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## Forsythe honored with 2021 Star Polisher award

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

As Sharon Hester presented the 2021 Star Polisher Award to retiring Russellville City Schools teacher Beth Forsythe, Hester described the purpose of the award, which is named in memory of her father, Dan Hindman, a former Russellville High School principal.

"The heart of our educational program is the teachers. I'm thrilled we sponsor the Star Polisher Award to recognize a teacher nominated by her peers," Hester said. "This person is the light coming into her school each day. She sings to her students and always has their best interests at heart."

Forsythe was honored at the May

25 meeting of the Russellville City Board of Education. While the award is usually presented at the annual Russellville City Schools Education Foundation Banquet, that event was canceled this year. Regardless of where she received the award, Forsythe was a well-deserving recipient of this year's award, which also includes \$1,000.

As the inscription on the award reads, a 'Star Polisher' takes students however they are and polishes them into a bright, shiny light for all to see.

Forsythe has been that light for 26 years. Her teaching career began in Lee County, Fla., in Ft. Myers, where she taught first grade.

Forsythe then moved to Polk

See 'FORSYTHE,' page 3

## RCS board approves transfer over teacher's request

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

After a 25-minute executive session, the Russellville City Schools Board of Education voted May 25 to approve the recommendation of Superintendent Heath Grimes to transfer a West Elementary School teacher to Russellville Middle School over the teacher's objections.

Justin Chandler has been a physical education teacher at West the past six years. Grimes, citing a need for additional math instruction, requested Chandler be transferred to teaching math at Russellville Middle School.

When Chandler was notified of the proposed transfer, he requested the opportunity to address the board, which he did last Wednesday after-

noon.

Chandler, who is certified in 5th-8th grade math instruction and taught math when hired by Russellville City Schools ten years ago, earned a Masters Degree in Physical Education at the University of Alabama Birmingham.

When he taught at RMS previously, Chandler taught remedial math and then had a physical education class later in the day.

Grimes said Chandler would likely be in that same position next fall.

For Chandler, though, it was an emotional opportunity to tell the board about how he believes he can best serve his students.

"I do not feel it's in the best interests of Russellville Middle School students to transfer me to a math

See 'TRANSFER,' page 7

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**Clyde Oneal Hallmark**, 82, of Tharptown, passed away on Sunday, May 23rd. Interment at Poplar Creek Cemetery.

**Harry James "Jim" Jenkins**, 74, of Russellville, passed away on Monday, May 24th. Interment at Franklin Memory Gardens.

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## 'FORSYTHE,' from page 1

County, Fla., and taught kindergarten for two years before moving on to Gwinnett County, Ga., and a return to first grade.

Her next move was to Russellville, where she has taught Title One Reading, first grade reading and math intervention and most recently, English Language Learning (ELL).

ELL teachers work with elementary students whose native or household language is something other than English.

Forsythe, who will be moving back soon with her husband to Ft. Myers, said she was shocked, and humbled, to receive the award.

"Thank you to everyone who nominated me. If you know me you know my passion is my students," Forsythe said. "They come first. I'm totally blown away by this. I wasn't expecting it at all.

"I'm thankful for the opportunity to work with Russellville City Schools from beginning to end, and I'm thankful to all you've done to help me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart," Forsythe said.



PHOTO BY JOHN PILATI  
Sharon Hester, left, presents Beth Forsythe with the 2021 Star Polisher Award.

## Employment Opportunity

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# Franklin BOE terminates Benford after four-count indictment released

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

On the same day that a four-count indictment against former Phil Campbell High School teacher Jordan Benford was released to the public, the Franklin County Board of Education voted to terminate Benford after a lengthy hearing that was closed to the public.

Benford was arrested in March after an investigation by the Franklin County Sheriff's Office into allegations that Benford, 28, was engaged in a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old PCHS student. At that time, Benford was employed as a high school science teacher and assistant football coach at Phil Campbell.

Benford turned himself in to authorities and was released on a \$50,000 bond.

