

Sports

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Basketball: Union opens with sweep of Habersham Central

Coach Hunter on new season: We just want to avoid taking any steps backward

By Todd Forrest
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With the Lady Panthers already sitting at 2-0 on the year, the Union County men took the floor for the first time last Tuesday trying to end a 15-game skid dating back to February 2020.

Trailing 13-7 just beyond the halfway point of the first quarter, the Panthers, still shorthanded following football season, found another gear and raced ahead 34-23 on the heels of a 27-10 outburst. Union would maintain its comfortable advantage at 34-25 as the squads broke for intermission.

The Panthers kept the Raiders at arm's length for the entire second half, never allowing the visitors to advance any closer than a 4-point margin during a 58-50 victory.

The turnaround came at the 3:48 mark of the first when Union County head coach Corey Garrett asked for a timeout after his transition defense surrendered a wide-open trey, resulting in a six-point deficit.

On the ensuing possession, senior Landon Kight crashed the boards and scored off a missed free throw. Fellow 12th grader Lake Hughes turned a steal into a layup, then freshman Jude Ellis put Union ahead 14-13 with a 22-footer just inside of 2 minutes.

Habersham went on to outscore Union 6-4 over the period's final 1:38 but the Panthers seized control with a 16-6 second frame. Sixteen of the quarter's first 20 points belonged to the Purple and Gold as they built a double-digit advantage.

Kight began the second with a turnaround jumper in the post, and after Hughes took a charge, Ellis drove inside and converted a scoop layup between three defenders.

The next eight points went to Kight and freshman Houston Henry as Union extended its margin to 32-23 at the 2:53 mark of the half.

And even when he wasn't scoring, Kight's fingerprints were all over the second quarter. After he pulled down a board on the defensive end, Kight fed Ellis for 2 points with an entry pass from the top of the key, opening up a 34-23 advantage.

The Raiders hit 2 of 4 at the charity stripe during the final minute, bringing the first half tally to 34-25. During the second frame, Habersham shot just 2 for 13 (15%) from the floor after a scorching 8 for 14 (57%) in the first.

The Raiders never seriously threatened the home team during the second half. Their last attempt at making things interesting came near the 3:15 mark of the fourth when the Raiders missed a driving one-on-one layup attempt that would have moved the visitors to within three points.

For the most part, Union maintained a 6-8 point advantage for much of the second half, beginning with an Austin Taylor trey that provided the home team a 37-27 cushion less than two minutes into the third.

A 6-0 Habersham spurt cut the margin to 37-33, but Eli Underwood came off the bench to sink 1 of 2 at the line and Taylor finished a dribble-drive with a finger roll off the glass. Taylor's deuce capped a low-scoring third quarter that saw



Corinne Hill blocks a shot during a recent game. The junior guard finished with a team-high two blocks at Rabun Gap. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union out front 40-33 entering the fourth.

A Taylor steal one minute into the final frame sparked a Panthers' fast break that ended with the senior guard dishing to Kight for a layup.

Union moved ahead 44-33 on a running hook shot by Ellis before Garrett decided to take the air out of the ball with around six minutes left.

Still down by nine with over five minutes to play, Habersham attempted to quicken the pace with full court pressure, forcing Union into a 5-second violation.

The Raiders eventually trimmed the margin to 44-39 with 3:46 to play but Kight sank a corner 3 a minute later to end a Union County scoreless drought of nearly four minutes.

With the Panthers nursing a 47-41 lead with 2:18 left, Ellis penetrated the Habersham zone and found Underwood under the basket where the junior was immediately hacked, resulting in two free throws and a 49-41 advantage.

Ellis delivered the dagger with 1:15 remaining in the form of a step-back 3 directly in front of an ecstatic "Pit Crew."

Taylor and Hughes hit eight free throws down the stretch to put the game away and hand Union County its first win since a Region 8-AA Consolation Game victory over Putnam County on Feb. 10, 2020 at Rabun County.

Kight finished with 17 points and 8 rebounds on 8-for-10 shooting while battling foul trouble. Ellis had 14 points and seven boards; Taylor added 9 points, two assists and two steals.

Hughes had 6 points and two steals on an off-night shooting -- 1 for 10 overall; 0 for 8 from deep. Henry led the team with three assists and a block while chipping in 5 points and seven boards.

In his first game back from an ankle injury, Underwood grabbed 6 boards and scored 4 points in 14 minutes.

