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Water Authority board makes push for federal funding to be used for broadband

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Franklin County is set to receive approximately \$6 million from President Joe Biden's American Rescue Plan, and the Franklin County Water Service Authority (FCWSA) is hoping those funds will rescue residents from the days of no reliable broadband internet service in rural Franklin County.

Members of the Franklin County Water Service Authority met with Franklin County Probate Judge Barry Moore last Friday to discuss the possibility of the county using those anticipated funds to install fiber optic cable across the county in areas currently unserved by any

broadband provider.

FCWSA Chairman Randy Schultz and Secretary/Treasurer Scott Mugno hope to encourage Moore and the Franklin County Commission that using the COVID-19 stimulus funds for broadband would be the best investment possible in Franklin County's future.

That \$6 million, combined with an additional \$6 million in grants through the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA), would be sufficient to build out the infrastructure needed to supply high speed broadband to all corners of Franklin County.

Working with Tombigbee Electric Cooperative/Communications, which

See 'BROADBAND,' page 5

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Fike resigns as Phil Campbell police chief

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At a special called meeting held March 11, the Phil Campbell City Council voted to accept the resignation of police chief Joe Fike, marking the end of a bizarre two-week scenario involving Fike, Mayor Michael McQuary, Phil Campbell police officer Jessica Clements, two members of the town council and Franklin County Sheriff Shannon Oliver.

At the March 11 meeting, McQuary read a letter from Fike wherein the 20-year veteran officer resigned his post 'effective immediately.'

Council member Phillip King made the motion to accept Fike's resignation. After it was seconded by Barry King, the council voted unanimously to approve the motion.

Fike said in his letter it was a 'difficult decision' to resign and described his time as Phil Campbell police chief as a 'pleasurable experience.'

While that may have been true most of his four-year tenure with the town, Fike described the two-week period leading up to his resignation as a 'very uncomfortable experience.'

According to multiple sources See 'FIKE,' page 8

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Joyce Mansell Boyles, 78, of Russellville, passed away on Saturday, March 13th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

Buell Keith Cansler, 55, of Phil Campbell, passed away on Thursday, March 11th. Interment at Spruce Pine Cemetery.

Kathryn Hitt Flanagan, 94, of Russellville, passed away on Saturday, March 13th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

Rena Nichols Pennington, 69, of Littleville, passed away on Saturday, March 6th. Interment at Tri-Cities Memorial Gardens.

Elva Lou Stidham, 103, of Phil Campbell, passed away on Sunday, March 14th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

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Local students excel in annual Franklin County Beef Cook-off

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When the three judges for the Franklin County Beef Cook-off left the A.W. Todd Centre Friday afternoon, they probably skipped dinner that night.

The judges, Bonnie Hargett, Ali Cantrell and Evan Hargett, sampled 18 beef dishes in order to determine the junior and senior division winners in the annual competition sponsored by the Franklin County Cattlemen's Association and the Franklin County Extension Office.

In the senior division (10-12 grade), Phil Campbell High School student Trinity Thomas won first place. Her classmate, Harley Cummings, finished second and Red Bay High School student Blake Nix third place.

In the junior (7-9 grade), Russellville's Peyton Parrish won first place out of the 12 entries, followed by Shaily Warren from Red Bay (second) and Phil Campbell's Lydia Garrison placing third.

The cook-off is open to all students who are taking, or have taken, at least one Family and Consumer Science class. Entries must be cooked and ready to serve when they arrive at the contest, and a copy of the recipe must be submitted.

Beef must be the primary ingredient in the recipe, and only fresh beef products found at local grocery stores may be used.

Dishes were judged on appearance, flavor intensity, palatability, healthfulness and nutritional balance.

The top finishers received cash prizes donated by Community Spirit and CB&S Bank.

Thomas and Parrish will now compete at the Alabama Beef Cook-off, set for April 24 at Birmingham's Jeff State Community College.

Katerna Cole-Coffey, Franklin County Extension Coordinator, said the number of entrants in the event grows each year.

"We are so pleased with the cooking talents of these students and the delicious ways they creatively prepared beef dishes," Cole-Coffey said.

