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Bell 'cruising' through COVID-19 recovery

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Jeff Bell loves cruising. So to see the East Franklin resident wearing a Hawaiian shirt, a lei, a safari hat and sipping a frozen drink while laying on a multicolored beach towel is nothing new.

And that's just how Bell spent last Wednesday, but he wasn't on a Carnival or Disney ship. Instead, the man nicknamed 'Conway' was lying in a bed inside Russellville Hospital's Intensive Care Unit, his temporary home since December 29, 2020, when he was admitted after a diagnosis of COVID-19.

Bell's birthday was March 26. He See 'BELL,' page 5



PHOTO BY JOHN PILATI
Larry Freeman visits with Jeff Bell Wednesday in the Russellville Hospital ICU. The two men have both faced serious health ordeals due to COVID-19 and have become friends in the process.

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Phil Campbell alum Smith notches 200th coaching win

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

By his own admission, Jared Smith wasn't a great player during his baseball career at Phil Campbell High School.

But Smith realized he had a great opportunity to learn the game as part of former coach Michael Beck's Bobcat program.

That's exactly what Smith did, and it set the foundation for his own successful career as a high school baseball coach—so successful that Smith recently earned his 200th win in only his eighth season as a head coach.

And that's all the more impressive when you consider one of those

years, 2020, saw the entire season canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I loved my time at Phil Campbell. Coach Beck was great and we had some successful teams," the 2003 PCHS graduate said. "I wasn't a very good high school player, average at best, but I knew I wanted to coach and continue being part of the game.

"I learned what to do and what not to do and that definitely helped me as a coach. I learned a lot watching other people because I was just an average player. But I was fortunate to play with some good talent and Coach Beck was ultracompetitive. Those definitely were some good

See 'SMITH,' page 7

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Carolyn Allen, 67, of Russellville, passed away
on Monday, March 21st. Interment at Knights
of Pythias Cemetery.

Vera Lee Scott, 89, of Phil Campbell, passed
away on Sunday, March 21st. A private service
and burial will be held at a later date.

Wilhelmina Scott, 92, of Russellville, passed
away on Sunday, March 21st. Interment at
Franklin Memory Gardens.

Daniel "Dan" Nedford Williams, 86, of
Russellville, passed away on Friday, March
26th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

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Pounders posthumously honored with Franklin County Hall of Fame Award

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Judy Pounders was a people person who influenced countless students during her career as a Russellville City Schools teacher and guidance counselor.

Her impact on her students' lives was never more apparent than after her death, with tributes on her obituary memorial describing her as a *Southern lady, my all-time favorite teacher, one of a kind and a special person.*

Pounders, who died December 10, 2020, was posthumously honored with the 2021 Franklin County Hall of Fame Award at Thursday's Franklin County Partnership Awards Ceremony.

The award is presented annually to one Franklin County resident whose lifetime accomplishments are both outstanding and historically significant to Franklin County.

Her sons, Darren and Dusten, accepted the award on their mother's behalf.

Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Cassie Medley described Pounders as a paradigm of the tradition embodied in Russellville City Schools.

"Many knew Mrs. Judy Pounders because she was a wonderful lady, teacher, guidance counselor, friend and role model," Medley said. "She truly embodied the phrase 'Forever Golden' and was a pillar that upheld the Russellville City Schools' 'Tradition of Excellence.'"

"What better memorial for her 48 years of service to Russellville City Schools than to be posthumously awarded the Hall of Fame Award," she added.

Born in Ardmore, Pounders moved to Russellville where she lived the final 50 years of her life. She was an active member of Calvary Baptist Church and served on the Russellville City Board of Education after her retirement.

The annual Partnership Awards are hosted jointly by the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and the Franklin County Development Authority.

Other recipients of this year's Partnership Awards included:

- Beautification Award: Oliver Place Apartments, Phil Campbell. Hotel Red Bay, Red Bay. Russellville Florist & Gifts, Russellville. Franklin County at large: Willow Oak Lodge.
- Business of the Year Award: Gault Signs.
- Franklin County's Best Kept Secret Award: King Drive-In.
- Distinguished Service Award: Jennifer Warhurst, Phil Campbell. Scotty Kennedy, Red Bay. Melanie Malone, Russellville.
- Volunteer of the Year Award: Milford Brown.
- Roger Bedford Unsung Hero Award: Jocelynn James.
- Excellence in Industrial Growth Award: The Girard Group.
- Industrial Support Award: Russellville Electric Board.
- Industry of the Year Award: Pilgrims.
- Educator of the Year Award: Angela Crittenden, Russellville City Schools. Jarrod Massey, Franklin County Schools.
- Robert I. Rogers Award: The Gist Family.



COURTESY PHOTO

Dusten and Darren Pounders accepted the Franklin County Hall of Fame Award from Brett Bendall on behalf of their mother, the late Judy Pounders, at this year's Franklin County Partnership Awards.

