

Sports

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Macon Bound: Panthers to play for State title

No. 6 Union Co. and No. 4 Butler square off Thursday at 3 p.m.

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@ngame.com

My oh my, how the times have changed.

This time four years ago, head coach Corey Garrett and the Union County men's basketball had hit rock bottom, coming off the first winless season in program history in 2020-21.

Now, this Thursday, Garrett and his Panthers will attempt to bring home the program's first state championship when they travel to Macon to face Butler (Augusta) at 3 p.m.

"No, I don't think I would have imagined [four years ago] that we'd be in the position. It's unreal," Garrett said. "But it's real now, so we better start thinking that way."

"I've been around basketball long enough and have watched enough state championship games on TV, and I've seen the types of teams that get there. More importantly, I've seen the types of teams that don't get there, and it's usually the types of teams that we play."

"But I'm not going to sit here and say it was impossible for us [to reach the finals] because I believed, with a little bit of luck, this group was going to make a run eventually. So it's time to start believing it now. And I know for a fact that these guys are here to win it all. That's our expectation this week."

The Panthers' historic playoff run continued last week



The Union County men punched a ticket to the program's first state title game in 54 years with a 54-38 win over Tattnall County on Friday at Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus. Photo/Todd Forrest

when they advanced to their first final four since 1972 by knocking off KIPP Atlanta 66-59 in front of an energized home crowd on Wednesday, Feb. 26.

Two days later, No. 6 Union traveled to Georgia Southwestern State University for its semifinal contest vs. No. 2 Tattnall County, overcoming a low-scoring first half to outpace Tattnall 54-38 and advance to the program's first State final since 1971.

Last week's victories

bumped Union County's record to 26-5, marking the second-highest win total in school history behind the 1971 team's 29-1 campaign.

No. 6 Panthers 54, No. 2 Tattnall County 38 - Union County and Hayden Hughes roared to life during the third quarter, outscoring the Warriors 22-10 behind four Hughes 3-pointers to blow open a 20-18 halftime advantage.

"This is an awesome feeling," Hughes said afterward. "It's just the second time Union has ever made it to the State Championship. It feels great."

Up 42-28 after three quarters, the Panthers were never threatened, eventually growing their lead to 53-32.

Houston Henry finished with 24 points, four rebounds, four assists and three steals. Hughes ended 5 of 12 from 3-point range, putting up 15 points, five steals and four rebounds.

Hughes hit his first trey of the night as Union County raced ahead 7-2, but the senior couldn't get into a rhythm for the remainder of the half against a defensive-minded Tattnall County squad.

After a Warriors trey closed the first, tying things up at 9-9, Tattnall capped their 9-2 run with an 11-9 advantage

early in the second. But Maddox Young didn't let Union's deficit last more than a few seconds, answering with six-straight points via a 22-footer and an old-fashioned 3-point play.

Tattnall fired back with 4-straight, knotting the score at 15-15, before Henry banked in an off-balance runner. However, an offensive board led to a Warriors' 3-pointer, resulting in Union's final deficit of the evening at 18-17.

Vince Marevka put back a Young miss and Henry split two free throws, sending the Panthers to the break up 20-18.

"I think the moment was a little big for us in the first half and I think it had us on our heels a little bit," Garrett said. "We weren't pushing the issue and were playing timid. We were a little afraid to go out there and get it. But I told the guys at halftime, 'we're not playing our brand of basketball, but we're still up two at the half in the final four. Now it's time to get past all of that and start pressing the issue. We're letting [Tattnall] play at a speed they're comfortable with. We can't live like that. Make them play our brand of basketball.'"

Still on top 21-20 in the third, Hughes caught fire, knocking down a transition

3 from the corner. Moments later, he came off a screen on an inbounds play and drilled a trey from the wing. Hughes' third-straight triple came via a feed from Kaden Combs, opening up a 10-point lead.

"I knew [my shots] would start falling eventually," Hughes said. "The ones I missed were just unlucky roll-outs. And I got called out for my defensive effort in the first half, so when I picked up the intensity on defense it seemed like it carried over to offense."

