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## Moore, Sumerel all smiles after Tuesday's Republican Primary

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

Franklin County voters sent incumbents a mixed message in Tuesday's Republican primary election, as they reelected Probate Judge Barry Moore while electing political newcomer Tracie Clark, who unseated incumbent District Four County Commissioner David Hester.

The largest margin of victory came

in the District Judge's race, where Russellville attorney Jamie Sumerel received more than 70% of the vote in his race over Russellville attorney Mitch McKinney.

Sumerel, through 23 of 25 precincts (Vina and Hodges not reporting), received 3,423 votes to McKinney's 1,439. Sumerel won each of those 23 boxes en route to his victory.

With no Democratic nominee,

See 'PRIMARY,' Page 4

## Aderholt secures \$3.892 million to construct Russellville library/media center project

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

A smile lit up the face of Russellville Mayor David Grissom as he shared a 'big announcement' with those in attendance at the March 4th Russellville City Council meeting.

The news came in the form of a \$3.892 million federal appropriation to the City of Russellville for a new library/multipurpose center to be located behind City Hall.

Funding for the project was announced Monday by Rep. Robert Aderholt, Senior Member of the U.S.

House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, as part of FY 2024 Community Project Funding.

"Today, I received a call from Congressman Aderholt's office letting us know they anticipate the library project being signed into law by the end of the week," Grissom said. "We want to thank Congressman Aderholt and his staff. They have worked on this for a long time."

14 projects in Aderholt's Fourth Congressional District secured funding, with the lone remaining step being President Joe Biden's

See 'LIBRARY,' Page 3

# CURTIS BAKER

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April 16, 2024  
Republican Runoff

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**Opal Mae McDuffa Alexander, age 92, of Phil Campbell, passed away on Friday, March 01, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.**

**Terry Lee Green, age 72, of Russellville, passed away on March 1, 2024. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted the family.**

**ALICE CORINNE BLACKWELL, 95, of Russellville, Alabama, passed away in her home on March 2, 2024. Visitation will be held Friday, March 8 from 2:00-3:00 PM, with the Funeral Services to follow at 3:00 PM. Both will be held at Pinkard Funeral Home in Russellville, AL.**

**Blake Russell Hargett, age 29, of Haleyville, passed away on Monday, March 04, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.**

**Shirley Annette Harbin Richey, 84, of Russellville, passed away on March 3, 2024. Akins Funeral Home assisted the family.**

# 'LIBRARY,' From Page 1

signature on the appropriations bill, which is expected to reach the President's desk by March 8th.

"Members of Congress know the needs of their districts far more than a Washington bureaucrat. That's why I've always supported directed spending for local projects during the annual appropriations process," Aderholt said. "The 14 projects in the Fourth District that I have secured funding for all have a direct impact on people's lives, on economic development, and on educational opportunities.

"This is the kind of work members of Congress should do for their districts and for their constituents," he added.

The funds are earmarked for the purpose of building a library/multipurpose community center....to provide this rural, economically disadvantaged community (Russellville) with access to a library, broadband internet, and multipurpose community center space.

In 2020, the Billy and Leila Norris family donated to the city with the specific purpose that a library be constructed in memory of the Norris family. Structures on the land, located at the intersection of Lauderdale Street and Coffee Avenue, were demolished last year as part of a grant. The land donation came with the stipulation the library be constructed within five years, with an option for a five-year extension depending on funding.

The Russellville Public Library is located at 110 Lawrence Street East. Once the new facility is complete, the 110 Lawrence Street location will be closed. Russellville Public Library Director Joshlyn Bowen received the news late Monday.

"I am so very proud of what our hard work has accomplished during my time as director," Bowen said. "This has to be one of the most momentous occasions we've had at Russellville Public Library.

"On behalf of myself, my staff and our Library Board, we want to thank Congressman Aderholt for securing the federal funding for this project and so many more that he has fought to bring to North Alabama during his time as our Congressman. None of this would have been possible without his work. I want to thank Mayor Grissom and the Russellville City Council for standing behind the vision we had for Russellville Public

Library when I began as director. It is amazing to see what can be accomplished when we all work together for the advancement of our community. And we are so excited to see the new Russellville Public Library and Media Center become a focal point in this wonderful community," she added.

