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Country duo *Thompson Square* set to headline Watermelon Festival

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Just like the state champion Russellville Golden Tigers baseball team did all spring, the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce has hit a home run with its lineup of musical talent for the 41st annual Franklin County Watermelon Festival.

Headlining the weekend will be the country duo Thompson Square. The husband-and-wife team will take the stage Saturday, August 20 at 8:30 to close out a weekend of outstanding live music.

Thompson Square broke into the Nashville music scene with a multi-platinum mega hit *Are You Gonna Kiss Me Or Not?* The Grammy nomi-

nated duo of Keifer and Shawna Thompson are multiple recipients of awards from the Academy of Country Music, the Country Music Association and Country Music Television.

Their songs have hit Number One in three countries and they've even started their own podcast, *Talking with Thompson Square*. The duo's three albums have resulted in 10 charted singles, including two Number Ones, *Kiss Me* and *If I Didn't Have You*. A third single, *I Got You*, made it to Number Eight on the country charts.

Friday night's headliner is the Velcro Pygmies, a popular band that pays tribute to the great music of the

See 'THOMPSON SQUARE,' page 3

Russellville man facing murder, drug trafficking charges after deadly dispute

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A Russellville man is being held in the Russellville City Jail facing murder and several drug charges after a Wednesday night dispute turned deadly.

Tyler Blake Garrison, 31, was arrested early Thursday morning at his residence located at 614 Cotaco Street, the same location where Garrison allegedly fatally stabbed a roommate, Richard Anthony Davis, 42.

According to witnesses who were outside in a neighboring backyard Wednesday night, the two men engaged in a verbal argument after one accused the other of taking his

cell phone.

Garrison is charged with causing Davis' death by stabbing him in his upper left torso. A source familiar with the investigation said the knife pierced the victim's heart. Davis was found unresponsive when officers arrived. Witnesses said someone drove to the residence and picked Garrison up shortly after 10:30 p.m., Wednesday, and he left the residence before officers arrived.

Approximately five hours later, Garrison returned to the residence and officers took him into custody shortly thereafter.

In the course of the arrest, officers found methamphetamine in sufficient quantity to charge Garrison with

See 'MURDER,' page 3

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at Franklin Memory Gardens.

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Russellville Council okays purchase of paving equipment

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council plans to begin repaving projects on a full-scale basis.

Earlier this month, the council approved the purchase of four tandem-axle dump trucks and at its June 20th meeting, the council approved the purchase of \$459,000 worth of equipment from Thompson Caterpillar, including a paver, road widener, planer head, vibration roller and broom attachment.

The council voted to advertise for bids from local banks to finance the equipment purchase.

According to Thompson Caterpillar sales representative Tyler Brown, most of the equipment will be delivered this summer, with the exception of the paver. Brown said it could be early 2023 before one becomes available.

The city will purchase the equipment off the Sourcewell Cooperative Bid list, which allows governmental entities to obtain better pricing through cooperative purchasing.

In other agenda items, the council:

—authorized the purchase of eight Dodge Durango Pursuit vehicles for the Russellville Police Department. The city will solicit sealed bids for the purchase of the new vehicles, and will sell or trade-in eight vehicles from the current police inventory to offset costs.

Earlier this month, the council approved a similar measure for the purchase of eight Ford Interceptor SUVs but there was no available inventory of the Fords, so RPD Chief Chris Hargett started researching other options.

—approved the low bid of \$28,179.84 from Alabama Gun and Pawn for the purchase of 26 AR-15s for the Russellville Police Department. Mayor David Grissom was not in attendance at the June 20 meeting and did not vote on the measure. The successful bid was the lowest of four received by the city.

—approved a 12-month maintenance contract with DataWorks Plus for support of the RPD fingerprint machine.

—accepted a grant award letter from the Franklin County Community Development Commission for \$4,000 and a pledge letter from the Franklin County Fire Association for \$4,000 for the purchase of fire prevention Pluggie training tool in the amount of \$8,901.50. The remaining \$901.50 will be paid by the city.

—accepted a letter from RPD officer Chad Sheffield asking for his resignation letter to be rescinded. The measure passed 4-1, with Councilman Darren Woodruff voting against the measure.

—declared vacancies for positions of Laborer and Heavy Equipment Operator II in the Russellville Street Department. The Laborer position will be advertised while the Heavy Equipment Operator II position will be promoted from within the classified service.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be July 5, 2022, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.