Henry knocked down a step-back jumper and Young went coast-to-coast to cap a 14-0 run with Union up 34-20 before Tattnall connected from long range.

Marevka answered by putting back a Young miss but the Warriors knocked down another trey, narrowing the gap to 36-26. But once again, Hughes delivered a momentum-shifting bucket, drilling a trey from the wing, and Henry added a free throw and a floater, opening up a 42-26 advantage.

Two Tattnall free throws and a basket to begin the fourth cut the margin to 42-30, but that's as close as they would get the rest of the way as Union put the game on ice with an 11-2 spurt.

Henry's step-back trey

sparked the run, and then he converted a Tattnall technical foul into two free throws. Young went 1 for 2 at the charity stripe, Henry connected from 24 feet then he effectively ended the game with a score in the lane near the three-minute mark.

Young finished with 9 points, three rebounds, two assists and a steal. Marevka had 4 points, 10 boards and a steal; Combs added 2 points, seven rebounds, an assist and a steal; Holden Payne chipped in one rebound.

Union County forced 19 Tattnall County turnovers in the win, limiting the Warriors to 29% (14-48) from the floor and 21% (5-24) from long distance.

No. 6 Panthers 66, No. 19 KIPP Atlanta 59 - Union County came out swinging, grabbing a 30-13 lead at the break in front of a home crowd that showed up and showed out in the Panthers' four seniors' final contest at UCHS.

"It still hasn't sunk in yet, but this was a great way to go out on this court," Henry said after the game. "This is the most packed this gym has been in a while. Overall, it was a fun night."

Henry led the way with 22 points, eight assists, seven rebounds and a steal during a contest that wasn't nearly as close as the final score would indicate.

The Panthers outscored KIPP 15-5 in the opening frame, then stretched the lead to 30-13 at the break. KIPP, which featured two starters north of 6-foot-8, cut the deficit to 30-17 early in the third but Union County stretched its lead back to 42-25 and held a 15-point advantage entering the fourth.

"Every team is good once you get to the Elite Eight, so we knew we had to come out and hit them first," Henry said. "And getting Vince going early really helped us out a lot."

Union's largest lead of the night came during the fourth at 45-27, and it was matched three more times at 48-30, 53-35 and 55-37 before KIPP made a late push after the outcome was decided.

Marevka poured in 15 points, 12 rebounds, three steals and two assists. Young had 15

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Hayden Hughes (34) and Jackson Nichols (13) celebrate Union's win over Tattnall. Hughes went off in the second half of Friday's victory, knocking down four 3-pointers in the third quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest



Houston Henry scored 24 points in the win over Tattnall County after going for 22 in Wednesday's win vs. KIPP Atlanta. Photo/Todd Forrest



Vince Marevka had 15 points and 12 rebounds during the quarterfinal win over KIPP Atlanta. Photo/Todd Forrest



Maddox Young had 15 points and two steals in Wednesday's victory over KIPP Atlanta. Photo/Todd Forrest

Baseball: Union Co. splits four games, gets wins over Towns, Lumpkin

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County, still short-handed due to basketball and injuries, finished 2-2 over a busy week, headlined by the program's first home-and-home season sweep of Towns County in 12 years.

The Panthers started the week by taking down Towns County 7-3 on Monday, Feb. 24, and two days later, Gunnar Akins picked up a complete game victory over previously undefeated Lumpkin County. Union County closed out the week with consecutive losses to Rabun County, falling 9-5 in Tiger on Thursday and 7-5 in Blairsville on Friday.

Panthers 7, Towns County 3 - Trailing 2-1 in the fourth, Union County put up four runs in the bottom half and added two more in the sixth to secure the season sweep of the Indians.

Chetley Cox went 1 for 2 with two stolen bases, delivering a two-run, go-ahead double in the fourth. Maddox Patton finished 1 for 3 with an RBI and a steal. Akins tripled and scored in the first inning of a 1 for 3 day. Later, he nailed down the win, tossing the final two innings and striking out four.