Once the bill is signed into law, Grissom said the next step would be a meeting with the project engineer and architects, the Norris family and Bowen to discuss plans once the funds are received. The city will have one year to complete the project from the date the \$3.892 million is received, Grissom said.

Grissom added there were times since the 2020 land donation that the outlook for funding for a new library/multipurpose center looked bleak.

"We looked at some state grants through NACOLG, but they were around \$250,000. To build the facility we plan to build required significant funding and it's a blessing to see it come together," Grissom said.

"Library usage has changed over the years to include more Broadband media technology, so this facility will also serve as a multipurpose, media, and Broadband library to adequately meet those changing needs," he added.

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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.

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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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# 'PRIMARY,' From Page 1

Sumerel will be uncontested on the November 5, 2024, general election ballot.

He will follow District Judge Paula McDowell, who is retiring and did not seek another term.

Moore, facing a challenge from Franklin County District Two Commissioner Jason Miller, won with just over 60% of the vote. Moore led 3,021 to 1,986 with 23 of 25 precincts reporting.

Political newcomer Tracie Clark retired after 34 years with the City of Red Bay. And she was successful in her run for Commission District Four, as she defeated Hester by a 55-45% margin (through 23 of 25 precincts), including a win in her home box of Red Bay.

"That was special because those are the people who know me best, the people in my hometown, and it was a blessing to win in Red Bay," Clark said.

Clark becomes the first woman to be elected to the Franklin County Commission.

There will be two runoffs for Franklin County Commission Districts One and Two, with the runoff set for Tuesday, April 16, 2024.

Curtis Baker received 1,774 votes (through 23 of 25 precincts) to 1,405 for Michael Murray, 975 for Kirk Sparks and 583 for Michael Eady. Baker and Murray will face each other in the Republican runoff. Baker received approximately 37% of the vote to Murray's 30%.

In the District Two County Commission race, Greg Hovater received almost 43% of the votes cast, outpacing Heath Ayers' 24%. Ayers and Hovater will have six more weeks of campaigning leading up to the April 16th runoff.

On the same day he announced a \$3.892 million appropriation to build a new library/multipurpose media center in Russellville, Rep. Robert Aderholt scored a lopsided win in Franklin County over challenger Justin Holcomb. Aderholt received over 85% of the county's vote as he eyes a 30th year in Congress representing Alabama's Fourth Congressional District.

Voter turnout was surprisingly low, as fewer than 6,000 Franklin County residents went to the polls Tuesday. Intermittent rainfall didn't help those numbers. Additionally, some voters lost motivation to vote as a result of former President Donald Trump's overwhelming support in Alabama. With no tight, contested Presidential primary, some voters didn't see the importance of casting their vote in a race that was already decided

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 **T**he Senior Center of Phil Campbell is under new management. Everyone age 60 and over are invited to come join us and be part of the group. This is for men and women. We meet at the Phil Campbell Community Center Monday thru Friday from 8-noon. A delicious lunch is served at 11 a.m. Meals are \$1 donation. Some come and play Rook. We also do Bingo when we have enough people. There are several games to play or just sit and socialize with other seniors.


 **P**astor Bro. Eric McKinney and the congregation of Crestview Missionary Baptist Church, 24131 Hwy. 24, Russellville, invite you to worship with them. Sunday morning Bible Study is from 10-Noon and Sunday morning worship from 11-Noon. All are welcome to our services! Call 256-324-0179 for more information.


 **T**ennessee River Bass Club is seeking members for our 23/24 season. Club fishes monthly on Tennessee river and Bear Creek lakes. We welcome boaters or non-boaters 16 or older of all experience levels to join. Club is based in Sheffield. For more information, contact Tommy 256-627-5662.


 **M**Y FATHER'S HOUSE MINISTRIES, RUSSELLVILLE, AL, 104 E. Lawrence St., Pastor Pearl Shelton, would like to invite you to our weekly Prayer Meeting every Tuesday evening at 5:30 p.m. Come join us as we pray together in unity and power! Anyone needing prayer please be sure to join us! Everyone is welcome!


