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End of an era: Heaps leaving RHS baseball after 10 years, five state titles

Brady Petree
Franklin Free Press

After ten years of building one of the most dominant and prestigious baseball programs in the state of Alabama, Russellville head baseball coach Chris Heaps informed the Russellville City School Board that he is retiring from the Alabama Public School System and pursuing an opportunity in the private sector in Birmingham.

brought home their second straight (and fifth during Heaps' tenure with Russellville) 5A state baseball championship.

While the decision is a massive blow to the Russellville athletic program and community alike, it comes with a good reason.

Heaps' daughter recently welcomed their first child, and Heaps' first grandchild, into the world and the move provides an opportunity to bring he and his wife Michele closer to their family who happen to live in Birmingham.

Heaps' retirement is effective as of August 1st

The move comes less than two months after the Golden Tigers

"Back last fall, we found out our

See 'HEAPS,' Page 15

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Cedar Ridge Road residents seeking road improvements from county

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

If there's strength in numbers, the 18 citizens who attended the July 11th Franklin County Commission work session to request improvements be made to Cedar Ridge Road was a formidable voice.

tore it up. And we would like something done."

Eight years ago, the Franklin County Highway Department made significant improvements on Cedar Ridge, which resulted in the road being in the best condition many of its residents had ever seen.

One year later, the road was broken and damaged with ruts up to 24 inches, as the result of a timber clearing project on land owned by Merwyn and Donna Crandell, an approximately 56-acre tract that runs along Cedar Ridge Road.

The group was comprised of landowners with lakefront property accessible from Cedar Ridge Road, a 1.3 mile road that comes off Bond Cemetery Road. One of those property owners, Sue Bowen, addressed the commission on behalf of the group.

"We want our road fixed," Bowen said. "We had it fixed and six or seven years ago and timber trucks

A group of Cedar Ridge Road and Hickory Lane residents appealed to the Franklin County Commission for help after the logging operation left

See 'IMPROVEMENTS,' Page 9

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Samuel Matias Francisco, 20, of Russellville, passed away on Sunday, July 10th. Interment Franklin Memory Gardens.

Petra Carrillo Perez, 55, of Russellville, passed away on Tuesday, July 12th. Interment at Colbert Memorial Gardens.

Bobbie Rice, 86, of Phil Campbell, passed away on Friday, July 15th. Interment at Liberty Hill Cemetery.

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Rankin "ready to listen" to patients after opening Russellville office

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When you meet Dr. Christopher Rankin, Russellville Hospital's newest physician, you immediately realize he's a good listener.

And that is often a lost art for doctors these days.

According to , one of patients' five most frequent complaints about their doctors is that he or she doesn't listen to them and the physician is dismissive toward them.

For Rankin, though, listening to his patients is fundamental to properly diagnosing and treating their health issues.

"I was always taught if you listen hard enough, your patient will tell you what's wrong and what you have to do about it. Listening is everything," Rankin said. "For example, there are times you think the patient has a certain medical issue, but listening to the patient and (his or her) tone of voice, there may be something additional, like a mental health issue. As a physician, you don't pick up on those things unless you listen to what your patients are telling you."

Rankin opened his Russellville office last month in the Medical Arts Building adjacent to Russellville Hospital. Rankin and his nurse practitioner, Tabatha Sutherland Marbutt, CRNP, offer primary care, health screenings, medical checkups and consultations and gynecological care.

A graduate of Tulane University (with degrees in Biology and History), Rankin attended medical school at Louisiana State University's Health Sciences Center in Shreveport. He earned his MD in 2001 and completed his residency in 2004.

Rankin's History degree was something he thought would stand out on medical school applications, as he figured no History graduate would apply. But he was wrong.

"My thinking was that anyone with a History degree would not be applying to medical school and I thought it would be something quirky or different, even though I had a Biology degree too," Rankin said. "But there were three applicants with History degrees who applied in my class, so I was wrong about that."

