

Sports

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Zach Odom leads unbeaten Panthers to 30th straight over Towns

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Union County stepped on the gas early and never let off the throttle as they picked up their 30th consecutive victory over rival Towns County and improved to 9-0 for the second time in three years.

Zach Odom came out firing away and scored 12 of his season-high 24 points in the first quarter. The senior guard scored from everywhere on the court during Union's 22-8 early outburst.

Following a bucket from James Rowe, Zach Odom connected on a trey from the left wing, Rhett McCombs drove the lane for two, CJ Byers went to work in the paint for a bucket, Zach Odom and McCombs each hit a pair from the line, Byers added another basket, then Zach Odom drilled a corner jumper, another trey, and a lay in to close out the opening frame.

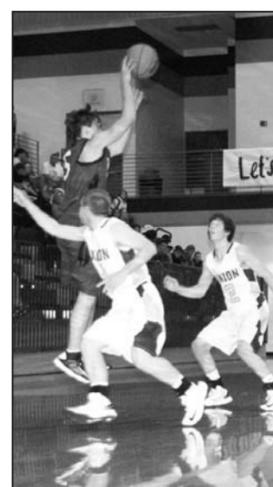
The Panthers extended their lead thanks to a 15-4 second quarter that saw Dylan Coyne score 6 points, Byers 4 points, Zach Odom 3 points, and Rowe 2. Towns scored on its first two possessions of the second quarter but Union closed the half with a 12-0 run to take a 37-12 lead into the break. The half was highlighted by a Coyne jumper at the buzzer to put an exclamation



Zach Odom lays in two points for the Panthers vs Towns Co. Photo/Todd Forrest



Sophomore forward Ralston Drake is fouled on a layup attempt during the fourth quarter of Union County's win over Towns County. Photo/Todd Forrest



Zach Odom and Rhett McCombs wreak havoc on Towns' guards. Photo/Todd Forrest

point on Union's dominating performance in the first two quarters.

Zach Odom posted seven more points in the third quarter, Rowe connected from long range and Coyne scored in the paint giving the Panthers a 49-20 advantage entering the fourth.

Rowe scored four in the final frame before fouling out at the 4:51 mark. Sophomore Ralston Drake added two from the line, and Byers and Zach Odom scored 2 points each to close out the Indians for the 30th straight time. The Panthers have also won 37 of the last 39 meetings between the teams

- dating back to the 1996-97 season.

"We came out, took care of business and Zach (Odom) had a super night," Union Head Coach David Tucker said.

The 9-0 start is just the second time that the Panthers have entered the Christmas Holidays undefeated since 1998. Both of Union's red hot starts have come during Coach Tucker's three-year tenure as boys basketball coach. A humble Tucker placed all the credit on his players and the community.

"I don't want to take any credit for that," Coach Tucker said. "I've had a great group of

guys. All of my players, boys and girls, are working very hard and that's a credit to the entire county."

Other than Coach Tucker the only common denominator among Union's last two 9-0 starts is Zach Odom.

Zach Odom was the starting point guard as a sophomore during Union's 13-0 start in 2010-11. After the victory over Towns, Zach Odom reflected on being the floor general for two of Union's most successful teams in recent history.

"The two (unbeaten) teams are very similar except this year we don't have as much size or depth, but we get after

it defensively, which has really helped us be successful," Zach Odom said. "This year we have a hard fighting group and we play well together as a team. That's because we seniors have all grown up together."

As for extending the winning streak over Towns to 30, Zach Odom admits he had a few butterflies before tip-off and didn't want his class to be forever known as the group who allowed the streak to end.

"For real, getting this win tonight was huge," Zach Odom said. "It was a little nerve racking before the game but jumping ahead early was huge."

Seven assists, 4 steals,

and 24 points was the final stat line for Zach Odom. Rowe finished with 11 points and 6 rebounds, Byers went for 10 points, 8 boards, and 3 blocks, and Coyne poured in 8 points, 8 rebounds, and 3 steals.

McCombs, who came in averaging 20.5 points a night, was limited to just 4 points but still came up with 3 steals while Drake added 2 points.

"Everybody is going to have an off night every now and again," Coach Tucker said. But CJ (Byers) and Dylan (Coyne) have stepped up and are playing better."

Union County will be off until the Battle of the States Christmas Tournament in Hiwassee on Dec. 27th-29th.

Participating in the Battle of the States will be the same eight teams from last year. In the 2011 tournament, Hayesville, NC won it all but have since lost seven seniors to graduation. However, the Yellow Jackets have reloaded with a talented group of freshman and sophomores, including Grant Arencibia - a Towns County transfer. Although, Class AAA's Dawson County appears to be the early favorites after returning all of its Region 8-AA Championship, and Class AA State Elite-8 roster.