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 **C**owboy Church of Franklin County will host its annual Egg Rodeo on Saturday, March 23, from 10 a.m. -2 p.m., at the church located at 25100 Hwy. 24 in Russellville. Egg hunt, stick horse competition, lunch served. All events will be in arena, so dress to get dirty.

 **T**he Franklin County Chamber of Commerce will be hosting Easter Egg Hunts in Phil Campbell, Red Bay and Russellville on Saturday, March 23rd. The chamber will provide eggs filled with candy, small toys and \$1 bills. Donations are being accepted for \$25 gift certificates/gift cards for prizes. These will be collected through March 15th.

 **T**he Bay Tree Council for the Performing Arts in Red Bay, AL announces auditions for its third and final performance of the 2024-2025, Suite Surrender, by Michael McKeever and directed by Anna Carol Porter. Auditions will take place on Sunday March 3 PM 2024 at 2:00 PM and Monday March 4, 2024, at 7 PM at the Weatherford Centre in Red Bay, AL. The cast calls for five women and four men, with younger adults and teens that could play older parts. Auditions will consist of cold readings from the book. Practices will start on Monday March 11, 2024, with the performances on April 25-28, 2024. If you are interested in bringing a group for a dinner theater, which is usually held on Thursday night of the performances, you may contact Beth Hammock at 256-668-0045. This production will be perfect for your church, senior and other groups that are looking for a fun time out. It's 1942, and two of Hollywood's biggest divas have descended upon the luxurious Palm Beach Royale Hotel -- assistants, luggage, and legendary feud with one another in tow. Everything seems to be in order for their wartime performance...that is, until they are somehow assigned to the same suite. Mistaken identities, overblown egos, double entendres, and a lap dog named Mr. Boodles round out this hilarious riot of a love note to the classic farces of the 30s and 40s.

 **E**ast Franklin Volunteer Fire Department will be serving William Earl Bishop's smoked chicken and pulled barbecue pork plates from 4-7 p.m., March 1, 2024. Candidates will speak beginning at 5 p.m. Plates are \$10 each. Dessert donations will be appreciated. The East Franklin Volunteer Fire Department is located at 10443 Highway 81, Phil Campbell.

 **L**ifeSouth Community Blood Center will host a blood drive at Russellville Hospital on THURSDAY, MARCH 28TH, 2024 from 10:00 AM to 6:00 PM.. LifeSouth is the primary supplier of blood products to Russellville Hospital. Please contact Deborah Lindsey to schedule an appointment at 256-332-8676 or by email at deborah.lindsey@russellvillehospital.org. Please be sure to bring your photo ID when you donate. Everyone who signs up to donate will receive a free T-shirt, an appetizer card from Texas Roadhouse, and a free meal ticket from Russellville Hospital. All donors will receive a free cholesterol screening. We will also be giving away DOOR PRIZES!

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Competitive bids on the following items:  
**ONE (1) USED VERMEER BC1800XL WOODCHIPPER**  
See ATTACHED Specifications and Requirements  
Equipment sold "as is"

The Franklin County Commission invites you to submit sealed bids on the above listed surplus item. Franklin County reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids.

Bids will be opened on **WEDNESDAY THE 6TH OF MARCH 2024 AT 3:00 P.M.** Bids may be delivered to the

Franklin County Commission Office at 405 North Jackson Avenue between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., or mailed to P.O. Box 1028, Russellville, AL 35653. Bids received after the opening time regardless of the postage date will not be accepted.

All bids must be sealed and marked "Bid on 2022 Vermeer BC1800XL Woodchipper" on the outside of the envelope.

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North Jackson Avenue between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., or mailed to P.O. Box 1028, Russellville, AL 35653. Bids received after the opening time regardless of the postage date will not be accepted.

All bids must be sealed and marked "Bid on 2021 Tree Frogg Skid Steer Tree Saw" on the outside of the envelope. If you wish to view the item or have questions, please contact Jason Baggett at (256) 332-8434.

