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Grissom announces bid for fourth term as Russellville mayor

Submitted

Russellville Mayor David Reed Grissom has announced that he will seek an unprecedented fourth consecutive term to the city's highest office this summer.

Grissom, a businessman, was first elected mayor in 2012. The 1990 Russellville High School graduate represented District 5 on the Russellville City Council from 2008-2012.

Grissom cited past success and several ongoing projects that he wants to see finished as the driving forces behind a re-election campaign.



GRISSOM

"There are many positive things taking place in and around Russellville," Grissom said. "We continue to add new jobs, continue to improve our infrastructure, continue to improve our city services, and we continue to redevelop our downtown district."

The city is currently involved in the largest paving and infrastructure improvement program in Russellville

See 'GRISSOM,' Page 4

One year into competitive powerlifting, Rea shattering state, national records

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Just over one year ago, Caleb Rea received some good news when his orthopedic surgeon at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital told Rea he was cleared to start lifting weights.

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Just six months earlier, the 14-

year-old Rea broke his neck after he had a seizure while driving a side-by-side on a farm where he worked in the summer.

The seizure wasn't the first for Rea, the son of Spruce Pine residents Lyman and Hollie Rea. In 2022, Rea was involved in a separate accident on a four-wheeler and suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury, or TBI, which caused him to develop a seizure disorder.

Two major accidents, two signifi-

See 'REA,' Page 8




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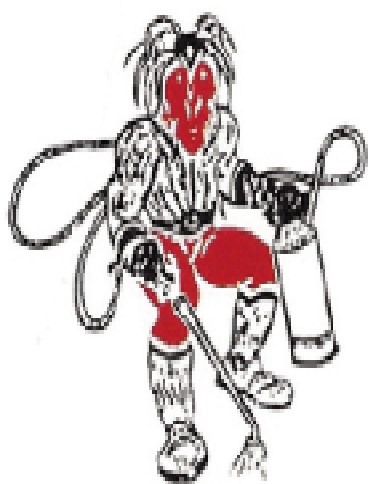


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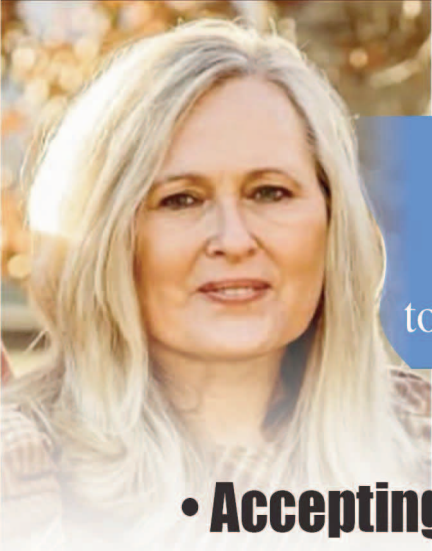
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Leonard Oneal Mitchell, age 79, passed away on December 14, 2024. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

James Terrell Hatton, age 80, of Russellville, Alabama, passed away on Friday, December 13, 2024. Visitation will be on Thursday, December 19, 2024 from 6:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. at Akins Funeral Home in Russellville.

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Hargett hired as new county attorney for Franklin County Commission

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission unanimously approved a two-year contract to make Russellville attorney Evan Hargett the new county attorney.

Since former county attorney Roger Bedford, Jr., died in October 2023, attorneys from the law firm of Bedford, Rogers, Bowling & McReynolds, P.C., including Hargett, have served in a temporary capacity as county attorney.

The contract between Hargett and the commission is for two years. The commission approved hiring Hargett at its December 16th meeting.

In other agenda items, the commission:

