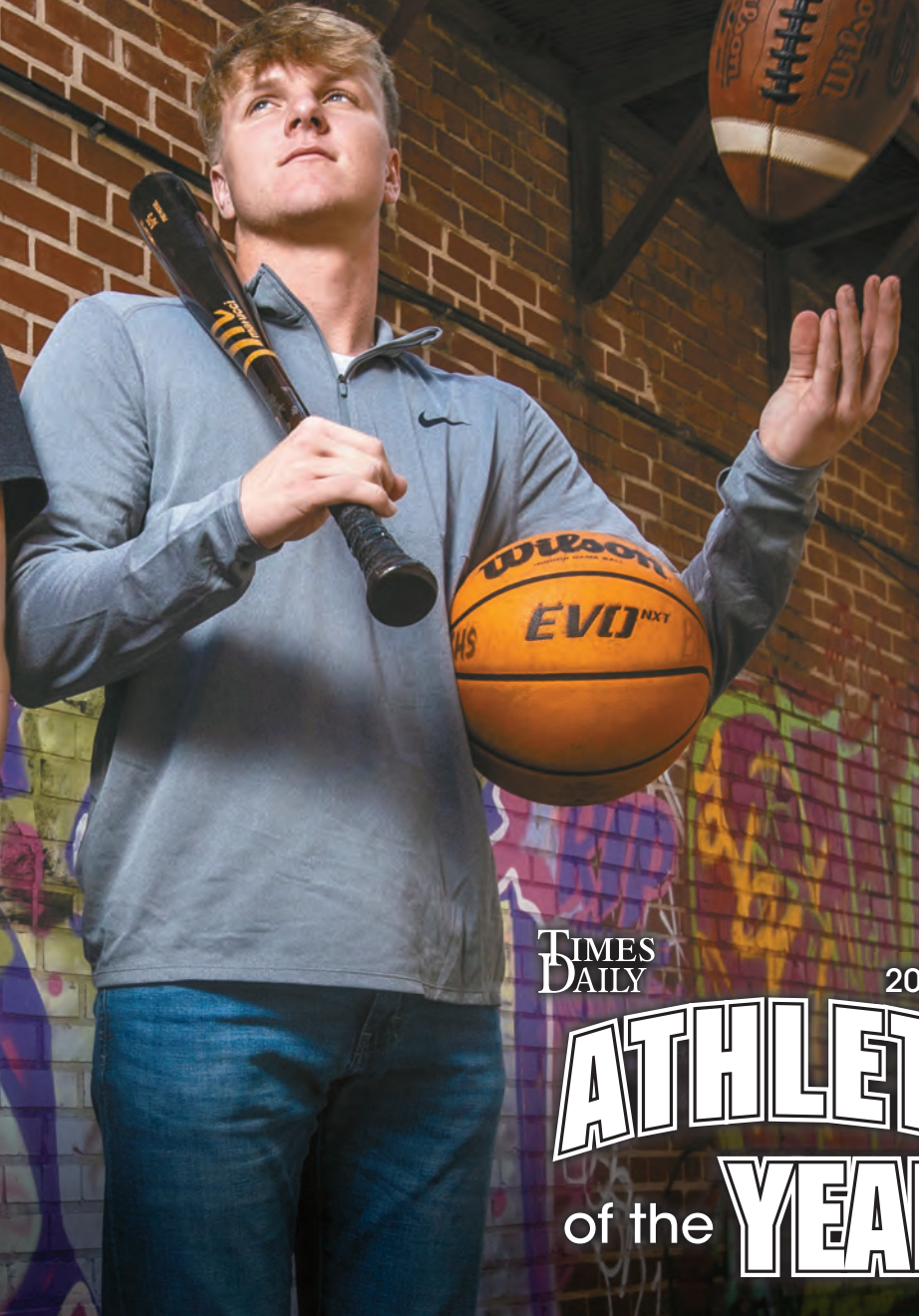


Head of the Class



**Weathers,
Murks juggled
multiple roles.**

TIMES
DAILY

2020-21

ATHLETE
of the **YEAR**

GIRLS ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

Karly keeps going

Weathers eager to see what she and Mustangs do next

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

There will be times at which Karly Weathers should think like a college athlete.

Though she's not yet joined the Alabama women's basketball team, it's not too early for the rising senior at Loretto to approach her workouts and practices the way a college athlete on scholarship does.

But games are different, she explained.

When she wears the black and gold of Loretto during competition, she is not Karly, the Alabama commit. She's Karly, the Loretto kid trying to do whatever she can for the Mustangs and the hometown that supports them.

"When I'm on the floor, I'm one of them and I'm a high schooler," she said.

To approach sports any differently would ruin much of what Weathers, the TimesDaily's girls athlete of the year, believes has helped Loretto achieve the success it has.

A highly recruited basketball standout who helped lead the basketball team to the Class A state title, Weathers is also a key member of the school's volleyball team, which was the Class A state runner-up.

Weathers had 577 kills this year for the volleyball team, which beat South Greene once and Sale Creek twice during the state tournament but took a pair of losses to county rival Summertown.

She averaged 23 points per game during the basketball season, earning Tennessee's Class A Miss Basketball award for the first time. She scored 18 points in the state championship win over — who else? — Summertown.

As a Loretto athlete, she celebrates a culture she and her teammates share that promotes honesty and responsibility but stops short of any negativity that would damage relationships.

"I firmly believe that last year the reason that we won (a state championship) was because we could all hold each other accountable and nobody cared



Loretto's Karly Weathers led the girls basketball team to a state championship and the volleyball team to a runner-up finish. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

about who said what," she said.

That works in part because so many of the Mustangs have the type of desire Weathers has to win to complement the group's collective talent.

But if you think Weathers will feel less urgency to win a state championship now that she and her basketball teammates have one, consider her story from Easter several years ago as a reminder of how

deep-seated her competitive drive is.

During an Easter egg hunt, she found a gold-colored egg she knew had \$20 in



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BOYS ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

Out here Killen it

Murks handles big roles for 3 Brooks teams

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

When Kyler Murks looks ahead, he does so in three parts.

The rising senior at Brooks High has taken big roles for the school's football, boys basketball and baseball teams since he transferred from Mars Hill after his freshman year.

It takes a lot of time and motivation simply to compete at the required level in all three sports, and plenty more once you throw in the practices and workouts necessary to be at your best.

But in each setting, Murks, the TimesDaily's boys athlete of the year, finds moments that draw him and make that work worth it.

"Friday nights stand out a lot," he said, referring to the fall. "There were a couple nights in baseball that stand out a lot.

"But I don't think anything really tops what we went through in basketball this year. I think that stands out the most."

Murks averaged more than 17 points and four rebounds per game this past basketball season and shined brightest in Birmingham at the Class 4A state tournament.

He scored 26 points, including a game-tying shot at the buzzer in regulation, as Brooks took its semifinal opponent to overtime for the second year in a row. (The Lions lost 69-61 to BTW-Tuskegee this year. Last year, they fell to Williamson.)

"The fans, the student section, they did a great job all year being there for us," he said.

But if basketball left the biggest impression this past year based on the team's success, he still added to his roles in the other sports.

Ineligible for football as a sophomore after transferring, Murks made the All-State team last fall after passing for more than 1,400 yards, rushing for more than 600 and being involved in 40 tackles from his spot in the



Brooks' Kyler Murks helped the Lions reach the postseason in football, boys basketball and baseball as a junior. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

secondary.

"That's what football's about — trusting the guys around you," he said. "So, you know, once I trusted the guys around me, it all came to."

Brooks was the reigning Class 4A state baseball champion for an extra year due to the COVID-19 pandemic canceling last year's playoffs.

The Lions lost a lot of good players over those two years, so Murks had a big responsibility as one of the team's proven players entering this season.

A shortstop, Murks batted .425 with 12 doubles, a triple and a home run this past spring, and the Lions reached the second round of the Class 4A playoffs.

In all three sports, Brooks was



Kyler Murks (right) made a game-tying layup at the end of regulation in the Class 4A state semifinal basketball game against BTW-Tuskegee. He finished with a game-high 26 points. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



Brooks' Kyler Murks passed for more than 1,400 yards and ran for more than 600 last fall in football.

[PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

MURKS

From Page G4

eliminated by a team that finished as the state runner-up.

Murks wants to play a sport in college, and next year will offer him chances to show he warrants a scholarship. He also likes playing for the

town of Killen, and he knows how much people there care about Brooks High School. They want success, too.

Murks doesn't let one sport get him behind in another, making sure to get shots up during football season or take a few swings during the winter.

Each sport this past year offered good moments. Each one also left him



Kyler Murks helped the Lions reach the second round of the Class 4A baseball playoffs.

chasing something.

"I think that we have a really good shot in all three sports," he said of the prospect of success. "It just depends how much work me and the guys put

in in the offseason."

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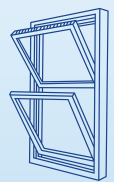
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Go west, young man

Russellville's Edgar Amaya will roam with the Buffaloes

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

RUSSELLVILLE — Entering eighth grade, Edgar Amaya didn't know much about football.

His parents, Edgar Sr. and Rosa, who were born in El Salvador, didn't either.

But Edgar Jr. was a big kid, and he wanted to play the sport with his friends. It was the start of what he calls a "crazy emotional ride."

"We aren't a football family obviously, being Hispanic and coming from a Hispanic culture," Amaya said. "... They didn't want me to play because they thought it was too dangerous. So getting them to let me play was a big step."

The first of many, it turns out.

Amaya was an anchor of Russellville's offensive line, splitting time at left tackle, left guard and right guard this year, and he is the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A football player of the year.

Originally a Kansas commit, Amaya de-committed from the Jayhawks during the fall and switched to Colorado. He joins a decorated list of former Golden Tigers who have signed football scholarships at prominent schools over the years.

His parents and other family members attended his signing day ceremony wearing Colorado Buffaloes merchandise.

"They never thought it would become this," Amaya said.

Amaya helped the Golden Tigers earn a Class 5A quarterfinal appearance this past fall. It was their best playoff run since 2015.

"The stereotypical thing was 'Ah, Russellville is going to fall out of the first round. We're just a first-round exit.' We just knew coming into this year that we had to break that," Amaya said. "We had to break that streak and we had to keep pushing forward and keep grinding."

