

Sports

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Lady Panthers topple Jefferson, take another step towards State Tourney

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Jefferson - The Union County Lady Panthers are now one win away from clinching one of the top two seeds in the Region Tournament.

With Union's 53-42 win over Jefferson, the Lady Panthers have put themselves in the driver's seat for a possible Region Championship and a fifth trip to state in six years.

In 8-AA only the first meeting counts toward the Region standings, so Union's loss at Rabun and this Friday's game with Jefferson won't affect the final seedings in the Region Tournament. On Saturday, Union visits Washington-Wilkes in a game that does count, and a Lady Panther win guarantees Union no lower than a second place regular season finish. A Union win over Washington-Wilkes combined with a Rabun win over Greene County on Thursday will give Union the No. 1 seed in the tournament and an automatic berth in State.

During Union's critical Region contest at Jefferson, Lauren Zollinger put up 18 of her game-high 24 points in the second half points as the Lady Panthers pulled away from the Lady Dragons in the final minutes.

Zollinger hit 7-of-8 free throws in the final 2:01 to put Jefferson away after nailing a turnaround jumper from 15 feet to give Union a 40-31 lead at the 5:10 mark.

Early in the fourth, the Lady Dragons were still within 4 points at 35-31 until Shawna



Lauren Zollinger



Brooke Maddox and Madison Rich provide Union with quality minutes off the bench at Jefferson. Photos by Todd Forrest



Ariel Maurer

Brown nailed a corner trey to stretch the lead to 38-31 with 5:48 to play. Following Zollinger's jumper, Jefferson scored consecutive buckets to get within 5 at 40-35 with 3:24 remaining.

Janelle Arnold hit 2-of-2 from the stripe but Jefferson answered by going 3-for-4 during two trips to the line, shaving the Union lead to 42-38. Zollinger sank 3-of-4 before the Lady Dragons hit 1-of-2 to stay within five at 45-40 with 1:10 to go.

Carly Adams hit a pair from the line, as did Zollinger and with a minute to play, Union led 49-40.

Ariel Maurer, Zollinger, and Adams each added free throws in the final 52 seconds to stretch the Lady Panther lead to 53-42 when the final buzzer

sounded.

"We played well and fought for four quarters like we're supposed to," Union County Head Coach David Tucker said. "We've got some people really stepping up and playing well."

An 11-point margin wasn't indicative of just how closely contested this brutal Region battle was.

The Lady Panthers jumped out to a 16-8 lead after the first quarter thanks to Arnold and Zollinger. The Union backcourt combined for all 16 points, with Arnold, who went for 10 in the quarter, scoring early by driving into the paint before knocking down two treys.

Zollinger did all of her damage in the paint. The Lady Panther point guard penetrated

the Jefferson defense for two lay ups and a short jumper.

The Lady Dragons opened the second frame with six unanswered before Brooke Maddox knocked down a trey, making it a 19-14 game at the 2:44 mark of the half.

Once again, Jefferson took advantage of another 6-0 spurt to regain the lead with a pair from the line at 20-19 with 19 seconds left in the half. Luckily for Union, the Lady Dragons committed two silly fouls in the final nine seconds to swing the momentum back into Union's favor.

Maddox was bumped at midcourt, sending the sophomore to the line for two shots. After she sank both shots, Jefferson's final shot attempt of the half was rebounded by sophomore Kaitlyn Day, who

was fouled as she pulled in the rebound, sending her to the line for two with one second on the clock. Day hit 1-of-2, allowing Union to take a 23-20 lead into the break.

The second half opened with a pair of Lady Dragon free throws, that were followed by a bucket at the 7:03 mark to give Jefferson its final lead of the night.

Zollinger, again found a seam for a driving lay up, Hannah Hughes hit one from the line, and Maddox hit 2-of-3 from the stripe after being fouled on a 3-point attempt.

Zollinger went back to work by taking a turnover coast-to-coast and drilling a pull up jumper from the baseline, the junior then found pay dirt from beyond the arc, pushing the Lady Panthers out in front after

three quarters at 35-29.

