

Sports

See the Sports Section at ngenews.com

UCHS Boys Basketball: experience and depth to pay off in 2012-13

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

With five starters and 12 total players returning, the Union County Panthers are in prime position to return to the State Tournament and snap a three-year drought.

Last season the Panthers finished 13-14 with a young roster and a brutal Sub-Region schedule that included East Hall, Dawson County, and Rabun County. All three reached the post season but Dawson and East Hall have moved up to Class AAA, along with Hart County, Elbert County, Jackson County, Banks County, Fannin County, and North Oconee from Region 8-AA.

The Panthers defeated a solid North Oconee Titans' team in the Region Tournament last February, before falling to a superior East Hall squad in the next round. However, the victory over the Titans gave Union some revenge for North Oconee's upset of the Panthers in 2011. It should also serve as a springboard for the 2012-13 campaign.

The lone Region holdovers from 2011-12, include Rabun, who graduated its top three scorers, most notably, multiple-time 8-AA Player of the Year recipient, Tanner Plemmons. Although, the Wildcats will return enough athleticism to keep them in the hunt for a fourth consecutive State Playoff berth. Jefferson, the defending Region 8-AA Runner-Up is back and will move into the 8-AA North Sub-Region this season. The Dragons lost four key players to graduation, including Austin Thompson's 17 points-per-game. However, the Dragons return enough size to remain in the mix for a State Playoff berth, where they reached the second round in 2012.

The Panthers, meanwhile, scrimmaged Class AAAA's Chestatee last week and fell 87-67. Union County was without the services of its three football players who had yet to practice. CJ Byers, Ralston Drake, and Jacob Rogers each sat, and that was Union County Head Coach David Tucker's decision.

"It's not fair for those guys to have to play right away," he said. "They had a great football



Coach Tucker and his guards: Zach Odom, Ryals, and McCombs.



Tyler Odom with a nifty pass to senior forward James Rowe.



Coyne battles for possession.



Zach Odom drives to the hoop.



McCombs tries to shake defender



Thomas Danek with a jump hook

season and their mind was on other things. Some of them are banged up because they played a big part on the football team. Those kids haven't had any practice (at press time) and I told them they didn't have to dress but each one did anyway. They now have a week to get ready and they'll be ready to go."

Despite playing short-handed, the Panthers still had five players in double-figures, Rhett McCombs, Zach Odom, Dylan Coyne, Tyler Odom, and James Rowe.

"Chestatee is a good basketball team and they just went on a run (29-13) in the third quarter," Coach Tucker said. "They've got their whole team back but we're a pretty good team also. They just made their shots and we didn't."

When the regular season tips off, look for returning All-Region selections, Zach Odom and McCombs, both seniors, to

lead a Panther backcourt that produced nearly 40 points a game on offense a year ago.

McCombs, who took 8-AA by storm, put up nearly 500 points in his inaugural season at UCHS, and could reach the 1,000-point mark in 2012-13, along with four-year starter, Zach Odom. So if both remain healthy, don't be surprised to see two different Panthers reach that milestone later in the season.

Joining the duo will be senior forward, Rowe. The 3-point marksman and team leader in rebounding may be the most versatile weapon in Coach Tucker's arsenal, and will provide the third-year coach with plenty of options on both ends of the court.

"Those three guys (Rowe, McCombs, and Zach Odom) are going to score," Coach Tucker said. "Not everybody can score. Some people will need to rebound, some will need to defend,

but everyone has to do their part. We just need each guy to do their part a little bit better."

Coyne, a junior starter, returns to a much improved Panther frontcourt that struggled offensively at times during 2011-12. In last week's scrimmage game against Chestatee, Coyne, already a top-notch defender, went for 12 points and 20 boards, so look for No. 12's productivity to increase across the board.

Byers, banged up from a grueling football season, is expected to be back and healthy at the center position, despite sitting out the scrimmage. Byers will again deliver some much needed size and rebounding for an undersized Panther frontcourt. The senior has been doing work, looking to increase his offensive production after stepping off the gridiron on Nov. 9th.

Union County will benefit from an abundance of talent coming off the bench. In the previous

season, the Panther bench had its moments, but for the most part, was too inexperienced to be consistently effective.

That's not the case in 2012-13.

Junior Elijah Ryals and sophomore Tyler Odom should anchor a loaded Panther bench. Ryals, who saw action as a starter last season when Zach Odom went down with a knee injury, should be a factor in the Panther backcourt.