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'THOMPSON SQUARE,' from page 1

1980s, 'when hair was big and rock-n-roll was bigger.' Here's the entire Friday/Saturday evening music schedule announced by the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce:

- Friday, August 19:
 - 5:45 pm: Opening Ceremony with National Anthem
 - 6-6:45 pm: Cody Bowen
 - 7-8:15 pm: Joseph Baldwin Band
 - 8:30-10 pm: Velcro Pygmies
- Saturday, August 20:
 - 6-6:45 pm: Tremayne
 - 7-8:15 pm: Rewind
 - 8:30-10 pm: Thompson Square.



COURTESY PHOTO

Thompson Square, above, will headline the Watermelon Festival and will perform on Saturday, August 20th from 8:30 - 10 P.M.

'MURDER,' from page 1

Trafficking, along with other controlled substances and marijuana. Garrison now faces five felony charges, the most serious of which, murder, carries up to a life sentence.

According to RPD Chief Chris Hargett, Garrison has numerous convictions and was released from the Alabama Department of Corrections approximately 13 months ago. Court records show Garrison has prior convictions for burglary, drug possession and promoting prison contraband dating back to 2009.

As of Monday afternoon, Garrison remained in the Franklin County Jail.

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Franklin BOE revises vaping policy at June 14th meeting

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

All Franklin County students caught in possession of vaping devices or E-cigarettes on campus will be required to complete a new vape education program after the Franklin County Board of Education approved a revised vaping policy at its June 14th meeting.

At the recommendation of Superintendent Greg Hamilton, the board unanimously voted to require the VAPE Education Program for all first-time vape offenders.

Additionally, students caught in possession of vaping devices or E-cigarettes on campus will receive a two day in-school suspension (ISS) for a first offense.

The penalty for students caught using vaping devices or E-cigarettes will be five days of ISS, as well as completing the VAPE Education Program.

Second time offenses for possession of the prohibited devices includes a two-day out-of school suspension (OSS). A third violation will include a three-day suspension.

Second-time offenders caught using vaping devices or E-cigarettes will receive a three-day OSS, with third offenses calling for a five-day OSS.

Subsequent offenses beyond a third time may result in permanent alternative placement for violators.

"We hope the VAPE Education Program will help students understand the dangers and long-term health risks of using vapes or E-cigarettes. They are not a 'safe' substitute for cigarettes and they will not be allowed on our campuses," Hamilton said.

While the board did not revise its cellular phone policy, Hamilton called on faculty and administrators to make sure the existing policy is enforced. Students from kindergarten through sixth grade may only have cell phones in their possession on school buses.

Students from seventh grade to twelfth grade may only have cell phones out in class if the teacher has authorized their use for a class assignment. Otherwise, breaks and lunch are the only allowable times for cell phone use.

"Our cell phone policy includes everything we need as long as it is enforced," Hamilton said.

Students in violation of the cell phone policy are subject to having their phones confiscated, Hamilton said.

In other agenda items, the board:

—awarded several 12-month bids to the lowest responsible bidders, including Wi-Fi to JSCM Group at a total price of \$214,072.06, paper bid for copier/computer paper to American Paper & Twine at \$41.90 for 8.5 x 11 paper case and \$59.50 for 8.5 x 14 paper case, LP gas to Thompson Gas at bid price of \$1.884 per gallon, and diesel fuel bid to Tatum Oil at \$4.873 per gallon.

The diesel fuel bid was for approximately 35,000 gallons of on road diesel fuel. Tatum Oil, according to the bid invitation, shall have the right to increase or decrease the per gallon price "upon furnishing to the Board of Education a copy of notice from the supplier denoting such change."

—increased the per mile reimbursement for travel to \$.625 per mile.

—rescinded the employment of John Torisky, Lori Thompson and Trina Franklin as 21st CCLC Contract Instructors and the retirement of Sherry Hutcheson that was effective June 1, 2022.

The next regular meeting of the Franklin County Board of Education will be July 29, 2022, with work session at 5 p.m., and meeting to follow.



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Common sense or common cents?

Ann Hill

Today there is a brand new meaning,
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It's now known as "common cents."

With high taxes getting higher,
And prices out of control,
They say government has the
answer—
Just put us all on the dole.

The rich are getting richer,
Many think that this is unfair.
No matter if their own hands earned
it,
They're accused of not wanting to
share.

Robin Hood had a solution.
Some thought it as fair as could be.

Robbing the rich to give to the poor—
That's called justice and equity.