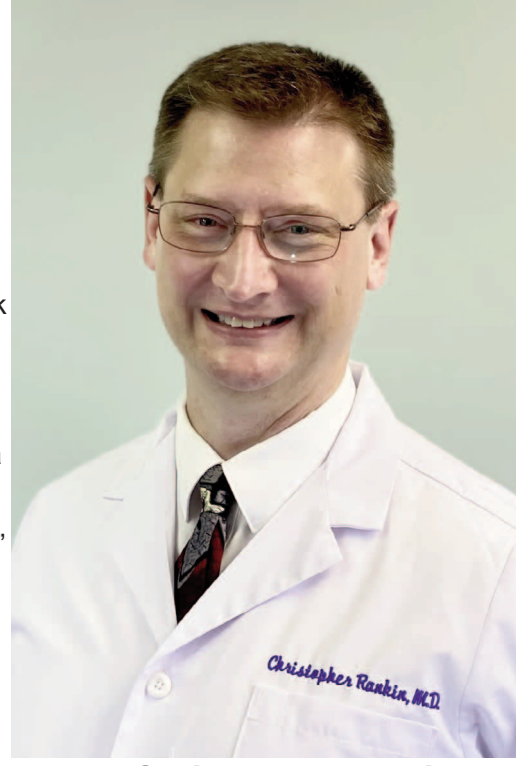
Rankin practiced in Shreveport after medical school before relocating to Zwolle, La., to open a family practice clinic six years ago. After a change in administration at the hospital he was affiliated with, Rankin and his wife Katherine decided last year to consider relocating. Soon thereafter, a recruiter called Rankin and asked if he'd ever heard of Russellville, Alabama. The answer was 'No,' but he and Katherine decided to visit Russellville Hospital anyway and they found Northwest Alabama offered many of the things they previously loved about North Louisiana.

"We drove around North Alabama and it really reminded us of what North Louisiana used to be," Rankin said. "Everyone is so friendly. We loved the cotton farms and the farming base. There's lots of industry and industrial parks so it's a great mix.

"I immediately felt this could be it for our family. I kept looking for the 'catch,' but never found it. Other than moving away from our families (Katherine is a Shreveport native) we found the ideal place," Rankin added.

Last summer, Rankin underwent a radical knee surgery that involved a meniscus transplant. When he was finally able to travel to Russellville, Rankin was still confined to a wheelchair. But that was no problem for Russellville Hospital Chief Executive Officer Stephen Proctor, who pushed his physician prospect through the hospital on his tour. Talk about personal service from the CEO...But it was worth the effort when Dr. Rankin accepted the offer from Russellville Hospital.

"I am very excited to welcome Dr. Rankin and his family to Russellville Hospital," Proctor said. "Dr. Rankin brings a great blend of clinical skills and knowledge with a passion for providing community-based health care to the



Dr. Christopher Rankin

My take on this... Older and loving it!

Hello my friends and followers!
I hope you are having a good day or had a good day depending on the time you are reading this.
I appreciate your continued support and your encouraging words. You are the ones who keep me motivated to write my articles.



Gail Motes

You are a blessing in my life.
Speaking of being blessed, I had a birthday on Monday. Getting older makes me happy and I appreciate every single day of life. I feel even more blessed by being a cancer survivor.
One never knows about a cancer diagnosis. It can go either way. I will always remember the last day of my chemo treatment. The final radiation treatment lifted a weight from me.
Having my port surgically removed felt like being disconnected from the disease and now, here I am six years later and still cancer-free and have celebrated another birthday. Thank you God!
My mother told me that she was so sick during her pregnancy with me that the doctor felt like taking her baby was the best thing to do.
He was concerned I would have health issues or die in childbirth or that we could both die. She refused and told him she was having her baby. We made it!
I was a healthy baby and started talking early and haven't shut up yet.
Older in my life, mother told me that whatever I did, to be the best I could at it.
I think she was referring to an occupation and since talking seems to be a "God-given" talent, I'll keep talking the best I can. I have to be making my mother so proud, don't you think?
I'm not just a talker; I'm a hugger as well.
There is nothing more comforting and reassuring than hugs from my sons and grandchildren. Hugs from my family and friends are a big pick-me-up! They always make my day better!
In closing, I hope you appreciate each birthday you are given. It's important to appreciate each and every day, every compliment and all the hugs and the magnificent beauty of God's wonderful creations.
Take care and as always, until later...

JOB OPPORTUNITY

THE FRANKLIN COUNTY COMMISSION IS ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS FOR THE FOLLOWING POSITION(S):

ASSISTANT COUNTY ENGINEER IN THE FRANKLIN COUNTY HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT

APPLICATIONS WILL BE ACCEPTED IN THE FRANKLIN COUNTY COMMISSION OFFICE UNTIL 5:00 PM ON WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 17, 2022.