At that time, Benford only faced one charge of soliciting a sex act with a student.

Franklin County District Attorney Joey Rushing presented the case to a grand jury this month and the grand jury indicted Benford on four charges: School Employee Distributing Obscene Matter to a Student, School Employee Soliciting Sex Act With Student, Transmitting Obscene Material to a Child and School Employee Engaging in a Sex Act with a Student.

The distribution of obscene material to a student charge alleges that Benford sent images of "nude male genitalia" to a student. The student's name and date of birth have been redacted from the indictment to protect the confidentiality of the alleged victim. That charge, along with the solicitation count, are Class A misdemeanors that carry up to one year in jail upon conviction.

The transmitting obscene material to a child count and the school employee engaging in a sex act with a child charges are Class B felonies, which carry a 2-20 year sentence upon conviction.

Rushing said Benford's cases will be on an arraignment docket in June, but he doesn't anticipate a trial date setting before next year.

The investigation began on a Sunday night in March, 2021, when the student's parents contacted the sheriff's office around 9 p.m. Benford was arrested later that night.

At that time, Franklin County Sheriff Shannon Oliver said Benford acknowledged an "incident of sexual activity" with a student. Benford was placed on paid administrative leave effective March 15.

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, a PCHS graduate, played baseball for the Bobcats and continued his athletic career as a member of the Alabama A&M University baseball team.

The Franklin County Board of Education held a special meeting May 25 to address, among other agenda items, a long list of personnel moves. Benford's name did not appear on the list of personnel moves approved by the board.

After that meeting, a closed hearing was held where evidence was presented to support Hamilton's recommendation to the board that Benford be terminated. As with any tenured employee, Benford has the right to such a hearing and can elect for the hearing to be closed to the public.

Franklin County Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton confirmed May 26 that he recommended Benford be terminated and that the board approved his recommendation after a vote was held at the closed hearing.

Hamilton, citing confidentiality issues, would not comment on his reasons for recommending the termination, nor any specifics as to what evidence was presented at the hearing.

Email us at [franklinfreepress@yahoo.com](mailto:franklinfreepress@yahoo.com).

## FRANKLIN FREE PRESS

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 The Belgreen Boys Basketball Camp will take place June 7 and 8 at Belgreen High School Gym. The camp is for boys from grades K-6. The K-3 group will have camp from 8-10 a.m., and the 4-6 grade from 10-12. The cost is \$30 if you preregister by May 27. Cost is \$40 after May 27. Please make checks payable to Belgreen Boys Basketball. Camp will be run by head coach Marty Cooper and assistant coach Jennifer Cooper. The Coopers have more than 20 years college coaching experience. Belgreen varsity players will also assist. Free camp t-shirt with registration. Call Coach Marty Cooper with any questions at 1-662-790-3672 or email to [martycooper@franklin.k12.al.us](mailto:martycooper@franklin.k12.al.us). There is an information sheet that must be submitted with the registration fee.

 A Reunion for the Family of Rev. Sid Hawkins and Dora Thompson Hawkins will be held Saturday, June 12, at Spruce Pine Community Center, beginning at 11 a.m. Please bring a covered dish. Everyone is welcome.

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# 'TRANSFER,' from page 1

teacher," Chandler said. "I earned a Masters Degree in Physical Education when I was transferred from math instruction.

"I've never had a single class in how to teach math and I've not taught math in six years. I believe I can make a difference in the lives of my students as a physical education teacher. I've been an employee of Russellville City Schools ten years and believe I've done the best I can for my students," he added.

After Chandler spoke, the board adjourned into executive session.

Upon returning, the board voted unanimously to approve Grimes' request to move Chandler to a middle school math position.

His salary will not change and the transfer will be effective August 4, 2021.

In addition to the special called May 25 meeting, the board met for its regular monthly meeting on May 27. The agenda for both meetings consisted primarily of personnel moves.

