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Council expected to ink agreement with medical cannabis company

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council is expected to approve a lease purchase agreement with a newly-formed Alabama company whose owners have applied for a license that would authorize the cultivation, processing, dispensing and sale of medical cannabis in Russellville. The council was to consider the agreement at its December 5, 2022, meeting. If approved, Natural Relief Cultivation, LLC, an Alabama corpo-

ration registered with the Alabama Secretary of State's Office on September 14, 2022, would enter into a lease purchase agreement for approximately 28 acres located on Highway 24 East. The land was purchased approximately 20 years ago by the City of Russellville during the administration of former Mayor Johnny Brown. If Natural Relief Cultivation, LLC, meets certain benchmarks within 36 months from the date the State of Alabama issues the company a medical cannabis license, the city will deed the 28 acres to the company.

See 'CANNABIS,' Page 9

Hamilton denies bond for woman charged in dog maulings

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

A Red Bay woman charged with multiple counts of manslaughter arising from two fatal dog attacks in April will remain in the Franklin County Jail, Circuit Judge Brian Hamilton ruled Thursday. Brandy Dowdy also faces two counts of violating Emily's Law, a 2017 Alabama statute that provides criminal penalties for 'keeping or maintaining a dog that causes serious physical injury or death, knowing the dangerous propensities of the dog.' Thursday's hearing also provided the first glimpse into what Dowdy's defense to the charges will be, as

her attorney, Jessica Bugge, addressed the Court about what she labeled an 'insufficiency' of evidence. "These are charges where the defendant was not even present," Bugge said. "Loose dogs assaulted two individuals. 27 dogs were put down that day and there's no evidence which dogs assaulted these individuals. There's not sufficient evidence to hold the defendant without bond," she added. Dowdy is charged with 'keeping or maintaining' vicious dogs at her residence on Crumpton Road near Red Bay. On consecutive days in April 2022, two women were fatally attacked by a pack of dogs at Dowdy's residence. Michelle Sheeks was taking a

See 'DOWDY,' Page 8

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*Odra Ballard, 72, of Russellville, passed away December 2,
2022. Pinkard Funeral Home of Russellville assisted the family.*

*Billy Gene Jones, 78, of Phil Campbell, passed away on
Tuesday, November 29. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the
family.*

*Bernice Geneva King, 95, of Russellville, passed away
Wednesday, November 30. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the
family.*

*Jim "Skip" Dobson, 75, of Russellville, passed away on Friday,
December 02, 2022. Arrangements are incomplete at this time.*

*John L Carter, 69, passed away Thursday, December 1, 2022.
Atkins Funeral Home assisted the family.*

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Franklin Free Press

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Phil Campbell man charged with animal cruelty/neglect

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A Phil Campbell man has been charged with animal cruelty after an investigation found that he had abandoned four dogs inside his former residence, police said.

James Bass was charged with one count of Cruelty to Animals, a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in jail and up to a \$3,000 fine upon conviction.

Phil Campbell Police Chief Jessica Clements said Bass will appear in Phil Campbell Municipal Court in December to answer allegations that he neglected the four dogs, which police found inside his former home. Clements said the dogs were underweight, appeared to be starving and at least one, a bulldog mix, had open sores and an infection around its mouth.

Clements said she believed the dog's injuries were worsened by repeated gnawing around a window in an attempt to get out of the house.

The investigation revealed that Bass moved to Russellville from his former residence in Phil Campbell, and in the process, he abandoned four dogs inside the duplex apartment.

Clements said a neighbor tried to feed the dogs since Bass did not return for them. Bass allegedly told police he was coming each morning to feed the dogs, but Clements said it was clear the animals were being neglected.

Cruelty to Animals can be a felony or misdemeanor in Alabama. Bass is charged with misdemeanor Cruelty to Animals, pursuant to Code of Alabama Sec. 13A-11-14, which reads: A person commits the crime of Cruelty to Animals if, except as otherwise authorized by law, he or she recklessly or with criminal negligence: (1) Subjects any animal to cruel mistreatment; or (2) Subjects any animal in his or her custody to cruel neglect; or (3) Kills or injures without good cause any animal belonging to another.