- approved a resolution authorizing expenditure of \$485,000 from American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funds for the construction of a new animal control facility to be built behind the Franklin County Jail. The commission also approved the contract for \$485,000 with Hovater Metal Works to construct the building. Commissioner Greg Hovater, owner of Hovater Metal Works, abstained from both votes.
- approved the purchase of a sign for the Franklin County Archives that will rename a part of the facility as the 'Chris Ozbirn Genealogy Center.' The sign will be made by Gault Signs of Russellville at a cost of \$3,060 for making and installing the sign.
- approved a meeting schedule for 2025 with work sessions set for the second Monday of each month at 5 p.m., and business meeting the third Monday of each month at 3:30 a.m. On months where those days are holidays, the meetings will take place on the following day.
- approved a no-cost contract with Investing in Alabama Counties for a three-year period. IAC will provide support and assistance for the commission when handling ARPA funds, grants or other expenditures.
- approved the hiring of Gregory Haithcock as Senior Equipment Technician and Roger Grissom as temporary employee in the Franklin County Highway Department.
- approved the resignation of Corrections Officer/Dispatcher Renee Halbrooks Butler, the termination of Corrections Officer/Dispatcher Philip Arrington, the retirement of Cindy Shivers, the termination of Destiny Contreras as Corrections Officer/Dispatcher and the hiring of Michael Seth Ables and Kara Lee Moody as temporary Corrections Officer/Dispatcher and Jason Boake Wilds as temporary deputy in the Franklin County Sheriff's Office.
- heard an update from Probate Judge Barry Moore about trees around the Franklin County Courthouse being cut and/or trimmed by the Russellville Electric Board at the commission's request. The trees, Moore explained, pose a danger to power lines. The commission authorized Moore to contact some companies offering stump grinding services to get the stumps around the courthouse removed.
- met for 15 minutes in executive session with the county attorney and Sheriff Shannon Oliver on an undisclosed matter.

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Bids will be taken thru 4:00 p.m. January 6th.
Truck is located at Water Dept.

'GRISSOM,' From Page 1

history. The \$4 Million project includes the improvement of various streets throughout the city.

During his terms as mayor, Grissom has seen the addition of over 1,400 new jobs with over \$56 Million in capital investments in the city. He quickly praises local and state officials and their willingness to work together in enabling the city to land additional jobs in Russellville.

"Our existing industries in Russellville continue to add jobs each year and this has led to record employment for the city. We are thankful for all of our existing commercial and industrial partners and are thankful for their continued success", Grissom said.

"One of the main things I campaigned on twelve years ago, and it continues to be just as important today, is that we all work together as a team to accomplish what we want for the city. I think we have built relationships with people across the state and country that will help us moving forward," he added.

The city just received approval of a \$3,892,000 earmark appropriation from Congressman Robert Aderholt for a new multi-purpose, media, broadband internet library and has just received a \$500,000 earmark appropriation from Senator Tommy Tuberville for new police vehicles. Grissom said he and the Russellville City Council actively pursued grant funding that has helped the city obtain more than \$18 million in grant projects, most paid through state and federal funds since elected mayor in 2012. That figure also included more than \$2 million in TAP Sidewalk Projects in the Downtown District.

The city has also been able to upgrade equipment in every city department. Since 2012, the city has seen improvements in infrastructure and equipment upgrades of over \$34 million.

"It is important to have safe and stable transportation and infrastructure in place," Grissom said. "Our work with the city council and the state and federal government has been a tremendous asset that has helped us do many much needed projects throughout Russellville."

The Russellville Commercial Historic District was also listed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior on January 19, 2019. Russellville was declared a Main Street Alabama Designated Community in 2023.

Grissom is the son of Judy Keeton Grissom and the late Bob Grissom. He is married to Melissa Fuller Grissom, who is an art teacher at Russellville High School. They have one daughter, Kate Reed Grissom, who is 19 years old, a 2023 Russellville High School graduate and a sophomore at the University of North Alabama.

Grissom received a B.S. degree in Marketing and graduated magna cum laude from the University of North Alabama in 1994. Since that time, he has been involved in numerous business endeavors in northwest Alabama.

He is a lifetime member of Russellville Masonic Lodge #371, member of Scottish Rite 32nd Degree Valley of Birmingham, member of Cahaba Shrine, Huntsville, and member of the Franklin County Shrine Club. He and his family are members of Mountain View Baptist Church.

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New county commission, same concerns expressed for Hwy. 73 from King

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

If you were to describe Franklin County resident Donald King using only one word, you couldn't go wrong with persistent.

King, who's lived on Highway 73 since 1980, has been a regular at Franklin County Commission work sessions and meetings over the past decade. And with a new county commission holding its first work session December 9th, King was once again on the agenda to state his case to commissioners about the condition of Highway 73.

