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Work on state project on Highway 43 (SR-13) resumes with return of warmer temperatures

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Work resumed last week on a \$2.801 million project that, once completed, will include the micromilling, resurfacing, traffic striping and guardrail installation on a 4.899 mile stretch of Highway 43 through Russellville.

Project NH-0013 (638), 'Constructing the MicroMilling, Resurfacing, Guardrail Installation and Traffic Stripe on SR-13 (US-13) from the junction of CR-36 to the intersection of Underwood Road

Seth Burkett, Public Information Officer for the North Region of the Alabama Department of Transportation, said the contractor

for the project, Rogers Group, would resume work on the site once the forecast called for a multi-day stretch of warmer temperatures.

The project was broken down into three sections, with expectations that one or two sections would be completed before winter, and the remaining sections completed in the spring of 2025.

"They were nearing completion of the 1.5 mile segment from Underwood Road to Walmart when the good weather ran out, unfortunately," Burkett told the FFP last week. "The main travel lane paving on that section was done, but they still need to pave median crossovers, side street tie-ins, etc."

The contract called for all work to

See 'HIGHWAY,' Page 4

Russellville Board of Education approves \$789,000 bid for new artificial turf at RHS Stadium

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At a special called meeting held February 4th, the Russellville City Schools Board of Education approved a bid to replace the artificial turf at Russellville High School Stadium.

The lone bid submitted was from Warner Athletic Construction Co., Inc., based in Smyrna, Tenn., in the amount of \$789,000. That bid was

unanimously approved by the board.

Russellville City Schools Superintendent of Education Tim Guinn said the bid includes installation of a reformation pad below the turf. The pad creates a more cushioned and shock-absorbent surface that also allows the turf keep its shape with no ruts resulting from impact.

Now that the bid has been accepted, Guinn said the company placed the materials order the same day.

See 'TURF,' Page 5



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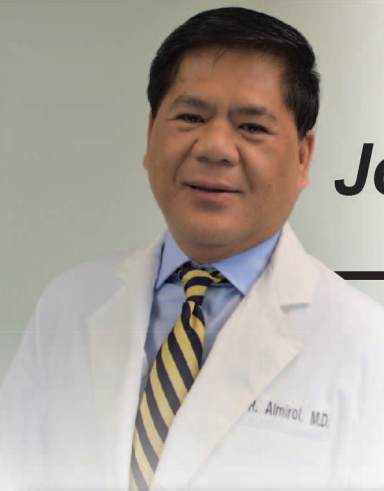
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- Publisher**
John Pilati
E-mail: franklinfreepress@yahoo.com
- Sports Editor**
Kadin Pounders
- Layout Design**
Michael Rice
- Sales Representatives**
John Pilati
- Content Contributors**
Willodean Davis
- Graphic Design**
Jason Hill

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Back to the Bible by Larsen Plyler: An Introduction...

Larsen Plyler
Franklin Free Press

This is the first in what I hope to be a running series of articles. As the title of the article indicates, my goal is to go back to the Bible for what I believe, teach, and do in my service to the Lord.

The Bible is breathed out by God and is profitable for us. It tells us what is right, what is wrong, how to get right, and how to stay right. It can equip us to be all that God wants us to be (II Timothy 3:16-17).

My name is Larsen Plyler. I have been married to Lydia for 12 years and together we have four little ones. We live in Spruce Pine (Frog Pond, to be specific). I work with the Quinn church which meets on top of Spruce Pine Mountain.

I am delighted to present this article in the Franklin Free Press and present a weekly radio program on 100.7 WGOL (Sunday morning at 8:30).

Each week the article will examine a text from the Scripture and conclude with "lessons to learn." I want to see what the Bible says, understand what it means, and then apply it to our lives. I will begin with the gospel according to Matthew so that we can see the story of Jesus.

The radio program will alternate between topical and textual studies. Some of the key topics will be about how to determine and apply God's will, God's design for local churches, how to respond appropriately to God's grace, and how to live as individuals and as communities of the faithful under the reign of King Jesus. The textual studies will pick up in the book of Acts. If you miss it, you can visit backtothebiblepodcast.com or find us on iTunes or Spotify.

As I hope you will read in each article and hear in each episode, I believe that God has revealed Himself and His expectations in the Bible. Because I love Him and want to draw close to Him, I am committed to hearing His words so that I can walk in His ways. Because Jesus has all authority and entrusted His apostles with the task of discipling people in His ways, I am devoted to hearing their words.

Of course, I make no claims to perfection. I am still growing as a Bible student. I want to continue to evaluate my teaching in light of God's word. I am open to questions and comments. Please reach out if I am unclear or if you believe I am in error. I will seek to clarify and correct where appropriate.

May God help us as we seek Him and live under the reign of King Jesus.

In all things, to God be the glory!

To reach us with your questions and comments or to request a personal Bible study find us at backtothebiblepodcast.com or email us at info@backtothebiblepodcast.com



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'HIGHWAY,' From Page 1

be done within 90 working days. Burkett explained these are distinguishable from calendar days, so the project is not behind schedule.

