

Sports

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Lady Panthers turned away at buzzer in Elite 8 thriller

Third-ranked Early County survives 48 combined points from Hunter, Hill and Dockrey

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The Union County Lady Panthers saw their State Tournament run come to close with a 60-58 loss to Early County in a back-and-forth barn burner that ended when a pair of game-tying attempts by Ava Hunter were blocked in the final seconds by Early's Makayla Timpson.

The 6-foot, 3-inch Timpson, a four-star power forward in the Class of 2021 according to *ESPN*, finished with 18 points and 11 boards to go with a game-high nine blocked shots. But none were more important than her two swats under the basket in the final moments to preserve the Bobcats' second-straight berth in the Class AA Final Four.

Hunter, an All-Region sophomore, finished with a game-high 19 points and 13 rebounds, along with two blocks and two steals.

"At the beginning of the season, nobody expected us to do what we did," Union County head coach Crystal Beach said. "A huge amount of credit goes to our four seniors (Brooke Dockrey, Andelin Hill, Kait McCarter and Sarah Sanchez) for the role they played. Each one was instrumental to our success and I can't credit them enough."

Early County closed the game with a 19-9 run after Union County used a 30-12 sprint, overcoming a 13-point deficit to take a 49-41 lead with under five minutes remaining while Timpson battled foul trouble.

After scoring scoreless in the first half, Hill scored 13 of her 15 points during the 30-12 outburst, including seven-straight points that made it an eight-point game with 4:50 to play.

With her team on the ropes, Bobcat senior Ashontay Henderson, who entered the game having missed 11 of her previous 15 attempts from long range, drilled three treys for a 55-51 Early lead with under three minutes to play.

"That's the risk you take when you press and play our style of defense," Beach said. "But you have to give credit to (Henderson)



L-R: Senior Andelin Hill exploded for 15 points in the second half with No. 8 Union County trailing 32-19 in the third. Coach Crystal Beach comforts Brooke Dockrey while the senior point guard is in disbelief after picking up her third foul in the first quarter. Photo/Todd Forrest

needed her most."

Henderson's first deep ball triggered a 14-2 Bobcat run before Hunter answered an Early deuce with a putback at the 4:05 mark. Down 51-46 with 3:50 to play, Henderson connected again from downtown before an and-one by Timpson, who was playing with four fouls, put the Bobcats back in front, 52-51.

Henderson's third 3 opened up a 55-51 lead but Hunter stopped the bleeding with a basket, followed by a 1-for-2 trip to the charity stripe by Dockrey, cutting the deficit to 55-54 with 2:14 left.

McCarter capped off a 5-0 spurt with a bucket down low that momentarily put Union back in front, 56-55 at the 1:40 mark.

After forcing a much-needed stop on the ensuing Early County possession, the Lady Panthers coughed up the basketball with a minute to play, leading to a Bobcats' go-ahead layup on the other end.

Later, Timpson would split

a pair at the line to extend the Early advantage to 58-56, but a Hill putback on the other end tied things up with 21 seconds to go.

The Bobcats attacked quickly, missing their first try, but Timpson came down with the rebound and converted a go-ahead layup at the 13-second mark.

Electing to push the ball across halfcourt before using her final timeout, Beach was finally awarded the stoppage after a delayed whistle cost her team two seconds. Inbounding from in front of the Union bench with 4 seconds on the clock, an accurate entry pass found Hunter on the low block but her turnaround jumper was blocked out-of-bounds by Timpson with 1.9 seconds left.

Inbounding from under their own basket and out of timeouts, all the Lady Panthers could do was throw a lob to Hunter, who came down with the pass, but with no time to pump fake or post up, her game-tying 12-footer was denied by Timpson as the horn sounded on Union County's



season.

According to Beach, going inside to Beach, the first option. But when the play didn't develop as expected, Hunter was Plan B in the hopes she could draw a foul.

"We wanted to go for the win but when that wasn't available, we were hoping to get an and-one with Ava," Beach said.

Playing in front of one of the largest home crowds in recent history, the Lady Panthers came out red-hot and took early leads of 7-2 and 11-4.

After holding an 11-6 advantage after one, the Lady Panthers found themselves on the wrong end of an 11-0 run in the second, resulting in a 25-17 halftime deficit.

Things started to go south for Union County when Dockrey picked up her third foul with 2:41 left in the opening frame. Still clinging to a 13-11 advantage early in the second, the Bobcats rattled off 11-straight to build a 22-13 lead.

unanswered to face its largest deficit of the postseason at 32-19. To make matters worse, McCarter was tagged for her fourth foul at the 5:52 mark of the third.