Equipment is to be removed within fourteen days from the date the bid is approved at no cost to the Franklin County Commission.

# \$1.12 million appropriated to Red Bay for lighting along Alabama 24

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

The City of Red Bay will received \$1.12 million in federal funding to improve visibility and traffic safety on Appalachian Regional Commission Highway Corridor X, known in Alabama as Highway 24.

The project was one of 14 to receive appropriation funding in Alabama's Fourth Congressional District, represented by Rep. Robert Aderholt, the senior member of the House of Representatives' Committee on Appropriations.

Red Bay Mayor Charlene Fancher said the funds will be used to purchase and install LED lighting along Alabama Highway 24 within the city limits of Red Bay. The city limits contains long stretches of highway with no lighting, so the LED light poles are expected to mitigate traffic accidents as well as create a safer driving experience along 24 in and out of Red Bay.

"We are very excited about this project," Fancher said Tuesday. "We were waiting on the second attempt to earmark funds for this through Congressman Aderholt's office, so we're very pleased our application has hung in there through the budget process."

Fancher said the highway has no lighting at all, which makes it difficult at night to locate the on and off ramps going into Red Bay.

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"It's a very unsafe situation, so once we install this lighting, we're hopeful Mississippi will pick it up from their state line and light up the rest of Hwy. 76 from 24," Fancher said.

Three years ago, Red Bay officials approved the purchase and installation of LED lighting on the on/off ramps connecting to Highway 19. Funds were obtained through a 50/50 grant with the Alabama Department of Transportation.

With easier access entering and exiting the City of Red Bay, officials hope there will be a resulting positive economic impact as well.

Fancher said there is no timeline for receiving the funds. City officials will receive notice of which agency they will work through to secure the funds. Once the \$1.12 million is received by the city, there will be a 12-month window for the project to be completed.

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## East Franklin baseball team races out to 4-0 start

Kadin Pounders  
 Franklin Free Press

The East Franklin Junior High baseball team is off to a perfect 4-0 start in its 2024 campaign, picking up doubleheader wins on the road at Belgreen and Winston County.

The Rebels have been impressive both on the mound and in the batter's box, outscoring opponents 34-9 over 15 innings.

"We're swinging the bats and we've got some pretty dang good pitching," said East Franklin head coach David Ward.

"This is probably got to be one of the best starts ever for the program," assistant coach Trey Benford added.

East Franklin started off the season on Feb. 20th with a doubleheader against Belgreen. The Rebels took both, winning 7-4 and 14-0. In game one, Isaac Duboise pitched all three innings and finished with four strikeouts. At the plate, Duboise added a hit, a run, and an RBI alongside RBIs from Eli Baker and Kye Baker.

In game two, the Rebels used a massive 10-run first inning to propel them to the rout of the Bulldogs. Isaac Duboise had an even better performance at the plate in game two with two hits and five RBI while Miles Duboise led the team with three hits and two runs scored. The most impressive performance, however, came from Eli Baker on the bump. Baker earned the win, tossing a six-strikeout no-hitter.

See, 'EAST FRANKLIN,' Page 12

## Golden Tigers baseball team riding three-game win streak

Kadin Pounders  
 Franklin Free Press

After a three-game losing spell, the Russellville High School varsity baseball team turned it around last week with three wins in three games, improving the Golden Tigers record to 5-5 overall this season.

The Golden Tigers have been swinging the bats over the last couple weeks but were hurt by errors and free bases during their losing streak. Over the last three games, Russellville continued hitting well and played more mistake-free baseball as it secured wins over Austin, Mars Hill, and North Jackson.

"I thought our guys did a good job of responding this week," Russellville head coach Jess Smith said. "I think I said (in the losses) we were making mistakes we couldn't outhit. I think we did a better job playing cleaner baseball this week."

Russellville opened the week on the road at Austin on Feb. 27, defeating the Black Bears 8-1. Errors had plagued the Golden Tigers up to that point, but they looked almost cured of it against the Black Bears.

"Tuesday was the first time it felt like we played pretty error-free baseball this season," Smith said.

