

Sports

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Union County advances to first Elite 8 since '01

Lady Panthers blast Butler in the Round of 16, will host No. 3 Early County on Tuesday

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

The 8th ranked Union County Lady Panthers (23-6) are on to the Elite 8 following a 61-37 blowout of Butler last Wednesday, Feb. 19 at Union County High School.

Sophomore Ava Hunter led the way with 20 points, to go with eight rebounds, three steals and two assists while Union took control courtesy of a 25-2 sprint that ended with a 40-16 advantage, early in the third quarter.

"I have to thank the guards for getting me the ball first and foremost," Hunter said after the win. "But the main thing is, I just wanted to win for our seniors because they mean so much to me and our program. I always want to play hard for them."

Holding a 15-14 lead in the early stages of the second quarter, the Lady Panthers rattled off six straight points, opening up a 21-14 advantage and forcing Butler to burn its second timeout of the game's opening 11 minutes.

In a full-court pressure defense, Union County caught the Bulldogs unprepared and forced three quick turnovers that led to a 6-0 run in less than 45 seconds. Leading 27-14, the Lady Panthers were never threatened again as they pushed their margin out to 31-14. Butler finally ended the 16-0 run with a basket that resulted in a 31-16 score at the half.

"After talking with Coach (Mandy) Hunter, we knew (the full court pressure) was something we were going to throw in, and at that time, I wanted a little bit of an offensive spark," Union County coach Crystal Beach said about her decision to apply pressure. "Like I've said, we play our best offense when we're playing good defense, and that little spark resulted in a big run for us."

Any chances of a Bulldog rally coming out of the break were immediately put to rest as Union began the third with 10-straight points, set off by five-in-a-row from Andelin Hill, who went on to score eight in the quarter.

The senior wing got the



L-R: Sophomore Ava Hunter finished with 20 points while holding Butler's Senior Andelin Hill scored 8 of her 17 points in the third to put Butler away

second half underway with a triple from the wing, then, following an 80-second drought by both squads, Hill scored inside for a 36-16 advantage -- Union's first 20-point margin of the night.

"It just comes from adrenaline and wanting to win so badly and do something that hasn't been done in 20 years," Hill said when asked about her killer instinct. "It was really important that we put them away (coming out of halftime) because we didn't want to allow them to go on a run. We've also been known to fall behind early sometimes, so it was important that we started strong in each half."

McCarter followed up Hill's 5-0 spurt with a putback and a free throw, sandwiched around a Brooke Dockrey dribble-drive for two.

Each team traded baskets until Hill nailed her second trey of the quarter for a 45-22 lead. Hunter would go to work down low for two more, ending the third with her team in charge, 47-23.

McCarter and Hunter continued to own the paint during the early stages of the fourth as Union County built a 51-23 advantage.

"Kait and Ava executed exactly what we practiced and what we talked about; they stepped up in a big way," Beach said. "(Butler's Micha Watson) is very talented and an incredible player, to hold her to 10 points speaks a lot to (Hunter and McCarter's) commitment on both ends of the floor."

A breakaway layup by Hill made it 53-25 before Hunter closed things in style with three straight baskets, beginning with an offensive board at the 5:00 mark.

"I just had to keep my back squared up, stay on balance and finish through their contact because they could all jump higher than me," Hunter said when asked about her matchup vs a physical and athletic Bulldogs frontcourt.

Freshman Corinne Hill put the finishing touches on Union's first Sweet 16 victory since 2001



Micha Watson to just 10 points -- her lowest point total of the postseason, for good following a 31-16 halftime lead. Photo/Todd Forrest

by scoring on a baseline jumper with 32 seconds left.

"I have a lot of respect for Butler, they're a very good team with some very talented kids," Beach said. "To beat a quality team like that says a lot about where we're at right now."

"I also want to add that it was really nice to have the support that we've had from the community. Playing in front of a big crowd like we did tonight means a lot to our girls, and it makes them even more proud to wear the 'UC' on their chests"

Andelin Hill finished with 17 points, along with eight boards and two steals. McCarter pulled down a team-high 13 rebounds while pouring in 11 points and blocking two shots.

Dockrey ended up with 8 points, six boards, two assists, two steals and a block. Sophomore Riley Allison led the team with three dimes and hauled in three rebounds.

