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Fleming, Cleveland honored as Educators of the Year for Franklin County and Russellville City Schools



COURTESY PHOTO
 Kamri Fleming, right, receives the Educator of the Year award from Sherye Price at the Franklin County Partnership Banquet.



COURTESY PHOTO
 Tanya Cleveland receives her Educator of the Year Award from Sherye Price with the Franklin County Development Authority at the annual Partnership Banquet.

*John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press*

In a county full of outstanding teachers, it's truly a special honor to be named Educator of the Year for Franklin County Schools and Russellville City Schools.

Each year, two educators receive that honor at the annual Franklin County Partnership Awards Banquet, held March 7th at the A.W. Todd Centre.

This year's recipients were Kamri Fleming for Franklin County Schools and Tanya Cleveland for Russellville City Schools.

Fleming, a Tharptown High School alum, teaches special education and coaches basketball and volleyball at her alma mater.

Fleming is a teacher who, each day, goes beyond just working with her students in the classroom. For example, with her help, many of her students were able to enjoy getting dressed up and attending Prom with their classmates.

She was instrumental in organizing the first Franklin County Special Olympics last year. Her vision for Tharptown athletics goes beyond just wins and losses this year for her teams. She's laying the groundwork

See 'EDUCATORS,' Page 9

CURTIS BAKER

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April 16, 2024
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Donnie Lee Wilson, age 68, of Russellville, Alabama passed away on April 1, 2024. Akins Funeral Home assisted the family.

Michael Wayne Smith, age 70, of Moulton, Alabama passed away on March 31, 2024. Akins Funeral Home assisted the family.

Jeanette Patricia Holland, age 87, of Bremen, Alabama, passed away on March 30, 2024. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted the family.

Jeanette "Jan" Kaye Wyatt James, age 71, of Spruce Pine passed away on Thursday, March 28, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel.

Freida Ann Swindle, age 82, of Muscle Shoals, passed away on Thursday, March 28, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.



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House Bill 238: An important step to protect rural pharmacies or another tax on Alabama residents? Depends who you ask...

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A controversial bill that would add a \$10.64 'dispensing fee' to every prescription filled in Alabama may not make it through the 2024 legislative session, which ends May 20th.

House Bill 238 was passed by voice vote from the House Insurance Committee last month. That vote allowed it to advance to the next step, a vote on the House floor.

Included among House Insurance Committee members who support HB238 is Rep. Jamie Kiel (R-Russellville). But Kiel believes the bill will run out of time before it can advance through the House, Senate and back to committees if there are any revisions.

"Advancing out of committee was just the beginning of the legislative process," Kiel said. "It must still go to the House floor, Senate floor, then the governor. And if there are any changes, back to committee."

Even without coming up for a vote on the House floor, HB238 has generated its share of controversy, as its opponents say the bill would create a tax on prescriptions that would hit the pockets of those who can least afford the additional cost.

Another concern from those opposed to HB238 is that it would restrict the state's ability to investigate allegations of fraud, waste and abuse by Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs), who are third-party administrators of prescription drug benefits in a health plan.

Among its opponents are Lynda Kirkpatrick, Chairman of the Marion County Democratic Party.

"This bill could inadvertently shield unethical practices within the

pharmacy industry, to the detriment of Alabama's consumers and insurers," Kirkpatrick said.

Another opponent of HB238 is the Alliance of Alabama Healthcare Consumers. In a release, the Alliance states the bill 'will have an effect on all Alabamians with pharmacy benefit coverage by increasing the premiums and/or out of pocket expenses at the pharmacy.'

Additionally, their argument against the bill is that it will place substantial financial burdens on Alabama employers and their employees that will add up into the millions.

Kiel says HB238 isn't a tax at all, because no revenue is being generated for the state.

"It's not a tax. The government has to receive money for something to be a tax. I know social media posts going around say otherwise, but it's not a tax. They're trying to paint it that way so insurance companies don't have to pay pharmacies for prescription drugs," Kiel said.

Instead, Kiel explains, the bill would provide protection for pharmacies so they would no longer lose money filling certain prescriptions.

"If you go to your pharmacy to fill a prescription and the pharmacist pulls it up and say it costs \$300. Then he pulls up your insurance and sees it will only pay \$250 for that drug," Kiel said.

"The pharmacist then has two options—fill it and lose \$50, and do that every month losing money, or saying they don't have it in stock. Then you as the consumer don't have your medicine, and you go to the next pharmacy, which may also say they don't have it in stock," he explained.

Kiel said that continued pattern can result in local pharmacies having to close their doors.

"When you fill prescriptions at a loss, you can't do that forever. Multiple pharmacies have closed because of that. We're averaging 27 pharmacies closing each year in Alabama since 2017," Kiel said.

