

Twice is nice

TIMES
DAILY

2021-22

ATHLETE
of the YEAR

Weathers,
Murks still
Shoals' best.





Karly Weathers said the relationships she has made while playing sports will mean more than the success she's had. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Karly cares

Weathers puts her pride in helping others

By Hayden Flatt
Sports Writer

Karly Weathers accomplished just about everything possible between the lines of the basketball court in high

school.

She was the Tennessee Gatorade player of the year. She was a two-time Miss Basketball award winner. She scored 2,711 career points with six 30-point games her senior year. This summer, she will

move to Tuscaloosa to join the Alabama women's basketball team.

But for Weathers, the back-to-back TimesDaily girls athlete of the year, that stuff is not as important as what she accomplished off the court.

"I think a lot of people see the awards and accolades and everything that came with that, but I see the success that I had with the girls and the relationships

SEE WEATHERS, G5



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BOYS ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

Empire State of mind

New York trip gave Murks biggest test

By **Hayden Flatt**
Sports Writer

Kyler Murks had a lot of things thrown at him over the course of his senior year of high school, and seemingly succeeded at all of them.

The back-to-back TimesDaily boys athlete of the year was decorated as an All-Area player in football, basketball and baseball for Brooks.

However, his toughest test was trying to get a flight home from New York.

Murks, along with two of his friends, took a trip to the Big Apple after graduation. The trip was smooth until LaGuardia Airport decided to throw a wrench in their travel plans. They were supposed to fly out of LaGuardia at 8:30 p.m. to hop on a connecting flight in Washington that would get them to Nashville at midnight.

As can be usual with airport travel, that did not go as planned.

“Our flight in LaGuardia got delayed, so we were not gonna make our connecting flight,” Murks said. “So we went to Newark. They throw our bags on the belt, and then the flight in Newark gets delayed until 12. So we get to Nashville around 2 a.m.”

At that point, Murphy’s Law was in full effect. They lost a few thousand dollars of luggage in all the mayhem.

“We’re sitting down there waiting on our bags, and they don’t come out. So we call (the airport), and they’re telling us that they can’t find them. But if they do, we’re gonna have to drive up to Nashville and get them,” he said.

“It was crazy.”

Murks enjoyed his time in the Empire State despite the travel woes. Walking across the Brooklyn Bridge and playing basketball at Brooklyn Bridge Park were among his favorite things.

Brooklyn Bridge Park has basketball courts that overlook the Hudson River and New York skyline. It is a spot that

SEE MURKS, G9



Brooks' Kyler Murks earned all-area honors in football, basketball and baseball this year. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]



Kyler Murks had more success on the football field than at the airport this year.



Kyler Murks will continue his baseball career at Wallace State-Hanceville next year.

WEATHERS

From Page G2

that I've built," Weathers said. "I see the relationships that I've built with my community and the younger kids.

"I think that, to me, is way more important than any award I could have won."

The relationships and community impact are the things that will stick around even when basketball doesn't. That is why Weathers puts her pride in those things above wins, trophies and high-scoring performances.

"That's what's gonna last forever," she said. "The trophies will go up in the attic one day and collect dust, but the people that I surround myself with will last forever.

"Loretto is just such a special community, and I just hold that very dear to my heart."

That level of humility is uncommon among people who just graduated high school, especially someone as decorated and athletically gifted as Weathers, who also starred in volleyball for Loretto. But she can credit that to a lot of her successes so far.

Weathers wants to keep that going in Tuscaloosa. She is not completely certain



Karly Weathers is continuing her basketball career at Alabama. She wants to play whatever role "helps the team succeed." [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

of what she wants to major in yet, but she has initially enrolled in education. One day, she hopes to be a teacher and basketball coach.

As important as the athletic talent is, Weathers just wants to help others. Being a teacher would allow her to impact even more people.

"I tell people all the time that from

Girls athlete of the year

2022: Karly Weathers, Loretto
 2021: Karly Weathers, Loretto
 2020: not named (pandemic)
 2019: Sara Puckett, Muscle Shoals
 2018: Taylor Aikerson, Deshler
 2017: Lilly Holmes, Florence
 2016: Erin Jewell, Brooks
 2015: Lauren Cantrell, Deshler
 2014: Cele Moon, Wilson
 2013: Ciarra Edwards, Wilson

August to May, teachers at the high school level are probably around kids more than their own parents," she said. "The impact that I would get to have every day would be awesome."

Obviously though, she still has work to do on the court for Alabama. She has a role to find on a new team and wants to do whatever she can to help the team's success.

And staying competitive won't be a problem. Despite playing three sports in high school, Weathers knows it is to time to turn the page.

"Whatever I won in high school stays in high school. It's a new chapter of my life," she said. "I'm trying to move forward from here and have a successful college career, and kinda leave the high

Girls athletic program of the year

2022: Brooks
 2021: Rogers
 2020: not named (pandemic)
 2019: Rogers
 2018: Deshler
 2017: Deshler
 2016: Wilson
 2015: Deshler

school in the past."

Weathers isn't completely heartless about being done with high school sports, believe it or not. She has built a foundation in the Loretto community that will certainly be hard for her to leave.

Part of that will be playing in the Barn, which has become an iconic venue for high school basketball.

"The Barn environment — if you've never been there, you should go there — every night showing out and the crowd showing up," she said. "It's a packed stands no matter what, and I'm gonna miss that."

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SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA FOOTBALL

A little of everything

In any role, Mars Hill's Thompson shines

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Damian Thompson is an All-State defensive back, but one of his best interceptions of the year wasn't quite the highlight it originally seemed to be.

Mars Hill was in the midst of a rout of Sand Rock in the first round of the 2A playoffs, and the 6-foot sophomore Thompson put himself in the right position for a pick-six.

But not all the Panthers could say the same.

"I caught it, and then I broke like three tackles and then scored," Thompson said.

A teammate was called for block in the back, though, and Thompson's touchdown was gone. Fortunately, it hardly mattered.

Mars Hill won the game 48-13, and Thompson still finished the year with touchdowns scored in five different ways — rushing, receiving, punt return, kick return and interception return.

"There's a lot of stuff I've got to work on on (defense). Like flipping my hips, staying with the defender and making open field tackles," said Thompson, the TimesDaily's small school football player of the year.

"... Defense is definitely harder because there's a lot more going on than just running, catching the ball and making moves."

But it's clear now Thompson can shine with pretty much any task coach Darrell Higgins gives him.

Even before accounting for both touchdowns in Mars Hill's season-ending semifinal loss at Cleveland, Thompson already had over 1,100 yards and 12 touchdowns of offense, nearly 700 return yards with five scores and a pair of pick-sixes.

And while Thompson was a featured player on the 2020 state championship team, he had to elevate his involvement in teaching teammates and setting an example on a team with only two seniors. "It's a little weird having everyone look



Mars Hill's Damian Thompson has been a star on offense, defense and special teams for the Panthers. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

up to me when I'm just a sophomore, so I've just got to try to do everything right and help them out," Thompson said.

Thompson does not have that responsibility alone, of course. He is good friends with sophomore quarterback Griffin Hanson, another player who's been prominent since middle school and someone Thompson has played with since rec ball when they were around 8 years old.

"It kind of gets overwhelming with everyone because I have like eight people in my wide receiver group, and it's hard for me to understand all of them at the

same time," Thompson said. "So they can just go over there and talk to Griffin, so it takes a little bit of pressure off of me."

Thompson dislocated his left shoulder during a midseason blowout loss to Cullman and played the rest of the season with a brace.

"I'm going to have to still wear the brace to keep it in," he said. "Hopefully it'll be off my senior year."

In the meantime, Thompson has been one of the most recognizable figures for Mars Hill football in the last couple years. The team is 37-7 since he was in

eighth grade, and this was the first year he didn't get to make a trip to the state championship game.

He eventually got around to looking at some highlights from the Cleveland game — "I was pretty sad that we lost," he said — and saw some encouraging moments.

Mars Hill is a known name now, and the Panthers are accustomed to having everyone's attention.

"Every team is pretty much going to give you everything they've got," Thompson said. "So you've got to give them everything you've got."



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LARGE SCHOOL ALL-AREA FOOTBALL



Brooks' Kyler Murks ran for more than 1,400 yards this season, plus passed for more than 2,500 yards and intercepted five passes. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

A fun ride

Murks finishes prep football career with flourish

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Kyler Murks is starting to gain clarity about his future.

He wonders if he might get a football scholarship offer, but he otherwise has a couple schools in mind that will give him a baseball scholarship.

"I love baseball. I've always felt like that was my best sport," said Murks, a Brooks senior who is a top player for the Lions in football, basketball and baseball.

Murks acknowledges he would miss being a football player, but not all aspects of it.

"I won't miss getting beat up all the time," he added.

If this past fall was Murks' last to be a football player, he made the most of it.

Murks accounted for 50 touchdowns as a senior, passing for over 2,500 yards, rushing for more than 1,400 and also intercepting five passes on the way to first-team Class 4A All-State honors.

His ability to improvise and make productive plays out of unpromising

situations allowed Brooks' offense to reach another level, and the Lions were unbeaten until the Class 4A state quarterfinals.

Murks, the TimesDaily's large school football player of the year, seemed like at times like half of a game-changing duo for Brooks.

Knute Wood, a senior and Murks' back-court teammate in basketball, caught 77 passes for more than 1,600 yards and 20 touchdowns.

And while the 12 opponents Brooks beat never figured out a way to stop them, Murks appreciates more about this year than that.

"You can't ever do it alone," Murks said, acknowledging how many good players were in his senior class alone. "That made it very special, too."