Someday we'll all be socialists.
The day is approaching fast.
We'll all have very little,
But they say we'll be happy at last.

No work, no bills, no payments,
Uncle Sam will pay for it all.
But when they awake they'll discover,
The nation has suffered a fall.

"What happened?," many folks will
question,

As the world in unison laments.
I think it began to happen

When we exchanged "common
sense" for "common cents."

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FRANKLIN FREE PRESS

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Correction Policy

The Franklin Free Press strives for excellence and accuracy, and we will be pleased to correct any error in our newspaper. To request a correction or clarification, call or e-mail our office.

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we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the
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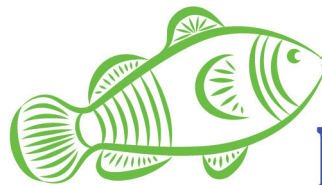
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What's Happening


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EVENTS OF INTEREST • FAMILY REUNIONS • PLAYS • CHURCH GATHERINGS • EDUCATIONAL • CLUB MEETINGS

 There will be an Antique Tractor Show as part of the City of Russellville's Fourth of July Jam on Sloss Lake. The Antique Tractor Show will be held at Sloss Lake from 7:30-2 on July 4. If you're interested in bringing a tractor to the show, call Jacob Murray at 256-668-7607.

 The NACOLG Seniorx – Medicine program is a program for free and low-cost medications for the uninsured, underinsured, Medicare coverage gap or disability waiting period. For more information, contact NACOLG Seniorx today. There is no charge for this service. 1-800-AGELINE (1-800-243-5463) Paula Pardue 256-389-0529.

 Back to Basic Life Skills Center will sponsor a free hamburger or hotdog meal give away on July 2, 2022, 11:00 AM to 2:00 PM, 129 Winfield Street, Russellville, Alabama.

 The yearly Welch reunion will be the second Saturday of July on the 9th. At the Mountain Valley Hee Haw building. Hwy. 79 Phil Campbell, AL, 35581. All Welch's and those related are welcome. We will do sandwiches, chips, desserts, drinks. Each family bring the meat, bread, chips, drinks and desserts of their choice. We will have tomato, lettuce, cheese, mayo and mustard. Please pass the word, and come on out. Thank you.

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Franklin County Rescue Squad president charged with felony theft

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The president of the Franklin County Rescue Squad now finds himself on the wrong side of the law facing felony charges of theft.

John WM "Pete" Brackin Jr., remains in the Franklin County Jail on one charge of Theft of Property, First Degree, a Class B felony that carries a prison sentence of 2-20 years upon conviction.

According to Franklin County Sheriff Shannon Oliver, the Sheriff's Office received a complaint in April about the Franklin County Rescue Squad having a large amount of money missing.

The complaint was made after an audit of Rescue Squad funds was conducted. After a review of bank records and receipts obtained by investigators, there was more than \$13,000 unaccounted for. The investigation showed Brackin had allegedly used the funds to purchase items not intended for use by the Rescue Squad.

These include purchases of food from restaurants, prescription drugs, men's clothing, dog and cat food, a back massager, a PlayStation 4 console, internet service at his residence and Brackin's and his wife's cell phone bills.

Oliver also said on some transactions, Brackin would get cash back and on several occasions, he withdrew Rescue Squad funds from an ATM.

"He was questioned and admitted to using the funds to purchase the items," Oliver said. "He was not able to produce receipts for any of the transactions. He also admitted being an 'avid' PlayStation player and he was the one who purchased the PlayStation 4 game."

Oliver said Brackin, who has been president of the Franklin County Rescue Squad for several years, demonstrated a "pattern" of using Rescue Squad funds to buy personal items for many, if not all, of his years as president.

The Franklin County Rescue Squad is not recognized by the Alabama Association of Rescue Squads as a member, Oliver said. Additionally, the Franklin County Emergency Management Agency does not recognize the Franklin County Rescue Squad as being an active rescue squad, Oliver added.

Over the past 12 months, the *Franklin Free Press* has conducted an independent investigation into the Franklin County Rescue Squad after receiving citizen complaints in 2021 about alleged misuse of funds.

The *FFP's* investigation revealed that the organization continues to receive monies from the Franklin County tobacco tax and the Franklin County Commission, as well as private donations, but the Franklin County

Rescue Squad has not received one emergency call or request for assistance in more than two years.

Additionally, a source familiar with the organization told the *FFP* that the Franklin County Rescue Squad does not have any insurance on its downtown Russellville building or equipment.