Hayden Payne (2) and Hayden Hughes (1) combined for 3 points to round out the Union scoring. Daniel Snow hauled in six rebounds.

The returning football players, most notably All-Region guard Caleb John, dressed out for last week's games but didn't see any action.

Lady Panthers 61, Habersham Central 49 - Union County used a 19-7 second quarter and an 17-0 second-half run to storm past Habersham Central in a 61-49 victory.

The Lady Panthers overcame 26 turnovers and a 10-

for-22 (46%) performance at the charity stripe to equal last year's win total in their first two outings.

Union County finished with four players in double figures, led by career-highs from sophomore Lara Turner (15) and junior Corinne Hill (12).

Senior Ava Hunter turned in a 15-point, 13-rebound double-double and fellow senior Rebekah Chambers had 10 points and seven boards in the win.

"We want to play up-tempo this year with pressure defense so we'll have to rely on a lot of people to keep everyone fresh," Union County head coach Mandy Hunter said. "We haven't figured out the rotations yet, but we're looking at using about 10 players. But our motto this year is 'do your job,' whether you play one minute or 30. Even if you don't play at all, you need to remain upbeat and keep patting each other on the back. In today's world, everyone likes to be negative and beat each other down, so we have to be there for one another."

Turner scored six of her team's eight points in the opening frame as the Lady Panthers fell into a 16-8 hole after the first eight minutes.

Turner hit two free throws to begin the second, then drilled a corner 3 to slice the deficit to 16-13 just 47 seconds into the quarter.

Hill banked in a floater on the ensuing Union possession and Hunter overpowered a double team down low to keep the Lady Panthers within a point.

Union started the second by hitting its first five shots, the fifth putting them on top when Hunter once again attracted extra attention in the paint, but this time she dropped off a pass to Chambers on the right block for 2 points and a 19-18 lead.

Two free throws by Hill at the 4:31 mark made it 21-18, but the Raiders answered with a trey from the wing. Later, a free throw and a 3-pointer from Hill provided Union a 25-21 advantage.

Clinging to a 25-23 advantage on the final possession of the half, Hunter drove left from the elbow and sank a short jumper in the paint to spot the Lady Panthers a 27-23 edge at the break.

Habersham Central opened the second half with a triple but Turner answered back by rattling home a 3 from the wing.

The Raiders were unable to capitalize on consecutive trips to the line, missing all four attempts, while Turner split a



Landon Kight goes to work in the post. The senior forward scored 17 points and pulled down 8 rebounds while shooting 80% from the floor in the win over Habersham Central. Photo/Todd Forrest

pair with 5:24 left in the third.

Habersham continued hanging around with a transition 3, but Hunter received a friendly bounce on a turnaround 10-footer.

Union continued feeding Hunter as the senior drove inside for two more and a 35-29 advantage. But Habersham immediately rattled off three straight buckets to even the score at 35-35 at the 2:47 mark of the third.

The two squads traded free throws until sophomore Sofia McNabb hit 1 of 2 for a 37-36 lead. On McNabb's miss, freshman Ariel McCarter grabbed the board and drew a foul on the put-back, eventually hitting both tries for a 3-point edge.

Hill made it a 5-point game by securing the rebound and going coast-to-coast, banking in a floater from 12-feet. Hill continued to make an impact in all phases, this time finding McNabb on the baseline for 2 points after Habersham missed the front end of a 1-and-1.

A steal by Hill led to a jump ball, awarding possession to Union under the basket. And on the ensuing inbound play, Hill hit a cutting Hunter to extend the lead to 45-36 just inside the final minute of the period.

Moments later, McNabb jumped into the passing lane on the perimeter and was off to the races for another Lady Panthers' deuce to end the third.

On top 47-36 to start the fourth, baskets from Chambers, McNabb and Turner capped the 17-0 onslaught with a 53-36 advantage.

The Raiders slowed the momentum by connecting from long distance at the 5:10 mark, then driving to the hoop for two more on the next possession.

A turnover led to a wide-open layup by Chambers, then a spin move in the post by Hunter resulted in another bucket with 2:45 remaining.

Chambers put the game away by knocking down an 18-footer after Habersham pulled to within a dozen on consecutive field goals. Hunter added a pull-up jumper for good measure at the 1-minute mark before the Raiders added a meaningless basket, bringing the final margin within 12.

a brutal turn after Thanksgiving with matchups vs. Class AAA No. 1 Lumpkin County and road trips to North Hall and Class AAA No. 7 White County.

