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'A Golden Jubilee' Russellville Hospital celebrates 50 years of meeting health care needs of its community

*John Pilati
Franklin Free Press*

As Bappa Mukherji addressed the crowd at Russellville Hospital's 50th anniversary 'Golden Jubilee' ceremony Thursday evening, what the Java Medical Group CEO said about the hospital's future far overshadowed his comments about its first half century.

"We've lost 50 rural hospitals since 2017. Not every community is fortunate enough to have the safety of its own hospital, Mukherji said.

"It's an honor to walk these halls every day and see our people caring

so much. There are 700 rural hospitals at risk today. We're fortunate not to be one of them.

"This hospital was bought basically out of bankruptcy six years ago. Everyone wanted this hospital to survive. The risk was and is real but we have overcome that and will continue to provide quality rural healthcare for the residents of Franklin County," he added.

Java Medical Group is the managing company for Russellville Hospital. The hospital is owned by DAVA Health, Inc., a Tennessee-based health care nonprofit that owns multiple rural hospitals.

See 'HOSPITAL,' Page 4

Freedom Fiber celebrates completion of 4,200 miles of fiber installation

*John Pilati
Franklin Free Press*

As officials from all levels of government gathered Thursday in Hamilton to celebrate Freedom Fiber's build-out of more than 4,200 miles of fiber ensuring reliable high-speed internet to homes and businesses across eight Alabama counties, there was some perspective offered as to the significance of that number—4,200.

You could drive three and a half days continuously from the coast of Washington state all the way to Florida's southernmost coast and half the way back before you reached 4,200 miles of travel.

Thanks to a vision from Tombigbee Electric Cooperative's Board of Directors nine years ago, more than 100,000 rural northwest Alabama

residents now have access to fiber internet, something that previously seemed impossible.

While the 'big boys,' including AT&T, Spectrum and others, readily built the infrastructure to light up high-population dense communities, these providers never embraced the 'first mile to last mile' approach that serves as the foundation for Freedom Fiber, a subsidiary of Tombigbee Electric Cooperative.

There were failed efforts by the Franklin County Broadband Task Force and others to convince these larger providers to expand to rural areas. Eventually, the Franklin County Water Service Authority, through local legislation giving it statutory authority to regulate and pursue broadband grant opportunities, found a company willing to

See 'FIBER,' Page 4

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Scott Anthony May, age 49, of Russellville, passed away on Monday, October 13, 2025, at Huntsville Hospital. Visitation was held on Friday, October 17. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

Glenda Jean Richardson, 65, of Russellville, passed away on October 14, 2025. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted the family.

Elizabeth "Beth" Lou Hester Robinson, age 90, passed on October 15, 2025. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

Jessie Delaney "J.D." Robinson, age 89, passed on October 20, 2025. Visitation will be on Thursday, October 23, from 9:30 a.m. until 11 a.m. at Spry Memorial Chapel in Russellville with funeral to follow at 11 a.m. at Franklin Memory Gardens.



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Publisher

John Pilati

E-mail: franklinfreepress@yahoo.com

Sports Editor

Kadin Pounders

Layout Design

Kadin Pounders

Sales Representatives

John Pilati

Content Contributors

Larsen Plyler

Willodean Davis

Graphic Design

Jason Hill

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Letters to the editor

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Back to the Bible by Larsen Plyler: *Matthew 8:1-13*

The next two chapters show how Jesus certified His authority. He will perform a series of signs and we will see the response of both the crowds and the religious leaders.

A leper came to Jesus. Leprosy rendered a person ceremonially unclean, cut off from the spiritual and social community. His desperate need is revealed in the fact that He implored Jesus. He had no doubt in Jesus' ability, but wondered about His willingness. Jesus was touched by this man's need and He touched Him. Under normal circumstances Jesus would have been made unclean by this man's touch, but instead, Jesus reverses the direction and makes this man clean (Lev. 5:3; 13:44, 45). Jesus instructed him to follow the Law's instructions for a person cleansed of leprosy (Lev. 14:2-32) to show them he had been healed. He told the man not to tell anyone. Perhaps Jesus recognized that the crowds would slow down His work.

A centurion, a Roman military officer, came to Jesus on behalf of His servant. Jesus said He'd come heal the servant, but the officer did not think that he was worthy to have Jesus in his house. He knew how authority worked. He gave and received commands. He could speak the word and the job would be done. He knew Jesus could just speak the word.

Jesus was impressed by His faith. It surpassed the faith of those in Israel. In addition, this pointed forward to a day when it would be outsiders from the nations who would join the spiritual fathers. Those who thought they were on the inside would be cast out.

Jesus told him that what he believed could be done would be. The servant was healed right then.

Lessons to Learn:

See the power of Jesus. Jesus was able to demonstrate His authority to speak in the way He did by showing His power in a variety of ways. He could heal disease with the touch of a hand or at a distance. We will see Him demonstrate His power in even more ways.

See the compassion of Jesus. The first man knew Jesus had the power, but didn't know if He was willing. Jesus was. The centurion and his slave may have been outsiders, but Jesus met the Roman's faith with healing power.

Great faith equals great humility. This is always the case. The first man trusted Jesus, but would not presume to demand Jesus' attention. The second man trusted Jesus and did not feel like He had the value for Jesus to come into His house. If we know and trust Jesus, we will humble ourselves under His will. We won't presume or assume we deserve anything.