What HB238 would do, Kiel said, is to require an insurance provider to remit to the pharmacy the actual cost of the prescription plus \$10, an estimated cost of what it costs to dispense it.

Kiel said Medicaid in Alabama already reimburses pharmacies in this manner. They take the average cost of the drug, plus a \$10 dispensing fee.

Kiel believes losing pharmacies, especially in rural areas, is a significant problem that needs to be addressed. And whether the bill ultimately passes doesn't change the need to find a solution to that problem, he explained.

"I voted to bring the parties to the table so that we can have access to medicine in rural areas where pharmacies are closing," Kiel said. "It brings some light on the subject, which is what's most important—to bring light to the fact we're losing rural pharmacies and people aren't receiving the medicine they need."

Although Kiel's brother is a pharmacist in Russellville, Kiel said that doesn't pose a conflict prohibiting him from voting on HB238.

"It was a pharmacist who brought the legislation (to the House)," Kiel said. "It's a very broad bill. I don't not vote on the education budget because my wife is a teacher, so there's no conflict in voting on this."

Since the bill was filed, Kiel said there has already been some small progress toward finding a solution for this important issue.

"The legislation was filed to start a conversation about how pharmacists are reimbursed by PBMs and insurance companies. I know both sides came to the table to discuss this. I think it's essential for them to continue the conversation so rural Alabamians can continue to have access to medicine," Kiel said.

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Sutherland crowned Phil Campbell Dream Girl 2024

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

March 15th was a dream night for Phil Campbell student Jaci Sutherland, as she was crowned Dream Girl in the 2024 Phil Campbell High School Dream Girl Pageant.



COURTESY PHOTO

2024 Phil Campbell High School Junior Dream Girl Aspen Misner.

(PCHS Dream Girl 2023), there on stage when they called my name.

Sutherland was selected from 15 contestants in the senior division of Dream Girl.

Aspen Misner was crowned Junior Dream Girl from a group of six contestants in the junior division.

For Sutherland, it was a team effort that came together to allow her to be named 2024 Dream Girl.

"I feel so honored and blessed to be crowned Miss Dream Girl 2024," Sutherland said. "I want to thank Anna Brooke Hutcheson for my hair and makeup. I want to thank Heather Miller for the spray tan and Shanda Barnett for the photogenic picture. I also want to thank my mom. I couldn't get on the stage without her help. She is always my biggest supporter. Also, I want to thank Curtis Baker for the ring he sponsored.

"I want to thank everyone who came and supported me. I couldn't have done it without all of you. Most of all, thank you to my Lord and Savior for everything He has blessed me with and given me," she added.

Misner said her night was made even more special because of who was on stage with her when her name was called as Junior Dream Girl.

"It was an amazing moment to have my sister, Raegan



COURTESY PHOTO

Jaci Sutherland, 2024 Phil Campbell High School Dream Girl.

It is a memory that I will always cherish. I wouldn't have competed if it wasn't for her. She pushed me out of my comfort zone and I am so glad she did," Misner said.

"Getting out of your comfort zone is something everyone should experience. I learned that when you take that chance and are confident in yourself, you can accomplish so much more than you think you can, so always believe in yourself. Everyone let their beauty shine bright and it was so fun to be a part of it," Misner added.

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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.

 **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!

 **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.

 **Y**ou are invited to sign up for a free Introduction to Pickleball class, sponsored by the Russellville Parks and Recreation Department. The one-day class will take place Sunday, May 5, 2024, at 4 p.m., at the Recreation Center at 201 Ash Avenue. Spots are limited, and all equipment will be provided. The class will be taught by Joseph Murray. Please call 256-431-8382 to sign up or with any questions.

 **A** Bean Supper will be held at the Frankfort Community Center on Saturday, April 27th. Serving begins around 2 p.m. Beans & ham, corn, slaw, turnip greens, cornbread, drink and dessert for \$10. FREE live music. Bring your own lawn chair. Proceeds go to the upkeep of the Frankfort Community Center. Hosted by Frankfort Extension Homemakers Club, a non-profit organization.

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Moore posthumously honored with 2024 Franklin County Hall of Fame Award

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Although he wasn't there to see it, Red Bay resident Kelly Moore was posthumously awarded the Franklin County Hall of Fame Award at last month's Franklin County Partnership Awards Banquet.

Moore's family accepted the honor in his behalf. Moore, known as 'Pops' by family and grandchildren and 'JoJo' by his golfing buddies, passed away in January at the age of 71.

The Hall of Fame Award is the centerpiece of awards presented at the annual Partnership Banquet, sponsored by the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and the Franklin County Development Authority.

The award recognizes one Franklin County resident whose lifetime accomplishments are both outstanding and historically significant to Franklin County.

James McCullar was the other 2024 nominee.