Clements contacted a representative from Save Our Strays Franklin County about picking up the dogs. That organization rescues stray or abused animals in Franklin County and works in conjunction with the Florence/Lauderdale Animal Shelter, where the dogs were temporarily placed.

Two of the four dogs were originally placed as foster dogs with Bass, according to a representative from the group. Those dogs are now back in that organization's custody where they are receiving necessary medical care.

In addition to Chief Clements, Phil Campbell Police Officer Brian Vickery also worked on the investigation.



**Letters
to the
Editor**

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For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out online at franklinfreepress.net!

'Radio' on the radio: Bohannon releases first single

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The first time you hear Austin Bohannon's new single, Radio, the immediate question that comes to mind is who the song is written about.

The Russellville native's first radio release, Radio, tells the story of a young artist whose former girlfriend never believed he could make it in the music business. And after they break up, she hears his hit song one day when she's in the car with her new guy.

*"I bet you're gonna turn it down low,
Wishing you were out on the road
Hoping that he don't know that
That's me on your radio.*

*You never thought I'd make it this far
Back when I was playing at bars
I've got my own show and you can't go
You're hearing me from the radio."*

So, Austin, who were you thinking about when you wrote this song?

Of course, Bohannon declined to throw a name out there, but he did explain some of the back story to his first radio release.

"I was seeing a girl who didn't think I could do the music thing. Finally I said I'm going to chase my dreams and that's what the song is about," Bohannon said. "More than just her, though, a lot of people said 'you idiot, what are you doing?' My brain is wired when you tell me I can't do something, I'm going to do it."

That same mentality and determination served as a springboard for Bohannon's collegiate baseball career.

After he graduated from Russellville High School in 2016, where his team won back-to-back state championships his junior and senior years, Bohannon enrolled at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, where he spent two years as a pitcher for the Buccaneers.

Bohannon joined the University of Alabama at Birmingham baseball program in 2019, when he appeared in 15 games for the Blazers. His career at UAB ended after his 2021 senior season, and as he contemplated a career path, Bohannon couldn't keep music out of his head.

"I sang in (Russellville) middle school and was on the show choir and loved it," Bohannon said "I did several plays but my brother (Wesley) and my cousin (Duncan McDowell) made fun of me and picked on me so I quit and just did sports.

When I went to college, I learned how to play the guitar at Shelton State. I'm not sure which came more naturally, singing or songwriting, but probably songwriting. I remember the first time I sang in front of people and they liked it. That lit a fire under me and I found something I really like doing," he added.

Bohannon hosted a Single Release Party November 11th at the Boiler Room in Florence.

If you've seen an Austin Bohannon show, (and there are plenty of opportunities as Bohannon plays multiple shows each week) you quickly realize it's going to be a high-energy performance mixed with lots of genuine interaction with the audience.

"In Florence, there are talented musicians everywhere every night," Bohannon said. "But one thing a lot of people lack is the entertainment and interaction with the audience. It makes you feel like you're part of the music rather than just sitting there and listening. I think that entertainment aspect is what makes me different from a lot of guys."

Bohannon posts his upcoming shows on his Facebook page, and his website, www.bohannonmusic.com.

He's been performing for just over one year, but he sings and engages the audience like a veteran artist, something he attributes to two friends and fellow musicians, Joseph Baldwin and Gary Nichols.

"I learned a lot playing with Joseph. When I first started playing with him I learned how to interact with a crowd. And Gary is a great entertainer. They have decades of experience I can get and I kind of soak that in to what I do," Bohannon said.

Radio was released last month and has received a great response from radio stations, including Russellville's own WGOL-FM 100.7, which debuted the song in November.

Bohannon is working on several more singles, having already recorded the vocals at the Nutt House Recording Studio in Muscle Shoals. The bass tracks are done, and they are currently getting mixed in a Minnesota studio. Bohannon said he may release the four new songs as singles, or an EP, something he hasn't yet decided.