Caleb Beason, Agri-Science teacher at Phil Campbell High School, coordinated the event. The beef dishes were prepared in advance and students brought them ready-to-serve to the Todd Centre. This year's contest included participants from all Franklin County high schools.

"The students and teachers did a great job promoting the cook-off. The dishes were great, especially in presentation and appearance. They really branched out this year in the types of recipes entered," Beason said.

Entries included Italian Beef sandwiches, beef steak and rice, beef stuffed peppers, beef lasagna, beef enchiladas and more.



COURTESY PHOTO

18 students competed in Friday's Franklin County Beef Cook-off, sponsored by the Franklin County Cattlemen's Association and the Franklin County Extension Service. The top three finishers in both age divisions are pictured above.

Send your letters to the editor, guest columns, cartoon panels and other creative submissions to franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

County vaccinations ramping up with expanded eligibility

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The list of Alabamians who are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccination is expanding effective Monday, March 22, with more than two million residents who will be newly eligible.

The newly eligible residents include people age 55 and older, those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and people ages 16 to 64 with high-risk medical conditions including cancer, chronic kidney disease, COPD, heart conditions, organ transplants, obesity with BMI over 30, pregnancy, sickle cell disease, smokers, Type 1 and 2 diabetics and critical workers in the areas of transportation and logistics, waste and wastewater, food service, shelter and housing, finance, legal, energy, media and public safety.

In Franklin County, residents have seven locations to choose where they want to receive the vaccine.

In Russellville, vaccines are being administered at the Franklin County Health Department, 801 Hwy. 48, Russellville Hospital, 15155 Hwy. 43, Family Pharmacy, 455 Underwood Road, Family Medicine Clinic 605 Gandy Street and Walmart, 13675 Hwy. 43.

There are two locations in Red Bay administering the vaccine. The Alabama Department of Public Health website shows Red Bay providers as Nabers Medical Clinic, 219 Hospital Road, and Red Bay Hospital, 211 Hospital Road.

Since COVID-19 vaccines became available, Alabama has ranked near or at the bottom of the nation with the lowest percentage of residents vaccinated based on the number of vaccines available in the state.

For more information on COVID-19 vaccine administration, log onto www.alabamapublichealth.gov.

Email us at franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

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Phil Campbell Elementary to hold kindergarten registration

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Phil Campbell Elementary School will hold registration for Pre-K and Kindergarten on Friday, March 26.

Registration will be from 8:30 a.m.-2 p.m., for Kindergarten and 8:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., for Pre-K, in the Kindergarten classrooms.

To be eligible for Pre-K, a child must be age four by September 1, 2021. Online registration is available at <https://alprek.asapconnected.com>.

There is no need to upload documents to the online registration site, as those documents are required for in-person registration on March 26 prior to the drawing at 1:30 p.m.

Required documentation for Pre-K includes current immunization form (white) form, not expired, birth certificate, Social Security card and proof of residency.

All required documentation must be turned in to take part in the drawing at 1:30 p.m. on March 26. Students who do not have all required documentation will be added to a waiting list when all documentation is turned in.

Children enrolling will not be denied participation on the basis of income, sex, race, color, national origin or disability.

To be eligible for Kindergarten, a child must be age five by September 1, 2021. Forms are available online at Phil Campbell Elementary School website <https://www.franklin.k12.al.us/Domain/10>.

Required documentation for Kindergarten registration includes current immunization (white) form, birth certificate, Social Security card, proof of residency and \$50 for school supplies (full or partial payment accepted at registration).

COVID-19 protocol calls for one adult plus the registering student only for in-person registration. Please wear masks for in-person registration.

Registering Kindergarten students will need to come to registration March 26 and participate in a short assessment/screener.

This assessment will be administered by PCES Kindergarten teachers.

Returning to traditional classroom learning raises concerns for some RCS parents

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

After a letter was sent to all Russellville City Schools parents announcing the end of the virtual learning option effective March 12, 2021, several parents contacted various media outlets with concerns about the safety of their children returning to a classroom setting.

In addition to reaching out to Huntsville television stations, two parents also contacted the *Franklin Free Press* with their concerns. Those concerns led to RCS Superintendent Heath Grimes clarifying, but not altering, the decision to end the virtual learning option.