Moore was an active member of the Alabama Walk to Emmaus Community and an avid supporter of the Red Bay Tigers and the Alabama Crimson Tide. He even spent some time on the radio broadcast team for Red Bay.

Moore's career saw him work at the Bank of Red Bay, Tiffin Motor Homes and CB&S Bank. He served on the Franklin County Board of Education, the Red Bay Lions Club, Red Bay Hospital Board, Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, the Redmont Recreation Club, Jaycees and he was a charter member of Grace Methodist Church.

"Kelly was a wonderful husband, brother, grandfather, great-grandfather and friend," said Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Cassie Medley. "His legacy will live forever because of how he

loved Franklin County, his friends, his family, but most of all his Lord, whom he served well."

Other award winners at the 2024 Partnership Awards Ceremony included:
--Beautification Award: Phil Campbell, Faelynn's Place, Red Bay, Happy Hollow Outdoors, Russellville, Good Shepherd Catholic Church, Franklin County at-large, Bear Creek Collaborative.

--Business of the Year: Happy Hollow Outdoors.

--'Sprout' Business of the Year: Farmhouse Table Cafe.

--Franklin County's Best Kept Secret Award: Northwest-Shoals

Community College.

--Distinguished Service Award: Phil Campbell, Virginia Burks, Red Bay, Scottie Belue, Russellville, Joel Davis.

--Volunteer of the Year: Andy Marbutt.

--Roger Bedford Unsung Hero Award: Andy Gault.

--Excellence in Industrial Growth Award: Clayton Russellville.

--Industrial Support Award: Hamilton Career Center.

--Industry of the Year: Pilgrim's.

--Educator of the Year: Franklin County Schools, Kamri Fleming, Russellville City Schools, Tanya Cleveland.



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Official Ballot R-1

Republican Primary Runoff Election Franklin County, Alabama April 16, 2024



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'EDUCATORS,' From Page 1

to improve these programs for years to come.

"Kamri does a great job with her students. She is a great teacher with a bright future," said Franklin County Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton.

"Her work in putting together the special need games for Franklin County students is one example. I'm happy to see Kamri honored," he added.

For Tanya Cleveland, a teacher at Russellville Elementary School, there's nothing 'cookie cutter' about education, as she works each day to tailor her teaching style to meet the unique needs of each student.

Her peers describe Cleveland's teaching methods as 'innovative and creative,' where her students are engaged and inspired to learn. She's spent many hours providing additional support for students who are struggling academically.


"She's amazing and very deserving of this award," said RCS Superintendent Heath Grimes. "Ms. Cleveland is a great teacher and I, her fellow teachers and Russellville City Schools are extremely proud for her."

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- The only races are two local races for Franklin County Commission District 1 & 2



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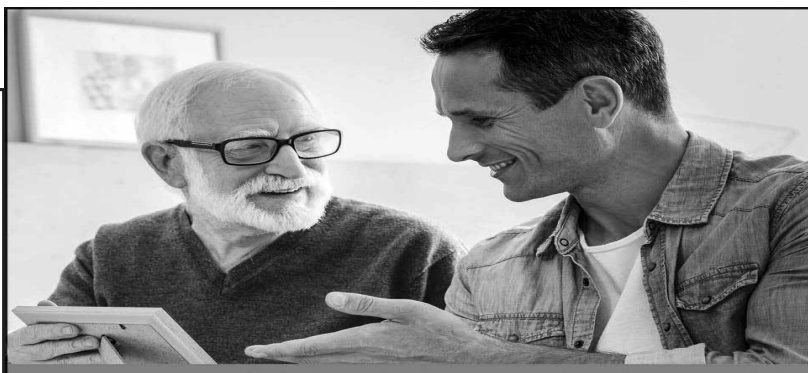
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Testing the waters: Russellville Parks and Rec Dept. to host Pickleball introductory class

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Quick...What's the fastest-growing sport in America? Cornhole? Nope. Ultimate Frisbee? Fun, but nope again. Lawn Darts? Is that even a sport?

It's pickleball, by leaps and bounds. And the Russellville Parks and Recreation Department wants to make it easy for you to learn about the sport.

That's why RPRD is hosting a Introduction to Pickleball class on Sunday, May 5th.

According to www.dogonews.com, there are more than 36.5 million Americans who played pickleball at least once last year.

Pickleball is a hybrid of tennis and badminton with a dose of ping pong. The class is free, but spots are limited. And you don't need any equipment. It will all be provided. The class will be led by Joseph Murray. To sign up for the class, call Murray at 256-436-8382.

Murray is Vice-President of the Shoals Pickleball Club, a non-profit organization founded last year to promote and introduce pickleball to the community.

Russellville Parks and Recreation Department Director Donnie Flanagan said he was attending a regional meeting of Parks and Recreation Directors recently in Muscle Shoals. He noticed the steady stream of people coming in and out and soon learned they were pickleball players.