Russellville beat Fairfield 14-7 and Leeds 35-14 before falling 54-14 to Ramsay at Birmingham's Legion Field in the quarterfinals.

"Outside of the game, I got better as



Russellville senior offensive lineman Edgar Amaya led the Golden Tigers to the Class 5A quarterfinals this past fall. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

a leader and better as a teammate. I was there for my teammates a lot more," he said. "I was checking up on them, making sure they got to practice. If they didn't have a ride I was (there). I grew as a teammate and a leader."

On the field, Amaya feels he was more disciplined and did a better job handling his assignments, particularly in pass

protection.

A Los Angeles native who moved to Russellville in time for kindergarten, Amaya will play in the Pacific-12 Conference and try to help Colorado return to the success it saw in the 1990s and 2000s.

He will room with a lineman from Texas named Jackson Anderson and

soon after signing started talking with all the recruits in his signing class through social media.

"We're going to be a special group," he said.

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"I'm so thankful that I've grown up playing around them because nobody hold themselves higher than the person next to them," Loretto's Karly Weathers (left) said. "It's very special."

WEATHERS

From Page G2

it. Her older brother, Ryan, knew it, too.

"I'm a little kid, and \$20 is a lot of money," she said. "Ryan steals it out of my basket and just because he stole it I kicked my Easter basket, and my parents were very upset with me."

Did she get to keep the \$20?

"Yes, I did," Weathers said, and then she laughed. "Probably after I got my tail spanked."

It should be no surprise Weathers is talking about how eager she is for the upcoming school year and a chance to find more success with her Loretto teammates.

The basketball team is a reigning state champion, and the volleyball team came close. But with another year of school left, why should all that be enough?

"I'm so thankful that I've grown up playing around them because nobody hold themselves higher than the person next to them," she said. "It's very special."

Contact Craig at Craig.Thomas@TimesDaily.com. Follow him on Twitter: [@TD_CraigThomas](https://twitter.com/TD_CraigThomas)



Loretto's Karly Weathers averaged 23 points per game this season. She has committed to Alabama. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



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Here to stay

Peyton Higgins helped Mars Hill remain on top

By Michael Hebert
Sports Writer

In 2019, Peyton Higgins spoke about his team after a loss to Lanett in the 1A state championship.

Higgins, a junior at the time, said Mars Hill proved it wasn't just a one-hit wonder. He believed the Panthers were here to stay.

Well, Higgins and the rest of his teammates didn't just say those words. The Panthers backed the statement up on the field. Mars Hill moved up a classification to 2A and brought home another state championship, the Panthers' second in three years.

Higgins, the Times Daily's 1A-3A football player of the year, has been an integral piece of Mars Hill's rise as one of the top programs in the area and the state.

"We've created a program at Mars Hill that's known for winning and for players that want to win," Higgins said. "We've got great coaches (and great support by all our fans. ... That's what makes us keep producing each year."

The senior running back and wide receiver capped off a long career with the Panthers by breaking the AHSAA record for career kickoff-return touchdowns. He recorded his ninth in the 2A state championship win over Abbeville.

Higgins never passes up an opportunity to be appreciative of his teammates, one of which being fellow senior running back Hunter Kilpatrick, who actually fielded the kick and tossed to Higgins for the return.

"It was definitely a team effort," Higgins said. "I had some great blocks but most importantly it was an unselfish act by the whole team."

This fall, Higgins will be at Troy. He's the first Mars Hill player to sign with a Football Bowl Subdivision school.

He expects to play receiver and is excited to get to know his teammates.

"They run a good offense," Higgins said of Troy. "They throw it around a



Mars Hill's Peyton Higgins helped guide the Panthers to the 2020 Class 2A state championship. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

lot, so that's exciting. ... I'm excited to get down there and see what I can do."

And when Higgins visits home in

the future, he's confident that when he watches his old team, it'll be more of the same.

"You definitely don't want to see it drop off and I know for a fact that Mars Hill will not drop off," Higgins said.

CLASS 4A-7A
ALL-AREA VOLLEYBALL

Burden Ball

Deshler junior Kallie Burden shook off injury to have big year

By Michael Hebert and Errol Chandler
For the TimesDaily

Deshler junior Kallie Burden tore her labrum and had surgery in January, starting a road to recovery in order to be ready for volleyball season.

The process was hard mentally, Burden said. But, thanks to help from Deshler athletic trainer Ricky Bryant, she thought it made her stronger.

Burden, who is the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A player of the year, not only fully recovered, but she set a goal to reach 1,000 career kills this season.

Now, she's at 1,150, after a season in which Deshler reached the second round of the North Regional in Huntsville.

"I just enjoyed playing with my team," Burden said. "(We) really worked hard to get as far as we got."

The start of the season, like it was with all fall sports, had uncertainty. Burden said the Tigers worked as if there was going to be a season despite not knowing, which helped the team overall.

Deshler is no stranger to success in volleyball under head coach Jana Killen. Burden said she likes that Killen makes the players work hard, but also appreciates her insight.

"She's helped me get out of some bad habits when I was coming back



Deshler junior Kallie Burden recovered from a shoulder injury to record more than 380 kills in the 2020 season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

from my surgery," Burden said. "She really helps all of us mentally, too, in our game."

Personally, Burden said her improvement this season wasn't all based in stats. As an upperclassman, she wanted to become a better teammate and leader.

As the season wore on and the Tigers were going deeper in the postseason, she started to see where she could help.

"I feel like I really tried to encourage everybody," Burden said. "Especially when there was pressure on us."

Burden wants to play volleyball in college. She's working with her club volleyball team, Level Elite, which is based out of Florence.

Going into her senior year, she's excited to see what Deshler can do. For starters, she's hoping that the season will be a bit more normal, which could mean more games.

The experience of making it to Huntsville is one she thinks will help going forward.

"We (saw) how it is and we know how much pressure was put on us," Burden said. "I think we can handle it and go farther next year."

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Embracing the challenges

Lila Beth Turner helped lead, guide Golden Bears through tumultuous year

By Errol Chandler and
Michael Hebert
For the TimesDaily

Lila Beth Turner went into the volleyball season not knowing what to expect.

With so many walls and barriers that needed to be addressed due to COVID-19, Turner knew from the beginning that this season would be unlike any other.

There were challenges. Turner, being the leader that she is, decided to keep pressing forward in order to ensure a strong season.

She recalled one point in the season that put things into perspective.

“I feel like the most challenging part of our year was at the area tournament,” Turner said. “The morning of the tournament, five girls that were starters were quarantined.”

This meant that Turner would be the only active starter. Not only would the team have to suit up with a team full of all eighth-graders, Turner would also be playing her first game back from an injury she had suffered earlier in the season.

Instead of complaining, the team held a meeting and made the decision to play the inexperienced bunch and sure enough, the decision paid off. The Lexington Golden Bears went on to win the area tournament and in that tournament win, Turner recognized one major point.

“After winning the area

tournament, we knew we could compete with any team. Even without the seven girls in total missing,” she said.

Moments like that helped Turner, the TimesDaily’s Class 1A-3A volleyball player of the year for the second straight season, become an even more polished leader.

Turner finished the season with over 400 kills and was thankful to be recognized again and appreciated the support of so many.

Turner knew early that the season would have its issues. Multiple times, the Golden Bears dealt with the issue of potentially not having enough players to play and were forced to bring in younger and more inexperienced players on the varsity level.

But the goal never changed.

“Our expectation at the beginning of the season was to be the best we could be with what we had,” she said. “We expected to go to state and win a blue map.”

Instead, Turner’s focus quickly became to make the most impact she could while stepping up even more as a leader. She even received guidance from a friend and former coach in Renita Toner, who gave her some early advice on how to properly handle this season.

“She told me that my job was to step up and encourage those girls and that’s how we would win and succeed as a team,” Turner said.



Lexington’s Lila Beth Turner totaled more than 400 kills this season for the Golden Bears. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Gave it his all

Senior Trey Hurt led Falcons with a last-chance mentality

By Michael Hebert
Sports Writer

Florence junior Trey Hurt said his approach to every race this cross country season was to treat each one as if it could be the last.

That's because Hurt and his teammates at Florence were unsure on how the season would shake out due to the effects of COVID-19. Nevertheless, the Falcons were able to complete a season and Hurt, who is the TimesDaily's boys all-area cross country runner of the year, finished 20th in the Class 7A state meet with a time of 16:26.

"Coming into every race, it was more of, this could be it," Hurt said. "I was like 'Guys, this could be it, so we have to go into every race like this could be the last one.' We gave all the effort we could in every race this year."

Hurt admitted that he was initially a little frustrated when Florence moved from 6A to 7A.

His first thought was that he might have had a chance to place a lot higher in 6A. As time went on, however, he realized that

competing with the biggest schools brought out the best competition in him.

"You see how good the competition is and it makes you want it even more to be a part of it and get on the podium with those guys," Hurt said.

Hurt said he had a goal to break the school record, set by former Florence runner Bennett Blake with a time of 15:55.12. While he fell short of that, he's leaning on his faith and he's grateful for the chance to compete.

He gets one more shot to compete again next fall, but he said he'll miss the seniors from this year's team. The group got close by playing ultimate frisbee and often going on long runs together.

"I'm going to miss those guys. They made practice fun," Hurt said. "It's definitely made the team chemistry (better)."

All the same, he's excited for next fall, as well.

"Getting one more shot at it next year, it's a true blessing," Hurt said.

Hurt wants to run in college and is considering Alabama, Mississippi State and Ole Miss.



Florence's Trey Hurt finished 20th in the Class 7A state cross country meet and was fastest of any local boy at the event regardless of class. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

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ALL-AREA GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY

No looking back

Ridgeway lived in the moment in final prep cross country season

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

There were about 400 meters left in Mary Claire Ridgeway's high school cross country career.

The Florence High senior carried a goal of a top-5 individual finish into the Class 7A state cross country meet Nov. 14, but she was in sixth place most of the race.

Closing on the end of the race, she passed a runner to move into fifth.

"I remember passing her and I was just like 'Hold on!'" Ridgeway said with a laugh. "I was just trying to hold on and push myself. It was kind of like a no-looking-back kind of thing."

