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Wooten: Positive attitude helped pave road to recovery from life-threatening COVID-19 complications

*John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press*

Tuesday, November 10, 2020, was a regular work day for Russellville chiropractor Rick Wooten.

It was also the last business-as-usual day Wooten would experience, as the early morning hours of November 11th completely changed the Haleyville resident's life.

After seeing patients all day in his Russellville office, Wooten enjoyed a dinner with friends and returned home. As the night went on, Wooten started to feel sick. As night turned to early morning, Wooten's temperature had shot up to 103 degrees.

Tylenol. A cold bath. Neither worked to break his fever, so Wooten went to the emergency room at

Haleyville's Lakeland Community Hospital.

It would be 42 days before Wooten slept in his own bedroom again.

Over the next month, there were times when Wooten's doctors were concerned not about when, but if, he would return home.

Life can change in a split second. As he faced a life-threatening battle with COVID-19, Dr. Rick Wooten wrote himself a 'prescription' that helped save his life. It wasn't a medicine, though. Instead, it was a script to remain positive regardless of how bad his condition became.

And that resolve would be tested sooner than Wooten thought.

"One of the things I told myself from day one at the hospital was that I

See 'WOOTEN,' page 9

Russellville City Schools earning state recognition for ELL programs

*John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press*

When officials from the Alabama Department of Education and State English Language Learners (ELL) Director Maria Franco visited Russellville City Schools last week, it was at the invitation of Superintendent of Education Heath Grimes.

Grimes wanted them to see what his system is doing to educate its students and help non-English language students to become proficient in English.

He was hoping for some ideas

and/or suggestions to improve what RCS is doing. For the most part, though, there weren't any suggestions or recommended changes, as the guests liked what they saw.

"They told us we are doing an amazing job," Grimes said.

With a school system that includes 54 percent Hispanic students, and more than a fourth of all students not English proficient when they begin school, it's clear to see why having a strong ELL program is paramount for Russellville City Schools.

At the November 17th meeting of the Russellville City Schools Board

See 'RECOGNITION,' page 3

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Eva Joyce Flannagin, 83, of Russellville,
 passed away on Friday, December 3rd.
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Ruby Dean Johnson, 91, of Phil Campbell,
 passed away on Tuesday, November 30th.
 Interment at Knights of Pythias Cemetery.

Martha Smith Uptain, 80, of Russellville,
 passed away on Sunday, November 28th.
 Interment at Tharptown Cemetery.



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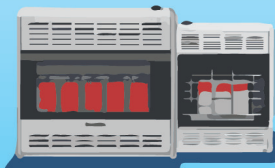
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'RECOGNITION,' from page 1

of Education, Grimes told board members about the visit and the feedback he received from the state officials.

"We feel like what we are doing is a good model for our students. And when we try to find answers at the state level, we seem to come back here and that's a good thing," Grimes said.

The Alabama Literacy Act, passed by the Legislature in 2019, requires all third graders in the state to demonstrate sufficient reading skills in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. The act provides that ELL students may be retained up to two years (from kindergarten through third grade) if they have received less than two years of ELL instruction.

Grimes maintains it takes between 5-7 years of ELL instruction for those students to become fully proficient in English and that research supports that time frame.

"If the research says it takes 5-7 years, why do we have the Alabama Literacy Act law that says to retain them for two years without that recommended time when we know they are going on to be successful with many of them going into the National Junior Honor Society?," Grimes said.

Russellville City Schools has received statewide recognition for its ELL program, including an "A" grade from niche.com in the category of diversity, which relates directly to the job a school system is doing with its non-English proficient students.

In other agenda items, the board:

—approved facility use requests for RHS Auditorium by Addie's Flip, Tip & Tap on May 17, 2022, for a dance recital, RHS Auditorium for a Community Thanksgiving Service on November 21 and RMS Gym on December 18 for the RHS varsity basketball program to host a basketball tournament as a fund raiser.

—approved a trip request for Russellville Middle School students to travel to Washington, D.C., from May 12-15, 2022.

—approved several personnel moves, including:

—Employment in Position: Rachel Rouse Kirby, special education teacher at RES, effective December 1, 2021, contingent upon Alabama certification.

