

Sports

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Weather forecast could throw monkey wrench into Region Tournament

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Tiger - Apparently Winter Storm Pax is anxious for the Region 8-AA Tournament to get underway this week at Rabun County High School.

Originally, Union County was set to open postseason play on Tuesday with the 3rd seeded Lady Panthers taking on No. 6 Oglethorpe County in the opening round of the Region 8-AA Tournament.

The 5th place Panthers were scheduled to meet No. 4 Washington-Wilkes on Wednesday but with Pax expected to wallop Northeast Georgia with more than 4-6 inches of snow, the first round opened Monday at 3 p.m. with the Panthers and Tigers squaring off in a rematch of last year's opening round contest.

The Lady Panthers immediately followed, and unless Pax arrived several hours ahead of schedule, the opening round will be in the books, and 8-AA's four State Tournament representatives will be set.

And while half of the men and women's teams in the Region will be granted at least another week to their season, the other half will be packing it up and heading home until next fall.

Weather permitting, the semi-finals will take place on



Lady Panther Head Coach David Tucker and assistant Tina Dockery (left) and Panther Head Coach Casey Jones (right) were informed Sunday the first round of 8-AA Tourney would be moved up to Monday, hoping trim the field to four teams before the winter weather hits. Photos/Todd Forrest

Friday night and the finals and consolation games to be played on Saturday.

If Pax knocks out Friday's games, there is a possibility games could take place on Sunday. However, the first round of State opens on Tuesday, so playing Monday is something that the coaches can hope to avoid.

"The Jefferson coaches don't want to play the tournament on Monday with the first round of State being Tuesday," Panther Head Coach Casey Jones said. "If Friday is canceled we will likely play Saturday and Sunday. If we aren't able to get

in any games over the weekend, I don't know what they will do. They may just rank us by our regular season finish."

The Panthers faced Washington-Wilkes last month but fell to the Tigers in a 69-60 thriller despite leading most of the game. Union was already without senior guard Elijah Ryals, but then lost senior post Grant Schuette right before the game, and junior post Ralston Drake in the second quarter, all due to injuries. Junior post Thomas Danek got into foul trouble leaving the Panthers interior defense vulnerable. Wilkes capitalized with a late



run and escaped Blairsville by knocking down their free throws in the final minute.

In last year's Region Tournament, the Panthers squandered a 5-point lead with 15 seconds to play in the second overtime, forcing a third overtime, where the Tigers finally put away the Panthers.

This time around, Coach Jones believes his team is hungry. Not only to erase the heartbreak from a year ago, but to end a 5-year drought from the State Tournament.

With 14 wins and a guarantee they will finish with a winning record, getting that

15th win is the ultimate goal, especially for the three seniors.

Unfortunately, Drake and Ryals are still out but Union now has had several games to adjust. The Panthers also had a tough week with three double-digit losses - two coming at the hands of 7th ranked Jefferson

"A win gets us to 15 wins and a trip to State and I feel that would be a pretty successful season," Coach Jones said. "We've talked getting better all season long and we hope to be firing on all cylinders (against Wilkes). I think that playing two very good teams at the end will help us going into the

tournament."

If Union knocks off the Tigers, they will likely face top-seeded Jefferson again in the semi-finals.

As for the Lady Panthers, after falling to Jefferson, they answered the call with a win at Greene County. Now they will face a six-win Oglethorpe County squad, who they soundly defeated 59-28 in early January. A win over the Lady Patriots secures Union's sixth trip to State in seven years.

If Union takes care of business, as they should, they would face the winner of (No. 2) Jefferson and (No. 7) Social Circle.

After losing twice to both Jefferson and Rabun, Coach Tucker said he would rather play Jefferson in the semi-finals but isn't looking past Oglethorpe.

"It doesn't really matter to me but I'd prefer to avoid Rabun until the end, but right now, my only concern is Oglethorpe," Coach Tucker said. "(Oglethorpe) is going to sit back and let us shoot it. If we make them we win. If we don't, it'll be close."

Due to the threat of winter weather the *North Georgia News* was on an early Monday deadline.

For results, game times, and cancellations, please visit our website at: www.nghanews.com.

Lady Panthers' struggles continue but secure third with win at Greene

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Despite their recent slide, Union County (15-8, 4-2) was able score a decisive win at Greene County.

Entering the contest, Union had lost five of six and were on the verge of dropping to fourth in Region 8-AA after a gut wrenching home loss to Jefferson on Wednesday.

Union traveled to Jefferson again on Friday and slipped up against the Lady Dragons one more time, but the second contest didn't count toward the 8-AA standings.