That approach served Ridgeway well throughout 2020. Though her times were still not as fast as they were during a dominant freshman year, after two years of occasional frustration Ridgeway stopped sweating the difference and prioritized making the most of her senior year.

For the fourth time in five years, she is the TimesDaily's girls cross country runner of the year.

"It was a good ending to a long journey of ups and downs," she said. "I had a good experience with my teammates this year, growing closer. I'm happy with how I finished."

Ridgeway was the Class 6A state champion as a freshman, when she finished the state 5K in 18 minutes, 20 seconds. But she was 5-foot-5 back then. She's now 5-10 or 5-11.

"The last two years after ninth grade I was just constantly pushing myself to be like I was in ninth grade. My body's changed. I've grown taller. It's just different," she said.

Ridgeway placed fifth in this year's Class 7A state meet with a time of 19 minutes, 19 seconds.

"I was trying to focus the best version of myself right now and not dwelling so much on not being as good as I was in ninth grade. Just focusing on who I am now and trying to be the best version



Florence's Mary Claire Ridgeway finished fifth in the Class 7A state meet and was the fastest local runner in any class. (DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY)

of myself now.

"I feel like this year I finally had some progress with that."

Ridgeway played on the Florence basketball team for the first time, and she ran track in the spring. Her current

plan is to study something related to computer science in college.

"I still feel like I have a lot of potential in cross country and I don't think that my times necessarily reflected my work this year and the past couple

years," she said. "I definitely feel like my body's getting stronger."

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ALL-AREA WRESTLING

Ready for the moment

Deaton added to Deshler's championship history

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

TUSCUMBIA — There is a moment Nathan Deaton anticipates in a wrestling match.

The Deshler senior watches how his opponent breathes and waits for the aggression to turn into a more passive pressure.

That's when Deaton senses his opportunity and, hopefully, success.

"It was the whole state tournament. I knew my stamina was way ahead of all theirs," Deaton said, referring to his opponents in the Class 1A-4A 132-pound weight class. "So I just kind of waited for them to start breathing hard.

"And as soon as they started breathing hard I just turned the jets on, and it worked."

The senior, who moved to the Shoals from Chattanooga after his freshman year, capped his three-year Deshler wrestling career with a state championship in the 132-pound weight class.

Deaton, the TimesDaily's all-area wrestler of the year, joined a long list of individual state champions over the years from Deshler and took advantage of his health a year after returning quickly from a collarbone injury and being eliminated in the sectional round.

Deaton told the TimesDaily about the physical work he did to stay fit, but he spent more time talking about how his mind works and how important that is to his success.

"I realize I have to work so hard to where I don't doubt myself at all," he said. "If you're sitting there doubting yourself before the match, you know how it's going to go. If you're doubting you can win the match, you're not going to win it."

Deaton beat Piedmont's Caleb Tidwell, Weaver's Travis Bellar, New Hope's Walter Allen and Montgomery Catholic's Titus Franklin at the state tournament.

Deaton said Bellar had the best technique of the group and has a similar



Deshler's Nathan Deaton went 4-0 at the Class 1A-4A state tournament to win a state championship at 132 pounds. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

wrestling style to his own, making him the toughest competition.

But Allen had beaten Deaton by a point in mid-December. That stands as Deaton's last loss as a high school wrestler. Deaton pinned him in the state semifinal.

Franklin was undefeated, and Deaton beat him by a convincing score of 13-7.

"There was no doubt in my mind at all about walking into the state tournament," Deaton said. "I just needed to wait until they gave up and just capitalize off that, and I did."

Now Deaton's name will go on the long banner on the wall in the Deshler gymnasium listing every individual state wrestling champion in school history.

"I like to move forward in my thinking," Deaton said. "I was more happy

Deaton is deliberate in his mental and physical preparation and said his task before this season was about perfecting each aspect of how he wrestles.

"Growth isn't really linear. You grow in, like, a zig zag, I would say," Deaton said. "And most people try to look at it as one way, but I kind of see growth as 'Well, this isn't working so let's go over here and let's do this, and then let's go over here and figure that out after I figure this out.'

"I knew I was growing, so I wasn't going to get angry about it."

He finished his season at 31-2 and took a state championship in his second appearance at the state tournament in three seasons.

Deaton will wrestle at St. Mary's (Kansas), an NAIA school, and he hopes his recent success spurs further improvement against college competition.

He will take with him the approach that's gotten him to this point.

"As long as your mind's strong enough to realize what to do, as long as your mind can choose what's best for you in each situation," Deaton said, "I feel like it'll always work out some way or another."

because all the younger people on the team get to see that they can do it, too."

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With Will, Belgreen finds way

Bonner pushed Bulldogs to historic heights

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Will Bonner has the ball in his hands more than any other player on the Belgreen boys basketball team, but that doesn't mean he gets to make every decision.

Coach Marty Cooper still gets the final say.

"We might butt heads every once in a while," Bonner acknowledged, thinking about times when he has had an idea Cooper vetoed. "For some reason, his stuff always works better than mine."

But Bonner said Cooper coaches the Bulldogs intensely in practice with the idea of giving them freedom to make a lot of decisions during games, and at the center of such relationships is trust.

Cooper puts a lot of that trust in the point guard Bonner, the TimesDaily's Class 1A-3A boys basketball player of the year.

Bonner averaged 20.8 points, 3.6 rebounds and four assists per game in guiding the Bulldogs to a Class 1A state runner-up finish, their deepest postseason run in 27 years.

Bonner and twin brother Collin transferred from Russellville to Belgreen after their freshman year. Will quickly bonded with Scout Bragwell, who closed his Belgreen career this season with a flurry of timely 3-pointers that helped the Bulldogs win big games.

Cooper arrived as the team's coach at the same time, and Will Bonner learned quickly the coach had faith in him. Bonner recalled a game against Deshler when the Tigers rallied out of a big deficit and Belgreen had to hold on to a small lead.

"We're going to put the ball in your hands, and you're going to make free throws," Bonner remembers Cooper saying during the 72-71 Belgreen win.

Last year's Belgreen team reached the Class 1A Northwest Regional final and lost to Decatur Heritage by three.

Bonner suspects the Bulldogs were a bit timid entering that game, and he



Belgreen's Will Bonner led the Bulldogs to a Class 1A state runner-up finish this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

thought the team generally practiced with more intensity. The Decatur Heritage game lingered throughout this past season.

"I thought about it before just about every game, especially playoff time," Bonner said.

Bonner enjoys a competitive relationship with his twin, though the taller Collin Bonner has a different role as less of a scorer but one of the team's top defenders.

"I'm gonna tell you, I beat him today," Will said during an interview last spring. "But he's obviously capable

of beating me."

Belgreen rolled past Holy Spirit and defending champ Pickens County in the regional and dominated Notasulga in the state semifinals before an 11-0 run by Autaugaville doomed the Bulldogs in the state title game.

Bonner acknowledged things will be different with four seniors gone, but he knows how much fun the Bulldogs had on this year's postseason run and believes they'll be motivated to earn another such experience.

Bonner said he thanks God for the opportunity the team had this past year

and thanks everyone in Franklin County for supporting the team so well. Large crowds showed up for Belgreen's state tournament games despite the school's small size, and they saw Belgreen compete well each time.

"We wanted to show that we were there for a reason," Bonner said. "Just to see how far we came from the beginning of the season to end, it's incredible."

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CLASS 1A-3A GIRLS ALL-AREA BASKETBALL

Striking gold

State title still brings smile to Weathers, Mustangs

By **Craig Thomas**
Sports Writer

The 2021 Class A Miss Basketball trophy sat near the kitchen table at the Weathers house last March, its permanent home not yet decided.

But Loretto junior Karly Weathers, who earned it, didn't seem too rushed to find a place for it. As much as she appreciates it, after all, another trophy means more.

Loretto beat rival Summertown for the Tennessee Class A state championship this year, claiming its first girls basketball state championship since 1958.

With the elusive "gold ball" trophy finally in the Mustangs' possession, Weathers feels the joy of earning it and quickly started working toward helping

the team earn another state title and gold ball next year as a senior.

That's how it works for Weathers, the TimesDaily's small school girls basketball player of the year. Winning is not new to her, but it doesn't mean pursuing success with any less intensity.

That Loretto won the state title two years after finishing runner-up and one year after the pandemic ended the season before a champion was determined gives Weathers and her teammates an even greater appreciation of their recent triumph.

"You can't stop smiling when you start talking about it," Weathers said. "We wanted to do that for our five seniors last year and we couldn't do it and it was out of our control. This year it was in our control."

Weathers led Loretto with 18 points in the state championship win. Despite the long buildup of work and anticipation, Weathers carried a calmness through the season's final games she attributes to her Christian faith and a decision to simply do her best and let that be enough.

Her older brother, Ryan, made his major league debut with the San Diego Padres last fall, pitching against the Dodgers in the National League Division Series. She said he told her he felt like he was floating on the clouds.

Then this spring, Karly got to feel something like that for herself.

"I had a sense of peace throughout the entire state tournament," Weathers said.

That does not, of course, mean Weathers wanted to win any less. Polite and thoughtful, the 5-9 junior is fiercely



Loretto's Karly Weathers led the Mustangs to their first girls basketball state championship since 1958. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

competitive in matters both athletic and otherwise.

"You probably don't want to play a board game or a card game with me," Weathers said, mentioning a card game she and her family like to play called Nerts.

"Someone always — it never fails, it's usually me — leaves the table mad," she jokes.

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The man for the moment

When Brooks needed big plays, Kyler Murks delivered

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

KILLEN — Kyler Murks had the ball in his hands for the big shot — just like he wanted — but had little time for inner debate.

Go for the two points and send the Class 4A state semifinal to overtime? Pull up for a 3 that would either put Brooks in the final or end the season?

Murks chose option one, and it worked in the short-term. But Brooks lost to BTW-Tuskegee in overtime, and the junior guard can't relish that moment as much knowing what came next.

"If I could go back, I would rather be the guy that misses the 3-pointer and we lose or the guy that makes the 3-pointer and we win in that position," Murks said.

There's no right or wrong answer, of course, but certain moments provide opportunities.

Murks, the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A boys basketball player of the year, capitalized on many of his opportunities and led Brooks to a second consecutive state tournament appearance.

