

Sports

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Panthers grab a pair of Region road wins at RMA, Social Circle

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Union County proved themselves as road warriors last week after taking a hard fought contest with a pesky Riverside squad 67-60, then, ventured to Social Circle where they blasted the Redskins 64-43 in front of a hostile home crowd.

Junior Tyler Odom led the Panthers in scoring for the fifth and sixth straight games, going for 15 at Riverside and 16 at Social Circle.

Fellow junior Hunter Hughes continued his solid play with 14 and 15 points, respectively. The Panther point guard has led Union to an 11-5 record and more importantly, a 3-0 mark in the Region.

On Tuesday, a pair of unbeaten 8-AA teams will square off when the Panthers travel to Rabun County for a 6:30 p.m. tip. Union will be looking to beat the Wildcats in back-to-back meetings for the first time since 2008. The Panthers played spoiler last year when they knocked off Rabun during the Wildcats' Senior Night festivities.

"No doubt they will be gunning for us after we spoiled their party last year," Union Head Coach Casey Jones said.

**Panthers 67
Riverside 60**

Gainesville - The Panthers got some revenge when they pulled away for a win over a much-improved Riverside Military Academy team. Union trailed for a total of 51 seconds during 67-60 victory.

Last season, Riverside rallied late to stun the Panthers during a February meeting in



Tyler Odom has led Union in scoring during every game since the calendar flipped to 2014. Photo/Todd Forrest

Gainesville. Following a Grant Schuette bucket that made it 13-10 Panthers with 22 seconds remaining in the first, Union coughed up the basketball allowing Riverside to put in a lay up at the buzzer. The Eagles opened the second with a basket to take their first lead at 14-13. Hughes hit a pair from the line before the home team knocked down a trey - making it a 17-15 game in favor of Riverside.

Senior Dylan Coyne went 2-for-2 at the stripe to tie it back up then Kyle Hamby took a turnover coast-to-coast putting the Panthers ahead 21-17.

Junior Ralston Drake hit two free throws and Matthew Wasko, another junior, hit a pull-up jumper. Schuette and junior Thomas Danek then extended the lead to 32-25 and with 9 seconds to play in the half, Odom

knocked down a pair at the line giving Union a 34-25 halftime advantage.

Riverside cut the Panther lead to 36-33 midway through the third quarter resulting in a timeout by Coach Jones.

Hughes and Odom hit two free throws each and Wasko added a lay up putting Union up 42-36 entering the fourth.

Odom connected from the baseline, Coyne converted an old fashioned 3-point play. Riverside drew another whistle for a technical foul allowing Coyne to take two more free throws and provide Union with a 5-point swing. Twenty seconds later, at the 6:22 mark, Odom hit a trey for three more of his 11 fourth quarter points.

"Their (Riverside) big guy tried to put the team on his back in the fourth quarter and did a pretty good job, but our guys are



Junior guard Hunter Hughes gets into the paint and scores with an acrobatic lay up at Social Circle. Photo/Todd Forrest

gaining more confidence and shooting better," Jones said.

Leading 52-40 the Panthers' lead would hold up and remained in double-digits for most of the final frame.

The Eagles got within six with 21 seconds to play but a free throw by Hughes sealed the 7-point win.

Coyne finished with 13 points and Hamby with eight. Wasko had six, Danek five, Drake three and Schuette one.

**Panthers 64
Social Circle 43**

Social Circle - The small but vocal crowd at Social Circle begged to differ with the officials on more than a few occasions.

However, the vocal audience didn't hinder the Panthers who cruised to a 64-43 win to improve to 3-0 in the Region for

the first time since 2011.

"The fans were getting a little rowdy at the end but we kept our focus and didn't let them back in the game," Jones said.

Union never trailed and snatched control early with a 20-9 first quarter led by Odom's 7 points and four a piece from Hughes and Coyne.