And Bohannon's music has caught the eye of some extraordinary Nashville and Shoals area talent, several of whom are featured on the new songs.

Gary Baker produced the songs, and Jeff King (electric guitar), Mac McAnally (acoustic guitar), Greg Morrow (drums), Jason Webb (keyboard) and Mark Hill (bass) all form an all-star lineup working with Bohannon.



COURTESY PHOTO

Austin Bohannon along with his all-star musical lineup on his debut single.

That's a long way from Bohannon's first public performance, just over 14 months ago, at Swamper's in Florence.

Radio is available for download through Apple Music, iTunes, Spotify and Deezer.

Bohannon's website also teases another new project for the young artist, a limited podcast series called Muscle Shoals Deep Dives, which will see Bohannon traveling to Shoals area studios to interview world-renowned songwriters, producers and session players.

Bohannon's young career moved at warp speed over the past year, but he's grounded enough to understand the music business doesn't always work that fast.

"I'm really just going with the wind," Bohannon said. "If there comes a time to take this to the next level, I'm waiting on the right move. I'm not just going to pack up and go to Nashville. But if something arises and I need to move, I can do it. There's nothing holding me back," the 25-year-old added.

And even though he's a new musician, Bohannon relies on his lifetime of experience on the baseball field to help his musical career.

"I'll say this about baseball—being on the mound was cool. All eyes are on you every pitch. You're, in a sense, entertaining," Bohannon said. "And that kind of prepared me for music in a way.

There are no pre-game jitters or nervousness but you realize here comes the moment. In that moment, you either show up or you don't. Pitching in some big games kind of prepared me for when I play bigger gigs," he added.

Bohannon's largest audience to date came in his hometown, as he took the stage at the City of Russellville's 2022 Jam on Sloss Lake.

"I wasn't nervous at all playing in front of that big crowd in Russellville. It was a home game, and a home crowd," Bohannon said.

And if his career rises to the next level, Bohannon won't ever forget his musical roots started right here in Northwest Alabama.

"If it takes off, and I truly believe it will, I'll still come back home. Look at Gary Nichols, Jason Isbell, Chris Tompkins, John Paul White and Iguana Party. You see them playing at Swampers and having fun," Bohannon said.

"They come back to their roots when they come back to town and that's awesome. These guys have done it all and they still look forward to coming back home and reliving what they used to do," he added.

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 **M**ountain View Baptist Church in Phil Campbell will be presenting their annual drive-thru nativity, "A Night in Bethlehem" on Sunday, December 11 through Tuesday, December 13, from 6-8pm each night. Come enjoy the narration of the Christmas story with your family as you drive through 11 scenes depicting the true meaning of Christmas. This is a free event! For more information, visit www.mtviewbaptistchurch.org or <https://www.facebook.com/mtviewbaptistchurch12>.

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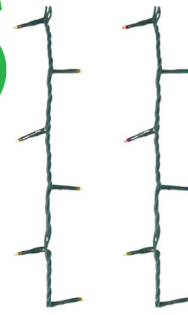


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‘DOWDY,’ from Page 1

morning walk on April 28th when dogs attacked her. Sheeks was treated in several hospitals before she passed away on July 12th as a result of her injuries.

The day after Sheeks was attacked, Alabama Department of Public Health Environmental Supervisor Summer Beard went to the residence to speak with the dogs' owner and determine whether the animals were current on rabies vaccinations.

Beard was attacked while trying to locate the dogs' owner, according to law enforcement records, and her body was found later that day.

Dowdy was released from the Franklin County Jail on May 2, 2022, after posting a \$60,000 bond on the manslaughter and Emily's Law charges.

She was subsequently arrested on an unrelated felony drug charge, for allegedly possessing methamphetamine, on July 10, 2022.

The Franklin County District Attorney's Office filed a motion to revoke Dowdy's bond on the manslaughter charges based on her violating the terms of good behavior and no new arrests on her bond.