A Brooks student through sixth grade who spent three years at Mars Hill before returning to Killen, Murks has helped maintain the Lions' boys basketball success under coach Brian Wright and been part of consecutive state tournament trips.

The Lions lost in overtime to Williamson in last year's semifinals. This year they earned double-digit wins over Central, Haleyville and Deshler to return to Birmingham, where they again lost in overtime in the semifinals.

"I was pretty pleased with us making it to Birmingham, and going back two years in a row is a pretty big deal, especially for us around here," Murks said. "It hasn't happened a lot."

He credits several teammates for knocking down shots and doing other good work to help the team.



Brooks' Kyler Murks averaged 17 points per game and led the Lions to the Class 4A state semifinals. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

That includes backcourt pal Knute Wood, a particularly close friend he has known since they were 3 or 4. Wood is a capable scorer, but Murks credits him for also being a willing passer and effective motivator.

"It's great, man, especially growing up both being athletes, always competing and stuff," Murks said. "It gets you better when you compete with somebody and you're best friends because you can get mad at each other and the next day you're back the same."

Murks, whose uncle, Rusty, is a

Brooks assistant coach, does not know what his athletic future will look like after next year. He plays basketball, baseball and football and said he'd be happy to play any of those sports in college.

In the meantime, he appreciates not only the big games Brooks plays in but the moments with teammates that complement the journey.

Good-natured roughhousing on road trips ("We had a couple bloody noses in the hotel room jumping around," Murks said.), ordering late-night pizza

in the lobby and joking around on the bus rides are all part of the fun.

But when it's time to work toward another state tournament trip, the fun comes with focus.

"I think we threaten people," Murks said. "I think they're worried when they see us walk in the gym. They know what we've done and what we can do."

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Sara, Sara

For Muscle Shoals, no time is a good time for goodbye

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

MUSCLE SHOALS — Sara Puckett graduated from Muscle Shoals High School at the end of May, but in many ways her college transition started before that.

The Tennessee signee completed workouts assigned by the Vols' coaching staff, continued working with local trainer Rayfield Ragland. She did a lot of running designed to improve her explosiveness and maintain overall playing shape.

It is the kind of work necessary for college athletes but not always beloved. Puckett grinned when asked if she ever hates the offseason conditioning.

"Not yet, no, honestly," she said. "I've really been enjoying it just because I want to be prepared for next year and impress the coaches as soon as I get to campus."

Puckett impressed throughout her high school career and is the Times-Daily's three-time Class 4A-7A girls basketball player of the year.

The state's Class 6A player of the year this season and the state Gatorade player of the year, the 6-foot-2 Puckett averaged 21.3 points, 10 rebounds and 2.6 assists per game.

She joined the Muscle Shoals varsity as a seventh-grader, shining in her very first appearance against rival Florence, and over each of the next five seasons added a little more to her game and expanded her role for coach Blair Woods' team.

Now she'll wear the signature orange of one of the signature programs in women's college basketball and have the chance to match up with schools like South Carolina, Mississippi State, Kentucky and Alabama.

"The competition is going to be unreal, and that's what I'm really excited for," she said.

Puckett has tried to become a more complete player, continuing to work on her shooting and scoring near the rim. She expects to play in a small forward



Muscle Shoals' Sara Puckett, who has signed with Tennessee, averaged 21 points and 10 rebounds per game as a senior. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

or power forward role depending on the situation.

As she waited to head to campus, she enjoyed the off-court aspects of getting ready, like going with her mom to get things for her dorm room.

"It's been super fun, just because that's where my girly girl aspect gets to come out, I guess," Puckett said. "I get

to make my own thing. I can put a homey feel into it, so if I do get homesick, OK, well, I'll be in my room and have pictures of me and my family (and then) OK, I'm good."

Just as there might be days Puckett misses Muscle Shoals, there will be days Muscle Shoals misses her.

"I definitely wish we could have gone

further each year, but I feel like my hard work that I put in, I just put that mentality into my teammates because they saw how hard I did work, and that's what I wanted," Puckett said.

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ALL-AREA GIRLS TENNIS

Powering up

Florence's Mitchener taking more chances and dominating

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

To be fair, it has a decent ring to it. Martha Mitchener does not remember exactly who on the Florence tennis team gave her the nickname. It was a good-natured way of teasing her for her conservative playing style, a willingness to simply keep the ball alive without looking for a powerful shot to end the point.

But the name highlighted a truth ("boring to watch, honestly") she wanted to change.

"They called me 'Marathon match Martha' because my matches would take hours," Mitchener said. "I was getting a little tired of long matches, so I was like, I think I need to amp it up a little and be a little bit more aggressive."

Consider her style amped up.

Mitchener, the TimesDaily's girls tennis player of the year, became a different player as a junior. She is taking more risks, hitting more powerful winners and beating opponents before dark. It seems "Marathon match Martha" can be retired.

"People have been coming up to me like, wow, it's so fun to watch you. You've gotten so much better hitting all those winners," Mitchener said. "And that just makes me feel really good to hear people say that."

The change did not come easily. She made routine trips to Turtle Point Yacht and Country Club to work with a tennis coach there named Mark Johnson. She said Johnson would have her run side to side hitting shot after shot as hard as she could.

"It was pretty frustrating. It took some time to get to where I could be more aggressive," Mitchener said. "Definitely heard an earful from Mark a couple of times."

Mitchener went 14-0 in regular-season singles matches as Florence's No. 1 player and won a sectional title.



Florence's Martha Mitchener helped the Falcons claim a sectional title and finish third in the Class 7A state tournament. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

She also teamed with Ruby Cunningham to go 14-0 in the regular season at No. 1 doubles, and there is a bittersweetness to reflecting on that excellent season because Cunningham has graduated.

The two were first paired together when Mitchener was in seventh grade, and they are close enough now they can have fun together even on challenging days.

"She's my go-to person. I love her. She's my best friend," Mitchener said.

Cunningham uses the aggressive approach Mitchener has worked to adapt over time, but that's not the only way they complement each other.

"I'm more quiet and she definitely brings me out of my shell with new people," Mitchener said. "We'll be meeting people at tennis tournaments and stuff and she'll always be like 'Martha, come and talk to so-and-so. I just met her. You'd love her!'"

"We've always gotten along like that. She's great in that way."

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ALL-AREA BOYS TENNIS

Strong impression

Drake Woodard emerges as leader for Muscle Shoals

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Drake Woodard's teammates left an impression.

He had started playing tennis as a seventh-grader, spurred in part by his tennis-playing parents' encouragement, and started to love the sport when he got to high school.

"Once I got to high school and really saw the varsity and how serious it was and how good those players were, that's when I started really taking it seriously," he said.

Now a rising senior at Muscle Shoals, Woodard remembers being a freshman and watching older Trojans including Jackson Hall, Hudson Thompson and Mason Stevens play tennis.

"I thought at the time 'These guys are insane. These guys are just crazy good. I want to be that good one day,'" Woodard said.

It's up for debate whether Woodard has reached that mark yet. ("I'd love to see how I am against them now," Woodard said.)

Either way, his development is clear beyond his title as the Trojans' No. 1 singles player. He earned that responsibility with his work in the fall and backed it up through a strong spring.

Woodard, the TimesDaily's boys tennis player of the year, went 18-7 this year and beat every opponent he played in north Alabama at least once.

"I think I did really well," he said. "It was my first year at No. 1, so I played a lot of tough matches, got a lot of experience. It's going to help me for next year. Hopefully I can be even more successful."

His challenge as a senior is to improve enough to match up with some of the state's best players in Class 6A.

After earning a bid to this year's



Muscle Shoals' Drake Woodard traded basketball for tennis in middle school and hasn't looked back. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

state tournament, Woodard lost his opening match to eventual state runner-up Jordan Garrett of Chelsea at No. 1 singles.

"He was really nice. After our match I told him, I was like, you know, I think you can probably make a run at state," Woodard said. "I didn't really think he'd go to the final, but he did and he was very, very good."

Woodard has one year of high school left to advance further in the post-season, one more year to be the older player leaving a positive impression on younger ones.

Woodard played basketball earlier in his life but decided in middle school that sport wasn't for him. That's when his parents, Paige and Al, suggested a switch to tennis.

He seems happy with his choice. "Oh yeah, very," Woodard said.

"Very glad."

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ALL-AREA GIRLS GOLF

Passing the torch



Muscle Shoals' Riya Key started playing golf in seventh grade and became a mentally stronger player over time. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Muscle Shoals' Riya Key closes out successful career

By Gregg Dewalt
For the TimesDaily

It only seemed like Riya Key played at Muscle Shoals forever.

The reality is that she was a member of the girls golf team for six years, including the lost season of 2020 that was scuttled by the coronavirus pandemic. Along the way, she was mentored by the Trojans' upperclassmen until all of the sudden, this past season, she was the one doing the mentoring.

Key also played some pretty good golf. She put together an area-leading 80.11 stroke average and just missed qualifying for the Class 6A state tournament. Her stroke average was nearly three shots better than any other player in the area.

Along her golf journey with the Trojans, Key celebrated two state championships and played in a third.

"I remember in the seventh grade when I started playing golf, it was more for fun. Mentally I was not as strong of a player or as competitive as I am now," said Key, the TimesDaily girls golfer of the year and now a Muscle Shoals

graduate. "Now, I'm mentally stronger and I'm a lot better at calming myself down and taking it shot by shot."

She also watched and learned from the players who came before her. Key admits she aspired to be like those players who were integral parts of a dominant stretch of girls golf at Muscle Shoals.

"I looked up to those players," she said. "When I was younger I wanted to be like them."

Eventually, Key became the mentor to the next wave of Muscle Shoals golfers.

"I tried to be the best leader I could be," she said. "I embraced that role and tried to encourage everybody."

Chad Willis, who began coaching the girls team when Key was an eighth-grader, watched her become a team leader.

"Riya has been the glue for girls golf at Muscle Shoals for the majority of her high school career," Willis said. "She is an extremely hard worker on and off the golf course. Her attitude and work ethic have inspired other girls in the program to be the best they can be. It's hard to think of this team without Riya being a part of it."