Freshman Ellie Cook had 6 points on 2-of-3 shooting from

both the floor and the free throw line. Corinne Hill added 2 points and a rebound. Kyla Locklear finished with three boards and a blocked shot.

Freshman Kaylee Helton chipped in two rebounds and an assist; sophomore Rebekah Chambers added one rebound.

Entering the game, it was well-publicized that both teams struggled from long distance, but at the end of the day, Union County won the 3-point battle by finishing a very efficient 3-of-5 from deep. Meanwhile, Butler went 0-for-13 from behind the arc.

Up next: The Lady Panthers will face an uphill battle on Tuesday when they host the defending State Runner-Up Early County (25-4). The third-ranked Bobcats are led by 6-foot, 3-inch junior Makayla Timpson, who is currently listed as a 4-star power forward in *ESPN's* Class of 2021 basketball recruiting rankings. According to *ESPN*, Timpson is listed as the 11th ranked forward

prospect in America and the 58th overall prospect in her class.

ESPN contributor Dan Olson, the owner and director of the highly regarded *Girls Basketball Report*, had high praise for Timpson.

"(She is) an athletic frontcourt prospect with superior length, offers versatility with quick attack in face up game, skilled interior production; quick-leaper, alters shots in the paint, runs the floor with guard-like speed; soft touch facing up in the key; continues as a stock-riser in the class of 2021."

Timpson currently averages 23 points, 11 rebounds, five blocks and four steals per game, despite sitting out the second half of numerous blowouts.

If she has one weakness, it's her lack of a 3-point shot (2-for-7 on the year). However, when you're 6-3 and shoot 55% from 2-point territory, there's little need to venture outside the paint.

Flanking Timpson is a talented supporting cast, featuring 5-8 sophomore guard Jordan Eafford, who scores at just under 13 points per game with a team-high five assists and four steals. With 10 points as a freshman in last year's 57-51 State title game loss to Douglass, Eafford was the only Bobcat not named Timpson to score in double digits.

Joining Timpson in the frontcourt is 5-8 senior Ta'Ziyah Jones, who also averages just under 13 per night while pulling down six boards.

As a team, Early County shoots 23% from downtown while averaging just 2.4 makes per game. Those numbers are very similar to Union, who also hits 23% percent from deep, while connecting on 2.5 treys a game.

Traveling to the mountains isn't anything new for Early County. During last year's road to the State Championship Game, Early County made a trip to Rabun County in the Elite 8 and came away with a 73-60 victory.

This year, the two squads have nothing resembling a common opponent, but Early County defeated northwest Georgia's

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Baseball: Union forces split with Pepperell in home-opening doubleheader

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Union County baseball played two with Pepperell on Saturday during the Panthers' 2020 home opener, coming away with a split following a 9-3 victory in game two.

After dropping the first game by an ugly 9-1 score, Union County bounced back to thump the Dragons in game two behind the arms of juniors Austin Garrison and Zeke Swartz.

Garrison got the game-two nod and worked 4 innings, allowing two unearned runs in the second frame. Swartz took over in the fifth and allowed one unearned run over 3 innings of action.

"In the second game, we picked our energy up and were able to get ahead early and that really helped our pitchers," Union County coach Zach Odom said. "The biggest thing was our approach (at the plate) changed. We finally decided to use the right side of the field, and as soon as we remembered that we could do that, things started to open up for us."

The pitching duo was aided by a pair of defensive gems by senior second baseman John Mancuso and junior right fielder Damien Chitwood. Early in the contest, Mancuso made a sliding, back-handed stab to throw out the runner at first from behind the bag at second.

Later, Chitwood made a running, over-the-shoulder grab in foul territory before crashing into the fence and receiving a few scratches, bumps and bruises. "He would stay in the game and deliver at the plate."

Speaking of the Union County bats, despite leaving 12 runners on base in the first game, they came to life in the first inning of game two, using a balk, of all things, to provide the spark.

Leading 1-0, senior Cayden Rich made it 2-0 with an RBI single before Chitwood tacked on another run with a sacrifice groundout.

Pepperell answered with two in the second, coming off a two-out, two-run error. But Garrison would escape the jam, limit-



Damien Chitwood crashes into the fence in right field after making a running catch during the game two win over Pepperell. Photo/Todd Forrest

ing the damage to two runs.