Tune in to 100.7 WGOL Sunday at 8:30am for our Back to the Bible Radio Program.

Reach out with your questions, comments, or requests for personal Bible study at backtothebiblepodcast.com or at info@backtothebiblepodcast.com.



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'HOSPITAL,' from Page 1

Mukherji said the hospital's most valuable asset is the people who work there and their daily efforts to make Russellville Hospital a special place for the community.

In the past six years, the hospital has added wound care, a sleep lab, expanded its surgical services and added clinicians to its team.

Mukherji also acknowledged one area where the hospital needs improvement and it will become a focus in the coming years.

"Russellville Hospital will continue to be a hub for acute care and we will expand our preventive care, something we need to do a better job of to help people," Mukherji said. "We will increase the focus to help keep people from getting sick rather than just providing treatment afterward.

"A lot of people believe you have to leave Russellville to get quality health care. I assure you that's not true. There's quality health care right here if you'll use it," he added.

In a time where the futures of many rural hospitals are in peril, it was a proud moment for the management and staff of Russellville Hospital to hear those reassuring words as the hospital celebrates its 1975 opening in Russellville.

And the numbers of patients treated last year shows the ever-growing importance of Russellville Hospital for Franklin County. More than 9,000 patients were treated at the facility's emergency room in 2024, with this year's total expected to surpass 10,000, Mukherji said.

Russellville Hospital saw more than 25,000 outpatient hospital visits last year. And if you add patient visits with Russellville Hospital's providers and clinicians, that number balloons to 220,000, almost seven times the population of Franklin County.

U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-Haleyville) presented a resolution read into the Congressional record recognizing Russellville Hospital's accomplishments and significance in this community the past 50 years.

State Rep. Jamie Kiel (R-Russellville) followed by presenting Mukherji and Ware a copy of a resolution approved by the Alabama Legislature also honoring the hospital's 50th anniversary.

Kiel (R-Russellville) recalls a phone call he received shortly after he was first elected to the Alabama Legislature in 2018.

"One of the first calls I got was 'the hospital is about to be running on generators,'" Kiel recalled. "And I thought 'is there a functional problem? And they said 'no, they cannot pay their electric bill. They have not paid their electric bill and their electricity is about to be turned off.'

"And it is a remarkable turnaround in the last six years, Bappa and Chris, that you guys have been here. The appearance of the hospital, the reputation of the hospital totally changed in that six years. On behalf of the Alabama Legislature, I'm very proud to present a resolution to Russellville Hospital acknowledging the work you have done to turn this around," Kiel added.

In conjunction with its 50th anniversary, the hospital's recent renovations reflect management's ongoing commitment to the facility's future. Those renovations include a newly painted exterior, a stone-enhanced facade, updated signage and a new neutral interior palette.

The emergency room has received a new paint job and new flooring, helping to ensure a welcoming and modern environment for patients and staff. In the always developing health care industry, Russellville Hospital will continue to be a trendsetter, its CEO explained in his final comments Thursday evening.

"The health care landscape is ever-changing. Our board and leadership team are dedicated to investing their time and money into our remaining on the front end of health care practices in this hospital," Ware said.

'FIBER,' from Page 1

invest in Franklin County. That's where Freedom Fiber came in. Local, state and federal elected officials worked tirelessly to obtain grants to begin, and complete, the buildout. These include the Franklin County Commission dedicating American Relief Plan grant funds, Rep. Jamie Kiel and Sen. Larry Stutts securing state grant monies and Congressman Robert Aderholt steering federal funds vitals to the project—a true team effort.

In 2018-2019, Freedom Fiber secured federal United States Department of Agriculture ReConnect support that jump started rural fiber construction. "Standing in that Hamilton warehouse six years ago, I said that broadband is the electricity of the 21st century," Aderholt said. "Today, we are closer than ever to ensuring that every home, school and business in Alabama has access to that vital lifeline. The progress is real—and the best is yet to come."

And as we near the end of 2025, more than 96% of Franklin County residents have access to reliable, high-speed internet at their homes and businesses.

Scott Mugno, former board member of the Franklin County Water Service Authority, attended Thursday's event and reflected on the impact of what Freedom Fiber has meant to Franklin County.

"This was a great celebration! Tombigbee Electric Cooperative and Freedom Fiber have made a permanent positive change in Northwest Alabama—both present day and for our future," Mugno said. "They should be very proud as should all the community leaders and officials who worked so long for this."

Freedom Fiber's 4,200-mile buildout serves seven counties in addition to Franklin County with one gigabit fiber access. Residents in Marion, Lamar, Fayette and portions of Winston, Walker, Cullman and Tuscaloosa counties also had no options for modern connectivity until Freedom Fiber came to their counties.

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Public invited to reception honoring 26-year law enforcement career of retiring RPD Captain Joe Hargett

John Pllati
Franklin Free Press

A 26-year career in any profession is quite a milestone.

In law enforcement, it's a rarity.

For Russellville Police Department Captain Joe Hargett, his 26-year career serving the citizens of Franklin County will soon end, with November 1st his retirement day.

The Russellville Police Department invites the public to join officers and colleagues at a reception honoring Hargett for more than a quarter century of dedicated law enforcement in his native Franklin County.



RPD Captain Joe Hargett
(Courtesy photo)

The reception will be Wednesday, October 29th, from 1-3 p.m., in the Municipal Courtroom of the Russellville Police Department building in downtown Russellville.