AN APPLICATION AND JOB DESCRIPTION MAY BE PICKED UP, FAXED OR EMAILED UPON REQUEST FROM THE FRANKLIN COUNTY COMMISSION OFFICE, LOCATED AT 405 JACKSON AVENUE, MONDAY - FRIDAY 8:00 AM TO 5:00 PM OR APPLICATIONS ARE AVAILABLE AT WWW.FRANKLINCOUNTYAL.ORG UNDER THE CAREER TAB.

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113 WASHINGTON AVE. NW
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The Franklin Free Press is published weekly by Pilati Investments, Inc.
Our publication is mailed to our readers at no charge.

Publisher

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Graphic Design

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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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The Franklin Free Press is published by hometown people, for hometown people. We urge contributions of all kinds, including guest columns, picture submissions, cartoons or letters to the editor. Send any letters to our office via U.S. Postal Service or e-mail, and we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the hometown and phone number of the author. The Franklin Free Press reserves the right to edit letters for style, length and content.

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'RANKIN,' from page 3

entire family."
Rankin was impressed that Russellville Hospital has a full-time surgeon (Dr. Jeffrey Manord) and an orthopedic surgeon (Dr. Lloyd Dyas) on staff, as well as a cardiologist (Dr. Phillip Dean) who comes to Russellville each week. This allows more patients to stay closer to home to have surgical procedures.

"Those are huge benefits that allow a patient to use their local hospital for 90-95 percent of everything they need...Russellville has good facilities and caring doctors who go out of their way to help patients, but know their limits," Rankin said. "And it's often the patient's neighbors, family or friends who work here. That says a lot to have that personal connection."

Rankin and Marbutt have quickly developed a good working relationship and their team approach allows for a better level of patient care.

"Tabatha has that intensive training so I ask questions of her and she asks questions of me," Rankin said. "She allows me to see more patients as she handles a lot of other stuff. If she encounters a complicated issue, my training comes in, but in a primary care setting, I'd say a nurse practitioner can do almost as much as I can."

Dr. Rankin's office is located at 15225 Highway 43, Suite I in Russellville. To schedule an appointment, call 256-331-2700.

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RUSSELLVILLE HOUSING AUTHORITY SECTION 8 (HCV PROGRAM) IS NOW ACCEPTING NAMES FOR A WAITING LIST. COME IN THE OFFICE MONDAY JULY 11TH THRU THURSDAY JULY 28TH 7:00 AM UNTIL 4:00 PM TO DO A PRE-APPLICATION. MESSAGES WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.



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The Foster Grandparent Program is seeking volunteers ages 55 and older to help tutor and mentor children in day care, head start and schools. Volunteers will receive a tax-free stipend and travel reimbursement. We have openings for several schools for the coming school year. Please call 256-332-6800 for an application.



Summer Revival will be held at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church, 305 Bethlehem Road, Russellville, July 17-22. Sunday service 2 p.m. Monday-Friday, 7 p.m. Evangelist Bro. Micah Fleming. Pastor Bro. Jeff Fleming and congregation welcome everyone. Prayer meeting 20 minutes before each service. For more information, call Bro. Jeff Fleming at 256-856-5610.



The Salt and Pepper Series presents a "W.C. Handy Week Special Edition" featuring Mike O'Rear and the Skyliters with special guest Rev. Jerry Reeves, at the Mane Room in Florence on July 28. Doors open at 6 p.m., and show starts at 7. This musical celebration will feature one of the icons of early Muscle Shoals Music, Mike O'Rear and the Skyliters. They were fixtures on the Alabama/Tennessee State Line Club Scene in the 1960s and 70s. O'Rear began his career as a musician and owner of the Famous Club XIII that's now the title of the current release by Muscle Shoals touring rock band, the Drive By Truckers. Tickets at the door are \$20. Advance tickets are available for \$15 at Counts Brothers Music in Muscle Shoals, Ye Ole General Store in Florence and WZZA radio in Tusculmbia.

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Letter to the editor...

Dear Editor:

In the early 1850's New York City alone had an estimated 30,000 homeless children running the streets. Not all the children were orphans. Some were just abandoned by parents that could not or would not care for them.