Senior Tyler Richards, working with a dislocated finger on his right hand, got the start and went two innings, allowing one run while striking out three. Colten Gibson bridged Richards and Akins, going three innings and allowing two earned runs with five strikeouts.

Union County got on the board during the first when Akins tripled and scored on Eli Gwynn's groundout. But Towns answered with one in the second and another in the



Senior Tyler Richards pitched 4+ innings last week despite dislocating the ring finger on his pitching hand hours before taking the mound on Monday vs. Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest

ending the contest by picking off the would-be tying run at second base.

Patton doubled, scored twice and stole a base during a 2-for-3 day. Cayden Miller belted his second homer of the year, a solo shot in the third, to finish 1 for 3.

Lumpkin County grabbed a 1-0 lead in the first via an RBI double, but the Panthers fired back with two in the bottom half when two Indian errors allowed Patton and Akins to score.

Miller's big fly in the third made it 3-1 before Lumpkin tied things up in the fourth. Union immediately regained the lead when Patton singled and Akins' double brought him around.

The Panthers made it 5-3 in the fifth via a Bo Brown single and a Cox double, but things got interesting in the seventh when Lumpkin County opened the inning with a lead-off walk.

Panthers 5, Lumpkin County 4 - Akins struck out 10 during a complete game victory on Wednesday, Feb. 26,

A one-out error moved the Indians within a run, but Akins fanned the next hitter and picked off the runner at second base to end the game.

Akins went 1 for 3 with a double at the plate; Brown finished 1 for 2 with an RBI; Cox doubled and drove in one during a 1 for 2 day.

Bentley Rich drew a walk and Haney stole a base.

Panthers 5, Rabun County 9 - Union County couldn't recover from the Wildcats' seven-run third, turning a 4-1 lead into an 8-4 deficit.

Down 1-0 in the third, Union County put up four in the top half when Miller singled home Tracy, and Brown's two-out double cleared the bags.

Rabun County wasted no time regaining the lead, opening the bottom half with a hit batter, a walk and an error, followed by a double and four singles.

Rabun added an RBI single in the fourth, and Union

got one in the sixth when Haney scored via an error off the bat of Patton.

Haney finished 2 for 3 with a double and a run; Brown went 1 for 3 with 3 RBIs; Patton scored and stole a bag during a 1-for-4 game. Miller went 1 for 4 with an RBI and a run; Tracy and Gwynn scored one run apiece; Gibson drew a walk.

Richards allowed seven earned runs in 2 1/3 innings; Gibson gave up one run over two frames; Rich tossed 1 2/3 innings of one-hit ball.

Panthers 5, Rabun County 7 - Union County couldn't keep pace as the Wildcats got three in the third and two in the sixth.

Akins doubled and drove in one during a 2-for-3 game. Haney went 1 for 4 with a double and 2 RBIs.

Rabun County scored in the first but Union answered with two in the bottom half when Patton singled and Akins doubled to start the game.



Junior catcher Bo Brown drove in three runs during Union's loss at Rabun County on Thursday. Photo/Todd Forrest

After Rabun got three in the third, Haney's double scored Akins, cutting the Panthers' deficit to 4-3.

The Wildcats got that one back in the fourth courtesy of a two-out single, but Union stayed within a run when Rich reached on an error and scored via Akins' single.

Rabun put up two in the sixth and Brown singled home Gwynn in the seventh.

Brown tossed 6 1/3 on the mound, allowing seven hits and 5 earned runs. Cox struck out one and didn't allow a hit in 2/3 of an inning.

Patton went 1 for 4 with a run; Gwynn scored, stole a bag and drove in one; Brown went 1 for 3 with an RBI and a walk; Rich scored during a 1 for 3 day; Cox and Tracy each finished 1 for 3.

Up next: Union County travels to Hayesville, North Carolina on Friday, March 7. The first pitch is scheduled for 4:30 p.m.