Hargett's law enforcement career began when he was hired as a Corrections Officer/Dispatcher in the Franklin County Sheriff's Office in 2000.

In his five-year tenure with the FCSO, Hargett would serve as a deputy after his law enforcement academy graduation and the department's K-9 Officer.

Hargett was hired by the City of Russellville in 2005. His advancement through the ranks of RPD saw Hargett begin as a patrolman, receive promotions to patrol sergeant, then investigations sergeant, investigations lieutenant and Investigations Captain.

Hargett was assigned to the Drug Enforcement Agency as a task force officer, as well as an assignment to the Alabama Law Enforcement Agency Region E Drug Task Force.

Those promotions didn't just happen by coincidence. Hargett, according to RPD Chief Chris Hargett, who happens to be his brother as well, served as an example of what a law enforcement officer should be.

"Throughout his career, Captain Hargett has led with integrity, professionalism and a deep commitment to this community. His experience and leadership have made a lasting impact on our department and those he's worked alongside," Chief Hargett said.

"On a personal note, I've had the privilege of serving with Joe not only as a colleague but also as my younger brother. I was working at the Franklin County Sheriff's Office when he began his career. And when I became Chief of Russellville, he was one of the first people I hired. It's bittersweet to see him retire, but I'm proud of all he's accomplished and thankful for his years of service," Hargett added.

Russellville Mayor David Grissom said Hargett will have a lasting impact on the Russellville Police Department because of the example he set each day he came to work.

"Captain Hargett's legacy will continue to live on in the men and women of the Russellville Police Department whom he worked with on a daily basis. We wish him the best in his well-earned retirement, but his professionalism and dedication to law enforcement will be very much missed," Grissom said.

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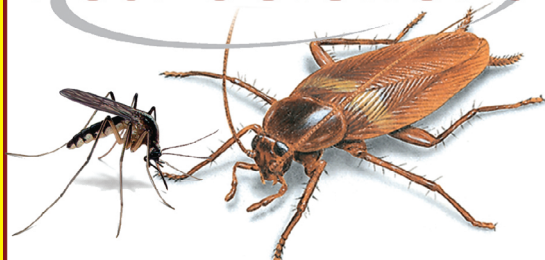
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 **N**orth Russellville Baptist Church will host its annual Fall Festival Saturday, Oct. 25 from 4-6:30 p.m. Bounce house, games, fun! Trunk or treating, face painting, hair tinsel, popcorn, cotton candy, photo ops, Little Debbie cake Walk. Wright Weiner Food Truck, Brew Sisters Coffee and an ice cream truck will be set up to sell food. Church is located at 1401 Waterloo Road in Russellville.

 **T**he NACOLG SENIORx medication assistance program supplies free and low-cost medications for anyone in Alabama with a disability or chronic illness, regardless of age, that requires daily medication. Medicare recipients may also be eligible. For more information, contact NACOLG SENIORx today. There is no charge for this service. Call Paula Pardue at 256-389-0529, 256-389-0530 or 1-800-AGELINE (1-800-243-5463). This program is in partnership with the State of Alabama and Alabama Department of Senior Services. Contact us for more information.

 **J**oin Safeplace in its campaign for Domestic Violence Awareness by participating in the Purple Mile Walk, Friday, Oct. 24th, 9 a.m., at the Franklin County Courthouse. T-shirts will be sold at a cost of \$20/each. To order t-shirts, call Kim Smith at 256-460-6832 or email her at ksmith@nwal-safeplace.org.

 **S**iloam Missionary Baptist Church, located at 1657 County Rd 60, Russellville, will have a Fall Festival on Sunday, October 26, from 5-7 p.m. There will be a Trunk or Treat, crafts for kids, a cake walk, and hot dogs will be served.

 **T**he Cowboy Church of Franklin County will host a Trunk 'R Treat on October 31, 2025, starting at 5 p.m. There will be candy-filled decorated trunks and fun for all ages! Church is located at 25100 Highway 24, Russellville. For more information, call Michelle at 256-668-2344.

 **T**he Cowboy Church of Franklin County invites you to a Judgment House Experience Chili Cook-Off, Saturday, October 25th, at the church, located at 25100 Hwy. 24, Russellville. Bring your best chili, if you dare! Chili drop-off by 4 p.m. Judging begins at 4:30 p.m. 'Judgment House: The Last Ride, a hayride drama experience will begin immediately following the Chili Cook-Off. Free admission. Family-friendly Western-themed fun with a powerful message of eternity. For more information, call Jean at 256-275-0730.

 **T**here will be a Car Show as part of the Leighton Fire Department's 2nd annual Fall Festival, Saturday, Oct. 25th, 4-8 p.m., 2225 Railroad Street, Leighton. Sponsored by Why Knot Show 'Em Off. Free to spectate. \$20 registration paid day of show in person. Cars, trucks, bikes & RatRods. Trophies, door prizes, 50/50 drawing. Call 256-668-2585 for more info.

 **T**he Russellville First Methodist Church will have a 5th Thursday Food Giveaway on Thursday, October 30th, at 311 N Jackson Ave., Russellville, AL, beginning at 1 pm. Please use the back entrance from Washington Ave. Remain in your car, have your ID ready, and allow our volunteers to serve you. Note: In case of inclement weather, the giveaway will be rescheduled.

