season in 2012, they won 18 games in 2013 but missed out on State.

Last season, their win total dipped to 14 and were once again bounced from the first round of region. Looking ahead to February, the defending Region Champ Jefferson has moved to AAA, creating an opening in the top four, and there is no one more likely to fill that fourth spot than the team

that's placed fifth in back-to-back seasons.

The Lady Tigers featured only two seniors last season so plenty of experience returns. With three seniors and seven juniors, Wilkes is the favorite to take the final playoff spot. They allowed just 40 points-per-game last season - second only to Jefferson in 8-AA.



Lisa Nalasci and Kaitlyn Day

Washington Wilkes Tigers

Last year's record: 16-10

Head Coach: Don Keiser

Returning Starters: 3

Players to watch: DeAndre Harris (Jr),

State Tournament Appearances: 11

The Tigers lost three seniors from last season's squad but return 10 sophomores from a team that just missed a berth in State.

Leading the way for the loaded junior class is DeAndre Harris, the athletic 6-4 post.

Wilkes will feature plenty of size with Chris Jackson, a 6-3 senior.

Six juniors, not counting

Harris top the 6-foot mark. Devon Lewis (6-3), Miles Gartrell (6-2), and the 6-1 Kendall Leguines give Coach Keiser plenty of size.

Wilkes must replace their 3-point sharpshooter Christian Keiser, guard Treyvon Booker, and 6-2 Queon Knight.

With plenty of size in the paint, the Tigers will need to find shooters to balance the offense.

Greene County Lady Tigers

Last year's record: 17-10

Head Coach: Shondra Williams

Returning Starters: 2

Players to watch: Celine Andrews (Sr), Diondra Burgess (Sr)

State Tournament Appearances: 7

Coach Williams must replace three decorated seniors off of last year's 17-win squad, who are all playing at the next level. Ja-Maya Cleveland, Miranda Davis, and Amber Rowland were at the head of a senior class that featured

six girls on last year's squad.

Despite the losses, Andrews and Burgess should keep Greene among the top teams in the region and reach State for the third straight year - matching their three-year playoff run from 2007-09.

Greene County Tigers

Last year's record: 19-10 (1st round of State)

Head Coach: Cory Hunter

Returning Starters: 3

Players to watch: Damien Kemp (Sr), Demone Kemp (Sr), Trey Christopher (Sr), Jakell Woodruff (Sr), Cordre Hunter (Sr)

State Tournament Appearances: 11

The defending Region Runner Up lost seven seniors to graduation but luckily for Coach Hunter, his squad had more than enough depth.

The Tigers went 14-deep last year with 10 different players averaging at least 3 points-per-game.

Anchoring the Tigers will be 6-6 Damien Kemp and 6-3 Demone Kemp.

Hunter is also expecting big things for Christopher, Woodruff, and Cordre Hunter.

While this year's squad might not be 14-deep, they have

enough depth to be the early favorites in 8-AA.

Since joining the region, Greene hasn't finished any lower than second in the final standings and are expected to reach their third consecutive trip to State.

After getting bounced in the first round of State following an embarrassing 60-38 loss to Hapeville Charter, the Tigers will be hungry for a No. 1 seed coming out of the Region Tournament.

Greene County's current playoff run is its longest since the Tigers went four-straight seasons from 2004-07.

Riverside Military Academy Eagles

Last year's record: 9-13

Head Coach: Marvin Latham (1st season).

Returning Starters: 3

Players to watch: Avery Cagle (Sr), Christopher Howard (Sr), JJ McClaston (Sr)

State Tournament Appearances: 3

Latham takes over at Riverside following successful stints at Dublin and Mt. Pisgah Christian, while winning a State Championship in Tennessee.

Riverside returns Cagle, who is deadly outside shooter, and an Honorable Mention selection on the Georgia Sportswriters All State Team.

Cagle made a name for himself in the mountains last

season when he scored 30 points on eight treys vs Towns County in Gainesville. When the Eagles traveled to Hiawassee a month later he dropped 40 on the Indians.

Joining Cagle are the athletic Howard and McClaston.

Riverside could compete for a playoff spot by season's end - which would be its first State Tournament appearance since 2010.



Kyle Hamby returns to the Union backcourt. Photo/Todd Forrest