Union will face Class AA No. 3 Fannin County on Dec. 11, Class AAAA Chestatee on Dec. 18 and No. 8 Commerce on Jan. 8.

The Region 8-AA schedule opens Jan. 11 with No. 3 Rabun County, followed by No. 1 Elbert County four days later.

Despite playing in one of the toughest regions in Class AA, Mandy Hunter believes her girls will be in the mix for an 8-AA title by season's end.

"This is a special group of girls and nobody realizes how much [work] they put in on the practice court, day-in and day-out," she said. "No matter what, they do their job and I'm really proud of them. I really feel like they've bought into what we're doing and trust the process. And we understand that life is much bigger than basketball, but we also realize that basketball can teach us valuable lessons that will help you in the real world."

According to Coach Hunter, the scrimmage game vs. Pickens was about seeing who is willing to compete and give a maximum effort. Now, moving forward, the Union coach will take it one game at a time and try to build off each result.

"It's going to be a process, like climbing a set of stairs, you have to take it one step at a time," she said. "It's not about making any huge leaps, we just want to avoid taking any steps backward. But I think we're at a really good point right now, we just need to keep working."

One significant change this season is the addition of a shot clock in region play. The decision came via the 8-AA coaches as the GHSA prepares to mandate the 35-second clock in all regular season and playoff games during the 2022-23 season.

"Our region voted to play with it this year," Coach Hunter said. "Other schools and regions elected not to use it, but we're going to try and play with it as much as we can this year."

During the next six weeks of non-region action, Coach Hunter hopes to fine-tune her rotation, limit turnovers and improve on the boards.

"Top to bottom, our region is really strong -- all four teams -- and I think on any given night, anybody can beat anybody," she said.

Elbert County started five sophomores last year during its 23-3 Region Championship season.

Rabun County went 19-7 and reached the Sweet 16, but graduated two key players and lost an up-and-coming sophomore to injury. However, they return four players that averaged at least 8 ppg a year ago.

Banks County is coming off a 16-12 season that saw the Leopards edge Union in the 8-AA consolation game.

Banks lost two seniors but return junior post Kamryn Grier, who averaged 14 points and 11 boards as a sophomore.

The Rabun Gap recaps and Union men's preview can be found on Page 3B

Season preview: The Lady Panthers' schedule takes

Wrestling: Eleven Panthers place at Kenwood Classic

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Clarksville, Tenn - The Union County wrestling team spent 11 hours on the road last weekend to compete in the Kenwood Classic. At the end of the day, the Panthers returned home with one medal for each hour sitting on the bus.

Union placed 11 wrestlers in the top-three as the only Georgia representative in Clarksville, Tennessee - located 50 miles north of Nashville, Tenn.

Among the 11, four Panthers took home gold: Landon Clark (125 pounds), Anderson Clouse (130), Payton Legatt (155) and David Heredia (165).

Five different Panthers picked up silver: Kanon Abercrombie (133), Brady Guild (168), Huck Whisenhunt (170), Sean Phillips (174) and Cody Meeks (276).

Those taking home bronze were Damon Wallace (142) and Asa Smith-Foot (150).

Other top-five finishers included Caleb Smith (244) in fourth, while Zander Rotko (135), Colson Lotts (138) and Brooke Kennedy (193) came in fifth.

After their return to the Peach State, Union County wrestling coach Justin Byers made it known that he and his squad were honored to represent their home state, and were grateful to Union County Schools for allowing them



The Union County wrestling team last weekend following the Kenwood Classic in Clarksville, Tennessee.

to make the trip to a national tournament that featured teams from across the country.

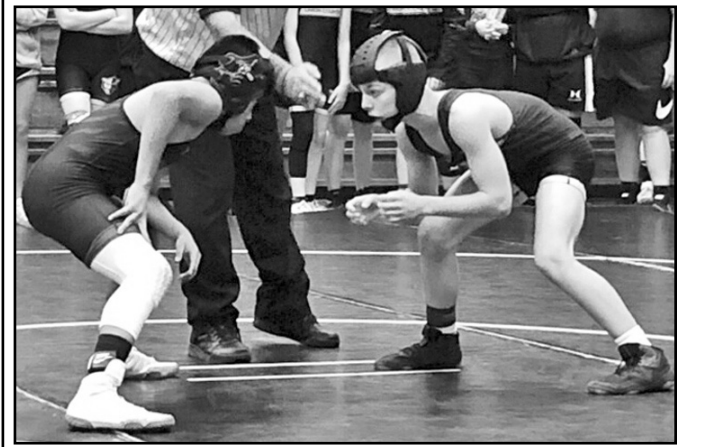
"It was an awesome experience," he said. "We got to see some teams from Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio and Texas. It was a big moment for our program and I'm thankful the school let us participate."