 **L**ove Packages Ministry is in need of donations of new and used Bibles (in any condition). They will be sent to ministers and missionaries around the world who will distribute them. Donations can be dropped off in the church office of Red Bay First Baptist Church or Russellville First Baptist Church.

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County Commission approves 10-year tax abatement for Pilgrim's \$9 million capital investment

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At its October 20, 2025, business meeting, the Franklin County Commission approved a 10-year tax abatement for Pilgrim's, Inc., based on the company's commitment to a \$9 million capital improvement expected to add 260 jobs for Franklin County.

The commission approved the measure after hearing from Franklin County Development Authority Executive Director Sherye Price.

The \$9 million capital improvement will include improvements and renovations of existing buildings rather than construction of a new facility. The project will allow the company to expand production and offer an additional product bringing an expected 260 new jobs to the Russellville facility, Price said.

The abatement does not relieve the company of paying education taxes for the 10-year period. Similar abatements have been granted previously by the commission for both new industry and expansion of existing industry in Franklin County.

In other agenda items at its October 20th meeting, the commission:

- accepted the resignation of part-time Emergency Management Agency Assistant Ron Coats and agreed to advertise for the position.
- tabled a proposal for repairs to four weather/emergency sirens across the county in order to obtain estimates for the necessary repairs and whether battery replacement will resolve the issues for any of the sirens.
- approved the resignation of temporary Franklin County Highway Department employee Eli Warren.
- approved a request by Delane Clark to vacate Parker Road after a public hearing brought no objection to the proposal.
- tabled an agenda item to consider a request of right-of-way for a portion of County Road 21 by a party that has leased hunting rights on the property and wants to ensure the ability to access it.
- tabled until December a request to vacate Husey Hammock Road to allow adjoining property owners and utility companies the opportunity to be contacted about the proposal.
- approved the hiring of Callie Barber as part-time Temporary Property Clerk in the Revenue Commissioner's Office and Kathy Morgan as part-time mapping clerk/property clerk.
- approved the hiring of Marina Staphill as Corrections Officer/Dispatcher and Dustin Chase Oliver as Courthouse Security Officer in the Franklin County Sheriff's Office.
- tabled filling two vacant Deputy positions in the Sheriff's Office.
- declared a 2015 Chevrolet Tahoe surplus property and authorized the sale of the same on GovDeals.com.
- accepted the resignation of Samantha Weeks as Corrections Officer/Dispatcher and authorized advertising for the same.
- approved hiring Tiffany Buchanan as temporary Corrections Officer/ Dispatcher.
- authorized soliciting bids for the purchase of two garbage trucks in the Solid Waste Department at a cost of \$298,590 per truck.
- approved the resignation of temporary Heavy Equipment Operator Joel Woods.
- reappointed LaVon Duboise to the NACOLG Board.
- appointed Michael Shane Bendall as District Two board member and Judy Bullen as District Four board member on the Industrial Development Board.

Russellville City Council approves retail liquor license by 3-2 split vote

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

By a split vote of 3-2, the Russellville City Council approved an application to issue a retail liquor (off-premise consumption) license to a business that will soon open in the former Dot's Cafe property on Highway 43 North across from Burger King.

The petitioner N Vir Russellville, Inc., d/b/a Tigers Beverages, applied for the retail liquor Class II package (per Alabama ABC Board) and the matter was set for a public hearing before the council's October 20th meeting.

There was no input either in favor of or against the application at the public hearing. Mayor David Grissom and Councilmen David Palmer and Jamie Harris voted to issue the license, while Councilmen Darren Woodruff and Gary Cummings voted against the application. Councilman Dexter Hamilton was absent from his final meeting on the Russellville City Council.

Prior to Monday's council meeting, city's Alcohol Review Committee recommended the council approve the application for Tigers Beverages.

Monday's meeting was the final one for the current council.

The next meeting will be November 3, 2025, which will be the organizational meeting for the new mayor and council. Only one change will take place, as Lonnie Freeman will be sworn in as District Four Councilman and join Grissom, Palmer, Woodruff, Cummings and Harris.

The council also made a number of board appointments, including the following:

- Zoning Adjustment Board: reappointed Scott Adcock, George Coleman, Sr., and Tony Chard, and appointed Chad Wells and Jeff Fretwell.
- Russellville Water and Sewer Board: reappointed Joe Graham.
- Civil Service Board: reappointed Scott Adcock.
- Russellville Industrial Development Board: reappointed Matt Cooper, Alan Rhudy and Greg Trapp. Appointed Chad Wells and Sergio Ruiz.
- Russellville City Schools Board of Education: reappointed Kim Clonts and Greg Trapp, both District One residents. The motion to reappoint was made by Woodruff and seconded by Palmer.

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Applications and copies of the Job Descriptions may be obtained at the Russellville City Hall, Office of the Mayor, 304 North Jackson Avenue. Applications submitted to the Russellville Civil Service Board less than one year ago remain active. Those individuals do not need to reapply in order to receive consideration for this appointment. They need to call the city hall and ask to pull their application. Applications must be returned no later than October 24, 2025, 2025, by U.S. Mail to:

The Russellville Civil Service Board
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'COUNCIL' from Page 7

"District Two is still working to appoint a representative on the school board," Woodruff said. "At this time, with the tenure of the current board members, for the good of our school system and the good of the board, I agreed to support the experienced board members for another term."