"We have some guys who are going to step up and play," Coach Tucker said. "We are going to need those guys to give Zach and Rhett some rest and I believe they will be ready to do that."

Tyler Odom scored 11 off the bench against Chestatee, and as we saw last year, can put up points in bunches. Look for Tyler Odom to have a breakout season now that he has a year of experience under his belt, play-

ing in Coach Tucker's offense that favors a rangy scorer like Tyler Odom.

Others who could make some noise are 6-6 sophomore, Thomas Danek. The big man got off to a fast start last season but his numbers fell off down the stretch. Again, Danek is another youngster who should only benefit from an extra year of experience.

Sophomore guards Hunter Hughes and Kyle Hamby will round out possibly the deepest backcourt in 8-AA, and should see an increase in minutes during the upcoming season.

Fellow sophomores, Ralston Drake and Jacob Rogers are also returning from the football field and could find their way into the rotation much sooner than expected. Rogers saw action in 2011-12, while Drake battled a football injury and never gained much traction. Drake again, is also recovering from another football injury, but seems to have made a full recovery, and should be a factor for the Panthers on the hardwood.

"We just need to fine tune a few things defensively," Coach Tucker said. "We've got a great bunch of guys who love the game and they are a joy to be around. They are working hard and we'll let the chips fall, but I feel like we're going to win, and we will win."

In other news around 8-AA: Riverside Military Academy has jumped to Class AA after a 5-13 season that saw them split their two meetings with Towns County. The Eagles have a new coach and three starters returning.

Washington-Wilkes finished 4-21 in Class A but lost just two seniors.

Social Circle went 3-18 last year and have already dropped one this year to Yeshiva, 61-38. Finally, Greene County is coming off a 17-loss season that featured six seniors. The Tigers are also under the helm of a new coaching staff.

The Panthers opened with the Glenda Gooch Foundation Tip-Off Tournament on Monday and Tuesday with Andrews NC, Hiwassee Dam, NC, and Lumpkin County participating.

On Nov. 27th Union travels to Andrews, NC to again face the Wildcats.

UCHS Girls Basketball: Lady Panthers have some big shoes to fill

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
sports@nganews.com

The Union County Lady Panthers have reached the State Playoffs in four of its last five seasons. Unfortunately, Becca Merritt, Angie Hughes, Catie Tanner, and Callison Payne won't be walking out of the locker room this time around.

Four-year starters, Merritt, averaged 19 points a game and Hughes was good for 8 a game. Three year starter Tanner scored 9 per game and Payne put up just over 7 points a night.

Second-year coach David Tucker isn't using the graduations as an excuse and expects his Lady Panthers to be one of the four teams left standing when the smoke clears in mid-February.

"We've got kids in place right now who can step up," Coach Tucker said. "We've got a good senior, junior, sophomore, and freshman class. Now we just need to get them ready to go. They like the game of basketball, now I just need to decide who's going to play and where they will play. I think they are making great progress."

Back to lead the Lady Panthers is point guard Lauren Zollinger. The junior directed the Lady Panthers to a 21-win season, and a State Playoff appearance in 2011-12, while posting more than 5 ppg.

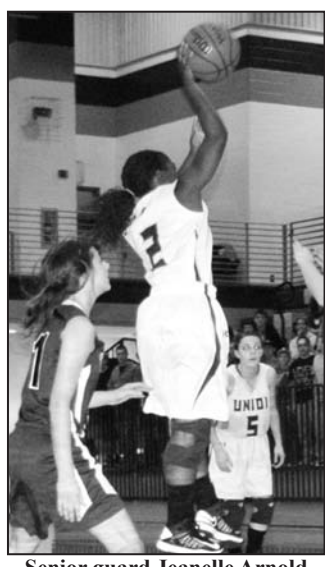
Zollinger led the Lady Panthers with 14 points on four three-pointers in Union's 41-40 scrimmage loss to Chestatee last week. After a slow start, Zollinger quickly heated up with three straight treys in the third quarter to turn a 25-19 deficit into a 28-26 advantage.

Junior Madison Rich connected three times from long range en route to a 10-point outing. Rich and Zollinger combined for five treys in the third quarter, accounting for all 15 Lady Panther points.

Seniors Hannah Hughes and Shawna Brown added 7



Senior guard Carly Adams moves into the starting lineup in 2012-13.