ALL-AREA BOYS GOLF



Deshler's Luke Linley won the Class 4A boys golf state championship. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Fast finish

Luke Linley caps Deshler career with Class 4A title

By Gregg Dewalt
For the TimesDaily

The past year has been filled with uncertainty for Deshler's Luke Linley.

He lost his junior golf season, like all other high school players in the state, to the COVID-19 pandemic. He wasn't even sure there would be a season in 2021, either.

Future plans were also uncertain — was college an option? Was college golf an option? Or was his career path something else?

Linley and his Deshler teammates did get to play golf this past season, and the now-DHS graduate made the most of it.

He fashioned a 37.0 stroke average per nine holes, won the substate tournament and capped it off by winning medalist honors with three rounds of 35 at the Class 4A state tournament in Mobile.

For his performance, Linley is the TimesDaily boys golfer of the year. His future plans, however, remain in limbo.

"I'm staying open-minded," he said. "I really haven't been in touch with many coaches because I didn't send my scores out much. I didn't know what I would do in college and I was also thinking about trades (schools).

"I waited too long, so now I have been sending my scores out hoping for some scholarship offers."

Without a junior season and with an NCAA-mandated coaching dead period,

it was a tough time for Linley to garner college interest.

"Going into last year and having the season canceled, it was a real bummer not getting to play," he said. "I was playing good golf last year and it was my junior season. You never knew if we would get to play our senior season."

But even Linley's win at the state tournament was filled with uncertainty. Because weather was likely going to be a factor, tournament officials changed the format from 36 holes of stroke play to a series of four nine-hole rounds. That way, team and individual champions would definitely be crowned.

Linley opened with a 2-under-par 70 at Magnolia Grove in Mobile and trailed two players, including Brooks' Zach Ashley, by one shot heading into the second day.

His second-round starting time was delayed by one hour at the outset. When he got to the course, his round was delayed again by lightning. When he finally did get to play, he shot 1-under-par 35. When the leaders both shot 37 on the front nine and the tournament was stopped, Linley was a winner by one shot.

"I knew with the conditions it was going to be hard for anyone to go low," Linley said. "It was a great feeling to win, but a little bittersweet because as a team we were only six shots out of second place and we really wanted to at least finish second."

ALL-AREA GIRLS TRACK & FIELD

Success with a story

Brooks' Helena Alley fought through effects of mono to win state title

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

A crowded medal rack illustrates how much success Helena Alley had in track and field as a Brooks High School student.

One medal, though, hangs alone. It's her Class 4A state championship triple jump medal she won this past spring.

Alley, the TimesDaily's girls track and field athlete of the year, has collected plenty of honors. But that recent triple jump state championship was the culmination of a journey that offered her a chance to prove herself in a new way.

Alley got sick last winter and was diagnosed with mononucleosis. Her high school basketball career ended prematurely while she sat in the doctor's office.

"Mom, I'm done," she remembers saying. "I have to turn my jersey in."

Still, Alley had a major role on the track team. Seventh in the state in Class 4A in both the triple jump and high jump as a sophomore, she was eager to show how she had improved over two years.

Instead, Alley was temporarily banned from eating dairy, spicy foods or cold foods and required to drink warm water.

"So gross," she said.

She missed the first three weeks of track and field practice but, upon getting healthy enough to return, figured she would resume her usual performances soon enough, particularly in the triple jump.

Recovery just wasn't that simple. Mono had enlarged her spleen and liver, and she had been physically inactive for too long.

"It's like if you had been lying on the couch for a week and then said 'I'm going to run a mile,'" Alley said.

Her body was not ready to allow her to run as hard as she needed to



Brooks' Helena Alley finished first in triple jump, second in discus and fourth in high jump at the Class 4A state meet. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

get momentum for the triple jump, and the first attempt was memorably humbling.

"I didn't even make the sand," she said.

Brad Black, her coach, brought her over to an area where the seventh-graders learn the basics. There was Alley, a seasoned skier being sent to the bunny slopes.

"Calm down. Get over here," she remembers Black saying. "We're going to do these until you get out of your head and jump how I know you can jump."

She got healthier and stronger and eventually qualified for state in the triple jump, high jump, long jump and discus.

It was a state meet to remember, with Alley helping Brooks win the Class 4A girls team title. She was fourth in the high jump at 4 feet, 8 inches. She took second in the discus at 100 feet, 1 inch.

And the triple jump? First place at 34 feet, 10 inches. The medal gets its own peg.

"It just warms my heart every time I look at it," she said.

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ALL-AREA BOYS TRACK & FIELD



Florence's Kneeland Hibbett won Class 7A championships in javelin and discus this year and was third in shot put. [GARY COSBY JR./FOR THE TIMESDAILY]

2 for the road

Hibbett, titles in hand, thankful he tried track

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

AJ Lee got the slow clap started. One clap. Then another. Then more claps at a steadily building pace as others watching joined in with encouragement.

Kneeland Hibbett felt his adrenaline rise. Frankly, the stakes were low, the mission complete. But he had one more chance for a mighty throw of the javelin.

The claps ringing in his ears at the Class 7A state meet, Hibbett ran forward and hurled the javelin 194 feet, 9 inches. His state title already secure by previous attempts, this throw was for decoration.

"There was no pressure. There was literally nothing wrong," he said. "I knew regardless of what happens on this throw I've completed what I wanted to complete."

Hibbett, the TimesDaily's boys track and field athlete of the year, closed his Florence High track and field career with two Class 7A state titles — in javelin and discus — and a third-place finish in shot put.

"Incredibly proud and fortunate," he said. "I was blessed to be able to have a coach like Coach (Vincent) Jackson and Coach (Mike) Horton. Those two guys really paved the path."

Hibbett, who is joining the University of Alabama football team as a long snapper and recently started summer workouts, did not originally plan to participate in track and field.

He hoped to try out for Florence's baseball team as a sophomore, but a minor injury during the tryout period kept him from a shot at making the team that year, so he looked for something else he could do.

He knew whichever sport he chose he wanted to work at with 100% effort.

Hibbett ventured into unfamiliar territory. Grabbing a javelin one day, a teammate got his attention.

"Dude, you're holding the javelin backwards," the teammate said.

Though discus was the event that instilled in him a love for track and field and remains his favorite, javelin has become his best. But it might be close — his discus mark of 164 feet, 5 inches was good enough for a state title after all, too.

"I didn't realize how far it would take me," he said of track and field. "After the first year I was like 'Track is what I need to be doing.'"

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ALL-AREA GIRLS SOCCER

On a mission

For Killen, humanitarian work a blessing that 'I need to do'

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Soccer was not Sadie Killen's reason for being in Zimbabwe this month.

The recent Mars Hill graduate is an intern this summer with Partners 4 Africa, a Christian humanitarian organization run by missionaries Dorian and Cheri Flynn.

Killen traveled with Partners 4 Africa this month to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe to help in its mission projects and also learn more about what goes into those efforts.

"They build wells. They feed orphans. They do so much good stuff, and I just got to go see it and help with it," Killen said.

While Killen was there, the organization ran a soccer camp for local children and young adults, and a soccer team of young women in their late teens and early 20s showed up.

That gave Killen, the TimesDaily's girls soccer player of the year, a chance to play the world's most popular sport on a different continent.

"They were a lot more skilled," Killen said with a laugh. "They're very skillful. It's just a different game than how we play. They pass so much, where we're more like you push the ball up as much as you can. I played with them. It was different, but I liked it."

Killen felt like she held her own with her new acquaintances in Zimbabwe. But the richness of her experience there went far beyond the pitch.

"What makes me want to go is I think God has given me the money and opportunity and everything I need to go, and I need to use that if he's done that for me. I need to go help people," she said.

"... They make me realize God really does do so much. And this life, we're here just to serve him. So I need to do my part."

Killen has certainly done her part

for Mars Hill soccer over the years. As a senior, she scored 29 goals and added 11 assists. The Panthers beat Danville to open the Class 1A-3A state playoffs before losing to eventual runner-up Donoho in the second round.

She and fellow seniors Samantha King and Emma Reaves had modest expectations at the start of the year and vowed to have fun with whatever happened.

"But then when we started playing we were like 'We're not that bad! You know, we've got some potential here,'" Killen said. "The younger girls, they worked hard and they stepped it up, and it was a great season."

Killen's role as striker puts her in position to score a lot, and she acknowledged earlier in her career letting too many promising chances get away.

On some Saturdays, she'd ask to challenge her older brother, Gates, in some one-on-one scoring opportunities. Like any good big brother, Gates made her earn it.

"He's strong and he's fast," she said. "He hasn't played soccer in a while, but he'll rough me up and make me better."

Killen is trying something new as she heads to Harding University in Arkansas. She was seeking a scholarship at the time but, with previous soccer players earning an extra year of eligibility following the canceled 2020 season, Harding offered only a walk-on spot on soccer.

"I've always been pretty fast, so I was like, 'Maybe I'll do track,'" Killen said.

Killen has not competed in the sport before, but Harding offered her a spot on the team.

"I'm a little nervous just because it's just something I've never done," she said. "I like different things. I'm going to work this summer. I've got all these workouts I'm going to have to do."



Mars Hill's Sadie Killen scored 29 goals and added 11 assists this past season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Killen plans to major in elementary education and minor in missions, hopeful of doing more international mission work in the future.

Her next pickup game, however, won't require an overseas trip but simply a few friends and some open

space on campus.

"I'll definitely play some soccer," she said.

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Promise to keep

Russellville standout Cano has extra motivation

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Everything Russellville's Juan Cano does has a certain level of urgency and determination to it.

It's there whenever he steps on the soccer pitch. It's also there as soon as he steps off, back in the routine of everyday life. There's a promise he has to keep.

"All this is for my mom," said Cano, the TimesDaily's boys soccer player of the year. "I promised her that I was going to do great and that's what I'm doing right now, trying to get better and go somewhere one day."

It's become a goal hard to forget. As Cano spent the spring running past defenders and making opposing goalkeepers look silly to lead a young Russellville program to its first championship game appearance, Cano's mother was more than 2,000 miles away.

Originally from Guatemala and in search of a better opportunity and life, Cano and his father made the journey when the rising senior at Russellville was just 12 years old. Other family members, however, had to stay behind. Cano hasn't seen his mother in person in more than four years.