The Children's Aid Society, along with other organizations, created a system to transport the homeless children westward, to families that would take them in. By the time the program ended in 1929, an estimated 250,000 children had been distributed throughout 45 States, Canada and Mexico. Many of the children were adopted into loving homes, but all too many were treated as indentured servants, turned into scullery maids, nannies, and farm or factory laborers. They were starved, beaten, sexually abused and many suffered early death under the sentence of abject slavery.

Because of a recent ill-advised ruling by the United States Supreme Court and various Fascist State Legislatures, History may soon repeat itself. Thousands of unwanted babies will no doubt be found on Church steps, in alley ways, dumpsters and public toilet stalls. If these unwanted babies somehow do survive, how many will be abused by their own parents or simply abandoned to fend for themselves?

Apparently, the Court, and the Fascist State Legislatures failed the study the obvious consequences of the ruling.

-Do we, as a Nation have enough orphanages and institutions to absorb them?
-Are we, the taxpayers willing to support and educate all of them?

-Will the powers that be relax their financially restrictive regulations so childless parents can afford adoption?

- Will our Mental Health system be able to treat all the damaged psyches as they grow older?

-Do we have enough prisons to house those who do not mature normally?
OR: Do we just pack them up and send them west.

Until the 1970's abortion was not a political issue or an issue with many churches.

Then along came certain Tele-Evangelists who realized that playing on sympathetic heartstrings and creating a "big deal" about abortion they could leverage the issue into "big bucks" and power. These guys were not Christian Evangelists.

they were hucksters, grifters, and snake oil salesmen. They constantly demanded donations from their followers with empty promises of Heavenly rewards. They were certainly not Religious Christians, and they were certainly not right!

Unfortunately, all too many ill-informed but well-meaning people swallowed the Kool Aid, while they sent their hard-earned cash to these pirates with the misguided assumption that they were helping with the Lord's work.

This sub-group, now referred to as the "Religious Right" has pressured the United States Supreme Court to overturn a half-century law, Roe v. Wade. In that recent ruling the Court and many Fascist State Legislatures have decided

that the Female population of the United States of America was to no longer have control over the most intimate and personal aspects of their own bodies.

They have concluded that the First, Fourth, and Ninth Articles of the Bill of Rights are not applicable to women and young girls. These arbiters of injustice (allegedly educated individuals) harbor a false "religious opinion" of the actual scientific facts regarding Biological and Reproductive Science.

The news recently reported that a pregnant 10-year-old child, a victim of rape, was being forced to carry to term. Fortunately, the child was able to escape to another State and safely terminate her life-threatening condition. It has also been reported that a 12-year-old child, having been raped by her father will be forced to deliver. These children are neither physically nor mentally mature enough to handle the trauma, let alone deliver and care for a baby.

The first Article in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States of America says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or the free practice there of....." In bowing down to the pressure of the so called "religious right:" the Court is trying to establish certain religious beliefs on all the citizens in the Nation.

The Fourth Article in the Bill of Rights says "the rights of the people to be secure in their

persons, houses, papers and effects against unreasonable searches and seizures shall not be violated. No doubt, the women of our nation are human persons and therefore guaranteed security in their personhood, the deviant decision of the Supreme Court can and must be construed as Judicial malpractice, not to mention, misconduct.

Furthermore, Article Nine quite clearly states "The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

No doubt in this writer's mind, the Supreme has been busy misconstruing. The barbaric cruelty

brought on by the renunciation of Roe v. Wade and the cult of the Right has gone too far. This writer believes they have violated their oath to uphold the Constitution, the Preamble of which reads:

"We the people in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and Secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

"Perhaps they just forgot that part of their oath, and allegedly being Christians, forgot to read their Bible

My Bible says, "Go forth and preach" It does not say "Go forth and force"

My Bible says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" One would certainly doubt that those "deciders" would countenance legal interference with own their bodily functions.

But, most importantly:

My Bible says, "God is Love" That means that everyone should be treated with love and respect. Love them for who they are and respect them for their individual personhood.

So, what is next? Do women lose the right to vote, own property, choose who we will marry, or even have our own bank account in our own name? Will we be forced back into domestic servitude? Barefoot and pregnant, scrubbing floors on our hands and knees.

The only alternative for women in the so called "Land of the Free:" is to exercise our right to vote before we lose it. We need to vote for enough Freedom Thinking candidates who will vote to maintain our civil and human rights. The only way to stop the egregious erosion of our Constitutional Rights is to vote for the Party that will Codify Roe v. Wade into law and protect us from the reprehensible repression of free will.