"I want to acquaint our new commissioners with Highway 73," King said. "It is the main traffic road into the

(Franklin County) Landfill, and other landfills. Over the years we've had a lot of torn up roads because of logging trucks, garbage trucks and trailers, and Highway 73 is among the worst."

King, who met with former Franklin County Engineer David Palmer regularly, said Palmer had sections of 73 chip sealed, but King says those sections tear up in six months to a year due to the heavy traffic the road sees each day.

"He then decided to go with this mix," King said of Palmer. And we were promised they would get the bad spots on Highway 73 done. They've been logging over a year on 73 and there are at least two logging operations going both ways now."

While King acknowledged a two-mile section of 73 south from Highway 58 was repaved and in good condition, he requested the commission to get an additional section repaved next year.

"I understand it can't all be done at once, but I'm asking you to at least get another section done—at least where some stretch of Highway 73 is repaved and there's progress being made," King said.

"Thank you for your time and please help us out," he added.

King said the deteriorating conditions of Highway 73 will only get worse if not addressed. He specifically mentioned the 'deteriorated condition' of 73 from Arnett Road to the creek.

With a limited budget, the Franklin County Highway Department doesn't have the funding to repave more than a fraction of the county's deteriorated roads each year. Criteria for deciding how and where to use the available funds include traffic counts on each road, the condition of each road after an inspection by the county engineer who looks at striping, utility cuts, rutting, erosion and edge repairs. Some lower traffic roads can receive repair of base failures and a chip seal, an option not always available for higher speed and higher traffic roads.

A conservative estimate of the cost to apply one inch of asphalt to a 20-foot wide road in Alabama is approximately \$85,000 according to Elmore County chief operations officer Richie Beyer, quoted in an article published by the Wetumpka Herald early this year.

Any citizen may address the commission at a work session by calling the Franklin County Commission Office to be placed on the agenda of the next meeting. The work sessions are held the second Monday of each month at 5 p.m., with delegations and citizens addressing the commission at 6 p.m.



COURTESY PHOTO

A section of Hwy. 73 near the Franklin County Landfill.

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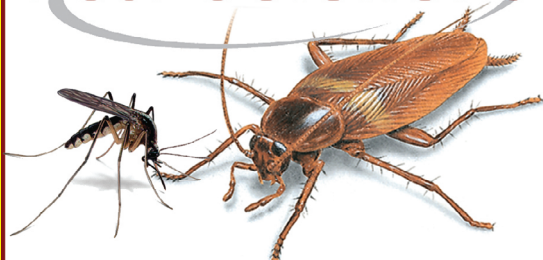
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 **T**he Foster Grandparent Program is seeking volunteers ages 55 and older to help tutor and mentor children in day care, head start and schools. Volunteers will receive a tax-free stipend and travel reimbursement. We have openings for several schools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

 **A**shaKiran serves victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking across Alabama. Their vision is to be a 'ray of hope' by bridging the gap between service providers and culturally diverse communities. Their 24-hour crisis line number is 1-800-793-3010. Learn more about AshaKiran by visiting www.ashakiranonline.org. Consultations are free and confidential, and available in 45 different languages.

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 **C**ommunity Action Partnership of North Alabama, also known as Russellville Head Start and Early Head Start, is a non-profit agency serving 3, 4 and 5 year old children absolutely free. We are located at 976 Ronnie McDowell Avenue in Russellville. Our hours are from 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m., Monday thru Friday. Call for an appointment today at 256-331-0162. Give your child a Head Start on school readiness! We offer top-quality, comprehensive early childhood educational services provided at no cost to your family. To learn more, visit www.capna.org/children-services.

 **G**ateway Church announces the following events for the month of December. Church is located at 15988 Highway 43, Russellville.
December 15th: Family Day at 10:30 a.m. Christmas Dinner immediately following service with Purpose singing during lunch. Everyone is invited. December 22nd: 10:30 a.m. Children's Christmas Play. December 24th: Christmas Eve/Candle Light Service from 5-5:45 p.m. This will be the church's first Christmas Even service. And they would love to have you join them for all events. For more information, call 256-627-7935.

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JOB OPPORTUNITIES

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

Roadway Maintenance Technician I, Highway Department

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Applications will be accepted in the Franklin County Commission office until 5:00 PM on Wednesday, January 8, 2025.

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.franklincountyal.org under the Careers tab.