Franklin County District Judge Paula McDowell granted the motion and revoked Dowdy's bond, and she has remained in custody since that date.

Bugge filed a motion to reinstate her client's bond, or in the alternative, asking that Dowdy be released to an inpatient substance abuse rehabilitation program. Bugge told the Court her client did not pose a risk of flight or harm to others, as she would be monitored 24 hours daily at Lovelady Center, a faith-based recovery program in Birmingham.

“There is no risk of harm to others as she will be under constant supervision. You know right where she'll be,” Bugge told Hamilton. “Ms. Dowdy has never been convicted of any crime. She has been in custody almost six months since that revocation and she is due to be reinstated. She's sitting in jail when she could be in a rehabilitation center.”

District Attorney-elect Jeff Barksdale told Hamilton the state objected to any release of Dowdy, whether to a rehab facility or not.

“The defendant recklessly caused the death of multiple people in this county and several months after her arrest, she was arrested for unlawful possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug paraphernalia,” Barksdale said.

“She violated the bond terms of this very serious offense and committed new offenses, so the state believes she should remain in custody. We are asking the Court to set this case for trial with no release for the defendant,” he added.

The widowers of both women killed by the dogs attended Thursday's hearing. Both Richard Beard and Wesley Sheeks told Hamilton they opposed Dowdy's release, as did Sheeks' son.

After the hearing, Bugge told the FFP that '27 dogs were murdered at one time and no evidence was preserved' so the state has no idea which dogs killed the two women.

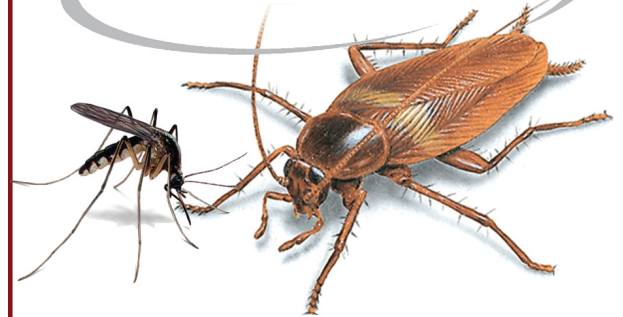
“There were no witnesses, and there's no evidence which dogs were involved, if any. The evidence would be the dogs, where the state had the dogs and could match bite marks,” Bugge said.

“We do not believe my client owned any of the 27 dogs. They were wild dogs that came out of the woods behind her residence. Ms. Dowdy's dogs were inside the home and they were not killed.”

Additionally, Bugge said the Crumpton Road residence does not belong to her client. Rather, it's her father's home, and Dowdy lived there with her father, her two daughters and one son-in-law, for a total of five adults. Bugge said Dowdy's arrest resulted from a rush to judgment from law enforcement.

“In a case like this they must have someone at fault, so that's what happened when they arrested Ms. Dowdy. There's no evidence that any dogs involved belonged to her and the home is owned by her father,” Bugge added.

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'CANNABIS,' from Page 1

If Natural Relief Cultivation fails to meet those benchmarks, it will purchase the land for \$500,000, according to Russellville Mayor David Grissom.

The agreement would not include an adjoining eight-acre tract the city will retain.

Those benchmarks include Natural Relief Cultivation's employment of at least 250 people, earning a minimum \$15/hour wage, and a capital investment of at least \$25 million in the city.

Additionally, if Natural Relief Cultivation's license application is granted, the City of Russellville would receive one percent of the dispensary's net profit each year, and a minimum of \$50,000 annually.

The city would also receive its proportional sales tax revenue on medical cannabis sold at the dispensary, as well as an additional two percent sales tax once that is approved by the council.

Natural Relief Cultivation includes a group of Arkansas businessmen who own a medical cannabis dispensary in that state, along with some additional Alabama investors. The group has been in discussions with city officials for several months about possibly locating in Russellville.