"I try to talk to her all the time," Cano said. "It's really hard sometimes, but that's part of life."

The trek from the Northern Triangle of Central America — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — can often be a perilous one, especially for someone so young. Poverty, violence and corruption are among the main issues in the region. But through all the obstacles Cano and his father were able to make the journey safely enough.

They originally went from Guatemala to Mexico and from there moved to Dallas. Once there, they were sent to Alabama, settling in Russellville.

"We were just trying to find the best future for our family," Cano said. "It's not that it's scary, it's just sad sometimes because in this moment I wish my



Russellville's Juan Cano, who led the Golden Tigers to the Class 4A-5A championship game this spring, made the journey to the United States when he was 12 years old. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

mom was here. But that's part of life. I know one day she's going to be here and it's going to be different."

That belief has been the main driving force as Cano continued to evolve his game with the Golden Tigers, who reached new heights. He netted 35 goals, including an overtime game-winner in the Class 4A-5A semifinals against Crossville, to go with nine assists. The team's only loss came to Indian Springs in the final.

Everything, of course, was with family in mind.

"I want them to be proud of me," Cano said. "There's a reason I came here and that was to find a better future. My dad is helping me a lot, so are my uncles and my friends. I've got some good friends who support me all the time. They help me when I feel sad, especially on my birthdays and Christmas. They're there for me. They're the reason I'm doing great. Sometimes, if you don't feel love in a place, it feels different and it's not the same."

Soccer can often be a refuge, a time to forget about any kind of troubles, a

time to spend with friends. There's wins to worry about, the best time to attack opposing defenses, the correct alignments and sets, when to get teammates involved.

But when the ball does find the back of the net or the clock hits zeros, it's all about keeping a promise.

"It's special for a player trying to go somewhere," Cano said.

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CLASS 1A-3A ALL-AREA SOFTBALL PITCHER

Veteran presence

Vaughn continues to deliver for Mars Hill softball

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

A little panic would have been understandable.

Mars Hill lost its margin for error in last month's Class 2A state softball tournament after blowing a lead in the first game and suddenly needed to win every remaining game to win a state title.

No one Panther was going to have more responsibility the rest of the way than junior pitcher Riley Vaughn.

But Vaughn factored heavily into the Panthers winning the 2019 Class 1A state title as a freshman, and she's been pitching in big games for the team since middle school.

Though Vaughn's stats would suggest she's a pretty good pitcher in any situation, this unexpected hurdle was the kind of challenge on which Vaughn says she thrives.

"It brings me up. It makes me feel like I need to do something. I think it helps me when I have more stress put on me," she added with a chuckle.

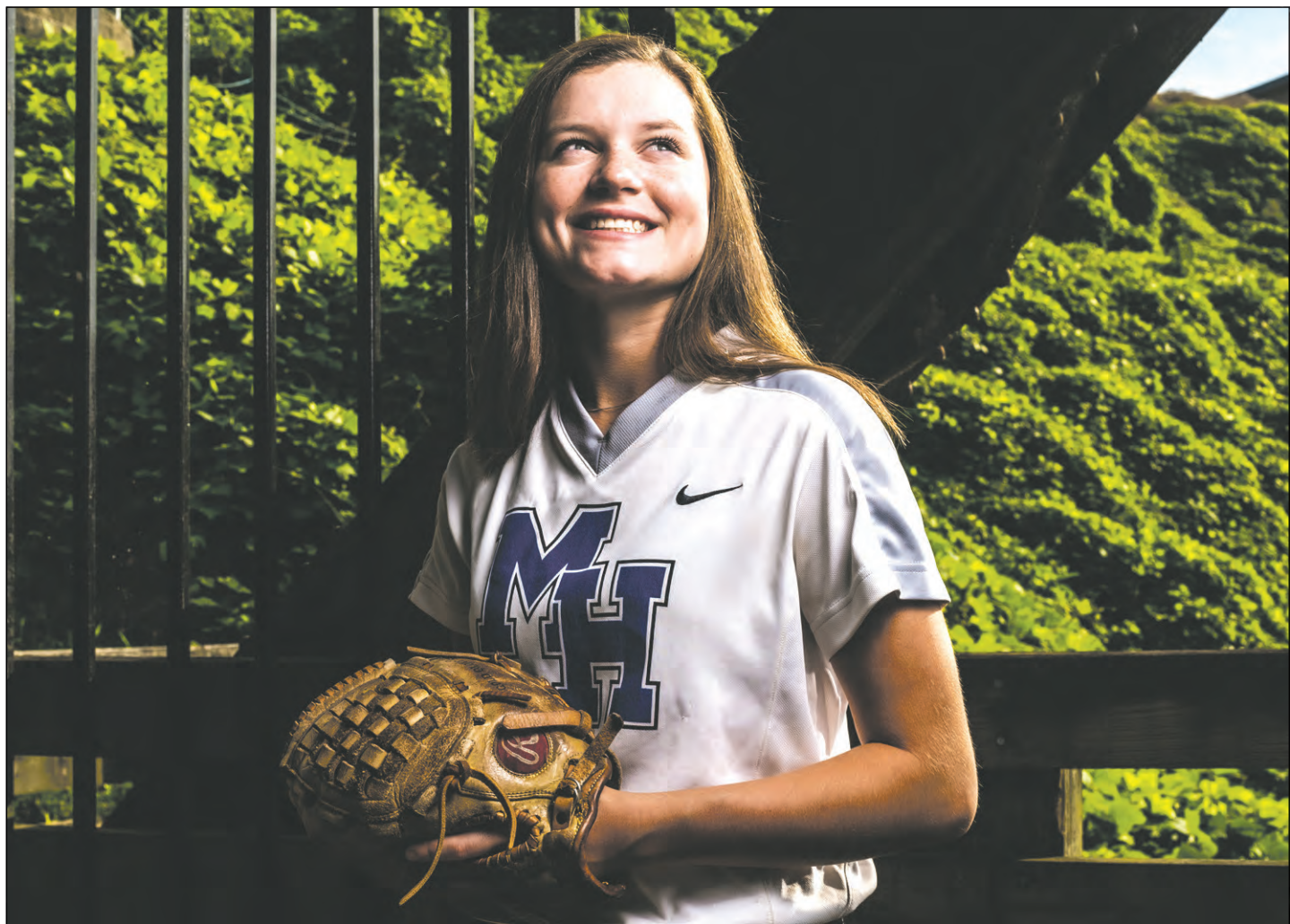
"I know there's some pressure on me, so I guess that helps me."

Vaughn, the TimesDaily's Class 1A-3A softball pitcher of the year for the third straight time, entered late in relief of that initial state tournament loss but dominated over two complete games later that day to keep Mars Hill alive overnight.

"It was stressful at first, but after we came together as a team it wasn't so bad," she said. "We knew we could do it."

And although the Panthers' state tournament journey ended with a loss the next morning, the tournament served as a reminder of how important Vaughn is to the Panthers and how often she delivers for them.

Boasting a hard-moving riseball she's worked on for the last couple years, Vaughn threw a perfect game and three other no-hitters among her 10 shutouts this season. She struck out 367 batters, averaging nearly 10 strikeouts per start, and had an ERA of 1.41.



Mars Hill's Riley Vaughn went 25-10 with 367 strikeouts and a 1.41 ERA this season. She was also named 1A-3A pitcher of the year in 2018 and 2019.

[DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Her value isn't limited to the circle, though. She is one of Mars Hill's top hitters by any measure. Her .418 batting average edged out Grace Stanfield for second-highest on the team behind E.K. Wright, the team's catcher and — importantly — one of Vaughn's closest friends on the team.

"We have a tight connection. We were able to connect and we trust each other," Vaughn said of Wright. "We're a lot alike."

Given Mars Hill's success in softball

in recent years, simply qualifying for the state tournament does not stand out historically the way it might at other schools.

But Mars Hill lost a lot of standout players over the past two seasons, and the 2021 team excelled despite having less experience than the 2019 state championship team.

Coach Mollie Mitchell is undoubtedly eager to see if the Panthers can return to Oxford and stay a little longer next spring, and Vaughn will of course be a big

part of that effort as the team's toughest pitcher and one of its best hitters.

As for this past season, Vaughn is pleased with what she and her teammates accomplished.

"It was great," Vaughn said. "The younger ones stepped up and did some big things for us, helped us a lot to be able to make it that far."

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CLASS 1A-3A ALL-AREA SOFTBALL HITTER

Major ingredient

Blackburn was prime power source for Red Bay

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Lila Blackburn got a little bit of a surprise at the Red Bay softball team's postseason awards ceremony.

Oh, she knew she'd had a good senior year. She batted .500 and was a key piece of the lineup for a team that reached the Class 2A North Regional. But hearing she hit 12 home runs caught her off guard.

"I thought I hit, like, five," she said.

Blackburn's routine is to keep the home run balls — as many players do — and toss them into the car trunk.

She has a display at home that can hold about 25, but that's not enough to cover six years of varsity softball.

"I have a garbage bag full of all the other ones," she said.

Blackburn, the TimesDaily's Class 1A-3A softball hitter of the year, acknowledges she's disappointed the Tigers couldn't take advantage of a good team chemistry to make a more serious push toward the state tournament. But she provided plenty of power in her final high school season.

"I wish we could have gone further than we did this year," she said. "And then last year, for (my) junior year, I thought we had a really good chance of going on, but it was cut short due to COVID.

"Yeah, I was upset after the games for regionals, but it happens. Stuff happens."

Blackburn said she wasn't too interested in T-ball as a young child. But a few friends encouraged her to start playing softball when she was 8, and she gave it a try.

She found hitting came to her naturally. She joined the Red Bay varsity as a seventh-grader and sensed some resistance from some of the older players.

"They didn't think I really needed to be out there," she said. "But I proved them wrong and they accepted me."

Blackburn plays shortstop when she isn't pitching. She finished the year with a 1.58 ERA over 106 innings, going 12-6 with 157 strikeouts.



Red Bay's Lila Blackburn batted .500 with 10 doubles, a triple, 12 home runs and 42 RBIs this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

But it's at the plate she feels most comfortable and, frankly, dangerous.

"I like hitting better. It's just more calming," she said. "There's just so much stress involved in pitching. When you go up there to hit, you just swing the bat."

