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RCS Board silent on ongoing superintendent search

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

Although the deadline to apply for the vacant Russellville City Schools Superintendent of Education came three weeks ago, the Russellville City Board of Education is remaining tight-lipped about every phase of the process.

Superintendent Heath Grimes announced last year he would be

retiring from the position on June 21, 2024. The board approved the job posting to begin on January 31, 2024, and run through March 1, 2024.

The Franklin Free Press has spoken with RCS Board President Greg Trapp on multiple occasions since March 1st and Trapp has offered no information as to the number of applications received, when and by whom applications would be

See 'RCS,' Page 3

County to solicit bids for four major road improvement projects

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission approved advertising for bids on four road projects to be paid for with funds from the Rebuild Alabama Act.

The county will solicit bids for labor, equipment, materials and any incidentals required to complete resurfacing work and traffic striping on the following projects:

- Highway 25, from Hwy. 23 to Alabama 24.
- Highway 83, from Hwy. 81 to Hwy. 724.

- Highway 152, from Alabama 187 to Hwy. 52.
- Highway 162, from Hwy. 58 to Hwy. 62.

Bids will be received until April 17, 2024. The award will be made at the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Franklin County Commission after that date.

Commissioners approved the bid process at their March 18, 2024, meeting.

The Rebuild Alabama Act, approved by the Alabama Legislature in 2019, was a controversial law that added an additional tax to every gallon of gasoline

See 'PROJECTS,' Page 4

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April 16, 2024
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David Myron Herring, age 69, of Phil Campbell, Alabama passed away on Friday, March 15, 2024. Atkins Funeral Home is assisted the family.

Edward Howell Bishop, age 86 of Phil Campbell, Alabama passed away March 17, 2024. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted the family.

Pedro Gerardo Valdez, 5-1/2 weeks old, passed away on Sunday, March 17, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

Obie Doil McDougale, age 86, of Spruce Pine, passed away on Sunday, March 20, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.



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'RCS,' From Page 1

reviewed, or when or if in-person interviews would begin.

The board conducted a work session the afternoon of Monday, March 18th, with its March business meeting set for the following day, Tuesday, March 19th, at 8:30 a.m.

On Thursday, Trapp told the FFP he did not expect the board to approve a new superintendent at its March 19th meeting.

"We have a work session Monday, where the board will discuss the candidates they want for this job," Trapp said. "There could be interviews after that if that's what the board decides to do. We'll work it all out Monday, but as far as (hiring a new superintendent), we've not got that far yet."

The vacant superintendent's position was not discussed at Monday's work session, although the board voted to go into executive session at the end of the work session. There was no reason stated for why an executive session was needed.

The FFP spoke with three different sources who said board members met on Thursday, March 14th and Friday, March 15th, at the office of board attorney Danny McDowell in downtown Russellville, to meet with superintendent candidates.

Two of those sources stated that board members and/or McDowell, in some capacity, met with four in-system candidates for superintendent at McDowell's office. Additionally, according to the sources, board members met with at least one out-of-system candidate at McDowell's office.

Although he did not offer specifics about what occurred at the board attorney's office, Trapp confirmed that no superintendent interviews took place.

"No one has sat down with the board of education," Trapp said. "That hasn't happened at all. The process has started. We're looking for candidates. I don't know any other way to say it."

The FFP contacted McDowell to inquire about board members meeting at his office two days last week.

"If your question is about board business, I believe the board is the appropriate one to comment on that," McDowell said.

The search for a new superintendent follows less than a month after the

RCS board hired Dustin Goodwin as the new varsity football coach at Russellville High School.

The coaching search, led by RHS Principal Jeremy Madden and Grimes, narrowed to three finalists, who were each discussed at a board work session. No hiring recommendation came at the board's February meeting the next day, though. Instead, Grimes recommended Goodwin for the job at a special called meeting the following Friday.

All personnel moves approved by the RCS Board must come from recommendations by the superintendent, with the lone exception being the superintendent position itself.

The final days of the coaching search saw the local community very active making social media posts and contacting board members about which candidate should be hired.

The FFP published the names of the five candidates who were interviewed. Those five were narrowed to three finalists and Madden presented the board with an informational Power Point presentation on each at a work session.

Trapp said the board is 'confident' it is in compliance with Alabama law regarding the Open Meetings Act and that the board is not conducting serial interviews, where candidates meet with board members in a 2-2-1 format. Serial meetings are illegal under Alabama law because they are seen as a way to circumvent the Open Meetings Act. Trapp said candidates were 'not meeting with multiple (board members) in multiple rooms' at McDowell's office.

"We're not going into this trying to break any law. We're trying to be respectful for everybody who showed interest, especially internal candidates," Trapp said. "When we get this down to who the finalists are for this, we'll probably have something to say at this point, but right now, nobody knows."