—Resignation in Supplement: Alissa Moore, RMS volleyball coach, effective August 4, 2021.

—Employment in Supplement: Tori Padron, RMS volleyball coach, effective August 4, 2021. —Substitutes: Renay Hallman, CNP and Mark Seay, bus driver.

—Retirement in Position: Denise Allen, WES Bookkeeper, effective January 1, 2022.

—Resignation in Position: Cara Townsend, RES teacher, effective November 22, 2021.

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The Evolution of a Communist Revolution: an essay by Celia Echeverria

Celia Echeverria

Northwest-Shoals Community College Student and Russellville High School Graduate (Published with permission of author)

In the United States, there are an infinite number of activists aspiring to promote social, economic and political change.

The United States Constitution guarantees that a citizen can state his or her opinion, regardless of whether that opinion aligns with the government.

Freedom is a privilege and is not available for everyone to enjoy. Unfortunately, some governments trample their citizens. Due to the abuse of power the Cuban government has displayed, Cuban citizens have been stripped of freedoms and are suffering.

Cuba once was a strong and economically successful country with a constitution that ensured rights and democracy. However, this democracy was disrupted in 1952 by Fulgencio Batista.

Batista, a previously elected president, suspended the constitution and established a repressive regime. Fidel Castro wanted to take over this abusive power. Castro appealed to many Cubans by making enticing promises.

Castro promised to make Cuba's health care system free and universal, terminate prejudice based on race, reestablish land ownership to Cubans and attract foreign investment.

Despite Castro having a past with Marxism, he convinced everyone he would uphold a democracy and a market economy. According to Fidel Castro, his revolution would be liberal, not communist.

In 1959, Castro successfully overthrew Batista and his regime. At first, Castro upheld his facade and appointed a president who vowed to restore open elections and a market economy.

However, just months later, the president was pushed out of office. Cuban leadership started to fill with Marxist political figures. Cuba broke its alliance with the United States and found a new friend in the Soviet Union.

Castro's real intentions were revealed and his reign of terror began.

In a communist world, freedom does not exist. Castro stomped out any desires people had of rebelling with his abusive control. Castro romanticized the thought of everyone being equal. Therefore, everyone was rationed the same amount of food.

With the Cuban people starving, they were more worried about their next meal than being free.

Many more abusive methods were used to keep the Cuban people at bay. The government refused to recognize the legitimacy of Cuban human rights. This communist political oppression led to the Cuban people desperately seeking freedom.

By 1980, Castro sensed political pressure rising, so he allowed Cubans to emigrate to the United States, essentially getting rid of possible threats to his regime.

Through the Mariel Port, 1,700 boats carried roughly 125,000 Cubans to Florida. Out of spite, Castro sent criminals, mental hospital patients and members of the LGBTQ community over to the United States. These were the people Castro considered to be 'garbage.'

Although Fidel Castro passed away in 2016, the citizens of Cuba are still suffering. On July 14, 2021, Cubans went to the streets to protest. They marched demanding freedom and this shocked the regime.

The protesters desperately want the 62-year communist regime to end. This prolonged oppression has denied them basic human rights like food, medicine and liberty.

Videos from these protests surfaced where policemen beat protesters until they were motionless. Police also stormed private houses and abducted teenagers. These teenager are now being forced to serve under the government.

After years of abuse, hunger and fear, Cubans are fighting for change. The American flag is serving as a symbol for the type of freedom Cubans are demanding.

They hope to terminate a suppressive government started by Castro 62 years ago. For those 62 years, Cubans have suffered endlessly.

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

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Letter to the editor...

Dear Mr. Editor and all Russellville Electric Board Customers:

I am a concerned citizen, a tax payer, and a REB customer. This past week I saw something that concerned me and should concern all of us. Not just a photo on social media, but it was something I saw with my own eyes and have seen my whole life as a Russellville citizen. The thing I saw and what I have always seen in this city is what I believe is abuse of the tax payers, the citizens, and R.E.B. Customers.

