

Sports

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Panthers on the hunt for the top spot in Region 8-AA

Four straight region victories has Union County back in the mix

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Union County finds itself back in contention for the region's No. 1 seed following three more wins and a pair of stunning losses by Banks County.

The Panthers' weekly slate featured two lengthy road trips to Elbert County and Putnam County sandwiched around a revenge-game vs Monticello at home.

On Tuesday, Union County completed the season sweep at Elbert with a 64-52 victory over the defending region champs. Later, the Panthers kicked off the weekend with a 67-48 blowout of Monticello after suffering an early-season road loss to the Hurricanes while playing without the injured Sawyer Drake.

The week concluded with another road trip as Union County (11-8) survived a low-scoring defensive-struggle at Putnam County, 46-38, to improve to 6-3 in region play and take a two-game lead over fourth place.

Currently sitting in third place and riding a four-game winning streak, the Panthers are one game back of second-place Banks County, who was upset by both Rabun County and Putnam County following a 7-0 start to region play. At the moment, the region's top spot belongs to Union's Tuesday opponent, Social Circle, who lost to Banks on Jan. 10 but sits at 8-1 in the region.

"Last week was an important week and this one is too," Union head coach Corey Garrett said. "We've talked about winning out and taking care of ourselves and letting whatever happens happen (within the region). But with Banks losing a couple games, a few things have happened and now we're right there."

A win over the Redskins on Tuesday will move the Panthers to just one game back of first place with plenty of basketball left to play. Union will host Banks County next Tuesday, while Social Circle is slated to visit Banks in the regular-season finale.

Panthers 67, Monticello 48 - Trailing 14-13 after one, Union County scored the first 15 points of the second quarter to take control for good at 28-14. The Hurricanes would never get within single digits again as the Panthers stretched their lead out to 24 points in the fourth.

In the first matchup with Monticello, Union County fell victim to a red-hot shooting performance in the second half. And in Friday's second meeting, the Hurricanes picked up where they left off, hitting two quick threes during an 8-2 start.

"When they hit those early threes I thought, 'here we go again,' but we started pressing up on their wings and it took them out of their comfort zone," Garrett said.

The Panthers responded with a 9-0 run but Monticello closed the first with a 6-2 stretch to take a 14-13 lead into the second frame.



Sawyer Drake's one-handed slam put an exclamation point on Friday's 67-48 region victory over Monticello. Photo/Todd Forrest

The Panthers would clamp down defensively in the second, holding the Canes without a field goal for more than six minutes as they built a 28-14 advantage via a 15-0 run. When the dust settled, the Panthers had dominated the second period 16-3, and held a 29-17 lead at the break.

Pierson Allison and Sawyer Drake combined for 17 first-half points as Allison led the way with nine. Allison did most of his damage in the second, scoring seven points and kickstarting the 15-0 run with a reverse layup, putting the Panthers back in front to stay.

Kyle Morlock sank a pair of free throws, Sawyer Brey scored on a putback, Drake hit two at the line and an Allison steal-and-score gave Union County a 22-14 lead at the midway point of the second quarter.

Allison knocked down a corner-three, Morlock split a pair at the charity stripe and Lake Hughes made two free throws to cap off the 15-0 run. The Canes finally got on the board with a triple at the 1:42 mark but Kaston Hemphill hit 1-of-2 at the line to give the Panthers a 29-17 halftime lead.

Union County quickly put the game away with the first six points of the second half, beginning with a Morlock deuce and four points from Allison.

After a Cayden Rich score made it a 37-19 game, Drake connected from downtown. Landon Kight split a pair of free throws and Drake converted again, this time going coast-to-coast for a layup to spot Union County a 43-23 lead.

Back-to-back buckets by Morlock along with two free throws apiece from Landon Cox, Allison and Hemphill gave the

Panthers a commanding 53-30 advantage after three quarters.

The duo of Drake and Morlock helped Union extend the margin to two-dozen early in the fourth, highlighted by a breakaway, one-handed slam by Drake at the 5:30 mark.

The final points of the night belonged to Kight and Bryson Lariscy as Union led 67-45 with 1:11 to play.

Drake led the way with 19 points on 5-of-8 shooting, a perfect 8-for-8 at the charity stripe and 1-for-1 from long distance. He also chipped in four rebounds, three steals and a pair of assists.

Allison finished with 15 points on 4-of-8 from the floor and 6-for-6 at the line, while coming up with three steals on the defensive end.

Morlock added 11 points and four boards, Hughes had five points and two steals. Brey, Cox and Hemphill each contributed four points to the win with Brey recording three steals and Hemphill picking up two.

Kight finished with 3 points and four rebounds, Rich added two points, four rebounds and a team-high four assists. Lariscy ended up with one point, one rebound and a steal.

Union County finished at 45% from the floor on 19-for-42 shooting. They also hit 55% of 2-pointers despite struggling from deep -- going 2-for-11 (18%). Luckily, the opposition was unable to take advantage from 3-point range, making 5-of-18 for 28%.

The Panthers made 78% at the line, hitting 28-of-36, compared to the Canes' 64% on 9-of-14. Union forced Monticello into 28 turnovers, resulting in 33 Panther points on the other end. As for the Union offense, they



Senior Pierson Allison led Union with 17 points in a come-from-behind victory at Elbert County on Tuesday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

coughed it up 15 times and won the points in the paint battle 32-24, despite both teams finishing dead even with 17 defensive rebounds and eight offensive boards.

Panthers 64, Elbert County 52 - Union County overcame a 21-13 deficit after one to outscore the Blue Devils 51-31 the rest of the way behind 17 points from Allison and a dozen by Brey.

"We didn't start out the way we wanted to, but the end result is what we wanted," Garrett said. "If that's what it takes for us to get wins, then I'll take a slow start."