On March 4, 2021, Alabama State Superintendent of Education Dr. Eric Mackey stated that public school systems could end the virtual learning option, which is what RCS announced in the March 5 letter.

"Students will return to in-class instruction on Monday, March 15. We will continue to practice social distancing and require students to wear masks until the current mask order ends April 9."

Grimes, who has been an advocate for a return to traditional classroom settings as soon as this could be done safely, said five parents contacted RCS administrators with concerns about their children returning to campus.

Grimes said as of March 12, only 75 of RCS' 2,405 students were participating in virtual learning. And some of those are Russellville High School students. Virtual learning was an option for RHS students before anyone ever heard of

COVID-19.

"The state asked us to put that in place several years ago so every high school in the state has a virtual option," Grimes said.

Grimes said the decision to return to the traditional classroom setting was made after "carefully evaluating several factors" and considering what was in the best interests of RCS students.

"We sent that letter with the intent that most everybody would come back," Grimes said. "If there are some parents who have legitimate reasons for their child not to return, we will work with them."

"But when we see kids at ballgames, Walmart and everywhere else but school we believe they need to be back in school," Grimes added.

As of March 12, Russellville City Schools had zero positive COVID-19 cases and more than 60 percent of the system's teachers have been vaccinated, Grimes said.

"We believe it is in the best interests of our students to have our kids in school. They need the academic support provided in a classroom setting," Grimes said. "But if there is an issue of an immunosuppressed student or some other medical reason the student can't return, we will work with those families."

Grimes said concerns have been resolved with each of the five parents who contacted school officials about their children not returning to campus.

"If there is an issue, we will work with everyone involved if you contact your child's principal. But it's not something to be resolved through the media," Grimes said.

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'BROADBAND,' from page 1

operates freedomFIBER, the FCWSA applied for five grants that would be used to provide fiber optic broadband to southern and eastern Franklin County.

The FCSWA has the statutory authority to develop broadband in Franklin County and to apply for grant funding. A 2020 agreement between the FCWSA and freedomFIBER outlined a plan to provide fiber optic broadband service to the entire 8,000-meter membership of Franklin Electric Cooperative.

That agreement hinged upon freedomFIBER obtaining grant funding through the Federal Communications Commission's ROF Auction for the areas it proposed to serve in Franklin County.

That plan was derailed in January after Charter Communications was the successful bidder on most of the non-served census blocks in Franklin County.

FCWSA officials have publicly stated their doubts that Charter will ever expand into those areas with last-mile fiber optic service.

While the ADECA grants, if officials are successful in obtaining them, would not be enough to build out broadband internet service into all non-served areas, it would be when combined with the \$6 million Franklin County will receive under the American Rescue Plan, Mugno said.

Franklin County Administrator Leah Mansell confirmed Monday the county will receive approximately \$6 million, but she said Moore and the commission are awaiting guidance and direction from the Association of County Commissions of Alabama as to how the funds may be used.

Schultz believes a lack of reliable broadband in rural areas is holding both Franklin County and Alabama back in economic development.

"We are underwater when it comes to this issue. There are many examples of people who are being held back in this county," Schultz said. "There are people working on degrees who can't work at home—people who can't do their jobs from home and it's definitely an issue when it comes to economic development."

"We've got to get broadband kicked off here. If we don't do it now, we'll miss the opportunity and will be delayed many more years," he added.

If adequate funding for broadband is secured, there will still be a two- to three-year delay in completing the buildout, Mugno said. With a partner like freedomFIBER, now is the time to act, he explained.

"Having unencumbered funding like this is the quickest way to catch this county up to where it needs to be," Mugno said.

The FCWSA, which consists of Michael Hughes, Alan Rhudy, John Thomas, Kenny Hurst, Leslie Cantrell along with Mugno and Schultz, is also working with state and federal elected officials to share the county's plight and hopefully see a change in the rules when it comes to broadband funding.

And Mugno explained what is needed is affordable, reliable, last-mile fiber optic broadband, meaning the service will be available to all residents, not just those who live on a crowded street or in a crowded neighborhood.