With two senior starters in serious trouble, the Lady Panthers were in danger of letting things get out of hand against an Early County squad that won each of its previous 17 games by at least a dozen points.

"Good teams are going to go on runs," Beach said. "The important thing is maintaining your composure and to just keep fighting and that's exactly what we did."

"What hurt us in the second quarter was we didn't move the ball very well on offense. At halftime, the focus was on playing hard-nosed defense and moving the ball on offense."

With her team down 13, Hill began to heat up after getting shutout in the first half. Hill began the Union comeback with a corner-jumper, followed by a pair of free throws after Hunter made it a single-digit game with a basket in the post.

With her team still down nine and under three minutes to play in the third, Hill sank a pair of technical free throws after a Bobcat player was hit with the 'T' for disagreeing with a foul call.

The technical sparked an 10-2 Union County run that pulled them within a point at 37-36 when junior Kyla Locklear set a short let pass and sank a short jumper in the latter stages of the quarter.

Early County would close the third with a basket to push the margin to 39-36 with one quarter to play.

"We started hitting some shots and getting a few calls to go our way during the third," Beach said. "Also, it was just an overall great game environment. You could feel the community behind us, especially during the second half."

Dockrey began the fourth with a pair of free throws and a coast-to-coast layup that put the Lady Panthers back in front. Hunter added a basket, then Hill poured in seven-straight to help build margins of 47-39 and

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Baseball: Panthers split doubleheader with Banks County to begin region play

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Union County (3-5, 1-1) scored two runs in the sixth inning of game two to force a split with visiting Banks County in last weekend's region-opening doubleheader.

Originally scheduled for Friday evening, winter weather pushed back the start of the Region 8-AA slate to Saturday afternoon where the Union County lineup needed 13 innings to finally defeat.

After giving up nine runs in the seventh inning during a 14-1 game-one loss, the Panthers found themselves down 2-1 in the sixth inning of game two. That's Union County would post its first two-run inning of the day, allowing senior Cayden Rich to nail down the save in the seventh.

Panthers 3, Banks County 2 - (Game 2) Junior Issac Mullinack got the nod and worked four innings, scattering six hits and allowing one earned. Junior lefty Zeke Swartz worked two innings in relief, picking up the win while giving up two hits and an unearned run.

At the plate, senior John Mancuso went 2-for-4, including a go-ahead RBI double with two down in the bottom of the sixth.

Rich entered in the seventh and fanned two, working around a two-out double to preserve the 3-2 victory.

Scoreless in the third, Mullinack issued a pair of walks that led to a two-out RBI single by Banks County. Still down 1-0 in the fourth, Mullinack singled and stole a base, eventually tying the score when the Panthers were gifted a run via a two-out, two-strike passed ball.

Swartz entered in the fifth and the Leopards immediately regained the lead when a two-out error allowed the go-ahead run to score.

Union County was in business during the bottom half of the fifth when Mancuso singled and



Through eight games, senior infielder John Mancuso leads the team with an 1.177 OPS and a .625 slugging percentage. Photo/Todd Forrest

Austin Garrison was plunked, putting two on with nobody out. Unfortunately, consecutive fly outs and ground out ended the threat.

Swartz pitched around a one-out walk in the sixth, setting the stage for Union County's late-inning heroics.

Rich opened the Panther half of the sixth with a walk and ended up at third with one down following an Alex Youngblood bunt. Ahead in the count 2-0, Hunter Loyd brought in Rich with a ground out to second.

Matthew Kelley kept the inning alive with a two-out single, bringing Mancuso to the plate for the go-ahead double to center.

Kelley finished 2-for-3 with the game-winning run and Mullinack went 1-for-3 with a run. Loyd and Carter Wright also drew walks for Union County, who were out-hit 9-5 by the Leopards.

Panthers 1, Banks County 14 (Game 1) - Leading 5-1, the Leopards sent 14 batters to

the plate during a nine-run seventh inning that blew things open in game one.

The Panthers were limited to just four hits -- two off the bat of Wright -- while three pitchers combined to surrender 16 hits and 13 earned runs.

Banks County took control in the top half of the first after Garrison fanned the first batter of the game. A double, four singles and a walk helped the Leopards put a 4-spot on the board in the first.

Garrison would stay in the game and give up just two hits and one unearned run over the next four innings. His final line read: five innings, four earned runs, seven Ks and a walk.

His only support came in the second when Union County, with one run already in, had two on with one out but couldn't muster another run.