The Panthers continued to pull away during the second frame with Hughes scoring five and Drake getting four of his 7 points. Odom chipped in a pair of buckets in the paint, while senior Elijah Ryals and Schuette added two each to the scoring column for a decisive 38-21 halftime edge.

The third was a 16-16 stalemate with junior Lake Arnick, Hamby, and Wasko getting in on the scoring action.

Leading 54-37 entering the fourth, an early put-back by Coyne made it a 19-point game

but three consecutive Union turnovers resulted in four Redskins' points.

That's as close as Social Circle would get as Union put them away at the foul line. Hughes hit 4-of-4 and Hamby 4-of-5 in the final 3:13.

Coyne tallied 8 points, Drake had seven, and Ryals had five. Hamby and Wasko had four each, Arnick had a trey, and Schuette added 2 points.

Drake and Coyne each hauled in a team high 5 boards. Wasko and Hamby dished out 2 assists a piece. Odom, Hughes, and Coyne grabbed 2 steals and Schuette blocked a shot.

As for the future, there's not enough adjectives to describe the importance of Tuesday and Friday's games for both Union teams.

The Panthers travel to Rabun on Tuesday with something to prove. Both teams sit at 3-0 in Region 8-AA and a win will show that Union can win against quality teams and possibly contend for a Region title.

"They have their big man back and great shooters surrounding him," Jones said. "If we pack it in, it leaves the shooters open, and if we get out on the shooters, it opens things up inside. The main thing we have to do is play solid defense and keep a hand in the shooter's face."

On Friday, the Panthers host Washington-Wilkes at 7 p.m. looking to avenge the overtime heartbreaker to the Tigers during last year's Region Tournament. The two teams were about as equal as you could get with Wilkes placing fourth and Union fifth in the regular season standings.

On Saturday, the Panthers give rival Fannin County their return game in Blue Ridge at 3 p.m. In December, Union held off a late Rebel rally to win by 10.

Lady Panthers overcome sluggish start at Social Circle; much riding on Tuesday game at Rabun

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Exactly 367 days since the Social Circle Lady Redskins won a game, they found themselves only trailing 8-6 to Union after one quarter.

From there on out, the Union defense turned the tide with 18 steals and 12 blocked shots, providing easy transition buckets and the Lady Panthers coasted to a 55-20 victory.

"You've got to take care of business against teams like this," Union Head Coach David Tucker. "That's why Tuesday (at Rabun) is a big game. It's because we've taken care of business for most of the season."

In the second quarter Union (12-3, 2-0), opened up some breathing room thanks to 8 points each from juniors Lisa Nalasci and Brooke Maddox.

With a 24-8 lead at the break, Maddox went off in the third quarter.

Spearheading Coach Tucker's 1-1-3 defense, Maddox wreaked havoc on the Lady Redskins, scoring 14 points, mostly off turnovers. Twelve of her 14 points came on layups, while her other basket also came in the paint off an inbounds pass.

With Maddox supplying 14 of Union's 15 third quarter points, the Lady Panthers ex-



Junior guard Brooke Maddox (12) connects on one of her six third quarter layups at Social Circle. Photo/Todd Forrest

tended their lead to 39-11 after three.

The fourth quarter saw a stark contrast in the Union County scoring column with seven Lady Panthers getting on the board.

Maddox finished with 22 points on two treys, to go along with 4 steals and 3 assists.

"Brooke (Maddox) and Madison (Rich) are our leaders defensively. When we can get pressure and get stops we win," Coach Tucker said.

Nalasci finished with 12 points, 5 blocks, 4 boards, and 2 steals. Junior Kaitlyn Day, senior

shots, with 2 steals and an assist. Senior Madison Rich chipped in 3 boards and 2 assists, sophomores Kim Coyne, Stephanie Busse, and Anna Danek grabbed 2 boards each, while junior Madison Larisch had an assist.

Now Union's eyes are fixed east on Rabun County. The importance of Tuesday's game can't be overexaggerated.

