

Sports

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Late surge topples Rabun; Lady Panthers tied for first in 8-AA

Union takes care of business at Washington-Wilkes, clinch fifth consecutive trip to State

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The packed Union County High School gymnasium watched a pair of Region 8-AA heavyweights battle it out, exchanging blows, and each team on the verge of getting blown out, only to storm back with a fury.

At the end of the day, it was the Union County Lady Panthers (17-5, 8-1), standing alone in the middle of the ring, with their hands raised high.

Supporters of the Lady Panthers and Lady Cats, even college scouts, were on the edge of their seats, holding their collective breaths on each possession. If one were to close their eyes for the entire game, it would be difficult to tell if there were 7 minutes left in the first quarter, or 7 seconds remaining in the game.

The intensity, the volume, and the atmosphere was electric. Whether decked out in red and white, or rocking the purple and gold, or simply shirtless, you got your money's worth.

Rabun (12-9, 7-1) entered the contest needing a win to knock the Lady Panthers out of contention for the No. 1 seed in Region 8-AA.

On the other hand, Union could tie things up between themselves and the Lady Cats atop the Region standings, and



Forward Lisa Nalaschi drops in two more points during the third quarter where the Union County senior took over the game - scoring 12 points in the period. Photo/Todd Forrest

barring some monumental upset, both squads would remain tied at the end of this week and the No. 1 seed in next week's playoffs would comedown to a flip of the coin.

However, there's already one thing that is set in stone. Regardless of what happens Friday, when Social Circle comes calling for UCHS' Senior Night, and whatever way the coin decides to bounce on Sunday, the Lady Panthers are returning to the

State Tournament for the fifth consecutive season and sixth time in seven years.

After surviving four quarters with Rabun, Union took a three-hour bus ride to Washington Wilkes (14-8, 4-4) where they showed no battle fatigue from the night before.

The Lady Tigers were no match as Union ran away with a 56-24 victory over Wilkes - punching their ticket to State for the third time under Coach Tucker. Yet, this time, the Union ladies are in prime position to claim one of the top two spots in the Region Tourney and host the first round of State - something that hasn't been accomplished since 2009, which is the last time Union advanced past the opening round of State.

The 2009 Region Tournament was also the last time the Lady Panthers defeated Rabun County on the road. And if Union wants to hang another Region Champion banner in the gym, they will need to take down the Lady Wildcats on the road in this year's Region Championship game. (Union and Rabun won't be able to face off again until day three of the tourney,



Union Head Coach David Tucker and Assistant Coach Tina Dockrey discuss their stall offense with point guard Brooke Maddox during the final minutes vs Rabun. Photo/Todd Forrest

either in the consolation game or championship game)

Five straight years of reaching State matches the longest streak in the history of Lady Panthers basketball. From 1970 through 1974, Union County reached State. Although, the current crop of Lady Panthers may have matched their consistency, they still have their work cut out for them when it comes to taking care of business in the State Tournament. The Lady Panthers reached the Final Four in 1972 and 1974. They were knocked out in the Elite 8 during the 1970 and 1973 postseason.

Meanwhile, the 2014-15 Lady Panthers have one game left on their regular season slate and the Social Circle Lady Redskins will visit Blairsville for Senior Night. Last month, Union went to Social Circle (7-10, 1-8) and left with a 60-26 victory - thanks in large part to a 19-3 first quarter.

**Lady Panthers 63
Rabun County 52**

The prizefighter analogy used earlier to describe this contest suits it to a T as

both squads were throwing haymakers and connecting.

In the first 13 minutes of the game, Union appeared to be poised to run off and leave Rabun, as the Lady Cats committed turnover after turnover.

With 2:55 to play before the half, the Lady Panthers held a 26-13 advantage. After Rabun went 1-for-2 at the line, Brooke Maddox picked up her third foul and went to the bench at the 1:41 mark of the half.

With Union's floor general on the bench, the Lady Cats cranked up their pressure defense and forced four turnovers on Union's final five possessions.

Trailing 26-20, Rabun nailed a trey at the buzzer, and just like that, a 13-point lead evaporated into a razor thin three-point margin.

At the conclusion of the half, Coach Tucker received a technical foul when he voiced his displeasure with the officiating. As a result, Rabun opened the third with two free throws and the ball.

And they made the Lady Panthers pay.

A free throw and a 3-pointer put the Lady Cats



Kaitlyn Day



Brooke Maddox

back on top for the first time since it was a 7-6 game.

A Rabun trey at the 2:58 mark of the third opened up a 42-30 advantage. Exactly one minute later, they held their largest lead of the game at 46-33.

With her team on the ropes, Kaitlyn Day banked in a trey that proved to be the turning point as the Lady Panthers became the aggressor and stunned the Lady Cats, just as they did to Union in the final minutes of the previous quarter.

Kim Coyne and Madison Larisoy each came off the bench to combine for 5-for-6 at the line in the third frame.

