

# Towns County Sports

Towns County's Leader In Sports

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## Indians seize Battle of the States Championship

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A long anticipated event occurred last week when the Towns County Indians varsity basketball team rose to the occasion of the 26th annual Battle of the States Basketball Tournament and swept three games for the school's first tournament championship. The Indians breezed past Armuchee High School of Rome, Georgia, in the first round before edging past the neighboring Hayesville Yellow Jackets and Union County Panthers for the tournament victory.

In the early years of the tournament, questions were sometimes asked as to why we, as one of the smaller schools participating in the tournament, would not invite teams we could defeat to the event. Of course, that would be a difficult chore to find schools willing to participate under such an arrangement, especially since schools often have a strong girls or boys team but the other having a lesser season and it is often not predictable as to how good a team will be.

But more importantly as viewed by those involved in the events, strong competition brings excellence for any teams so greater emphasis has been placed on having very capable opponents, including a number of larger schools, on a regular basis. Such was the case this year with the four teams reaching the semi-finals of the boys division of the tournament being Class AAA Lumpkin County, Class AA Union County, and Class A Hayesville and Towns County.

Of unique interest this year is the fact that the four semi-finalists are from adjoining counties from a grouping of teams from four states in the boys portion and five from the girls portion of the tournament. As to the mention of great competition bringing future success, it can be safely stated that the Lady Indians teams through the years have especially benefited from the tough competition of the tournament with three teams not winning the tournament making it to the State Final Four among numerous other noteworthy accomplishments.

And last year's dramatic victory by the Lady Indians over the Union County Lady Panthers for third place could be reasonably seen as a trigger for great success the remainder of the season when they finished in a tie for second place in Region 8A and made it to the Class A Public State Tournament.

They took a rousing 76-46 first round home court victory over Lanier County before traveling to Calhoun County and giving the eventual state runners up team quite a battle in trailing by just a 30-27 score near the mid point of the third quarter before the Lady Cougars took advantage of cold shooting by the Lady Indians the remainder of the game in pulling away for a 52-31 victory.

As related to the Indians, one need go back just three years to the 2016 Battle of the States when they lost a heartbreaking 70-67 decision to Lumpkin County in the championship game but no doubt used the strong competition in proceeding to a 19-10 record and the Indians' first trip to the state tournament in twelve years.

Beyond that, they got a 68-58 home court victory over



The Towns County Indians won three games in three days to claim their first Battle of the States Christmas Tournament championship. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

Schley County for the Indians' first state tournament victory since 1974 before traveling, like the Lady Indians last year, to Calhoun County where they used a lengthy 30-16 run in reducing an early 29-5 deficit against the super athletic Cougars to 45-35 past the mid point of the third quarter before Calhoun used a second potent scoring run of 13-2 to great advantage in taking a 75-48 victory. Calhoun County, like the Lady Cougars last year, went on to finish as the Class A Public State Runners Up for 2017.

At week's end, the Indians had improved their overall record to 8-3 with primarily Region 8-A opponents to face during the 2020 portion of their schedule. They host undefeated Region 8A foe Providence Christian Academy on Friday, travel to Hayesville for a non region battle on Saturday and then return home to face Region 8-A opponent Riverside Military Academy of Gainesville next Tuesday.

**Indians 64, Armuchee 53** – It required not much more than half a quarter of playing time on Thursday for the Indians to take control of their game against Armuchee as they led 12-4 by the 3:55 mark of the first quarter and extended the margin to 22-12 by quarter's end as junior Kolby Moss included a trey in leading the way with nine points. He was followed by six points by sophomore Collin Crowder and four by junior Aidan Berrong and a trey by junior Luis Quijada.

The Indians would outscore the visiting Indians 17-8 in the second quarter with Moss contributing eight points, Berrong five, and Crowder four as they held a whopping 39-20 lead at intermission and coasted to a 50-37 lead after three quarters and a 64-53 victory.

The Indians extended the lead to 50-30 by the 3:36 mark of the third quarter with four Indians entering the scoring column before the visiting Indians scored the final seven points the final 3:16 for just the 50-37 Towns lead entering the fourth quarter.

When Armuchee sank a trey just eleven seconds into the

fourth quarter for an overall 10-0 run and just a 50-40 deficit, Moss responded with a pair of treys by the 5:59 mark as the start of a 10-0 Towns run for a 60-40 lead with Armuchee again closing the gap for the remainder of the game for a comfortable 64-53 TCHS victory.

Scoring leaders for the game for the Indians were Moss with 28 points, Berrong with 15, and Crowder with 14 while leaders in assists were sophomore Kyle Oakes 7, Moss with 3, and Berrong with 2. Leaders in rebounds were Crowder and Moss with 10 each and Berrong with 6 while leaders in steals were Berrong with 5 and Crowder and Oakes with 2 each.

Scoring leaders for Armuchee were senior Luke Mayhall with 20 points and junior Wyatt Miller with 9. Armuchee went on to fall to Polk County (Tennessee) 70-47 after trailing by just a 30-21 score at intermission and to Murphy in the third round of the tournament to by a 64-60 score.

**Indians 67, Hayesville 64** – The quest for the tournament championship became much more difficult for the Indians in the second and third rounds, beginning with neighboring Hayesville on Friday. The Class A Yellow Jackets entered the contest with a 6-1 record with the only loss being by a 61-60 score at Class 2A Franklin, a team with a 7-1 record and their only loss by a 77-75 score at Cherokee.

The Yellow Jackets had made it to the second round by breaking away from a 49-45 lead after three quarters for a 70-56 victory over Polk County (Tennessee), a team with a 7-1 record entering the game against Hayesville.