After the council voted to allow medical cannabis dispensaries inside the city, those discussions led to the proposal the council will consider at its December 5th meeting.

Since medical cannabis dispensaries opened in Arkansas in May 2019, the Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration reports the state has collected nearly \$34 million in tax revenue from the more than \$500 million in cannabis sales.

Natural Relief Cultivation, LLC, is one of 133 applicants seeking an integrated facility license from the Alabama Medical Cannabis Commission. The commission will issue no more than five integrated facility licenses, considered the 'golden goose' of licenses because it allows the license holder to cultivate, process, transport and sell medical cannabis. The integrated facility license also allows the holder to operate up to five dispensaries anywhere in Alabama.

The Alabama Legislature approved the Wesley 'Ato' Hall Compassion Act in 2021. That law legalized the use of medical cannabis in Alabama and created the Alabama Medical Cannabis Commission.

Franklin County's Legislative delegation of Rep. Jamie Kiel (R-Russellville) and Sen. Larry Stutts (R-Tuscumbia) both voted against the legalization of medical cannabis.

Although the words cannabis and marijuana are often interchanged, they are not the same thing. Cannabis refers to all products derived from the Cannabis sativa plant, and marijuana refers to the part of the plant that contains significant levels of THC, the substance that creates the effect on one's mental state.

Certain cannabis plants have very small amounts of THC and these are marketed as industrial hemp.

Last month, the Russellville City Council approved an ordinance that would allow the operation of medical cannabis dispensary sites within the city. A city or county must approve such a measure before any dispensary may open within the city or county.

"This law was passed by the Alabama Legislature and signed by the governor. These facilities and dispensaries are going to go somewhere in our state so we have property available and this would be a huge economic development opportunity for our city," Grissom said.

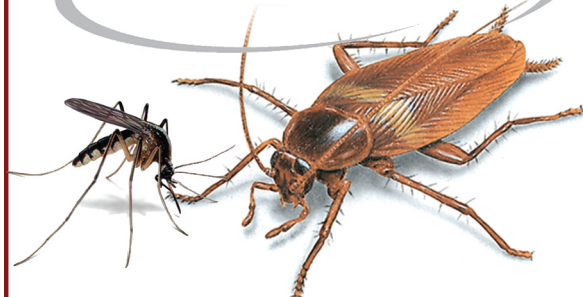
"How often do people come in and spend \$25 million and create 250 jobs in our city? And this is going to be a very regulated business," he added.

District Two Councilman Darren Woodruff said he researched the issue of medical cannabis 'extensively' before deciding to support the agreement with Natural Relief Cultivation.

"I spoke with several medical professionals and all of them agreed they would recommend it for their family members if they had the choice between medical cannabis and opioids," Woodruff said.

"Opioids have killed hundreds of people in our communities and thousands in our nation. And the laws that regulate medical cannabis in Alabama are the strictest regulations ever written," he added.

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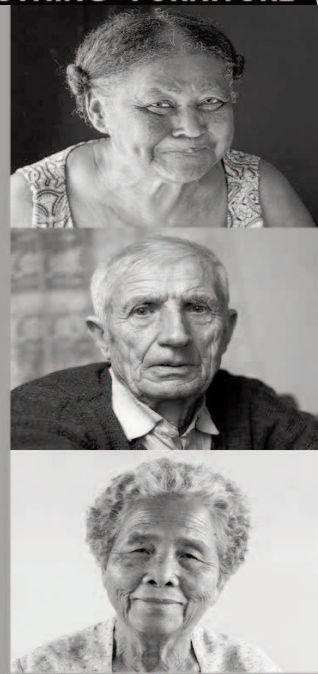
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Happy Homecoming as Bulldogs sweep county rival Vina.

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Belgreen Bulldogs' girls varsity team did its part to make Homecoming not only a fun week, but a winning day, as the Bulldogs rolled over Vina 62-34 on December 2nd.

Coach Chad Green's team built a 18-12 lead after one quarter, paced by the hot shooting of BB Scott, who had 10 of Belgreen's 18 in the first eight minutes.