The photo and what I saw is a disgusting use of public money. Ask yourself can you afford a \$85,000 vehicle? Of course, the answer to that question would be an absolute no. But the electric department manager Charles Canida used your money to buy himself a 2022 GMC Yukon Denali. I personally know people who have lost their jobs due to Covid-19 and have not been able to work and struggle to pay high electric bills and the R.E.B have told many of them to either pay up or sit in the dark and in the cold.

I personally know one individual who had severe Covid-19 and that individual lost their job and is to this day not able to work and struggles to make it each month and barely gets by and no one else that I know of who had Covid-19 has received ANY help from just not Russellville

Electric Board but any Russellville or Franklin County departments of any kind.

How many widow women who couldn't pay until the third of the month and were forced to take out a loan just to pay their electric bill or those who couldn't get a loan were forced to sit in the dark just so Charles Canida could ride around in an \$85,000 SUV. Think about the employees who make more in one hour than what 99% of people in Russellville make in three and that same 99 percent's children will never get the opportunity to work at the R.E.B because you're not a member of the "clique".

That's why today I do not ask I DEMAND THAT ALL RUSSELLVILLE ELECTRIC BOARD MEMBERS AND CHARLES CANIDA RESIGN IMMEDIATELY. If they do not resign, I ask all city councilmen and the mayor if you value your jobs to remove all board members for the misuse and their extreme negligence with our money.

The citizens of Russellville, the customers of Russellville Electric Board, and the children of this city deserve better and WE DEMAND BETTER! The negligence that has made Russellville a laughing stock in this state has to stop and it is going to stop today.

Sincerely,
Jimmy Landers
Russellville

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Florence Lauderdale Animal Services and local rescues are working with Franklin County to help save many abandoned animals to give them a chance at a new life. Save Our Strays needs donations called into Russellville Animal Clinic, to pay for veterinary services, spay/neuter and medical treatment for everything from heartworms to Parvo. There are also boarding expenses for the animals due to their medical treatment. No amount of donation is too small. This group has saved many cats and dogs, and they need the community's help. Call Russellville Animal Clinic and tell them you're donating to the Save Our Strays Account. Their phone number is 256-332-2254.

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~ Dr. Rick Wooten



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'WOOTEN,' from page 1

was not going to complain," Wooten said. "I wasn't going to complain about food, my room or anything that happened. And I stayed true to that."

After he was admitted, Wooten's oxygen level deteriorated to the point where he needed specialized care beyond what Lakeland physicians could offer. So the search began for an available bed in a critical care facility.

There wasn't a room available within a 250-mile radius of Haleyville, and that concerned Wooten's doctors.

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!

After his fourth day in Haleyville, those prayers were answered, as Wooten was transferred to North Mississippi Medical Center in Tupelo. A critical care team was dispatched to Haleyville to transport Wooten to Tupelo.

"I was asked in the hospital what I was going to do because they couldn't find a room within 250 miles," Wooten said. "I look back at that time now and see how God works things out. There was nothing I could do. Now, I realize it was one of those look back moments where God's hand was at work in my life."

He was on oxygen around the clock and Wooten was experiencing significant respiratory distress. The COVID-19 virus had filled his lungs with blood clots and that presented a risk of stroke.

That risk soon became a reality, twice.

"I remember pressing the little button in my hospital bed and telling the nurse I think I've had a stroke," Wooten said.

Testing showed two blood clots in Wooten's brain. As a result, he'd suffered two strokes, one on each side of his brain.

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!

Before contracting COVID, Wooten had no illnesses or chronic conditions. He wasn't on any medication and he ran five miles three times a week. He'd never been a smoker, but now his lungs had taken a major hit. Breathing was no longer something he took for granted.

When people can't breathe, they can suffer panic attacks and/or anxiety. That anxiety is only compounded when separated from family and friends. Wooten was isolated in the hospital's COVID unit, where contact with patients was limited to only the necessary nursing measures that required entry into the patient's room. Wooten's IV tube ran all the way under his hospital room door with the IV pole situated in the hallway.

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!