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Russellville BOE approves 2021-2022 academic calendar

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Board of Education approved the school calendar for the 2021-22 academic year at its March 25 board meeting.

Students' first day of school will be Wednesday, August 11. Teacher work days will begin one week earlier, on Wednesday, August 4.

Homecoming is scheduled for Friday, October 1, with an early dismissal that day. The following week will see the two-day fall break, on Thursday and Friday, October 7-8.

Students and staff will have three days off the week of Thanksgiving. Those days are Wednesday-Friday, November 24-26.

The fall semester ends on Friday, December 17, with an early dismissal that day.

Teachers will return on Monday, January 3 for two work days and students will return to the classroom Wednesday, January 5.

The 2022 Spring Break will be the week of April 4-8. The school year ends on Friday, May 27, with an early dismissal. Graduation is also set for May 27.

In other agenda items, the board:

—approved trip requests for RHS varsity and junior varsity cheerleaders during the week of June 6-11, 2021, to attend cheer camp at Auburn University, and for RHS students on April 23-24 to participate in the State Beef Cook-Off competition at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham.

—approved a facility use request for RHS Fine Arts Building on April 9-10, for District 3 Honor Band.

—approved personnel moves as follows:

Employment in Position: Jennifer Pace, RMS remediation teacher, Callie Mayberry, Kade Touchstone, part-time student lifeguards in Parks and Recreation Department, Jennah Harrison, Taylor Sheley, Mitchell Lane, Anna

See 'CALENDAR,' page 7

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Letters to the editor

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'What If?' A poem by Ann Hill

The following poem, "What If?," was submitted
by FFP reader Ann Hill of Russellville, in honor of
the Easter celebration of our Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ.

As I reflect on Christ's resurrection,
And ponder the things that took place,
I wonder how Mary and the disciples
Could have seen Him and not known His face.

Two disciples walked the road to Emmaus
And talked with the Lord on the way.
Yet, knew not to whom they were speaking
Till something strange happened that day.

They communed and their hearts burned within
them.

Still, they couldn't quite understand
Till Jesus took bread and broke it,
Ah—Was it the scars in His hands?

We know it's the work of the Spirit
That opened their eyes on that day.
But scars often tell a story.
What if scars had a part to play?

What if scars hid that face, so familiar,
(Isaiah said His visage was marred),
Yet, revealed that the man had been crucified
When they saw how His hands were so
scarred?

And what if the world's view of beauty
Is not really beauty at all,
Compared to the greater beauty
The world would reject and appall?

What if now and throughout eternity,
Christ would bear awful scars to reveal
The love that gave all to redeem us,
And beauty that scares can't conceal?

—Ann Hill



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'BELL,' from page 1

was scheduled for transfer to a LTACH (long term acute care hospital) in Athens, Ga., on March 25, but severe weather warnings and a minor health setback led to delay of Bell's transfer.

Anticipating he would be transferred Thursday, the ICU staff held an early birthday party for Bell Wednesday afternoon. And they decorated his room for the cruise-themed event.

Bell was all smiles as he visited with family, friends and staff. And after 80 days on a ventilator, he needed, and deserved, some smiles.

Bell and his father, Roger, were admitted the same day. His father recovered from his bout with COVID-19, but Jeff had more serious complications and was moved to the hospital's Intensive Care Unit on January 5, the same day another patient, Larry Freeman, was moved to the same unit.

Freeman, whose battle with COVID-19 turned into life-threatening pneumonia, was discharged from Russellville Hospital last month. Freeman, like Bell, served as an inspiration to the ICU staff, who kept him positive with the mindset he would recover.

Freeman, whose birthday was March 24, was invited to come for Bell's surprise party, not knowing the event was a double birthday celebration for both men.

Freeman and Bell shared a few minutes together Wednesday afternoon. Still on a ventilator, Bell wasn't able to do much talking, but the friendship formed between the two men who are at different stages of the same journey, was apparent.

And it wasn't the first time Freeman and Bell spoke.

The previous week saw the ICU nurses and Dr. Keith Morrow, Bell's physician, recommend he try a TCT, or tracheostomy collar trial. It was the next step in Bell's recovery, but he initially refused it.

So the hospital staff turned to Freeman to provide some inspiration. And the words from someone who had recently experienced the same trials resonated with Bell.

"I told him I've been where you've been. I came in the same door and I walked out of that door," Freeman said. "You've got to encourage yourself and stop using 'I can't.' Find something to motivate yourself and keep saying 'I can do this.' I thanked him for allowing me to speak with him and told him if there was anything I can do to encourage him I would."

Bell's aunt, Shelia Jones, came last week to give him a shave and haircut before his transfer.

Even though the transfer has been delayed, Bell remains positive with a support system of staff, family and friends to lift him up.