If all else fails, and a woman is forced to give birth against her will, she should fill out the hospital form as follows:

Father of the child: The United States Supreme Court
Person Responsible for Payment: The United States Supreme Court.

Since I am no longer free should I be brave and sign my own name?
Randi Gross
July 2022

Or Randy Hull (as it appears on my birth certificate)



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Russellville Airport project flies in under budget

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council approved a third change order in the \$3.2 million recently completed Russellville Municipal Airport, but this time it reflected a decrease in the original contract amount and a savings of \$69,082.91. Garver USA served as the engineer and Midsouth Paving of Tusculumbia as the contractor for the project that saw significant rehabilitation and upgrades to the runways, lighting and underdrain installation at the Russellville Airport. The original contract amount of \$3,271,908.94 was just over \$69,000 over the actual work completed on the 100 percent grant project. The unused funds will revert back to the federal government.

The council approved the changes at its July 5, 2022 meeting. Other agenda items approved by the council included:

--approval of a transfer of license for wholesale beer and wine from Shoals Distributing to Adams Beverages, LLC, which purchased Shoals Distributing. The company is the primary supplier of beer and wine to Russellville businesses. The council voted 4-1 in favor, with Councilman Gary Cummings voting against the resolution.

Prior to the vote a public hearing was held on the application and no one spoke for or against the measure.

--approved a resolution granting Russellville resident Jamie Medley's request to use a portion of the unimproved right-of-way for Pace Street adjacent to Medley's property, for the purpose of ingress and egress into certain property. Medley will, at his own expense, make the necessary work and improvements to the right-of-way in order to make the property usable. Medley indicated he planned to build three or four houses at the end of Pace Street as the reason for the request.

--approved the low bid of \$326,047.92 (\$40,755.99 per vehicle) for eight 2021 Dodge Durango Pursuit police vehicles for the Russellville Police Department. The low bid came from Stivers Prattville CDJR. The vehicles will be purchased with monies the city received from the American Rescue Plan Act Fund.

--approved the promotion of John Williams to Heavy Equipment Operator II in the Russellville Street Department.

--accepted a letter of resignation from Sergeant Craig Bullion with the Russellville Police Department and declared a vacancy for Patrol Officer and authorized the extension of job application deadline to July 11, 2022.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be July 18, 2022, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.

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'IMPROVEMENTS,' from page 1

the road in shambles. Hickory Lane is a short, narrow road that comes off Cedar Ridge Road near its end. Hickory Lane residents shared the same concerns to commissioners.

In 2015, then-Franklin County Engineer David Palmer sent a crew to rehabilitate Cedar Ridge Road with a road reclaimer. Additionally, highway department employees repaired and cleaned the ditches, allowing the restoration of proper water flow at the time.

There were promises made by the owner of the logging company to pay for a subcontractor to restore the ditches that had been compromised, but that never happened, so county crews did the work and invoiced the company. That invoice was never paid, according to county officials and that company is no longer in operation.

Seven years later, Cedar Ridge Road is now covered in gravel because that was the only cost-affordable method for the county to maintain it.

Significant erosion, the result of damage from logging trucks crossing back and forth onto the private tract, has narrowed the road and water runoff is damaging what's left, residents told the commission last week.

Franklin County Engineer Jason Baggett told Bowen and the other residents he has personally inspected Cedar Ridge Road and the base is

in 'okay' condition, having been motor graded recently. Baggett said he plans to have crews take chert material and put it in problem areas, as well as working on the ditches.

"Any time you end up clearing vegetation from an area it increases the runoff significantly when it rains," Baggett said. "There's no vegetation left to collect the runoff. That's what causes the water issues over-topping the road. We can work to address that and put a few pipes in to help with drainage."

Many roads around Franklin County lakes were built as old logging roads, or some developer got the county commission at the time to accept the roads as county roads even though they weren't built to the standard needed as far as width and surface. And these roads, including Cedar Ridge Road, are not built to withstand the weight of loaded log trucks.

The blame game often results. Are the logging operators responsible for repairing roads damaged by their trucks? Or are county officials responsible for not anticipating a road built in the middle of timber acreage would be used in timber operations at a later time?