"Though weather didn't allow the contractor to accomplish as much as they hoped during the 2024 construction season, I



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don't know that there has been much delay to the overall project on ALDOT's timetable. We still anticipate completion in late spring/early summer," Burkett said. But he understands concerns about the project and the fact that

median crossovers, when not repaved along with the highway on either side, create concerns for motorists.

"We apologize to motorists for the inconvenience, and we thank them for their patience. With some warmer temperatures showing up in the forecast now, the contractor plans to be back on site in the next few days to resume work on the current section, which should require a week or two to complete," Burkett said.

"They likely won't start work on the remaining sections, from Walmart to CR-36 (Rockwood), until spring, when conditions are more consistently favorable," he added.

Several residents have contacted the FFP asking for information on when work on SR-13, or Highway 43 as it's known locally, will resume. Concerns about driving onto the medians, which have not been repaved, were expressed.

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'TURF,' From Page 1

The turf will be painted with lines, markers and logos.

Guinn said the installation should be completed in late spring, in time for the May 23, 2025, graduation ceremonies for Russellville High School.

"We anticipate now that we accepted the bid that they began the order for materials today, including printing on the turf," Guinn said last Tuesday. "They will have all materials before they come (for installation). Weather permitting, we hope to see the new turf installation completed by mid to late April," he added.

Turf was initially installed at Russellville Stadium nine years ago, in 2016.

Red Bay baseball program, Tharptown High School choral among recipients of FCCDC grants

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Community Development Commission met January 31, 2025, and awarded grants to multiple schools and agencies.

The commission, which includes Brad Bolton, Jeremy Campbell and Red Bay Mayor Charlene Fancher, meets quarterly to review grant applications. The commission is comprised of two appointees from Franklin County's legislative delegation and a rotating seat between the mayors of Russellville and Red Bay. Sen. Larry Stutts reappointed Bolton and Rep. Jamie Kiel reappointed Campbell to another four-year term.

With the most recent grants, more than \$2.742 million has been returned to Franklin County since the inception of the funding. The funds come from in lieu of tax payments from the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Grant awards for the January 31st meeting included:

- \$500 to Phil Campbell Elementary School for purchase of rolling bins.
 - \$250 to Red Bay High School Baseball for field sign sponsorship.
 - \$500 to Belgreen High School for restocking of art supplies to the school's art program.
 - \$250 to Tharptown High School Voices Choral Group for travel expenses, concerts and supplies.
 - \$3200 to Phil Campbell Elementary School for purchase of classroom iPads for kindergarten classes.
 - \$250 to Phil Campbell High School for Future Teachers of America State Conference expenses.
 - \$800 to Franklin County Career Technical Center for purchase of iPads.
 - \$2,500 to Russellville City Schools for girls' soccer locker room project.
 - \$2,500 to Red Bay High School football for helmet reconditioning.
 - \$1,250 to Phil Campbell Elementary School for purchase of classroom chairs.
 - \$1,250 to Red Bay High School Band for instrument and equipment needs for Jazz and Concert Band.
 - \$750 to Franklin County Emergency Management Agency for purchase of Terrain Master Wheel & Litter System Rescue Equipment.
 - \$800 to Northwest Regional Library—Weatherford Library Summer Reading Program.
 - \$250 to Phil Campbell Elementary School for purchase of materials and supplies for administrative duties.
 - \$750 to Phil Campbell Elementary School for purchase of folding chairs and cart.
 - \$800 to Belgreen High School for Special Education classroom purchase of training for Post-Secondary Education Options.
 - \$6,000 transfer to the Future Economic Development Fund.
- The next meeting of the FCCDC will be March 21, 2025, at 8:30 a.m., at the Red Bay City Hall. Grant requests for the March 21, 2025, meeting must be received by a commission member before 12 p.m., March 14, 2025.

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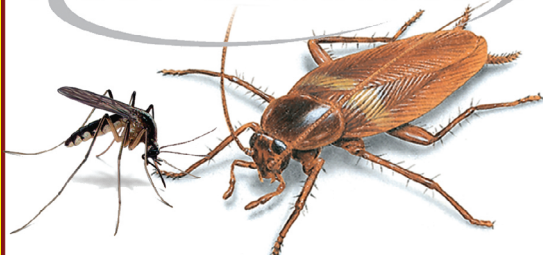
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 **A**shaKiran serves victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking across Alabama. Their vision is to be a 'ray of hope' by bridging the gap between service providers and culturally diverse communities. Their 24-hour crisis line 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.

 **T**he North Russellville Baptist Church Youth Group will host a Charity Golf Tournament Four-Man Scramble on Friday, March 14, 2025, at Twin Pines Country Club. Lunch will be served at 11 a.m., and the shotgun start begins at noon. \$400 per team entry, or \$100 per person. All proceeds benefit the North Russellville Baptist Youth Fest 2025. For pre-registration or more information, call Jason at 256-412-9786 or Randy at 938-646-4656.

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Red Bay resident earns degree from University of Maryland Global Campus

Submitted

Kaylea Milam of Red Bay, earned a(n) Bachelor of Arts Cum Laude in English from University of Maryland Global Campus in fall 2024.