The blood splinters under his fingernails and toenails indicated the next health issue for Wooten—a cytokine storm. A cytokine storm occurs when the body responds to infection with a severe immune system reaction. Cytokines are proteins that raise or lower the body's immune activity and Wooten's cytokine production was in overdrive.

A cytokine storm is a serious, and often fatal, reaction to COVID-19. It causes inflammation and excess fluid in the lungs, making it difficult to breathe as the body is deprived of oxygen.

Wooten was concerned about the risk of his infecting his medical team. And that risk didn't stop with them. It was also a risk to their families.

"It's a terrible thing that these nurses and health care workers are exposed to. Not only are they exposed, they take that home to their families and those family members didn't sign on to be health care workers," Wooten said. "So you worry about spreading it to innocent people and that's just terrible. I felt for everyone who had to come in to see me or treat me. They were taking chances with their own lives for me."

When his mind started racing down those paths, that's when Wooten had to reel his emotional well-being back in.

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!

Russellville Mayor David Grissom has been friends with Wooten for several years. Grissom, whose mother was one of the last patients Wooten treated last November 11th, kept in regular contact with his friend during his year-long battle with COVID.

"He was always upbeat and positive, just wanting to get better and get back to helping his patients," Grissom said. "He had a really tough time with this virus as have so many people. But the way Rick remained optimistic was so important for his recovery."

Two days before Christmas, Wooten was discharged and returned home. But his road to recovery would be a long one, with more challenges to come.

His entry into a post-COVID clinic at the University of Alabama Birmingham Hospital was delayed because portable oxygen was in such short supply.

"Everyone who had been sick was trying to get oxygen. Even suppliers were running out. I couldn't get portable oxygen for two months after I got out of the hospital and they ran out of tanks to refill, so I couldn't get enough tanks to travel to Birmingham," Wooten said. "So I had to stay on an oxygen concentrator at home."

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!

Wooten did his pulmonary rehabilitation at Russellville Hospital. As with the staff in Haleyville and Tupelo, Wooten describes his caretakers at Russellville Hospital as "doing a wonderful job."

As the calendar rolled into 2021, Wooten weighed 135 pounds and had incurred significant muscle loss. He had to build up his strength just to get to his pulmonary rehab therapy. And he continued to have difficulty breathing.

"I had to take medication for the anxiety. You just have to learn to deal with breathing issues. You learn you might not be breathing like you used to but you're not going to die," Wooten said. "It was all new. It felt like drowning but I wasn't in water and that brings on a level of anxiety just in itself."

"The first thing we do when we're born is take a breath. Now, all of a sudden, 55 years later, I wasn't able to do that. Many people experience that with other diseases like COPD or asthma, but with me, it was a new thing. It was comforting to learn other people felt that same anxiety but they worked through it," he added.

With Wooten needing to focus on his recovery, the staff at his Russellville clinic worked to continue caring for his patients. La-Keta Crittenden (Wooten's sister) and Stephanie Briles worked with three chiropractors, (Dr. Bruce Thompson, Dr. Aaron Fletcher and Dr. Kyle Eaton), who volunteered to step in and treat Wooten's patients.

Wooten wanted to make sure his patients were cared for, and it turns out they were in very capable hands.

"La-Keta and Stephanie kept things running. They have to get a lot of credit for keeping the clinic going," Wooten said. "They had to brief the doctors about patients the doctors didn't know, so it was quite a task for them. But they stepped up and did it beautifully."

Drs. Thompson, Fletcher and Eaton continued to come to Russellville one day a week each until Wooten returned to work last month.

"I will always be grateful for what they did for me and my patients. They did all of this without being asked and it allowed us to keep going," Wooten said.

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!

Wooten gets emotional as he reflects on the support he's received from family, friends and his patients over the last 13 months. Prayer matters. Just ask him.

"People may not even think about what it means to help somebody else—to send a card or text or phone call. I was on more prayer chains than I even know about," Wooten said. "What a wonderful community we live in. It's been overwhelming. People you don't even know taking time out of their lives and from their families to say a prayer for me, or send a card or text. The support network I received was amazing."

Doctors cleared Wooten to return to full-time work in November, but he still feels the effects of COVID and knows his road to recovery is not complete.