As recently as 2021, Franklin County Rescue Squad members continued to actively solicit donations for the organization.

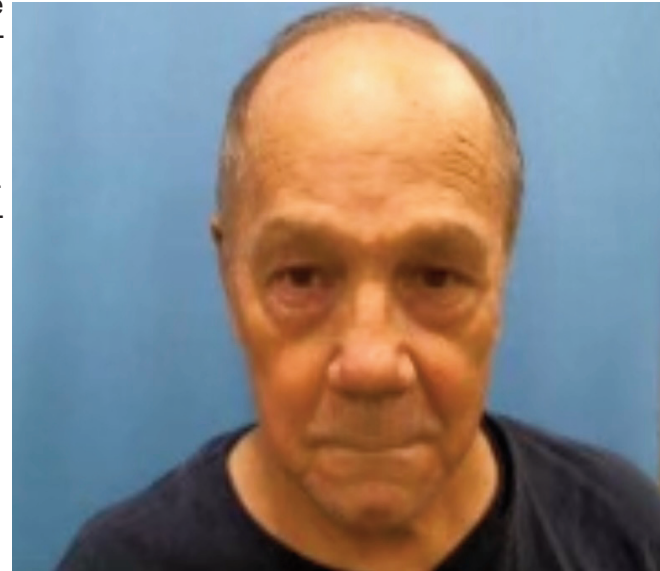
Investigators asked Brackin for records of calls for service the Rescue Squad had received, but he was unable to produce any.

Over the last 36 months, \$13,019.39 of taxpayer money has been converted by Brackin for personal use, Oliver said. "We want the public to know that the Franklin County Rescue Squad periodically asks the public for donations," Oliver said.

"The rescue squad is not in good standing with state or local officials to operate as a rescue squad.

"The Franklin County Rescue Squad has now been removed from receiving any more taxpayer funds," Oliver added.

Oliver said Brackin could face additional charges as the investigation moves forward.



COURTESY PHOTO

Brackin, above, faces 2-20 years upon conviction as he faces one charge of Theft of Property, First Degree which is a Class B Felony.




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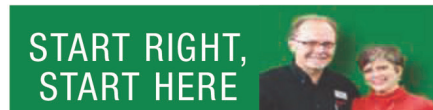
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FRANKLIN DISCOUNT DRUGS

RV Electric Board hires RPD officer Bullion to fill tree-trimmer position

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At a three-minute meeting held June 22, the Russellville Electric Board approved the hiring of Craig Bullion as a First Period Tree Trimmer.

After another RPD officer turned down the same job offer last week, REB Manager Charles Canida recommended Bullion to be hired to fill the vacancy at a pay rate of \$20.96/hour.

The First Period Tree Trimmer job opening was never posted publicly where the public at-large would have had the opportunity to apply.

Bullion, a sergeant and seven-year veteran of the RPD, gave notice to RPD Chief Chris Hargett June 21 that he intended to accept the REB job if offered the same. The tree trimmer position represents a pay raise of more than \$3/hour over his sergeant's pay, Hargett said, so he understood Bullion wanting the position.

The FFP reported earlier this month that Canida requested the previous officer, who he later recommended be hired by the Electric Board, run a personal errand for him by going to the home of a citizen who had requested to appear on the REB's April 2022 meeting agenda.

That officer, Chad Sheffield, had applied for a job with the Electric Board more than a year before he was offered the position. That came less than two months after he went to the citizen's home, gave him Canida's phone number and told him Canida wanted to speak with him.

That citizen, Gary Blackburn, contacted his City Councilman Darren Woodruff to complain about an on-duty, uniformed officer in a RPD vehicle coming to his home to deliver a personal message on Canida's behalf.

Several weeks later, Canida recommended that the board hire Sheffield.

Tuesday's REB meeting lasted less than three minutes, with the only other new business being approval of a \$200 sponsorship donation from Russellville Middle School baseball, which was approved unanimously, and an update from Canida about the county-wide power outage over Memorial Day weekend.

"All of the county lost power. TVA called and said they lost a phase in the system that caused the county-wide outage," Canida said. "They worked to locate the fault and asked us to ride toward Mississippi to help locate the fault.

"They found the problem and within two hours, power was restored," Canida said.

The next business meeting of the REB will be Tuesday, June 19 at 6 p.m., at the Electric Board Warehouse.

