

Sports

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Panther rally falls short at Spencer in Class AA First Round

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COLUMBUS -- Union County saw its season come to a close with a 69-53 loss at Spencer in the first round of the Class AA State Tournament last weekend.

After trailing 39-20 at halftime, the Panthers would close the third on an 8-0 run to cut the deficit to single digits before pulling within six at 57-51 in the final minutes. They would get no closer as the Green Wave hit 10-of-12 at the foul line to bolster a 12-2 run down the stretch.

"I think it took us a little while to adjust to (Spencer's) speed," Union County coach Casey Jones said. "They were faster than what we had seen or expected and it shocked us a little bit. But I'm proud of the guys for not folding the tent. It would have been easy to do but instead, we battled back to within six."

Not only was Union County playing from behind all night, they were handicapped by a sizeable discrepancy in the shooting percentage column as they grinded through a 34-percent performance (19-of-56) from the floor. On the other end, Spencer connected on 55-percent (26-for-47), thanks in large part to 19 fast break points, aided by 17 Panther turnovers, resulting in a slew of easy buckets.

"Another thing that surprised us what their (full court) pressure and how much they tried to trap us," Coach Jones said. "We didn't expect that much pressure based off the scouting reports and game film that we had. We finally settled down and (Spencer) also got a little careless with the ball too. Once we settled down we were fine, we just found ourselves in too big of a hole from the get-go."

Pierson Allison led Union County with 18 points on 6-of-17 shooting, 2-for-8 from downtown and 4-of-7 at the line. Cayden Rich poured in a career-high with 12 points -- 10 coming in the second half and Sawyer Drake added 11 points with team highs in rebounds (7), assists (5) and steals (5).

"We've told Cayden (Rich) multiple times throughout the year to shoot the basketball," Jones said. "He hit a few shots and that boosted his confidence. I thought he played well, and looking ahead to next year, we're hoping that he'll score a lot more. It would be a tremendous help if he could average double digits in scoring."

The Green Wave entered Friday night's contest with a 22-4 record but suffered an upset loss in the 5-AA Region Tournament to drop to the No. 2 seed. And in the early going, Spencer was a team on a mission, looking to put its only region loss of the season in the rearview mirror. As a result, the Panthers found themselves in an early 15-4 hole that Spencer eventually widened to 39-20 at the break.

"I don't think we ran one offensive set in the first half," Jones said. "We were out of control. (Spencer) was a good defensive team but we also helped them out with some quick shots."

Trailing 49-32 late in the third, Rich sparked an 8-0 run with a trey that was followed by an Allison basket to pull Union within a dozen at 49-37. With time winding down in the period, Allison was fouled on a dribble-drive layup, resulting in a 3-point play and a 49-40 score to begin the fourth.

A Drake three cut the



Junior Cayden Rich scored a career-high 12 points during Union County's first round loss to Spencer. His 10 second half points played an important role in the Panthers' comeback bid. Photo/Todd Forrest

Spencer lead to 53-45, then Rich answered a Green Wave deuce with a triple to make it seven-point game at 55-48. Rich kept the margin at seven with a pull-up jumper from 15-feet followed by a 1-for-2 trip to the line by Drake that made it a 57-51 game.

Following a Green Wave basket, the Panthers were tagged with an offensive foul and moments later, Spencer sank 1-of-2 at the charity stripe. The Panthers would go cold as the Green Wave hit six straight at the line as all Union could muster was one free throw each from Drake and Allison to stay within 11.

"Once we finally settled down we were able to start running our offense and taking better shots," Jones said. "We just found ourselves in too big of a hole to come back from. But I'm proud of the guys. They played hard as they always do."

Spencer put an exclamation point on the victory during the final minute with a steal that led to a break away one-handed slam and a 15-point lead.

The senior trio of Kanon Hemphill, Britt Waller and Jared Nelson combined for 11 points as Hemphill scored 6 points with 4 boards and Waller chipped in 4 points and 3 rebounds.

Nelson finished with 3 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals and one free throw.

"We had a good year, we would have liked to have moved on but this season was still something to be proud of," Jones said. "You can always hold your head high anytime you make it to the (state) tournament."

The contest began with both squads trading baskets until Spencer used a 10-0 run to take a 15-4 advantage. Union appeared to weather the storm but the Green Wave beat the first quarter horn with a triple for a 20-9 lead after one.

An Allison three and a Drake free throw got the Panthers off on the right foot in the second but an offensive foul stifled the Union County run and kept the margin at 20-13.

Spencer retaliated with a 9-2 spurt before Drake kept the Panthers within a dozen at 29-17. Five of the next seven Union County possessions ended with turnovers as two free throws

from Allison and one by Nelson was all they could muster on the wrong end of a 10-3 run as the Green Wave took a commanding 39-20 lead into the locker room.

The third got underway with baskets by Allison and Rich to trim the difference to 15 points. Union would continue to break even until a Drake basket made it a 44-30. Later, Spencer would convert an and-one to take a 49-32 lead late in the third.

With the graduation of Waller, Hemphill, Daniel and Robertson in the post, along with Nelson, who played multiple positions, Coach Jones could potentially see the Union County offense open things up and play at a faster pace with a smaller lineup.