Murks took over as Brooks' starting quarterback midway through last season, but Brooks lost in the first round for a third straight year.

It was different in 2021. The Lions were 4-0 entering a game at Deshler, and the way Brooks played in a 42-14 win over the Tigers encouraged Murks.



Kyler Murks was an all-around star for Brooks this season, helping the Lions compile a perfect regular season for the first time since 2006.

"We kind of felt unstoppable for a second," Murks said. "We kind of saw how it could be if we played like that every week."

The Lions kept going, earning single-digit wins over West Limestone, West Morgan and Lauderdale County on the way to an unbeaten regular season.

"We didn't feel like when we went 10-0 we were done just yet," Murks said.

Brooks thumped Dora and Randolph before falling to Oneonta 56-28 in the

quarterfinals.

"Oneonta was just a really good team. They definitely played better than we did," he said.

Murks is a throwback as a three-sport athlete and is in full basketball mode now, hoping to help the Lions reach the Class 4A state semifinals for the third straight year. (And hopefully more.)

As for one final ride with Brooks football?

"It was definitely special," he said.

MURKS

From Page G4

locals play pickup at, and they were not expecting to have to leave when Murks showed up.

“We went down there, and, you know, gave ‘em buckets,” he smirked. “We went on like a five-game win streak. They were saying, ‘He’s from Alabama, he doesn’t belong here.’ We smoked ‘em.”

Murks has gotten pretty used to winning. He will try to keep doing that when he goes to Wallace State-Hanceville this fall to play baseball.

For the first time, he will not be juggling multiple sports throughout the year. Being able to hone in on baseball will give him more time in the weight room, in the cages and on the field.

“I’ve never focused on just one sport my whole life. I feel like playing just baseball, I’ll really be able to take some huge strides,” Murks said. “That will make it a lot easier on me.”

Murks — Class 4A first-team All-State in both football and baseball — saw improvement in all three sports he played his senior year.

Perhaps the most impressive of his



Kyler Murks averaged over 15 points and five rebounds per game for Brooks last season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

three seasons was football. He was the TimesDaily’s large school player of the year with over 4,000 yards of total offense and over 50 total touchdowns.

Murks had friends and family in the stands for each game. He will miss the

camaraderie that high school sports bring, but he knows he can find something similar in college.

“(I’m gonna miss) the community. All my friends coming to the games. It feels like we were playing for the community,”

Boys athlete of the year

2022: Kyler Murks, Brooks
 2021: Kyler Murks, Brooks
 2020: not named (pandemic)
 2019: Colt Smith, Mars Hill
 2018: Ryan Weathers, Loretto
 2017: Malik Smith, Sheffield
 2016: Brax Garrett, Florence
 2015: Keaton Anderson, Florence
 2014: Kendrick Doss, Florence
 2013: Thomas Burrows, Mars Hill

Boys athletic program of the year

2022: Mars Hill
 2021: Russellville
 2020: not named (pandemic)
 2019: Mars Hill
 2018: Lauderdale Co.
 2017: Muscle Shoals
 2016: Russellville
 2015: Russellville

Murks said. “I’m gonna miss that a lot, but I can make new friends and new community in college.”

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ALL-AREA GIRLS CROSS COUNTRY



Lauderdale County's Addison Embry finished second in the Class 3A state meet 5K with a time of 19 minutes, 20 seconds. It was 31 seconds faster than her previous personal record. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Well on her way

Addi Embry made sophomore season her best yet

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Addison Embry got her cross country career off to a promising start, but even she didn't realize it right away.

It was three years ago, and Embry was a seventh-grader running her first junior high race.

"I did not know what place I was in," the Lauderdale County High sophomore recalled this week. "We were just running, and I saw the two girls in front of me. I ended up passing them, and then whenever I finished, Mom was like 'You just won.'

"I had no idea. I didn't even really see the four-wheeler or anything. I just figured everybody was long gone."

The only thing gone was any notion Embry hadn't found her sport.

Embry, now a three-time first-team all-area runner and the TimesDaily's 2021 girls cross country runner of the year, was routinely the fastest high school girl in northwest Alabama this fall.

Embry, who goes by "Addi," finished the state meet 5K in 19 minutes, 20 seconds.

That was the best time of any local girl regardless of classification and good enough for second place in the Class 3A race, 12 seconds behind Providence Christian's Millicent Talmadge.

"Whenever she passed me, I thought she was going to give out, but she definitely didn't. She was awesome," Embry said. "I wasn't really disappointed in my place because I went up from last year and I got a way better time, so I was proud of myself."

A better time indeed: Embry's 19:20 was 31 seconds better than her previous best mark.

"They added the clock as you turn right there (near the finish), so as soon as I saw my time right there I knew I was going to definitely going to get it. And then I just stared at it as I came across.

"... It definitely came as a shock and I felt really good about it. I was really excited."

Embry, 15, is an enthusiastic runner who enjoys being part of the LCHS team and is willing to run outside of team practices on her own at several area sites.

A few years ago, though, she didn't think much about running at all. Her cross country journey started with a physical fitness test near the end of sixth grade.

All the students had to run a mile. Embry finished it in 6 minutes, 44 seconds.

"I did basketball also at the time, so I wasn't even focusing on running at all," Embry said. "Then as soon as we started actually having races, I was like 'Oh, I actually love this sport.'"

ALL-AREA BOYS CROSS COUNTRY



Florence's Trey Hurt developed names for his running routes while in high school. One was the Waffle House loop. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Hurt so good

Florence runner, Auburn signee caps stellar career

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Trey Hurt is an optimistic person. And when you're having the kind of senior season you want — breaking a school record, getting a scholarship offer from Auburn — it tends to come naturally.

But that optimism withstood a serious, if brief, test the week before a sectional race in late October that determined which runners would qualify for the state meet.

Hurt was driving on Cox Creek Parkway when another driver on Mars Hill Road ran a red light and hit the front of Hurt's car.

"I grabbed both my legs," the Florence senior said. "I was like, 'OK, I can move my legs. God, you just protected me. I'm good.'"

Though his car suffered significant damage, Hurt felt good enough the next day to run and continue his preparation.

The TimesDaily's boys cross country all-area runner of the year for the second straight season, Hurt finished a decorated high school cross country career with a 10th-place finish in the Class 7A state meet. His time of 15 minutes, 51 seconds was seven seconds off the school record he set earlier this fall.

"My perspective changed after that wreck," said Hurt, now an Auburn signee. "Even when I would have a bad run or a bad workout or something, I'd be like 'You're still getting to run. You could have possibly died in that accident. Your legs could have been paralyzed and you may have never run again, and yet here you are having a bad workout."

"See the blessing in what you're doing."

He has lived in Florence his whole life. And while he is eager to explore some new places to run, he will not forget the various routes he's developed in Florence over the years, nor the fun names he uses to identify them.

There's also Old Industrial, which cuts through the industrial part of Lauderdale County north of Florence. And the Keys run, a route through the Hickory Hills neighborhood. Hurt uses an app called Strava that traces his path, and the Keys run is so named because the path looks like the grooves on a key.

"I created the Waffle House loop," Hurt said, describing a run he can tweak to be somewhere in the 6-8 mile range. "I would run out of (Deibert) Park, into Hickory Hills, and then go out to Waffle House, through the cemetery, around the mall and come back."

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA VOLLEYBALL

Gann-do attitude

Covenant's Ashlee Gann thrives after injury

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

Under normal circumstances, few students at Covenant Christian would likely be more willing or able to attempt an athletic feat than junior Ashlee Gann.

But earlier this year, as Gann recovered from an ACL injury she suffered during basketball season, the athletic feat she was asked to try was jumping off a box just inches off the floor.

And no one would have been less eager to try it than Gann.

"I made my physical therapist hold my hand," she said. "I was so nervous."

Gann's repaired right knee didn't crumble, of course. But while she spent the rest of the summer preparing for competition through stretches and other less strenuous work, she said she didn't attempt running or any other hardcore

physical activity until a week before the season started in August.

"My goal was just to be able to play the first game," she said. "I wasn't expecting to go out there and get any kills or blocks."

Her statistical prediction proved modest.

Though Gann, the TimesDaily's small school volleyball player of the year, did not feel her usual self at the start of the season, her value to the team throughout the year was the same as ever.

As the year progressed, Gann not only helped the Eagles compete well but also experienced personal growth she didn't have to worry about in a normal season.

At the start of the year, she recognized she was landing on her left side any time she jumped because she didn't trust the right side as much. In practice, she could get away with it. But in games, fear of



Covenant Christian's Ashlee Gann recovered from an ACL tear last winter to be a productive volleyball player for the Eagles this fall. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

trusting her knee was replaced by the fear of losing.

"In games, I could not think about it because I was on go mode. I just would land on both (legs evenly) and not even

know it," she said.

"... And when I realized I could do that, then I was like 'Oh, I can do this.' Then I started jumping on both and it was up from there."

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LARGE SCHOOL ALL-AREA VOLLEYBALL

Enjoying the moment

Burden works to create, appreciate success

By Craig Thomas
Sports Writer

There is a feeling Kallie Burden is chasing.

The Deshler senior recalls one this past season, at the end of a tight set against Rogers in area play.

Burden's Tigers led 26-25, needing one more point to finish a sweep. Positioned near the net, Burden slapped the ball down and across, away from her and over the net for a clinching point.

It wasn't the most vicious or impressive point Burden ever earned for Deshler volleyball, but it got the job done.

"I scored that last point and I just felt on top of the world," Burden said.

The quick thinking to punish an opponent's overpass earned her praise from her coach and teammates.