With the last two undefeated teams in region play meeting on Tuesday, and only the first contest counting towards the final standings, the matchup is almost a much win.

Rabun has already knocked off Jefferson and could own the tiebreaker over the Lady Dragons and Lady Panthers with a win.

Of added importance, the winner of the 8-AA girls regular season title gets an automatic berth into State, and will earn the right to host the entire Region 8-AA Tournament - for the men and women.

Rabun defeated Union in overtime at the last meeting, which came in the Region semifinals. Although, Union was victorious in their first meeting last year.

Washington-Wilkes comes to Blairsville on Friday for a 7 p.m. tip off. On Saturday, the Lady Panthers travel to Fannin County looking for an unprecedented seventh straight over the always-tough Lady Rebels.

The Pit to host Middle School tourney game

By Todd Forrest
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After a successful night of high school basketball in The Pit on Jan. 11th, the old gym will now play host to one night of middle school basketball during the North East Georgia Mountain League Basketball Tournament.

The remainder of the games will be played at the Union County Middle School gym.

The tournament runs from

Tuesday, Jan. 21st to Saturday, Jan. 25th.

Tuesday opens with girls' play and girls' teams from across the league will be in action every day except Thursday, Jan. 23rd.

The boys will be playing in the Pit on Friday, Jan. 24th with both championship games to be held on Saturday.

"All four teams have had a very successful season," UCMS Athletic Director Mandy Hunter said. "Good luck in the tournament."



Union County's 8th grade girls during their recent win at Towns Co.



Union's 8th grade boys also took care of Towns. Photos/Lowell Nicholson

Union owns Murphy meet for second time

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Murphy, NC - The Union County swim team doesn't have a home pool but considering the recent success, the facilities at the Hiwassee Valley Pool and Wellness Center are about as close to home as the Panthers can get - physically and mentally.

As the high school swim season nears its home stretch, Head Coach Carol Knight and her swimmers are still seeking postseason berths and still have room to improve despite winning back-to-back meets at Murphy.

On Jan. 9th both Union swim teams took first place at the Murphy Invitational. Individual first place finishes included: Megan Foster in the 200-yard individual medley, Anna Knight in the 50-yard freestyle and 100-yard backstroke, Brennen Wilkes in the 50 and 100-yard free, and Lindsey McCann in the 100-yard fly (school record). Relay first place finishes included: both men and women in the 200-yard medley and the men's 200-yard free.

Last Thursday Union went back to Murphy and was victorious once again. Wilkes, Austin Norton, and Joseph Mancuso took the top three spots in the 50-yard free.



Coach Knight encourages her swimmers last week in Murphy where Amelia Turner (right) set two personal bests. Swim team photos by Todd Forrest. Wrestling by Lowell Nicholson



Youth wrestlers steal the show



Panther wrestling traveled back to Hiwassee for a meet that involved youth wrestlers. Union middle school would win, and high school lose.

MUSA Spring Registration

Mountain United Soccer Association is ready for spring soccer.

Registrations are currently being accepted for age groups U6-U14. This season we are offering online registration at www.mountainssoccer.org. Registration forms are also available on the website, to print and mail in. The deadline to register is Feb. 15th.

In Blairsville, Cott Beverage is our community host for the soccer fields. In Hiwassee, the fields at the Towns County Fairgrounds are utilized through the cooperation of the local recreation department. The league is grateful for their commitment and support.

The spring season will begin in early March. Anyone who is interested in playing needs to register promptly. In some spaces is limited.

MUSA is a volunteer run



organization and is also a 501C3 nonprofit. Any and all donations are directed to the youth player. Field Sponsors, Sign Sponsors and Team Sponsors are always needed.

If you are interested in supporting the youth soccer players in our community through sponsorship and/or donation, please contact the association.

For additional info contact the league at 706-994-4351, musa.soccer@gmail.com or visit us on the web at www.mountainssoccer.org.