"That's what industries are asking for. Satellite broadband is not feasible because of the price point, reliability and limited data issues," Mugno said. "Broadband is a utility just like water, electricity and sewer, and we've got to start thinking that way. Broadband is not a want, it's a need."

Schultz shared a story of a rural Franklin County resident who contacted Spectrum wanting to get internet to her home. According to a letter from the resident to Rep. Jamie Kiel, the company quoted her an \$8,000 fee to run service to her home from the road frontage. That figure later was amended down to \$3,000 to run the line underground on the condition the resident dug the trench for the buried lines.

"There are so many cases like this one. All of this takes time and we're getting the assistance we're pushing for on all fronts," Mugno said. "But this is the best opportunity to get the fastest unencumbered funding."

"We want to bring in development into Franklin County. With everything going on in Decatur and Huntsville, there's no reason why we can't see some of that growth going on here," he added.

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What's Happening

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EVENTS OF INTEREST • FAMILY REUNIONS • PLAYS • CHURCH GATHERINGS • EDUCATIONAL • CLUB MEETINGS

The Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and the Franklin County Development Authority are accepting nominations for the 2021 Partnership Banquet, tentatively scheduled for Thursday, March 25th. Nomination forms are available on the Chamber's website (www.franklincounty-chamber.org) or at the Chamber office (located at 103 Jackson Avenue North, Russellville). Deadline for nominations is February 5th. For more information or details, please contact the Franklin County Chamber at 256.332.1760 or director@franklincounty-chamber.org.

The NACOLG SenioRx Medication Assistance Program supplies free and low-cost medications for anyone in Alabama with a disability or a chronic illness, regardless of age, that requires daily medication. Medicare recipients may also be eligible. For more information, contact NACOLG SenioRx today. There is no charge for this service. Call 1-800-AGELINE (1-800-243-5463) or 256-389-0529 and ask for Paula Pardue. This program is in partnership with the state of Alabama and Alabama Department of Senior Services.

Everyone is welcome to worship services at Duncan Creek Baptist Church, 3925 Duncan Creek Road, Russellville. Service times are Sunday School at 10 a.m., Worship Service at 11 a.m. and Bible Study at 5 p.m. Pastor is Bro. Joe Thorn.

New Life Ministries invites you to join them for Sunday School at 10 a.m. on Sunday mornings and for worship services on Sundays at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. and Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. On the first Sunday of each month, there will be a fellowship lunch after morning services. You and your family are invited to come worship and fellowship with the Lord of Hosts and his children. New Life Ministries is located on Hwy. 24 west toward Red Bay, behind Tompkins Feed.

TOPS 0155 Russellville is now meeting at the Russellville Hospital Education Room at 4:30 p.m. every Monday. Everyone is welcome to drop in for a free meeting visit. Call 256-446-5962 or 256-412-2855 for more info.

The Newburg Masonic Lodge #388 meets the first Thursday of every month. The Russellville Masonic Lodge #371 meets the first and third Tuesday of every month. The Franklin County Shrine Club meets the second Tuesday of each month. The Order of the Eastern Star Chapter 256 meets every second and fourth Tuesday of each month at the Russellville Masonic Lodge. Spruce Pine Masonic Lodge #608 meets the second and fourth Thursday of each month. Phil Campbell Masonic Lodge #880 meets the first and third Thursday of each month. Burleson Lodge #143 meets the second and fourth Monday of each month. Belgreen Lodge #428 meets the first and third Monday of each month. All meetings start at 7 p.m.

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The Franklin County Commission will accept applications for the following position(s):

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An application and job description may be picked up, faxed or emailed upon request from the Franklin County Commission Office, located at 405 N. Jackson Avenue, Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM or applications are available at www.franklin-county-al.org under the Careers tab.

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Applications may be obtained at the Russellville City Hall, Office of the Mayor, 304 North Jackson Avenue. Applications must be returned no later than March 22, 2021 by U.S. Mail to:

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Phil Campbell teacher charged with engaging in sexual relations with student

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A Phil Campbell High School teacher is out on bond Monday after being charged with engaging in sexual intercourse with a student.

Jordan Benford, 28, is a science teacher and assistant football coach at PCHS. Benford was arrested late Sunday night by the Franklin County Sheriffs Office after investigators met with the parents of a 17-year-old female student at Phil Campbell.

