

Sports

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Lady Panthers tied for first in 8-AA following perfect week

Hunter scores 18 in the second half as Union more past Fannin County, 62-47

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We've passed the halfway point of the region schedule but we're no closer to establishing a clear-cut favorite as five teams remain in contention for the top seed in next month's Region 8-AA Tournament.

On the heels of last week's Putnam County victory over the previously unbeaten Rabun County, a bottleneck has developed atop the region standings with Union County, Putnam and Rabun all tied for first place with one loss each. Sitting two games back of all the congestion is a pair of three-loss teams in Banks County and Elbert County.

However, the standings would look very different today if the Lady Panthers (14-3, 5-1) are unable to survive a 45-40 defensive battle at Banks on Tuesday. As a result, Union once again controls its own destiny in Region 8-AA: Win-out and they're hosting the Region Tournament as the No. 1 seed.

On Friday night, the Lady Panthers made quick work of last-place Oglethorpe County (2-12, 0-7) in a contest that saw Union rest its starters after halftime. A day later, the Lady Panthers were able to dish out a bit of revenge with a 62-47 victory over Fannin County, who handed Union its first loss of the season in December.

Lady Panthers 45, Banks County 40 - Union held off a furious late push by the Lady Leopards, who made things interesting despite trailing by eight points with under two minutes to play.

"I'm quickly learning how tough certain environments are (in this region) and Banks is one of those places, but we did what we had to do to get the win," Union County head coach Crystal Beach said. "We made the necessary adjustments and our girls took care of business."

With 3:47 remaining, Andelin Hill scored in the paint to give Union County a 41-33 lead. From the looks of it, Hill's basket would be more than enough as Banks came up empty on its next three possessions. Unfortunately, the Lady Panthers also found a lid on the basket and were unable to put the game out of reach.

Still trailing by eight with 1:40 to play, the Lady Leopards managed to stay alive with a clutch triple. Following a Union miss, Banks County trimmed the margin to 41-38 with a minute left.

Ava Hunter sank two free



Ava Hunter was on a mission vs Fannin. The sophomore accounted for seven of her team's 10 second-half field goals. Photo/Todd Forrest

throws after drawing a foul on a shot attempt with 50 seconds remaining. The Lady Leopards quickly sliced the Union lead back to three with a layup seven seconds later. Then, following another Lady Panthers' miss, Banks had a chance to tie the game but came up empty as sophomore Riley Allison secured the rebound with 19 seconds left.

After a Union timeout, senior Kait McCarter stepped to the foul line with 14 seconds on the clock and hit a pair of free throws to secure the 45-40 victory.

Hunter finished with a game-high 12 points despite going just 1-of-10 from the floor. The bulk of her damage came at the line, where she went a perfect 10-for-10 while grabbing eight rebounds.

Allison and Hill added 9 points apiece with Hill pulling down six boards and blocking two shots. Allison, meanwhile, had three rebounds and three steals. Her 3-point marksmanship played an integral role late in the first half, hitting back-to-back treys to turn a 22-20 deficit into a 26-22 advantage. Union County would go on to take a 26-23 lead into the intermission as Allison and Hill led the way with 8 first-half points.

Banks County came out of the break with five-straight points to go back on top 28-26 before a McCarter putback led to a 3-point play and a 29-28 Union lead.

Down 30-29 with time

running out in the third, Union scored four points in the final seven seconds, beginning with a 15-footer from Hill. And as Banks rushed back for the final shot, freshman Ellie Cook came up with a steal, and with three-tenths of a second left, she was hacked on a midcourt heave, sending her to the line for three shots. She would make two, giving the Lady Panthers a 33-30 lead after three.

Two Hunter free throws and a three from Cook capped off a 9-0 run as Union built a 38-30 lead with 5:17 remaining. Still ahead 38-33, Allison split a pair of free throws and Hill scored inside for a 41-33 advantage at the 3:47 mark.

Earlier in the game, an Allison putback sparked a 9-2 run to close the first quarter after the Lady Panthers trailed 10-8 with just over three minutes left in the period.

After Allison's offensive board tied the game at 10-10, Hunter hit four free throws and Hill drilled a corner trey in the final seconds to open up a 17-12 advantage after one.

McCarter finished with 7 points and 11 rebounds. Cook added 5 points, a steal and a block; Brooke Dockrey had 3 points, three assists and three steals.

Lady Panthers 62, Fannin County 47 - Hunter poured in 18 of her game-high 27 points in the second half as Union County pulled away from a 29-29 tie at the break. Still even at 34-34, the



Freshman Ellie Cook takes the floor during pregame introductions prior to Friday night's contest vs Oglethorpe County. Photo/Todd Forrest

Lady Panthers outscored Fannin 12-5 over the final 5-plus minutes of the third to take a 46-39 lead into the final frame.