"It's awesome. It's a great feeling," Burden said.

Burden, the two-time TimesDaily's large school volleyball player of the year, will pursue that feeling again next year as she continues her volleyball career at Tennessee Southern. The Firehawks represent the school in Pulaski that was once known as Martin Methodist before a rebrand.

Burden will take with her a hunger to be a better individual player and motivational fuel from Deshler's postseason, which ended with a loss to West Morgan in the Class 4A North Regional quarterfinals that denied the Tigers a trip to the state tournament.

Deshler's final record was 39-8.

"I think we could have done better," she said. "I think everyone was shocked when we lost when we did. I mean I'm not disappointed because we had a pretty good season, but it's just sad how the outcome was."

The 5-foot-11 Burden had another statistically impressive year, totaling 511 kills, 67 blocks, 154 digs, 15 assists and 36 aces over 46 matches. (She did not play in one match.)

Burden shifted to Tuscumbia City Schools from Colbert Heights in fifth grade, and that meant playing for longtime



Deshler's Kallie Burden, a two-time TimesDaily volleyball player of the year, has signed with Tennessee Southern. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Deshler volleyball and basketball coach Jana Killen.

"It's really challenging, especially to please her. It makes you work really hard," Burden said. "But she makes it known that you're loved and she's really proud of you, each and every one of us."

Burden started training on her own last summer to prepare her body for college volleyball, though she backed off that extra training during the season and is set to focus on her individual work again now

through the upcoming summer.

Much of the work comes down to weightlifting and conditioning. Burden's current nemesis is called a ski machine, which provides a cardio and upper body workout.

"It's awful," Burden said. "You stand up, you grab the (handles) and you just come straight down as fast as you can. It's rough."

As a hitter, whatever Burden can do to improve her speed, upper body strength

and leaping ability will help.

There's also the mental side of the sport. As in life, Burden recognizes patience and grace go a long way. She also knows soaking in each moment is important, even if that's easier said than done when there's always a goal to reach.

"You have to learn how to shake things off when you mess up, realize that you're not going to hit a perfect ball every time," she said.

"But when you do, celebrate."

ALL-AREA WRESTLING

Lasting impression

Initially unsure, Deshler's Laster embraces sport

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Dathan Laster initially wanted to play basketball.

But when the final cuts for the Deshler seventh-grade team came out, Laster's name wasn't on the list. So, his parents, noting his ability to occasionally flop, made a suggestion. How about wrestling?

Laster, however, was far from enthusiastic about the idea.

"I was like, 'Ahh. I don't know about that,'" Laster recalled. "I looked it up and it's everyone in a skin-tight suit."

In the end, Laster acquiesced. He still wanted to do a winter sport. He went to inquire if the school had a wrestling team. Just like that, he was in.

His first match? It was ... an experience. "I was shaking and scared," Laster said. "I thought I was going to get slammed, but it wasn't that bad."

Five years later, Laster is surprised with how far he's developed on the mat.

The Deshler senior points to his results in the Class 1A-4A North Sectional. He didn't win a single match his freshman and sophomore seasons. The tournament his junior year was canceled due to COVID.

This year, he pinned his first three opponents, including Susan Moore's Jose Calderon in 3:13. Calderon was the No. 1 seed in the 138-pound bracket and



Deshler's Dathan Laster took up wrestling in middle school as a way to participate in a winter sport.

[DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

had already beaten Laster earlier in the season.

"He had two (hands) on me and I did this little duck-under thing," said Laster,

The TimesDaily's wrestler of the year. "And when I spun back around, I hooked his leg and I put him on his back."

Laster then beat Asheville's Tyler Ebner with an 8-5 decision in the final.

"I was very, very happy about that," Laster said. "It was probably the greatest experience of my life. I'll have that the rest of my life. I'll probably tell me kids and grandkids about it."

Laster placed third in the state tournament and finished with a 37-13 record. He lost his first match before winning his final two by a decision and pin.

Not too bad for someone who used to spend time watching different college programs like Penn State and Iowa to pick up different techniques or spend extra time with his coach at practice to ask about ways to improve.

"It's not really big up here (in the northern part of the state)," Laster said. "Down near Mobile, there's a lot of schools who wrestle. We have to go maybe two or three hours away to wrestle people."

Not too bad for the seventh-grader who initially didn't want to wrestle, either. Now, he couldn't imagine not competing in the sport throughout high school.

Skin-tight suit or not.

"I wish I would have started a little earlier," Laster said. "I feel like I could have been way, way better. I don't regret it at all. I love wrestling. I'm sad it's over."

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Song & dance?

Weathers, a star on the court, won't show off her voice

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

The words flow out like water passing by in the nearby Tennessee River.

Karly Weathers, sitting at a park near Wilson Dam, says something that immediately grabs attention. It was almost as dramatic as if a shark fin were in sight.

The Alabama signee, barely pausing after being asked and more than two months before going to Tuscaloosa, admits she's well on her way to adapting to the Crimson Tide.

"Yeah, I know the fight song," she says. Ears perk up. Phones start coming out. Video is ready to be made. Everyone's immense enjoyment — and posterity's — awaits when Weathers swiftly delivers some crushing disappointment.

"I'm not going to sing it for you, but I know it," the TimesDaily's large school player of the year says. "I've been to enough football games."

Maybe at graduation? "Oh, probably not." How about one day in the hallways at Loretto? "Absolutely not."

Doesn't the homecoming queen — also the Tennessee Gatorade player of the year and a four-time TimesDaily all-area player of the year — have some pull in such matters? Maybe rules at Loretto don't allow such Alabama-tinged heresy that even Weathers can't overrule.

"I'm sure it's allowed," Weathers said, "but I just haven't done that yet."

Weathers, though such is frowned upon in Loretto (and almost all points north of the state line), says she already has a fierce connection with the Crimson Tide.

Her signing didn't include any boos, spark a boycott or end any friendships. But it didn't start a fashion trend, either.

"They say they won't wear anything crimson. They'll wear a gray and white shirt, but not crimson," Weathers said, remembering an idea Alabama coach Kristy Curry gave her.

"She said we were going to have to create a shirt that said, 'Roll, Karly, Roll,'" Weathers said, "because nobody



Loretto's Karly Weathers is an Alabama signee who was the state of Tennessee's Gatorade player of the year this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

around (Loretto) was going to wear one that said, 'Roll, Tide, Roll.'"

Weathers, who currently plans to major in secondary education with hopes of being a high school teacher, has already started the team's workout program and reports to campus in late June.

"I love that university. I love that coaching staff," Weathers said. "I feel like they believed in me from the very beginning. That doesn't happen everywhere, especially at a Power 5 school.

"I think they will bring out the best in

me as a person and a player."

Leaving home, Weathers admits, will be the toughest part.

Her family — with one retired major league baseball player, one current professional baseball player, one former Division I women's basketball player and another potential future Division I women's basketball player — is close. So are her friends.

"It will be hard," Weathers said. "I love Loretto, I love my family, I love my friends, my teammates. It's going to be

hard to leave all of them."

Her 1-on-1 showdowns with sister Ally, a freshman this year, will have to go on hiatus.

"She doesn't beat me. She does not beat me," Karly said. "She's good, but I think that 'older sister' kicks in where I'm not going to let my younger sister beat me."

There's also Lizzie, a miniature goldendoodle.

"And she's a handful," Karly said. "I have to keep her at home with Ally, but Ally has to take care of her."

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA GIRLS BASKETBALL

Top Gann

Gann grows shy over Covenant-vs.-Covenant showdown

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Ashlee Gann pauses while pondering the question.

Perhaps she weighs the cost of honesty against her boyfriend's feelings, trying to decide how much to say when everyone knows the primary answer.

The Covenant Christian junior guard — that's girls basketball — unveils a devilish grin ... and doesn't really answer at all.

If this year's Covenant girls team played this year's state champion Covenant boys, by how much would the girls win?

"I don't know," said Gann, the TimesDaily's small school player of the year. "I don't want to start an argument."

Gann quickly says the heights of the boys players would be a factor against the girls, but the status of such a showdown has not been a large topic of discussion.

Maybe between Gann and boyfriend Reed Trapp, there has been some debate.

"Me and Reed have talked about it," Gann said before narrowing the discussion from Eagles vs. Eagles to Gann vs. Trapp.

That would be an All-State player vs. All-State player showdown.

"I think I could take Reed 1-on-1, if he wasn't 6-5," Gann said. "If we were the same size, I think I could take him."

Merci. Or — more accurately — take mercy, Ashlee.

Gann still grows emotional thinking back to watching the boys win the Class 1A championship. After the girls lost in the Northwest Regional semifinals, Gann was relegated to the stands for the rest of the boys team's title run.

"When I was little, it was like you couldn't think about winning state because there was no possible way," Gann said. "Every time they would win a game, I would still be thinking it's so far away. Then they were in the Final Four, I still thought there was no way. "After they won, it was so much fun,

and I got to yell with all my friends and cheer them on."

Gann remembers the tears flowing in the moments after the championship vividly enough that she started crying again talking about it a month later.

"I cried so hard because it was so emotional," she said. "I was so happy, but I was also sad. I don't know why I'm crying now."

"I think it was really good for the school. People are finally going to be like, 'They're not just a little private school. They won state. They're somebody to look out for.'"

Gann, too.

She recovered from a major knee injury last season to be the TimesDaily's small school volleyball player of the year last fall and, now, basketball player of the year, too.

"It's just so crazy to me that I'm blessed to be able to do that," Gann said.