"We're confident after meeting with our board attorney we are complying with all Alabama law. He says we're not doing anything wrong. We've got several internal candidates we owe it to to at least talk with them and that can't be done in a public setting. Some of them don't want their names mentioned if they are not going to be a finalist," Trapp added.

Trapp further stated this superintendent search is 'the same process as was done in prior superintendent interviews.'

"We talk to people, then decide who the most qualified people are to pursue as superintendent and that's what we're trying to do now," he said.

A key issue as to what information, if any, the board must release to the public, revolves around whether the board's actions at McDowell's office constitute interviews.

Alabama law requires any superintendent applicant interview to be conducted in public, at a meeting, with prior notice of the meeting time, place and agenda given.

Again, Trapp and McDowell maintain no interviews have taken place. Trapp further said it would be up to the board to determine whether it wants to interview certain applicants.

McDowell said there is no requirement for the board to conduct interviews before hiring a new superintendent. But if there are interviews, they must be done in a public setting.

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'PROJECTS,' From Page 1

purchased in the state.

Franklin County Engineer Jason Baggett said the act requires the county to submit a transportation plan each August that shows where and how the funds will be used in the following year.

In addition to the four projects that will be bid out, Baggett said there will be a few more projects that will be done in-house by the Franklin County Highway Department.

The county received approximately \$850,000 in Rebuild Alabama Act funds last year. Those funds are earmarked for road and bridge improvement projects, Baggett said.

In other agenda items, the commission:

--authorized Baggett to complete Bridge Investment Program grant applications for bridge improvements on Highway 8, Lakeview Lane and Highway 25.

--accepted a bid of 4.11% from Community Spirit Bank to finance the purchase of two 2024 Kenmore dump trucks for the Highway Department in the amount of \$488,870.

--rejected bids on the sale of a used Tree Frogg Skid Steer tree saw and a Vermeer Woodchipper. The items will be posted on GovDeals.com for sale.

--tabled the hiring process for an Equipment Maintenance Technician II in the Franklin County Highway Department.

--approved notice by publication for a public meeting on April 15, 2024, at 8 a.m., to receive public input regarding the possible vacating of a portion of Indiana Street and Taylor Road.

--approved the hiring of Kayla Tabares as Corrections Officer/Dispatcher in the Franklin County Sheriff's Office and the resignation of Jared Yancey from the same position.

--approved the hiring of Terry Demastus as a full-time Heavy Equipment Operator in the Highway Department.

--reappointed Jonathan King to the Franklin County Industrial Development Board and appointed Joel Bohannon as a District Three appointment on the same board.

--reappointed Sue Bowen to the Department of Human Resources Board.

--went into a brief Executive Session to discuss pending litigation.

--authorized Franklin County Emergency Management Agency Director Mary Hallman-Glass to submit a bid application for a Homeland Security Grant. The grant is 100% reimbursable if approved.

--approved granting an easement to Freedom Fiber to install a cabinet on property owned by the county across from the former Franklin County Jail location. The cabinet will be part of the company's build out into the City of Russellville.

--approved advertising for a Custodian/Groundskeeper/Maintenance Technician at the Franklin County Courthouse.

--declared property owned by the county in Red Bay as surplus property. The tract of land, which has two buildings located thereon, was previously used as a satellite office for the Highway Department. The City of Red Bay will be purchasing the property for \$120,000.

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The Franklin County Commission is accepting applications for the following position(s):

Equipment Maintenance Technician II, Franklin County Highway Department

Applications will be accepted in the Franklin County Commission office until the position has been filled.

Corrections Officer/Dispatcher, Franklin County Jail

Applications will be accepted in the Franklin County Commission office until 5:00 PM on Friday, March 29, 2024.

Part time, Temporary Custodian/Housekeeper/Groundskeeper, Franklin County Courthouse


Applications will be accepted in the Franklin County Commission office until 5:00 PM on Friday, March 29, 2024.


An application and job description may be picked up, faxed or emailed upon request from the Franklin County Commission Office, located at 405 N Jackson Avenue, Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, by calling (256) 332-8850 or applications are available at www.franklincounty.org under the Careers tab.


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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.


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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.

 **S**pring Revival will be held at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church, April 7-10, 2024. Sunday at 5 p.m., and Monday-Wednesday at 7 p.m. Pastor Bro. Jeff Fleming and congregation invite everyone to attend. Evangelist will be Bro. Jonathan Prince. Church is located at 305 Bethlehem Road in Russellville. Spring Revival will be held at Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church, April 7-10, 2024. Sunday at 5 p.m., and Monday-Wednesday at 7 p.m. Pastor Bro. Jeff Fleming and congregation invite everyone to attend. Evangelist will be Bro. Jonathan Prince. Church is located at 305 Bethlehem Road in Russellville.