Weight limits for loggers are set by the Alabama Department of Transportation, not the Franklin County Commission. And Baggett said those restrictions allow for a degree of overage. The only thing the county sets weight limits for are certain bridges, he explained.

Compounding the problem is the high cost of chip sealing a 1.3 mile stretch of roadway, particularly when future logging operations will use the same roads. And with limited funds, the Highway Department must spread its paving projects around the county with priority to major collector roads.

But frustrated landowners want answers about what can and will be done to improve a road that been in such poor condition in the past that four-wheel drive was required to access it. The residents have no other way to reach their lakefront properties, and county officials don't have the funds to repave Cedar Ridge Road any time in the near future, so those questions remain unanswered.

Meanwhile, logging operations in the area will continue. There's no question about that.



PHOTO BY JOHN PILATI

One of the steeper stretches of Cedar Ridge Road that shows narrowing of the roadway and runoff damage to ditches.

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SPORTS

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A farewell and thank you to Franklin County

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

When I arrived at the Franklin Free Press and WGOL as a young wannabe media member almost a dozen years ago, I never envisioned the path that has led me to this point.

I first came to the *FFP* and WGOL as a member of the 'Football Friday Tailgate Show' which was then hosted by the great Mike Self.

My thirteen-year-old self gave opinions on college football like they were the most important opinions on the face of the planet. And no one could tell me that they weren't, even though they couldn't hold their own weight.

What would transpire over the next dozen years would lead me from becoming a board operator for Russellville athletics, a journalist for the *FFP* and eventually the role of executive editor and sports editor.

While I have come to love this position and my heart and mind is filled with countless memories over the past two-and-a-half years, it is time to begin a new chapter in my life.

As my fiancé Stacy and I make the move to Mobile to pursue other career opportunities for myself and as she pursues physical therapy

See 'FAREWELL,' Page 13

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Prepping for another region title run



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

The Golden Tigers are prepping for what they hope will be their third straight region-winning season by squaring off against the likes of West Morgan, Florence and other schools in 7-on-7 competition days.

Michael Rice
 Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - The Russellville Golden Tigers had its summer 7-on-7 camp in recent weeks and coach John Ritter is pleased with the results so far.

Despite the Golden Tigers having lost key players, there is growing optimism that the players coming back can lead Russellville to their third straight region title.

Mixed into the returning group is a solid core of newcomers from the middle school program looking to make an impact.

"Malachai, Conner and TJ, we know what to expect from those guys, but as for newer guys we got exactly what we thought we'd get," Ritter said. "Those guys are doing what they're supposed to do. We lost some great seniors but we are excited for the younger kids coming up and hoping they will step up on Friday nights."

The Golden Tigers have new faces on the team and a few young kids that will need to step up. Mike Young is one of the new faces on the team.

Young is the point guard for the Russellville varsity basketball team and Ritter is expecting big things from him.

"Mike Young hasn't played since 7th grade and him coming out he's added depth to our receiver core," Ritter said.

Young performed very well in the 7-on-7 game against West Morgan. Ritter said the best part about 7-on-7 is not trying to win a game but get a good look at the payers and how they react in different scenarios.

"These competition days are a great way of getting a good look at some of your guys in a competitive setting right before the season and it gives you plenty of time to work on things and correct certain issues before that first kickoff," Ritter said. "For us these competition days are about experience and doing what we do and practicing what we're doing on Friday night."

The Golden Tigers will host another 7-on-7 game against the Florence Falcons on Wednesday, July 27th in preparation for their first regular season match up against Grissom on August 19th.

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'FAREWELL,' from page 11

school at the University of South Alabama, this decision to leave doesn't come easily.

Over the course of my two and a half years as executive editor and sports editor, I have been very fortunate to experience some of the greatest moments in sports in Franklin County and with it, create relationships that will hopefully last a lifetime.

In 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, I was able to cover the Russellville Golden Tigers football team win the first of two (so far) straight region titles and their first since 2015.

Then, in the winter of 2020/spring of 2021, the Belgreen Bulldogs provided me with my first opportunity to cover a state championship game in the 1A boys title game against Autaugaville. And despite the Bulldogs falling just short of the ultimate goal, the experience is something I will take with me forever.

Shortly after my first state championship experience, I was blessed to cover two state title winning baseball programs right here in Franklin County.

The Phil Campbell Bobcats won their first championship in program history and to be able to cover that historic achievement was a remarkable experience.