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'REA,' From Page 1

cant injuries in less than two years. From July until December of 2023, Rea essentially had to learn how to walk again. His physical therapy routine was grueling. But Rea actually started to enjoy his therapy. That sparked his interest in powerlifting so he began training as soon as his doctor gave Rea the green light.

One year later, Rea, now 15, holds 21 Alabama and nine national records as a result of his meteoric ascent through the competitive powerlifting ranks. And he recently won the Southeastern Powerlifting Federation's World Powerlifting Championship, held earlier this month in Gatlinburg, Tn.



COURTESY PHOTO

Caleb Rea at the recent world powerlifting championships in Tennessee.

To earn an invite to the world championship, an athlete must finish in the top three among your age and weight division at a sanctioned event.

In the teenage 13-15 age division, Rea won the title after the three-event competition that includes squat, bench and deadlift, with an eye-popping combined total of 1,170 pounds (420 pounds squat, 295 pounds bench and 455 pounds deadlift).

Caleb's success at the World Powerlifting Championship was even more impressive considering Rea had a seizure while attempting 500 pounds on his second squat. Minutes later after he came out of it, he gave his parents two thumbs up and said 'I'm not through. There's still work to be done today.'

Powerlifting competitions involve athletes making three attempts on squat, bench and deadlift. Their score is the weight of their highest attempt. After Caleb's seizure, his father scrubbed his third attempt. With a large number of competitors in Gatlinburg, Caleb was able to rest and regain his strength before the bench press and deadlift events.

At the end of the day, wedged around a seizure, Rea came home with a first-place finish in the pinnacle of Southeastern Powerlifting Federation competition. He came home a world champion.

Since his first competition in February, Caleb has won every meet in which he's competed, sweeping the board in all three events.

But powerlifting's impact on Rea goes well beyond setting records. The sport has helped the 9th grader perform better in school, stay motivated and overcome some mental health issues in the aftermath of two serious accidents in 12 months.

"We've seen Caleb's self-esteem go up tremendously since he started training," said Lyman Rea, who also began powerlifting with his son. "When he started competing his whole outlook really improved. Powerlifting has given him something to be involved with and to be proud of. Caleb had issues with fitting in and he dealt with some anxiety. Now, he feels like he fits in anywhere. He's thriving. Even at home schooling he's thriving. He even joined the Frog Pond Volunteer Fire Department as a junior firefighter," Lyman added.

Caleb has trained at Freemon Fitness and No Limit Fitness in Russellville. He's sponsored by Kajun Labz, the company that handles his supplements. Caleb, Lyman and a few others compete as 'Corn Bread Fed' Powerlifting, a very appropriate team name if you've seen the father-son duo in person.



Powerlifting competitions are categorized into divisions, based on the sex, age and weight of the participants. Weighing in at 304 pounds, give or take a piece of cornbread, Caleb competes in the 308-pound class.

The Alabama High School Athletic Association does not have powerlifting as a competitive sport, so competing means lots of travel, often for four or five days at a time across the southeast. That rigorous schedule was the reason the Reas are home schooling Caleb this year. His girlfriend Avery also travels with Caleb's family to most meets.

Prior to his accidents, Caleb's best sport was baseball. But his team of doctors said they could not release him for contact or team sports. And that hit Caleb hard. But it didn't take him long to overcome that obstacle.

"I wasn't happy but the only thing I could do is listen (to his doctors). My sport was baseball. Once I couldn't do that, it took a while to get happy and powerlifting was my only option so I took it and ran," Caleb said. "I've had football coaches ask me to play and they would get a special helmet (to reduce the risk of concussion), but I just couldn't. So powerlifting just filled the void I had. It was something to do and once you get dedicated to do one thing, you get kind of good at it," he added.

Lyman describes the competitive powerlifting community as family. And he wants folks to know you don't have to be a certain age or size to get started.

"We really want to raise awareness about powerlifting. I see so many kids stuck behind a video game who they can't do anything else," Lyman said. "They think they're too heavy or too small, but size doesn't matter. Everybody cheers for each other. When you go to a meet, it may look like a bunch of giants walking around, but it's not just the physical size of someone that counts, because they're all big hearted. People are so nice and supportive and they help each other," he added.