The ICU staff nicknamed Jeff 'Baby Bell,' since he and his father were patients at the same time. 'Papa Bell' is doing well and back home. 'Baby Bell' remains in the caring hands of Russellville Hospital's ICU staff, armed with the resolve to defeat COVID-19, and the strength of an army of prayer warriors lifting him up.

Here's hoping the next frozen drink Bell enjoys will come with a view of the Caribbean. Bon Voyage, 'Baby Bell!'

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 American Legion Post 64 will have a meeting on April 8th at 6 p.m. Will meet at the fellowship hall of North Highland Church of Christ. Meal will be provided.

 Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church will host its Spring Revival April 18-21, 2021. Sunday night services begin at 5 p.m. Monday-Wednesday services begin at 7 p.m. The church is located at 305 Bethlehem Road in Russellville. Pastor Bro. Jeff Fleming and congregation invite everyone to Revival. Evangelist will be Bro. Terry Pace from Scottsboro.

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 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.

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'SMITH,' from page 1

times," he added.

Beck remembers Smith as a hard-nosed player and a true student of the game.

"Jared was a very solid player. He was the kind of guy that no matter how hard a ball was hit at him, he'd stay down, take it off the chest and throw you out," Beck said.

Beck said Smith is one of several former players who have gone into teaching and coaching.

"It does make you feel good to see these kids turn out to be successful. Hopefully, some of the things I taught him he's still using," Beck said. "He's obviously doing things right as his record shows."

Smith, in his sixth season leading Class 7A powerhouse Bob Jones High School, started his coaching career as an assistant baseball coach at Northridge High School in Tuscaloosa. After five years there, he was hired as varsity baseball coach at Dothan High School.

Smith stayed at Dothan through the 2015 season before taking over the Patriot program later that year.

Smith's 2019 team earned a red map as Class 7A Runner-Up. Expectations were high for last year's senior-laden squad before their season was wiped away due to the Coronavirus. This year's varsity team is 18-10 and well on its way to another deep run into the playoffs at the state's toughest level.

Smith's 200th win (his record is now 204-116 overall) came on March 16 at a tournament in Foley as the Patriots defeated Washington, Okla., 11-1. While Smith knew he was closing in on win number 200, he didn't want a lot of fanfare about the milestone.

"They had a banner made and presented it to me after the game while we were playing in the beach tournament," Smith said. "It's a nice honor, but I've had some really good players (including 9 college signees from his 2020 team) and last year's senior class won over 100 games before they graduated."

"There are three players starting in the SEC or Big-12 as freshmen. I'm thankful to the players I had who were hungry to win when we got to Dothan and their success jump-started me to Bob Jones where we have excellent talent and wonderful parental support for our program," he added.

Smith graduated from the University of Alabama with a Bachelors of Science in Education degree in 2007.

He earned his Masters of Arts in Education the following year, followed by a Masters of Arts in Education, Instructional Leadership from the University of West Alabama in 2013.

Smith received his Educational Specialist in Instructional Leadership advanced degree from UWA in 2014.

He and his wife Hannah, a special education elementary teacher, have one son, Rhett, who's 10 months old. Smith is the son of Alan Smith and Vicki King. His grandparents, Horace and Linda Smithy, live in Oak Grove and his other grandmother, Betty Lawler, lives in Phil Campbell.

Alan is the varsity baseball coach at Winfield High School. Father and son agreed several years ago their two programs would play one game each year. This year's matchup was played at Bob Jones, with the Patriots winning

6-1.

In addition to coaching baseball, Smith teaches Algebra at Bob Jones.

The week-long beach tournament provided a great opportunity for his team to face some top-level competition, Smith said. As a 7A program, that experience of facing outstanding pitching and hitting helps Smith's team succeed in its difficult region.

"The big difference at this level is the depth you have in terms of pitching and position players," Smith said. "During this Spring Break week, we played 12 games in nine days and we pitched 15 different guys."

"Depth is the thing that separates 7A from other classifications. When I played at Phil Campbell, everyone had good players, but the difference is the amount of players

at this level and the teams you play run out quality arms every game. We try to play in big tournaments with top-level competition. That's the type of talent you face week in and week out at the 7A level," he added.

With his team chasing playoff dreams, Smith doesn't have a lot of time to reflect on his 200th win. But he credits his assistant coaches for the success his programs have seen.

"I have some great assistant coaches. Hunter (Smothers) and Caleb Rogers have been with me most of the way," Smith said. "I'm blessed to have great players and a supportive, awesome wife who lets me do what I want to do and work through week-ends."

"I'm definitely in a good spot, with a great school with great administrative support. I'm fortunate to be where I'm at in my career," he added.



COURTESY PHOTO

Smith's 200th career win came during a tournament in Foley earlier this month. His career record as a head coach currently sits at 204-116.