And she's done that well. Blackburn liked hearing Susie Tverberg, the coach of county rival Belgreen, shout "Never inside" to her pitchers with Blackburn at bat. It was an acknowledgement of how well Blackburn can turn on a pitch over

the inner half of the plate.

"Now I've gotten to where I can just yank the outside pitches, too," Blackburn said. "So she's like 'Well, I'm just going to have to walk you now.' She and I have that respect."

Blackburn will play next season for Copiah-Lincoln Community College, which is in Mississippi about 4½ hours from Red Bay.

Blackburn acknowledges she will miss her hometown, with her friends and

family there, but looks forward to building her stamina to handle the rigors of a college schedule and becoming a better player.

"I hope I don't just bottom out when I get to college," she said. "I hope I keep growing and becoming a better teammate and maybe a leader, too, for them."

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CLASS 4A-7A ALL-AREA SOFTBALL PITCHER

Pursuit of perfection

Rogers' Hannah Price maintains high standards

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

The garage door took the beating first. Hannah Price was in elementary school when she first started pitching and loved it enough to practice her form on her own. Her dad, Steve, saw the dents she put in the garage door, decided enough was enough and started catching her himself.

But the daughter he has caught pitches from for nearly a decade is not a little girl anymore and instead a rising senior at Rogers who throws more than 60 mph. Hannah suspects her dad has started phasing out his catching duties.

"I whacked him good one time and he just got up," she said. "Couldn't do it no more."

Asked where the damage was done, Price paused and then laughed.

"Not in a good place at all," she said.

While that won't make his list of favorite moments in his daughter's softball career, there are plenty of good ones from which to choose.

Rogers has reached the Class 4A state finals in each of the last two full seasons. Price, the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A softball pitcher of the year, has been at the center of that effort.

She had an 0.79 ERA over 283 innings this past season, totaling 504 strikeouts along the way. Price has one more year with the Pirates to try and win a state title after consecutive close calls.

"Let's go out with a bang, you know?" she said. "Gotta get first. It's my senior year. I would love to do that. I really hope it motivates everyone else as much as it motivates me because that would just be amazing."

Price knows the value of those pitching sessions with her dad over the years.

"We would have times where we would just get in full-on screaming arguments, but it's helped me grow," she said. "It means a lot just to have him there in support and know he's going to support me no matter what I do."

Her other battery mates are Piper Gooch, the Pirates' regular catcher, and



Rogers' Hannah Price has led the Pirates to Class 4A state runner-up finishes in 2019 and 2021. She had an 0.79 ERA this past season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Kayleigh Chmura, another member of the team who is a close friend. But Price draws from the support of all the Pirates.

"It's great getting to go out and play with everyone behind you, knowing those are your teammates. They love you and you love them," she said. "Those are your friends. You get to play with them. Be thankful that you do get to play with them (and) have this kind of opportunity and family."

Price is hopeful of drawing interest from college teams this summer and would love for her family to see her play on television.

In addition to that dream and working toward the team's success, there is other

motivation.

Price admits she visits the GameChanger app to check out statistics. She doesn't have stats for seventh and eighth grade, but she's hopeful of reaching 1,000 strikeouts during high school by the end of next year. She also makes it a personal goal to keep her ERA under 1 each season.

"You don't want to always be about stats," she said. "But there are some things I do like looking at and see how I'm doing in them."

She has spent plenty of time working on locating pitches exactly where she wants and making them move exactly where she wants.

She'll pick a spot on a pole and throw over and over, trying to bend the ball around the pole in just the right way. She pays attention to the tightness of the ball's spin and makes whatever adjustments are necessary.

Price knows the better she gets at those details, the better she'll be.

"I strive for perfection. I want to throw every pitch just how it needs to be thrown. You cannot do that," she said. "But it's a good way to keep your mindset going."

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CLASS 4A-7A SOFTBALL ALL-AREA HITTER

Finished with a flourish

Moody's big numbers led Haleyville to state

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Hailie Moody signed in March to play softball at Beville State Community College for the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

But she didn't realize right away how much that moment would affect her 2021 season at Haleyville.

"It took all the pressure off my shoulders," she said. "I knew that I got to where I wanted to be, so now I just had to go and play and have fun, and it just took all the pressure off of me. So that's all I did. I went out there and had fun."

Moody was determined to follow the path of older Haleyville teammates who signed college softball scholarships but at times found herself thinking she had to get a base hit here or make a play there.

It was too much sometimes.

"When you have that kind of pressure on you, you feel like you're carrying the team, but in reality you're really not," she said. "You just have to push it out of your mind (and know) that you're not the single person on this team and you're not doing it for you, you're doing it for everybody else."

And Moody, the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A softball hitter of the year, got to share the season's biggest success with the others. That was a trip to Oxford for the state tournament, a first for any of this year's Lions.

Moody had plenty of influence. Her .496 average, .535 on-base percentage, 25 doubles, three triples, 13 home runs and 48 RBIs this season all ranked first on the team.

Part of the richness of this season for Moody was not only that individual success but seeing teammates — many of them without much varsity experience — playing well enough to help Haleyville get past the Class 4A West Regional and clinch a spot at the state tournament.

"If you had asked me the (last) morning of that regional tournament if we were going to go to state, I'd have probably told you, no, we didn't have it in us," Moody said. "But we got out there



Haleyville's Hailie Moody batted .496 with 25 doubles, three triples and 13 home runs this season, helping the Lions reach the Class 4A state tournament. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

and those girls, they fought until they couldn't fight any more. They have so much grit."

Haleyville won consecutive must-win games over Bibb County (11-1), Gordo (10-3) and Northside (16-8) to secure a state tournament spot. Several of the girls' classmates greeted the players by dumping cold water on them in celebration.

Moody ran straight for Carlie Pendley, the only other senior on the team, and picked her up. Their graduating class once featured five softball players, but Moody and Pendley were the last two left.

"We grew together and we taught the girls how we wanted the program to be like," Moody said. "With me and her having the same mindset of what we wanted and how we wanted things done, it just made the year so much smoother."

She also noted a close relationship with coach Whitney Webb. When Hailie's father, Robert, an electrician, was burned in an accident this past spring, Webb took her to the hospital. (Hailie said Robert is better now and has returned to work.)

"She's a great coach. She puts us in our place. If we do wrong, we run. She gets us going," Moody said. "But she's one of

us. I wouldn't really consider her more of a coach, I would consider her as like a second mom. She always takes care of us, always does anything we need her to.

"... You realize it's not just softball where you connect."

Moody was glad she and her teammates had a good season that drew notice outside Haleyville, and she's hopeful the returning Lions make it a habit.

"It was one of the best years that I could have asked for," she said.

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CLASS 1A-3A ALL-AREA BASEBALL PITCHER

Never satisfied

Phil Campbell's Swinney showing hard work pays off

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Mason Swinney's MVP plaque from the Class 3A baseball title series is still sitting in the back of his truck. The Phil Campbell standout hasn't had much of an opportunity to think about it.

There's been a lot to do and plenty to celebrate since the Bobcats won the school's first state title in any sport since 1947.

"All of us are still on cloud nine," said Swinney, the TimesDaily's Class 1A-3A baseball pitcher of the year. "Our whole town has been real supportive. In the first week I got back (from Montgomery) I didn't pay for a meal. Everyone else would pay for it."

Throughout its championship run, Phil Campbell players talked about how important it was to win a state title, not only for themselves, but for the town as well. It wasn't uncommon to see Roger Bedford Sportsplex, where the Bobcats play their home games, packed more than an hour before the first pitch.

And no one wants to disappoint their own fans.

"We had good crowds every round, every game," Swinney said. "It didn't matter if it was home or away. I think it helped us play better. Our community was just into it and it just flowed real well together."

Swinney certainly rose to the occasion this season, something he credits to playing some tough competition over the summer that forced him to notice where his game was deficient and how to raise his own level of play. And others took notice, both at the high school and college level.

During Phil Campbell's playoff run, Swinney committed to Alabama and afterward, racked up the awards. Along with being named the Class 3A tournament MVP and the TimesDaily's 1A-3A pitcher of the year, he earned first-team All-State honors and the Class 3A player of the year.

On the mound, Swinney went 11-1 with a 1.75 ERA. In six playoff appearances, five of which were starts, he went 5-1 with a 1.62 ERA and 48 strikeouts.

And Swinney saved perhaps his best start for his final one. In the first game of the 3A final series, he threw a four-hitter and struck out 10.

At the plate, he hit .453 with 18 doubles, four triples and eight home runs.

"It's really the work you do before the season that makes you successful," Swinney said. "I really worked on hitting and I worked out a lot to get my (velocity) up, and that really helped on the mound."

Swinney is already back at work bettering his game. There's still a lot to do between now, next spring and eventually his first season of college baseball. And there's a lot of goals to cross off the checklist.

The first thing on that list, of course, is making sure Phil Campbell stays on top in 3A.

"We have (talked about it)," Swinney said. "But we have a long way to go. It's about playing well together, having good energy all the time and working well together. I think we're going to be hard to beat."

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Phil Campbell's Mason Swinney is always trying to find ways to improve his game. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Ready for more

Now healthy, Lentz eager to continue making impact

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

There was a silver lining for Brodey Lentz moving to Lauderdale County from Spring Hill, Tennessee, three years ago.

Aside from the fact he likes his new home, the move came right before he started high school, so he didn't have to make an extra switch of schools.

"My sister, she moved her 10th-grade year and then she moved to another school her senior year, so she had it rough," Lentz said. "I was happy knowing I would get to start high school here and finish high school here."

He is set up to make it a pretty good four-year run. Lentz, a rising senior who is the TimesDaily's Class 1A-3A hitter of the year, added to his athletic contributions during the baseball season with a .521 batting average, six doubles, three triples and four home runs.

That came despite dealing with significant pain throughout much of the year, which led to a late-season surgery that kept Lentz out of the team's lone playoff series against Fyffe.

"It was a nerve issue," Lentz said. "Every time I would pronate (with the forearm facing down) it would hit my bicep tendon, and it was just constant pain, aching. So it was weird."

The pain did not limit his ability to hit — clearly — but pitching was a problem.