Gunnar Akins celebrates an RBI triple during the first inning vs. Towns. Later that evening he picked up a two-inning save, and then tossed a complete game vs. Lumpkin County on Wednesday. Photo/Todd Forrest

Soccer: Union men open region play with win over NCC



The Union County men's soccer team picked up a 4-0 Region 7-AA win at North Cobb Christian on Friday night. The Lady Panthers dropped a 4-1 contest earlier in the evening. Union County's hosts Ringgold on Tuesday in the 2025 home opener. Photo/UCHS Soccer

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points, three assists, two boards and two steals. Hughes finished with 9 points and five rebounds; Payne had 3 points and a board; Combs added 2 points and two steals.

KIPP started the game with a triple but 15 of the final 17 points of the first went to the Purple and Gold.

Marevka scored Union's first 7 points, then Young connected from the corner for a 10-3 lead. A free throw by Young and two Henry deuces concluded the quarter with a 15-5 score.

Young's one-handed floater built a 12-point lead, and later, Payne hit from deep for a 20-7 score. KIPP closed within 20-11 near the 3:20 mark of the second, but Marevka provided this team's next 4 points and Union led 24-13 with under 45 seconds left in the half.

With KIPP attempting to get to the halftime locker room still within striking distance, Henry delivered a back-breaking sequence courtesy of consecutive 3s in front of the visitor's bench -- the second a buzzer-beater that sent the home crowd into a frenzy with their team up 17.

"I could tell before the game, I saw a confidence and swagger in those guys," Garrett said. "I knew when I walked in the locker room, I could feel the energy and it spilled over into the game. We gave KIPP a full dose of the team we're capable of being. Now we just have to do that one more time."

third, Young juked a defender and scored at the hoop, and then Henry sank two free throws to push the lead back to 17.

Young, Henry and Hughes answered KIPP buckets, resulting in a 42-25 lead with under two minutes left in the third.

Henry's fourth-quarter triple extended the lead to 45-27, then Hughes hit from deep for a 48-30 score with 6:30 remaining. Two minutes later, Young drilled a 3 on the break, mounting a 53-35 advantage.

Henry kept Union up 18 at the 3:30 mark, and Combs scored inside for a 57-41 lead with under of 2:20 remaining. Three late treys by KIPP, including one at the horn, reduced the final margin to 66-59.

"The atmosphere was electric and our guys feed off that," Garrett said. "I'm begging for as many Union County people as possible to come down to Macon on Thursday. We need them. We need friends, we need family, we need fans. Even if you haven't been to a Union County basketball game in a long time, I'm begging you, please make your way to Macon. These guys deserve it and the community deserves it. It's been 54 years since our last state title game so these chances don't come around very often. We're going to do our part to try and seize this opportunity for our Union County community."

"I'm a Union County guy, I wore those colors and played in that gym. This is my hometown and I'm not going

anywhere, so I want to win this for our community."

Up next: Union County faces Butler (21-9) in Thursday's GHSA Class AA State Championship game. The Bulldogs earned a spot in the finals by knocking off No. 1 Carver-Columbus in overtime during Friday's semifinal round.

"I think we've got a good gameplan [for Butler]," Garrett said. "But our message is just realizing the importance of the game and how locked in they need to be."

"The game itself and what happens on the court won't be any different. We don't have to pull out any

trickery, or dig into the vault for something crazy, or recreate the wheel. We don't need to do anything different, just play hard. We're here for a reason and we need to punch them in the mouth early. The message is clear and it will be preached every second until gametime. We're going after them with everything we've got."

Including Union County, Region 7-AA will feature three teams in this week's championship games. North Cobb Christian faces Holy Innocents in the private school championship, and Murray County's girls will meet Hardaway in the Class AA title game.



Kaden Combs and coach Corey Garrett vs. Tattnall. Photo/Todd Forrest



Union County's student section came out in full force for last week's win over KIPP Atlanta. Photo/Todd Forrest