In fact, it was Russellville's second errorless game, the first coming in the 10-0 home rout of Austin earlier this season.

The Golden Tigers also didn't give up free bases, another area of improvement Smith has stressed this year. Starting pitcher Brandt Cummings had just one walk in his five scoreless innings pitched and allowed just three hits while striking out seven batters. Ty Engelthaler finished out the final two innings, allowing a run on two hits with three strikeouts.

Four Golden Tigers had multi-hit performances as Russellville put up crooked numbers in the second and fifth inning versus Austin. Cayden Johns and Devin Green both came around twice to score while Daniel Askew led the team with two RBI.

See, 'GOLDEN TIGERS,' page 13

## Boatwright, track and field athletes, building program they can be proud of

Kadin Pounders  
 Franklin Free Press

An hour before Russellville hosted its first outdoor track and field meet of the season on Feb. 27, as traveling teams made camp in the away stands, equipment was being set up on the field, and athletes were lacing up cleats or mingling with teammates, the Golden Tigers' head coach, Chris Boatwright, wasn't hard to pick out of the crowd.

Wearing a white Russellville Track and Field t-shirt, a walkie talkie clipped to his hip, and carrying a box of forms under one arm, the first-year head coach of the program was giving directions to two volunteers at the check-in table before turning around to address the

questions of two student-athletes and a local sportswriter.

Boatwright was a busy man.

"Being the head coach is not necessarily just coaching. You are the admin, you know, whether it's money, parents, the team, the facilities, everything that goes into it," he said. "For me, the most surprising thing...at our first meet was just how busy, as the head coach, I am. Whether it's answering questions, turning on the lights, helping kids get into the right heats. You take on a lot of responsibility and wear different hats at any time."

To be clear, this is not Boatwright complaining. Far from it. It only takes talking to him for a few seconds to realize he cares about his athletes, the program, and the role he plays as

See, 'TRACK,' Page 14

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## 'EAST FRANKLIN,' From Page 11

"Eli Baker is a seventh grader who threw a no-hitter, which is impressive," Ward said. "We're really looking at him."

Younger players like Baker coming into the team and playing big roles have been a pleasant surprise for the Rebels, Benford said.

"Biggest thing right now is how happy we are with our youth. We're starting six or seven seventh graders right now," he said. "We're really excited having that many seventh graders coming in and making that big of an impact."

East Franklin traveled to play Winston County on Feb. 26, adding 4-3 and 9-2 results to the win column. The Rebels were able to eke out a one-run win in five innings with Isaac Duboise back on the mound in game one. He allowed two earned runs off six hits and fanned 12 batters over five innings.

"Our main thing, our strongest thing right now has probably been our pitching, and we've got some really good kids that are stepping up," Ward said.

Duboise, a ninth-grader, is the number one on the Rebels' pitching staff that includes Eli Baker and Miles Duboise. Benford said his presence will be key to East Franklin's success this year.

"I think last year...he had almost 100 strikeouts. Having him back this year is massive for us," Benford said.

East Franklin took game two in more convincing fashion, beating the Yellow Jackets 9-2 in four innings. The Rebels, led by a four-RBI game from Isaac Duboise, scored two runs in the first, another four runs in the second, and capped the scoring with three runs in the third inning. Miles

Duboise started on the mound and pitched three innings, allowing two runs off two hits and struck out six. Eli Baker came in in relief and tossed a scoreless fourth inning with two strikeouts.

Benford said the wins over Winston County point to just how well the Rebels are playing early this season.

"We came in knowing we were going to be pretty good, but (the players) have come out and just blown away expectations," he said. "We beat Winston County, which played their (junior varsity)

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team, I think."

"Being able to beat a team like that, you know, is pretty big for us," he added.

Talent has played its role in the team's flawless start so far, but Ward said coachability and work ethic has been a big factor.

"I think it's because the kids like to work, and you know I'm going to work them," Ward said. "They're easy to teach and it's a good group of kids. They want to learn, they're eager to learn, and very enthusiastic."

Ward, in his low-key way, said success at the end of the year looks simple.