In addition, the Russellville Golden Tigers won their fourth state championship in baseball and the first of two in a row.

There were so many moments I was beyond blessed to cover during my time with the FFP, and too many to mention here in my final column.

From the coaches who allowed me to give them a call late at night for a quick quote, to the players taking time after a win to speak to me, to the readers of the FFP

who look forward to our sports section every week and everyone in between during this journey, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

My deepest thanks and appreciation to the school systems in Franklin County and Russellville for allowing me to cover their athletic programs and providing me with every resource needed to do the best job possible.

I would also like to extend a special thanks to the Russellville baseball program.

It's incredibly rare for a broadcaster to broadcast not one, but two state championships in the first two years of covering them. But the Golden Tigers did just that. I was fortunate enough to not only cover those two talented teams, but to also broadcast games as the voice of the Golden Tigers and have a front row seat for that success.

The job would not have been as fun and rewarding had I not been welcomed in with open arms by the Russellville school system, community, parents, fans, coaches and players and treated as though I had been there for years. And for that, I am immensely thankful.

To my color commentator Brian Pace who was in the booth with me for almost every single Golden Tiger baseball game over the previous two seasons, the knowledge that I have gained regarding baseball and life from you is something that can never be taken away from me and I consider priceless. And more importantly, I've gained a friend in the process.

And to the staff and contributors at the Franklin Free Press and WGOL, I would not be here without you.

My many thanks to my colleagues (and friends), Gail Motes, Jason Hill, Christian Medina, Christopher Arthur, Kyle Glasgow and many others.

To those that joined me on my two sports talk shows, 'On Deck' and the 'Football Friday Tailgate Show', including Blake Kerr, Sammy McCluskey, Mike Rice, Jacob Anthony, Brody Roberts, Lucas Shepherd and Christian Medina, thank you for joining me in my quest to have a platform to express my sports takes despite absolutely no one asking for them.

Last but not least, thank you to publisher John Pilati for taking a flier on me succeeding the insanely-talented Mike Self and giving me the opportunity to jumpstart my career. I am deeply indebted to you for these incredible opportunities.

Franklin County will always hold a special place in my heart and I hope that over the past two years, I have etched a place into your hearts as well.



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'HEAPS,' from page 1

daughter was pregnant and my wife and I talked about it and just said 'we need to get to Birmingham' once our boys finish," Heaps said. "People will want to know why I'm leaving and it really just comes down to wanting to be with my family. I've got a new grandson that we're excited to get closer to. And my wife has been chasing this baseball thing with me for 21 years and I've been coaching it for 26 years. She coaches me more than anyone does. She has been crucial to my success and she calls me out and is honest with me and she's as much a part of this as I am."

Of course the move comes one year earlier than anticipated for Heaps as his sons Brayden and Casen will be seniors in the upcoming school year and will now make the transition to a new program somewhere in the Birmingham area.

"Taking my kids out of Russellville right now was not the ideal situation but I just feel like there's a great opportunity for them to grow and be challenged in a new setting," Heaps said.

Russellville City Schools Superintendent Heath Grimes says that search for Heaps' successor will include candidates from inside and outside the school system. Jay Stanley will be named the interim head coach while applications are received.

"We believe in what Coach Heaps has built and the way he has coached and led our players," Grimes said per a press release. "Our goal will be to find someone to lead the baseball program that holds those same ideals and is focused on the same goals. And we know the program will be in good hands with Coach Stanley as we go through this process."

And don't think for a second that Heaps is just going to drop everything and leave the Russellville program in a bad state until a new coach comes along.

In fact, as recently as Saturday, Heaps was doing his usual rounds on the field tending to every blade of grass and ensuring that the infield was still in pristine condition.

Heaps oversaw a decade of success during his time at Russellville. But before any blue maps were brought home and even before his first game, Heaps was unsure of what he should expect from the Golden Tiger school system, community and fanbase.

What he got exceeded his expectations both on the field and off it.

"When I got here, I didn't know if I was going to like Russellville and I didn't know if Russellville was going to like me. So we didn't buy a house here. We rented one," Heaps said. "And after about a year and a half, I told my wife that we had made the right decision. I knew things were about to start getting good for us and we had some really good young players. It was a fairytale for us and a love affair with Russellville for us."

