

Sports

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Panthers headed to State as a 3-seed following wins over Putnam and Rabun

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

ELBERTON - Union County (17-10) won two-of-three at last week's Region 8-AA Tournament to secure a No. 3 seed in this weekend's opening round of the Class AA State Tournament.

Entering the region tournament as the No. 4 seed, Union opened play with a 57-43 win over 5th seeded Putnam County in a contest that was much closer than the final score indicated. The Panthers closed the game with a 20-6 run following a 37-37 tie, late in the third period.

After suffering an upset loss as the No. 4 seed in last year's Region Tournament, Allison and the Panthers leaned on that valuable experience as they faced another No. 5 seed this postseason.

"We were determined not to let that happen again," Allison said after the win. "You can never take anyone for granted. Just because you beat someone twice in the regular season, that doesn't mean anything once you get into the playoffs."

With a state tournament berth in their back pocket, the Panthers fell to top-seeded Elbert County, 52-41 on Thursday after trailing 30-16 at the half.

On Friday, Union County locked up a 3 seed at state by routing the 6-seed Rabun County, 57-37 in a contest that was never close following a 19-9 lead after a quarter.

Originally, the Panthers appeared to be a prime beneficiary of No. 3 Social Circle's upset loss to Rabun County in the opening round. Unfortunately for Union County, they must now travel to Columbus in the first round to face the Spencer Green Wave, the No. 2 seed from 5-AA.

What's the big deal, you may ask?

For the first 25 games this season, Spencer was head-and-shoulders above the rest of the region until suffering a 56-54 upset loss to a 12-11 Bremen squad, who sank a desperation 30-footer at the buzzer in the 5-AA title game.

As previously mentioned in earlier editions of the *North Georgia News*, Spencer was undefeated (12-0) in regular season region play with all but one win coming by double digits -- and that one was a 9-point victory.

Entering the region tournament, the Green Wave were ranked 5th in Class AA according to Georgia High School basketball guru Kyle Sandy at sandyspiel.com. After the shocking loss to Bremen, however, Spencer has been relegated to the land of the unranked in Sandy's most recent rankings.

Which Spencer team will Union County face this weekend? One that peaked too early in the season and was eventually



Pierson Allison drives by a defender at last week's 8-AA tourney. Allison was named First Team All Region for 2018-19. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sawyer Drake scores two of his 12 points vs Putnam. Drake joined Allison as a First Team All-Region 8-AA selection. Photo/Todd Forrest

exposed by an 11-loss Bremen squad? Or a state title contender using the loss to regroup and refocus and will show up playing with a chip on its shoulder, looking for someone to take its frustrations out upon?

As of this writing, no date or time has been set for the opening round matchup at Spencer High but Friday night is the likely time slot. When scheduled, the day and time will be available on social media.

Panthers 57, Putnam County 43 - In a back-and-forth affair for three quarters, Union County finally put away a scrappy War Eagles squad with an 18-6 fourth quarter and 21 points from junior point guard Pierson Allison.

Despite struggling from the floor and shooting 0-for-5 from 3-point range, Allison was able to penetrate at will and get to the foul line, where he sank 11 free throws -- seven coming during a 13-point first half.

"I had to change my gameplan a little bit," Allison said afterward. "Whenever my outside shot isn't falling I try my best to drive to the rim so I can get to the free throw line."

Tied at 37-37, late in the third, junior Sawyer Drake drove the base line and scored on an up-and-under layup as time expired, giving the Panthers a 39-37 advantage to begin

the fourth.

Allison would open the final frame with five-straight points -- an and-one off a turnaround jumper in the post, followed by a pair of free throws -- to extend the Union lead to 44-37 at the six-minute mark.

The War Eagles answered with a triple, and following a near-two-minute scoreless drought by both squads, senior Britt Waller scored inside off an inbound play for a 46-40 lead with four minutes left.

Allison made it 48-40 with a floater in the lane and Kanon Hemphill stretched the lead to 50-40 when he converted a Putnam turnover into a fast-break basket with 2:54 remaining.

Following a War Eagle free throw, Hemphill struck again for a 52-41 advantage, then a Colton Day steal led to a pair of free throws and a 54-41 lead at the 1:30 mark.

Waller would hit 2-of-4 at the line and Allison 1-of-2 down the stretch as Putnam's deficit was no fewer than a dozen over the final 75 seconds.

"We found a way to pull away in the second half and were fortunate enough to win it and keep playing," Jones said.

Drake finished with 12 points -- seven in the second half -- while Hemphill scored six of his 10 points in the second half.

Waller added 7 points, Day had five and Jared Nelson scored 2 points. The win also marked the 90th of Jones' coaching career.

The first frame saw Union County fall behind 7-3 before pulling within a point at 8-7 by quarter's end. Allison was scoreless over the opening 8 minutes as his struggles vs Putnam carried over from the previous meeting with the War Eagles -- a double-overtime victory on Jan. 26.

Allison didn't stay quiet for long, however, as he opened the second by going coast-to-coast for a layup and a Panther



Senior Britt Waller scored seven vs Putnam, eight vs Rabun and was named Region 8-AA Honorable Mention for the 2018-19 season. Also pictured is Kanon Hemphill (10) who scored 10 vs Putnam. Photo/Todd Forrest

lead. After Hemphill made it 11-8, Allison sank two free throws to give Union a 13-8 advantage. Leading 13-12, Allison drove to the hoop for two and a 15-12 edge.