"We were the only Georgia team there, which was kind of neat. I told the guys before, 'usually we're just representing Union County, but this weekend, we're not only representing Union County, but the State of Georgia.'

"We wrestled really well and had a couple guys go 5-0 for the tournament, and a few more go 4-1 and 3-2. It also allowed some of the football guys to get on the mat for the first time, and overall, I believe we were one of the most solid teams there. We have an opportunity to be a really good team this year."

"What I'm most proud of, we had two heavyweights (Meeks and Smith) that just came from football and are brand new to wrestling. They only had two or three days of practice, and when I asked if they wanted to go to the tournament, they didn't

UCMS Wrestling: Union topples Clear Creek and Rabun at home



The UCMS grapplers were back on the home mat for the second time this season, scoring a pair of wins in a tri-match vs. Clear Creek and Rabun County. The Panthers edged Clear Creek (49-48) with Union winning on criteria following the last match. Union thumped Rabun 56-33.

hesitate." Union visits North Hall on Saturday before taking part in Towns County's annual King of the Mountain on Dec. 3-4.

"We're excited to be back in the King of the Mountain," Byers said. "It's an extremely exciting weekend and something we always look forward to. We hate we had to miss it last year. It's a great tournament and we're thrilled to be in it and we hope it grows back to [the size] it was."

Union's first home match is the 515 Classic on Dec. 10 with Fannin, Gilmer, Pickens and Towns.

Basketball: RGN hands both Union County teams their first loss

Coach Garrett discusses 2021-22: We're trying to sharpen every tool we have

By Todd Forrester
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Corey Garrett looks on during the scrimmage win. Photo/Todd Forrester

Dillard - Rabun Gap-Nachoochee wasted little time putting away Union County on Wednesday, Nov. 17, jumping out to early double-digit leads in a pair of wins over the visitors.

The girls contest saw the Eagles grab a quick 7-0 advantage, en route to a 21-11 first-quarter lead and a 64-40 victory.

Meanwhile, the Rabun Gap men were less kind after Union took an early 1-0 lead, answering with 26 unanswered points to take an 84-41 victory.

Lady Panthers 40, Rabun Gap 64 - Ava Hunter was the only Lady Panther in double figures, posting her second-straight double-double with 17 points and 10 rebounds.

Trailing 21-11 after one, Union's last gasp at making it a competitive contest came in the second quarter when they pulled within single digits for the final time at 24-15. Unfortunately, Rabun Gap answered with a 6-1 spurt to extend its margin to 30-16.

A basket by Lara Turner kept Union within a dozen but

Union County shot 25% from the floor on 12-for-49 overall and 0 for 10 from behind the arc. Union out-rebounded the Eagles 45-35 but lost the turnover battle 30-17.

Panthers 41, Rabun Gap 84 - In what will likely be his final game without a full compliment of weapons, head coach Corey Garrett's Panthers took one on the chin last week at Rabun Gap.

Union never recovered from a 23-1 first quarter deficit that became 45-16 at the break.

The first five points of the third went to the Panthers, but the Eagles would outscore Union 27-15 over the period's final 5-plus minutes.

Rabun Gap shot a blistering 58% (19 for 33) from 3-point range and controlled the paint by a 22-12 scoring margin despite getting out-rebounded 30-29 by Union County.

Lake Hughes hit 5 of 11 from long distance, finishing with a team-high 19 points. Landon Knight ended his night with 8 points, 10 rebounds and three assists.

Hayden Payne and Eli Underwood added 5 points each with Underwood pulling down three rebounds.

The dynamic freshman duo of Jude Ellis and Houston Henry were limited to just 2 combined points on 1 of 12 shooting and 0 for 7 from downtown.

Senior Daniel Snow chipped in 3 points and three rebounds.

Up next: The Panthers meet Cherokee Bluff and Wilson Academy this week - both contests at Cherokee Bluff High.

Season Preview: Union will then face North Hall, Lumpkin County, White County, Fannin County and defending Class A Public State Champion Towns County in non-region action. The Panthers will also meet Commerce and Chestatee, who is under the direction of former Rabun County standout and first-year head coach Tanner Plemmons.