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Lisa Nalaschi hugs sophomore Holly Stroman (far right) as the Lady Panthers celebrate after defeating Rabun for just the second time in the past six years. Photo/Todd Forrest

Union takes two of three last week; secures third seed in Region Tourney

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The Union County Panthers got back on track last week, winning two of its three Region contests after dropping four straight games.

On Tuesday, the Panthers traveled to Gainesville to meet last place Riverside, but the Eagles gave Union all they could handle but the Panthers were able to hold off the home team, 60-58.

The only blemish came Friday night when Rabun routed the Panthers 88-64 despite Union leading by as many as nine points during the first half.

If Rabun was the most important game as far as a rivalry and bragging rights are concerned, then Washington-Wilkes was the most critical game of the week when it comes to standings and win-loss records.

The Panthers were able to escape with a 61-54 win to clinch the third seed in next week's Region 8-AA Tournament. The No. 3 spot will likely result in Union drawing Social Circle or Oglethorpe County in the opening round of the playoffs. The Panthers will need just one win to reach State and record back-to-back trips to the field of 32 for the first time since the 2001-02 and 2002-03 seasons.

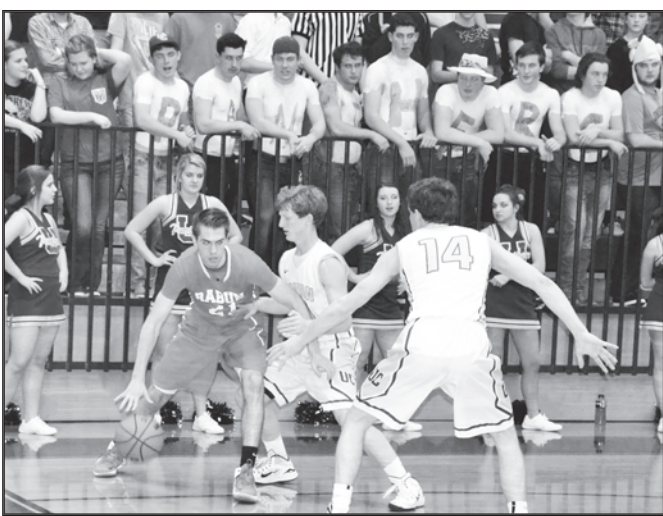
The Region Tournament will be held at the first place boys team - which will be either Rabun or Greene. If Greene wins at Rabun on Friday, the playoffs will be held in Greensboro for the second time in three years. If Rabun takes care of business on their home court, the Wildcats will need a coin toss to go in their favor to earn the right to host - it would also be their second time hosting in the last three years.

**Panthers 60
Riverside 58**

Gainesville - Hunter



Ralston Drake (left) sets a screen on Rabun's Bryce Dillard to allow senior Tyler Odom some room to operate. Photo/Todd Forrest



Hunter Hughes and Tyler Odom (14) get some extra help on the defensive end with Union County's sixth man and cheerleading squad directly behind them. Photo/Todd Forrest

Hughes' 25 points was enough to overcome an 15-9 deficit after one quarter.

The second quarter was all Union as they used a 19-11 advantage in the frame to gain a slim 28-26 lead at the break.

The Panthers extended their lead to 43-37 after three but Riverside refused to go away and Union was able to hold on for a too-close-for-comfort victory over the Eagles.

SCORING: Hughes 25, Hamby 12, Shook 8, Odom

**Panthers 64
Rabun County 88**

Thirteen Rabun County treys and 32 points by senior Austin DiNofrio was too much for the Panthers to keep pace with as Rabun moves one step closer to its first place showdown with Greene County.

The third place Panthers opened up a 23-14 lead in the first quarter, following a Lake Arnick trey. But it was all



Junior Chase Shook delivers a two-handed slam from the baseline, going up-and-over Rabun's Austin DiNofrio. Photo/Todd Forrest

Rabun from there.

The first quarter closed with a 11-4 run to cut the Union lead to 27-25. The second quarter saw them extend their advantage to 50-39 at the break, and then 64-47 after three.

**Panthers 61
Washington Wilkes 54**

Washington - The Panthers were in control most of the game with leads of 20-7 after one and 41-22 at the half.

The Tigers narrowed the gap in the third - clawing their way back to a 46-36 score.

SCORING: Hughes 24, Odom 18, Shook 10, Drake 4, Arnick 3, Hamby 2 FT SHOOTING: 16-24 (67%)



Kyle Hamby



Lawson Baenninger

2014-15 Region 8-AA Mens Basketball Standings

School Name	W-L	PF	PA	GB	Overall
Greene County	9-1	753	583	--	18-5
Rabun County	9-1	790	592	--	15-6
Union County	7-4	697	662	2.5	14-10
Wash Wilkes	4-6	682	703	5.0	10-11
Social Circle	3-7	500	699	6.0	7-12
Oglethorpe Co.	3-8	711	800	6.5	9-15
Riverside Mil.	1-9	542	636	8.0	5-14