Franklin County Sheriff Shannon Oliver said the initial call from the student's parents came around 9 p.m., Sunday night. Deputies arrested Benford shortly after 10 p.m.

Oliver said Benford spoke with investigators and acknowledged 'an incident of sexual activity' with the student. He was held in the Franklin County Jail overnight before bonding out Monday on a \$50,000 bond.

Oliver notified Franklin County Schools Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton Sunday night about the case. Hamilton said Benford has been placed on leave as of March 15. The next regular meeting of the Franklin County Board of Education is set for April 20, 2021.

Alabama Code Section 13A-6-81 makes it a Class B felony for a school employee to engage in sexual intercourse with a student. And consent is not a defense to the charge.

Upon conviction, the crime carries a 2-20 year prison sentence.

The constitutionality of Alabama's law relating to school employee/student sexual activity has been challenged multiple times. Defense attorneys have argued the equal protection rights of school employees have been violated by the 2010 law because it makes otherwise consensual sex with a 16-year-old or older illegal for school employees yet legal for other adults.

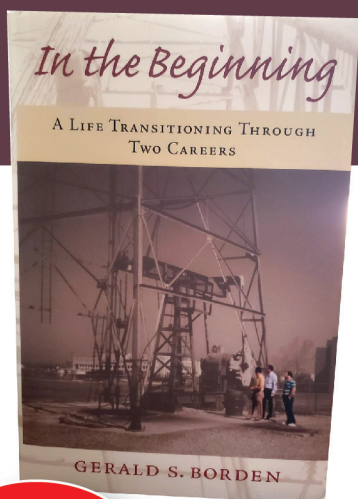
A Morgan County judge ruled the law was unconstitutional in 2018 and dismissed a case against a Decatur teacher. The Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals later reversed that ruling and sent the case back to Morgan County Circuit Court for prosecution.

Benford played baseball while a student at PCHS and his playing career continued at the collegiate level at Alabama A&M University.

Hamilton refused to state whether Benford was placed on paid or unpaid leave, citing confidentiality issues.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, visit us online at www.franklinfreepress.net.

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'FIKE,' from page 1

inside the city, on Monday, March 1, the day before the city council's March 2 regular meeting, Fike contacted council members Lynn Landers and Eddie Marbutt and asked them to meet him at City Hall that evening. Fike also contacted McQuary and, according to the mayor, Fike told him "it would be in your best interests to be at City Hall that evening."

Oliver was also asked to attend the Monday evening meeting and did so, Oliver confirmed to the *Franklin Free Press* March 11.

At that meeting, Fike said he had received allegations that McQuary had been harassing Clements, the department's only female officer, with reports of inappropriate physical contact and sexually suggestive language.

While Fike did not say where the allegation came from, he said at the informal meeting the complaint had not come from Clements herself. It was also unclear at the time whether Fike had even discussed the allegations with the officer.

McQuary said Fike asked him to resign at the March 10 meeting after Fike disclosed the allegations he had received. Fike denied ever asking McQuary to resign and said that would not have been his place to do so.

"A couple council members asked for that, but I never asked for that," Fike said.

"I'm not in a place to ask for his resignation. I'm not in a position to even consider that. I feel like that would have been overstepping. Everyone is innocent until proven guilty. Just because an investigation is initiated doesn't mean you're guilty."

Fike told the *FFP* he contacted several agencies in Montgomery to receive guidance on how to follow up on the allegation of sexual harassment. Fike said he was advised by the Attorney General's office how to proceed in investigating the allegation.

"I got some guidance on how to handle it. I felt like it was something I had a responsibility to do to make sure there wasn't anything going on," Fike said. "If I didn't at least look into it, and there was something going on, I felt like I would share in the burden of what was happening. You have to err on the side of caution to do your due diligence."

McQuary, who attended the informal meeting with his wife, immediately denied the allegations, which included a claim he was riding with Clements in her police car during her work shifts.

"It literally blindsided me. I have not even been in a police car and I never made any improper statement to the officer. None of this was true. You just have to be prepared to deal with allegations and have faith the truth will come out," McQuary said.