'CALENDAR,' from page 4

Jeffreys as part-time and as needed employees at the Teacher Afterschool Tutoring Program and Summer Camp. Anayeli Ruiz, Mirtha Macias Diego Hall, EL Aides at West Elementary School, Amara Qualls, Debra Abernathy as part-time Parks and Recreation Department employees, Sarah Hester Goodman, Madison Thompson, Afterschool Tutoring Program and Summer Camp teachers, Judy Wilson, Pam Herring, Margaret Nichols and Julie Wilson, Margaret Brown, Keith Wilson, bus drivers for Afterschool Tutoring Program and Summer Camp, Diane Townley and Amanda Ridge, teachers for Afterschool Tutoring Program and Summer Camp.

Employment in Position: Tiffany Terry, Parks and Recreation Department Pool Management, and Jermaine Groce, Eagle Eye Timing Systems Operator.

Transfer: Joanna Macias, transfer from EL Aide at West part-time to EL Aide at West full-time.

Substitute Bus Driver: Garry Lee Parker, Jr.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Board of Education will be Thursday, April 22, at 8 a.m.

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Barksdale earns CPA designation, continues family tradition

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Although it's been a Russellville fixture since 1964, Strickland & Barksdale, CPAs, is more than just a long-standing local business.

It's a family affair, and the third generation of the family, Will Barksdale, recently earned his designation as a Certified Public Accountant. Barksdale follows his mother Donna and his grandfather Glen Strickland in becoming the third family member to successfully complete the CPA training and test.

Strickland started the company in 1960. His two daughters, Donna (Barksdale) and Cynthia (Fennel) both work at the office, along with his grandson Will. And that family togetherness is the primary reason Strickland, now in his 80s, loves coming to work every day.

"If not for them I probably would have retired already," Strickland said. "Some people can't work with family but we have always worked together well and that keeps me going."

Strickland's CPA career began in Birmingham, but he returned to Russellville to open his own practice in 1964. Donna joined her father's firm in 1983, and Will joined the firm in 2015.

After earning his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Auburn University, Will received a Master's Degree in Business Administration from the University of North Alabama with a concentration in Accounting.

He began studying for the four-part CPA exam in 2019 and he completed the final part of the 16-hour exam last year. In addition to passing the CPA test, candidates must have at least one year of experience in public accounting working with a licensed CPA.

Barksdale said he was never pushed to go into accounting by his mother or grandfather. Instead, he decided on that career after working at the office while he attended Northwest-Shoals Community College.

"I kind of grew up around (accounting)," Barksdale said. "After I worked here during my time at NW-SCC, I decided I liked the work and that was for sure what I wanted to do."

After he graduated from Russellville High School in 2009, Barksdale saw many of his classmates move away to pursue educational or professional opportunities elsewhere. But that was never in the cards for Will.

"I had my time at Auburn and loved it, but at the same time, this is home and I always wanted to come back. No where else feels like home except here," he added.

As with most professionals, accountants have faced challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, including learning the tax implications of Paycheck Protection Program loans, stimulus payments and other federal programs designed to help the economy.

"The PPP loan program is constantly changing," Donna said. "I read all the time and there are changes all the time. And those rules change each time Congress passes new legislation."

The challenge of keeping up with an ever-changing tax code is one of Will's favorite parts of his job.

"Every client's needs are different. Each return includes different challenges as to how I can best serve them and get the most for them," Will said. "I really enjoy helping each client individually."

Working within the confines of ethical accounting practices, Strickland said he wants his clients to see their fees as an investment rather than an expense.

"With the fees I charge, I want to provide more value to the client than what my fee is. That is the goal with all of my clients," Strickland said. "We try to get back all the money we can get ethically for them."

When it comes to accounting, the Strickland family tree also branches out into Birmingham, where Donna's daughter Alison (Montanaro) has her CPA practice.

One of the essential traits for a successful CPA is being a good listener, as

Will explained.

"It starts with listening to your clients and what their concerns are. You make sure to put in all the work to resolve their issues or questions. And you do it in a trustworthy and ethical manner to make sure everything is handled correctly for them," Will said.

When he began in 1960, changes in the federal tax code came "every five years or so," Strickland said.

"You could do an individual return on two pages and make a copy on the Thermo-Fax," Strickland explained. "Now, the law is changing constantly."

With no plans for retirement, Strickland said he'll continue working as long as he's physically able to do so.

"I still enjoy coming to work every day. And having an office with my family is a big part of that," Strickland said. "When they were growing up, all of them used to say because I worked long hours they would never want to go into accounting, but they all ended up doing it."