"Their parking lot was full and I started asking some questions," Flanagan said. "They have folks playing pickleball all day long. So we started looking into it and we've had a few people reach out to us saying they'd like to play in Russellville."

Two pickleball courts have already been taped off on the basketball floor at the Russellville Recreation Center, Flanagan said. If the sport takes off in Russellville, he said they're looking at the tennis courts behind Russellville High School as a possible location for pickleball.

There are at least three locations in Florence with pickleball courts, including Veterans Park, Royal Avenue Tennis Complex and the Broadway Recreation Center.

"We'll see the response with the class. We're testing the waters. We've got two courts already taped off and we'll put up the nets the morning of the pro-

gram, and balls and racquets will be provided," Flanagan said.

"We're just trying to get some things started here for Russellville for adults, and really for everyone. We're constantly working to build and grow the Parks and Recreation Department," he added.

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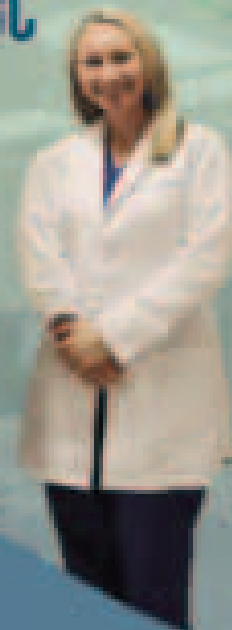
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Sizzling hot Golden Tiger baseball team sweeps three weekend games

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

The Russellville High School varsity baseball team had a big weekend in Arab, knocking off two ranked opponents and a playoff quarterfinalist from last season to extend its winning streak to 11 games.

The Golden Tigers, ranked No. 4 in the latest Alabama Sports Writers Association poll, are now 19-7 on the season.

Russellville started its weekend on Friday with a doubleheader against Sparkman and Piedmont. The Golden Tigers defeated the Senators, ranked No. 10 in class 7A, 10-7 before downing the Bulldogs, Class 3A's top ranked team, 7-5. Russellville followed it up on Saturday with a 6-4 victory over Arab.

"I think this is the most proud I've ever been of this group of guys," Russellville head coach Jess Smith said. "We definitely had our hands full this weekend in the three-game set...and our guys fought every inning of all three games, and that's what makes me proudest."

Against Sparkman, Russellville produced solo runs in the second and third innings before pulling away with a six-run fifth inning. Half of the Golden Tigers' 12 hits came in the sixth—five singles after a double by Cayden Johns to lead off the inning.

However, it didn't take long for an opposing response. The Senators answered with seven runs in the bottom half of the inning to quickly slash Russellville's lead to one run, 8-7.

"We took our foot off the gas, and when you're playing a really good time like Sparkman and you

See, 'BASEBALL,' Page 13

East Franklin baseball team caps outstanding season with tournament title

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

The East Franklin Junior High School baseball team captured the Franklin County Tournament title with wins over Tharptown and Phil Campbell on Saturday, besting the Wildcats 8-1 before walking it off against Phil Campbell for the county crown.

"Those kids deserved it," East Franklin head coach David Ward said. "They worked hard all year."

The Rebels, who outscored Tharptown 22-3 in two wins earlier in the week, emphatically dispatched the Wildcats, allowing just two hits in their first game of the tournament. Issac Duboise got the start on the mound for the Rebels and struck out eight of the nine batters he faced in his three innings of work. Miles Duboise came in in relief to finish out the last two innings.

"You know we've had great pitching all year and we had some great pitching on Saturday," Ward said. "Isaac Duboise started for us and he did what he normally does."

East Franklin, led by a three-RBI performance from Eli Baker, scored in all but the final inning of the game. The Rebels opened the scoring with an RBI single by Baker in the first, and then a Tharptown error and a single by Miles Duboise scored B.B. Garrison and Jonah Stancil to make it 3-0. Half of East Franklin's eight runs came in the third inning. A single by Kye Baker and a double by Isaac Duboise got the



COURTESY PHOTO

See, 'EAST FRANKLIN,' page 14

RHS track and field teams growing in numbers, medals

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

The Russellville High School varsity outdoor track and field teams are halfway through the spring schedule and have just three meets left before the qualifying season is over.

The Golden Tigers have competed in three varsity meets thus far, including one home meet, the Chucky Mullins Classic, held on Feb. 27. The Chucky Mullins Classic was Russellville's opening meet of the season and saw the boys team take first place out of a field of 10 with 164 points, while the girls team placed second with 92 points.

Some of the top performances from the Russellville-hosted meet included a first-place finish by junior EJ King in the high jump, first- and second-place finishes by Matthew James and Tait Barnes in the shot put, and earning silver in the boys' long jump was Cash Crumpton.