Region play opens Jan. 11 vs. Plemmons' alma mater when the No. 10 Wildcats visit UCHS.

Rabun returns four senior starters from last year's Elite Eight squad, including senior All-State guard Connor McKay.

Banks graduated five starters and returns only a handful of players with any varsity experience. Riverside is in the same boat following the cancellation

of their 2020-21 season and will lean heavily on a young backcourt.

Defending region champ Elbert County graduated six seniors from last year's Sweet 16 squad.

As Union trots out a full lineup this week, one facet where Garrett will not be lacking is depth with 11 or 12 players capable of seeing varsity action.

"You can never have too many tools, and as I tell the guys, 'iron sharpens iron, and each day we're trying to sharpen every tool we have,'" Garrett said. "They've been doing a great job with that and I think you're going to see it this year."

Following a promising summer camp season, Garrett's squad has spent most of the fall developing chemistry between his mix of experience and youth.

"Getting the older guys to gel with that youthful energy, while gaining experience for the young guys [is our goal] and I think you saw a little bit of that so far," he said. "Sometimes that energy can break loose and get a little crazy, but once we can harness that, I think it will work to our benefit."

Swimming: Nushtayev breaks school record

Union County Middle & High School
Pirate Plunge Meet Highlights

200 Free 7th- Lilly Collins (HS) 7th- Grayden Cobb (HS)	100 Free 5th- Olivia Loyd (HS) 9th- Anniston Howse (HS) 2nd- Isabel Hoover (MS) 1st- Andrew Nushtayev (MS)	100 Breast 5th- Lily Helton (HS) 6th- Rachel Reid (HS) 8th- Meghan Cory (HS) 10th- Olivia Loyd (HS) 7th- Michael Leird (HS)
50 Free 1st- Reese Jones (MS) 3rd- Nicholas Nushtayev (HS) 2nd- Eli Gwynn (MS) 9th- Ian Lander (MS) 10th- Andrew Farmer (MS)	100 Back 7th- Courtney Foster (HS) 8th- Anniston Howse (HS) 7th- Nicholas Nushtayev (HS) 10th- Preston Perren (HS)	50 Breast 3rd- Isabel Hoover (MS) 4th- Ava Serrano (MS) 5th- Clara Kazmierzak (MS) 9th- Ava Wheeler (MS) 5th- Andrew Farmer (MS) 7th- Wyatt Chandler (MS)
50 Fly 2nd- Reese Jones (MS) 6th- Ava Wheeler (MS)	50 Back 6th- Ava Serrano (MS) 7th- Clara Kazmierzak (MS) 1st- Andrew Nushtayev (MS) 7th- Ian Lander (MS)	200 Medley Relay 4th- Courtney Foster, Rachel Reid, Lily Helton, Olivia Loyd (HS) 5th- Lilly Collins, Meghan Cory, Anniston Howse, Cassie Flowers (HS) 1st- Isabel Hoover, Reese Jones, Ava Serrano, Clara Kazmierzak (MS) 3rd- Preston Perren, Michael Leird, Nicholas Nushtayev, Grayden Cobb (HS) 3rd- Wyatt Chandler, Eli Gwynn, Andrew Nushtayev, Ian Lander (MS)
500 Free 1st- Lily Helton (HS) 3rd- Rachel Reid (HS)	200 Free Relay 4th- Lily Helton, Rachel Reid, Courtney Foster, Olivia Loyd (HS) 6th- Lilly Collins, Cassie Flowers, Hannah Kazmierzak, Anniston Howse (HS) 1st- Ava Serrano, Ava Wheeler, Isabel Hoover, Reese Jones (MS) 5th- Grayden Cobb, Michael Leird, Preston Perren, Nicholas Nushtayev (HS) 5th- Wyatt Chandler, Ian Lander, Andrew Farmer, Andrew Nushtayev (MS)	

Both Union swim teams competed at Clarksville's Pirate Plunge, where Andrew Nushtayev broke the UCHS record in the 50-yard backstroke. In all, 40 of Union's 51 swims resulted in personal bests or improved times.

Youth Football Super Bowl: Union County sixth graders fall short in defensive battle



The Union County sixth grade football team and cheer squad following a 6-0 loss to Fannin County in the Mountain Athletic Conference Super Bowl on Nov. 13 in Dawson County.

Dawsonville - The sixth grade Panthers turned in an incredible defensive effort in a 6-0 loss to Fannin County in the MAC Super Bowl earlier this month.