Personnel items approved at the May 25 meeting included:

—Resignation of Position: Anna Jeffreys, WES teacher, Maegan Knight, speech language pathology at WES.

—Leave of Absence Request by Steve Bragwell, bus driver, from April 14, 2021, to May 28, 2021.

—Three-Year Principal Contracts: Kristie Ezzell, RES, and Tony Bonds, RMS.

—Employment in Position: Jennifer Butler, assistant principal RHS, Challice Langston, instructional coach RMS (10 month) and Tori Padron, special education teacher WES.

—Retirement in Position: Laura Pruet, nurse at WES, Lesa Rickard, library aide at WES.

—Voluntary Transfer: Monica Moon, from assistant principal at WES to assistant principal at RMS, Alicia Stanford, from assistant principal at RMS to assistant principal at WES, Angie James, from CNP assistant manager at RES to CNP manager at RES, Chris Balentine, from nine month teacher at RHS to 12 month teacher at RHS, Johnna Morrow, from first grade teacher to EL teacher at WES, Marlana Young-Jones, from second grade teacher to EL teacher at WES, Rhonda Pounders, from at-

risk teacher to instructional data coach at WES, Sarah Beall, from CNP worker at RMS to library aide at WES, Melissa Greenhill, from fifth grade teacher to ARI reading coach at RES, Jennifer Wynn, from SPE teacher at WES to SPE teacher at Pre-K, Cassy Groce, from nurse at RES to nurse at WES, Tessa Benford, from teacher at RMS to teacher at RES.

—Athletic Consultants for 2020-21: Micah McCulloch to be pro-consultant for RHS track and field. Maximum payment shall not exceed \$400, to be paid by Track and Field Booster Club.

—Temporary Employment in Position: Jennifer Bishop, teacher at WES, Michell Lane, Karen Mitchell, teachers at WES, Emitt Green, student worker at RES, Airreon McCulloch, student worker at RES.

—Volunteer for 2021-22 Athletic Program: Jermaine Bates, girls basketball.

—Resignation in Supplement: Brittany Flanagan, JV softball.

At the board's May 27 meeting, Greg Trapp was voted to serve as board president for the 2021-22 year, with Bret Gist as president-elect.

Other agenda items included:

—Approving facility use requests for RHS Marching Hundred on August 21, 2021, to host the Watermelon Run, and RHS facilities on September 25, 2021, for the RHS Marching Hundred to host the Northwest Alabama Marching Classic.

—Employment in Position: Angie James, Angela Franks, Chanda Logan, Angie Beard, Stephanie Taylor, Judy Putman, June Smith, Pamela Waldrop, Caroline Patrick, Rebekah Quaintance as CNP Summer Program workers, Derek Ergle, RHS assistant principal.

—Resignation of Position: Mirtha Macias Diego Hall, EL aide at WES.

—Temporary Employment in Position: Cindy Bailey, WES teacher and Lori Masterson Malone, WES teacher.

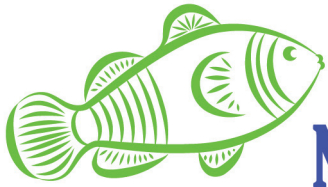
—Temporary Employment in Position for 2021 Summer Learning Program: Kim Palmer, teacher.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Board of Education will be June 16, at 8 a.m., with work session on June 14 at 3:30 p.m.



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# *Congratulations to the Russellville High School Class of 2021!*



**Russellville City School Board of Education. Front Row, from left: Kim Clonts, Jerry Groce and Superintendent Heath Grimes. Back Row, from left: Greg Trapp, Bret Gist and Greg Batchelor.**

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# Congratulations

## CLASS OF 2021!

### **RHS Valedictorian: Lily Pounders**



**Lily Pounders**  
**RHS Class of 2021 Valedictorian**

*John Pilati*  
*Franklin Free Press*

As a member of Russellville High Schools' Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) chapter, Lily Pounders had the opportunity to serve the organization as its 2020-21 president.