"Keep winning. Keep getting better," he said. "Success is just getting better and improving each game."

Still, the Rebels are excited about the 4-0 start, and Benford said East Franklin wants to continue to defy the doubters.

"People still think we're that East Franklin team that's not as good as everyone else, but we want to prove that we're the best," he said. "That's been the message, don't get too content."

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# 'GOLDEN TIGERS,' From Page 11

The wins kept coming over the weekend when Russellville hosted Mars Hill and North Jackson in a doubleheader March 2. In the first game against the Panthers, the Golden Tigers were again led by a strong effort on the mound, this one from Johns, as the hosts beat Mars Hill 3-1.

"Cayden Johns pitched outstanding for us on Saturday," Smith said. "He was scoreless through six innings against Mars Hill and I think he had just a couple walks."

Johns didn't have a ton of strikeouts in his six shutout innings but allowed his defense to go to work behind him.

"We had some plays where our defense really came up big," Smith said of Russellville's weekend. "We had some tough defensive plays and turned some double plays that kept us in those games."

Johns was relieved in the seventh by Gunner Sappington and Ty Engelthaler, who picked up his first save of the season.

Offensively, Russellville scored all three of its runs in the third. A defensive error put KJ Murray on base to leadoff the inning. Murray would later come around to score on an RBI single by Askew. A couple errors and a couple passed balls brought in the other two runs scored by Askew and Tripp Cleveland.

Plenty of runs were scored in the final game of the week against North Jackson. Russellville, defeating the Chiefs 13-7, were led by Cummings who followed up his midweek win on the mound with a perfect 3-for-3 day at the dish. Cummings was just a triple shy of the cycle as he singled, doubled, and then capped off his day with a grand slam to right field in the fifth inning, his second grand slam of the season. He finished with four RBI and four runs scored.

"Brandt Cummings had a big week at the plate for us," said Smith as he listed off the senior's stats. "He's been big for us this year both pitching and at the plate."

Russellville finished the game with 11 hits and every starter contributed to the runs column with either a run scored or RBI or both. Alongside Cummings, Neyland Baker also had a three-hit game and scored three runs.

"You can tell when your offense is clicking when you score 24 runs this week and most of those were earned and weren't given away," Smith said. "I think the big thing is we've been having quality at-bats and we've been doing better with two strikes on us, not striking out as much, putting the ball in play and making the defense work for outs."

The Golden Tigers went behind early in the top of the first inning but responded in the bottom half of the inning to tie it up 2-2. From there Russellville didn't look back, scoring four runs in the third, two in the fourth, and five runs in the fifth.

"Errors put us in a hole against North Jackson, but our defense responded and made some double plays and kept us in it," Smith said.

Russellville still isn't perfect, Smith added, but just as his team has started to decrease their mistakes they've increased their ability to weather them.

"We still made some mistakes but we saw our guys play through those and overcome those mistakes," Smith said, alluding to his previous comments about Russellville's inability to "outhit" its errors. "That's what you want to see. Can guys respond when something happens. I think our guys have been able to do that the last few games."

Russellville's three wins on the bounce are sure to be a boost to the team's morale and confidence, but Smith said the Golden Tigers still have work to do to reach their peak as the schedule tilts closer to the most crucial of games.

"The goal going forward is to keep getting better and keep progressing as we get closer to area baseball," he said



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# 'TRACK,' From Page 11

the head coach.

"My approach to it is, first of all, to show the kids that I'm passionate and I love them. Second of all, I want them to know I'm their biggest fan. I want them to go out there and give it their all," he said. "I let them know that everything we do is for a reason, and that reason is either going to be a negative or a positive. So if I eliminate the negative that gives them a positive reason to want to go compete."

"These kids, they show up for practice and they want it and I'm just trying to give them a program they can be proud of," he added.

Senior Matthew James said Boatwright brings a lot of excitement to the program and increased the interest in participation.

"He brings a lot of energy to the team," James said. "Last year we didn't have a whole lot of people on the team, but when people heard Coach Boatwright was going to take it over a lot more people came out and joined this year."