Scott's 22 points, including five three pointers, led all scorers.

The Bulldogs added to their lead in the second quarter, as the teams went to halftime with Belgreen ahead 35-22.

Belgreen's defense held the Red Devils to 12 second half points.

Other double digit scorers for Belgreen included Dakota Green (16) and Noelle Willingham (13).

Vina was led by Sara Harper's 13 points. Kaitlyn Athey added six.

Earlier in the week, Belgreen hosted Shoals Christian and came away with a 48-36 win.

A tight first half ended with the Bulldogs leading 22-17. Scott poured in 12 first half points and Green added seven.

Scott's 13 points and Green's 12 led Belgreen in a low scoring game that saw the Flames hang around, although the Bulldogs led most of the game.

Mamie Bachifer led Shoals Christian with 18 of the team's 34.

Belgreen's girls will host Waterloo on Friday, December 9th, and travel to Sheffield on December 12th and Phillips on December 13th.

4-4 Golden Tigers battling injuries, opponents as area play nears

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville Lady Golden Tigers are 4-4 this season with a chance this week to make that a winning record.

Having battled injuries early this season, the team has played at less than full strength, Coach Jermaine Groce said. The Lady Golden Tigers faced the Deshler Tigers last Monday night in a game that saw Deshler build a large early lead.

"We started out weak, and came out with our big guns down low and the Tigers took advantage of us by playing small ball," Groce said.

This was Jenna Whitfield's first game back from an injury she had prior to the start of the season. The first half ended 43-13 with the Golden Tigers trailing. Russellville made adjustments at halftime and outscored the Tigers 33-28 in the second half, but it was not enough after a lopsided first quarter.

"We were much more efficient scoring in the second half running the court," Groce said.

At the time of writing this article the Golden Tigers were preparing to face the Tigers again on Monday, December 5th.

Groce will look to start the game faster like the Golden Tigers did in the second half of the previous match-up.

The Golden Tigers' second game of the week was scheduled against the Florence Falcons, but was canceled due to the chance of severe weather.

The Golden Tigers faced the Hamilton Aggies last Friday night and fell short, 68-61, in a tight game that went to overtime.

The Golden Tigers led a majority of the game against the Aggies, but had to pull the reins back

after second quarter foul trouble. After the first quarter Russellville led by six points.

"The Aggies had trouble getting past our pressure defense," Groce said.

That was until leading scorer Ella Copeland found herself in foul trouble.

After pulling back the Golden Tiger defense to save players, the Aggies took advantage and pulled ahead. In the second half, foul trouble

really became a problem.

"Entering the last four minutes of the game, I had four starters with four fouls," Groce said.

The Golden Tigers were up by three when the Aggies got a last second three-point field goal to force overtime.

In overtime without being able to apply pressure and with two starters fouled out, the Golden Tigers lost 68-61.

Russellville travels to Brewer High School Friday, with girls varsity tipping off at 6:30 p.m., and boys' varsity action to follow 15 minutes later.

Russellville will play a rare Saturday afternoon of basketball Saturday, as the Golden Tigers travel to Red Bay. Junior varsity boys' action starts at 2 p.m., followed by the girls varsity game at 3:15 and the boys varsity at 4:30. Russellville will host Hamilton on Tuesday, Dec. 13, with JV and varsity boys games as well as girls varsity action.



GROCE

Bobcats move to 6-1 after Tharptown win

Michael Rice
Franklin Free Press

The Phil Campbell Boys Varsity Basketball team is off to a 6-1 start after a week that included a win over the Tharptown Wildcats and a postponed game against Red Bay. The Bobcats were set to start the week against the Tigers last Tuesday but the game was canceled due to the chance of severe weather.

The Bobcats then had additional time to prepare for the Wildcats on Friday night, and the extra work paid off.

The Bobcats jumped out early on Tharptown, with a 16-4 lead at the end of the first quarter. Bryant Hyde led the first quarter scoring with nine points.