On the girls' side, Russellville's Lourdes Ellis and Aleah Bonman took second and third place, respectively, in the shot put event and Ari

Willingham finished second in the 400-meter race. Cesar Felipe, a seventh grader, cruised to first place in the boys' 3200-meter race with a time of 12:27.56, nearly setting a new school record.

Since the Chucky Mullins Classic, the Golden Tigers have competed at two other meets, one hosted by Muscle Shoals and the other hosted by Florence. Russellville head coach Chris Boatwright said he was pleased with how his teams performed.

At the Muscle Shoals Invitational on March 7, the Russellville girls' team placed fourth out of 15 and the boys' team took sixth place in a field of 17 teams. Those team finishes, Boatwright said, signify just how far the program has come over the last year.

"Last year, I don't think we even had enough athletes competing in events to even get points," he said. "I chose to do the Muscle Shoals meet to face other athletes at Muscle Shoals and Florence, you know, because when we go to the sectional meet we're only going to compete

See, 'TRACK,' Page 12

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'TRACK,' From Page 11

against 5A teams." "If we go into some of these better meets and compete, that shows me that our kids are buying in," he added. "For both our teams to finish in the top 10 at Muscle Shoals, I have to admit that I had a smile on my face after that."

The Golden Tigers took a handful of top three finishes out of the meet, including a trio of gold medals. Peyton Parrish and Isabela Pedro had third-place finishes in the girls' 1600-meter and 3200-meter races, respectively. In field events, Bonman grabbed second in the discus throw and senior Avery Watts was top of the podium in the girls' high jump with a mark of 1.42 meters. King came in first in the boys' high jump and Hunter Kastberg was first in the boys' pole vault.

In Russellville's last meet, the Florence-hosted Battle of the Tennessee Valley meet, the Golden Tigers were 10th out of 20 teams in the boys standings and 15th out of 23 in the girls standings. Boatwright said the Florence meet, like the Muscle Shoals Invitational, was not about winning the meet or every event but an opportunity for his athletes to compete against some of the best and see how they fared.

"I had a conversation with my kids to say, you know, we're running against the clock and we're jumping against the bar. We're not trying to outrun Muscle Shoals or outrun Athens, we're trying to outrun Russellville," he said. "This was more so to see that heavy-hitting competition and see where we stacked up against them."

In a very crowded field of competitors, Russellville had a few top five performances. In the girls' long jump event, Keira Cruse finished fourth with a jump of 4.78 meters and Crumpton placed fifth at 6.10 meters in the boys' long jump. Russellville's top performance at the meet belonged to King, who grabbed gold in the boys' high jump with a 1.93 meter (or 6'4") jump, a personal record.

One cool moment, Boatwright said, was watching King jump in front of former Russellville track and field athlete Micah McCulloch, who was an official judge for the high jump at the Florence meet. McCulloch holds the school records for the boys' high jump, long jump, and triple jump, setting all three back in 2009. Records like McCulloch's are used by Boatwright to help motivate the team.

"Just in these last couple years—last year as an assistant, this year as head coach—I've had five school records set," he said, specifically citing the new boys' 3200-meter record set by Pascual Felipe and the boys' 4x800-meter relay record broken this year. "I really hold that up to them to let them know that some of these records have been held since the early 2000s and haven't been broken in 15 years and all of sudden they're starting to make a push to break them. I really try to use that to pump them up and say, 'Hey, you can do it. It's right there in front of you and you've just got to go get it.'"

"Cash Crumpton is our junior long jumper that has a PR of 21'3" this season. He says his goal is to jump 22' by the state meet. Now that he has seen the record he says he wants to try and get that 23' to grab the school record," Boatwright added. "EJ King is our high jumper that is closing on the school record in that category. He plans to try and get the record before he graduates."

While motivating the team he has now, Boatwright, going forward, is also trying to increase it. King, Watts, and Parrish represent just a few current team members that are of the type of athlete Boatwright is wanting to attract to track and field: the ones that are already excelling in another sport. King is an all-state basketball player. Watts played on both the girls' basketball and volleyball teams. Parrish is a standout girls' tennis player who recently signed to play at North Alabama.

Even if a student-athlete is already participating in a spring sport, Boatwright said he's flexible. Anyone who wants to give track and field a shot should have an opportunity to be involved without sacrificing the sport they enjoy best, he said.

"This year I've made it very accessible for my dual athletes. I've got several playing tennis, several playing soccer and softball that are also competing in track," he said. "We really want it to be where our kids don't have to pick and choose which sport they play."

"I'm willing to be that middle man, I guess you could say, who will say, 'You go play your sport first and you come do track when you're able to,'" he added. "I think that's freed up a lot of them and why I've got so many—I think I've got 11 dual athletes—and they're playing two great sports."