"I'm still on oxygen at night and I'm still very short-winded. I've been in a post-COVID clinic at UAB where I'm seeing a pulmonologist, cardiologist and neurologist," Wooten said.

"This is a very physical job to be in physical contact with each and every patient the way I am. It takes a little bit out of you each day. But the support my patients gave me far outweighs what I give them. I'm blessed. I'm not lucky or fortunate. I'm just completely blessed by God and I'm thankful for that," he added.

No five-mile runs yet, but Wooten is walking on a treadmill now, and building up his stamina to walk outdoors. An avid traveler, Wooten plans to return to the Caribbean once he's able.

"The more I can do, the better. I'm recovering not only from COVID, but from a cytokine storm and two strokes. I haven't traveled anywhere since this happened. But I'm looking forward to getting back out and resuming life," Wooten said.

"In August, my father (Roy) passed away, and that took the wind out of my sails. It's been a rough year. But I'm thankful every day. Everybody is going through something in their lives and we all have to encourage each other to get through the trials of life. That's what it is all about. I hope if somebody is dealing with what I've gone through, they can find some hope and inspiration. You just can't give up hope. As long as you've got breath, you've got hope. I've said that many times to cancer patients and patients with other illnesses. And now I've lived it," he added.

Stay positive! Don't complain! Keep praying!



COURTESY PHOTO

Wooten was cleared to return to work full-time in November after his lengthy bout with COVID-19.



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IN THE MATTER OF THE ADOPTION PETITION OF:

TIMOTHY AND ANDREA EWART

CASE NO.: 8739

STATE OF ALABAMA }
COUNTY OF MADISON }

NOTICE TO: SKYLER SHANE VANDIVER
FATHER OF S.I. VANDIVER, DOB MAY 21ST, 2020

Please be advised that a Petition for Adoption, in the above-styled matters have been filed in the Probate Court of Madison County by Timothy and Andrea Ewart and that on the 10th day of February, 2022 at 1:30 p.m., these matters have been set for a hearing on the same in said Probate Court in Madison County, Alabama. Should you intend to contest this adoption, you must file a written response within thirty (30) days of the date of the last publication herein, with counsel for said Petitioners, whose name and address are shown below and with the Clerk of the said Probate Court.

Coby McEachern Boswell, Esq.
Attorney for Petitioner
1000 Church Street. NW
Huntsville, AL 35801
(256) 534-8799

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In accordance with the Alabama Abandoned Motor Vehicle Act, Alabama Code Sections 32-13-1 through 32-13-8, the following motor vehicle will be sold for cash at 10:30 a.m., on January 12, 2022, at M&N Wrecker & Service Center, 11833 Hwy. 43 South, Russellville, Al, 35653. Seller reserves the right to reject any bid and the right to bid.

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Belgreen boys, girls, secure home wins over Sheffield

Staff reports

Friday proved to be a very profitable day for both Belgreen varsity squads as they were able to deposit wins over Sheffield.

For a girls squad coming off of a tough loss to 5A Russellville, the Lady Bulldogs were hoping for an all-around performance to get them back on track.

A close matchup for the boys just a few weeks ago, Belgreen would need strong performances on both ends of the court to ensure a much larger margin of victory than just weeks prior.

Belgreen 51 Sheffield 30 (Girls)

Two Lady Bulldogs scored in double digits to lead Belgreen to a 51-30 victory over 2A Sheffield on Friday.

A strong defensive showing from Belgreen in the first quarter allowed the Lady Bulldogs to jump out to a 16-3 lead. Dakota Green scored ten points in the quarter while going 4-4 from the free throw line to lead Belgreen in scoring in the quarter. Makenna Fisher and Noelle Willingham each had three points in the quarter.

The second quarter saw Belgreen continue their strong defensive showing as they outscored Sheffield 13-8 in the quarter to extend their lead to 29-11 entering halftime. BB Scott and Isabella Tate each scored five points while Green added three points to her total on the night to give her 13 points entering halftime.