Caleb has to remind himself occasionally to take a moment to reflect on how far he's come in one year. And he wants to take time after 2025 to train and help other powerlifters who are just getting started.

If Rea's success continues, there could be a college scholarship on the table. One school that interests him is Texas A&M, boasting the nation's number one powerlifting team.

Caleb will begin the 2025 competition season in January. When the powerlifting season ends next December, he plans to take a break for a year or so. And he's got something else on his mind after that.

"A few years down the road I'll go away from powerlifting and go to strongman," Caleb said. "And one day be the world's strongest man."

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Franklin Board of Education approves superintendent's recommendations for Section 16 Land Advisory Committee

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

After Amendment One passed with more than 70% of Alabama voters supporting it, Franklin County Schools Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton promised transparency as the system considers what to do with approximately 389 valuable acres of Section 16 land located at the Interstate 22/Alabama 13 intersection in Walker and Fayette Counties.

Amendment One's approval by voters means the Franklin County Board of Education will be able to sell and/or lease the property with all proceeds coming back into Franklin County Schools.

Recent developments at I-22 intersections in the area have included a Love's Truck Stop in Jasper along with retail development. Based on the asking price of adjacent lands, the sale of the school system's property could bring in tens of millions of dollars.

At a special-called December 10th meeting, the board approved Hamilton's recommendation of a 13-person Section 16 Land Committee to oversee all matters related to the management and/or sale of the Fayette and Walker County lands.

The committee includes two Franklin County Schools employees, and 11 stakeholders representing each of the county's 10 schools. Committee members include: Justin Baker, Alan Bostick, David Britton, Johnny Cleveland, Chris Fretwell, Jason Harris, Paul Humphres, Abby Madden, Jarred Pierce, Steven Smith, Rick Suddith, Lori Tompkins and Chris Williams.

"The committee will meet at the discretion of the superintendent on matters pertaining to the management of Franklin County Schools' Section 16 land located in Fayette and Walker County," Hamilton said.

"We are blessed to have this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to possibly secure the financial stability of the Franklin County School System for many, many years. I am not going to squander this opportunity," Hamilton added.

It was simply good fortune that these Section 16 lands would end up right in the path of a major east-west interstate corridor linking Memphis to Atlanta. And with that good fortune comes a responsibility to maximize the long-term benefit to the system, as Hamilton explained.

Hamilton told board members he had been in contact with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which managed the land prior to the passage of Amendment One, and the agency is working on preparing a deed that will give the school system complete autonomy as to the land.

Hamilton said some of the land is leased, although none of those leases exceed five years.

The committee will be non-voting, but will meet to listen to what the board considers as it relates to the Section 16 lands. Ultimately, the board of education remains the voting body, though.

In other agenda items, the board:

--approved the employment of Keslie Garrett, Career Coach, Franklin County Schools, effective January 6, 2025, Emma Whitfield, temporary special education teacher, Red Bay Elementary School, and Abby Ward, elementary teacher, Tharptown Elementary, effective January 6, 2025.

--approved the transfer of Randy Hester, from bus driver at Phil Campbell to bus driver at Vina High School, Jerome Morgan, from bus driver at Tharptown to bus driver at Phil Campbell and Billy Fell, from bus driver for bus #19-31 to bus driver for bus #19-28 at Phil Campbell Schools.

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Baker UNA bound to join Lions' corps of offensive linemen

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

Russellville High School senior Neyland Baker was celebrated by friends and family, teammates and coaches at a signing ceremony held at the Russellville Field House on Monday afternoon. The Golden Tiger offensive lineman signed with the University of North Alabama football program on National Signing Day on December 4th, taking the official step towards a long-time goal.

"It's always been a dream of mine to play football at the next level," Baker told the Franklin Free Press. "I only started playing football in the seventh grade, but this is pretty special. I've always enjoyed playing the sport, and my dream is coming true."

Baker, a 2024 FFP All-Franklin County First Team selection, is fresh off an appearance in the AHSAA North-South All-Star Football Game in Mobile, where he helped the North All-Stars defeat the South All-Stars 45-24. In his final season with Russellville Baker was also a Class 5A All-Region 7 First Team offensive lineman, helping pave the way for a Russellville ground game that totaled over 3,100 yards rushing and tallied 41 touchdowns. Baker never allowed a sack in 2024 and he graded 93 percent for the year.