Oliver, who was there only because he was requested to attend by town officials, said he later spoke with Clements and she said the allegations were not true and denied ever reporting to Fike or anyone else claims of harassment by the mayor.

"From that point, I told them it was a civil matter and if there was an allegation, the process would be for the complainant to report it to her supervisor and file a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission," Oliver said. "After I spoke with the officer, there was no further action I needed to take."

There was nothing related to the allegations on the agenda for the council's March 12, 2021, meeting. In fact, the only police-related matter was a request by Fike for a raise. That matter was tabled by the council and no action was taken.

Fike told the *FFP* he was just following recommended protocol and that he didn't know who had reported the allegations to begin with.

"I was at City Hall during lunch that day and received a phone call so I answered it," Fike said. "An unknown male caller reported the allegations to

me anonymously. There's no preparation for how to handle a situation like this. So I wrote down exactly my part in that conversation and called the AG's office to ask what to do from there."

Fike said his resignation was unrelated to the harassment allegations and that a better paying opportunity in law enforcement had presented itself.

"It was with a larger agency and I had an opportunity to gain a \$5 per hour pay increase. I had been talking with them for two months, so it wasn't something that just popped up all of a sudden," Fike said.

Although Fike's resignation made it a moot point, a council member told the *FFP* the council was prepared to vote on possible termination of Fike at the March 11 meeting.

The council voted to name Clements interim police chief and the town will advertise the position of chief for six weeks before hiring Fike's successor.

Council member Lynn Landers said at the March 11 meeting Fike had stopped by her home the previous evening to drop off the keys to his patrol vehicle and office, as well as his city gas card.

Council member Eddie Marbutt said an inventory had been completed to make sure all department-issued property had been returned by Fike and that inventory was in proper order.

McQuary described the last two weeks as stressful but he was satisfied that the allegations had been determined to be baseless.

"I'm not going to let this deter us from moving forward and pushing forward to make Phil Campbell a better place," McQuary said. "That's about as plain as I can make it."

While Fike did not explain why he did not speak with Clements before reporting the allegations to council members and the mayor, he said none of his actions were meant to be malicious to anyone.

"There was no malice in what I did. I don't have some kind of chip on my shoulder or vendetta. I did nothing but follow the procedures laid out to me," Fike said.

"I don't know the person who reported it or why they reported it to me. I'm still scratching my head about that. But our world is changing, and it was explained to me if I didn't take action and something actually was going on, I'd be responsible. I've never dealt with anything like this and I pray I'll never deal with it again," he added.



COURTESY PHOTO

Phil Campbell Police Chief Joe Fike resigned at a special called city council meeting on March 11th.

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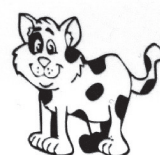
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EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITY

White set to continue baseball career at Millsaps College

Brady Petree & Christian Medina
 Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - Gordon White has been a key cog in the Russellville pitching machine for quite a while now. And while the senior Golden Tiger might be on the last leg of his high school career, his college career has officially been kicked off.

White officially signed his letter of intent last Wednesday afternoon to continue his baseball career at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi once his senior season with Russellville comes to a close.

For White, who came into this season sporting a glistening 2.29 ERA to go along with an 8-4 record on the mound for the Golden Tigers, choosing Millsaps College as the place to call home for the next four years came as an easy decision.

According to White, once he got a glimpse of the campus and was able to deal with some of the people associated with Millsaps, it didn't take long for a choice to be made.

"Today is everything that I've been dreaming of ever since I started playing baseball. This is what every kid dreams of. The people at Millsaps were just phenomenal and when you step on campus, everyone is just so friendly towards you and they make you feel like family," White said. "Even before I committed to them, everyone at Millsaps was just extremely nice to me and they made me feel like I truly belonged and that's what ultimately drove me to commit."

Like many of his fellow seniors both within and outside the Russellville program, there is a sense of making up for lost time following the cancellation of last season due to the ongoing pandemic.

See 'WHITE,' page 14

Kicking off the year right

Before last season was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russellville boys soccer head coach Trey Stanford had a feeling that the Golden Tigers had what it took to make it to state. Fast-forward one year later, and Stanford is starting to have the same kind of optimism about this year's squad.