By halftime, the Bobcats had played a sound first half and led 39-20.

"I thought we played the first half very well. I thought it was the best half we could play. We really shot the ball well, played great defense and rebounded well," Phil Campbell Coach Shane

Clay said.

Hyde led the team with 17 first half points. Sage Raper added seven and Gage Baker had five.

"After halftime we came out a little slow. They outscored us 15-9. I felt we were playing complacent," Clay said.

At the end of the third quarter the Bobcats still led 48-35. During the fourth quarter the Bobcats took quality shots and ended the game 68-41.

"Tharptown was one of the first schools to apply adequate pressure on defense we had played. It led to us making some bad passes in the third quarter, but overall we made adjustments and came out with a win," Clay said.

Hyde finished the game with 30 points and 5 steals. Raper finished with 12 points and five rebounds while Kyle Pace finished with 10 points and five rebounds.

The Bobcats are 6-1 with their only loss coming to the Shoals Christian Flames by two points.

Phil Campbell's next games include a Friday night trip to Danville, and a December 13th home game against Colbert Heights.

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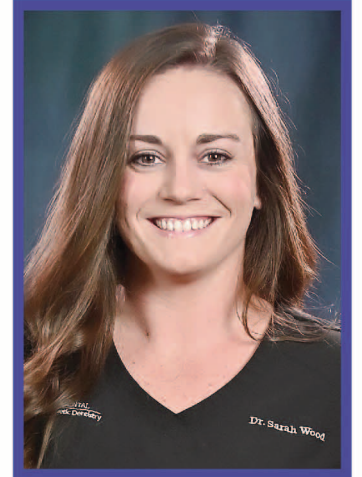


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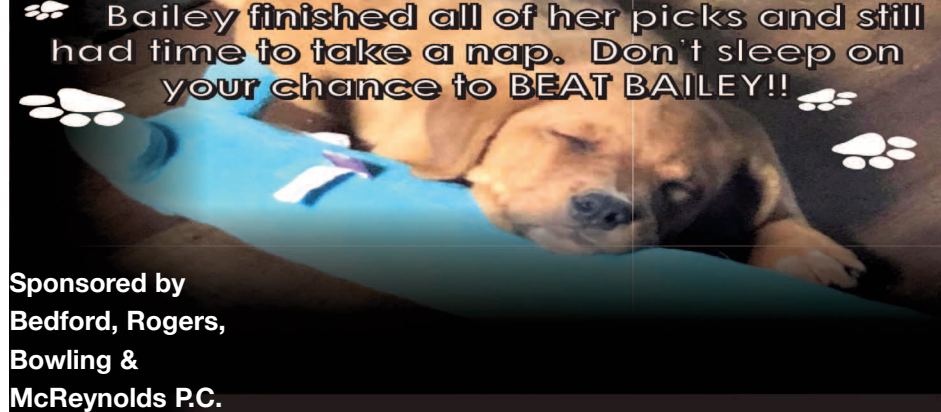


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Congratulations to Phillip King, our final weekly winner, who picked 8 of 10 games last weekend, and won our tiebreaker. The following slate of bowl games is open ONLY to our weekly winners. If you were a weekly winner this year, please submit your predictions by December XX. The top scorer will win our grand prize of \$100. Submit your picks to us each week in one of two ways: Fill out the entry form on this page and mail it to us at 113 Washington Ave. NW, Russellville, AL 35653, or email your picks to us along with your name and number at franklinfreepress@yahoo.com. Picks sent in by mail for Week 13 must be postmarked by Friday, December 2nd and picks submitted by email for Week 13 must be received by Saturday, Saturday December 3rd, at 10 a.m. Each week, the contestant who correctly picks the most games will win a free T-shirt and the chance to pick in the grand-prize final-week contest. If multiple contestants correctly pick the same number of games in a given week, the tiebreaker score will be used to determine a winner. Contestants are only eligible to win the weekly contest once. No multiple winners allowed. ONE entry per telephone number.

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