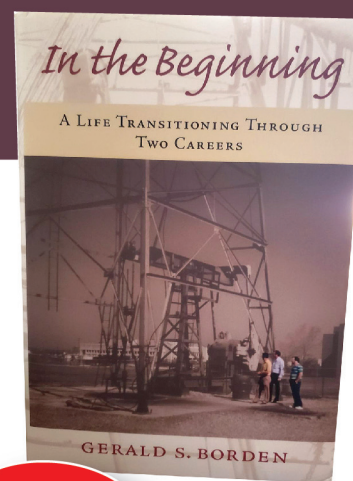


COURTESY PHOTO

Will Barksdale (center), became the third member of his family to complete the CPA training and test after completing the fourth part of the examination last year.

In the Beginning: A Life Transitioning Through Two Careers

Russellville native Gerald Borden tells his story of a life of achievements mixed with its share of tragedy. With a foreword from Russellville attorney Danny McDowell



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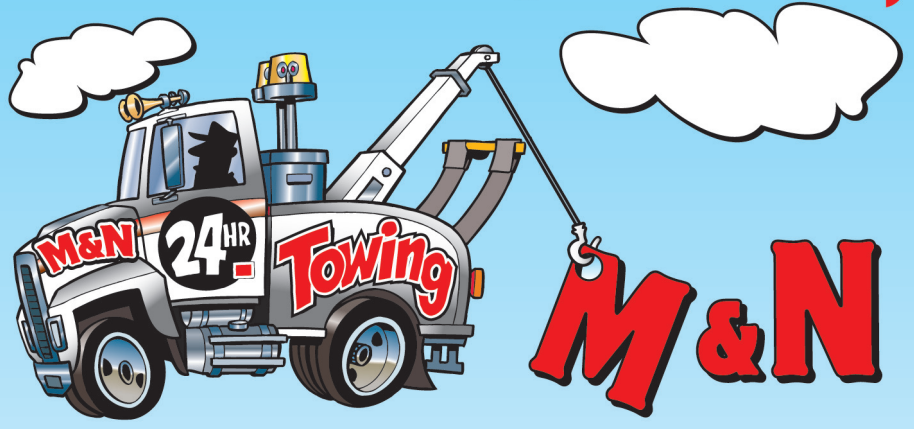
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Beginning Monday, April 12, 2021, the Russellville Utilities lobby, located at 721 South Jackson Avenue, will reopen to the public.

The lobby has been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask that you continue to practice social distancing guidelines upon entry to pay your utility bill and/or to apply for new service.

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DEFINITION OF JOB: Patrols a designated sector of the city of Russellville and responds to complaints. Serves warrants and subpoenas and testifies in court. Provides traffic control assistance. Performs dispatching duties. Performs other police related duties as required.

REQUIRED KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES:
 Knowledge of: the city buildings and street system of Russellville; city, state and federal laws; court procedures; department rules, regulations and procedures; maintenance and use of weapons; radio codes, surveillance equipment and legal procedures involved with illegal drug cases.
 Ability to: operate a motor vehicle; read; safely fire a weapon; communicate on telephone and radio; generate written documents such as reports and tickets; bend, crouch; stretch; stretch; walk; run; respond to emergency situations on short notice when off-duty; and do the essential functions of the job as directed in this description.
 Willingness to: work overtime, irregular hours, weekends and holidays; travel and attend seminars and workshops.

QUALIFICATIONS and SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS:
 Possession of a high school diploma or GED
 Minimum of 21 years of age
 Must meet or exceed the minimum requirements established by the State of Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission
 Possession of a valid Alabama Drivers License
 Possess the ability to obtain an Alabama Police Academy diploma or its equivalent

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Applications and copies of the Job Descriptions may be obtained at the Russellville City Hall, Office of the Mayor, 304 North Jackson Avenue. Applications submitted to the Russellville Civil Service Board less than one year ago remain active. Those individuals need not reapply in order to receive consideration for this appointment. Applications must be returned no later than April 11, 2021 by U.S. Mail to:

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**EQUAL HOUSING
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Golden Tigers get Saturday sweep, improve to 16-4

Brady Petree
Franklin Free Press

Eli Gipson hit a leadoff home run for Russellville on Saturday, and Ethan Oliver threw five innings of two-hit ball as the Golden Tigers beat East Lawrence 7-1 in the second of their two games at Decatur High School.

Earlier on Saturday, Russellville got a tie-breaking two-run double from Brayden Heaps in a seven-run sixth inning, pulling away late for a 9-3 win over Decatur.

Oliver (1-2) started Game 2 on the mound and was terrific, holding East Lawrence (10-11) to one earned run on two hits while striking out four and walking one. He threw 39 of his 68 pitches for strikes before turning things over to reliever Casen Heaps, who struck out three in two hitless innings to finish off the win.

The Golden Tigers (16-4) grabbed an early lead when Gipson jumped on the first pitch from Eagle starter Connery Lowery in the bottom of the first and hit it over the fence in left for his first career home run. Andrew Hatton followed with a single (the first of his four hits in the game), stole second, took third on a single by Reed Hill and then scored on a sac fly by Gordon White to make it 2-0.