—Library Board: reappointed Debbie Beason, Tammie West, Maria Mojica, Lela Ray and Connie Cole and appointed Katernia Cole-Coffey and Cassie Medley as advisory board members.

—Airport Authority: appointed Rob Grant.

—Compatibility Board: appointed Chad Wells.

In other agenda items, the council:

—approved the promotion of David Romans to Sergeant in the Russellville Police Department.

—approved the promotion of Chris Watkins to Captain in the Russellville Fire Department.

—approved promotion of Mickey Gentry, Marcus Hill, Grant Tarascou, Brad Pounders, Shane Mansell and Bryan Sutton as Lieutenants in the Russellville Fire Department.

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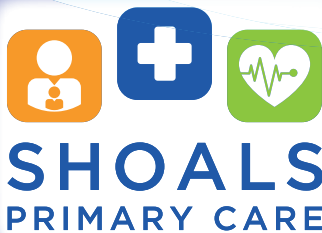
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Golden Tigers clinch playoff berth with Homecoming win over West Point

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

It was a great night to be back at the friendly confines of Golden Tiger Stadium for the Russellville High School varsity football team on Friday.

After a three-game road stretch, the Golden Tigers clinched a postseason berth on Homecoming night, beating region foe West Point 42-14 to improve to 5-3 overall and 4-1 in Class 5A Region 7.

"It's definitely good to get into the playoffs. That's a big goal each and every year," Russellville head coach Dustin Goodwin said. "If you're not in it then you don't get the chance to extend your season, so making the playoffs is always a big plus. We're very pleased with our kids."

Homecoming week comes with many distractions, but Goodwin felt his players did a good job of handling them and maintaining focus on their opponent throughout the week.

"It's been a great week," Goodwin said. "There were a ton of potential distractions. Our middle school football team won the conference championship; our volleyball team won the area championship and we went and cheered them on, and that was great to see something that hasn't happened in a really long time here. Then there was

See, 'HOMECOMING,' Page 12

Red Bay claims first region title since 2019 after Decatur Heritage win

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The Red Bay High School football program's turnaround from the 2024 season to the present has been a remarkable one.

On Friday night, the Red Bay Tigers went on the road and routed Decatur Heritage 50-9 to win the Class 2A Region 8 title, the program's first region championship since 2019. The victory over the Eagles improved Red Bay's record to 7-1 overall and 4-0 in region play and guaranteed the Tigers a home playoff game for the first time since 2020.

"It's a big moment for our program, and I think our kids have done a great job so far," first-year Red Bay head coach Tyler Jeffreys told the *Franklin Free Press*. "We're the region champs for the first time since 2019. That was one of our goals before the season started, and the players achieved it."

"This was definitely a team effort. We have a bunch of unselfish kids that want each other to play well, and I think that's been a huge part of our success," Jeffreys added. "Credit to our staff—it's not just me. Credit to our kids for the effort they've put in week in and week out."

"I'm super proud of our kids and how they've played all year long."

Red Bay dominated the hosts overall, but it was actually Decatur Heritage that scored the opening points with a successful field goal on the opening drive of the game.

That was just about all the Eagles could hang their hat on in the contest, however. Red Bay answered with a drive and a short touchdown run by senior Jaxon Vinson to make it 8-3, Tigers. The visitors never surrendered the lead after that.

Jaxon Swann was the next Tiger to find the endzone to make it 14-3; Vinson scored his second touchdown of the night on a 20-yard rush to increase RBHS' advantage to 20-3; and senior quarterback Jeremiah Thorne's 47-yard touchdown scamper late in the second quarter made it 28-3 before the halftime break.

See, 'RED BAY,' Page 12

RHS volleyball downs Lawrence County to capture long-awaited area tournament title

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

In front of a large crowd and a packed student section, the Russellville High School varsity volleyball team took care of business in the Class 5A Area 15 tournament on Thursday night, dispatching the Lawrence County Lady Red Devils 3-1 in the championship match. After falling behind 1-0 to start the contest, the Lady Golden Tigers roared back to take the next three sets and capture the tournament title.

"It just means a lot," Russellville's second-year head coach Madison Lamon said. "I love that they (the players) give no quit. We...came off with the loss that first set and they bounced back, and that's all I could ask of them. I told them to leave it all out there on the court, and they did exactly that. They didn't quit."

Russellville secured the right to host the area tournament and clinched an automatic berth into the area championship game after winning the regular season area title back on October 7.

The Lady Golden Tigers had to wait to find out who they would draw in the area final on Thursday night, decided by the outcome of the West Point and Lawrence County semifinal. It was LCHS that advanced.

In the championship match, it was the already warmed-up Lady Red Devils who grabbed an early advantage and earned a victory in the first set, 25-15.

But the Lady Golden Tigers' heads didn't fall, and the team had a blistering start to set two, taking a quick 7-1 lead and forcing LCHS to take a timeout.

The hosts continued to dominate in the set, going up 14-5, then 18-8, and, after a brief run by LCHS, put the set away 25-17 with senior Laila Hill's kill ending it.

See, 'VOLLEYBALL,' Page 13

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‘RED BAY,’ from Page 11

In the second half, Vinson recorded a third rushing touchdown—this one for close to 90 yards—to make it 36-3. And for good measure, Vinson rushed for another touchdown, his 20th of the campaign, in the third quarter to give Red Bay a 43-3 advantage.