Wright led off with a base hit and Mullinack drew a one-out walk. An opposite-field single by Youngblood made it 4-1 before consecutive strikeouts ended

the inning.

Banks got that run back in the third when a two-out error kept the inning alive and the Leopards made Union County pay with an RBI double.

Banks would lead 5-1 until the seventh when a pair of RBI singles made it 8-1 with one out. After a hit batter and another single made it 10-1, the Leopards loaded the bases with two down before blasting a grand slam to center.

Thomas Dyer and Conner Shields worked the final two innings for Union County. Dyer went 1.2 innings and Shields tossed a third of an inning.

Wright went 2-for-3, Garrison was 1-for-3 and Youngblood finished 1-for-2 with an RBI. Dyer, running for the catcher Wright, scored on Youngblood's single.

Panthers 0, Lumpkin County 3 - While the Lady Panthers basketball team hosted Early County on Tuesday, Union County baseball was at Lumpkin County, where they fell 3-0 despite out-hitting the home team 5-3.

Mancuso and Garrison finished with two hits apiece and Kelley added another, but the Indians got two runs in the fourth and one in the fifth to hang on to the shutout victory.

Garrison, Dyer and Mullinack tossed two innings each as Dyer allowed two runs and Mullinack surrendered one.

Garrison fanned three during two hitless innings. Lumpkin County retired eight straight Panthers to end the game as Union never threatened after a Mancuso double in the third put two runners in scoring position.

One-out singles by the Panthers went to waste in the first, second and fifth innings. A two-out single was stranded in the fourth.

Up next - Union County will host Social Circle (1-6, 0-2) on Friday in another Region 8-AA twin bill vs a playoff squad from last season. First pitch is scheduled for 5 p.m. in the opener.

Not a moment too soon: Drake tops 1,000 points

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Tiger - In his second to last game at UCHS, senior basketball star Sawyer Drake surpassed 1,000 career points during the Panthers' Region 8-AA Consolation Game rout of Putnam County.

Entering the contest, the three-year starter needed 17 points to reach the milestone and he accomplished the feat with a pair of free throws in the fourth quarter, en route to a season-high 22-point outing.

Afterward, the *North Georgia News* caught up with Drake, who missed most of December with a broken hand, to discuss his not-so-simple path to 1K.

While out with the injury, Drake watched from the bench as teammate and close friend Pierson Allison scored his 1,000th point during a mid-December victory over Gilmer. Allison and Drake arrived together and have both contributed since their freshman year. Unfortunately, injuries have cost Drake a handful of games, otherwise, reaching 1,000 points would've been guaranteed for the three-time all-region selection.

Despite missing six games in 2019-20, Drake finished with a 12.3 points-per-game average, while shooting 45% from the floor and a much-improved 38% from 3-point range on almost three attempts a night from downtown. He also pulled down five boards, averaged 2.4 assists and 2.1 steals per game.

NGN: Did you know how close you were to 1,000 coming into tonight's game?

SD: I had an idea but I didn't know exactly how many I needed. I knew I was in range, that was about it.

NGN: When the buzzer sounded and they stopped the game, did you realize right then that you had done it?

SD: I had an idea that I was about to get it. They started sending in plays that they never run for me, and when they told me to go to a certain spot, I knew it was so I could get the ball with a chance to score. That's when I knew that I must be getting close.

NGN: Was it the inbounds play that they called for you, or



Drake hits a 3 during postseason play at Rabun. Photo/Todd Forrest

was it the play before?
SD: The play before I drove (to the basket from the perimeter) and they called a jump ball when the guy tied me up. The next time we ran an inbounds play for me and I was fouled and went to the line.

NGN: Early in the year you were injured and watched Pierson score his 1,000th point. Did that make you wonder if you would also get a chance to accomplish it? Considering that your two careers have almost run parallel, did any doubt or regret start to sink in?

SD: I was happy for Pierson most of all, but it made me stop and think a little bit about how close I was and how many games I had missed. I was a little worried that I had missed too many games to get the chance. But it all worked out in the long run.

NGN: Tonight we got off to a hot start and then allowed (Putnam) to get back into the game. But during the second half it seemed like you decided to take over. How do you know when it's time to do a little bit more individually? Do the coaches urge you on, or is it something you decide yourself?

SD: Nobody has to tell me, I just sort of know. And it usually happens when I get to a point where I need to stop thinking too much and start playing ball.

NGN: It also helps when your jumper is falling.

SD: Oh man, definitely. I've worked very long and very hard on that. It feels good when all that work pays off.