Zollinger added 2 assists to her 24 point performance. Arnold finished with 12 points and 2 steals, Maddox had 5, and Brown scored 3. Adams went for 3 points, 5 boards, 2 assists, and 2 steals. Day had 2 points, Hughes chipped in 1 point and 2 steals. Maurer had a blocked shot and one free throw. Lisa Nalasci added five boards off the bench while Madison Rich dished off 2 assists.

The Lady Panthers have now put themselves into prime position by picking up wins over both Jefferson and Rabun (Jefferson defeated Rabun earlier in the season).

"This was a big region win for us," Tucker said. "A win is a win and that's our goal is to keep winning every game and be in the best position going into the tournament."

With Oglethorpe County and Social Circle being the sixth and seventh seed, the Lady Panthers need to finish no higher than third to meet one of the aforementioned teams with a trip to state on the line.

Union defeated Oglethorpe 61-16 and Social Circle 57-12, so either team would be a welcomed sight with a trip to state riding on the outcome.

The only scenario that could keep Union out of a top-three seed is losing to Washington-Wilkes and Rabun, knocking off Greene. That would create a log jam at the top of 8-AA and force the tie-breakers into play. However, Union can avoid any outside influence by simply beating Washington-Wilkes (who upset Greene), which would all but punch Union's ticket to the State Tournament.

McCombs' 35 not enough at Jefferson

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Jefferson - Despite 35 points from Rhett McCombs, the Jefferson Dragons used its size advantage to pound Union County (17-4, 3-3) in the paint during the Panthers' 73-67 loss.

The Dragons did most of their damage inside as they totaled more than 50 points in the paint and from the foul line.

The loss drops the Panthers into a fourth place tie with Washington-Wilkes and regardless of the remaining outcomes, Union will likely meet the Tigers in the first round of the Region Tournament in the No. 4 vs. No. 5 match up.

Jefferson and Rabun County remain in the mix for the top spot and a Rabun win over Greene County would create a three-way tie between Jefferson, Rabun, and Greene for the top seed and the right to host the Region 8-AA Tournament.

The Dragons remained in the mix for the top spot by overcoming Union's red hot shooting performance to open the game. A 13-0 Panther run, sparked by McCombs and James Rowe. The duo combined for 21 points as Union led 21-10 after one.

With 1:52 to play before the half, a McCombs lay up gave Union a 30-22 lead.

Twelve seconds later, Jefferson scored the first points of a 12-2 run that saw the Dragons take a 34-32 lead into the break. The run came on the heels of Zach Odom and Rowe picking up their second foul at the 2:33 and 2:07 marks of the second quarter.

McCombs put up 20 points in the first half, hitting a trey to open the game, scoring 6 points via dribble penetration or lay up, and converting 11-of-13 from the charity stripe.

Jefferson picked up where they left off and used a 10-2 run to open the third, putting Union in a 10-point hole at 44-34 with 5:40 to play in the quarter.

A 3-point play by junior Dylan Coyne brought the Panthers back within seven but Jefferson outscored Union 11-2 over the next four minutes.

A trey from Odom and another bucket by Coyne trimmed the Dragon lead after they had stretched their advantage to 17 points at 59-42. When the smoke cleared after three quarters, Union still found themselves facing a 59-44 deficit.



Senior forward James Rowe scored 8 first half points at Jefferson. Photo/Todd Forrest



Rhett McCombs fires away from downtown at Jefferson. The senior guard poured in a season-high 35 points.

Coyne led the Panthers with 5 in the quarter, while McCombs was momentarily held in check with 2 points.

The fourth quarter began with Jefferson opening back up a 17-point lead at the 6:52 mark, but a basket from Coyne kick started an 11-2 Panther run that shaved the Dragon lead to seven points at 62-55 with 4:26 to play.

Four free throws by McCombs, another 3-point play from Coyne, and a 15-footer by Odom highlighted the Panther surge. The Dragons briefly stretched the lead back to 11 despite a McCombs jumper and a Thomas Danek put back.

Still trailing by 11, McCombs nailed a trey, Coyne hit two free-throws, and McCombs connected on a pull up trey with 1:02 left, bringing the Panthers to within five points at 72-67.

