

# Sports

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## Lady Panthers clinch No. 1 seed and State Tournament berth

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
sports@nganews.com

The Union County Lady Panthers (17-6) are headed back to the State Tournament for the fifth time in six years.

After falling 45-43 in overtime to Jefferson on Senior Night, Union County responded by thumping Washington-Wilkes 48-30 in a must-win game on Saturday.

Despite arriving just 20 minutes before tip-off, the Lady Panthers stepped off the bus shooting. They led wire-to-wire after a 15-9 first quarter that saw Jeanelle Arnold hit two treys on her way to an 8-point quarter. Lauren Zollinger had 5 and Shawanna Brown had 2 points in the opening frame.

The Lady Panthers extended their lead to 28-15 at the half thanks to 4 more from Arnold, a trey by Hannah Hughes, buckets from Brown and Zollinger and a pair from the line by Brooke Maddox.

Union maintained a comfortable margin through three quarters after Maddox nailed two treys, Arnold connected from downtown, and Ariel Maurer scored a basket.

The fourth quarter belonged to Union as Zollinger and Maddox did all the scoring and Union pulled away in a 48-30 State-clinching victory.

Arnold led the way with 15 points, Zollinger had 13, and Maddox added 10.

Brown finished with 4



Sophomore Brooke Maddox fires away from long distance during Union's clinching victory at Washington Wilkes on Saturday. Union will be the No. 1 seed in the 8-AA Tourney and will return to the State Tournament for the third consecutive year.

points, Hughes with 3, and Maurer with 2 points.

"We bounced back," Union County Head Coach David Tucker said.

"We've got some great kids and the entire season they have always bounced back."

On Friday, Union County let one slip away in overtime to Jefferson, 45-43.

With six minutes to play, Zollinger banked in a pull-up jumper to give Union a 38-33 lead. Jefferson added a basket at the 5:05 mark to bring the Lady Dragons back within three at 38-35.

A Lady Panther turnover with 2:11 to play allowed the visitors to pull within a point 10 seconds later.

Another Union miscue

handed the ball back to Jefferson but two missed free-throws gave the ball back to the Lady Panthers.

Zollinger missed the front-end of a 1-and-1 and Jefferson grabbed the lead at 39-38 with 39 seconds left.

Following the score, Union's Lisa Nalashi broke free for a lay up, but was fouled from behind, sending the sophomore to the line for two shots at the 32 second mark.

After hitting two from the stripe earlier in the contest, Nalashi misfired but an offensive rebound by Arnold resulted in a miss, but another board by Hughes led to a Jefferson foul, sending Hughes to the line.

During the scramble, Nalashi was tripped and took

a hard fall, sending her to the locker room with a separated shoulder and unfortunately, will be out for the season.

With 28 seconds to play, Hughes went to the line for the 1-and-1 but missed her first attempt. As Jefferson secured the board, Arnold tied up the Lady Dragon, resulting in a jump ball with the possession arrow pointing in Union's favor.

With 12 seconds to play, Arnold drove up the middle for a go-ahead lay up at 40-39. Jefferson raced back down the court and with 3.8 seconds to play, Union was whistled for a foul, sending the Lady Dragons to the stripe for two shots.

The first shot was on the money but the second went wide and Union secured the

rebound and sent the game into overtime at 40-40.

In the extra period, Jefferson used two free-throws to open a 42-40 lead with 1:34 to play.

On the ensuing possession, Zollinger drove hard to the basket and was fouled, sending her to the line where she hit 1-of-2, making it a 42-41 game.

With 30 seconds to play, Arnold went back to work. The senior guard swiped the Lady Dragon ball handler and went coast-to-coast for a lay up, giving Union a 43-42 lead.

Jefferson, again responded with a game-winning basket with 13 seconds left.

Zollinger's 15-footer was off the mark and the Lady Dragons held on for the win.

"We played hard but just didn't finish," Coach Tucker said. "There is a lot of emotion on Senior Night and we gave a great effort but Jefferson wanted revenge."

Union opened the game with treys by Arnold, Zollinger, Carly Adams, and Maddox.

Maddox scored on a baseline jumper and Hughes added 2 in the paint for a 16-11 Lady Panther lead after a quarter.

The Lady Dragons clamped down in the second quarter, holding Union to one bucket from Adams, putting the Lady Panthers behind 19-18 at the half.

Union would trail 23-18 and 25-20 in the third quarter but answered with a 7-0 to spark them to a 34-31 advantage after three. Six different players scored for Union in the quarter with Hughes leading the way with 4 points. Arnold and Madison Rich each hit a trey, Zollinger hit two from the stripe and Maddox scored on a lay up.

Arnold put together another impressive outing, leading the way with 10 points, 8 boards, 4 steals, and 4 assists.

Zollinger finished with 8 points, Maddox had 7, Hughes had 6, and Adams scored 5. Brown scored 2 points to go along with 7 rebounds. Rich added 3 points and Nalashi had 2.

The Lady Panthers are now the No. 1 seed in the 8-AA Region Tournament which gives them a bye into the Semi-Finals and guarantees a berth in the State Playoffs.

Union opens the tournament on Friday at 7 p.m. in Greene County. The Lady Panthers face the winner of No. 4 Rabun County vs No. 5 Washington-Wilkes.

A win on Friday and Union plays for the 8-AA title at 7 p.m. on Saturday. A loss and Union plays for third place at 4 p.m. on Saturday. All Region Tournament games will be held at Greene County.

## Zollinger named 8-AA POY

Union County junior Lauren Zollinger took five of the seven first place votes at Sunday's Region meeting to claim 8-AA's 2012-13 Player of the Year honors.