She had to wear a brace for every game this season, including one on the anniversary of her injury. The doctor's requirement conveniently ended about a week after her final game.

Gann did discard it for a late-season practice and surprised herself with how much faster she felt running. The brace remains in her possession.

"I feel like I should keep it as a reminder," Gann said. "No matter how hard it gets, you can always get better."

Maybe it could go on display at Covenant? "Put it in the gym," Gann joked. "I'll make them hang it up."

This spring, Gann is working to improve her vertical leap to help land a college scholarship. In volleyball.

She's not playing anything, though she was on the softball team before her injury, a decision she admits was "out of fear" of reinjuring herself.

"This year, it's kind of hard because I'm choosing not to play," Gann said. "I'm not abandoning my teammates, but it feels like that. I had a choice this year, and I'm not playing."

With that, she won't be a Triple Crown TimesDaily player of the year.

"I know," Gann said. "Dadgumit."



Covenant Christian's Ashlee Gann, after a major knee injury a year ago, was a star this season for the Eagles in both volleyball and basketball. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

No knock on Wood

For Knute, he's ready to shoot into college

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Knute Wood still finds humor in it, though he's about to graduate high school and is confident the confusion will soon start all over again.

He's been prominent enough over his Brooks basketball career that the pronunciation of Wood's name has become widely known — that's K-Newt, everyone — but a new opportunity awaits.

Tennessee State is on his college horizon.

"People forget the K a lot and say it like Newt," said Wood, the TimesDaily's large school boys player of the year. "It all sounds almost the same."

If he plays well enough, maybe the point will become moot, he can give the boot to the mispronunciations, which will become mute. Wouldn't that be a hoot?

But he's sure of the root of the problem. "I know Knute Rockne," Wood said. "I haven't watched the movie, but everybody thinks it's 'Newt' because of the Notre Dame coach."

Wood is already growing comfortable with Nashville and is excited about getting to TSU this summer.

"I'm ready for it," Wood said. "I'm ready to be able to learn things, a new experience and develop more as a player."

He's made two trips to Nashville since signing in November to scout the area — and has recently added an enhanced ability to make an impression when he hits campus.

"It's crazy up there. There is traffic everywhere," Wood said. "It's a busy city, but I'm going to love it up there."

Nashville's Broadway district — famous for bachelorette parties and infamous for the 2020 bombing — has made an impression.

"I love it," Wood said. "There's this little food hall called Assembly Hall. We go there every time. They have a bunch of different food places, ice cream places. I have to go there every time I go."

Ice cream? How cute for Knute. He should consider fruit.



Brooks senior Knute Wood says he's excited about heading to Tennessee State for college. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

"I know," he said. "Ice cream is not good for you."

Wood will go in his new car, a reward from his parents for him earning a full college scholarship, and will — believe it or not — go without much of his hair.

The guard who got sheared midway through this season plans to repeat the feat.

"I'm going to grow it out until I'm about to leave and then I'll buzz it again," Wood said, promising not to spoil any upcoming pictures. "I'll do it after graduation."

His original cut was sort of spontaneous, he said. Wood had suggested

the possibility to some friends, who all mocked him.

Oddly, he had been planning for a lengthy look for months.

"It was one of those things where I was like, 'I'm going to buzz my hair today,'" Wood said. "All my friends were like, 'You won't do it.' I came back to the game that night and I didn't have any hair."

The sudden shock compares to how Wood was when he first started playing basketball — "I was bad," he says — to now.

Despite admitting he has a bad memory, Wood remembers his first dunk. (Online

video and annual reminders help those efforts.) There's also that time he had a "wide-open corner 3" and calmly lobbed his shot to the top of the backboard.

But there's also signing his college scholarship and thinking ahead. He plans to major in business at Tennessee State, but he wants to be a college basketball coach.

"Basketball has taken me places I could never imagine," Wood said. "It's paying for my school, and that was one of the biggest things for me and my parents."

"Now, I can get a good education and set myself up for a successful life."

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA BOYS BASKETBALL

Will do

For Bonner, there is no doubt of favorite sport

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Will Bonner needs a little more clarification.

“Right now?” the Belgreen senior asked. “If I had to go today?”

Such is the conundrum when deliberating if he had to choose between attending the Final Four, NBA Finals or a PGA Tour major. So to offer some help, the answer to both those questions is a yes.

It still wasn't an easy choice. There was a note of serious internal discussions.

“I'd probably say — that's a tough question,” said Bonner, the TimesDaily's small school player of the year for the second straight season. “I want to say the PGA ... but I'd probably pick the NBA Finals, even though I'd love to watch the PGA Tour.”

The major of choice? The Masters, of course.

Don't get Bonner wrong. As much as he enjoys golf — he plays on the school team — he doesn't leave any doubt about which sport is his favorite.

“Basketball, 100%,” Bonner said.

It's safe to say it's worked out more than it hasn't. The two-time All-Stater has the Class 1A player of the year award to offer some assistance.

But even Bonner admitted he was surprised by the honor, especially after the way Belgreen's season had ended and some of the players he was up against. Yet, so too was his twin and teammate Collin.

“He called me right after the ceremony was over to ask me if I won,” Bonner said. “I told him I did and he's like, ‘There's no way,’ and was like, ‘I have the trophy to show you if I need to.’”

A photo was promptly sent to verify



Will Bonner might be the best player in Belgreen history, but he lets others debate that when he's not around. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

the result.

Part of Bonner's path to being one of the most decorated players in school history, however, began with a little help from the internet. It wasn't long after he and his brother transferred from Russellville right after their freshman season that he started watching old highlights of Michael Jordan (Bonner's too young to have seen him play).

By Bonner's own estimation, he's probably watched 50% of the YouTube videos on the six-time champion. He's tried to replicate some of the easier

moves.

“If you would have looked at my YouTube two years ago, it would have been MJ all the way down the line,” Bonner said with a laugh. “Watching his motivational videos gave me a better aspect of the game, so I could learn and went from there.”

There is still the matter of where he'll be playing in college. Right now, Bonner is looking at a few junior colleges. He's approaching it the same way he did when he got to Belgreen, ready to show why he's worth playing.

Though, he admitted, it will be different not being on the same team as Collin for the first time in their lives. Well, a lot different, actually.

“It's something, if you have a twin, you need to cherish those moments,” Bonner said. “You never know when it's going to be your last. We surely didn't. We figured we were going to have practice the next day. It's been fun. We fight on the court, in practice, but that's part of being brothers. It made him better, it made me better.”

“I'll miss it.”

Hello, Dolly

Florence keeper getting ready for Division I

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Eager might be the best way Maddox Dolly can describe it.

She's excited for the impending 6½-hour trip to Louisiana-Monroe, a place where she'll soon be suiting up for the soccer team. There's the competitive environment and the different skill levels required.

But the now-Florence graduate doesn't have to report until July 30, meaning there's still plenty of time to enjoy one final summer before getting into the rigors of Division I athletics.

Well ... sort of.

"I'm on a fitness plan right now, and it's kind of kicking my butt," said Dolly, the TimesDaily's All-Area girls soccer player of the year.

Yes, it turns out, even goalkeepers must do their fair share of conditioning.

Right now, Dolly tries to lift three days a week and run five times. There are short-distance days. (A speed workout, as Dolly called it.) There are long-distance days. Each athlete's progress is tracked through an app.

As for the matter of what qualifies as "short" and "long," that is solely up to each individual who comes across the required runs.

"On our short-distance days, it's 3.1 (miles)," Dolly said, barley holding in a laugh. "And then long-distance day is 6.2."

Three miles is short distance?

"I know, right?" Dolly said.

There's also the nutrition plan, which Dolly said she hasn't had much trouble following. Of course, there have been some food items that have been harder to stay away from than others, much to the keeper's chagrin.

"They tell us don't eat white bread, and I love bread," Dolly said. "That one's been hard, and dairy. They say to limit dairy and I love chocolate milk."

It also means having to limit the intake of her favorite cereal — and it's a unique



Florence's Maddox Dolly, who shut out 12 opponents this season, is hoping to do the same at Louisiana-Monroe. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

one — Fruity Pebbles with marshmallows.

"It's probably the unhealthiest," Dolly conceded. "But it's the best."

Perhaps the Fruity Pebbles might be required going forward.

Dolly didn't have much trouble stopping shots this past season. She posted 12 shutouts out of Florence's 21 matches. The Falcons gave up 12 total goals.

The only thing she couldn't do was

convince coach Tiffany Walker to allow her to wear pink goalie attire. Neon yellow had to do. It turned out fine, anyway.

"I was hoping so," Dolly said when asked if she planned on having that kind of senior season. "I think this team really kind of wowed everyone this year, especially Bob Jones."

Florence beat Bob Jones for the first time in Dolly's high school career in early

April.

But now it's time for some new challenges. It's what the offseason work is for, though it will be a little bittersweet when she has to leave.

"I think it'll be good to find out who I am away from home and being uncomfortable so I can grow," Dolly said. "But I'm definitely going to miss being around my mom and my friends."

ALL-AREA BOYS SOCCER

Higher goals

Russellville's Jimenez eager to live out dream

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

There's a look of determination that washes over Orlando Jimenez's face. Then again, it might be more of a calm confidence.

After all, it's always better to go after a goal with a certain kind of conviction.

"The dream has always been to be a soccer player and that's what I'm trying to be," said Jimenez, who joined teammate Juan Cano with giving Russellville back-to-back recipients of the TimesDaily's boys soccer player of the year honors.

"I just love it and I want that to be my job for the rest of my life."

That's some dream.