See, 'BAKER,' Page 14

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Phil Campbell, Russellville split pair of varsity games

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

Franklin County teams squared off at the Russellville Middle School gym on Friday, December 13th as the Russellville High School varsity girls' and boys' basketball teams hosted Phil Campbell.

The Lady Golden Tigers and Lady Bobcats tipped the night off, the visitors coming out on top 54-51. Phil Campbell led for the duration, but Russellville kept it close, keeping the score within three points at the end of the final two periods.

The victory capped a great week for the Lady Bobcats, who knocked off Class 5A Russellville after earning consecutive area wins against Colbert Heights and Sheffield.

There was a silver lining in the defeat for the Lady Golden Tigers, though, with sophomore Ella Copeland scoring her 1,000th career point during the contest. Copeland, in her first game of the season, hit the milestone in the first few minutes; sitting at 995 points coming in, Copeland scored five of Russellville's opening seven points to reach the mark.

"Most people don't ever have the opportunity to score 1,000 points. For her to accomplish it as a sophomore, it's a testament to her ability to put the ball in the basket," Russellville head coach Jermaine Groce said. "She's progressively gotten better every year. As an eighth grader she was averaging about 14 points per game. As a ninth grader she was up to 17 or 18 points per game. This season she came into the season injured and so she didn't have an opportunity to play in our first eight games. But when she came in (Friday) night, she wasted no time. She needed five points going in and I think she got in in the first two minutes.

"She's a special athlete and I'm lucky to have coached someone like her," he added.

Groce also praised Copeland for the time and energy the sophomore puts into the game, as well as her perseverance and tenacity in returning from injury so quickly.

See, 'GOLDEN TIGERS,' Page 12

Belgreen girls declaw Eagles 52-19 in Area 14 game

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

Basketball fans at Belgreen High School saw mixed results after the BHS varsity girls' and boys' basketball teams faced Covenant Christian in area play Tuesday night.

The Lady Bulldogs, off to a 9-2 start, put another whipping on a Class 2A Area 14 opponent, defeating Covenant Christian 52-19 on December 10th. The Belgreen boys, however, were unable to follow up with a similar result, losing to the Eagles 48-38 to drop to 4-5 overall and 1-1 in the area.

To start the night, the BHS girls' team had no issues dispatching the Lady Eagles. The Lady Bulldogs began the game with an 8-0 run and their lead was never tested. Belgreen suffocated Covenant Christian defensively, allowing just 10 points in the first half and only nine in the second. Senior Dakota Green led the Lady Bulldogs with 19 points while Bryn Scott added 10 points in the victory.

"It's always good to win area games," Belgreen varsity girls' basketball coach Chad Green said.

Green, who's been disappointed with specific facets of his team's play in the last few games, was happy to see improvement in those areas against Covenant Christian.

"I thought our ball movement was better, and I thought our rebounding was better, so maybe we're getting things worked out," he said.

Rebounding, in particular, was a point of emphasis for the Lady Bulldogs, who, even in wins, have struggled on the boards at times this year. Green was happy with the energy he saw with his Lady Bulldogs against the Lady Eagles Tuesday night.

"Every coach, I'm sure, does different rebounding things (in practice) and stuff like that, but honestly it's just effort—effort and want-to," Green said.

See, 'BELGREEN,' Page 13

'GOLDEN TIGERS,' From Page 11

"No one understands the amount of work she puts in," Groce said. "I track minutes in the gym and she consistently puts up 200 to 300 minutes on her own—that's outside of what we do in practice."

"She tore her ACL in late July, early August which is another testament to her hard work and dedication. She has defied everybody," Groce said. "Most people were skeptical of her ability to return and we're still mindful of that. She's still on a limited rotation, but she rehabs all the time, she doesn't miss an appointment, she does everything that the doctors ask her to do, and to be able to come back probably after four or five months of the surgery, it takes a special individual to be able to do that."

In the final game of the evening, Russellville's boys took care of business against Phil Campbell, defeating the Bobcats 66-41 to improve to 4-2. At halftime Russellville led by 19 points, even after Austin Elliott sank a buzzer-beater from beyond half-court to make it 38-19. In the second half, the Golden Tigers extended their lead, eventually winning the game by 25 points.