"I think we just started to execute better (in the second half)," Coach Beach said. "We did a better job of finding the gaps and the openings on our cuts. Brooke (Dockrey) also did a great job of executing the offense and making adjustments."

Hunter's hot shooting continued in the fourth quarter, scoring the first four points to open up a double-digit lead at 50-39. After a Lady Rebels' basket, sophomore Rebekah Chambers split a pair of free throws to keep the lead at 10.

Fannin would hit two free throws to cut the deficit to eight but they couldn't find an answer for Hunter, who scored consecutive baskets for a 55-45 lead at the 2:46 mark.

Hill sank a pair at the charity stripe and Hunter went 1-for-2 to extend the Union County advantage to 58-45 with 1:38 remaining.

Dockrey would knock down four free throws over the final 1:15 to secure the 62-47 victory.

Dockrey also got the scoring started for Union County as she gave them an early 2-0 lead. Still in front 10-7, the Lady Panthers surrendered a 6-0 run as Fannin jumped ahead 13-10. The lead was short-lived as Cook caught fire, drilling back-to-

back threes before coming up with a steal-and-score to beat the horn for an 18-15 Union edge.

A three by Hill, two baskets by Cook and one from Hunter gave Union County a 27-20 lead before Fannin stormed back with a 9-2 run to close the half.

Cook finished with 12 points, Hill added nine, McCarter had seven, Dockrey scored six and Chambers had one.

The Lady Panthers have now won five of their last six and 8-of-10 vs Fannin County.

Lady Panthers 43, Oglethorpe County 13 - Union County put things away early with a 20-2 first quarter that turned into a 37-2 lead at the break.

The Union County starters sat the entire second half as Hunter led the way with 11 points, Hill scored eight, Cook added seven, Dockrey had four and McCarter finished with three.

"We're focusing on developing those younger women so anytime we can get them game experience is really huge for us," Coach Beach said. "(Games are) so much different than practice and they played very well. And again, anytime we can get them touches and actual game experience it's going to lead to future success."

Hunter scored eight of her 11 in the first quarter, Hill added five on a three and a two. Cook scored four, Allison had

two and McCarter added one as the Lady Panthers opened with a 9-0 run, then closed the quarter on an 11-0 run.

Union would outscore the Lady Patriots 17-0 in the second to close the half on a 28-0 run. Dockrey got on the board with four in the second. McCarter scored her first and only field goal, Allison hit two free throws and Cook, Hill and Hunter scored three points apiece.

Chambers and Kyla Locklear each scored in the third as Oglethorpe won the quarter 7-4 for a 41-9 score after three. The Lady Patriots outscored Union 4-2 in the six-minute fourth. Freshman Corinne Hill accounted for the only Lady Panther basket of the period.

Up next - Union County will visit Elbert County on Tuesday before hosting Monticello on Friday. The game of the week will be Saturday when they travel to Putnam County to makeup the Jan. 4 cancellation.

Union defeated Elbert County 58-46 in December, but the Lady Blue Devils have gone 9-2 since that trip to Blairsville.

Meanwhile, Monticello is going in the other direction, dropping eight of nine since its 56-39 loss to the Lady Panthers.

Finally, Putnam County is currently 14-2 and 5-1 in region. The Lady War Eagles are coming off a 58-54 home win over Rabun County. On Tuesday, Putnam County will host Banks County, who is responsible for Putnam's lone region loss.

Saturday's showdown with Union County will conclude a six-game homestand for the Lady War Eagles, who finish with three of their final four games on the road.

Tip-off is scheduled for 5 p.m. Tuesday at Elbert County, 6 p.m. Friday vs Monticello and 2 p.m. Saturday at Putnam County.

Speaking of Putnam, after hosting Banks on Tuesday, the Lady War Eagles welcome Social Circle on Friday night. Meanwhile, Rabun County will travel to Banks County on Friday after hosting last-place Oglethorpe County on Tuesday.

And as for Coach Beach and her Lady Panthers, you don't have to tell them what's at stake over the final two-and-a-half weeks of the regular season.

"It's a race and we're back in it," Coach Beach said excitedly.



Despite giving up several inches in the paint to the Banks County frontcourt, sophomore guard Riley Allison (center) scores on an offensive rebound during the first quarter of Union County's 45-40 Region 8-AA road win last Tuesday night. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior point guard Brooke Dockrey drew praise from head coach Crystal Beach for her play on both ends of the court last week. On Saturday, she helped lead the Lady Panthers' offense to a 62-47 win over Fannin. The last time Union County scored 60-plus on the Lady Rebels was in January 2012. Photo/Todd Forrest