But the senior also understands it won't be easy and there figures to be plenty of running, weightlifting and technical drills. He plans to take the next year to just strictly train with the hope of landing a professional contract. His preferred destination — Nashville.

"I did think about college first, but I want to try out to see if I can go pro," said Jimenez, who finished with a Shoals-high 30 goals and eight assists in another state runner-up campaign for the Golden Tigers.

He's already got plenty of support to lean on.

"My parents said I should go out and give it a chance," Jimenez said.

For the Jimenez family, soccer has always been important.

The family moved to Alabama from Acapulco, Mexico, when Jimenez was 5 with the desire to find a better life. From there, it didn't take long for a young Jimenez to join his first youth team. His love and competitiveness for the sport has only grown since.

It also helps that the talent level in the United States is better than in Mexico,



Russellville's Orlando Jimenez wants to take his skills to the pro game. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

according to Jimenez. He made the note without much of a second thought when asked which country has better players. It's part of the reason why he wants to achieve his dream here.

"There's more opportunities here than there," Jimenez said. "There's a lot of opportunities here. There's more teams here. I know I can make it here.

"Plus, I feel safer here."

It's just a matter of making the most of the opportunity when he gets the chance. And Jimenez believes he has the right skill-set and makeup to succeed when he does.

"I'm not that selfish and try to score, score, score," Jimenez said. "It's about helping my team and teammates and trying to get a win."

Russellville can attest to that.

Soon, it will be about having other teams see it, too. Until then, it's back to training.

After all, a future job might depend on it.

"I'm excited about the opportunity," Jimenez said. "We'll see what happens."



Orlando Jimenez finished with 30 goals to help Russellville finish as the Class 4A-5A runner-up for the second straight year. [MARVIN GENTRY/FOR THE TIMESDAILY]

ALL-AREA GIRLS TRACK & FIELD

Pumped and ready

Cole overcomes diabetes, turns into running star

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer



It's practice where Mallory Cole will start to feel lightheaded and listless, where she knows she needs to find a sugary treat or she might collapse.

Actual events are different — the thrill of competition seems to shoo away any diabetic episodes — but those quiet practices at Brooks, with only her teammates, coaches and usually parents around can be ominous.

“At meets, I have so much adrenaline going that my blood sugar shoots up to like 300,” said Mallory, the TimesDaily’s girls track and field athlete of the year.

“At practice, I’ll be running with low blood sugar and it can feel like I’m about to pass out.”

Cole was first diagnosed when she was 12 and now wears an insulin pump on the back of her right arm.

And it’s better than the alternative. “I definitely prefer it over needles,” she said.

The pump is just the first line of defense against Cole suffering a diabetic episode. Her parents are usually at practice, and there are goodies stowed in the car at all times to help her blood sugar.

“I have a diabetic bag with snacks and stuff,” Cole said. “If I’m running while slow, I have to drink a Capri Sun or something, Capri Sun or fruit snacks.”

Before she was diagnosed, Cole said she had lost a lot of weight and admits she was overly cantankerous, particularly with younger sister Rachel.

“I was irritable all the time,” Cole said. “That’s one of my main symptoms.”

One day, her mom, who has a nursing background, told her to stay in bed and not go to school. That day, Cole went to a doctor and was diagnosed.

“I was tired all the time, wasn’t feeling good and took it out on everybody,” Cole said. “We’re good now. I have it handled.”

Brooks’ Mallory Cole, first diagnosed with diabetes when she was 12 years old, and her teammates, coaches and parents are always prepared. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Rachel is now 14, and Cole is unaware if she plans any revenge. “I hope not,” Cole said. “I think we get along good now.”

Cole’s diabetic bag isn’t the only bag she’s been stocking.

Cole, who had the Shoals’ best times in the 800, 1,600, 100 hurdles and 300 hurdles, was the Class 4A silver medalist in three of those events. Her 1,600 was fourth in 4A.

“I have a little bag where I keep all my track stuff,” Cole said. “I have all my stickers and medals and newspaper clippings. I have it for cross country and track since seventh grade. It’s a lot of stuff.

“The whole week after state, I kept getting the bag out and looking at (the medals). It’s fun looking at them. I was happy with how I did.”

Next spring, once track season comes around again, the goals are already obvious.

“Maybe winning an event at state would be nice,” Cole said.

ALL-AREA BOYS TRACK & FIELD



Florence’s Avery Thomas was the fastest in the Shoals in both the 100 and 200, plus ranked second in the 400. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Eye on the future

Florence’s Thomas aims to help grieving families

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Avery Thomas is already working on his future and has specific plans on how to meet his career goal.

He may have just ended his junior year at Florence, but the TimesDaily’s boys track and field athlete of the year is looking well beyond that.

Sure, those plans may sound odd or macabre, but Thomas sees his future career as something necessary.

Thomas wants to be a mortician. “That’s my goal,” Thomas said. “I want to own my own funeral home right here in the Shoals. I don’t think it’s weird. It’s weird to others, but that’s my passion and my plan for the future.”

It’s something he started considering nine years ago when his grandmother died.

Thomas said he was heavily invested in his grandmother’s funeral, saw a lot of the elements that go into planning them and how much they can help a family with their grief.

Bashie Rowell was 78 when she died in March 2013 and continues to be an inspiration to him.

“She’d be proud of me,” Thomas said. “She’s looking down on me saying, ‘Good job, Avery.’”

Thomas is already gaining experience

toward that goal.

He’s working at a funeral home this summer and will continue to do so during his senior year through Florence High’s LAUNCH program.

“I try to connect with the families,” Thomas said. “I know they’re going through a bad time, so I try to be there for them as much as we can. We’re always a phone call away.

“If they need anything, they don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and call us.”

Thomas wants to run track in college as a means of getting his four-year degree in business management. After that, he plans to study mortuary science at Jefferson State Community College.

“It’s just always been my passion. Growing up, going to funerals, it kind of clicked,” Thomas said. “The older I got, the more I started looking it up.”

His parents, he admits, were initially suspicious and surprised over his interest in being a mortician. His friends all know about it, too. But they don’t critique him for it.

“They say they wonder about my priorities because sometimes I tend to want to do my funeral home job more than hang out with them,” Thomas said. “My priorities go funeral home, then track, then everything else.”

ALL-AREA GIRLS GOLF

Family ties

Trojans' Annalee continues run of great Regan players

By Gregg Dewalt
For the TimesDaily

The Regan surname is synonymous with high school golf at Muscle Shoals.

Thomas Regan was part of three state championships with the Trojans and was the TimesDaily's boys golfer of the year in 2018 when he won the state individual championship in Class 6A.

Fast forward four years and Regan's younger sister — Annalee — can claim a player of the year award as well. A rising freshman at Muscle Shoals, Annalee Regan is the TimesDaily's girls golfer of the year.

Her 75.1 scoring average was easily the best in northwest Alabama and she tied for third place in the Class 6A state tournament with rounds of 76-71 while competing as an individual.

Golf is part of the fabric of the Regan

family. Thomas just finished his sophomore year on North Alabama's men's golf team, while her dad Jason and uncle Justin both played at UNA.

Annalee has got plenty of time to figure out if she will continue the family's UNA golf connection, but her trajectory might indicate bigger things on the horizon.

For now, the player of the year is content to work on her game and remain a two-sport athlete. (She also plays basketball.)

"I guess I started playing when I could walk," she said. "My dad has always worked on a golf course so I was always out there with him and my brother."

Thomas' exploits at the state tournament inspired his sister to want to emulate him.

"When I watched Thomas at state do what he did, I wanted to do that too," she said. "He had a pretty good run at state."

Thomas and Annalee are frequent



Muscle Shoals' Annalee Regan is the second member of her family to win golfer of the year honors.

[DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

playing partners at Cypress Lakes. She has yet to beat him, though.

"I'm trying," she laughed.

Thomas said he noticed in the past year the improvement Annalee made in her game.

"She really buckled down last summer on practicing a lot," Thomas said. "She's got more determination to practice and get better than I have seen in anybody in a long time. She's out there every single

day. She has the will inside of her. She's a grinder."

Annalee likes the calmer nature of golf.

"It's not so crazy and fast-paced," she said of the difference between being a basketball player and golfer. "I can always find a way to get up-and-down for par on the golf course. In basketball, if you kind of mess up, it's hard to redeem yourself. In golf, there's always another hole to get it right."

ALL-AREA BOYS GOLF

Lost and found

Haleyville's Hudson Lawson finds magic with former putter

By Gregg Dewalt
For the TimesDaily

Imagine that on the eve of the most important golf tournament of the season, you lose your putter.

It's the putter that has helped you become Haleyville High's No. 1 player with a 73.0 stroke average.

Time to panic, right?

Not really; not if you are freshman Hudson Lawson.

After somewhat of a frantic search, he turned to his backup putter. It turned out to be not a problem.

All Lawson did was shoot 69 in the substate tournament to claim medalist honors and lead the Lions to a 298 team total and the substate championship. He followed that by claiming medalist honors by four shots over teammate Jake

Temple at the Class 4A state tournament and helping the Lions to their first team championship in dominating fashion.

"Yeah, that's kind of a funny story," said Lawson, the TimesDaily's boys golfer of the year. "I was inside my house practicing and then I went outside for a second to hit a few wedges. I laid it down and then I couldn't find it. I was freaking out."

After his search came up empty, Lawson grabbed his former putter — a Scotty Cameron similar to what PGA Tour player Jordan Spieth uses. It's still in his bag today.