"I'm going to have a hard time sleeping knowing that we've got to get prepared for that tournament, but we will be ready," Coach Tucker said.

Panthers' perseverance pays off

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With starters Dylan Coyne and CJ Byers on the bench with five fouls, Union County held off a relentless Class AAAA Lumpkin County (3-7) squad during the final 2:26 of the contest to improve to 8-0 on the season.

Just six days removed from holding off a furious Indian rally in Dahlonega, Union found themselves in a similar scenario on their home court last Friday.

Except this time around, the Panthers were handicapped by two starters being fouled out of the game.

After a see-saw battle ensued in the first quarter, Union found some breathing room when Zach Odom nailed a trey as the first half buzzer sounded, giving the Panthers a 31-25 lead at the break.

Lumpkin cut into the slim Panther lead with four-straight to start the second half but a lay in by Coyne and a jumper from Rhett McCombs kept the Panthers on top, 35-33. An Indian bucket was answered by a corner trey from James Rowe that sparked an 11-2 Panther run, giving Union its largest lead at 46-35 with 1:34 to play in the third quarter.

Zach Odom followed Rowe's three by driving the lane for a bucket, Byers scored two more from down low. A McCombs jumper was followed by two more from the stripe, giving Union its double-digit lead. Lumpkin, however, finished the quarter on an 8-2 run with Union's only points coming on a pair of Zach Odom free throws. Entering the final quarter, Union held a rather uncomfortable, 48-43 lead.

A put-back from Byers and two from the line by McCombs allowed Union to momentarily breathe a sigh of relief before Lumpkin made another push at Union's 52-43 margin.

Six unanswered from the Indians tightened things up at 52-49 at the 4:53 mark of the game. Zach Odom edged the Panthers back in front by five with a bucket in the lane before Coyne added a free throw giving the Panthers a 55-51 lead with 3:32 left.

48 seconds later, Byers would foul out, sending the Panthers' reigning Defensive MVP to the bench. The whistle on Byers resulted in a 1-for-2 trip at the line for Lumpkin, making it a three-point game. Things would get worse for the Panthers when Coyne picked up foul number five, 18 seconds later. The Indians connected on both free-throws to get within 55-54 with 2:26 to play.

A pair of Panther miscues in the final 120 seconds



The UCHS Pit Crew cheers on their Panthers in the final moments of Union's Friday night win over Lumpkin. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior CJ Byers goes for the blocked shot as junior Dylan Coyne awaits the rebound. Photo/Todd Forrest



Senior James Rowe makes life tough for anyone who enters the paint against Union County. Photo/Todd Forrest

appeared to give Lumpkin the opening they needed but Byers and Coyne's replacements, Thomas Danek and Ralston Drake stepped up in a big way for their team. Following a Panther turnover, Danek came up with a steal, then seconds later, Drake's hustle recovered a loose ball, preserving a Panther possession.

With 72 seconds left, Union again coughed up the ball but Lumpkin misfired on a go-ahead 3-pointer with 50 seconds to go. McCombs was fouled and sent to the line for a 1-and-1 opportunity. The senior, cool as ever, nailed both from the line, giving Union a 57-54 lead with 31 seconds showing on the clock.

Seven seconds later, Zach Odom was whistled for a questionable foul call, sending Lumpkin to the line where they went 1-of-2, bringing the Indians back within two points. Another Panther turnover gave the ball back to Lumpkin but the Indian fast break was halted by a Panther foul with 8 seconds to play. Once again, the Indians went 1-for-2 and Rowe secured the rebound and was fouled with 6.9 seconds remaining. The first of Rowe's 1-and-1 attempt was unsuccessful and

Lumpkin raced down the court to get off a game-winning shot. The Indians drove the length of the court but made one pass to many as they sailed the errant pass out-of-bounds, securing the Panther victory.

"I don't know how we won," said a frustrated Union County Coach David Tucker after the game. "They made the foul call on Odom, when really it was on McCombs, to try and bail them (Lumpkin) out. Then the foul on Rowe's rebound, they weren't even close to him yet when they blew the whistle. Then after he had gotten rid of the ball he was shoved, and that one should have been called an intentional foul."

Zach Odom led the way with 17 points and 4 steals. Rowe recorded 14 points on four 3-pointers, while grabbing 9 boards. McCombs scored 13 with 3 steals, Byers had 6 points and 9 rebounds, Coyne finished with 5 points, 3 steals, and a block, and Drake added 2 points.

Earlier in the day, the Union County JV Panthers routed Lumpkin County 54-18. Lake Arnick scored more than the entire Indians' squad with 19 points. Tyler Odom finished with 13.

Lady Panthers punish Lumpkin

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The Union County Lady Panthers (6-2) jumped out to a 14-4 advantage over Lumpkin County and never looked back, as they coasted to a 46-31 victory.