COURTESY PHOTO

With a schedule full of top-tier opponents including James Clemens, West Morgan and Florence, the Golden Tigers figure to be well-positioned to make a deep playoff run.

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - Coaches and players throughout sports never want to hear the words, "there's always next year". Primarily because more often than not, those words are preceded by a gut-wrenching playoff loss or something to that effect.

However last year, like many other sports programs across the country, the Russellville High School boys soccer program was forced to kiss their season goodbye once the COVID-19 pandemic hit and caused life as we know it to completely shut down.

What makes the cancellation of the season harder to swallow for Trey Stanford, head coach of the Golden Tiger boys soccer team, is the fact that last year's team was extremely talented and were it not for the pandemic, might have been staring down a state title.

"Last year's team was very strong and we had just a ton of talent with a good group of seniors," Stanford said. "We really felt like we were one of

the better teams in the state with that group we had last season."

But in 2021, with a full season in front of them and a schedule as tough as any team in the state to prime them for their inevitable playoff run, the Golden Tigers are once again hopeful that for the first time in the young programs history, they'll be playing for a state title just a few months down the road.

With wins over 7AAustin (5-0) and 2AJuggernaut Mars Hill (3-1) to go along with a number one ranking in class 4A/5A soccer in the state, things are looking up once again for Russellville.

"Everything just went right for us against Austin. We went into halftime tied at 0-0 and we made a formation adjustment and our guys executed," Stanford said. "Our guys are hungry to play and after the way last year ended just made them want to get back to playing even more and we've started out very well."

With future matchups coming against formidable opponents such as Hartselle, West Morgan and

See 'KICKING' page 12

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'KICKING,' from page 11

Haleyville, once the playoffs roll around, the Golden Tigers figure to be battle-tested in their quest for a championship. Factor in their matchup against Florence this Friday night, (as Russellville will be looking for their first win over the Falcons in program history), and the Golden Tigers boast one of the toughest schedules around.

"We've got some really tough opponents down the stretch which is good for us because once you get into the playoffs, everyone has talent and then it comes down to teamwork and how hard the guy next to you is willing to play," Stanford said.

That aforementioned teamwork-first mentality is part of the reason that Stanford and the Golden Tigers have managed to build up one of the better soccer programs in the northern part of the state.

Stanford and his squad have made it a priority to put each other first and the rest will fall into place.

"Team bonding plays a key part of what we try to do here. We've got a great group of kids that have played soccer their entire life," Stanford said. "We've had groups of kids before that have had a ton of talent but haven't been as close. This group has a ton of talent and it's closer than any group we've had and that bonding and teamwork shows on the field."

While their wins over top-tier opponents might be what catches the eye of the common fan most often, the fact that the Golden Tigers have been able to continue play without any kind of interruption from the pandemic is perhaps more impressive.

And according to Stanford, the work that has gone into preventing a stoppage of play while keeping their players healthy goes beyond just the immediate coaching staff for Russellville.

"Our athletics facility caretaker Jack Dugan and our head of maintenance Alan Long have done a great job cleaning our facilities and making sure that everything is safe for our players to use and be around. We have a great administration that did a phenomenal job in putting together a health and safety plan for the program and they executed it flawlessly," Stanford said.

"Dr. Grimes, Dr. Goodwin and Coach (John) Ritter have given us every opportunity to play and make sure our guys have the best possible environment to be in and we're really fortunate to have the administration that we have."

Despite the Russellville soccer program being relatively new, as it saw its

first season in the 2014-2015 school year, it has already made a name for itself within the AHSAA soccer community and beyond. However the most important place that the program has left its mark on, has been the Russellville community itself.

And to hear Stanford put it, the Golden Tigers have created an outstanding playing environment and the experience that comes with watching Russellville on the pitch is unlike any other in high school soccer.

"Ask any coach that comes to play us, and they'll tell you that our atmosphere in big matches is unbeatable. Our fans are all onboard with what we're trying to do here and the crowd really gets our guys back into the game whenever we might not be playing great," Stanford said.