Russellville broke the game open with a five-run second inning highlighted by an RBI double from Gipson and a pair of two-run doubles from Hatton and Hill.

Gipson went 2-for-3 with two RBIs and two runs scored. He finished Saturday's doubleheader 4-for-7 and is now 9-for-20 with eight RBIs and seven runs scored in seven games since returning

See 'SWEEP,' page 13

Franklin Free Press 2020-21 All-County Boys Basketball

Brady Petree
Franklin Free Press

With three schools within Franklin County advancing at least to the regional semifinals, this season was chock full of veteran talent leading the way for an extremely efficient year of success on the boys side of the basketball scene.

Red Bay, Russellville and Belgreen all managed to take home their respective area titles, and the Bulldogs were able to advance to the state championship game, the first for the program in two decades.

Regardless of where you went to watch a basketball game on any given night involving teams within Franklin County this season, there was a good chance you were going to feel as though you got your money's worth by the time the final buzzer sounded.

This week, we'll hand out our *Franklin Free Press* All-County boys team after revealing our girls team in last week's edition.

Let's kick things off with a familiar face leading the charge at player of the year...

Player of the Year

Will Bonner, Junior Guard, Belgreen

If you watched Will Bonner play basketball this year, there was a good chance that you came away amazed at a few different aspects of his game. Most notable being his court vision and awareness. As the leader of the Bulldogs (and reigning *FFP* player of the year), the 5'10 Bonner led the Belgreen Boys program to its first state championship appearance since the 1999-2000 season.

En route to a 26-3 record on the season, Bonner led the Bulldogs in a majority of all statistical categories.

Averaging 21.2 points per game, Bonner was one of the premier scorers throughout Franklin County. Shooting an astounding 60.8% from the field (23-64 3PT), Bonner managed to just miss the 600-point mark for the season with 596 points on the season. But scoring the basketball wasn't the only aspect of his game that merited player of the year considerations.

The aforementioned court vision and overall awareness enabled Bonner to lead Franklin County in assists with four assists per game over 29 games played for the Bulldogs for a total of 113 assists for the year.

With 101 rebounds, six blocks and 66 steals to his credit, Bonner was no slouch when it came time to do the hard work.

Having eclipsed the 1,000 point mark for his career early on in his junior campaign, getting to the free throw line played a large part in his scoring efforts as he would shoot 77.7% from the charity stripe (157-202).

What Makes Bonner's numbers that much more impressive, is that often nights he was only play-



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA
Bonner totaled 596 points in his junior campaign to lead the Bulldogs to their first state championship berth since the 1999-2000 season.

ing one half of basketball due to the Bulldogs jumping out to early commanding leads so often.

Finishing his junior season with 1,549 points for his varsity career, the question isn't whether or not Bonner will set a historic milestone of passing 2,000 points for his career, the question is when will he do it?

Bonner, along with his brother Colin (who we will talk about later on), return alongside a strong core and a ton of depth for the Bulldogs as they will look to make it one step further next season and bring home the program's first state title.

First-Team All-County Chandler Dyas, Senior Guard, Russellville

After putting up 17.3 points per game as a junior (and the lone returning starter for the Golden Tigers last season), Dyas continued to build up an already impressive resume during his time at Russellville. The 6'3 senior guard for the Golden Tigers led the way in scoring, tallying 490 points

See 'TEAM,' page 14

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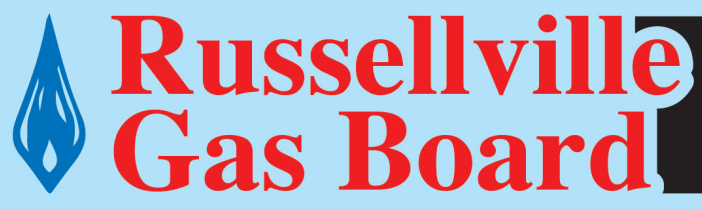
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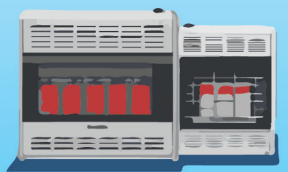


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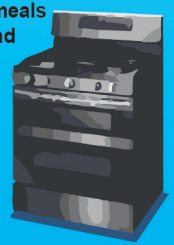
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'SWEEP,' from page 11

to the lineup following an injury.

Hatton was 4-for-4 in Saturday's second game with two RBIs and two runs scored. Hill went 2-for-4 with two RBIs, and Karson Hyde was 1-for-3. Banks Langston and Gavin Slay each scored a run.

Langston started Saturday's first game against Decatur on the mound and pitched four solid innings, allowing two earned runs on three hits with three strikeouts and no walks. He surrendered a solo homer to William Burgreen in the bottom of the first, but the Golden Tigers took the lead in the top of the second when Cole Barnett followed a single by Canyon Pace with a two-run homer to left.