"It's always good to win," Russellville head coach Patrick Odom said in his postgame radio interview. "Losing the game earlier in the mid-week when Hillcrest had to cancel, I felt being off for a few days kinda hurt us. But, you know, proud of the win. There's an escalation in the competition level we're gonna see over the holidays, which is really good for us. We just gotta continue to grow and get better. We're in a good spot but we're nowhere near where we wanna be."

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'BELGREEN,' From Page 11

Belgreen has a couple of non-area games on the schedule ahead of its next area game against Tharptown on December 17. Up next the Lady Bulldogs will travel to Rogers. The game on Thursday, December 12, should be a good test for BHS, according to the head coach.

"Rogers will be a good challenge for us because, you know, they play good half court man-to-man defense, and we're gonna have to work and move the basketball to get open and get good looks. Of course, we'll have to run them off that three-point line because they love to shoot the three," Green said. "When you shoot threes it results in long rebounds, so if we can rebound we can get out and run the floor."

In the boys' basketball game between Belgreen and Covenant Christian, both teams struggled at the basket and with turnovers. It was a fast-paced battle waged as both the Bulldogs and Eagles attempted to push it up and down the court, but in the end the visitors left victorious after denying the hosts' comeback attempt in the final period of play.

"We like to play fast, but they do, too," Belgreen head coach Will Bonner said postgame. "I think it was to our advantage to play fast, but it seemed like we slowed down a lot whenever we should have been speeding up.

"They ran the box and won—I kinda figured it was gonna happen at some point. This is our first look at it. We practiced it, I thought we would handle it a little better than we did, but we'll have to continue to work on that," he added.

Midway through the third period, the Bulldogs tied the game after trailing for the previous 20-odd minutes, but Belgreen couldn't quite keep the Eagles down in the end. Bonner felt his team's defensive play could have been better.

"I think we prepared well all week, but I think when it came down to it, on the defensive end, we didn't play very good," the first-year head coach said. "We didn't have help side on the post, so (Covenant Christian) was able to get a lot of good open looks, and at times when we really did help the post it seemed like they got a couple three-point shots.

"Defensively we did not play well at all tonight. There's still a lot to work on," he added.

With nine games under their belt and after having seen both area opponents, Tharptown and Covenant Christian, at home, Bonner still believes his team can achieve their goals this year if they can continue to improve as the season rolls on.

"I definitely think we can make it out of this area. Obviously you want to win, and I think we're good enough to win, but we're gonna have to clean some stuff up," Bonner said. "I told our guys it's not about today, it's about February. Wins and losses—I hate to lose, but it's about February. That's what I want us to be ready for."

The two teams finished up the week with games at Rogers on Thursday, December 12th. The Belgreen girls defeated the Lady Pirates 54-40 to improve to 10-2 overall. The Lady Bulldogs were led by 14-point games by Dacota Green and Bryn Scott.

The BHS boys fell later that evening to Rogers 62-20, dropping to 4-6 this season. Jake Dill was the Bulldogs' top scorer in the loss with six points.



COURTESY PHOTO

Belgreen boys' varsity minutes before tipping off against Covenant Christian.