The Indians got a 2-0 lead just a minute and one second into the game on a field goal by senior Jacob Kinsey that they would hold for more than twenty minutes of playing time but with the victory not assured until the final buzzer. The Indians got leads such as 5-0, 10-4, and 14-9 on the way to an 18-14 lead after one quarter with juniors Aidan Berrong and Kolby Moss leading the way with six and five

points respectively.

Four Indians put points on the scoreboard in the second quarter for leads of 22-16 at the 5:35 mark, 27-19 at 2:45, and 31-21 at 1:22 before a late Jacket basket closed the margin to 31-23 at intermission with Moss leading the way with a deuce and four for four free throw shooting for six points.

Sophomores Kyle Oakes and Collin Crowder combined for a deuce on a blue star pass by Oakes for a blue star basket by Crowder prior to a pair of treys by Berrong which gave the Indians a 39-30 lead at the 4:57 mark of the third quarter. At this point, however, the Indians would endure a brief period of what might be described as trying to do too much, resulting in a few turnovers and the Yellow Jackets taking advantage by including two treys and an old fashioned three point play between just the 4:43 and 2:52 marks for a sudden 41-39 Indians deficit.

The Indians would "right their ship" in short order, however, with the game being a real battle until the final buzzer with a trey by the Yellow Jackets at that 2:52 mark being the first of ten lead changes along with three ties during the last 10:52 of the game with both teams making numerous clutch baskets and defensive plays. A basket by Crowder and Berrong's third trey of the quarter at the 1:57 and 1:12 marks had the Indians back in front 44-41 but the Jackets used two free throws and a trey from mid court at the buzzer for a 5-1 finish and a 46-45 lead entering the fourth quarter.

A field goal and four for four free throw shooting by Moss highlighted a 7-3 Towns run for a 52-49 lead at the 5:58 mark of the fourth quarter but an old fashioned three point play and a deuce had the Jackets back ahead 54-52 at 5:01. A trey by Crowder at 4:48 gave the Indians a 55-54 lead but two free throws by the Jackets at 4:27 got them a 56-55 advantage they would extend to 60-56 at 3:59.

A field goal and free throw by Moss had the Indians within 60-59 at 3:36 and the score remained that way until a Hayes-

ville field goal at 1:48 had the Jackets ahead 62-59. Berrong struck at 1:10, however, with a trey and completed a four point play with a free throw when fouled on the shot with the Indians back in front 63-62.

A drive for two points got the Yellow Jackets a 64-63 lead at thirty four seconds but Crowder nailed a deuce on a short jumper in the lane at seventeen seconds for a 65-64 Indians lead and when the Jackets missed a field goal attempt, Moss grabbed the rebound and was sent to the foul line with 2.9 seconds on the clock.

Both free throws were good by Moss for a 67-64 Indians lead with the Jackets setting up a hail Mary pass with the Jackets getting off a second pass and a trey attempt for the tie but Crowder blocked the shot and the game was over with the Indians coming away with the victory in a game that was clear to most observers the last 10:52 of the game to be a heartbreaking loss for the losing team.

The Indians were led in scoring for the game by Moss with 23 points, Berrong with 19, Crowder with 16, and Oakes with 5 with it being noteworthy that Berrong sank seven of eight field goal attempts and Crowder six of eight shots in the game. Oakes contributed 7 assists and Moss 6 while Moss and Crowder led in rebounds with 9 and 5 respectively and leaders in steals were Oakes with 3 and Berrong and Moss with 2 each. The victory by the Indians served as a most welcome birthday gift to Head Coach Rob Benson with the celebration to continue for an extra day as things turned out for the Indians.

Scoring leaders for the Yellow Jackets were sophomores Jake McTaggart with 28 points and Kolby Ashe with 20 and junior Blake McClure with 8. The Jackets went on to claim third place by taking a 29-12 halftime lead over Class AAA Lumpkin County of Dahlonega and completing a 57-45 victory. Lumpkin completed the tournament with just a 6-10 overall record but include a stunning 85-67 upset of Class AA power

Banks County, ranked fourth in the state, for the only blemish on a 12-1 record at week's end for that team.

**Indians 67, Union County 61** – After claiming an 83-70 early season home court victory over a shorthanded Union County team with five team members still involved in the Class AA State Football Playoffs, the Indians had traveled to Blairsville on December 6 and held several leads during the first half and early in the third. They continued to hang close to the Panthers, including trailing by just a 49-45 score near the mid point of the fourth quarter before the Panthers used a 20-4 finish for a 69-49 victory.

Union County entered the Battle of the States with a deceptive 4-6 record after losing to the Indians without their football players and then playing several games without the services of injured 2019 All Region 8AA player Sawyer Drake who returned to action in time for the Battle of the States.

In fact, Drake scored the winning basket in the final seconds of a 54-53 Union victory over Walhalla (South Carolina), a team entering the tournament with a 6-0 record, in the Panthers' first round win.

The Panthers then took a close all the way game over Lumpkin County by a 64-61 score in the second round to reach the championship game with details about the Lumpkin team included above in the Hayesville coverage.

With all of this in mind, it certainly seemed that the senior laden Panthers were obvious favorites to take the championship and they led for most of the first quarter by as much as 4-0 with the Indians holding a brief 5-4 lead on an inbound basket by sophomore Collin Crowder and a 13-11 advantage at quarter's end on a putback basket by junior Kolby Moss.

The Indians would come alive for more than 20 minutes of playing time after that, probably appearing to be taking control of the game to some observers but

See Championship, Page 4B



L-R: Luis Quijada launches a 3-pointer from the corner during Towns' win over Hayesville. All-Tournament Team selection Aidan Berrong pulls up for a jumper in Saturday's title game. Photos/Lowell Nicholson