Finally the Lady Panthers were able to bounce back with a 12-point win down south in Greensboro to keep them in a favorable bracket entering the Region Tournament.

**Lady Panthers 31
Jefferson 34**

The Lady Panthers were unable to finish off the Jefferson Lady Dragons in a battle for second place last Wednesday night in Blairsville.

It was a low scoring affair throughout but Union was able to mount a 10-point lead midway through the third quarter at 23-13 but the Lady Dragons mounted a 9-0 run to close the frame, then outscored Union 12-8 in the fourth for a 34-31 Jefferson victory.

Brooke Maddox led the Lady Panthers with 12 points but foul trouble again took its toll on Union's leading scorer. The junior guard picked up foul number three with 2:28 to play in the first half,



and her fourth with 4:24 left in the game. She eventually picked up her fifth with 50 seconds remaining.

The Lady Panthers held an 18-13 lead at the break thanks to a 10-5 second quarter. Maddox picked a Lady Dragon ball handler and knocked down a short jumper, with just under 6 minutes to play in the third. She went on to knock down two from the line at the 5:33 mark and with 3:42 to play in the third, junior Lisa Nalaschi went 1-for-2 at the line, giving the Lady Panthers a 23-13 advantage.

Jefferson answered with a trey, a pair of deuces, and two free throws to close the quarter and get within a point of Union.

Just 19 seconds into the fourth, Maddox hit another pair from the line but the Lady Dragons responded with a trey to tie things up at 25-25. Senior Madison Rich

nailed a 15-footer then a trey, putting Union back up three with 5:30 to go.

Jefferson fired back with a trey of their own to even it back up at 30-30. A pair from the charity stripe with 4:18 left gave the visitors their first lead since early in the second quarter. Maddox trimmed the lead in half with a 1-for-2 visit to the line with 3:46 to play.

Trailing 32-31, the Lady Panthers had several chances to regain the lead, but the shots didn't fall. Jefferson eventually added two free throws with 50 seconds left for a 34-31 advantage.

Union was able to get two good looks at a game-tying three but both shots missed the mark.

In the final seconds, the Lady Dragons went to the line with a chance to put the game away but missed on the front end



of a 1-and-1. Union was able to get off a desperation heave from mid court that sailed wide and Jefferson escaped with a come-from-behind victory.

Nalaschi finished with 6 points but was limited to a free throw in the second half. Rich got all five of her points during the fourth quarter, Lauren Zollinger had a first half trey, while Kaitlyn Day and Ariel Maurer chipped in 2 points each.

Early on, Maurer got Union on the board and Nalaschi hit a corner trey to give the Lady Panthers a 5-4 lead. Maddox took a steal coast-to-coast for a lay in and later she added a free throw for an 8-6 advantage.

All square at 8-8 after one, Jefferson hit a trey early in the second for an 11-8 score. Nalaschi got Union within a point before Zollinger connected from the

top-of-the-key. Day hit a jumper and Maddox nailed a trey for an 18-11 Union lead. Jefferson added a free throw at the 2:28 mark and the 53-second mark of the half to make it an 18-13 game at the break.

**Lady Panthers 30
Jefferson 38**

Jefferson - Lauren Zollinger scored a season high 12 points but it wasn't enough as Union dropped another defensive struggle with Jefferson.

The Lady Panthers trailed 9-7 after a quarter and 20-16 at the break, despite two treys from Day, a trey by Zollinger and 4 points by Maddox.

A trey by Nalaschi, two free throws from Maddox and a bucket by Zollinger was all Union could muster in the third as Jef-

erson stretched its lead to 29-23 after three.

Zollinger scored five of Union's seven points in the fourth but couldn't overcome the Lady Dragons free throw edge. Jefferson made 12-of-17 from the line, 5-of-6 in the fourth while Union was 5-of-8 for the game.

Maddox finished with 8 points, Day had 6 points. Nalaschi scored 3 points, and Rich added a point.

**Lady Panthers 68
Greene County 56**

Greensboro - The Lady Panthers used a 21-6 first quarter to take control early but the Lady Tigers rallied to hold a 43-42 edge after three.

However, Union responded with a 26-13 fourth quarter thanks to 12-of-16 shooting at the line to put away Greene.

Maddox got back on track with 22 points and Zollinger continued to steadily progress, contributing 11 points that included two early treys.

Colwell also returned to form after being shutout at Jefferson. The sophomore came up big for the Lady Panthers, scoring all of her 11 points in the fourth quarter.