 **R**ussellville Masonic Lodge 371 is selling Hams for Easter. Hams are \$35 each and may be pre-ordered by calling 256-810-1970. Pickup is Saturday, March 30 between 8-10 a.m., at the Lodge on Coffee Avenue.

 **T**he Why Knot Show 'Em Off Easter Car Show will be Saturday, March 30, from 2-6 p.m., in downtown Russellville. Cash prizes, 50/50 drawing, Easter Eggs for kids, door prizes. In front of the Franklin County Courthouse. Easter Bunny from 4-5 p.m. Food truck vendors on site. \$15 entry fee.

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Kiel calls Alabama's IVF immunity law a 'first step' in longer process

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When residents of House District 18 started receiving texts earlier this month urging them to contact Rep. Jamie Kiel and 'demand he...protect life,' Kiel's phone blew up with a flurry of calls from curious constituents.

Kiel is known as one of the most conservative members of the Alabama Legislature, so the unsolicited text message seemed in conflict with his zealous pro-life stance. As a result, those Kiel represents wanted some answers.

The answer came in three words — American Action Fund.

Kiel had just voted in favor of a bill that granted both civil and criminal immunity for in vitro fertilization providers and receivers in Alabama. The legislation sailed through the House and Senate and was signed by Gov. Kay Ivey just five days after it was introduced. That's as fast as a piece of legislation can move through the process of becoming law in Alabama.

As defined by the Mayo Clinic, in vitro fertilization involves 'mature eggs collected from ovaries and fertilized by sperm in a lab. Then a procedure is done to place one or more of the fertilized eggs, called

embryos, in a uterus, which is where babies develop.'

The law came in response to a recent Alabama Supreme Court opinion holding that frozen embryos are human beings and those who destroy them can be held accountable for the loss of life.

Immediately after that ruling, Alabama's IVF providers halted their services, concerned about possible civil and/or criminal liability. Franklin County's other legislator, Sen. Larry Stutts, cast the only vote against the bill in the Alabama Senate. Stutts was concerned the bill provided no protection for IVF patients. Instead, he described it as an 'IVF provider and supplier protection bill.'

As soon as the bill passed, the American Action Fund went into action blitzing likely Republican voters whose representatives supported the measure with text messages urging them to 'sign a petition to protect the preborn' with a link allowing them to donate to the non-profit organization.

Kiel describes the American Action Fund's social media posts and text messages as a deceptive means to raise money.

"It was a money making effort," Kiel said. "These people are running over 300 ads nationwide. Their message was meant to have shock value inducing people into sending them money.

"I can't think of a more pro-life stance than allowing people to have babies. So that's what I voted for—to get the clinics back open so people in the process of going through IVF can have their babies," he added.

After the American Action Fund's text campaign, Alabama Speaker of the House Nathaniel Ledbetter sent a text message on behalf of the House Majority Political Action Committee to voters in House District 18 contradicting the AAF's message.

"Rep. Jamie Kiel recently voted to protect IVF treatments, a pro-life vote, which guarantees Alabama families can continue to grow and create life," Ledbetter said. "That's how a Conservative, Christian, pro-life lawmaker represents his district."

Ledbetter described the American Action Fund as an 'out-of-state, dark money group...that sent out misleading texts and Facebook ads smearing Rep. Kiel for his pro-life vote.'

The new legislation gave Alabama IVF providers sufficient security to reopen their clinics, but the bill was only a short-term answer to a much larger, long-term debate about IVF.

"I don't think this is the end of it," Kiel said. "The Supreme Court opened up issues we all need to contemplate and answer. What we did was a stopgap measure to allow people to have babies in the meantime while we visit the issue and look at all the ethical and moral issues that IVF creates.

"We need to look at how these clinics are operating and make sure their methodology lines up with what is a clearly pro-life, conservative state. We need to give it a long look for the people of Alabama in order to do the right thing," he added.



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Legislature considering increase in number of medical marijuana licenses to be issued

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

After three rounds of medical marijuana licensing have produced multiple lawsuits and legal challenges, the beleaguered Alabama Medical Cannabis Commission may receive some much-needed assistance from the Alabama Legislature.

Sen. Tim Melson, the original sponsor of the state's medical marijuana bill, said he hopes a revision to the law that would allow up to 15 integrated facility licenses, three times the amount of licenses allowed in the original legislation, will be approved by the Alabama Legislature this session.

The latest round of licenses awarded by the commission resulted in immediate lawsuits and a stay of the entire licensing process by the Alabama Court of Civil Appeals.

Integrated facility licenses are the 'golden tickets' of Alabama's Medical Cannabis law because they allow the licensee to operate a marijuana growing facility, cultivation facility, manufacturing facility and up to five dispensaries.