Milam was one of nearly 5,900 students worldwide who earned degrees from UMGC in the fall 2024 term.

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Saturday rally at courthouse 'a very important event' in Russellville, event supporters say

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A Day Without Immigrants.

That was the theme of a nationwide event held on Monday, February 3rd in cities and towns across America.

The social media-driven event encouraged immigrants to skip work, keep their children out of schools and boycott any shopping that day. And there was a good bit of local support for the event in Russellville, as Russellville City Schools saw absences on Monday soar to 545, more than four times the normal absence rate for a winter school day.

Russellville City Schools Superintendent of Education Tim Guinn said there were 166 absences Monday at Russellville High School (compared to 33 the following day), 113 absences at Russellville Middle School (compared to 39 the next day), 119 at Russellville Elementary School (compared to 31 the next day) and 140 absences at West Elementary School and the pre-K program (compared to 42 the next day).

Guinn said most of the students absent were Hispanic, although others were not at school due to field trips.

Additionally, several Hispanic-owned businesses closed Monday. On its Facebook page, the Ville Nutrition's post read: To all our sweet & loyal friends, we will be closed TODAY ONLY—Monday, February 3rd in observance of 'A Day Without Immigrants.' This is a day to recognize the contributions of immigrants in our communities and workplaces. (Not all immigrants are criminals). We appreciate your understanding and look forward to serving you when we reopen on Tuesday, February 4th. Thank you for being part of our journey and for always supporting us! See you tomorrow!

A rally is scheduled for Saturday, February 8th, at the Franklin County Courthouse from 1-4 p.m. Organizers are calling the event 'Protesta Para Nuestra Gente,' meaning 'Protest For Our People' in the English translation.

Flyers posted around Russellville and circulated on social media urge rallyers to protest peacefully, be respectful of the building and other people and please bring flags, posters along with family and friends.

Franklin County Probate Judge Barry Moore said Thursday afternoon that an individual picked up a request form to use the courthouse for Saturday's rally but that form had not yet been returned.

Russellville Police Chief Chris Hargett said he was aware of the scheduled protest and his department would have additional officers working Saturday as a precaution.

Organizers are encouraging those who may be hesitant to attend Saturday's rally out of fear of retribution that the event will be respectful to the United States of America, its flag, its people, as well as flags of other countries.

Tuscumbia resident Claudia Martinez, who planned to organize a similar rally this Sunday in Florence, said she will attend the Russellville rally and hopes others will come to what she describes as 'a very important event' in a post on Facebook.



"Be proud of your culture. Be proud of your skin color. Bring your flags! Bring your banners! Please come out. This is gonna go down in the books!," Martinez said.

The Minnesota-born Martinez said her father came to the United States as an illegal immigrant. Her mother, now deceased, was a United States citizen. Martinez said her father navigated the long process of becoming a United States citizen.

"For 19 years he tried to become a citizen and they finally accepted him this year," Martinez said. "There are many people who came over here and had kids but can't really voice their opinions because of fear. Yes, I get that one person may do bad things but that doesn't make every single Hispanic a bad person because of a few people. It's not fair. We are all God's children and God doesn't see a person's color—just their soul.

"It's not our fault where we were born. It's not our fault we may have a parent who came over here illegally. But we are American citizens," she added.

A rally was held Wednesday in Montgomery to oppose four bills pending in the Alabama Legislature that organizers describe as 'anti-immigrant' bills.

One of those would allow law enforcement officers to question people about their immigration status and require law enforcement agencies to collect DNA samples and fingerprints from illegal immigrants taken into custody.

Another would impose a fee on wire transfers from Alabama to other countries. Its sponsor, Sen. April Weaver (R-Alabaster) said it's in response to the problem of migrants who don't pay taxes but send money out of the state.

Another, SB53, would make it a crime to 'conceal, harbor or shield from detection an illegal alien if he or she knows or reasonably should have known the other individual is an illegal alien.

Some legislators said this week that up to 10 immigration-related bills may be considered by the Alabama Legislature this year, consistent with the strengthened enforcement of illegal immigration by President Donald Trump.

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Men's, women's golf the latest sports to return to Northwest Shoals Community College's athletic department

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When Northwest Shoals Community College Interim President Dr. Chris Cox announced the reinstatement of the school's athletic programs in 2021, he promised a quick timetable, beginning with the return of baseball and softball in the fall of 2022.

Less than three years later, NWSCC officials have kept their promises regarding the return of sports on campus.

With NWSCC Athletic Director Taylor Franks' announcement last week that the college will add men's and women's golf beginning in the 2026 spring semester, that will bring the total to eight sports teams for the Patriots.

In addition to men's and women's golf (2026), women's flag football and volleyball will debut this fall, joining baseball, softball and men's and women's cross country.

"In a little over three years, the college has added over 100 scholarships for student athletes," Franks said. "It has truly been a team effort to get to this point so quickly. We have such an amazing Patriot community of former athletes, alumni and supporters who have made these opportunities for our current and future Patriots possible."

NWSCC had a men's golf team until 2010. When women's golf begins in the spring of 2026, it will be the first time for that sport at Northwest Shoals.