Including the wins at substate and state, Lawson finished with three tournament wins and also was on the all-tournament team at the Wildcat Invitational. It shouldn't come as any surprise. He's been playing golf almost since he could hold a club and his family lived on a golf course



Hudson Lawson helped lead Haleyville to the program's first team state title. The Lions won every match and tournament they played this past season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

until moving closer to Haleyville.

His cousin, Jack Lawson, was a senior on this year's team and had the third best scoring average (75.6) on the team. Hudson Lawson said they pushed each other to get better.

"We are both really competitive and we

try to beat each other every day," he said. "We try to get the best of the other every time we play."

Oh, and that putter he lost before substate? Turns out it really wasn't lost at all.

"It ended up being on the back porch," Lawson said.

ALL-AREA GIRLS TENNIS

Exchange rate

Schultz enjoyed 'incredible' year on, off court

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Amira Schultz's whirlwind year in the United States that began with such a surprise will end in the land of Mickey.

Schultz didn't learn until two weeks before takeoff back home in Germany that she would be placed in Alabama.

She developed a taste for sweet tea, an appreciation for friendly people and a distaste for politics in her year at Mars Hill. An undefeated season in tennis is nice, too.

"We do have sweet tea in Germany, but here they have better sweet tea," Schultz said.

Schultz, the TimesDaily's girls tennis player of the year, arrived in Alabama last August. She'll head back to Germany on July 9, though her parents will visit here first.

The family has a trip planned that will include stops in New Orleans and, Schultz said, "several cities in Florida." Hollywood Studios are on the agenda, and it's likely Mickey Mouse will get a visit, too.

"It was a really, really nice year," Schultz said. "It was incredible, and I love my team. Definitely."

Schultz admits she knew little about Alabama when she arrived.

"When I thought of Alabama at first, I thought country, not much city," she said during a heavy thunderstorm last week. "Everything was new and exciting. The weather is so much better here, though not right now."

Schultz first planned to spend a year in the United States back in 2020, but a certain pandemic scuttled that idea.

In a way, she started working toward that when she first started learning a little English in kindergarten. Those lessons became serious in second grade.

Schultz, after a year at Mars Hill,



Mars Hill's Amira Schultz went unbeaten this season and won the Class 1A-3A championship. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

has shed almost all of her accent. To borrow a quote the most-famous Schultz — Sgt. Schultz of Hogan's Heroes, of course — her accent is almost "nothing, nothing."

"Thank you," she said when her lack of heavy accent was recognized. "I do have a little one, and sometimes I get confused with the order of words, but I don't have any problems with vocabulary anymore."

She had few problems with the tennis, either. Schultz was unbeaten in her first year of high school tennis.

"In Alabama, tennis is not the biggest sport, but it's a little bigger in my hometown," Schultz said. "We don't have school sports in Germany, so I play for a club team."

She's from Lübeck, near Hamburg and the Baltic Sea, and will return with an appreciation for Alabama.

"The best thing is that people are so nice here," Schultz said. "They are so incredibly friendly to you. Everybody is so friendly."

ALL-AREA BOYS TENNIS



Muscle Shoals' Drake Woodard, a two-time player of the year, is set to enroll at the University of Alabama. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Make a racket

Muscle Shoals' Woodard ready for next chapter

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Drake Woodard's countdown has started.

The Muscle Shoals senior, the TimesDaily's boys tennis player of the year, has specific plans for the coming weeks that fall between his graduation and him going off to college.

The details are etched in stone, a specific agenda to link two major life events. "My last free summer," Woodard said. "I'm going to play a lot of tennis and work a lot. That's about it."

Woodard will keep swinging his racket before enrolling at the University of Alabama — as a regular student. And he plans to keep swinging once he gets to Tuscaloosa, too.

He'll work his job at Turtle Point as a tennis coach and — he crosses his fingers — hopes to do the same at a Tuscaloosa country club, too.

"I think I have a job lined up down there, which would be awesome," Woodard said. "It's not 100% sure yet."

Woodard, who plans to major in business, says coaching at Turtle Point helped him as a player at Muscle Shoals.

He has worked with 4-year-olds to develop their interest in the game and worked with adults continuing to

develop at it.

"When I'm coaching, I can recognize something in somebody's game, and I can understand that I do that, too," Woodard said. "The more I coach, the more I can help myself."

There has also been pain.

"I had a kid throw a racket at me one time," Woodard said — and it was not retaliation for zealous coaching.

"I was coming up behind him to come help," he said. "He brings it back and hits me with it. Hit me right in the chest. It could have worse, I guess."

Yes, it could have been.

"I had a high school girl who was pretty good hit me in the mouth with a ball," Woodard said. "That one hurt."

Woodard, a two-time TimesDaily player of the year, also felt a different kind of anguish at his final Muscle Shoals match. He thought back on his career, the highlights and the lowlights, and grew emotional.

"It kind of didn't hit me that it was going to be the last match until I got to the very end. It was tough," he said. "I was just thinking about how quickly it had gone by."

"I vividly remember every single year, and I was thankful to have had such a great team all four years that I could enjoy all of it."

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA SOFTBALL PITCHER

1 to remember

'Wild Thing' Vaughn made Mars Hill memories

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Maybe, one day, Riley Vaughn will call up her favorite streaming service, search for one classic movie's name and, ahem, learn about her "family."

No, the Mars Hill senior softball pitcher has not studied up on that famed baseball pitcher of yesteryear.

She has not enjoyed learning about the Cleveland Indians of Tinseltown fame. She has not rocked out to the classic song from — could you have named the band? — The Troggs.

The Mars Hill Panthers may not have hummed the song at Vaughn's appearances over the last six years, but the song surely fits.

"Wild Thing, you make my heart sing."

No, Riley Vaughn is of no known relation to Ricky Vaughn of "Major League" fame. Ricky Vaughn is a fictional character.

"I have heard of that," said Riley, the TimesDaily's small school softball pitcher of the year. "It hasn't come up often, but it has before."

But it has led to her being called "Wild Thing" a few times.

"Yes, they have actually," Riley said.

Vaughn, over the last six years, has helped the Panthers hum some good tunes after many a victory.

The four-time TimesDaily small school pitcher of the year has led the Panthers to five straight state tournaments. Mars Hill also went in 2016 when Vaughn was a sixth-grader.

With Vaughn, Mars Hill has one state championship and two runner-up finishes, including this season.

She's a five-time All-State player and — had COVID not nixed the 2020 season — might have been the first six-timer in Alabama Sports Writers Association All-State softball history.

Her career numbers: 139-40, including 59 shutouts, with a 1.36 ERA and 1,717 strikeouts in 1,104 innings.

Not too shabby.

So, when is Mars Hill going to retire



Mars Hill's Riley Vaughn didn't leave many hitters with smiles over her six-year career with the Panthers. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

her No. 1 jersey?

"I don't know" if they should, Vaughn said, squirming from the spotlight with her usual veracity, akin to a Wild Thing fastball.

"I'm not sure."

Soon, she'll be off to Tennessee's

Union University where her wide-ranging plans initially boiled down to one word.

"Pitch," she said.

Anything else? "Yeah, I'll go to class, too."

Vaughn — after softball — said

she's considering a major in physical therapy.

"I'm not for sure on that, but it's interesting," Vaughn said. "Helping people interests me. I've always liked helping people and thought of doing something like that."

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA SOFTBALL HITTER

No debate

Quails has no qualm over top sport now

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Kailyn Quails has revised her statement.

Toward the end of Hatton's girls basketball season, with the Hornets enjoying another playoff run and softball season on hold, Quails said she preferred hoops.

Almost four months later, after Quails enjoyed some massive success on the diamond, her view has changed.

With the deftness of a politician, Quails isn't as absolute anymore.

"Well, it's kind of hard now, to be honest," said Quails, the TimesDaily's small school hitter of the year — in softball. "I like basketball a lot, but softball is starting to grow on me.

"That's a hard decision, actually."

Quails is actually a three-sport star at Hatton, though she is certain what ranks No. 3 on her list. Sorry, volleyball.

However, all three sports continue to be a success.

Girls basketball has made the Northwest Regional finals for four straight seasons. Volleyball has reached the state quarterfinals each of the last two years.

Softball this spring made the state tournament for the ninth time in 12 playoff seasons. Quails is hopeful the Hornets will soon add another softball championship.

The Hornets have five titles and 33 state tournament victories since 2010. This year's 1-2 trip was Hatton's worst in that time.

"I'm going to make sure to make it further than we did this year," Quails said. Already a star in three sports, Quails says she will not be adding to her repertoire next year as a senior.

Cross country? "No. I don't do running. It's just not for me."

Football? That would allow softball/



Hatton's Kailyn Quails hit .500 this spring and was a first-team Class 2A All-State player. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

football coach Denton Bowling to coach her in a second sport. "I don't play football, but he has mentioned it before."

In softball, how about moving from right field to catcher? "Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no. Not catcher. That's not for me."

If Quails matches her improvement in softball over last year, she'll have options to consider.

Quails upped her batting average by

135 points this year to a cool .500. She more than doubled her run production — 24 runs and 24 RBIs last year, 57 runs and 57 RBIs this season.

Quails cites a change in her stance that Bowling made during last season.

The comfort she found continued this entire year.

"He's always told us if it's not working, fix it," Quails said before describing the change Bowling made.

"I guess I see pitches (better) this year instead of just swinging at random stuff."

But her stance, Quails said, isn't changing again on what is Hatton's No. 1 girls sport.

"Probably softball," Quails said. "We have won a pretty good bit of championships. Our coach works hard for us. He has high expectations for us and makes us work real hard."

LARGE SCHOOL ALL-AREA SOFTBALL PITCHER

Tittle me this

Deshler softball star also shushes baseball Tigers

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Rylee Tittle's eyes perk up and she swells with pride.