Belgreen extended their lead after a third quarter in which the Lady Bulldogs outscored Sheffield 13-9, giving them a 42-20 lead entering the final quarter. Carson Hovater was able to get on the board with her first points of the night in the third quarter, scoring six of her ten total points. Meanwhile, Green added six points to her credit with Willingham going 1-2 from the charity stripe in the quarter.

See 'BELGREEN,' page 13



PHOTO BY BRADY PETREE
 Gipson, left, and Pace, right, are part of the first class of recruits to Union University to be recruited straight from the high school ranks.

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

You would be hard-pressed to find a better up-the-middle duo than Canyon Pace and Eli Gipson.

The two Russellville Golden Tiger seniors have both played vital roles in the recent success of the Golden Tiger baseball program as the catcher and shortstop for last year's 5A state championship winning team.

And now with the ultimate team goal accomplished, Pace and Gipson were able to cross off a personal goal as they both signed on to continue their baseball careers at the collegiate level with Union University once their senior year wraps up.

For Gipson, who transferred to Russellville his sophomore year, the expectations that he had for his time at Russellville were relatively high. And after a state title and an opportunity to play baseball at the next level, it's safe to say that Gipson's expectations have exceeded themselves.

"I've gotta say, this is a pretty exciting day. I'm just super thankful for everyone that showed up today to the signing and just really blessed," Gipson said. "Winning state has always been a goal of mine and I got to accomplish that last year. Playing baseball at a four-year college has always been a goal of mine too and now I'm going to be able to accomplish that goal as well so it's really

special."

Union University, located in Jackson, Tennessee, is a division two school that participates in the Gulf South Conference - one of the more elite baseball conferences in division two.

Both Pace and Gipson are baseball "lifers" who have dedicated a large part of their lives to the game that they are so passionate about.

While the days of starting up their careers are far in the rearview mirror, the reality of just how far they have come in their careers hasn't quite set in yet.

And for Pace, getting the opportunity to play alongside one of his close friends and teammates just doubles down on how special the signing day was for the Golden Tiger backstop.

"It's crazy because it feels like just yesterday I was starting out playing and now here we are signing to play college ball," Canyon Pace said. "Union is in a really good conference and they were a perfect fit for me both on the field and academically and I know they will prepare me for life outside of baseball as well," Pace said. "It's going to be very fun to be able to go up and play alongside Eli. It will just bring out that competitive spirit for both of us even more for sure."

The recruitment process can ultimately be a difficult, tedious one as the weeks and months go by

See 'SIGNED,' page 14

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'BELGREEN,' from page 11

The only quarter in which Belgreen was outscored in the win over Sheffield came in the fourth quarter. However, it was too little too late for Sheffield as Belgreen had created an insurmountable lead despite being outscored 10-9 in the quarter. Hovater would score four points in the quarter while Isabella Tate scored three points and Willingham added two points to her total on the night.

Green finished with 19 points in the game to lead all scorers while Hovater scored ten points in the game. Tate scored eight points while Willingham scored six points, Scott scored five points and Fisher scored three points in the 51-30 win for Belgreen.

Belgreen 49 Sheffield 24 (Boys)

When these two teams met up a few weeks ago, the result was a one-point win in Belgreen's favor. Fast-forward to Friday and Belgreen made sure that things weren't able to get too close for comfort again.

A dominant first quarter on both offense and defense saw Belgreen jump out to an 18-4 lead over Sheffield. Will Bonner scored 11 points in the first quarter to lead all scorers for both teams while Collin Bonner scored four points and Austin James knocked down a three-pointer.

The offense took a small step back in the second quarter but the defense continued to play on an elite level for Belgreen, holding Sheffield to just five points in the second quarter.

Belgreen got eight points in the quarter thanks to getting two points apiece from Collin Bonner, Canaan Stough, Hadden Taylor and Jordan Wright.

Belgreen would carry a 26-9 lead into halftime.

Sheffield would outscore Belgreen in the third quarter by a thin margin of 11-9, cutting Belgreen's lead to 37-20 headed into the fourth quarter.

Much like the second quarter, Belgreen was able to get contributions from four different players. James knocked down another three-pointer, his second of the game, while Adrian Reaves, Collin Bonner and Will Bonner scored two points apiece.