As with other sports, the focus of recruiting student athletes for men's and women's golf will be securing local high school talent in the Northwest Alabama area.

"Golf has tremendous support in our community, and we have some very competitive high school teams. We look forward to having some of the best high school talent staying home to be Patriots," Franks said.

The Patriot golf teams will consist of seven men and seven women scholarship student athletes, with walk-on opportunities to be determined by the coach.

It was a devastating blow for the college and Phil Campbell community when NWSCC disbanded athletics in 2011 due to financial constraints. But the return of sports, along with a \$30 million building and campus renovation project at the Phil Campbell campus, has reinforced the college's long-term commitment to its Franklin County campus. NWSCC's Phil Campbell campus was Alabama's first junior college and has opened doors for Franklin County residents to continue their post-secondary educations in a local and affordable setting.

The search for a golf coach is underway. Applications may be completed at <https://nwsc.edu/college-departments/human-resources/>.



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Older but inexperienced Vina team set for varsity baseball season

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

When Vina High School hits the baseball diamond to start the 2025 campaign, the Red Devil team's makeup in terms of age and experience will be a little different than in years past.

Vina head coach Cody Renfrow said the baseball team has grown in numbers but swelled with athletes who have either taken a few years off or haven't played at all to this point.

"We'll be an inexperienced team but an older team—I know those two don't really seem to go hand-in-hand," Renfrow said. "We've got several seniors out that haven't played in recent years, but we're happy to have them out there. I think there's potential there and we're excited."

It may take a little while for those older, inexperienced players to pick the game up or shake the rust off, but Renfrow said the Red Devils are not lacking in any leadership ability.

"There are multiple guys that will provide that leadership role. Some of them have been playing baseball over the last few years, but some, like a Cai Lawler—he hasn't played in a few years—can come in and step into a

See, 'VINA,' Page 13

Phinizee snares 5A Back of the Year honors

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

Many great players have taken the field for the Russellville High School football team over the years, but few Golden Tigers have been able to claim they were the best at their position in their respective classification.

In Montgomery, on the morning of Tuesday, January 28, Russellville junior running back Cameron Phinizee became the first Russellville player since Brent Calloway in 2010 to be named the Alabama Sports Writers Association Class 5A Back of the Year and is just one of four Golden Tigers to earn an annual individual award from the association. (Aaron Sears was named 5A Lineman of the Year in 2002 and Chad Sears was the ASWA 5A Player of the Year in 1994.)



Cam Phinizee doing what he does best.

COURTESY PHOTO

"I think he's one of four Russellville players to come away with this type of award," Russellville head coach Dustin Goodwin said. "It's a tremendous honor and it's a testament to his ability and

See, 'HONORS,' Page 12

Belgreen, Phil Campbell girls and Red Bay boys advance to Hanceville Regional

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

Three Franklin County high school varsity basketball teams advanced to the AHSAA Northwest Regional tournament to be held in Hanceville this week.

The Belgreen Lady Bulldogs, the Phil Campbell Lady Bobcats, and the Red Bay Tigers advanced to the next round of the playoffs with wins in the subregional over the weekend.

Belgreen, champions of Class 2A Area 14 and ranked No. 8 in 2A, hosted Lamar County and dominated the game 57-18 on Friday night. Jumping out to an early lead, the Lady Bulldogs never looked back. In the first period alone Belgreen dropped 22 points, more than enough that would be needed to beat the visitors from Vernon.

Lilliana Willingham led BHS with 14 points and junior Bryn Scott added 10 points.

Belgreen's next trial in the Northwest Regional semifinal will be one of its toughest of the season; the Lady Bulldogs take on the top-ranked team in Class 2A, Decatur Heritage, at Tom Drake Coliseum on the campus of Wallace State Community College on Tuesday, February 11 at 6 P.M.

Phil Campbell's girls also orchestrated a convincing win, going on the road and beating Winfield 52-42 on Friday.

The Lady Bulldogs started hot and went on a 12-0 run from tip-off. The early lead later proved vital as the Lady Pirates mounted a comeback that saw hosts pull back within a few points in the second half. Phil Campbell managed to weather the storm, though, and was eventually able to create a cushion in the fourth and win the game.

See, 'HANCEVILLE,' Page 14

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'HONORS,' From Page 11

what he's been able to do on the football field the last two seasons."

During the 2024 season Phinizee, the Class 5A Region 7 MVP, rushed for 2,331 yards, averaged just over 10 yards per carry, and scored 28 rushing touchdowns. Phinizee was the third-leading rusher in the state, according to MaxPreps, and one of just six to rush for over 2,000 yards this past campaign. The two-time First Team All-State running back has rushed for over 5,000 yards in his career, has averaged 9.4 yards per carry, and has a career total 75 rushing touchdowns over three seasons with the Golden Tigers.

Goodwin added that Phinizee's accomplishment not only shows the respect the individual has garnered around the state but counts the award as a win for the football program as a whole, too.