For all she accomplished this season — from being an All-State player for the Deshler softball team, helping the Tigers reach the Class 4A North Regional and signing a college scholarship — one final act of bravado belongs on the list.

Oh, Deshler baseball Tigers, what were you thinking?

"They talked all season. All season long," Tittle said of the weeks, the months leading up to that wondrous day.

"They never hushed, for sure."

The TimesDaily's large school softball pitcher of the year was walking to a senior picnic when some baseball players finally reached her last nerve.

"I was going to the baseball field, and they stopped me," Tittle said. "'Go to the softball field, and let's go.' I said, 'OK.' That's where I met them."

Fellow softball senior Maddie Roberts caught Tittle and joined in the dissection.

The baseball miscreants, according to Tittle, were: Logan James, Henry Finch, Devin Burdett and Jake Thompson.

Hello, gentlemen.

"I struck out Logan James the first time, and we're not going to talk about the second time," Tittle said. "Struck out Logan, I didn't strike out Henry. I got Devin Burdett out, and I also got Jake Thompson out."

Tittle, a left-hander, didn't delve deep into her repertoire to dispose of the challenge before getting back to the senior picnic.

"Fastball. My fastball outside or my curveball inside," Tittle said.

The experience was a memory that will last.

"It was fun," Tittle said succinctly.

A few of the baseball Tigers, all of whom had been "very confident, very 'talky'" beforehand, Tittle said, walked away silently with their tails tucked between their legs.



Deshler's Rylee Tittle, after tormenting opposing softball hitters all year, did the same to some Deshler baseball players at a senior picnic. [PHOTOS BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

Others did not.

"Some still want a rematch, but they're not going to get one," Tittle said.

No rematch?

"Nope, nope, they are not," Tittle said. "I've already handled business. No need to handle it again."

Tittle, a Calhoun Community College

signee, handled business from the circle this season, too, with a 1.12 ERA with 264 strikeouts and a .150 average against in 188 innings. Imagine if she had faced baseball players.

Tittle became the second Alabama Sports Writers Association All-State softball player in Deshler history.

"I've never gotten anything like that, never gotten that kind of recognition, so I was really surprised," Tittle said. "I was in my room getting ready for church. My mom barged in and showed me the list. I wasn't expecting it.

"Then I looked at the paper and saw 'Tittle no riddle.'"

LARGE SCHOOL ALL-AREA SOFTBALL HITTER

Banner year

After historic season, Dover and Mustangs want more

By A. Stacy Long
Sports Writer

Briley Dover's summer, at least according to her plans, promises to be calmer.

She has "just" four softball tournaments and they don't require long trips. "We're taking it easy," she says.

There's her job at a Loretto daycare, helping preschoolers manage their summers, too.

No, diapers won't be involved. "I don't like changing diapers," she says.

But there's nothing that can wipe away what she and the Mustangs accomplished this spring.

Loretto softball reached the state tournament for a second straight year — the first two times in school history — and came home with a third-place finish.

"We had a really good season," said Dover, the TimesDaily's large school hitter of the year. "It was really exciting. Personally, I would have liked to have a little better season at the beginning, but we finished strong."

Overall, even before softball season began, Loretto girls sports had a banner year.

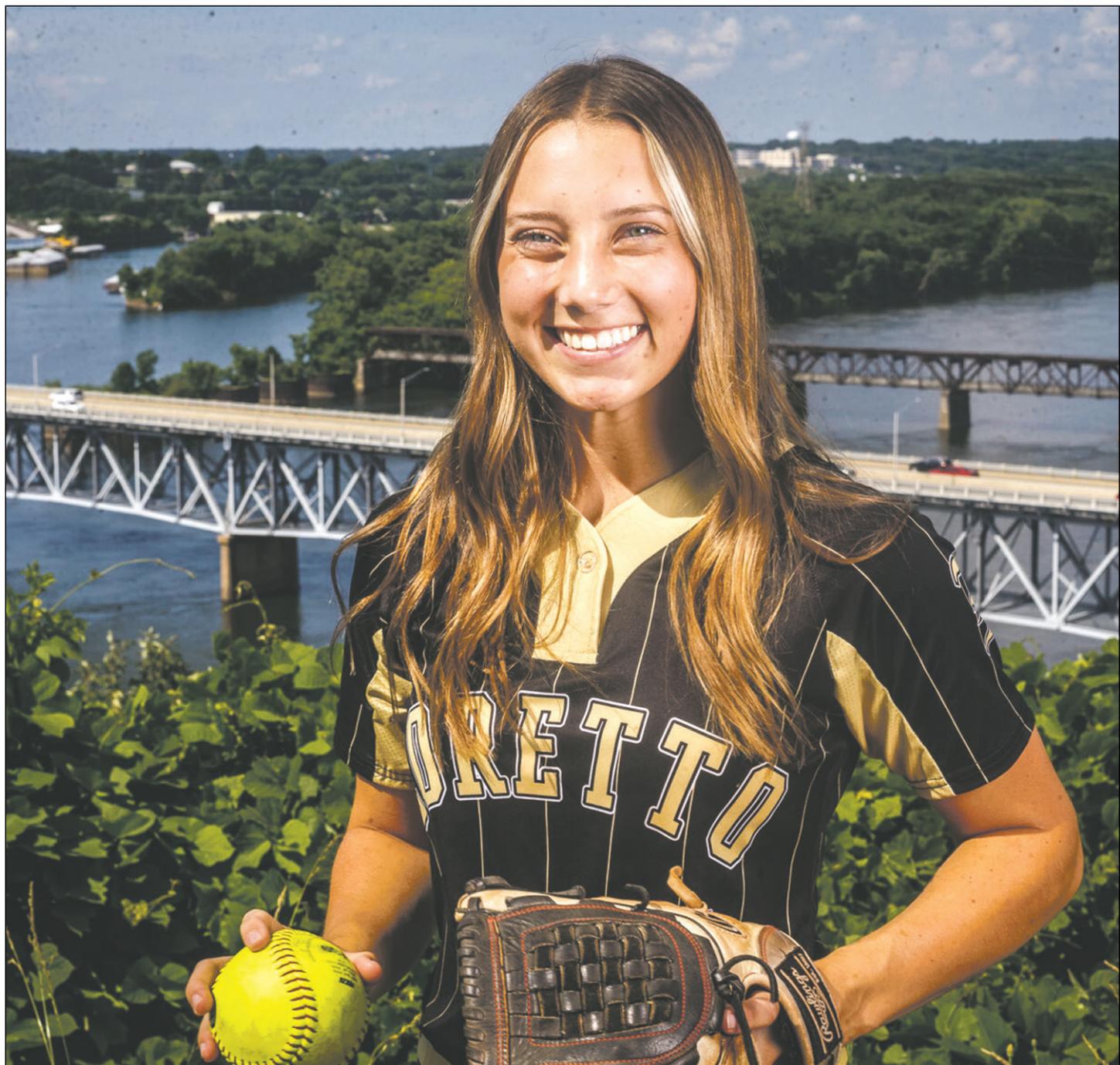
The volleyball team, of which Dover is a part, also finished third at state. The Mustangs won a state championship in 2020.

The girls basketball team, of which Dover is not, was undefeated through the regular season. Those Mustangs were defending a state championship, too.

"We really love girls athletics at Loretto," Dover said.

These last two years, Dover said, have hopefully signaled a change in softball's status at Loretto.

"They've been more of a basketball school, a baseball school," Dover said. "The softball team has been looked over, but the last few years, we've brought



Loretto's Briley Dover had a .563 on-base percentage and slugged .731 this season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

more attention to it."

Loretto baseball also made the state tournament and finished third this year.

"Sports has been Loretto's brand," said Dover, a shortstop in softball, a libero in volleyball and a fan in basketball. She stopped playing in sixth grade to focus on softball.

"That's what Loretto is," she said. "To everybody, if you think of Loretto, that's what you think of."

Playing volleyball has its softball benefits, she said.

"I think it helps me be able to move more," Dover said. "It helps me dive for balls. It's kind of the same thing, so it helps me move side to side."

But it's already time to start thinking about next year, juggling her daycare duties with a little softball, a little volleyball and her final year at Loretto.

Dover plans to sign with North Alabama softball in November, fulfilling a longtime dream.

"It's so exciting," Dover said. "It's where I've wanted to go the past few

years. I love (UNA coach Ashley) Cozart down there and what they're building. This year, they had 40 wins and made it deep in the ASUN tournament.

"I hope I can go there and do really well."

Before that, maybe the Loretto softball team can show one Loretto rival where it stands.

Loretto baseball, you ready for a showdown? Maybe not.

"Oh, I think we'd beat them pretty bad," Dover said.

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA BASEBALL HITTER

Decisions, decisions

Choosing between Tide, MLB draft awaits Swinney

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Mason Swinney smiles and offers up a slight shrug of the shoulders.

The Phil Campbell standout hasn't been up to much, he said, since the Bobcats' season ended. He's been chilling with friends and working out in preparation to play baseball at Alabama.

Oh ... there's also been a few workouts for major league teams sprinkled in as well. He had just gotten back from one with the Kansas City Royals at the beginning of June. The MLB draft is July 17-19.

"I went with my dad and my grandpa," said Swinney, the Times-Daily's small school hitter of the year. He was also named the 3A hitter of the year by the Alabama Sports Writers Association.

"It was a boys trip. It was fun." And by fun, that meant strictly baseball. Swinney, a self-proclaimed baseball fanatic, toured the Royals' stadium and met with members of the team's scouting department and front office.