Parrish was one spring athlete that Boatwright cited. Suffering from an injury that kept her from competing in tennis matches, Parrish would still be able to run in track events.

"She came out and said, 'Coach, I don't have a match. Can I go run at Muscle Shoals?' and I said absolutely. She goes to Muscle Shoals and finishes third in her event," Boatwright said. "Now she's coming off her shoulder injury and won't be at (the next meet) because she's going to be playing tennis that day."

"What I'm trying to do is allow these girls and guys to see that this can be a dual spring sport, you just have to be willing to put in the work," he added.

Russellville has three more regular season meets left and is hosting its next two, the RVL Invitational on April 1 and the Golden Tiger Invitational on April 15. Most people don't know, Boatwright said, that track and field has its own home field advantages, just like many other sports. The Golden Tigers should seize those opportunities while they have the chance, he said.

"There's a difference in jumping in different pits...and even the track surfaces may be a little different from where we go to meets," he said. "With us being at home these next two meets, I've challenged them that if they want to go to sectionals, if they want to make a state qualifier, now's your chance."

"I've really challenged our kids to step up and I really want us to finish in first place, both boys and girls, because we really do have the athletes to do it," Boatwright added.



COURTESY PHOTO

Avery Watts and EJ King with their gold medals earned in the high jump at the Muscle Shoals meet.

'BASEBALL,' From Page 11

take your foot off the gas, things are going to happen and we saw that," Smith said. "I think our guys learned, more than anything, no matter who the opponent is you have to stay locked in on winning every single pitch."

The Golden Tigers received the message loud and clear, adding two premium insurance runs in the seventh thanks to an RBI walk by Brayden Entrekinn and an RBI groundout that scored Elliott Green. Two errors to start the bottom half of the inning put Russellville's lead, once again, in danger, but two strikeouts by Entrekinn and a heads up play to catch a Sparkman base runner stealing got the Golden Tigers out of trouble and sealed the victory.

"I'm glad we got to experience that, and I'm glad that it didn't come at the expense of a loss that our guys had to experience it," Smith said. "I think it says a lot about our team that when all the momentum was in Sparkman's favor, we were still able to respond there in the seventh inning, get two runs, and extend the lead."

"It wasn't enjoyable from the coaching staff's point-of-view, but looking in the rear view, so to speak, I'm really glad that our team got to experience that and learn from it," he added.

Offensively against Sparkman, designated hitter Neyland Baker led the team with three RBI while senior second baseman Daniel Askew and left fielder Elliott Green both had three hits. All three players received praise from Smith, but for Askew and Green not all of it was just for their performances over the weekend.

Askew, a mainstay at second base for the Golden Tigers, has batted leadoff in most of Russellville's games this season, a spot in the lineup typically reserved for the batters with a high on-base percentage. For Askew, that leadoff spot hasn't always been so certain. In fact, up until this season, Askew hardly stepped into the batter's box at all.

"Last year in his junior season, we'd actually DH for Daniel. He played second base for us every day, but in almost every single one of those games we'd DH for him," Smith said. "It speaks volumes to who Daniel is to be in that situation his junior season and then (this year) be one of our top offensive producers all season long—and doing it in the lead off spot, which is what's most impressive."

"You want your lead off guy to be your leader in quality at-bat percentage and he's doing that. Not only is he doing that but he's played great defensively and, most importantly, he's taken a leadership role. He's tried to lead this team and be as consistent with his work ethic, his effort, and his energy, day in and day out, from practice to games," Smith added.

Green, like Askew, was lauded by Smith for his determination and effort to improve his game. However, Green's rise to near lock in the Russellville lineup right now came from—well, please pardon the phrase—it came from left field. Unlike Askew, who had a spot at second base already locked down, Green came into the season with nothing guaranteed but a day in the dugout

"Elliott really wasn't in the hunt for a spot as a starter preseason," Smith said. "And you know, in the first half of the season he was still a guy that was primarily used as a courtesy runner and would just get a few at-bats here and there."

It was in a private meeting that Green had with Smith where Green's determination to make a real impact on the team was revealed.

"He basically said 'I want to be here and I want to play. It's not just, I want to be a part of the team. I want to be a contributor and what do I need to do to do so?'" Smith said, paraphrasing the conversation. "Coaching high school kids, not many have the maturity to request to sit down with their head coach and basically ask what they need to do to be a contributor versus, you know, sit down with their head coach and ask, 'Why am I not playing?' He never did that and he handled it with maturity."

From that point forward Smith said Green's progression, intent, and attention to detail in practice slowly but surely earned him more opportunities in games, and he's taken advantage of them.