"He's gotten visibility, for sure, and it's a testament to what he's been able to put on tape being that he had a lot of success as a sophomore and then continued that in his junior season—and doing it through a coaching change. It speaks volumes to the talent he has and really the guys playing around him, too," the Russellville head coach said. "I think anytime you have an individual award it's great for that kid and they do everything to deserve it, but it's a team achievement, as well. He's a special talent but you can't do everything by yourself, so I think it's big for not only Cam but for our entire football team."

Still just a junior, Phinizee has one more season to make his mark at the prep level. Recently the running back has received college offers from Division I programs like UAB and Yale, and there will almost certainly be more to follow.

Goodwin said Phinizee has a lot of natural gifts and talent and just like any player his potential can only grow if he continues to work hard.


"He's a good-sized kid, his build is very good, he's very tough to tackle, and he has good vision," he said. "He's very tough to tackle at the second level and in space and then he has the speed to finish runs. I think all those things are great positives that he has, and he puts them on display on Friday nights.

"Where can he get better? You know, I believe in constantly trying to improve no matter where you are or what position you hold. I think that's the goal: Wake up every day and get a little better. That's how we challenge them, whether it's getting stronger in the weight room or doing a little more film study or being more flexible or faster," Goodwin added. "I think everyone has room to improve from a personal standpoint and that's what we encourage both our coaches and players to do.

"Fortunately for us Cam's got another year left and so he can only grow as a person and as a player. We're excited to see what's in store for him and where his career takes him."

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'VINA,' From Page 11

leadership role. Tristan Farr, as well—those are a couple of guys you know you can lean on when it comes to leadership and being kind of an extended voice of mine on the field and at practice,” Renfrow said. “They understand the standard that it’s important we play up to and practice with.

“Christian McCarley is another one that hasn’t played in a few years, and we’re really excited to get him out there this year. He’s a tremendous athlete, great attitude, great leader,” he added.

“Lane Easterling is another one who is one of the players with more experience than some of the others as a junior. We’ll lean on him at shortstop and he’ll log several innings on the mound, for sure.”

Apart from the top-tier leadership intangibles, on the field Renfrow said his Red Devils come into the season with other strengths. The head coach believes this team will need to rely on its defensive ability, especially early on in the year.

“Obviously we still have a ton to work on, but I think the strength in the team, if I had to pick one to lean on, I’d say it’s defensively,” Renfrow said. “We’re further along there than we have been in the past.”

Vina’s pitching staff, Renfrow said, is going to rely on the guys behind it to help retire the other side this season.

“Our weakness would be on the mound. We’re gonna have more depth on the mound this season than what we’ve had in years past, but we don’t have a lot of guys that are gonna overpower you,” he said. “We’re gonna have to pitch to contact and get outs that way. We’re not gonna have any guys that are gonna get 12 or 13 strikeouts a game, so we’re gonna have to play solid defense.”

Vina will eventually need more than just defense in order to make the playoffs, though. The Red Devils are in a tough area and will need to play well to get out of it.

“We’re in a bit of a different area this year. With Belgreen moving up to 2A we’ve added Lynn to our area along with Hackleburg and Bear Creek,” Renfrow said. “Over the last years Hackleburg has had a good baseball team along with other sports and they’ve set the standard in our area—the standard we’re chasing.

“Lynn is also a good baseball program, especially here recently, and Bear Creek will be competitive, as well,” he added. “I think we can compete with all of those teams but we’ve got a lot of work to do at the same time.”

Hard work and improvement, regardless of the ultimate outcome, is what Renfrow and the Red Devils are pushing for in 2025.

“I’m optimistic and looking forward to the season,” Renfrow said. “We wanna work to get better each and every day and at the end of the year to look back and say we’ve played to our potential. Whether that’s playoffs, winning the area, being the two-seed, winning double-digit games, or just missing out on the playoffs—just getting better every single day and really competing, no matter who we’re playing. Playing to our standard and to our potential, that’s what we wanna do, regardless of what they may be.”

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'HANCEVILLE,' From Page 11

After defeating the Class 3A Area 10 champions, the Lady Bobcats' path doesn't get any easier. Phil Campbell's opponent in the Northwest Regional, set to tip-off on Tuesday at 9 A.M., is Holly Pond, the No. 8 team in 3A.



The Red Bay High School boys' varsity basketball team was the final Franklin County team to advance to the regional. The Tigers, ranked No. 6 in Class 2A, took down Covenant Christian, last year's Class 1A runner-up, 42-29 on Saturday night.

Red Bay got out to an early lead and never surrendered it. A low-scoring game, the Tigers nevertheless took care of business at home to advance.

Red Bay's opponent in the regional semifinal will be the Tanner Rattlers. That game is set to tip off at 7:30 P.M. on Tuesday night.

The Belgreen boys and the Russellville girls' and boys' teams were all defeated in the subregional round.

The Bulldogs, after leading at halftime and for nearly the entire second half, allowed the visitors from Sulligent to tie the game up late. Tied up 50-50 at the end of the fourth the game was sent to overtime where Belgreen came out on the wrong end of the result. Sulligent outscored BHS 10-2 in the four-minute overtime period to win 60-52 and eliminate Belgreen from the postseason.