"We don't have a true post player coming back so we might have to change things up a little bit and maybe pick up the pace," he said. "We have the guys to do it so we'd be alright playing that way."

"But those five seniors that we're graduating are a good group and they're all high character guys. That's for sure going to be something we'll miss next season."

The Panthers will, however, return four starters next season with both of its First Team All-Region selections returning in Allison and Drake.

"With the guys we have coming back, expectations are going to be high going into next year," Jones added.

A look at 2020: Banks County and Union County will likely be the early favorites in Region 8-AA. Both teams return four starters with the Leopards bringing back Region Player of the Year Carl Cleveland and first team selection Pierce Martin.

Defending region champ Elbert County graduates all five starters and eight players overall off this year's 20-win squad so they'll likely be a wild card going into next season.

Rabun County graduates some key players but were also very young at other positions. At the end of the day, however, the Wildcats should see a significant improvement over this season's 6-21 campaign.

Another improved squad



Colton Day looks on as Sawyer Drake wins the tip-off during a region tournament game. Photo/Todd Forrest

will be Putnam County, who returns four starters including all-region guard Rodney Daniel. The War Eagles started one senior, one junior, two sophomores and a freshman this season.

Social Circle placed third in the regular season before suffering an upset loss to Rabun in the opening round of the region

playoffs. The Redskins should remain in the mix for a playoff spot in 2020 but must replace senior all-region selections Ennis Woolfolk and Brian Oglesby.

Monticello graduates eight seniors but only four were significant contributors, most notably, all-region guard Jay Fleetwood and his 16 points a

night. Second leading scorer Kedrion Jackson, team captain Corde Ross and Thomas Rogers were also seniors.

Finally, last place Oglethorpe County featured three seniors and two juniors in the starting lineup. Rounding out the Patriots' rotation was a handful of 11th graders off the bench.

Garrett reflects on 2019; looks ahead to 2020

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At the conclusion of the 2018-19 Lady Panther basketball season earlier this month, the *North Georgia News* was able to sit down with Union County Girls Basketball Head Coach Corey Garrett to discuss the past, present and future of his program.

NGN: The lone senior starter this season was Adeline Dockrey. She wasn't the flashiest player but what did she bring to the team that will make her so difficult to replace next season?

CG: If Adeline were a football player, she would be our game manager quarterback. She's not going to do anything that wows you but she's never going to hurt you. She always knew the game plan and she always knew what needed to be done. She was very steady and you could always trust her. When she was hitting threes, we were tough to beat, so I wish she would have shot a little more. She played a huge role and someone will have to fill that role by taking care of the ball and doing whatever needs to be done to make us successful.

NGN: How much will Adeline's replacement determine our style of play next year? Do we go with Riley Allison or Ansley Collins and use a smaller, quicker lineup? Or do we move Kyla Locklear or Rebekah Chambers into the starting five and get even bigger?

CG: That's something we're definitely going to have to figure out. That will be a huge part of the summer camps. We'll plug-and-play and see what fits. We could either be really big again or go a little smaller. It helps that Kait (McCarter) is so versatile. She went from a true post player last season to someone that could handle the ball for us. Some people might question that but I was around her



all the time and I saw how hard she worked. I actually thought she did a pretty good job (on the perimeter).

NGN: Speaking of Kait, all season long, she and Ava (Hunter) forced opposing defenses to pack the paint, yet they were still able to average 14 and 10 points-a-game, respectively. How did they, along with your coaching, adapt to being the focal point of everyone's defensive schemes over the course of the year?

CG: Coming into the year, everyone knew who Kait was so they tried to take her away, and as a result, Ava had some huge games. Then, I wouldn't say they forgot about Kait, but they started focusing on Ava a little more and it allowed Kait to score a few easy points.

But most of the season, teams were going to gamble and use three girls inside to guard Kait and Ava and dare anyone else to beat us. And when we hit outside shots, we were successful. When we didn't, we weren't.

NGN: What of a focus will there be on improving outside shooting to potentially open things up inside?

CG: We really needed more outside shooting this year and Kait was one of our best shooters. But when she's outside, we lose her presence inside. I

wouldn't say it's a bad problem to have, but going into next season we need to figure out a better way to get the most out of (McCarter and Hunter).

From the previous season to this season, our outside shooting improved. Last year we attempted 188 threes and made about 24-percent. This year we shot over 300 and made 29-percent. The girls came in and worked and it paid off, so we just have to keep getting better.

We also played a lot of freshmen that probably weren't ready to play that many minutes. That will be huge going into next year, but for this year, they probably weren't ready.

NGN: That is the perfect segue to my next question, which was in regards to the play of the other freshmen, besides Ava.

CG: Obviously, Ava stood out but Riley (Allison) did a great job despite not being ready for that many minutes. She had some big games for us. The one that stands out in my mind is the Fannin game.

Then there is Ansley (Collins) and her energy is always there. She's not a big time scorer but her energy is always there and that is huge for us.

I think Rebekah (Chambers) is going to get a lot better in the offseason so it was good to get her some minutes this season.