When the Darren Wesley "Ato" Hall Compassion Act was approved by legislators in 2021, it created the Alabama Medical Cannabis Commission to be the oversee the licensing and operation of medical marijuana in the state.

From the first round of licensing, though, there have been legal challenges alleging violations of state law in the selection process that include preferential treatment of certain applicants as well as other intentional and negligent misdeeds by the commission.

Natural Relief Cultivation, LLC, was one of 33 applicants for the five integrated facility licenses. Brian Faught, a co-owner of Natural Relief Cultivation, owns and operates Arkansas' largest medical cannabis dispensary.

Faught met with City of Russellville officials to gauge their interest in having the company locate its cultivation facility, processing site, corporate office and a dispensary in Russellville.

The Russellville City Council would later approve an agreement that would provide land on Highway 24 East to NRC, LLC, either by the company meeting certain benchmarks regarding number of employees, etc. If those were not satisfied, Natural Relief Cultivation would purchase the property for \$500,000.

When the commission awarded the five licenses in December, Faught's group was not among those chosen.

Although NRC did not join in a lawsuit filed by a number of integrated facility license applicants who were not chosen, Faught said if the legislature changes the law to increase the number of licenses to be granted, he would be interested in moving forward with the application process yet again.

"If they still want to play ball, I'll sure throw a glove in the range," Faught said. "I'm a realist. If I'm out, I'm out. But if I have a chance we'll move forward. I was stacked with some pretty good Alabama boys."

Faught said Natural Relief did not join the lawsuit because, to borrow a political phrase, he didn't see a path to victory.

"I don't mind spending my time and money, but I've got to see a patch. When the commission took its own second place finisher and twice boot-ed him out of the whole thing, that told me they didn't have a clue. And there are still questions about integrity," Faught said.

If the number of licenses is expanded, that could be a fast-track resolution to the lawsuits pending against the commission. Melson hopes the legislature will support the expansion as a way to allow medical cannabis to move forward where Alabama residents who qualify can actually begin to receive it.

Sen. Larry Stutts, who represents Franklin County as part of District Six, was a vocal opponent of the legislation and voted against it. Last year, Stutts told the FFP with all the legal challenges and allegations of corruption against the commission, he anticipated a push for the legislature to open up the law where all applicants who qualify could receive licenses.

Although the amendment under consideration this session doesn't go that far, it's right in line with what Stutts expected to occur.

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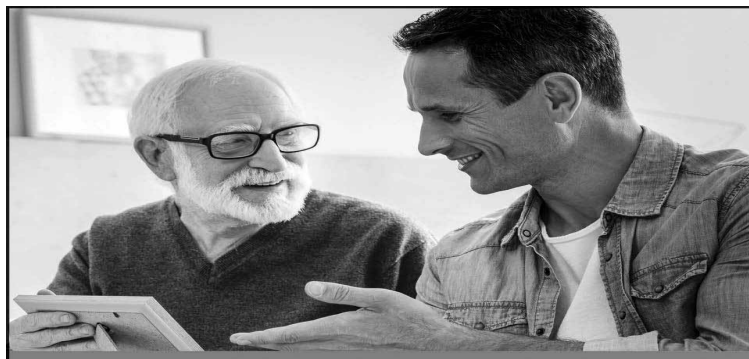
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Managing your daily stresses and anxieties

Staff Reports

Everybody deals with stress and anxiety, however the key is to know what to do when your stressed out. It is not always easy to keep your feelings from getting the best of you.

With this in mind, here are seven tips that a person can use to help manage their daily stresses and anxieties before they get out of control.

1. Get all of the facts of the situation: Gathering the facts of a certain event can prevent us from relying on exaggerated and fearful assumptions. By focusing on the facts, a person can rely on what is reality and what is not. Most importantly, do not focus on your fearful thoughts when your stressed out.

2. Take a break: Sometimes, we get stressed out when everything happens all at once. When this happens, a person should take a deep breath and try to find something to do for a few minutes to get their mind off of the problem. A person could take a walk, listen to some music, read the newspaper, or do an activity that will give them a fresh perspective on things.

3. Carry a small notebook of positive statements with you: Another technique that is very helpful in managing fear is to have a small notebook of positive statements that makes you feel good. Whenever you come across an affirmation that relaxes you, write it down in a small notebook that you can carry around with you in your pocket. Whenever you feel depressed, open up your small notebook and read those statements.

4. You can't predict the future: While the consequences of a particular fear may seem real, there are usually other factors that cannot be anticipated and can affect the results of any situation. We may be ninety-nine percent correct in predicting the future, but all it takes is for that one percent to make a world of difference.