Locked in a scoreless tie coming out of halftime, a Union fumble on its opening possession of the third resulted in a short-field Rebels' touchdown.

Still trailing 6-0 late in the fourth, the Panthers' offense started to find its rhythm, driving inside the Fannin red zone, where the drive eventually stalled near the 2-minute mark.

The defense, however, made one final stand, forcing a punt with 50 seconds to play and handing the ball back to the offense in Rebels' territory.

Union went to the air and connected on pair of throws, moving inside the Fannin County 10-yard line. Unfortunately, the Panthers' last-gasp was picked off in the endzone.

The North Georgia News would like to congratulate all of Union County's youth ath-

letes and coaches on their 2021 season and we look forward to covering them on Friday nights in the very near future.

The Union County sixth grade team roster: No. 3 Michael Davis, 4 Hudson Collins, 7 Dylan Birnbaum, 8 Kylar Juracka, 10 Brayden Ball, 13 Camden Kendrick, 15 Haze Burnett, 20 Nolan Davis, 21 Jackson Nichols, 23 Corbin Combs, 27 Sam Quillian, 30 Arthur Galindo, 34 Isaiah Stepp, 37 Kade Owens, 40 Jax Dillinger and 88 Micah Wallace.

The coaches are Levi Kendrick, Mike Davis, Chris Collins, Kevin Kilpatrick and Josh Wallace.

The Union County cheer squad roster: Maci Bennett, Emma Berry, Kaleigh Bruce, Aubrie Cox, Cambrie Cox, Arlee Davis, Evyn Davis, Chloe Dvornitsyn, Brooke Frechette, Kaylee Garrett, Chelsea Hutson, Reagan Ingram, Kayla Loyd, Morgan Montgomery, Shyann Owenby, Chloe Roberson, Adreona Shook, Kyla Shumaker, Emry Sosensky, Ansley Stroud, Lelah Tinch,

Lindsey Tinch, Luna Thompson and Zaydee Webster.

The coaches are: Deanna Webster, Alayna Bruce, Gracie Davis and Kim Rugar.

Editors note: Levi and Rebecca Kendrick contributed to this article.

Benton MacKaye Trail hikes

November 26 (Friday): The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a moderate 5-mile hike to The Narrows, a deep narrow gorge through which the old river bed flows, on the Hiwassee in Reliance, TN. For more information, contact Hike Leader Clare Sullivan at HikeleaderCS2@bmtmail.org.

November 29 (Monday): The Benton MacKaye Trail Association sponsors a 5-mile moderate hike on the BMT trail from Hwy 68 to Buck Bald and return. Incomparable 360 view of the Appalachian Mountains. For more information, contact Hike Leader Steve Dennison at HikeleaderSD@bmtmail.org.

Local Racing Report: Tri-County

By Blake Lynch
North Georgia News
Racing Reporter



Brasstown, NC - On Nov. 6, Tri-County held its last scheduled race of the season. Additionally, there was an infield ceremony for two concession stand workers with a combined 33 years of service - a big thank you to Pat and Kathy.

FWD: No. J3 Josh Deese took home the win. No. F3 Josh Falforn was second. K3 James Krause was third. No. 24 James Queen was fourth. No. 18 Bobby Raper was fifth.

Crate: No. 7 Jason Deal took the checkered flag again. No. 12D Drew Deaver took home second place. No. 9 Brian Kinnersly finished third. No. 11

No. 21 Troy Turner placed second. No. 44 Chuck Sims was third. No. 01 Jacob Lynch was fourth. No. 69 Jim Weller was fifth.

Modified Street: No. 03 Dante Curtis took home the win. No. 25 Jacob Hamby was second. No. 27 Mike Davidson was third. No. 56 Colton Berrong was fourth. No. 81 John Howard was fifth.

Last Chance Race: This race was for cars that didn't make the main event, which was fastest 16 cars. No. 14 Mark Ledford took home the win. No. 37 Ethan Fleming was second. No. 50 Jerry Bire was third. No. 42 Johnny Gulizia was fourth. No. 3 Floyd Self was fifth.

Thank you for your support of your local track and drivers. Hope to see you next year.

Preston Crisp was fourth. No. 6 Mark Wilbanks was fifth.

Pony: No. 4 Marty King went to the winner's circle again this week. No. 11 Jamie Cross was second. No. 18x Lucas Beavers was third.

Street Stock: No. 7 Lynn Burchfield took home the win.