The five state championships (six appearances) and eclipsing the 300 career win mark while the head coach of the Golden Tigers will surely grab most of the attention of outsiders looking back on his tenure.

But for the 2021 5A head coach of the year, the thing that remains one of the more significant highlights of his time at Russellville goes a little deeper than trophies and championship rings.

The amount of work, dedication and attitude of the players he has coached over the years is one of the things Heaps says has stood out the most to him.

"What we've been able to do at Russellville is have guys buy into the process where it's not about *me*, it's about *we*," Heaps said. "We didn't win that first year. It was tough. Those guys could have given up or took a step back. But everything they learned from that experience led to the back-to-back-to-back down the road. And every team I have had here has been like that. Wanting to learn and get better and do whatever it took to be the best they can be."

"As a coach, you spend a lot of time with your players and inevitably become a major influence in their life," Heaps said in a press release. "I can't thank the parents of these players enough for trusting me with their children and loaning them out to me to teach and to coach. It's an extreme privilege I don't take for granted."

Since 2012, Heaps has had 32 players sign on to play college baseball. Add to that 25 all-state players, four honorable mentions, four All-American selections, two 5A players of the year, 5A hitter of the year and 5A pitcher of the year twice and it's easy to see how the success was attained.

And of course, Heaps had a sturdy group of top-tier assistant coaches along the way to help reach their ultimate goals of where they wanted the program to go.

"If anyone wants to give credit to the winning, that goes to way more people than just me. That goes to an unbelievable staff of assistant coaches over the past ten years," Heaps said.

Before he was hired as the Russellville baseball head coach in 2012, Heaps wanted to make sure that his plans for the program were heard loud and clear before any hiring decision was made.

And to hear him put it, the last decade of Russellville baseball could have looked a lot different had the first half of the decade not worked out as well as it did.

"When Rex Mayfield and Tim Guinn hired me, I told them that we were going to work like they've never seen Russellville work, we were going to raise money like you've never seen Russellville baseball raise and we were going to find the best teams we could find to play against," Heaps said. "I told them that we might not win all of our games, but we weren't going to lose a lot because we were going to learn a lot in the process. And I told them that if we weren't competing for state championships in five years, I'd resign."

Safe to say those first five years worked out pretty well.

Heaps was hired at Russellville as the head baseball coach for the 2012 season after one season as the head coach at Central Phenix City where he led the Red Devils to a final four appearance in his first and only season.

As for that promise about competing for state championships within five years? Heaps was able to make good on that promise in just three seasons as the Golden Tigers not only competed for a state title, but *won* their first state baseball title in 2015 in what would be the first of three-in-a-row for Russellville.

The Golden Tigers would go on to win two more state titles, including a runner-up spot, over the rest of Heaps' career with Russellville. And had it not been for the COVID-shortened season, the Golden Tigers might have added a sixth blue map.

The legacy that Heaps leaves behind at Russellville is a lasting one that will be felt for generations of Golden Tigers to come. A decade that saw the Russellville baseball program go from a good one, to a great one, to becoming the epitome of successful high school baseball programs in the state of Alabama, all on Heaps' watch.

As Hartselle secured their place as the team of the 90's in the state of Alabama and Cullman did the same in the 2000's, Russellville made a compelling case to be in consideration for the team of the 2010's with Heaps at the helm.

His chapter as one of the best coaches in the history of high school baseball in the state of Alabama is still being written. But his place as one of the best coaches and one of the best people to come through Russellville has been cemented and will always stand as such.

"This is the end of an era, but we in no way believe it is the end of the success we've seen for Russellville Baseball. Coach Heaps is leaving a legacy that our current players and coaches will uphold and pass along to future players, and we know that will lead to continued success for RHS Baseball in the years to come," Grimes said.

Years down the road, when Heaps has hung up the turf shoes and handed over the lineup card for the last time, he will have a plethora of noteworthy moments during his time at Russellville to reminisce on.

It will surely be difficult to single out one moment in particular, but there *is* one moment from his final season in the gold and black that will always stand out.

"It's been an incredible ride and has been so much fun. I've never seen a community back a program the way this community does," Heaps said. "I came from Hartselle where we won a lot of games and a lot of championships. I've seen a lot of impressive crowds and what I saw this year and last year from our community was just remarkable. I've never seen a crowd change a series the way they did. When our crowd took over that series, that just proved how much this community cares and supports this program and that's something that will stay with me."

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