But HOSA meant much more to Pounders, who interned at Russellville Hospital and the office of Russellville optometrist Jeremy Campbell.

Those experiences solidified Pounders' decision to study medicine and enter the medical field after her education is complete.

She will start at Auburn University this fall. Pounders chose Auburn in large part because of Auburn graduates' high percentage of acceptance into medical school.

"Ever since I was little I was interested in the medical field. This year when I got to intern at the hospital and Dr. Campbell's office, my passion grew and it confirmed that desire," Pounders said. "This is how I need to serve others."

While some students might have been apprehensive about a hospital internship during the COVID-19 pandemic, Pounders said the experience was invaluable.

"Just being able to see the health care profession in action and how they really stepped up to the plate when the world is in a state of fear and uncertainty," Pounders said. "It's inspiring to me how they help others in such a great time of need. It makes me want to continue working for that type of degree."

Pounders, the daughter of Jeff and Paula Pounders, is the RHS Class of 2021's valedictorian. The honor stayed in the family for the second consecutive year, as Lily's older sister Gracie was the 2020 valedictorian.

Lily and Gracie (who attended Auburn virtually this year) will room together at Auburn this fall. And Lily says she couldn't find a better role model than her big sister. No sibling rivalry here.

"I have to admit she has better study habits than I do. She's always been like a second mother figure in our family being the oldest sister. She's definitely helped take care of me," Lily said.

Unlike some top students from Russellville, Pounders hopes to return home after college.

"I really dream of coming back home because of how amazing our community is. But whatever God's plan is and whatever doors open, that's

where I'll end up," Pounders said.

Russellville City Schools Superintendent of Education Heath Grimes describes Pounders as an outstanding student and role model for others.

"Lily comes from a great family. She is a talented and disciplined student who has served as a leader among her peers. We wish her the best of success at the next level of her education and life," Grimes said.

In addition to serving as HOSA president, Pounders was president of the National Honor Society. She earned the Legacy Award as a six-year cheerleader, all the way from seventh grade to her senior year.

And if that wasn't enough, Pounders played tennis for the RHS girls tennis team this year.

Although she didn't work during the school year, Pounders worked as a lifeguard at the Russellville City Pool and she taught private swim lessons. She and her family attend Calvary Baptist Church.

Pounders delivered her valedictorian speech at Friday night's graduation ceremony, held at the RHS Stadium.

Since Russellville doesn't announce its valedictorian until the week of graduation, she didn't have long to prepare, but Pounders got a trial run last week at church.

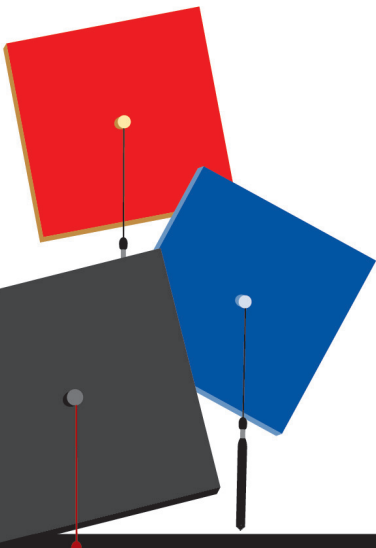
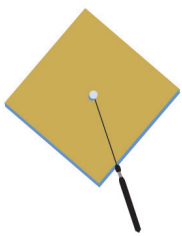
"Last Sunday my church had a graduation party and I had the opportunity to go on stage and say 'thank you' to everyone along the way. I couldn't speak. I was just crying, not because I was sad but because there were so many emotions coming together at the same time," Pounders said.

Pounders isn't apprehensive about leaving her hometown to further her education. And she embraces the idea of college life in a different setting with a diversity of cultures.

Whether it's her discipline in school, her work ethic or the way she treats other people, Pounders deflects all credit for those to her parents.

"I often think about how blessed I am to have the two most amazing parents in the world. They've shown me there's so much more to life than just to be concerned about yourself," Pounders said.