Senior guard Jeanelle Arnold



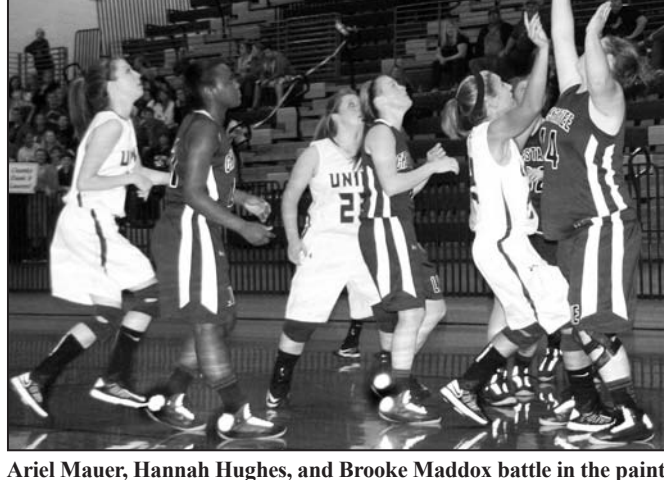
Junior guard Lauren Zollinger



Senior Shawna Brown hits a trey



Junior Madison Rich from downtown



Ariel Mauer, Hannah Hughes, and Brooke Maddox battle in the paint

and 5 respectively, but it wasn't enough to hold off the Lady War Eagles, who returned five starters off last year's Region 8-AAA Runner-up and Sweet-16 team. Although, Coach Tucker wasn't worried about the score. He was looking for effort and believes his girls left it all on the floor.

"I just wanted to make sure we played hard and we did," Coach Tucker said. "We've been practicing very hard for two weeks and I knew we'd have trouble with our legs, but the effort was there. It was fun and everything looked good."

With the loss of several key players, look for Union to take advantage of a smaller but quicker line-up in 2012-13. Senior Jeanelle Arnold (3 ppg in

2011-12) moves into a starting role after stabilizing Union's bench over the past two seasons. The guard is known for her aggressive defensive style that has given the opposition fits, so don't expect that to change now that she's in the starting five.

Senior guard Carly Adams (2 ppg in 2011-12) will join Zollinger and Arnold in the back court as Union goes to a three, maybe four-guard line up.

"I'm a believer that you play your best players, even if it's all guards or all forwards," Coach Tucker said. "The best players play and that's the way we're going to do it."

Adams was steady off the bench last season and after waiting patiently behind Tanner

and Payne, will now get her opportunity to shine.

Union's front court will consist of Brown and Hughes. Both are seniors, but Brown, the more experienced of the two, will be relied upon heavily at the defensive end. For the Lady Panthers to compete at a high level, Brown must stay out of foul trouble and control the boards. Brown has added some range to her shot and connected on a 3-pointer in the scrimmage.

Hughes, a versatile forward can play in the paint and beyond the arc. The senior is capable of scoring anywhere on the floor and is another who will finally get plenty of minutes and play a major role in the success of the Lady Panthers.

three starters who have carried the program for the past four years. Rabun fell to a much-improved Dawson County team in a scrimmage last week.

Yet, that doesn't have an affect on Coach Tucker's approach.

"I'm not worried about who lost what or what anyone else has," he said. "I'm only worried about us. We've got 12 girls on varsity and they are all here putting their time in and that's all you can ask," he said.

"We can sit around and make excuses about how many players we lost, but my job is to coach what we got and go with it. We've got a great group of girls and we're having fun and that's the most important thing," Coach Tucker said.

Elsewhere in Region 8-AA, the Jefferson Lady Dragons graduated three starters, including leading scorer Skylar Evanson (14 PPG) who is now playing at the college level. The Dragons do return plenty of height, with four players close to 6 feet tall.

On the flip side of 8-AA, Social Circle is coming off an 0-20 season that saw them fall 63-15 to Towns County. The Lady Redskins return nearly their entire roster and will be improved.

Washington-Wilkes won 20 games and advanced to the second round of State with only two seniors on the squad.

Greene County went 12-14, losing in the first round of the Region 4-AA playoffs. The Lady Tigers relied heavily upon nine freshmen and sophomores in a difficult region, but are faced with a coaching change this season.

Oglethorpe County has gone 2-71 since 2008, with both wins coming in 2011. The Lady Patriots replaced three seniors and a coach after last season.

Union opened with Andrews, NC on Monday night and Hiwassee Dam, NC on Tuesday night. On Nov. 27th, Union travels to Andrews, NC for a rematch with the Lady Wildcats at 6 p.m.