5. Challenge your negative thinking with positive statements and realistic thinking: When encountering thoughts that make you fearful or

depressed, challenge those thoughts by asking yourself questions that will maintain objectivity and common sense. Focus on the reality of your situation and not on your thoughts. Your fearful thoughts can make things worse so try to focus on something positive when you get anxious.

6. Divide your activities into separate steps: When facing a current or upcoming task that overwhelms you with a lot of anxiety, divide the task into a series of smaller steps and then complete each of the smaller tasks one step at a time. Completing these smaller activities will make the stress more manageable and increases your chances of success.

7. Take advantage of the help that is available around you: There are many individuals who have been expertly trained in the field of psychology to help you find ways to manage fear and anxiety. Seek out someone whom you trust to provide sound advice and guidance. This same professional can also help you create an action plan for dealing with your fears and anxieties in the future.

BIOGRAPHYStan is the author of "A Layman's Guide to Managing Fear" which covers a variety of techniques that can drastically improve your mental health. For more information, please visit Stan's website at <http://www.managingfear.com>

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Russellville takes opening area baseball series 2-1 over Lawrence County

Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press

Over the course of three days, the Russellville High School varsity baseball team took two of three vital games from the Lawrence County Red Devils, capturing the Golden Tigers' first area series win of the season.

Relief and pride were head coach Jess Smith's immediate reactions following his team's 9-3 win in game one on March 12. Relief because the Golden Tigers finally got that first area game out of the way—and won, of course. Pride because of his players' performance and their response after what was, for some of the players, an "unusual" game day.

"It's just a massive relief, you know? Always leading up to area play it's nerve racking," Smith said. "Tensions are high and, you know, (area play) is consequential. Up to this point you basically say (after a loss), well, we'll learn from it. The message would still be the same if we got beat tonight, but anybody would be lying to you if they said it didn't feel good to go and get the first one."

"I'm super proud of (the players). It was a bit of a different day with juniors taking the ACT, our seniors had a real world seminar. In my experience as a head coach your guys can kind of be drained or like zombies on days like that, but we showed up with intensity. I was really, really proud of that."

A five-run first inning is sure to help relax any

See, 'BASEBALL,' Page 13

Golden Tiger softball team wins area opener over Lawrence County

Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press

After dropping consecutive games for the first time since late February, the Russellville High School varsity softball team rebounded with an important 5-4 win over Lawrence County in the team's area opener March 14.

The Golden Tigers' win over the Red Devils capped a week that started with back-to-back losses to Hamilton, 3-2, at home and on the road at Florence 6-3. Both losses happened for different reasons, according to Russellville head coach Rick Lawson.

"It was a tale of two different ball games, really," Lawson said. "We came out against Hamilton—they're a very, very good team—we hit the ball extremely well. We just didn't get that big hit we needed to and their defense made some great defensive plays to help them out of tough situations and keep us off the scoreboard."

Russellville fell behind 3-0 before scratching across a run in the bottom of the second inning. The Golden Tigers clawed back another run in the fifth on a two-out, Ticelee Gholston single to make it 3-2 but no rally was forthcoming. Senior Jacey Moore was stuck with the loss. She struck out seven batters but allowed eight hits and three runs, one earned.

The following day, Russellville traveled to play 7A Florence. The Golden Tigers led off the game with a single but were held hitless after that until the fifth inning.

"We forgot to bring our bats, apparently, because we just did not hit very well at all," he said. "I'm not taking anything away from Florence because they did a great job. Their pitcher changed speed up on us and the defense played really good behind her."

The Golden Tigers eventually knocked the goose egg off the board, but all their runs came in the seventh. An RBI single by Paislee James and an RBI triple from Gholston cut the Falcons' lead in half, but it wasn't enough.

"We were down 6-0 and were able to scratch a few runs across in the last inning. It was just too little, too late at that point in the game," Lawson said.

See, 'SOFTBALL,' page 14

Golden Tiger boys varsity soccer team enjoys 3-0 week

Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press

The Russellville High School varsity boys' soccer team won all three of its matches last week, improving to 8-3-1 overall and staying a perfect 5-0 in area play.

The Golden Tigers jumped into the outright lead in the race for the area title, knocking off rivals West Point 3-1 on March 11 and Brewer 4-1 on March 15. Sandwiched in between those two big area contests was a revenge game against West Morgan which Russellville won 2-1.

"This doesn't guarantee we win (the area) but it puts us in a really good position," Russellville head coach Trey Stanford said after the Brewer win. "I'm looking forward to hopefully getting a few more (area wins) and getting our fourth

area championship in a row."

Coming off a disappointing home loss in their previous game against West Morgan on March 5, the Golden Tigers responded and got back to winning ways with a solid 3-1 road victory over West Point. Russellville held a seven-goal advantage over the Warriors from the two teams' previous meeting so Stanford used the game to rest starters and any players nursing injuries.