"It's important to reach out and help others, to always be forgiving, and they've always tried to teach us by their actions rather than their words," she added.





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## Year in review

This week, we begin to take a look back at the first half of what was a historic 2020-2021 high school sports scene in the FFP coverage area.

Brady Petree  
 Franklin Free Press

The 2020-2021 high school sports season has finally come to a close and as seniors move on and begin their collegiate athletic and academic career or forge a different path, their final season as a high school athlete was certainly a memorable one.

And while there may be a sea of unknown as for what lies in the future, one thing is for certain: last season was one for the books.

So this week, we take a look back at the first half of this year's sports scene across the FFP coverage area starting with football, volleyball and basketball before looking at all other sports next week.

Things got off to a strong start on the gridiron with three teams reaching the postseason within Franklin County.

Russellville notched their first region title since 2015 with their win over East Limestone on October 16th. In addition to their first regional title in over six seasons, the Golden Tigers also made their deepest playoff run since that aforementioned 2015 season as they managed to reach the 5A quarterfinals before falling to Leeds.

With a plethora of talent from offensive lineman Edgar Amaya, to defensive back Ashaad Williams and countless others, the Golden Tigers had no shortage of talent.

On the southeastern side of the county, Phil Campbell was putting together a special season of their own.

The Bobcats managed to sneak into the class 3A

See 'REVIEW' page 13

# A sign of things to come

Russellville's Smith signs on to continue baseball career at Martin Methodist

Brady Petree  
 Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - When Nick Smith transferred to Russellville from Shoals Christian as an eighth-grader, the future was the furthest thing from his mind.

At the time, Smith was focused on one thing and one thing only: playing baseball.

The only question was focused on exactly *where* he would end up playing ball. And by the time the dust settled, Smith was calling Russellville home.

And as he put pen to paper to continue his baseball career at the collegiate level by signing a scholarship with Martin Methodist (which is soon to merge with the University of Tennessee and will be known as UT Southern), Smith reflects on where he thought his career might go when he was an eighth-grader all those years ago.

"This wasn't how I thought my career was going to go at all. I was honestly just happy to play baseball. During that time I was really just looking for somewhere to play ball," Smith said. To be alongside his friends, family coaches and teammates on such a monumental day brought forth a plethora of emotions for the former Golden Tiger third baseman.

Those emotions came to the surface once he addressed the crowd gathered in the RHS fieldhouse last Thursday afternoon to celebrate Smith's accomplishment.

"It's just such an emotional day. I'm excited and sad at the same time because I'm a senior and this is my last go around," Smith said. "I'm sad to leave these guys, they're like my brothers. But I'm also excited and ready to see what happens in the future."

Smith's now former head coach Chris Heaps has known Smith for years and according to Heaps, from the first time they met, he knew that Smith was bound to have a prominent role in the Golden Tigers' lineup for years to come.

"I remember when Nick transferred here from Shoals Christian as an eighth-grader and I asked him what position he played and he gave me a response that not a lot of people give. He told me he was a hitter. Not many guys say hitter," Heaps said. "But right away we knew we had a special player. He's been a very solid hitter and has another gear in the barrel."

The most memorable moment of Smith's career in the eyes of Heaps, came just a few weeks ago after the Golden Tigers put a bow on the 2021 season with the program's fourth state championship.

"The dearest moment of having Nick as a player came right after the state championship game. We wept on each others shoulders because the work is done. Everything that he came here for and woke up early and hit the weight room for, it's finally all came around," Heaps said.

For Smith, making the decision to continue his career at Martin Methodist really came down to how comfortable he felt with the campus. And due to the size of the campus comparative to that of the Russellville campus, the decision was rather easy.

"I really like how small and close the campus felt.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA  
 Smith, above, carried a .291 average along with a .890 OPS with four homers into the Golden Tigers' state championship series.

It really feels like high school to be completely honest," Smith said.

And while his career as a Golden Tiger has come to a close, Smith and his fellow seniors were able to do what not many seniors get the chance to do: go out on top.