At that point, Union began fouling and despite Jefferson only hitting one free throw in the final minute, the Panthers were unable to secure the Dragon misses. The Panthers had a shot to cut into the lead but

suffered from a travelling violation, then a trey from Odom went wide-right and Jefferson prevailed 73-67.

In Union's four losses this season, they have given up 70-plus points in each outing. And just like the Rabun game, Union gave up too many points in the paint to keep pace.

"We could have rolled over tonight but we didn't," Union County Head Coach David Tucker said. "I'm proud of these guys, and I'm proud to be sitting on the bench as their coach. They're playing their hearts out and they're busting it."

Coyne scored a season high 12 points while picking up 2 steals and blocking a shot. Rowe finished with 8 points, 4 assists, and 3 steals. Danek also posted a season-high with 6 points and 6 boards. Odom finished with his lowest scoring of the season, as the senior guard was limited to 7 points.

The Panthers will get another crack at Jefferson on Friday when they visit Union for Senior Night at 7 p.m.

Panther defense clamps down at Rabun

By Todd Forrest
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Tiger - After giving up nearly 100 points in the paint in the two previous outings, the Union County Panthers (18-4) limited the Rabun County Wildcats to just four inside field goals for the first three quarters as Union took a 41-26 lead after three quarters and held off a late Wildcat rally for a 48-45 victory on Rabun's Senior Night.

Holding a 12-point lead late in the third, Zach Odom connected with a corner trey with three seconds remaining, giving Union a 15-point cushion entering the fourth. The Wildcats finally found some success down low in the final frame and trimmed the Panther lead to two with a 15-2 run. Dylan Coyne's put back was Union's only field goal of the final eight minutes. Then a Rabun County fast break dunk attempt was thwarted by James Rowe, who prevented the throw down that would have tied things up.

Later, Rowe would hit 1-of-2 at the line, giving Union a 44-41 lead with 58 seconds to play. The Wildcats responded again by going down low and making it a one-point game at the 43-second mark. Rowe stepped back to the line where he hit two of the toughest free throws of his career.

"Those were definitely two big free throws," Rowe said. "Their student section was rocking and that made it a little more difficult. But Coach Tucker making us shoot a million free throws in practice definitely helped out."

On the ensuing Wildcat possession, the Panther defense continued to apply the pressure, forcing a Wildcat ball handler to make an errant pass - turning it back over to the Panthers. With nine seconds between Union County's seniors and their first victory at Rabun County, who better to hammer the final nails into the Wildcats' coffin than Odom. Along with Rowe, Odom has played varsity for four years and had yet to leave Rabun with a W. Odom nailed both shots giving Union a 5-point lead and the victory.

"Those free throws were huge," Odom said. "To come in here and get a win tonight feels really good."

Early in the second quarter, Odom went down with a left shoulder injury but stayed in the game to score 16 points and lead the team with 4 steals and 3 assists.

"It's just a stinger, I'll be



Sophomore Thomas Danek blocks a Rabun shot. Photo/Todd Forrest



James Rowe (No. 20) gets back to break up a dunk attempt, while Dylan Coyne led Union with 12 rebounds. Photos by Todd Forrest

with a free throw but a driving jump hook from Rowe was followed up with another drive to the hoop by the senior. Rabun scored a deuce inside but McCombs connected on back-to-back treys making it a 36-23 game. A bucket and free throw by Rabun was wiped away by a lay up and trey from Odom.

After the Panthers held on in the final frame, Coach David Tucker talked about his team's road win and the adjustments that were made to Union's interior defense that had been Union's Achilles heel in their four losses.

"We moved our defense up (to make them post further out) and made things a little harder on them," Tucker said. "C.J. (Byers), Dylan, and Thomas (Danek) all did a great job defensively tonight."

"Our big guys, Thomas and C.J. definitely stepped up to the plate tonight," Rowe added. "C.J. had some foul trouble but Thomas came in and backed him up. Dylan did a good job tonight and we all chipped in and did a better job defensively."

Rowe finished with 7 points and 10 rebounds. Danek blocked 2 shots, and

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