With the wet weather of late, practice has been limited and it showed at times in the field.

"You don't want to give them that excuse, but it definitely is a factor," Odom said. "Everyone has been fighting with the weather and we've only been on the field twice in two weeks, so there is obviously a little bit of rust. Hopefully, once we get on the field with some consistency we can straighten all of that out."

The Panthers extended the margin to 5-2 in the fourth as Swartz singled and senior Carter Wright doubled, driving home one run apiece. The three-run lead was more than enough with Swartz on the hill as the junior lefty allowed just two hits and fanned two.

Union tacked on four more in the sixth, starting with Wright drawing a bases-loaded walk, followed by a two-run single from Chitwood and a Pepperell error that allowed sophomore JJ Littles to score.

The Dragons scored their lone run off Swartz in the seventh to trim the final margin to 9-3.

Swartz helped himself by scoring three runs; Mancuso also added three runs during a 1-for-4 day at the plate. Junior Isaak Mullinack tacked on a run, Rich went 1-for-3 with a run and an RBI and fellow senior Matthew Kelley finished 1-for-3.

In the opener, Union surrendered a 5-spot in the third and never recovered, en route to a 9-1 loss to Pepperell. The Panthers got one run back in their half of the inning but the Dragons responded

with a run in the fourth.

Pepperell put the game away with three runs in the seventh to open up a 9-1 advantage. Union County was limited to just four hits while giving up 11 to the Dragons. Their lone run came when Garrison brought in Swartz with an RBI fielder's choice in the third.

Garrison finished the game 1-for-4 and Swartz went 0-for-2 with a pair of walks. A Wright double was Union's only extra-base hit while Kelley and Mullinack each singled to round out the Panther offense.

Mancuso walked twice; Chitwood and Alex Youngblood drew one free pass each.

Mullinack got the start and sat down four batters through two innings. After striking out the side in the second, the junior right-

hander ran into trouble in the third. Down 1-0, Mullinack fell victim to a bases-clearing triple, followed by a run-scoring bunt single.

Sophomore Thomas Dyer spelled him in the fourth and limited Pepperell to one run until the seventh, bringing Chitwood to the mound to escape the inning.

Dyer yielded six hits and four earned over 3.1 innings, striking out four and walking one. Chitwood didn't allow a hit during his 0.2 innings.

Earlier in the season, a shorthanded Panthers squad dropped two-of-three on the road. In the season opener, Union fell 12-4 to Pickens after leading 4-3 when Pickens put up nine runs in the fourth inning.

Sophomore Tyler Loyd, Dyer and Chitwood all saw action on the mound for Union County.

At the dish, Mullinack, Chitwood and Mancuso each turned in a two-hit performance with Wright and Chitwood driving home two runs apiece.

Later that day, the Panthers gave up 10 runs in the sixth during a 12-1 loss to Lumpkin County. Mancuso went 1-for-3 with Union's only RBI of the day -- scoring Mullinack, who started on the mound and threw four shutout innings.

Sophomore Conner Shields replaced him in the fifth but struggled in the sixth. Dyer spelled him with two down in the sixth and allowed one hit before escaping the inning.

Last Tuesday, the Panthers blanked Gilmer 10-0, scoring four runs each in the fourth and fifth innings.

Mancuso went 3-for-4 with 4 RBIs, two runs and a triple. Mullinack went 1-for-2 with an RBI and two runs, Kelley finished 3-for-3 with a double and two runs.

Youngblood had himself a 2-for-3 day with a double, Swartz knocked in two runs, Chitwood brought home one while going 1-for-2 and Wright doubled and scored twice.

On the bump, Garrison and Swartz slammed the door early then nailed it shut. Swartz fanned eight in four innings, allowing four hits and one walk.

Garrison threw a dozen pitches and struck out a batter over one hitless inning.

Union County is back in action at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday when they visit Lumpkin County. Region play is scheduled to begin Friday when the Panthers host Banks County, who finished tied for second in 8-AA last year with Union County and Social Circle.

The first pitch is currently slated for 5 p.m. vs the Leopards.

"We've got to clean up some of the freebies we've been giving to teams, especially since we open with Banks and they're the favorites," Odom said when asked what must be fixed before region play. "We've been giving away too many free bases with walks and by throwing the ball around. We also need to work on some communication problems and just some little things here and there."