So to win a state title in his final year, alongside the guys he had gone through school with that have become his brothers, just made things that much sweeter.

"It's kind of crazy because it still really hasn't hit me yet. I'm still at a loss for words," Smith said. "But I know I wouldn't want to win it with anyone else but these guys. I know that."



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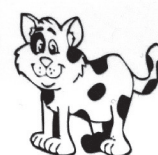
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## 'REVIEW,' from page 11

playoffs after going 6-5 to earn their first postseason berth since 2015 before dropping in the first round to Walter Wellborn.

The Red Bay Tigers notched their third-straight playoff appearance after taking home the 2A region eight runner-up spot. In what ended up being the final playoff run of the Michael Jackson era at Red Bay, the Tigers found their way into the second round for the fourth time since 2015.

And while things were going well on the football field, Franklin County teams managed to continue the success into volleyball season as well.

With the kickoff of the inaugural season for the Red Bay Lady Tigers volleyball squad, Phil Campbell High School announced during the year that they too would be welcoming volleyball into the fold in the coming year.

Both Belgreen and Tharptown managed to put together a successful season in their respective areas with the Lady Bulldogs securing a playoff spot at the regional tournament in Huntsville with their strong performance on the season. And for the Lady Bulldogs, along with it came the first-ever Franklin County volleyball tournament title.

On the hardwood, Franklin County continued to not disappoint.

Putting together one of the strongest basketball campaigns in recent memory (in Franklin County), the Belgreen Bulldogs worked their way to a 26-3 record behind the strong play of Will and Collin Bonner and notched their fifth-straight area title. But they weren't done yet.

After beating the reigning 1A state champion in Pickens County at the regional tournament in Hanceville, the Bulldogs cruised to a state championship appearance for the first time since 1999-2000. And while they might have fallen short of the program's first state championship, the Bulldogs figure to be a frontrunner in the 2021-2022 season.

Behind veteran seniors like Braden Ray, Lane Shewbart and Jalen Vinson,

See, 'REVIEW,' on page 14

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## 'REVIEW,' from page 13

the Red Bay Tigers also put together a great season, winning the class 2A area ten title for their third area championship in a row before falling to Sheffield in the sub-regional round of play.

And in Russellville, Chandler Dyas, Brooks Scott and Jeb Bishop and the rest of the Golden Tigers embarked on a quest to bring home an area title and they accomplished just that.

With a win over West Point, the Golden Tigers secured an area championship before falling to a talented Mae Jemison squad at home in the sub-regional round.

On the girls side of things, multiple squads managed to leave their mark on the postseason.

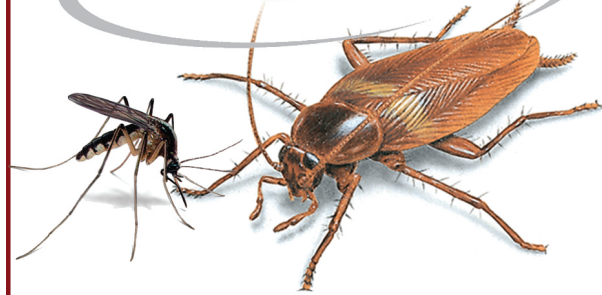
The Phil Campbell Lady Bobcats, with the help of one of the best senior trios in county girls basketball history in Katie Thomas, Olivia Taylor and Caitlynn Mills, managed to win yet another Franklin County title and an area title along with it before falling to Susan Moore in the sub-regional round.

Down in Vina, the Lady Red Devils put together a historic season of their own. Before finishing runner-up in 1A area, the Lady Red Devils clinched a spot in the area title game for the first time since 1998.

In Belgreen, the boys basketball team wasn't the only team making moves.

The Lady Bulldogs secured their first area title in four years with a win over Vina. Emma Dempsey earned FFP player of the year honors with her outstanding performance on the season and was one of the primary reasons the Lady Bulldogs found their way back on top of the local 1A scene.

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