Red Bay’s final touchdown was also scored in the third quarter. Decatur Heritage would go on to grab a garbage time touchdown in the fourth.

The region title was a well-deserved reward for the team that hasn’t been beaten since week two of the campaign and has not lost a home game yet this year. Jeffreys, who got drenched by his players at the end of the game, said his players were stoked by the accomplishment.

“After they gave me a water bath I was a little shocked, but they were really excited,” Jeffreys said of his players. “It was a big night for them. All of the kids that are on this team have set the standard for this program for years to come. They worked really hard for this and they deserve to celebrate this one.”

With the 41-point victory over Decatur Heritage, Red Bay secures one more game at Fred Bostick Jr. Stadium this season. Whatever happens the remainder of the regular season, the Red Bay Tigers will host the fourth seed in Region 7 come November 7.

That said, after the celebrations are over the Tigers have to remember the job is not done just yet, Jeffreys said.

“The thing about it is we’re not done,” the RBHS head coach told the FFP. “We’ve gotta keep grinding. We’ve achieved one of our goals, but we can’t be complacent.

“Not too long from now the games will just keep getting tougher and tougher, so we’ve gotta continue to get better each week,” Jeffreys added.

Red Bay continues its regular season slate with a final region game at Tanner on Friday, October 24.



Red Bay players following their 50-9 win over Decatur Heritage. (Photo by Caleb Ramey)

‘HOMECOMING,’ from Page 11

the bonfire and the pep rally and the parade and getting out of school—still being able to come out here and execute and play as well as we did, I think it’s a testament to the character of our team and the focus they have.

“We’ve had great crowds at everything that’s gone on this week,” he added. “It’s been a great week for Russellville athletics, for Russellville High School, and I think this week shows why it’s great to be a Golden Tiger.”

The Golden Tigers drew first blood in the region contest against West Point. Russellville opened things up with a 59-yard touchdown pass from sophomore quarterback Whit Goodwin to senior wide receiver Connor Devaney, giving RHS a 7-0 lead after the extra point by senior kicker David Tomas.

The visitors tied it up late in the first quarter on a 13-yard touchdown, but another touchdown pass by Goodwin—this one to senior Bryson Cooper—gave the Golden Tigers the lead again, 14-7, with 11:34 remaining in the first half.

Russellville was able to extend its lead to two touchdowns before halftime after an interception by freshman Drake Ergle gave the Golden Tigers the ball back. A 70-yard completion to receiver Julyun Francisco set up a short touchdown run by junior running back Tarus Davis to make it 21-7 at the break.

After the intermission, West Point struck on a 64-yard touchdown run, making it 21-14 with less than a minute gone in the third quarter. However, the Golden Tigers shook off the early second half sucker punch and controlled the game moving forward.

An 11-yard touchdown pass from Goodwin to junior Daniel Aycock doubled the lead for RHS, 28-14 in the third quarter.

Later in the third, Goodwin scored a TD with his legs from five yards out to make it 35-14.

Goodwin, who ended the night with over 325 yards passing, capped the scoring with a 50-yard touchdown toss to Davis to give RHS a 42-14 lead with 2:27 remaining in the third.

“I don’t think we were perfect in the first half—or the second. But I think our guys were prepared and they played the way they were supposed to,” Goodwin told the Franklin Free Press. “We had some big plays, and that’s always good to see offensively. We gave up 14 points on defense, and I know our defensive staff is not gonna be happy about those 14 points.

“But all in all, I’m very pleased with our kids and their ability to do what needed to be done to win the football game,” he added.

In addition to securing a playoff berth, the win over West Point Friday night set the Golden Tigers up for a showdown with the Priceville Bulldogs for second place in Region 7. The winner of that contest on October 24 will earn the right to host a first round playoff game.

Goodwin said the Golden Tigers have been focused on West Point, but in the coming days Russellville will turn its eye to Priceville in what should be a very competitive contest.

“We really talk to our kids every week about being 1-0 and attacking the task at hand. The Priceville game next week wouldn’t have the same significance if we didn’t win this week, so we’ve really been focused on West Point,” Goodwin said. “In the back of our minds we knew we’d have the Priceville game to finish region play, but we didn’t know the implications of it until after tonight. Now we know what they are. We get it at home, so I expect nothing less than our coaches and kids to be itching to prepare for that.

“We just have to do our part to prepare and then execute next Friday night,” he added.



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‘VOLLEYBALL,’ from Page 11

“After that first set they showed that grit, you know? When you face adversity, a lot of teams normally want to shut off; I think that gives my group a little bit more power,” Lamon said. “They want it. You can tell they want it. But they’re coming together after every point; they’re cheering for each other, even after mistakes. That’s what we talked about all year: you need to be an encourager to each other even when it’s not going our way, and I think they showed that even in the first set.”

The third set saw more of the same from Russellville: the Lady Golden Tigers jumped up 8-3 to start, extended their lead to 14-7 and then 20-12 before finishing with a 25-18 win.

The fourth—and what proved to be the final—set demonstrated more of the ‘grit’ from RHS that Lamon talked about postgame.

Lawrence County (25-29), determined not to go down without a fight, started hot and went up 10-4 before Russellville was able to gain a foothold. Methodically, the Lady Golden Tigers started to cut into Lawrence County’s advantage, slashing the deficit to 12-8 and then 13-11. A Blevyn Sappington kill eventually tied the game back up 18-18, and a block by Bella Malone gave Russellville a 19-18 lead, its first of the set.