Up 16-14, he knocked down two more freebies for an 18-14 score, just inside of the midway point of the second. He returned to the charity stripe with 1:48 on the clock, where he sank two for a 22-18 lead. His final points were an and-one with 20 seconds remaining that gave the Panthers a 25-24 advantage.

Putnam, however, would take a 26-25 lead into halftime thanks to a putback on the final possession of the first half.

"All bets are off once you get into the playoffs," Coach Jones said. "Seeds don't really matter at this point. We saw Rabun, who was the 6-seed, knock off Social (Circle). Then Putnam came out and played really gritty and did what they needed to do in the first half."

A steal-and-score by Drake gave Union a brief third-quarter lead before the War Eagles rattled off five-straight for a 31-27 edge. Drake responded with a 3-ball and Waller sank two free throws as the Panthers raced ahead 32-31 at the 5:20 mark of the third.

Following a mid-range jumper by Putnam County, Hemphill scored in the paint and Waller split a pair at the line for a 35-33 lead. Tied at 35-all, Day soared to the hoop to put back a Union County miss with 1:16 left in the period.

"(Putnam) was killing us on the offensive glass so that was something we talked about at halftime," Jones said. "We also needed to pick up our energy and our effort because I felt like they outworked us in the first half."

Once again, the War Eagles would keep pace with a basket of their own but Drake ended the third on a high note - sparking a 7-0 run that opened up a 44-37 Panther lead, early in

the fourth quarter.

Union County was led in rebounding by Drake and Hemphill with seven each. Allison was tops in assists with four while Drake added three.

Day finished with 3 steals; Allison and Drake had two apiece. Waller and Sawyer Brey each blocked two shots.

Panthers 41, Elbert County 52 - Union County was unable to overcome an early double-digit deficit to the 7th ranked Blue Devils in Thursday's Region 8-AA Semifinals.

The Panthers turned it over on three of their first four possessions as Elbert jumped out to an early 7-2 lead that they extended to 18-8 by quarter's end.

Union's all-region trio of Allison, Drake and Waller combined for just 12 first-half points as the Blue Devils took a 30-16 lead into the break.

Allison and Drake combined for 12 points during a high scoring third quarter but the Panthers still found themselves behind 49-32 entering the fourth.

An Elbert steal to open the fourth led to a free throw and a 50-32 score. After the teams swapped baskets, Allison connected from 3-point range and Drake scored on a layup to cut the deficit to 52-39. Later, Allison knocked down a long 2-point jumper to bring the final score to 52-41.

Allison scored 13 of his game-high 21 in the second half but was the only Panther in double figures. He also led the team with 6 rebounds and 2 steals.

Drake finished with 8 points and 2 blocks. Cayden Rich had 4 points and 3 assists. Meanwhile, Hemphill, Nelson, Robertson and Waller had 2 points each.

Panthers 57, Rabun County 37 - Less than 24 hours removed from its loss to Elbert, the third day of the region tournament saw Union County to jump out to a large early

lead before cruising to an easy victory.

Leading 19-9 after one and 36-17 at the break, the Panthers put the game away with a 13-5 third quarter that allowed them to extend the lead to 49-22 entering the fourth.

The 3-point shot has been Rabun County's bread-and-butter all season long but the Union defense did a tremendous job in preventing the Wildcats from finding their stroke. Through the first three quarters, Rabun connected on just 2-of-11 (18-percent) from downtown while finishing 4-for-18 (22-percent). They also struggled from the charity stripe, connecting on only 5-of-13 (38-percent).

Meanwhile, the Panthers shot a respectable 20-for-45 (44-percent) overall and 3-for-9 (33-percent) from long distance. Union County also outperformed the Wildcats 34-28 while forcing 22 turnovers.

Drake (15) and Allison (13) combined for 28 points despite sitting most of the final frame. Waller finished with 8 points, senior Christian Robertson had six and Cayden Rich added five. Day scored three, Hemphill, Brey and senior Cole-son Daniel had two each while Nelson scored one.

Waller led the way with six rebounds while Drake, Robertson and Rich pulled down five boards each. Allison finished with 4 rebounds and Hemphill pulled down three.

Allison and Rich both recorded a team-high 4 assists while Drake finished with 2 dimes. Rich's 3 steals were tops on the team with Allison, Day, Drake and Waller recording 2 steals apiece while Day and Drake both blocked a shot.

The win is Union's 17th of the season - matching the 2014-15 season for the highest single season win total under Jones. This year also marks the fourth time in six seasons under Jones that the Panthers have won at least 16 games.

2019 Baseball and Softball registration opens at the Union County Recreation Department January 7th - February 15th for ages 3-14. Fee: \$55

- 3-4 Coed Start Smart-parent participation is required.
- 5-6 Coed T-ball
- 7-8 Girls Machine Pitch
- 7-8 Boys Machine Pitch
- 9-10 Softball
- 9-10 Baseball
- 11-12 Softball
- 11-12 Baseball
- 13-14 Softball
- 13-14 Baseball