The Russellville varsity girls' basketball team went on the road to No. 6 Priceville for its subregion contest. The Lady Golden Tigers played well but were ultimately outmatched,

falling by a final score of 70-50.

Similarly, the Russellville boys, after failing to win a fifth-consecutive area tournament championship, faced a tough path to Hanceville. The Golden Tigers traveled to Athens for a matchup with No. 4 East Limestone.

Russellville hung around in the first half, but things got out of hand quickly after halftime. The Indians took a 10-point lead into the break and expanded it to 18 at the final buzzer as the Golden Tigers ended their season in an 80-62 defeat.

Hubbard, Williams to continue FB careers at collegiate level

*Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press*

Two Russellville High School seniors made decisions to further their playing careers last week, signing with football programs in Mississippi and Kentucky on National Signing Day.

Zay Hubbard and Jah Williams, defensive backs on the Golden Tigers' football team, made it official by inking their names with the respective programs of their choice; Hubbard signed with Northeast Mississippi Community College in Booneville and Williams signed with Kentucky Wesleyan College in Owensboro.

"We're excited to see them both play at the next level and for them to get the opportunity to further their education and get that paid for," Russellville head coach Dustin Goodwin said. "I'm really proud of them and know that if they do what they're capable of doing, they're gonna be successful."

Hubbard and Williams were both named First Team All-Region in their senior season with the Golden Tigers and each featured on the Franklin Free Press's All-County First Team Defense.

Hubbard, listed at 6-foot-1 and 175 pounds, was the second-leading tackler for Russellville this past season with 126 and led the team in solo tackles with 67 and interceptions with five.

Williams, at 6-foot-1 and 180 pounds, had three interceptions, 63 total tackles, and was also integral in the Golden Tigers special teams unit at the kick return specialist.

Goodwin said the duo have a little different skill set from one another which helped them compliment each other in the defensive backfield.

"They're both really athletic kids," Goodwin said. "Jah is probably a little faster and got a little more range on the field as a defender; Zay is more of a box player and a really good tackler."

"That said, Zay can cover and Jah can tackle but their strengths complimented each other well and they worked well together on the backend," he added. "I think they grew over the course of the year, and we're gonna miss them."

Hubbard and Williams are the second and third Golden Tiger football players from the 2025 class to sign with a college program after Neyland Baker signed with the University of North Alabama back in December. Goodwin said the trio represent the possibility of opportunities for student-athletes who work hard on the playing field and in life.

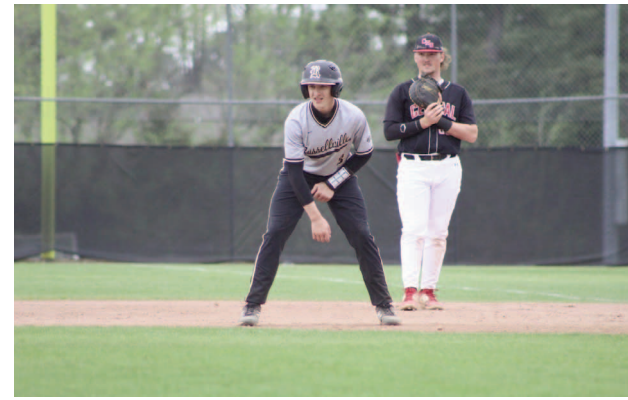
"If you work hard and you do what you're supposed to then you're gonna perform at your highest level possible on a Friday night, and then if you're continuing to grow as an individual and open to going places to play, those opportunities can present themselves," Goodwin said. "If you do that we're gonna work for you and get you in front of as many people as possible to make that happen."

"I'm really glad those three guys took the opportunity to increase their education and play and look forward to many more down the road," he added. "I'm really happy that we were able to help them get that opportunity, but I'm more proud of them for putting themselves in the position to get the opportunity and having the courage to take it."

Younger but experienced baseball lineup for 2025 Golden Tigers

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

On a cool and cloudy late-January afternoon the wind whips around the fortress that the Russellville High School baseball stadium has become. Inside its gates preparations are underway for a new campaign, one all those on the field hope will see them conquer all competitors.



COURTESY PHOTO

Ty Sollis preparing to swipe a base against Central.

In the mid-2000s the RHS baseball program flirted with ultimate greatness, fielding a couple teams that tested the strength of top teams in the state. But beginning in 2012, under the new leadership of Coach Chris Heaps, the Golden Tigers started on a path to dynastic success—one that would see the program capture five state crowns over the course of eight seasons, from 2015 to 2022.

Like all dynasties at some point must, this one went through a transition of lead-

ership before the 2023 campaign as Heaps retired and his former assistant and then-Scottsboro head coach Jess Smith was tapped to take the reins.

Back to the stadium on that overcast January day. Smith, heading into his third season at the helm of the Golden Tigers, sits on a folding chair behind home plate. Guarded by a net screen, Smith, who has led RHS to back-to-back playoff quarterfinal appearances, appraises the troops, taking notes and keeping score. It's a scrimmage day—a day to test the players in game situations.