"Those (injured) guys didn't play at all. They didn't step on the field," Stanford said. "We came out and scored three goals in the first half. In the second half we let the subs play a lot, and West Point scored a goal, but I wasn't too worried about it. I wasn't risking somebody getting injured in that game."

Brian Lara scored one of Russellville's goals with Erik Jacobo adding two more for his

See, 'SOCCER,' Page 12

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'SOCCER,' From Page 11

second brace this year. Lara and Jacobo finished the week with a joint team-high 10 goals.

The following night, Russellville stayed on the road and traveled to West Morgan, looking to avenge a 1-0 home loss to the Rebels from the last time the two sides met.

"The first time we played them we played absolutely horrendous," Stanford said. "It was one of the worst performances I've seen since I've been here and I told them that. So we talked about it and went through quite a few things honestly."

"They beat us here (at home) and we talked about how...that's not cool, you know? We needed to have more pride in ourselves."

Stanford's team talk appeared to do the trick. Russellville jumped out to a two-goal lead in the first half with goals scored by Manny Martinez and Jacobo. West Morgan pulled one back in the final 40 minutes but the Golden Tigers held on to keep the result in the win column.

"West Morgan is a really talented team. They have a chance, I think, this year to make it to the finals," Stanford said. "I feel like we played really well. We played solid in the first half, and we kind of fell off in the second half a little bit, gave up a goal, but it was a good night. Our guys stepped up to the challenge, again, understanding we have to come to play all the time in every game."

The week ended with the match Stanford had circled on the calendar since the start of the season: Brewer.

"Last year, Brewer gave us fits," Stanford said back on Feb. 13 after Russellville's first match.

"Brewer is extremely talented. I've been watching them very closely this year," Stanford said following his team's win over Lawrence County on Feb. 26. "Their coach and I are good friends, he's a good dude, and he does a great job with their program with what he's got. They've got a center (midfielder) that can absolutely play."

Like Russellville, Brewer, as predicted by Stanford, came into the game with a flawless area record. The winner would be in the driver's seat on the road to the area title.

"We'll have to play very well to win the region this year and, luckily, we get them here first when we play them," Stanford added earlier in the season.

It was another prediction the Golden Tiger head coach nailed, but the much-anticipated match really could not have gone much better than Stanford imagined.

An early Russellville goal relieved some of the built-up pressure leading into the game. Just 10 minutes in, Brian Lara, staring down a free kick from outside the box, smashed the ball past the rooted Patriots goalkeeper, giving the Golden Tigers an early 1-0 advantage.

Russellville took the lead into the halftime break and then added three more in the second half to assure the result the Golden Tigers were looking for. Three minutes after the intermission, a sublime cross from Hailezgy Tekle found Manny Martinez, who, after missing out multiple games to injury, was back in the side and scored an easy tap-in past the keeper.

"(Crosses) were something we worked on multiple times this last week and the week before," Stanford said. "They crossed the ball well and they laid it up to each other and they were loving it."

In the 47th minute, it was Martinez again who received a perfectly weighted through ball past the Patriot defense and, using the outside of his boot, curled his shot past the goalie.

"My favorite part of the match was after we scored we were loving on each other," Stanford said. "Everybody was hugging each other, high-fiving each other. There wasn't any selfishness."

Down 3-0, Brewer took advantage of some disarray at the back to pull a goal back in the second half, but a late penalty awarded to Russellville and put away swiftly by Tekle ended all hopes of a comeback by the visitors.

"It was an emotional match, but, man, it's good to get a 4-1 win and...finish shots we're supposed to finish and just finish out a game. I'm really proud of that," Stanford said.

The win by itself was massive for the Golden Tigers' ambitions of the area crown, but the three-goal differential gives Russellville even another edge when the second leg is played at Brewer.

"Beating them by three goals is big," Stanford said. "It's going to be tough for them to beat us by four goals. Even if we have a bad night, four goals in 80 minutes is a lot of goals. Can it happen at their place? Absolutely. Are they going to come out even hungrier? Absolutely. But it's huge for us getting that big of a score(line) against a talented team."

No doubt the result is a big boost to Russellville's hopes of at least one championship this season, but Stanford added maybe—just maybe—the win will also serve as a warning shot across the bow of all the doubters.

"I've seen some of the comments posted and that's fine. That's what keeps sports, in general, exciting, you know? That's what's fun about it," he said. "But, you know, after this win right here maybe everybody will realize, 'hmm, crap, they are pretty good.'"

'BASEBALL,' From Page 11

pre-game jitters and energize a dugout, and that's exactly what Russellville got. After starting pitcher Cayden Johns retired the Red Devils in order in the top of the inning, the Golden Tigers took advantage of some erratic pitching and strung together a few hits to punish the visitors early.