Junior Lauren Zollinger scored 11 of her game-high 20 points in the first quarter as Union doubled up the Lady Indians 16-8 in the opening frame. The Lady Panthers used a 13-5 second quarter to blow things open for a 29-13 lead at the break.

Zollinger scored Union's first 5 points of the game before Brooke Maddox dialed up a trey from the corner for an 8-4 Union lead. Consecutive treys from Zollinger and a driving lay-up from Jeanelle Arnold gave Union its commanding 16-8 lead after one.

Shawna Brown opened the second quarter with two corner treys, giving Union a 22-10 lead. Zollinger then went to work inside, penetrating into the paint for two lay ins, before Maddox closed the half with a



Ariel Maurer sent back 9 Lumpkin County shots on Friday night. Photo/Todd Forrest

3-pointer from the wing.

Ariel Maurer blocked three Lumpkin County shots on the Lady Indians' final possession of the half to keep Union's 16-point lead safe at the intermission.

Hannah Hughes came out firing away early in the second half, connecting on a mid-range jumper and a 3-pointer from the top-of-the-circle. Maddox drove into the lane and scored, that was followed up by a bucket from Arnold, and

Union was starting at its largest lead - 38-16 with 2:45 to play in the third quarter. Back-to-back treys from Maddox and Zollinger in the final 33 seconds of the frame sent Union into the fourth quarter with a 21-point cushion at 44-23.

Union would go scoreless for nearly the entire fourth quarter, until two from the line by Zollinger produced the Lady Panthers' lone points of the final period. With Arnold, Brown, and Maurer battling foul trouble most of the evening, the Lady Indians seemed to be the beneficiary of the officiating on the evening. Union County didn't attempt a single free-throw until the 1:03 mark of the fourth quarter while holding a 44-31 lead. With the foul discrepancy at 3-to-1 in favor of the visitors, Union didn't reach the bonus until just over a minute to play, after Lumpkin was forced into fouling.

The Lady Indians eventually cut the Union lead to 44-31 with 1:52 remaining but two free-throws from Zollinger with 27 seconds to play put the finishing touches on Union's

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TC Lady Indians continue to torment

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The undefeated Towns County Lady Indians used a 14-2 third quarter run to propel them past the Lady Panthers 63-44 on Saturday.

Union County (6-3) led for most of the first quarter thanks to 6 points from Lauren Zollinger and 5 from Hannah Hughes.

Holding a 15-12 advantage after a quarter, Towns stormed back with an 11-2 run and led 23-17 with 1:59 to play before halftime. A jumper by Hughes and a steal-and-score from Jeanelle Arnold made it a 23-21 game at the break.

A corner jumper from Shawna Brown and a driving lay in by Zollinger put Union back on top 25-23, less than 45 seconds into the third quarter.

That's when Coach Jim Melton's Lady Indians kicked it into overdrive.

Towns quickly tied things up then two trips to the line resulted in three Lady Indian points. Brown picked up her fifth foul less than two minutes into the third period but Hughes' put back lay up with 5:39 to play in the quarter kept the Lady Panthers within a point at 28-27. Unfortunately, Towns scored the next nine points, four coming off turnovers and two from an offensive board.

Hughes, Zollinger, and Brooke Maddox briefly ended Union's woes by making it a 37-31 deficit with 1:45 left in



Senior Jeanelle Arnold gets after one of her 10 offensive rebounds and tosses it to sophomore Brooke Maddox. Photo/Todd Forrest

the third but Towns answered with a backbreaking 21-3 run that left Union looking up at an insurmountable 58-34 disadvantage with 2:30 to play in the game.

Earlier in the fourth, Arnold joined Brown by picking up her fifth foul and Zollinger later fouled out with 1:28 to play.

"We came in with a game plan but some of our younger girls just aren't ready yet," Coach David Tucker said. "The effort is there we just couldn't get the shots to fall, but we're getting better, a little at a time."

Zollinger scored a team-high 14 points with 2 steals and a blocked shot. Hughes wasn't far behind with 12 points, meanwhile Arnold put up some incredible numbers, grabbing 16 rebounds, 10 on the offensive glass, picking up 6 steals and scoring 6 points -

despite sitting out the final 6:18 of the contest.

Brown scored 4 points, Kaitlyn Day had 3 points, Maddox and Lisa Nalasci finished with 2 each, Carly Adams scored a point with 5 assists, and Ariel Maurer added a blocked shot.

The Lady Panther JV squad ran away with a 57-34 victory over Towns County. Day led the way with 13 points, Nalasci scored 12 points, and Kim Coyne also had 12.

Both JV squads will be in action this week as Union hosts Tellico Plains, TN on Thursday before traveling to Tellico on Friday.

The Lady Panthers won't see any action until after Christmas when they participate in the Battle of the States in Towns County beginning on Dec. 27th. Union placed second in last year's Battle of the States Tournament.