Critical to consistent, sustained success, whether it be at the level of medieval European kingdoms (as the previous played-out metaphors might suggest) or prep baseball programs, is deft man management, a desire for constant improvement, and meticulous concern for detail.

At one moment Smith is giving a good-natured ribbing to a player in the dugout—an inside joke, apparently. The next he's out in the field chiding a player out of position after a backside double, asking another who made the same mistake the day before where he should be. Then he's taking note to correct an error on a play sheet while keeping an eye on the reaction of the batter that just struck out.

"Good cut" for a line drive that just sails foul; "Great pitch" for a breaking ball that paints the outside corner—these are frequent refrains from coaches and players alike.

Not said aloud are more specific observations that can only be made after hours and hours together on the field and in the locker room. These are details Smith and his coaching staff alone can catalog. Attention to "the small stuff" is demanded of Smith and his assistants but the head coach is proud to say his players have made it a priority, too.

"I've tasked this team to be sold out and bought into the little details that are most often overlooked and preached that that's gonna be the difference in getting us over the bar this year," Smith said.

"I think the X factor with this group is how much they care, how hard they work, and

how much pride they take in the little things that will only propel their potential. And I'll think they'll reach it because of who they are as people," he added.

But what is potential? Something you can feel but can't touch—a mirage until you reach it. An intangible that bears tangibles—potentially. It's a vagary that nonetheless is fairly easy for a practiced eye to spot.

Of course one has to assume Smith, a former collegiate baseball player and now a head coach for about half his adult life, has the eye for baseball potential in all his teams. But whether this team reaches it, that mirage until it's not, Smith said, is not, at the end of the day, up to him.

"Defining what success is for these guys, that's them reaching their fullest potential and telling them that it's ultimately up to them," he said. "The coaching staff and I reiterate to them the potential is a banner—adding to the letters outside the stadium. That's the fullest potential. But it could also be not entering the playoffs. It really, truly is up to them, but I believe they'll reach their fullest potential because of how I see them approach every day."

One indisputable element of potential is talent, of which Russellville has plenty. But another is experience. In that area the Golden Tigers are presented with a mixed bag. Seven seniors graduated from last year's squad, but that didn't leave Russellville devoid of players with valuable game reps.

"We return some young guys that had some experience last year and some older guys that have kind of waited for their turn and haven't necessarily had their names in the papers so far," Smith said. "We like to think that you're going to be talking to them and about them a lot this upcoming season. Some guys like Brennon Thorpe and Ty Willis and a handful of others that have been role guys or maybe haven't been out there every single day that are seniors and have been waiting patiently. We're expecting big things in a lot of ways out of them this year, especially offensively."

"Then we're returning some young guys on the mound and some that are older with experience, like (Brayden) Entrekin and Tripp Cleveland," Smith added. "They logged a lot of meaningful wins last year. In fact, Entrekin and Cleveland split (innings) in the deciding game three against Lawrence County last year."

"You throw a freshman and an eighth-grader in a deciding game three and what became the area championship last year, you like to think those two are poised for a lot of big innings this year."

Add into the mix players like senior Neyland Baker, who was selected as a designated hitter in last year's North-South All-Star game; senior Gunner Sappington; Eli Boutwell; and Ty Engelthaler, whom Smith described as Russellville's "Swiss Army knife, and the Golden Tigers have a solid base of experienced players to build from.

That said, however, there are still some big shoes for returners to step into.

Smith said the loss of Daniel Askew at second base has been a bit of a worry, but he feels good about a handful of guys that can do the job. The position that Smith considers the biggest hole to fill is at catcher. Last year that role was played by Michael Scofield, a player Smith considered "an extension of myself" behind the plate, now on the roster at Huntingdon College.

"The task right now is just replacing Michael behind the plate. There's a competition going on right now between Tristan Ray, Keifer Hallmark, and Ty Engelthaler," Smith said. "It's one of those things that you may not know who wins that competition until area play in March. There's a lot to be done in that competition."

Each of the players competing for catcher have different traits and pitchers are building relationships with each of them. Those factors, Smith said, may very well play a role in who eventually gets the top spot on the depth chart.

"The more we've played this offseason, guys are starting to form opinions, guys are starting to form preferences behind the dish, and that certainly goes into decision making," he said. "All three guys are different but all three guys do things really well. Tristan is a great receiver, great blocker, great game manager—pitchers like throwing to him. Keifer is more of an athlete-type, fast-twitch competitor—middle linebacker in football that kinda carries that same mentality over to playing catcher. And then Engelthaler is a superb athlete back there. He knows how to call pitches and be on the same page with pitching coach, Coach (Cody) Greenhill; how to manage a game and the tempo of how (pitchers) wanna work."

"I think with us having three viable options back there, you could see a hybrid of that position until one really solidifies and wins the trust of teammates and coaches."

Golden Tiger fans will undoubtedly be keeping one eye on that competition as the season gets started but should save the other for a couple of lesser known players who will be looking to make their mark this year. Freshman Caleb Hawkins is one; senior Coltan Oliver, cleared after a long journey back from injury, is another.