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An application and job description may be picked up, faxed or emailed upon request from the Franklin County Commission Office, located at 405 N Jackson Avenue, Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM or applications are available at www.franklincountyal.org under the Careers tab.



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SPORTS

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Taking a sneak peek: A closer look at Franklin County football schedules

Brady Petree
Franklin Free Press

In our June 15th issue of the *Franklin Free Press* we took a closer look at some of the upcoming high school football schedules and some of the key games for fans to look forward to.

After examining the likes of Phil Campbell, Red Bay and Russellville, we now wrap up our sneak peek of the schedules with the final two schools in Franklin County that we have not taken a look at yet in Tharptown and Vina.

Tharptown Wildcats

After former head coach Kevin Lacey departed the program weeks ago, the Wildcats went with a change of pace for their coaching decision.

Tharptown hired Jacob Hamilton to be the next head coach of the program in what will be his first head coaching job as he will look to lead the Wildcats to their first ever playoff berth in the young program's history.

The Wildcats only have four home games over the course of the season with the first coming in week one against Shoals Christian, a matchup in which Tharptown has won the last five meetings so Hamilton should be in line to get his first win rather quickly.

If the win doesn't happen in week one, the

See 'FOOTBALL,' page 14

TOP OF THE O-LINE

Brady Petree
Franklin Free Press

TROY - Austin Stidham could have easily walked away from his college football career after last season.

After all, he had been named to numerous all-conference teams while cementing himself as one of the top offensive linemen in the Group of Five schools during his time at Troy.

But in his mind, he could do better.

So as he decided to return for his sixth and final year (as he was granted an extra year of eligibility by the NCAA due to COVID-19) as a Troy Trojan, he is fully prepared to leave it all out on the field this year.

During his previous five seasons as a Trojan, Stidham has made a name for himself and has numerous accolades to show for it.

And as college football season draws near, more honors are coming down for the 6'5 300-pound offensive lineman as Athlon Sports, one of the top sports media entities in the country, named Stidham to their preseason all-conference team for the Sun Belt Conference.

"I came back for my sixth year this year after not performing up to my own standards last year. So I'm just trying to give myself the best opportunity that I can to get to the next level and be successful," Stidham said. "To be named to the preseason all-conference team, it really just sets the precedent for this season and I'm trying to succeed at the highest level and that's the highest level in this conference. I'm very appreciative of being named to the list and I think it shows the type of work that I have been putting in and what is to be expected of me this season."

Stidham certainly has the size and athleticism needed to play at the next level.

But the one thing that typically takes a while for offensive lineman to adjust to when making the transition to the next level, is the experience factor.



COURTESY PHOTO

Stidham, above, had a pass blocking grade of 77.1 according to Pro Football Focus and was one of only 12 linemen in the Group of Five schools to not commit a single penalty on passing plays.

After all, it's not very often one sees an offensive lineman start for five seasons at the division one level.

However, Stidham even checks off that all-important box on his resume as he enters his sixth season with the Trojans, five of which has been as a starter.

"I think that right now, based on the factors that I have been evaluating myself on, I give myself a really good chance. Obviously nobody knows for sure and I still have some work to do but I believe that I am on the right track," Stidham said. "My athleticism, intelligence and just overall experience and all of the other attributes I have will benefit me in the long-run and I think it will help boost my stock."

Of course, Stidham isn't *only* attempting to lead the Trojans to as many victories as possible during his final season with the team. But he is also attempting to boost his resume for NFL teams in need of offensive line help in next year's draft.

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'O-LINE,' from page 11

Part of his game plan in appealing to as many NFL teams as he can is actually quite simple: making himself as valuable and as versatile as possible.

"I've always believed in making yourself as valuable as you can and I have no doubt in my mind that I could play all five positions up front so I'm just going to make myself as valuable as possible and just see where the lord takes me from there," Stidham said.

In the never-ending coaching carousel that is college football, Stidham has had his fair share of offensive line coaches over his five, going on six, years as a Trojan.

Stidham gives credit to the different coaches that he has had during his college career for enabling him to learn so many different styles and techniques.

Add to that list of coaches Cole Popovich (a former New England Patriots coach with two super bowl rings to his credit), who was recently named the offensive line coach for the Trojans, and it's easy to see just how skilled Stidham has become.

"I've had the opportunity to have exposure to a lot of different line coaches over the years. I'm on my fourth different line coach. So being exposed to so many different styles and ways of learning and having such a wide range of variety in terms of playing, it really gives me so much to build off of," Stidham said. "It gives me a lot of background to reference and coming back this year not only gave me the opportunity to develop physically, but it also gave me the opportunity to develop mentally as well and get more ideas from different coaches and having coaches to bounce ideas and things off of has benefited me greatly and will continue to do so."