That was before the on-the-field workout.

"It's pretty cool," Swinney said. "It was huge and it was pretty sweet being there. Going into the locker room and seeing what that was like and how it compared to a high school locker room and seeing how big the stadium was around it, it was just a whole different atmosphere."

But showcasing his skills — when he was finally able to — might have been his favorite part. Mother Nature threw in a little bit of a hiccup right before Swinney was set to take the field. He had to wait out a thunderstorm.

So, any home runs during batting practice?

"I got a few of them out," Swinney said with a smile.

Swinney doesn't have any kind of preferred destination in mind. It's just



Mason Swinney, an Alabama signee, has gone to a number of MLB workouts since Phil Campbell's season ended. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

about the opportunity to play. But it does leave a bit of a conundrum.

Alabama or the pros?

"It may get a little tough," Swinney admitted. "We'll have to see. If it fits right, then go on and if it doesn't, then go to Alabama and go from there."

"I don't really have anything to lose coming out of high school," he added. "I have Alabama for sure and if (getting drafted) happens, that's cool. If it

doesn't, that's fine."

In the meantime, it's just about staying active trying to find ways to improve. It's something Swinney also talked about last offseason. This summer is about finding different ways to increase his range at shortstop, a position he hopes to continue to play.

"I live, eat and sleep baseball, so I like doing all that stuff," Swinney said. "Ever since I was little, my dream

has been to play professional baseball and I guess that's what keeps me going."

Who knows? That might be sooner rather than later.

"It's starting to come true a little more and hopefully it comes true pretty soon, whether that's from Bama or straight from high school," Swinney said. "It's a pretty cool feeling no matter what happens next."

SMALL SCHOOL ALL-AREA BASEBALL PITCHER

Ready to roar

Mars Hill's Bowerman all set for UNA

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

Josh Bowerman gives up the answer rather easily.

The Mars Hill baseball team reached the state semifinals for the seventh straight playoff season. The Panthers' softball team, where his younger sister Marah starts at second base, was the 2A runner-up.

So, which of the siblings is better at their respective sport?

"Marah is probably better all around," Bowerman said. "She's a lot better defensive player than I am. She's definitely better at basketball than me."

But Bowerman isn't too shabby at the whole sports thing, either. The Times-Daily's small school pitcher of the year — and the Alabama Sports Writers Association's Class 2A player of the year — will soon be off to North Alabama, where he'll start getting ready for his freshman baseball season.

"I'm very excited," Bowerman said. "Maybe I'll get a little playing time. We'll see how this thing goes."

Right now, there is a little uncertainty in who will be coaching Bowerman.

Mike Keehn recently retired after 14 seasons as the Lions head coach and 34 years overall with the program. UNA athletic director Josh Looney said he plans to have the position filled by the end of June.

It's a situation Bowerman has been keeping tabs on. And while he's confident in whomever UNA brings in next, it did initially cause a little bit of nervousness and anxiety that required a little bit of reassurance.

"Coach Keehn called me and said I should be all right," Bowerman said. "That calmed me down a little bit."

Bowerman joked he asked Mars Hill coach Josh Willingham, a former UNA standout and major league outfielder, to take the job — a result he conceded that probably won't happen. (Willingham is helping the school in its search



Mars Hill's Josh Bowerman says he's eager to start classes and baseball at North Alabama. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

process.) But it was a chance to turn the tables a little bit.

After all, it was Willingham who might have happened to nudge his now-former player in the direction of UNA. And continuing to get coached by a former big leaguer usually never hurts.

"He did and Douglas Hargett did and just about all my coaches," Bowerman

said with a laugh. "They had a bunch of connections at UNA. I think getting to stay home for the next couple years will be fun."

So what is Bowerman looking for in Keehn's successor?

"Just (someone) to push me to be the best athlete I can be and push me to work hard, not only on the baseball field, but in the classroom as well,"

Bowerman said. "Really, just push me to be the best person I can be."

They'll certainly have an option of where to play him. It could be on the mound, maybe in the field, perhaps both.

"I don't know to be honest," Bowerman said. "It might be mainly pitching, but hopefully I'll get to swing it a little bit."

LARGE SCHOOL ALL-AREA BASEBALL HITTER

Thumb up

Russellville's Pace adapted well after injury

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

After winning the 5A state championship his senior season, after the celebrating on the way back to Russellville and after taking a moment to savor the memories, Canyon Pace allowed himself some time off.

If you want to call it that.

"I took three days off," said Pace, the TimesDaily's large school baseball hitter of the year.

A whole three days?

"Yeah," Pace said with a laugh. "The first time in 12 years. High school is over, but I have to get ready to play in college."

The Golden Tigers catcher/designated hitter will be playing at Division II Union University in Tennessee next season. But then again, it was time off well earned. It was a long season compounded by the fact Pace wasn't entirely healthy for a good portion of it.

Rumor had it Pace played through a broken thumb.

"It is true," Pace said. "Second game of the year, I was catching and the inning before, I had just hit my first home run of the season. Logan (White) was pitching, and we got mixed up and I took at fastball off the thumb, and it broke it. I ended up finishing the inning.

"I didn't want to come out (of the game), but I knew I had to just 'cause I couldn't move it, couldn't throw. It was already swelling up real bad."

It was about the only break he got. After that game was over, Pace wanted to make sure he remained in the lineup. Broken thumb, no problem.

After all, missed time was missed opportunities.

"The next day, we were playing Faith(-Mobile) and I said if I can't throw, I'm just going to hit." Pace recalled. "I ended up doing pretty well. I had two or three doubles and six or seven RBIs."

Modest day, indeed.

And then Pace found out, it might have been a little bit worse than he initially anticipated.



Despite a broken thumb, Canyon Pace finished with 12 home runs and 61 RBIs in 48 games. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

"Monday, we went got back home, I went to the doctor and it had broken pretty much in half," Pace said. "I got put in the DH role and focused on hitting until I got cleared to catch again."

"I missed (catching) a lot," he continued. "But at the same time, being able to sit in the dugout and get everyone else excited and then go hit, I love hitting. I'm

a hitting guy. Being able to hit every day, it made my year pretty much.

It worked out.

Pace was also named the 5A hitter of the year by the Alabama Sports Writers Association. So yeah, not too bad in what ended up being a memorable season.

And for Pace, it might be one of his favorites.

"Probably after we won state and just being with my friends and just being on a team one final time," Pace said of his most cherished memories. "We were still a team on the bus, but once we got off, we pretty much weren't a team anymore. The seniors were done.

"Those final hugs, the tears and that excitement was unbelievable."

LARGE SCHOOL ALL-AREA BASEBALL PITCHER

Brace yourself

Langston made short work recovering from surgery

By David Glovach
Sports Writer

When the bus finally pulled out of the parking lot at Jacksonville State, the Russellville baseball team had some items it needed to take care of before getting back to school.

One — obviously — was taking care of the obligatory pictures with the new state trophy that was coming home with them. The other was selecting the music that was accompanying them on the way.

“I had a few songs in there,” Banks Langston said a few weeks later. “We Are the Champions’ was one of them.”

So, what was the other?

“‘Party In the USA’ by Miley Cyrus,” Langston said with a laugh.

An interesting choice. But the rising senior earned himself the unique selection after working his way back from an ACL and meniscus tear from the fall in order to be ready for the spring.

Langston, the TimesDaily’s large school pitcher of the year, ended up winning the opener of the Class 5A championship series against Holtville. He finished it with a walkoff single in Game 3.

“It was not easy,” said Langston, who was also named the Alabama Sports Writers Association’s 5A pitcher of the year. “I had to go to rehab like right after I had surgery. I had to get started so I could get ready for baseball. I couldn’t hit and stuff the first few games, but I was able to pitch.”

“My dad and people at Bone & Joint (Rehabilitation) kept me going and helped me get ready for the season.”

It doesn’t take Langston long to recall the details of the injury. It happened in the first week of the football team’s season. There were four minutes left in the first quarter when someone rolled up on the back of his left knee.

Troy Layton of SportsMed performed the surgery out of Huntsville not long after. He took a graft of from one of Langston’s hamstring to replace the damaged ACL ligament. Physical therapy was next in order to be ready for the Golden Tigers’ season. Some exercises were a little easier than



Banks Langston was back on an athletic field less than seven months after tearing his ACL during Russellville’s football season. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

others.

“Honestly, scooting around in a rolling chair across the room was the hardest part,” Langston said.

But playing baseball also meant he had to wear a stabilizing brace to support the reconstructed knee, which caused a bit of an adjustment period. The feeling of wearing a knee brace and the bulkiness of it when the knee wants to torque can be odd.

“I really didn’t get used to it because when I land when I pitch, it kind of does some weird stuff,” Langston said. “I just had to fight through it.”

It’s safe to say it worked out.

Now, Langston is working on getting some strength back in his lower body he lost during surgery and rehab. There is after all football season to get ready for.

Which leads to another interesting

question — baseball or football?

“I’d say I’m probably better at baseball,” Langston said. “I mean, I’m pretty good at football, but I’m not a big college football guy. I’m hopefully going to college for baseball. But football is very fun. Being under the Friday night lights is a fun experience.

“But I definitely have to say I’m a baseball guy.”

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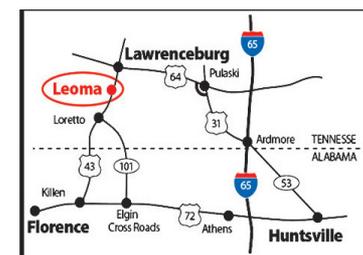
WARRANTY

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