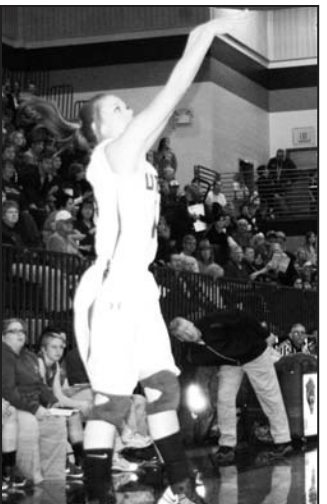
The only two votes she didn't receive were from Greene County and Washington-Wilkes, who voted for their own players.

The junior guard has averaged 15 points a game this season, including a career-high 26 vs Fannin County. She also posted 24 at Jefferson and against Polk County. She scored 21 during wins at Oglethorpe County and Towns County.

Senior Jeanelle Arnold was also included on the All-Region First Team.



Junior Lauren Zollinger



Shawanna Brown for three.



Carly Adams drives for two.



Hannah Hughes vs Jefferson



Jeanelle Arnold with the go-ahead bucket with 12 seconds left.

## McCombs tops 1,000 points; Panthers enter 8-AA Tourney without Zach Odom

By Todd Forrest  
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sports@nganews.com

Union County (18-7) dropped two games over the weekend to Jefferson, 64-56 and at Washington-Wilkes 72-59.

However, Union County also lost the services of senior guard Zach Odom to a shoulder injury suffered at Rabun County on Feb. 1st.

Playing without Odom, the Panthers made the long journey to Washington-Wilkes and fell 72-59 after the Tigers used a 10-0 run in the final 5 minutes to close out the Panthers.

During the second quarter, senior Rhett McCombs reached the 1,000-point mark for his career in his 50th game. Nobody in school history has ever reached 1,000 points in that few games.

The Panthers came out of the gates sluggish and fell behind 24-10 after one quarter of play. Union would narrow the margin to 41-32 at the break thanks to 8 points second quarter points from James Rowe, 7 from McCombs, and 4 from Tyler Odom.

McCombs continued to carry the short-handed Panthers with 10 third quarter points, bringing Union to within 5 points at 58-53. Tyler Odom added



Tyler Odom scores two at Washington-Wilkes. Union County will now rely heavily on Tyler Odom, Hunter Hughes, Kyle Hamby, and Elijah Ryals to fill in for an injured Zach Odom.

4 more in the quarter, Ralston Drake nailed a trey, while Dylan Coyne and Rowe added 2 points each.

The Panthers were able to get within three at 62-59 with 5 minutes to play but Washington-Wilkes finished on a 10-0 run to close things out.

McCombs scored all 7 Union County points in the fourth quarter, en route to a 28-point performance.

Rowe chipped in 10 points, Tyler Odom had 8, Kyle Hamby and Hunter Hughes

added 4 each, Drake had 3 and Coyne finished with 2.

"We could have lost our composure, but we didn't," Coach Tucker said. "Those kids are a credit to the game of basketball."

With Hughes moving into the starting line up in place of Zach Odom, Coach Tucker believes that playing for their injured comrade will only rally his squad.

"As the troops get thinner, this team pulls closer together and will keep on playing," he said.

Tucker will now turn to sophomores Hamby, Hughes, and Tyler Odom, and junior

Elijah Ryals in hopes of finding someone to fill Zach Odom's shoes. But the coach admits, a player like Zach Odom is irreplaceable.

"Our bench did all they could (at Washington-Wilkes). They all played well and we'll be fine and ready to go on Wednesday. I don't know if anybody can pick up the slack for Zach, but those boys will play hard because they love the game of basketball."

During Union's loss to Jefferson, McCombs led the way with 23 while Zach Odom put up 19 points despite playing with a separated shoulder.

"The pain became too



McCombs with a jumper at WW.

with a 9-1 run to close the quarter in a 28-25 dogfight. McCombs finished with 12 second quarter points, Tyler Odom chipped in 2 points and Hughes had a free throw.

The third quarter saw Zach Odom, playing with a bad arm, take over and give the Panthers a 45-43 lead entering the fourth. Zach Odom scored 12 points in the third, including the go-ahead jumper with 3:40 to play in the quarter.

McCombs scored 6 points and C.J. Byers had 2 to help Odom put the Panthers out in front.

Leading 48-46, McCombs drove the lane for two and Zach Odom entered the paint for two more giving Union a 52-46 lead with 4:44 left. However, the Dragons closed the game with an 18-4 run for their 64-56 win.

Rowe finished the contest with 13 boards, 4 steals, 3 assists, and 2 blocks. Coyne ended up with 4 points, Hughes with 3, Byers and Tyler Odom had 2 each.

No. 5 Union will face No. 4 Washington-Wilkes in a Wednesday rematch at 5:30 p.m. in Greene County.

Union needs one win to reach its first State Playoff since 2009. A win on Wednesday will result in an 8:30 contest on Friday against the winner of tournament-host and No. 1 Greene vs No. 8 Social Circle.

## McCombs and Zach Odom named to All-Region Team



Zach Odom and Rhett McCombs

The Union County backcourt duo of Rhett McCombs and Zach Odom were selected to the 8-AA All-Region Team.

McCombs put up nearly 20 points a game, while Odom has averaged 17 points a night.

The two seniors are tops on the team in steals and assists.

McCombs has topped 30 points on three different occasions with a season-high 34 coming at Jefferson. He also hit a career-high 8 treys at Riverside.

Odom's high was 29 points against Hayesville, NC during the Battle of the States where his 76 points in the three games was the most of the tournament.



C.J. Byers with the lay up.



James Rowe driving for two.



McCombs with the fade away



Zach Odom nails a jumper

Union County Senior Night Photos by Todd Forrest