Decatur tied the game with a run in the bottom of the fourth, but Russellville took the lead for good with seven runs in the top of the sixth. Barnett drew a one-out walk, and Gipson and Oliver both singled to load the bases. Brayden Heaps delivered a double to center, driving in two to put the Golden Tigers on top 4-2.

Oliver later scored on a passed ball, and Hill had an RBI single. Pace came through with a two-run single to make it 8-2, and Gipson capped off the rally with an RBI single (his second hit of the inning).

Emitt Green pitched the final three innings in relief to earn the win. Green (5-0) gave up one earned run on five hits, striking out one and walking none. Decatur got four singles off Green in the bottom of the sixth but scored only once, running into a key out at third base.

Pace was 2-for-4 with two RBIs, and Gipson went 2-for-4 with an RBI and a run. Heaps was 1-for-1 with two RBIs and a run scored. Oliver went 1-for-2 with a run, and Nick Smith was 1-for-3 with a double and a walk. Barnett went 1-for-3 with the two-run homer and two runs scored. Hill was 1-for-5 with an RBI and a run, and Grayson Thorpe scored a run.

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'TEAM,' from page 11

(19.6 points per game) en route to an area championship, the first for the Golden Tigers since 2019.

Dyas also made significant strides in the rebounding and assisting aspects of his game as he increased his totals from a season ago in both categories with 7.0 rebounds per game (4.6 last season) and 5.2 assists per game (2.9 last season). On the defensive effort, Dyas made his presence felt more often than not as he would accumulate 32 blocks on the year as well for the Golden Tigers.

Entering his senior season just 104 points shy of 1,000 for his career, Dyas was able to eclipse that mark and thensome. Dyas finished his Golden Tiger career with 1,386 points to his credit and has committed to Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi to continue his basketball career.

Braden Ray, Senior Forward, Red Bay

After averaging under ten points per game as a freshman and sophomore, Braden Ray elevated his game in his junior campaign and became one of the premier offensive threats not just in Franklin County, but Northwest Alabama as well.

While his scoring number dipped slightly in his senior campaign after going from 16.2 points per game in his junior year to 16.0 points per game as a senior, Ray was still able to put together a solid performance on the offensive side. Over 24 games played, Ray knocked down 65 three-pointers while shooting a highly-efficient 83% from the free throw line.

Ray also managed to increase his performance in other aspects of his game despite playing in five less games this season.

The senior Tiger more than doubled his assist total from one season ago, going from 46 assists (1.8 per game) as a junior, to a whopping 96 assists (4.0 per game) as a senior.

Ray was also a dominant force on the glass for the Tigers, pulling down 108 boards (4.5 per game). Ray also made his presence felt on the defensive side for the Tigers, accounting for 49 steals and 12 blocks on the season.

For his career, Ray finished with 1,453 points while garnering Regional MVP honors in his junior season and a final four appearance.



PHOTO BY CHRSTIAN MEDINA

Ray scored 16.0 points per game while increasing his assists per game from 1.8 per game in his junior season, to 4.0 in his senior year.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Dyas upped his scoring efforts in his senior season, averaging 19.6 points per game to lead the Golden Tigers.

Colin Bonner, Junior Guard, Belgreen

If there were an award handed out to players with the best overall tools, you would be hard-pressed to find a better candidate for the award than Colin Bonner. Thanks to his 6'1 frame, the junior guard improved in virtually every area of his game both offensively and defensively going from his sophomore campaign to his junior season.

Averaging 11.5 points per game just one season ago, Bonner saw his offensive profile become more robust, increasing his scoring average to 14.1 points per game for the Bulldogs while shooting 63% from the field, mostly from mid-range and in the paint.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Bonner has established himself as the premier two-way player in Franklin County and shot 63% from the field.

Using his massive wingspan and his impressive vertical, Bonner managed to haul in 145 rebounds on the season (5.0 per game) while swatting 50 blocked shots on the season.

Bonner also had 50 steals to his credit on the year to go along with 66 assists (2.2 per game) for his junior season.

As the best two-way player in Franklin County, Bonner and his brother Will will be looking to return as the leaders of the Bulldogs next season in search of the program's first state championship.

Winston Nolen, Senior Forward, Tharptown

Nolen perhaps had the best individual performance of the season in Franklin County boys action back in November as the senior forward for Tharptown managed a 47-point outing against Shoals Christian.

And that outing wasn't the only impressive scoring night that Nolen put together over the course of the season. Eight times over 27 games played for the Wildcat senior, Nolen managed to eclipse the 30-point mark en route to totaling 707 points to lead all scorers in Franklin County for the year.

Averaging 26.2 points per game in his senior season, Nolen finished his career with the Wildcats with an impressive 1,788 points.