Boatwright has been on staff coaching football at Russellville since 2019. Last year he added assistant track and field coach to his duties. After then-head coach Brett Voss moved over to take the Russellville Middle School head football coach job, Boatwright stepped in to grab the reins. Since then, he has added efforts to fundraise for the program, including taking over the concession stand at Russellville soccer games.

"I decided to pick up soccer's concession stand...to help fundraise and to give our kids an opportunity to raise money for the program without having to go out and sell t-shirts or sell different things," Boatwright said. "We have sold street tacos and really ramped this thing up, all the while we're also doing concession stand at our track meets, as well. I'm super proud of the parents because they have really stepped up and made this happen."

Boatwright has used the fundraised money to purchase new equipment and new gear and apparel for the student-athletes.

"I told the kids my number one thing, whether it's coaching football or

coaching basketball at the middle school level or now track, if we look like a team, we'll play like a team," he said. "We bought each kid a hoodie, a long sleeve dri-fit, and a new jersey. That way these kids would be proud of the things they have."

"I told them this year 'I don't want you showing up to a meet in a Russellville baseball or your Russellville football shirt on. If we're going to be a successful program, you are our walking billboard.' We've got to have that outward appearance," he added.

Even before he became the head coach, though, Boatwright was making his mark on the program. After some students approached Boatwright about Russellville's lack of an indoor track and field team, he went straight to the top.

"I reached out to our then-head coach and (athletic director) John Ritter and asked him about it," Boatwright said. "He called me back two days later and said 'All right, I got you set up. If you're going to do it, do it.'"

Boatwright did it. Admittedly, he didn't know everything there was to know about the indoor side, but he put together a small roster of 10 athletes and it competed well for a first-year team. Nine of the 10, Boatwright said, met the minimum qualifications to compete at state and three athletes—Neyland Baker, Cash Crompton, and Keira Cruse—did.

After its initial success, Boatwright said he is going to expand the outdoor program.

"My goal was to do a limited roster just because I didn't have a clue what to expect," he said. "This year, after seeing the success of our three state competitors last year and those nine that qualified with the minimum...indoor will be offered to all my outdoor athletes."

The addition of the indoor program will also serve as a way for his athletes to stay prepared for the outdoor season.

"I think that's what's going to make us successful going forward is our kids compete in indoor and then come out of indoor, straight into outdoor season and we are already in race shape," Boatwright said.

With the new outdoor season now underway, the Golden Tigers are off to a good start. In its first home meet, the Russellville Classic, the RHS girls' team placed second with 92 points and the boys' team finished first in a field of 10 with 164 points.

A few special performances stuck out at the meet. Senior EJ King finished first in the boys' high jump while Matthew James and Tait Barnes finished first and second, respectively, in the boys' shot put event. Lourdes Ellis and Aleah Bonman finished second and third, respectively, in the girls' shot put and Ari Willingham placed second in the girls' 400 meter race.

Seventh grader Cesar Felipe also had a standout performance as he finished first in the 3200 meter race with a time of 12:27.56, just three seconds off the school record, according to Boatwright.

Boatwright is hopeful those solid performances from the first meet will only continue to improve. His goals in his first full year as head coach are to build off what the Golden Tigers did last season when 16 athletes went to sectionals and seven made it to state.

"I told the kids I want to take 45 to sectionals this year, and I would love for 30-plus to make it to state," he said. "When I go to these other track meets, I see we have talent. We have kids that are just as competitive and can do the same thing."

James, for one, is bought in and he said Russellville's showing at the home meet has injected confidence.

"I expect to go to state this year, not just me but the whole team. And I expect us to win all our meets," he said. "If we keep practicing, keep listening to what Coach Boatwright is telling us, keep working hard, it's something we can do."

Even though track and field events are individual events, Boatwright said he views the Golden Tigers' ultimate goal through a team lens.

"One person can't win a state championship all by themselves. All of us have to pull together, win each of our events to get those team points," he said. "I feel like if we come with that approach, we put the kids in the right events and we create team points, that's what's going to help propel this program to be a state contender each year."



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