"The coaching staff and I watched him and thought it was about impossible not to give Elliott opportunities based off what he's done in practice, and so you start giving him opportunities in games and all of a sudden you've got a guy who's hitting over .400 for you," he said. "It's a special thing when something like that occurs, not just because of the performance of Elliott, but because of what it took to get here. I just want to make sure people know that that's who Elliott Green is and we're super proud of him, not only of his performance but of who he is."

In Russellville's second game Friday, the Golden Tigers battled Piedmont to a 7-5 win. The Golden Tigers opened up the scoring in the third with a three-run inning highlighted by RBI singles from Cummings and Entrekinn. A sacrifice fly by Johns scored Gunner Sappington for Russellville's single run in the fourth to make it 4-2. The Golden Tigers then capped their scoring with a vital three runs in the sixth inning: another sacrifice fly, this one by Baker, made it 5-3 before an RBI single by Brodie Vandiver scored Askew and Green.

The Bulldogs knocked in two more runs belonging to starting pitcher Tripp Cleveland in the sixth when Sappington came in in relief mid-inning to close the game out, trimming Russellville's lead to 7-5.

Piedmont threatened again in the bottom of the seventh with two leadoff singles, but Sappington responded, forcing a fly out, a strikeout, and a lineout to the shortstop to end the game.

Given the short turnaround following the Sparkman game, Smith said he was happy with how his team came out against 3A's top-ranked team. The attitude the Golden Tigers took into the game had Smith confident in a positive result.

"The guys played tough as nails, and it was the first time this season I felt like when I was coaching our team that it didn't really matter what was going to hap-

pen, that we were going to win that game," he said. "I was extremely proud of how we played against Piedmont but most proud of the energy and toughness we played with."

Russellville returned on Saturday to face hosts Arab, a fellow 5A playoff quarterfinal team from last season. The Golden Tigers started the game with a four-run first inning, highlighted by a two-run homer by Baker, before the Knights stymied the Russellville offense and tied the game up 4-4 in the fourth inning. Starting pitcher Eli Boutwell, after surrendering three earned runs in the third, was relieved by Baker, who pitched the next four and two-thirds innings, allowing one run.

The score held for the next three innings and forced the game into extra innings, a first for the Golden Tigers this season.

In the top of the eighth, a Baker RBI double scored Green for the go-ahead run before a Brodie Vandiver sacrifice fly knocked in Brennon Thorpe from third to make it 6-4. Baker, who accounted for half of Russellville's runs against Arab, has been a consistent player for the Golden Tigers this season, Smith said, and deserves credit for his game against the Knights.

"Neyland is someone I feel like deserves a lot of attention for the weekend he had," Smith said. "His offensive production against Arab ultimately helped us win that game. And it's not only that but he came in in relief in a really, really tough situation and kept it 4-4."

Ty Engelthaler, who came in to pitch after Baker's outing, got credit for the win, striking out two batters and forcing a groundout for the final out of the game.

"We handed (Engelthaler) the ball...with a runner already in scoring position at third base with two outs in the bottom of the seventh inning," Smith said. "A young guy who hasn't (always) played at Russellville, who hasn't played in a lot of these situations before...comes in to pitch and makes an extremely athletic play to get us out of that jam."

"We scratched two runs across in the eighth and then Ty was able to come in to shut that game out. It was a huge moment for him, our team, our bullpen going forward. It gives us as a team and a coaching staff confidence that we can put him in and get out of any situations. That's got to go miles for him and his confidence, as well," Smith added. "We've used Ty a ton out of the bullpen this season, but we think he's an arm to keep an eye on with us for the next two seasons. We think he's going to be really special."

Heading into the weekend, before any of the games were played, Smith said the Golden Tigers were going to treat the three-game set like the postseason.

"Like a playoff series, we're going to have that same mentality. We're going to treat Saturday, no matter what the results are on Friday, like we've got to bounce back and win a game three," he said last week.

In that sense, Smith got exactly what we wanted.

"You look at the first game and we get out to a lead and take our foot off the gas. They respond and now you've got a one-run game. That's playoff baseball to a tee. We fought like heck to see who wins that game and we did. Now we've got 20 minutes to reset and play another," Smith said. "Then we play No. 1 Piedmont, who is jumping at the bit to take you down and we know that going in. They're going to give us everything they've got, and it was an absolute war between us, but we came out on top."

"We were exhausted after those two games Friday, and I don't like to make excuses for our guys, but I'll even side with them after Friday night. We were exhausted. But we've still got to turn around and play a tough team like Arab the next morning, and I told them we were going to treat it like we split on Friday and this was a must-win game," he added. "Did we play as clean as we wanted to? Absolutely not. But did we find a way to win? And, by the way, win in extras? This team did that. And if we approach it like a game three in the playoffs, we're jumping through the roof with joy because we found a way to win and did it in extras."