"This community had been wanting a soccer program for several years and Dr. Grimes came in and listened to the community and got to work. That first goal, which was scored by Andy Alonzo, the roar of the crowd was crazy and something that I will never forget."

Stanford is joined in his coaching staff by associate head coach Fred Ambrosio and assistant coaches Larsen Plyler and Derick Blagburn.



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'WHITE,' from page 11

Now that things seem all clear for the time being, White is gearing up for what he hopes will be a huge final season in the black and gold.

"I think every senior year you have a little bit of extra motivation but with not being to play last year and not really having a shot at all, it definitely adds a little bit more motivation going into this season for sure," White said. "Not having a shot to make the playoffs or anything like that definitely drove me and the rest of the seniors to be better for this season. We've been working extra hard this year and we're going to try and get some big things done."

So far this season, White has made good on his hope of getting big things done as he has helped guide the Golden Tigers to a current eight-game winning streak.

White's best pitching performance to this point in the season came in a start against Haleyville in which White managed to notch the win after going five innings while striking out five and only allowing two earned runs on four hits on the night.

For White, his philosophy once he steps onto the field comes down to one simple concept: be the best he can be and everything else will play itself out eventually.

"I try to be the best player that I can be in all aspects of the game. As long as I'm doing that and giving it my best shot, I think that everything else will fall into place for me this season," White said.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

White signed his letter of intent to continue his baseball career at division three Millsaps College in Mississippi.

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Raper notches 20th career win as Bobcats dominate yet again

Staff reports

Ridge Raper picked up his 20th career win for Phil Campbell on Saturday, and Mason Swinney hit a two-run homer in a five-run second inning as the Bobcats routed Lamar County 15-0 for their fourth straight win.

Raper (3-1) barely broke a sweat, throwing just 36 pitches (27 of which were strikes) in three hitless innings. He struck out seven and walked one. The senior right-hander is now 20-3 in his varsity career with a 1.87 ERA and 211 strikeouts in 149.2 innings.

Phil Campbell (11-1) gave Raper all the offensive support he would need in the top of the first, scoring twice on an RBI double by Austen Baker and an RBI single by John Miller Lawson. Raper then breezed through a one-two-three bottom of the first, striking out two.

The Bobcats broke the game open with a five-run second highlighted by Bryant Anthony's RBI single and Swinney's second career home run, a two-run shot to center.

Raper worked around a two-out walk in the bottom of the second, recording three more strikeouts. Phil Campbell added to the lead in the top of the third when Luke Barnwell

delivered a two-run double and then scored on an error to make it 10-0.

Raper notched his sixth and seventh strikeouts of the day in a one-two-three bottom of the third before turning things over to reliever Levi Crittenden in the fourth. Crittenden was just as sharp, throwing 22 of his 26 pitches for strikes and fanning four batters in two innings of one-hit ball.

The Bobcats finished things off with five runs in the top of the fifth, getting a two-run single from Cam Habada, a two-run double from Sage Raper and an RBI single from Kyle Pace.

Nine different players had at least one hit for Phil Campbell. Eight drove in at least one run, and eight crossed the plate at least once.

Swinney went 2-for-4 with the two-run homer and two runs scored, raising his average to .467 on the season. Lawson was 1-for-3 with an RBI and has now driven in 16 runs on the year, tying him with Swinney for the team lead.

Austen Baker went 1-for-2 Saturday with three runs scored, and Barnwell was 1-for-3 with two RBIs and three runs scored. Habada and Sage Raper were each 1-for-1 with two RBIs, and Hunter Baker went 1-for-1 and scored a run.



Mason Swinney Junior, Pitcher/INF Phil Campbell

Swinney was dominant both on the mound and at the plate for the Bobcats last week. The junior pitcher and infielder threw five shutout innings against Mars Hill to go along with six strikeouts while going 1-3 at the plate with two RBIs. Later in the week against Lamar County, Swinney's offensive talent was on display yet again as he would go 2-4 in the win with a two-run homer on the day.



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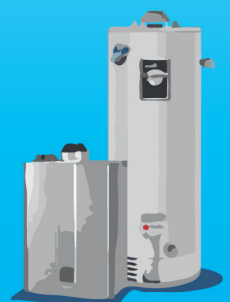
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