Lawrence County, finally sensing the momentum shift, called a timeout after Malone’s go-ahead block, but it was probably too late at that point—the Lady Golden Tigers wouldn’t be denied.

RHS took a three-point advantage, 22-19, after senior setter Fatima Ramirez deftly tapped a ball over two LCHS blockers to a vacant space on the floor. A few rallies later, a Lawrence County attack error ended it 25-21 and sealed the triumph for the hosts.

One can imagine the scenes as the referee blew the final whistle and the Russellville student section rushed the court. While the Lady Golden Tigers showed fight to bounce back on the court, their classmates—dressed in cow costumes, holding signs and waving pom-poms, celebrating every kill—and the rest of the Russellville fans brought the energy all night and got a deserved nod from Lamon, who said the team was fueled by their support.

“That’s the biggest crowd that I’ve ever seen at a volleyball game,” she said. “Everytime we have a crowd and there’s people cheering for us specifically, that gets my girls fired up even more.”

Seniors Laila Hill and Fatima Ramirez led the team with 15 kills and 21 assists, respectively, in the win. After the game Lamon praised her senior duo for their leadership in this campaign.

“I’m so proud of my seniors,” Lamon said. “They’re not really a group that likes to say a whole lot vocally but they’ve stepped up...and really led our team.”

But it’s not just the two seniors shouldering all the responsibilities and making plays, Lamon said. At this point in the season, the whole squad is making valuable contributions.

“I’ve also had some sophomores and juniors—everyone’s stepping up now,” she said. “They see the impact they’re making, so they want to continue to help.”

And it shows in the stats, too. Sophomore Blevyn Sappington finished with 14 kills and 17 digs, sophomore Bella Malone recorded nine kills and had two blocks, and junior Alexia Groce made 13 assists in addition to everything Hill and Ramirez were contributing.

Then there’s libero Bri McCulloch, who would normally see her name in the headline for her performance Thursday night. The sophomore finished her area championship match with a team-high 27 digs, giving her 827 for the season and 1,393 for her career. Both numbers set new program records... —and did I mention she’s a sophomore?

Really, if you take a step back, McCulloch’s record-breaking year kind of parallels perfectly with where the Lady Golden Tigers are as a whole this season. Lamon is in her ‘sophomore’ season as head coach, a majority of the players on her team are sophomores, and the squad is breaking program records left and right.

After the area tournament, Russellville’s record sits at program history-best 40-15 overall, which shatters the previous record that the team broke nearly a month ago. Oh, and I forgot to mention that the area tournament championship the Lady Golden Tigers won might also be the first in the program’s history.

Postgame, Lamon couldn’t recall seeing a previous area tournament title in the record books and a glance at what history is available online shows two area tournament championship appearances for Russellville in 1997—RHS finished runner-up to Muscle Shoals—and 2014 (Lamon’s sophomore season at Russellville) when the Lady Golden Tigers were runners-up to Lawrence County.

Whether it is the first area tourney title for RHS or not, the fact remains: it’s been a banner year for RHS volleyball already—and the Lady Golden Tigers aren’t done yet.

This 2025 Russellville team will have more opportunities to rewrite the record book when it travels to Hoover for the AHSAA North Regional tournament next week.

Lamon acknowledges the regional will be a greater challenge, but believes the key to her team’s success will be to just keep doing what it’s doing.

“Even if we happen to get down at some point, still showing that grit, that fight. Still staying encouraging, making sure they cheer after every single point because we’re going to be playing tough teams,” she said. “We’ve seen the bracket of who we could play and we’ve already been preparing for it.”



The Russellville Golden Tiger varsity volleyball team, the 2025 Class 5A Area 15 Tournament champions. (Courtesy photo)

PCHS advances to regional with runner-up finish in Class 3A Area 15 tournament

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The Phil Campbell High School varsity volleyball team is headed back to the AHSAA North Super Regional for the third straight season after finishing runner-up in the Class 3A Area 15 tournament at Colbert Heights on Thursday night.

Despite winning just five matches during the regular season, the Lady Bobcats took care of business when it mattered most, securing a tournament semifinal win to advance to the area championship and earn an automatic berth in the regional tournament.

To get to the area final the Lady Bobcats had to first take down Sheffield, which they did in four sets.

Phil Campbell, which hadn't played for a full week prior to the Sheffield match, had to shake off some rust—or have the rust knocked off them—before putting their best foot forward. The Lady Bobcats were routed in the first set 25-8 but rebounded quickly in the second set to win 25-18. The Lady Bobcats didn't fool around after that, beating Sheffield 25-13 in the third set before grabbing a 25-22 victory in the fourth and final set.

Advancing to the area tournament championship, Phil Campbell put up a fight against the host, top-seeded Colbert Heights, but ultimately fell in three straight sets, 18-25, 21-25, and 14-25.

Though PCHS has yet to have a winning regular season record in the young history of its program, the Lady Bobcats have done what they've needed to do to qualify for postseason play in three of their four varsity campaigns, winning the area tournament in 2023 and finishing runner-up last season. When the Lady Bobcats have gotten to the playoffs, their teams have played fairly well, advancing to the second round of the regional in 2023 and taking Winfield the distance in the first round of the regional last season.