Rich came through in the clutch with eight fourth quarter points. Nalaschi finished with 7 points, Day had 6 points, and Maurer had two.

"We hit 10 threes but it was still nip-tuck the whole way," Coach Tucker said. "We made our free throws at the end and it was a big win. We played with a lot more confidence and that will help us going into the tournament."

Panthers take care of Riverside, fall twice to Jefferson and at Greene

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On Tuesday, Union County (14-11) was able to run away from Riverside in a 60-45 win but then fell twice to the 7th ranked Jefferson Dragons. Union kept it close at home but never challenged at Jefferson.

On Saturday, Union traveled to Greene County and suffered its worst loss of the season at the hands of the Tigers, 82-42.

**Panthers 60
Riverside 45**

Hunter Hughes led a balanced scoring attack with 19 points as the Panthers shot an outstanding 27-for-31 at the line in a 15-point win over Riverside Military Academy.

Hughes was a perfect 8-for-8 while Kyle Hamby was 7-of-8 during a 13-point performance.

Senior Grant Schuette scored all of his 10 points in the second quarter.

Tyler Odom finished with 7 points, Dylan Coyne had 6 points, Thomas Danek scored 3 points, and Matthew Wasko added 2 points.

The victory secured Union a winning season in Head Coach Casey Jones' first year at the helm.



Dylan Coyne snags a rebound vs Jefferson. Photo/Todd Forrest

**Panthers 42
Jefferson 60**

The Panthers were able to hang around with Jefferson for three quarters but the 7th ranked Dragons used a 16-6 run over the final 5:42 to take a 60-42 victory over the Panthers.

Despite never leading during the contest, Union kept the Dragons in sight but were never able to sustain any offense, derailing any comeback hopes.

A pair of buckets by Coyne, a baseline jumper from Odom and a trey by Hamby had Union within two at 11-9 with 3:02 left in the first. The Dragons would close with eight unanswered to

hold a 19-9 lead with 5:59 to play in the half. Hughes went on the offensive with consecutive treys sandwiched around a Jefferson free throw, getting Union within five at 20-15 at the 4:24 mark of the second.

Again, the Dragons responded with a 7-1 run but Hughes slowed the bleeding with his third trey of the quarter. Hamby added a free throw to make it a 27-20 game but Jefferson closed the half with five straight, making it a 32-20 game at the break.

Hughes knocked down two from the line but Jefferson connected 15 seconds later, going back on top by 12. The Panthers caught a break when the Dragons



Hunter Hughes takes a charge against Jefferson. Photo/Todd Forrest

were caught napping during a substitution and were whistled for six players on the court. Hughes made both free throws, making it a 34-24 game with 7:14 left in the third.

Following a Dragon old-fashioned 3-point play, Schuette and Lake Arnick scored in the paint, getting the Panthers within single digits at 37-28 with 3:15 left in the frame.

"We kept it close but could never get close enough," Coach Jones said.

Jefferson extended its lead back to 12 but a 3-point play from Arnick made it a 9-point game again.

However, the Dragons

connected at the 18-second mark of the third to stretch its lead back to double figures at 42-31 entering the fourth.

Coyne, Hamby, and Odom trimmed the deficit to 44-36 at the 5:42 mark but a Jefferson finished off Union with a 16-6 run.

Behind by 17, Coyne and Odom scored again to make it a 53-40 game, and a pair at the line by Hughes made it 55-42 but that's as close as the Panthers would get as Jefferson closed with five straight over the final 1:14.

Hughes led the way with 15 points, Coyne had 8 points, while Odom and Hamby scored 6 each. Arnick had 5 points, and Schuette and Danek added 2

points a piece.

**Panthers 44
Jefferson 67**

Jefferson - A 22-8 Dragon run to open the game was too much for the Panthers to overcome.

Odom led the way with 21 points and Coyne added 10. Hamby and Schuette chipped in 4 points each, while Arnick had 3 points and Danek finished with 2 points.

The second quarter was dead even at 12-12 but the Dragons blew things open with a 15-8 third quarter.

**Panthers 42
Greene County 82**

Greensboro - The Tigers outscored the Panthers 50-18 in the second and third quarters after Union only trailed by three after one.

Coyne led the Panthers with 12 points and Hughes posted 10 after putting up a goose egg at Jefferson the night before.

Schuette scored 8 points, Wasko had 4 points, Odom and Hamby had 3 points each, while Chase Shook had two.

"Their pressure got to us at both Jefferson and Greene County," Coach Jones said. "We played hard and turned the ball over too much."