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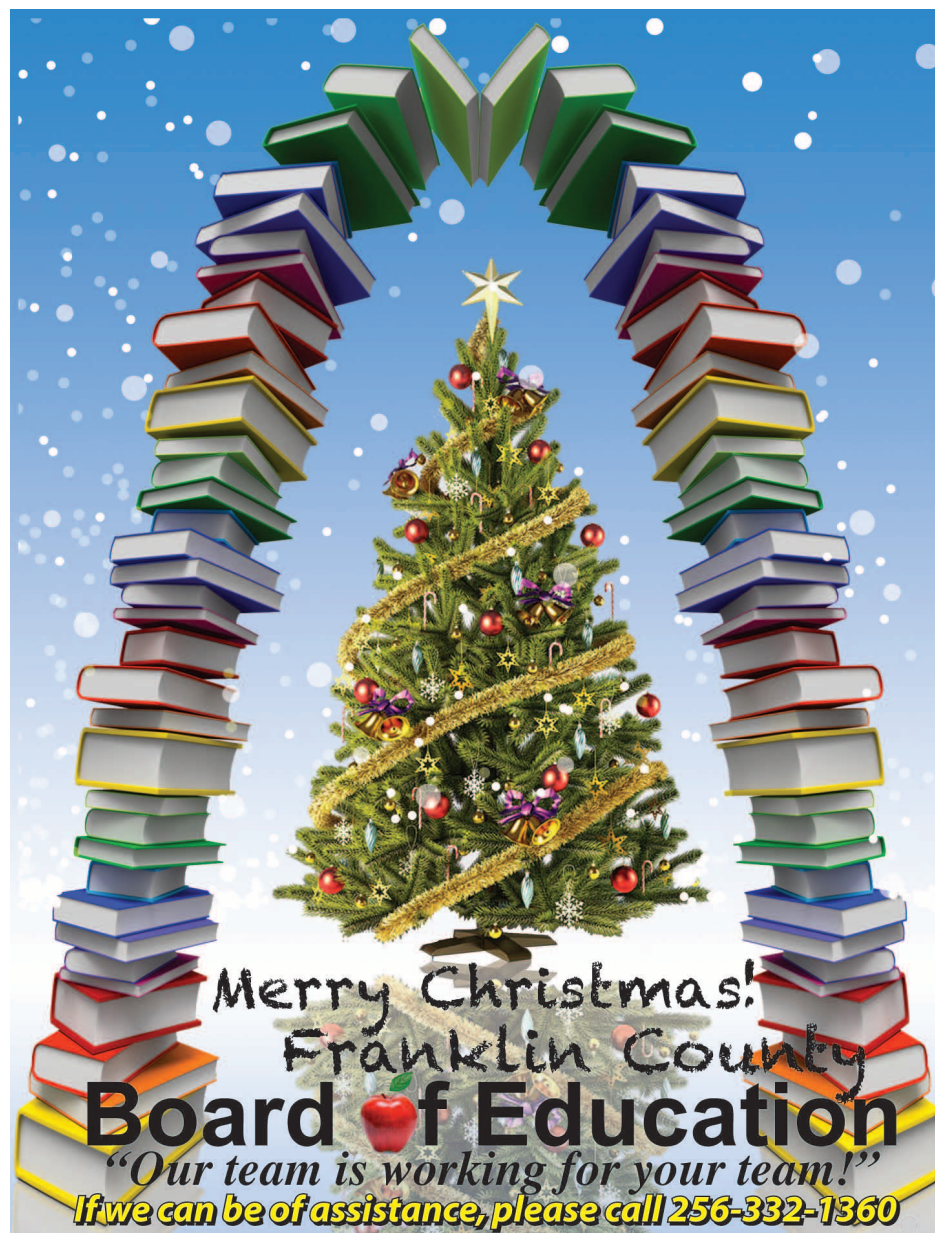
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'BAKER,' From Page 11

Baker credits his achievements in the game to his work ethic, and he believes that will prove to be a great asset for him when he makes the jump to Division I football.

"I bring a certain attitude to the table, I think. I'm gonna keep my nose on the grindstone and go to work every day and go to war for my teammates," Baker said. "I think if you ask anybody, they know I'm the hardest worker. I'm not a very vocal guy, but you can tell by my actions how hard I work and doing what I'm supposed to."

Russellville head coach Dustin Goodwin concurs:

"(It's) his work ethic. It doesn't matter what he's doing, he's going to work really hard to be the best he can be," Goodwin said.

Taking the leap from prep ball to the college ranks can be quite a challenge for players, but on the Russellville coaching staff Baker had a RHS alum and former Division I offensive lineman to mentor him. That apprenticeship, Baker believes, will aid him tremendously at UNA.

"Every single bit of coaching I've gotten from Austin Stidham (will help)," Baker said. "You know, he played college ball at Troy—he played for four years and was there for six. He's very knowledgeable about the game. He's taught me just about anything and everything that I need to know, so that'll help me on the way to the next level."

Baker, who currently plans to study business at UNA, still has his final spring semester at Russellville High School to look forward to, but when he does make the move to Florence next fall his expectations will be a lot of other new college students and athletes.

"I'm looking forward to meeting new friends, obviously," he said. "I'm looking forward to traveling and meeting new people, and I'm looking forward to fulfilling my dream of playing college football."

Baker and the Lions will travel to face Western Kentucky in UNA's 2025 season opener on August 25th.

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