One of the more noteworthy achievements, beyond making numerous all-conference teams during his playing career, is the fact that Stidham is one of the most disciplined players not only in his conference, but in college football as a whole.

In the Group of Five schools, Stidham was one of only 12 offensive linemen that was not called for a single penalty on a pass blocking play and sports a 77.1 pass blocking grade per Pro Football Focus.

And with Stidham, one could point to a myriad of factors that make him so dominante. His size is overwhelming, his footwork is impeccable and his technique is often in top form.

But if you ask the man himself, his answer goes a bit deeper than the things one can see on the gridiron.

In fact, the biggest key to his success comes in his mental state leading into each and every snap which has led to him being an incredibly reliable lineman in a day and age where passing the football has become king and the need to protect the quarterback as he drops back has become as vital as ever.

"I think what a lot of people may not understand is that you have to prepare your mind before each and every snap. You have to know what your assignment is, the type of technique you need to use in each assignment and to be able to get to that assignment in a way that you are not going to get a penalty," Stidham said. "So a lot of it happened pre-snap. Just being focused every single play and just having the maturity to understand your assignment and what technique you need to use to achieve handling your assignment in the best way."

As he prepares over the summer for his final season in a Troy uniform with hopes of donning an NFL uniform soon thereafter, he will have an opportunity right out of the gate this upcoming season to showcase his talent against an SEC opponent.

The Trojans will square off against the Ole Miss Rebels on September 3rd in their first game of the season.

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See 'O-LINE,' page 15

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'FOOTBALL,' from page 11

Wildcats then travel to Phillips in week two in another matchup that Tharptown has won in their previous two games.

From weeks three through five, the Wildcats will take on tough region opponents in Tanner (home), Hatton and Lexington (both away) before traveling to Cherokee.

And while it remains to be seen with those region games, Tharptown will be looking for their first region win since 2017 in which the Wildcats were a 1A school and defeated the Shoals Christian Flames.

2022 might be the year that the Wildcats break that winless region streak as Lindsay Lane Christian has put together their first team in program history and is in the same region as Tharptown.

The Wildcats will host Lindsay Lane on October 7th before wrapping up their season on the road in back-to-back weeks against Sheffield and Falkville, both region opponents.

Vina Red Devils

The 2021 season was a rough one for the Red Devils as they went 0-10 part of a 13 game losing streak dating back to 2020 when their last win came against Cherokee.

However, there is room for optimism amongst the Vina faithful as the team returns a decent amount of underclassmen from a year ago that will take one step further in their advancement in search of ending that losing streak.

Add to that a favorable schedule in the first half of the season and there's good reason to think that the Red Devils can take that next step.

With bye weeks in weeks one and three, the Red Devils take to the road to take on Addison in week two in what will be a tough matchup.

However, the next three games after Addison look very promising for the Red Devils.

They return home to take on Shoals Christian, whom Vina beat 44-12 back in 2019, then take on Woodville in an away game. Woodville also went 0-10 in the 2021 season.

The Red Devils then take on 4A Curry but the Yellow Jackets have not won a single game since the 2018 season.

Then the Red Devils wrap up their season with five straight region games, the last three of which are at home against Meek, Hackleburg and Waterloo.



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'O-LINE,' from page 13

And while playing against power five schools might pose as intimidating to some, Stidham has a plethora of experience going up against that level of talent.

In fact, he has not only held his own in those games, but he has thrived during them as well.

So it's safe to say that the moment most likely won't be too large for the former Russellville Golden Tiger standout as he looks to show NFL scouts and coaches a glimpse of the player they could potentially get once the NFL draft rolls around next year.

"Anytime you get the chance to play and play in front of one of these larger stadiums and those types of crowds is just amazing and it's what you dream about as a young kid playing football. Luckily I have had the opportunity at Troy to play in environments like this quite often," Stidham said. "In 2018, my first year starting, we traveled to Nebraska and beat them and I've had the opportunity to travel to Missouri, South Carolina and places like that. I wouldn't be doing it justice to say that it was just another game, because it's not. It's a big time opportunity for us as individuals and as a team to be able to play in games like that. And it's just another opportunity for me to show that I can compete against anybody, anywhere and be able to showcase myself against that level of talent."

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