Phil Campbell will have another opportunity to make its mark in 2025 when they travel to Hoover to face Donoho in the opening round, Wednesday, October 22. First serve is set for 9 a.m. at the Hoover Met Complex's Finley Center.

RUSSELLVILLE VOLLEYBALL



BLEVYN SAPPINGTON

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OCTOBER 13-18, 2025

The FFP Athlete of the Week for October 13-18 is Russellville volleyball's Blevyn Sappington, who recorded 14 kills, 17 digs, and two services aces in the Lady Golden Tigers' area championship match against Lawrence County. Sappington's performance helped RHS secure the area tournament crown and advance the team to its first regional appearance in over a decade.



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Tharptown, Belgreen volleyball teams close out campaigns in Class 2A Area 14 Tournament

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The Tharptown High School and Belgreen High School varsity volleyball teams both crashed out of the Class 2A Area 14 volleyball tournament, held at Mars Hill Bible School, on October 15, ending both the Lady Wildcats' and Lady Bulldogs' 2025 seasons.

It was Tharptown and Covenant Christian that got the tournament started around 1 p.m. on Wednesday. As the No. 3 seed in the area, THS faced No. 2 seed Covenant Christian in the first semifinal match played at Mars Hill's gym. THS lost in three sets 25-18, 25-10, 25-12.

In the opening set, the Lady Wildcats went up early 3-0 but the Lady Eagles responded quickly to take a 9-5 lead before THS called its first timeout. Covenant then went up 21-16 before Tharptown called its final timeout of the set, and the Lady Eagles ultimately went on to win it 25-18.

Set two was all Covenant: The Lady Eagles jumped out to an 8-4 lead to start and then extended it to 19-9 before THS took a second timeout. CCS closed out the set on a 6-1 run to win 25-10.

In the final set of the match, Tharptown fell behind 8-1 and then 14-2. Credit to THS: The Lady Wildcats didn't quit and cut the deficit by a good margin before it was over, thanks in part to four straight service aces by Cami Jeffreys. But, in the end lost, THS lost the set 25-12.

Despite exiting in the semis of the area tournament, the Tharptown volleyball program showed improvement during this first season under head coach Lori Huffaker, as evidenced by a better area record and the team's Franklin County Tournament championship. Things, Huffaker told the *Franklin Free Press*, are certainly looking up for the Lady Wildcats volleyball program.

"Today we just didn't execute our game plan, but I'm still proud of our girls for their effort," Huffaker said. "We made great strides this season. Not only have they initiated a resurgence in the volleyball program at Tharptown High School, they have ignited some school spirit. We had a great crowd there today, and I'm so thankful for the support from our student section and our parents! It really means a lot to our players!"

"These girls have laid a great foundation and things are looking bright for the future of Tharptown volleyball. And I'm excited to see what these underclassmen can accomplish during their high school career!" she added.

Next up it was Belgreen's turn in the semis.

Belgreen, taking on one of the top 10 teams in Class 2A in Mars Hill, gave the Lady Panthers all they wanted and more but ultimately fell 3-1. Belgreen, behind hot starts and grinding rallies, forced Mars Hill to come from behind in two of the four sets to win it.

The fourth-seeded Lady Bulldogs sent a shot across Mars Hill's bow early by winning the back-and-forth opening set 27-25. Up 16-15, Mars Hill called a timeout after feeling the Lady Bulldogs begin to surge. But the break didn't phase Belgreen, who continued to fight back, tie the set up, and finally earn the necessary two-point advantage to end it after a Mars Hill defensive error.

Mars Hill didn't play around in the second set, however, easing by the Lady Bulldogs in set two 25-7.

Sets three and four were thrillers, and that's when the regular season area champs had to come from behind to defeat Belgreen.

In set three, Belgreen had a 9-6 and then an 11-7 advantage before Mars Hill stormed back. MHBS scored five straight points to take a 12-11 lead and force a BHS timeout. After that interlude, the hosts out-scored BHS again 7-1 and took a 19-12 lead prior to Belgreen calling its second timeout to try and regroup. The Lady Bulldogs continued to make it interesting but in the end lost the set 25-17.

In the fourth—and what proved to be the final set—of the match, Belgreen got off to another hot start, pulling ahead 9-4 before Mars Hill asked the referee for time to think. Belgreen maintained its lead for a while, but Mars Hill slowly clawed back a point here and a point there until it was 18-17, BHS, and the Lady Bulldogs called time.

Forty-four points into the set, it was all knotted up 22-22, but on their home court the Lady Panthers willed their way to a 3-0 run and—no doubt relieved—avoided having to play a gritty Belgreen squad in a tie-breaking fifth set.

"While our season came to an end with a tough loss in the area tournament, I couldn't be prouder of this group of girls. They've worked incredibly hard all year, showing resilience, heart, and dedication both on and off the court," Belgreen head coach Alison Terry told the *FFP*.

"Our seniors have been exceptional leaders—not just in play, but in character. They've been role models to the younger players, showing kindness, setting high standards, and creating a supportive team culture that truly feels like family," she added. "The friendships built on this team will last long after the final game, and the lessons in teamwork and perseverance will serve them well in every part of their lives."

"I genuinely love these girls, this program, and this school. Coaching them has been an honor, and I'm grateful for the journey we've taken together this season."

Belgreen ended its 2025 campaign with a 22-11 overall record.



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