"Caleb Hawkins has certainly made an impression on us as a guy who, right now, we're going to have a hard time keeping him off the field, and truth be told we're trying to find a place for him," Smith said.

"One big addition has been the return of Coltan Oliver, a senior this year who suffered an injury...and hasn't been cleared in the last three and a half years. He finally got cleared and released to play this summer, but you wouldn't be able to tell it from how he's played so far this offseason," Smith added. "He can swing the bat and a big addition for us in the bullpen."

For the Golden Tigers to get past the quarterfinals, that barrier that has stood in their way to another potential championship run the previous two years, Smith said all of these pieces will need to come together. For this group to reach its full potential, the players will have to believe in themselves when it matters most.

"Playoff baseball comes down to who's the most confident. We've got a young team and it's our job this year to have a young team that's prepared and confident for those moments to compete," he said. "We've got guys that are returning with experience and new guys that are promising in what we've seen this offseason, but you never know what you might get when you mix a group of young and old and inexperience. What I will say about them is that their work ethic and attention to detail has been exceptional."

"Confidence stems from work ethic, so we've been punching the time card this offseason, but it's been enjoyable to come to work every day with them," Smith added. "I'm excited about this group. They play with an edge and I think that edge will help us get over the bar."

"I'm really looking forward to this season. Appreciate this community and all the support they show Russellville baseball—it's second to none."



From buckets to bulls: Former Belgreen hoops standout Adam Green a rising star in bull riding

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

Bucking basketball for bull riding, Franklin County native Adam Green has made quite the transition in his athletic career since graduating from Belgreen High School in 2017.

Green, 26, recently competed in the Southeastern Professional Rodeo Association finals at the Neshoba County Coliseum in Philadelphia, Miss., January 23-25, placing second in the first two rounds, winning in the average category and taking home just under \$2,500.

A standout basketball player for the Bulldogs, Green's route to rodeo was a little unconventional. Bull riding is a sport that dates its origins to 18th century Mexico and it remains popular in North America today. Those that want to go pro in the sport usually get their start early in high school or in junior associations and then move up to the college circuit. At that time of Green's life, he was sinking baskets, not straddling bulls. After Belgreen he signed to play college hoops for Alabama Coastal Community College and then attended Florida College. From there Green went west to the Lone Star State. It was in Texas, naturally, where Green found the sport of bull riding calling and where he earned his spurs.

"After college in 2020 I went to Texas through an internship," he said. "It was some guys out there that introduced me to it. I started doing some practice rides and started entering into competitions.

"It's a lot different than basketball," he added. "Every bull is different and every time it's a different challenge. You don't know if (the bull) is gonna spin left, spin right. It's always challenging."

Green moved back to Alabama in 2023 and decided to join the Southeastern Professional Rodeo Association, taking his commitment to "the most dangerous eight seconds in sports," as bull riding has been coined, to the next level.

"I bought my (SPRA) membership in 2023 and I've been riding ever since," Green said. "It'll be two years this month (February)."

In bull riding events for a ride to count the rider must stay on the bull for eight seconds. There are three rounds and the rider earns a score for each successful ride; these scores will be combined at the end. Contestants can also forego rounds if they choose, so that's where some strategy comes into play—and where a risk taken by Green paid off.



COURTESY PHOTO

Adam Green competing last month in Neshoba County, Miss.

"I rode two bulls and no one else rode more than one," he said. "I was the first up to ride before everyone else, so I had to take a bit of a gamble on that.

"If anyone else had rode two and gotten like an 80 (score) they would've beat me," Green added. "My scores weren't that great; I got some easy bulls, I guess you could say. But it worked out."

The only rider to successfully ride two bulls, Green earned a combined score of 131 and won by 46.5 points over the runner-up.

Of course Green was happy to win, but one gets the feeling he wouldn't have taken it too hard if he hadn't. He said he not only enjoys the challenges of the sport but also the rodeo community he's joined.

"There's definitely a family aspect there that's really great," Green said. "Everyone is encouraging. We pick each other up and there's a lot of slapping each other on the back when someone has a good ride.

"We're trying to take each other's money, so it sounds a little contradictory, but we want everyone to do well and are happy for them when they do."

Russellville City Council approves hiring of two police officers

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council approved the hiring of two police officers at its January 30th meeting.

The council unanimously approved Russellville Police Chief Chris Hargett's recommendation to hire Jonathan Copeland and Kyle Knight.

Additionally, the council approved the temporary appointment of Shane Mansell to lieutenant in the Russellville Fire Department and Aloe Wallace to sergeant in the Russellville Fire Department. Both appointments run through April 25, 2025.

In other agenda items, the council:

--approved a resolution to make a 2002 Chevrolet Impala and a 2007 Ford F150 truck surplus property in the Russellville Fire Department and authorized the sale of said vehicles.

--promoted Kendrick Baker to the position of Heavy Equipment Operator III in the Russellville Street Department.

--approved a change in the City of Russellville's Elected Official Salary Ordinance, increasing the salary for the city's full-time mayor position from \$48,000 to \$65,000 a year. This change will take effect starting in the new term once a new mayor is elected in the August 2025 municipal elections.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be February 17, 2025, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.