Second-Team All-County

Jeb Bishop, Senior Forward, Russellville

A two-year starter for the Golden Tigers, Bishop ramped up his play in his senior campaign, helping the Golden Tigers win an area title. The 5'10 senior totaled 380 points on the season, good for 15.2 points per game.

While he doesn't possess the height normally required to be extremely efficient in the rebounding game, that didn't stop Bishop from putting together a solid season crashing the boards. Bishop accounted for 155 rebounds on the year, good for 6.2 rebounds per game and good for second on a Golden Tigers squad that managed to quietly put together a successful season in terms of rebounding the basketball.

Not only did Bishop stand out in the paint on the offensive side of play, but he also managed to shine on the defensive side as well, totaling 57 blocks on the season for Russellville to lead the Golden Tigers.

See 'TEAM,' page 15



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Nolen led all Franklin County scorers with 26.2 points per game, finishing his career with 1,788 points.

'TEAM,' from page 14

Scout Bragwell, Senior Guard, Belgreen

Had these honors been for postseason play only, Bragwell might have carried this award by a landslide. Facing the reigning 1A state champions in the Bulldogs regional final matchup against Pickens County, the senior sharpshooting guard knocked down 24 points while going 6-8 from beyond the arc to send Belgreen to the final four.

Fast-forward just a few days later and Bragwell was at it again in the Bulldogs' state semifinal matchup against Notasulga. This time, Bragwell would go 5-7 from deep while scoring 18 points.

Overall for the season, Bragwell averaged just 9.0 points per game but shot an efficient 40% from three-point range (57-141 3PT). Bragwell also managed to haul in 63 rebounds while dishing out 46 assists in his senior season.

Bragwell finishes his Bulldog career having posted the Belgreen school record (and second-highest in state history) three-point percentage in his junior season with 49.8% just one season ago.

Mason Swinney, Junior Forward, Phil Campbell

One of the breakout performers in Franklin County this season, and one of only three juniors on our All-County team, Swinney put together an extremely solid junior season.

Across 23 games played, Swinney shot 43% from the field while averaging 13.4 points per game (310 total points on the season) to lead the Bobcats in scoring. Swinney was an absolute monster on the glass, pulling in a gaudy 184 rebounds during the season, good for an average of 8.0 rebounds per game.

While he might have made our second-team this season, Swinney's stock is rising as quickly as any player in Franklin County this year. And if he continues on his current trajectory, a first-team selection could very well be in the cards for his senior season.

Brooks Scott, Senior Post Player, Russellville

A *Franklin Free Press* All-County Second-Team selection from a year ago, Scott finds his way back for another selection in his final season with the Golden Tigers.

While his scoring totals dipped from his junior campaign (13.9 points per game as a junior/11.3 points per game as a senior and 273 total points) the big man for Russellville managed to continue to improve on his rebounding game.

Helping the Golden Tigers put together a solid campaign on the boards alongside Dyas and Bishop, Scott pulled in 5.1 rebounds per game for Russellville in his senior season.

Bryant Hyde, Senior Guard, Phil Campbell

Another first-time selection to our All-County team, Hyde put together a solid senior season as the point guard for head coach Shane Clay and the Bobcats.

Averaging 12.0 points per game while shooting 43% from the field, Hyde was the primary facilitator for the Bobcats.

Across 24 games played, Hyde totaled 66 assists for Phil Campbell, good for an average of 2.7 assists per game. While he only brought in 38 rebounds during his senior season, Hyde was able to swipe a steal 38 times, good for second-most for the Bobcats behind Swinney.

Coach of the Year

Marty Cooper, Belgreen

When you lead a team to its first state championship appearance in two decades, that's a pretty good indicator that you'll be taking home the coach of the year award at season's end.

And that's just what second-year Bulldog head coach Marty Cooper did.

The Bulldogs put together a 26-3 record over the course of the season and did so with an extremely talented group of players ranging from the starting five, down to the last player on the bench for the Bulldogs.

In addition to securing a Regional finals victory and a state championship appearance, Cooper led the Bulldogs to their second-straight Franklin County Championship as well.

With stars such as Will and Collin Bonner returning, along with a host of talented underclassmen making their way up from the b-varsity level to join the varsity squad, don't be surprised if you see Cooper's name here again one year from now.

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

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

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Emitt Green Junior, Pitcher Russellville

Green kicked off his week with a complete game shutout against area foe Lawrence County last Tuesday to lead the Golden Tigers to their first area win of the season. Green managed to hold the Red Devils hitless through 6.1 innings pitched before serving up a weak single to the right side to spoil the no-hitter. Green allowed just one hit while striking out four and walking none. The junior righthander followed up that performance with a solid relief outing against Decatur where he went 3 innings pitched, allowing five hits and striking out one.



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