A 14-8 quarter from Belgreen was enough to seal the deal and keep the Bulldogs record perfect on the year with a win. Belgreen's leading scorer, Collin Bonner, scored six points in the final quarter, giving him 14 points total on the night. James scored one more three-pointer as Reaves chipped in with three points of his own in the quarter. Wright scored two points in the fourth quarter for Belgreen.

Will Bonner scored 13 points on the night for Belgreen as James finished with nine points on the night. Reaves scored five points for the Bulldogs while Wright added four points and Stough and Taylor each scored two points.

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'SIGNED,' from page 11

with student-athletes mulling over offers. But for Gipson, who was on the fence about signing before his senior season got underway, the decision for him to sign ultimately was an easy one.

"The decision ultimately was kind of easy once Canyon and I were both being recruited by the same school. As soon as they offered both of us, we both agreed that that is where we needed to be," Gipson said. "I had some offers at first but I was really in-between if I wanted to go ahead and sign before baseball or if I wanted to wait and see what else was out there but at the end of the day, I loved Union, I'm excited to go there and so I knew I needed to go ahead and sign."

During last season's championship run, Pace was one of the more durable catchers around as he caught 48 games while batting .297 with a .348 OBP (on-base percentage) including 44 hits in 48 games with eight extra-base hits and three home runs. Pace also carries a 4.59 GPA. Gipson, who possesses arguably one of the top gloves at shortstop in northwest Alabama (and potentially the state), also put up significant numbers last season for the Golden Tigers. Hitting .296 with a .411 OBP oftentimes at the top of the Golden Tiger lineup leading the charge for a formidable offense with 32 hits in 36 games. Five of those hits were for extra bases with one being a home run. Gipson also has a 4.12 GPA as a student at Russellville.

A familiar face to both Canyon and Eli who kicked off the signing day speeches, was Brian Pace, who has had the opportunity to coach both of the Golden Tigers over the years during the offseason. Pace, who is Canyon's father, also played baseball at Union University after his high school days were finished and has had a front row seat to both Canyon and Eli's development over the years. And to see their hard work culminate in a scholarship was almost too much to be put into words.

"I've been coaching these guys for quite a while. I think the Bama Ballers was the team where I first met Eli and as I've gotten a chance to coach him over the years, I've gotten a chance to watch him grow as a player as well," Brian Pace said. "To be able to be a part of their growth is amazing. I don't coach. Coaching happens with coach Heaps. I just manage and talk to these guys about college and try to encourage them along the way. But it's just really special to see them both going off to the next level."

Having one's dad play college baseball will certainly circle recruitment conversations back around to the alma mater eventually. And while the decision was ultimately left up to Canyon as to where he wanted to continue playing baseball in college, it's safe to assume that the best recruiter for Union University undoubtedly was right there within the Pace household the entire time.

"Obviously having my dad go there meant a lot to me. And Union is a great school that is in a really good baseball conference and I think they are good for me both athletically and academically," Pace said. "My dad definitely talked up Union a lot but he did let me make my own decision as to where I wanted to go in the end. But I knew for a while that Union is where I was wanting to go and I'm really glad that I was able to make that happen finally."

As he addressed the large crowd gathered in the top room of the field house at Golden Tiger Stadium, Russellville head baseball coach Chris Heaps expressed his gratitude and pride as to what both Gipson and Pace have meant to the program.

However, while their talent certainly speaks for itself, it was the off-field factors that really stood out to their head coach over the years.

"If you ask a coach what he expects out of a player, every coach would love to have talent. But not near as important as the character, enthusiasm, body language, work ethic and so many other things," Heaps said. "We have a saying in our program that 'if you want to be great, you can't be the first one out of the building', and these guys are always the last ones out of the building. These guys are really good baseball players, but they are even better young men."

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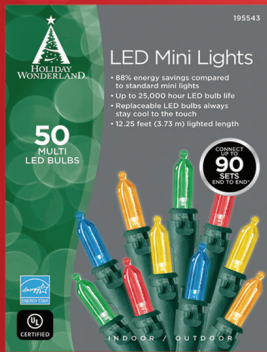
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