"Even though there were some nerves it was good to see our guys throw the first punch, so to speak," Smith said. "We capitalized on some of their mistakes and had really good at-bats. I know there were some (hit batters) in the first inning, but whenever it was time to hit the ball, we hit it and whenever it was time to take our walks, we took our walks. Some guys had a really good day."

A walk, a single, and a hit batter quickly loaded the bases before Daniel Askew scored on a passed ball to score the game's first run. Compounded Lawrence County mistakes then brought in Brandt Cummings before Brodie Vandiver and Brayden Entrekin hit back-to-back RBI singles.

Vandiver and Entrekin were two players Smith acknowledged for their performances in the batter's box.

"Brodie Vandiver has kind of been struggling at the plate here lately but he got back hot today," Smith said. "Brayden Entrekin, you know, is an eighth grader. It was his second start, first time in area play...he came up with two big RBIs. I think he's going to be a special kid."

Lawrence County got on the board with two runs in the second inning. Johns surrendered a single and a double to lead off the inning, putting the Red Devils in position to knock them in on sacrifice flies to make it 5-2.

Russellville answered back with a run in the bottom half of the inning and then three more in the third. An RBI single by Eli Boutwell scored Neyland Baker in the second inning. In the third, Vandiver scored on an error and Cummings capped the scoring for the Golden Tigers with a two-RBI single up the middle.

Lawrence County tacked on its third and final run in the sixth inning with a home run over the right field wall.

On the bump, Cayden Johns' night came to a close after the sixth. The righty earned the win and finished the game with five hits and three earned runs allowed, two strikeouts, and two walks. It wasn't Johns' best performance of the season, but Smith said he had a solid, reassuring outing.

"Cayden Johns had a good day on the mound. It wasn't his A-plus stuff, right? But we tell our pitching staff, we don't judge you off your A-plus performances. We judge you off your B-minus, your C-plus performances. If you can still win on those days, you have arrived as a pitcher," Smith said. "I thought today was probably Johns' B-minus, maybe C-plus stuff, but he competed his tail off and that's huge, especially when it comes to area play. You don't have to depend on your guys having their best arsenal, so to speak, every game, so it was good to see that from him."

Ty Engelthaler came in in relief to pitch the final inning. With two outs, Engelthaler

found himself in a bases loaded situation but pitched his way out of it without any damage. He ended the game with a strikeout and a fist pump.

"(Engelthaler) was able to limit the damage there and get us out of the game," Smith said.

A turned double play would've ended the game sooner, but the call was overturned by the home plate umpire. Smith disagreed with the decision but found a silver lining.

"It was good to put him in that situation," he said. "At this level of baseball and this stage of the season when you're playing area, no lead is safe. It could be one swing and your back is against the wall. I think that's going to be a good growing moment for him going forward."

The series continued on March 14 with games two and three at Lawrence County. It turned out to be anything but a typical doubleheader.

Game two of the series was nothing to write home about for the Golden Tigers. Lawrence County run-ruled Russellville 13-0, putting crooked numbers up on the scoreboard every inning. The visitors finished with five errors and only three hits to their name. It wasn't the ideal performance coming off a big win two days earlier, but Smith knew going in Russellville was going to get the Red Devils' best shot.

"We knew we had our hands full going into Thursday. They're a team that can swing it and they had their best arms lined up against us," he said. "Everything that could've went wrong kind of did, combined with tipping your hat to Lawrence County. They played really, really tough and induced a lot of those mistakes we made."

It was a game to forget, but Russellville didn't have much time to forget it with the decisive rubber match looming.

"You drop game two and you've got 25 minutes to get your mind right and get ready for the first pitch of a must-win game," Smith said. "That's pressure baseball at its finest."

Russellville didn't drown under the pressure, however. More like goldfish, the Golden Tigers appeared to forget all about the last game, or at least played like they did, riding a wave of 10 hits to six runs in the first four innings.

"For me, watching our guys respond like they did, that was probably my biggest takeaway from this series," Smith said. "There was pressure and there's no denying that—our guys felt it going into that third game. I just asked them to, with that pressure, play together, lean on each other, depend on each other...compete and try to win every pitch. I thought we did a good job of that."

A Johns RBI single in the top of the first knocked in Brandt Cummings for the game's first run. In the next inning, Russellville added two more runs with back-to-back RBI singles from Gage Sappington and Daniel Askew to make it 3-0.

A three-run fourth inning capped the scoring for Russellville. A leadoff walk led to Askew's RBI triple into left field. An RBI double by Cummings, a single by Neyland Baker, and then a balk to advance Cummings home from third accounted for the final two runs.

It was then that Mother Nature decided to get involved. After a weather delay the game was halted for the night and then eventually scheduled to pick up again the next evening at a different location, Deshler High School. The Golden Tigers had a six-run lead, but the stoppage added another ingredient to the pressure cooker.