"Something that might be causing our slow starts is our zone defense because it does slow the game down. So (the slow starts) may be something that I just might have to get used to."

Tied at 13-13, Elbert closed the first with eight unanswered. Moments later, they held a 23-15 advantage early in the second before Union used a 12-2 run to grab a brief 27-25 lead.

The two teams entered the break deadlocked at 37-37 after Union overcame a slow start that saw them shoot just 26% in the first. They would eventually heat up, connecting on 63% overall and 67% from long distance in the second frame.

As for the home team, after hitting 6-of-12 from behind the arc during the first half, the Blue Devils missed 7-of-8 in the second half.

"In our zone, two things we're going to give up are threes and offensive rebounds," Garrett said. "Both Monticello and Elbert came out hitting threes, but when we start forcing the amount of turnovers that we have lately, it just starts to wear down (the opponent). I will give up a few threes and offensive rebounds if we're getting 15-plus steals and 20-plus turnovers."

After giving up a bucket to open the third, the Panthers responded by outscoring Elbert 15-9 to hold a 52-48 edge after three quarters. Union continued to

pull away, starting the final frame with two straight baskets for an eight-point lead. The Panthers would open up their first double-digit margin of the night at 60-50, capping off an 8-2 spurt to begin the fourth.

Allison went 10-of-12 at the line to lead Union County with 17 points. He would also turn in a game-high four steals to go with a team-high four assists.

Brey finished with 12 points and five boards, Drake added 11 points, three rebounds, three steals and two dimes.

Rich scored 9 points while pulling down a team-high six rebounds. Hemphill had six points, four rebounds, three assists and two steals; Morlock chipped in 4 points and five boards, Kight knocked down a trey to finish with 3 points and Cox finished with 2 points and two steals.

Elbert was led by DJ Ardister's 27 points on 7-of-13 from 3-point range. The rest of the Blue Devils finished a combined 0-for-6 from downtown.

Both teams were fairly even from the field with Union hitting 44% to Elbert's 42%. The Panthers were more efficient from deep, connecting on 5-of-9 (56%) to the Blue Devils' 7-of-19 (37%).

Union County outscored Elbert 32-26 in the paint and held a decisive edge at the line, making 17-of-24 for 71%. The Blue Devils made just 5-of-9 (56%) at the foul line but won the rebound battle 30-26.

Panthers 46, Putnam County 38 - Union County jumped out front 8-2 before falling behind 20-18 to a War Eagles squad fresh off an upset of Banks County. But the Panthers would never trail again, taking a 24-20 lead into the break, eventually stretching their advantage to 37-27, late in the third quarter.

Leading 37-29 entering the fourth, Union would keep Putnam at bay, never allowing the War Eagles within six points. The Panthers opened up their largest lead at 42-31 before Putnam tried

making things interesting at 42-36. But Union quickly slammed the door, pushing its margin back to double-digits at 46-36.

Morlock was the only Panther to score in double figures -- leading the way with 10 points and seven rebounds.

Allison finished with 9 points and five steals in 30 minutes of action. Brey added 7 points, four rebounds and five steals; Cox had 7 points, three boards and a pair of steals.

Drake finished with 4 points, five rebounds, five steals and four assists. Helcher also contributed 4 points, Hughes had three and Hemphill scored two.

Rich chipped in four rebounds and a block and Lariscy added one steal to an opportunistic Union County defense that forced 30 turnovers on 20 steals.

Putnam also turned in a stellar performance on the defensive end, limiting the Panthers to just 34% (18-for-55) from the floor and 12% (2-for-17) from deep. As for the War Eagles, they also struggled putting the ball in the hoop, making just 39% (16-for-41) from the floor and 29% (2-for-7) from three.

Union won the offensive boards 15-9, despite getting outrebounded 33-30 overall. Union County outscored Putnam 30-22 in the paint and 24-18 on points off turnovers.

Up next - First-place Social Circle visits Blairsville on Tuesday night looking to extend its winning streak over the Panthers to four games.

"I know our guys will be fired up and it would be nice to have a good home crowd there to support us," Garrett said. "Hopefully everybody shows up and we can get a win. That would be huge, for sure."

At 8-1 in Region 8-AA, the Redskins are looking to maintain their one-game lead over second-place Banks County. A win for Union moves them within a game of Social Circle and Banks, who would be tied for first, assuming the Leopards win at Monticello on Tuesday.

On Friday, the roles will be reversed as Union looks to stretch its winning streak over Rabun to seven games. At the same time, the Panthers are hoping to keep the fourth-place Wildcats in their rearview mirrors.

Rabun visits Elbert County on Tuesday and the winner will take sole possession of fourth. If Rabun defeats Elbert and Union falls to Social Circle, Friday's showdown at Rabun takes on added importance with the No. 3 seed in next month's region tournament up for grabs.

"In this region, anyone can beat anyone on any given night," Garrett said. "We're taking no days off at practice and guys are starting to hold each other accountable. We're treating every rep in practice like it's the last play of the region championship."

The Panthers will host Putnam County for Senior Night in a Saturday afternoon rematch.

At 3-6 in region, the sixth-place War Eagles are trying to keep pace with Elbert and Rabun. Currently, Putnam is tied with Monticello, one game back of the 4-5 Blue Devils and Wildcats.



Senior Cayden Rich helped lead a Union County defense that forced 81 turnovers in its three wins last week. The Panthers would harass Monticello into 28 giveaways during Friday night's victory. Photo/Todd Forrest



Junior Kaston Hemphill attacks the basket during the second half of Friday night's blowout victory over Monticello. Hemphill's aggressive play on the offensive end would lead to six attempts from the free throw line - he made four. Photo/Todd Forrest