That toughness and mental fortitude exhibited by Russellville over the weekend exemplified the type of resiliency that Smith has been preaching, in public and private, his team needed to reach its full potential. Early in the season, Smith admits, there were doubts about whether this Golden Tiger team could do it, and the road to "get over the bar" in that regard was not easy. After this weekend, Smith said, if there are any more naysayers doubting the ceiling of this Russellville squad, those suspicions should be put to bed.

"This is the proudest I've been of this team, and it's probably the proudest I've been since I've been the head coach at Russellville, just because of the toughness it required. If people knew the challenges I've tasked this team...it's not been hunky-dory and all sunshine and rainbows this season. A lot of times at practices I'm asking for them to do more than they think they can give, and our coaching staff has been really consistent in challenging them," Smith said. "Early on I think there were a lot of question marks. Could this team do something like they do this weekend? Could this team find a way to put itself in a position like teams of the past?"

"It's just been battle after battle after war after war and our guys have stepped up to the task every time. I almost get emotional talking about it just because of what other people don't see that goes into this. It's not common for high school-aged kids to respond to the adversity like our team has," he added. "My message to my team and to the public after this weekend is if there are any doubts that this team could be special, well we've proved that wrong. It's just about staying humble and playing together and really enjoying every moment going forward."

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'EAST FRANKLIN,' From Page 11

inning started while walks and Wildcat errors did the rest.

The Rebels' final run of the game came in the form of an RBI ground out by Eli Baker to score Kye Baker from third base.

"We swung the bats well and we jumped on (Tharptown) pretty good," Ward said. "We swung the bats well all day and ran the bases really well all day."

In the championship game, East Franklin faced off against one of the only two teams to beat the Rebels this season, Phil Campbell. East Franklin's last loss came at the hands of the Bobcats back on March 21 when the two teams split in a doubleheader. With that, the championship game was more or less the season's rubber match between the two teams.

"We knew it would be a tough game," Ward said. "(Phil Campbell) brought some kids down that were pretty good, too."

The championship was a back-and-forth affair. East Franklin got the scoring started in the bottom of the first inning when a wild pitch on a strike three that would've ended the inning allowed Hallman and Miles Duboise to score from third. Phil Campbell took a 2-1 lead in the top of the fourth when an error scored Shooter Motes and Cody Sneed came in on a passed ball before the final out was recorded.

East Franklin and Phil Campbell then proceeded to swap back-to-back three-run half innings. The Rebels retook the lead in the bottom of the fourth thanks to three straight walks with the bases loaded, all three runs coming with two outs.

Momentum then swung back to the Bobcats in the top half of the next inning when an RBI single by Jack Owens, a ground out RBI by Motes, and a sacrifice fly by Kruz Cochran made it 5-4, Phil Campbell.

Down a run in the bottom of the fifth, the Rebels needed to keep the game alive and they did just that, when Kye Baker was hit by a pitch with the bases loaded. Level at 5-5, the game went into extra innings. A Phil Campbell single and then a walk with two

outs put the go-ahead run on second base, but Miles Duboise, who came in in relief of Issac Duboise, got out of the jam with a ground out fielder's choice.

"They had a chance to win, we had a chance to win, they had a chance to win—back and forth," Ward said. East Franklin wasted no time in the bottom of the sixth. Eli Baker led off and reached on a single before Eric Gutierrez came in to pinch run for him. Braylin Hallman was next up at the plate and his one hit of the game proved to be the most important. Hallman's hit, a hard ground ball into right field, sent Gutierrez running and an error by the right fielder allowed Gutierrez to come all away around for the walk-off run.

"Eli Baker gets a big base hit and then Hallman came through and gets a base hit behind the runner," Ward said. "The right fielder goes to throw it in and I just sent (Gutierrez) home to score the winning run—thank goodness."

"I just took the chance," Ward added.

The county tournament championship was the finale in a 2024 campaign that saw East Franklin finish 16-2 overall. From within there were high expectations of what the team could achieve, but the Rebels still felt they had something to prove.

"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," East Franklin assistant coach Trey Benford said earlier in the season.

On Saturday, the Rebels did just that.

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Commissioner District 1

ATTENTION FRANKLIN COUNTY VOTERS—AN OPEN LETTER FROM MICHAEL EADY ENDORSING MICHEAL MURRAY FOR FRANKLIN COUNTY COMMISSION DISTRICT ONE:

Hello, I'm Michael Eady. I was a candidate for the Franklin County Commission District One nomination in the March 5, 2024 Republican Primary.

I want to thank those of you who supported my campaign and voted for me. Although I came up short in the end, I'm still going to do my part to make sure Mr. Micheal Murray, the best man for the job, wins the April 16th runoff.

And I'm asking those of you who supported me to vote for Micheal Murray, a hard-working man of character who is our best choice for District One Commissioner.

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