"Unfortunately we have the split (days) where the game is suspended so that just brings another element of anxiety and the unknown of, 'where are we going to get this game finished?'" Smith said. "Friday around midday we go to our guys and say, 'hey, we found a location, we're playing tonight, and we've got to win,' you know?"

It was a different day and a different location, but the result in the final three innings didn't differ much from the first four when play resumed. The Golden Tigers didn't manage a hit for the remainder of the game but, in the end, didn't need any. Russellville's pitching staff shut down Lawrence County on both sides of the storm.

Tripp Cleveland started game three on the mound for the Golden Tigers and came up with a huge performance in a pivotal moment, Smith bragged.

"He's a freshman and we put the ball in his hands in his first area series after we just got run-ruled by a team. He comes in and through three innings only allowed two hits," Smith said. "We only called one or two offspeed pitches in those three innings so that just means he was attacking hitters with fastballs and letting the defense make the plays. Our success in that game started with Tripp, no doubt."

Another young arm, Brayden Entrekin, came in in relief and continued right where Cleveland left off.

"He did amazing. He did everything we asked him to, and he got a one-two-three inning to start off his varsity career in area play," Smith said. "We told him we weren't asking him to strike them out. We asked him to place a few pitches and give the defense the opportunity to get them out and he did that, which was huge for our team."

"It's certainly a bright spot when you have two young guys stepping up for us like they did and it makes me extremely proud of them," Smith added of Cleveland and Entrekin.

Lawrence County ended the shutout with a single run in the bottom of the seventh, but the Golden Tigers' six runs proved more than enough to secure the important victory and claim the series.

"All of (the area series) are big, but this one is huge," Smith said. "I think this team learned they have some toughness about them that maybe had been in question. Anytime you respond to getting run-ruled on the road and then turning around and basically shutting down your opponent, that takes an elite level of toughness, no matter what level of the game you're playing."

"I think the takeaway is we do have the ability to be touched, but it's imperative for us to show up with that blue collar worker's mentality and, no matter the circumstances, know we're going to roll up our sleeves, take it one pitch at a time, and be where our feet are."

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'SOFTBALL,' From Page 11

Facing the possibility of a three-game losing streak for the first time this season, Russellville reversed the week's fortunes up to that point, edging Lawrence County 5-4 in the Golden Tigers' area opener on March 14.

"I was really proud of how the girls responded coming off that loss against Florence," Lawson said. "We had a good day of practice on Wednesday and focused on hitting and driving the ball."

The game ended with a victory for Russellville, but it was an inauspicious start for the Golden Tigers. The Red Devils hit two solo home runs off ace Jacey Moore in the first inning, putting the hosts in an early hole.

"Lawrence County's leadoff and three-hole hitter both hit home runs to start the game and put us down 2-0 going into the bottom of the first," Lawson said. "We stayed patient though and were able to bring across a run, cut the lead in half, and we pulled away from them there in the third and fourth inning."

A three-run third inning gave the Golden Tigers their first lead of the game. A two-RBI single by Addison Holcomb got the scoring started in the inning. Her hit was followed up later by another RBI single, this one by Jacey Moore. Crucially, Russellville tacked on another run in the fourth inning to make it 5-2. Gholston's two-out, RBI single to left field proved to be decisive when Lawrence County's McKenzie Hyche hit her second home run of the game, a

two-run shot in the fifth to make it 5-4.

"We went into the last inning defending that lead and defensively our players made some great plays behind Jacey, who was spinning the ball very well.

She did a good job filling up the strike zone and putting the pressure on (Lawrence County) to score that last run," Lawson said.

Up one run in the top of the seventh, the Golden Tigers signaled a respect for Hyche's bat and intentionally walked her, putting the

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game-tying run on first base with two outs.

"Nothing against any of the other players, but it was going to take someone else to beat us besides her," Lawson said. "We ended up getting a big strike-out at the end and winning the game. That was huge for our girls."

The win improved Russellville's record to 12-6-1 overall this season and gives the Golden Tigers an early upper hand in Area 16.

"In area play, if you can jump out to an early lead in that series it's always a help," Lawson said. "Getting that first win gives us a little bit of an advantage in the second game because the pressure is on the opposing team. We still can't take anything for granted, but to have that lead, knowing we have a little bit of cushion is a big assurance."

Russellville's next test will be on the road in another area clash, this time against Ardmore, the defending Area 16 champions.

"It's a big game and we think it's going to be a dogfight," Lawson said. "The winner of that game definitely has an advantage in the area."

"To win it's going to take some really good hitting, in the circle we're going to have to fill up the strike zone and be aggressive on the base paths," Lawson added.

Russellville travels to Ardmore on March 19 with first pitch scheduled for 4:30 P.M.

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