"It started last year and then I pitched again for school ball that first week of school ball, and it started hurting again. That's when I knew I had to get surgery."

Lentz was unavailable to play the team's first-round series against Fyffe, though he was there to watch as the Tigers lost 8-5 and 6-2.

Lentz pitched in the playoffs two years ago and was the Tigers' best all-around hitter this year, so his absence hurt. But he said he doesn't feel any pain now.

"I really wanted to be out there on the field with them, but I'll be ready next year," he said.



Lauderdale County's Brodey Lentz batted .521 with six doubles, three triples and four home runs this past season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Lentz said his dad, Jason, has worked with him on baseball since Brodey was four and helps some of the other Tigers, too.

"I was shocked with myself actually because I hadn't hit that well in a while," he said. "But I wouldn't have been able to do that without my teammates. My teammates, they would go hit with me in the cages whenever I asked.

"I started off well and I tried to contribute as much as I could."

Lentz has made a habit of that. He plays for the Lauderdale County boys

basketball team, and he's joining the football team after not playing since he was in fifth or sixth grade.

At around 6-feet, he expects to get a shot to play wide receiver and/or cornerback and said he was excited but also nervous as workouts began.

"I haven't hit anybody in so long," he said with a laugh. "But I think I'll get the hang of it."

He enjoys being part of the Rogersville community. He said teammate Ashton McLemore has two little brothers who routinely seek Lentz out at the baseball

field, hopeful of a hug or a photo.

On the other end of the age spectrum are his fellow seniors, the kids he started getting to know three years ago.

"They mean a ton. Everybody that's in my senior class, they push me more than anybody," he said. "We'll hit the weight room every time that we can. They're great friends. They've been with me through it all."

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CLASS 4A-7A ALL-AREA BASEBALL PITCHER

Let's compete

LSU-bound Taylor thrives against tough opponents

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Grant Taylor admits there aren't many similarities between himself and Clayton Kershaw.

Some are obvious.

One is a three-time Cy Young Award winner, a World Series champion and has often been described as the best pitcher in the major leagues over the course of his career. The other just completed his senior season at Florence and, although he's signed to play for LSU next year, has yet to play a game past the high school level.

Some are less so, such as the types of pitches each throws. But Taylor loves the mentality the Dodgers ace shows and tries to incorporate that into his own game.

"He always goes on the mound with the thought that he's going to win and that he's the best guy on the mound," said Taylor, the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A baseball pitcher of the year.

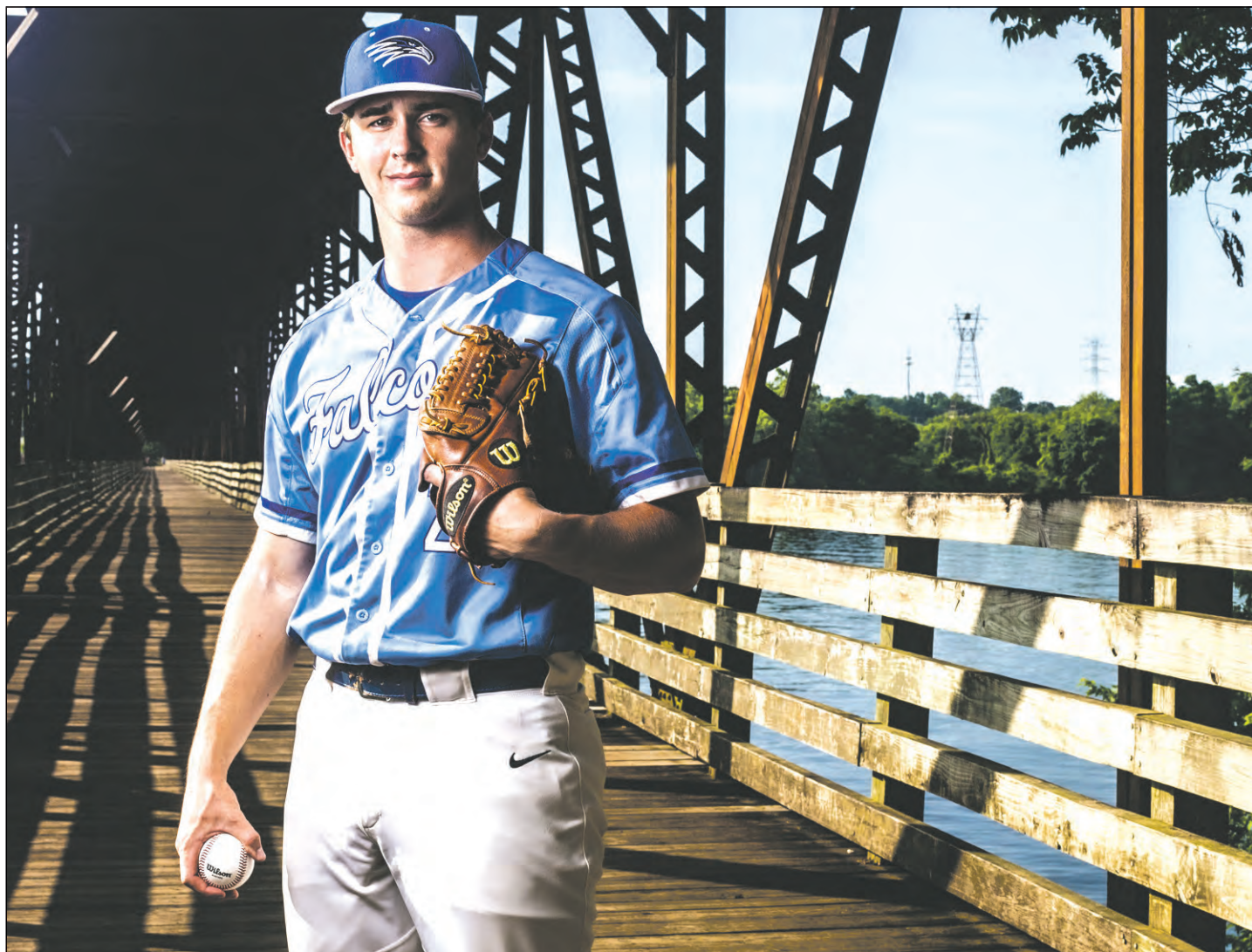
"He's going to go out there and do his job. And then off the field, he's a great guy. He has a foundation where he donates \$100 for every strikeout he gets, so it's \$300,000 a year sometimes. He's a great guy to mold your game after."

Taylor, of course, has had quite a bit of success during his time with the Falcons. He was recently named the 7A player of the year after posting a 7-0 record with a 2.28 ERA.

Now, Taylor's excited to see how he'll be able to handle SEC competition next. And he's looking forward to the opportunity in front of him.

"I think it's going to be a lot of fun," Taylor said. "My favorite thing about baseball is being able to compete at a high level and winning situations you shouldn't win and making plays you shouldn't make. Being in those situations gets the adrenaline going. And after the game, if you get the job done, you're like, 'Oh. That was a lot of fun.'"

"If you don't get the job done, it's more motivation to get the job done next time



Florence's Grant Taylor said he tries to model his mental toughness after Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

and get to work."

Things, however, will be a little different when Taylor arrives in Baton Rouge than when he signed. Longtime LSU baseball coach Paul Mainieri has retired after 15 seasons at the school.

Taylor first learned of Mainieri's departure like plenty of people — through Twitter — although LSU called him a little while later to see if he was still committed. But the way Taylor sees it, there's no reason to second-guess playing at the

school, coaching change or not. It's too good of an opportunity to pass up.

"I think LSU is a great program," Taylor said. "They've always been a great program from years, years and years ago. Regardless of whether he was the coach or not, I think they're going to have a great hire and my next couple of years at LSU are going to be great no matter who the coach is."

Going from Florence to LSU will still be a big jump — in competition, demands,

the atmosphere. But for Taylor, like Kershaw, it wouldn't be fun without any of that.

"I think they're getting a guy who is going to go there and compete every single day for their job in the SEC and try to win them a (College) World Series," Taylor said.

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CLASS 4A-7A ALL-AREA BASEBALL HITTER

Zeke in the zone

Bishop helped Florence baseball raise standard

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

When the Florence baseball coaching job came open before the 2020 season, Zeke Bishop and several other Falcons talked to athletic director Byron Graham and advocated for then-assistant JR Myers to get the job.

Graham indeed hired Myers, who got his first full season with the Falcons this past spring since the 2020 season ended early due to the pandemic.

Just as Bishop believed in Myers as the right person to be head coach, Myers believed in Bishop's ability as an elite hitter. He lobbied the right-handed hitting Bishop to try to hit the ball away to right field.

"I was having success just hitting the ball to the left side, up the middle," Bishop said. "And then once I kind of got it through my thick skull, I started to go to the right side,

and I started showing a lot more results."

A good hitter got better, and so did Florence. Bishop, the TimesDaily's Class 4A-7A baseball hitter of the year, batted .470 with 10 doubles, one triple and six home runs this spring to help the Falcons reach the Class 7A state semifinals. It was the deepest postseason run in team history.

At one point late in the regular season, Bishop had 23 hits in 32 at-bats. After his lone triple this year, Bishop told Myers he didn't think anyone could get him out at that moment.

"I just wanted to keep hitting," Bishop said. "I was ready for the one through nine to get done so I could come back up and hit. It was awesome."

A third baseman, Bishop will play baseball at South Alabama next year. The Jaguars played in the NCAA tournament this spring and were one win away from advancing to a super regional.



Florence's Zeke Bishop hit .470 with 10 doubles, a triple and six home runs, helping the Falcons reach the Class 7A state semifinals. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Bishop watched those games and envisioned himself in that uniform and playing in that kind of setting.

"If I'm getting to play, holy crap, that's going to be so cool," Bishop said. "Playing in front of all the fans, it's just big time. I would love to be in that situation, in those shoes."

That part of Bishop isn't limited to baseball. He smiled as he recalled paying at dollar to try for a halfcourt shot during halftime of a basketball game at Deshler. ("Nothing but net," he said.)

He enjoys the TV he won for it, but he also enjoys an audience.

"That's the thing I live for," he said. "It doesn't matter what I'm doing. I could be playing pool, and if there's a bunch of people, I want to win. I want to do something where everybody's going to see, dang, he's pretty good."

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