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RUSSELLVILLE

Guinn: Four-time state champion Higgins 'the right guy at the right time' to lead Golden Tiger football program

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

After a couple weeks of speculation and anticipation, the wait is over for the Russellville High School football program and its supporters—a championship-caliber head football coach was officially hired on Saturday afternoon.

Darrell Higgins, a coaching veteran with over three decades of experience and a four-time state championship winner in 10 seasons as head coach at Mars Hill Bible School, announced his resignation from MHBS on Friday and was unanimously tapped by the Russellville City Schools Board of Education as



the new head coach of the Golden Tigers during a called special meeting a day later. Higgins was also hired as the athletic director and as a teacher.

The RCS Board wasted no time in its search for the football program's 29th head coach; the job was posted soon after former head coach Dustin

See 'HIGGINS,' Page 4

13 road & bridge improvements completed in 2025 with \$2.1 million of gas tax funds

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At its January 20th business meeting, the Franklin County Commission approved a report outlining 13 road and bridge improvement projects completed in FY2025 using Rebuild Alabama Act gas tax funds.

Those 13 projects included 16.71 miles of roadways in Franklin County at a total cost of \$2.178 million. The projects were funded entirely by proceeds Franklin County receives through a 10 cent per gallon tax approved by the Alabama Legislature in 2019. Proceeds from that tax are earmarked for road and bridge improvements. Counties must document how the tax proceeds are

spent and submit reports annually to account for all spending.

Franklin County Rebuild Alabama Act projects completed in FY25 included:

- resurfacing and traffic striping of Highway 25 from Hwy. 23 to AL 24 at a cost of \$213,313.57.
- resurfacing Bedford Circle from Green Road to Morrisette Drive at a cost of \$37,230.74.
- resurfacing Morrisette Drive from Green Road to the dead end at a cost of \$41,418.19.
- resurfacing and traffic striping of Hwy. 152 from AL 187 to Hwy. 52 at a cost of \$150,855.65.
- resurfacing and traffic striping Hwy. 26 from Hwy. 59 to AL 13 at a cost of \$4,195.47.

See 'PROJECTS' Page 5



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*Linda Laurelette Zills Dill passed away on Monday,
January 19, 2026, at Russellville Hospital. A service
is not planned at this time. Spry Memorial Chapel as-
sisted the family with arrangements.*

*Thomas Wayne Boyd, Sr., 87, of Florence, passed
away January 14th at Glenwood Healthcare and
Rehab Center. Akins Funeral Home assisted the
family with arrangements.*

*Barbara Elaine Hutcheson, 80, of Spruce Pine,
passed away January 14th at Helen Keller Hospital.
Spry Memorial Chapel of Russellville assisted the
family with arrangements.*

*Glenda Fay James, 82, passed away January 14th.
Pinkard Funeral Home of Russellville assisted the
family.*

*Carolyn Jean Dawson Davis, 87, of Russellville,
passed away January 13th at Burns Nursing Home.
Spry Memorial Chapel of Russellville assisted the
family with arrangements.*

*Steve Reace Hill, 70, of Russellville, passed away
January 13th. Spry Memorial Chapel of Russellville
assisted the family with arrangements.*



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*The Franklin Free Press is published weekly by Pilati Investments, Inc.
Our publication is available at newsstands and online at no charge.*

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Letters to the editor

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hometown people, for hometown people. We urge contributions of all kinds, including guest columns, picture submissions, cartoons or letters to the editor. Send any letters to our office via U.S. Postal Service or e-mail, and we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the hometown and phone number of the author. The Franklin Free Press reserves the right to edit letters for style, length and content.

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Back to the Bible by Larsen Plyler:

Matthew 12:1-8

On a Sabbath, Jesus' disciples grabbed some grain, rubbed it between their hands and ate it. The Pharisees accused them of doing something unlawful. In reality, the disciples had not broken God's Law. Really, all the Sabbath Law said was "Remember the Sabbath. Keep it Holy. Don't work." It did not provide much detail. Jews in the period between the Testaments added those details and they became synonymous with "Law" for the Pharisees and scribes. The disciples had only broken this tradition.

Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. He cited an event where David had eaten bread that was not lawful for him to eat. Jesus wasn't excusing David's actions— He said they weren't lawful (Lev. 24:9). Jesus didn't believe that hunger was a good reason to not trust in God (Mt. 4:3,4). Wouldn't that set aside all self-denial, sacrifice, and any obedience that might cause discomfort? David's life surrounding the occasion Jesus mentions is characterized by a series of decisions that revealed a lack of trust in God (1 Sam. 21-22).

Jesus reveals their bias showing they were critical of Him and His disciples when they hadn't done anything wrong, yet, they didn't criticize David at all even though he had actually done something wrong,

Beyond that, they had missed the point of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was not to be a burden; it was given as a day of rest. Jesus, as "Lord of the Sabbath," was in the best position to pronounce upon it. The Sabbath itself pointed to Jesus. It was a shadow of Him in whom we find our rest (Col. 2:14-17; Mt. 11:28-30).

Lessons to Learn:

Don't be bound by human tradition. These men condemned because they were more devoted to standards passed down from men than they were to the will of God. Sometimes that meant they were over critical and sometimes that meant that they gave themselves a pass when they were violating God's will (Matthew 15). Using the Bible as our standard helps us hold to exactly the right standard for ourselves and others.

Don't judge hypocritically. They were harsh towards the ones they didn't like and easy on the ones they appreciated.

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

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Goodwin told RCS Superintendent Tim Guinn of his intention to leave for another school, and the afternoon following the required two week window closed on January 23, Higgins was handed the reins.

"I felt it was important to find the right guy at the right time in the right place here at Russellville, and we've done that with Coach Higgins. We had a 14-day posting in place that ended Friday we could not get around, so this was done once that ended," Guinn said after the meeting.

"We had a very good cross-section of some candidates with extensive offensive and defensive coordinator experience at some of Alabama's top schools. We had some out-of-state candidates, including one who coached in the European professional league. We had candidates with more than 20 years' experience coaching teams in Alabama and Florida where they built programs. Darrell's resume includes longevity both at Deshler and Mars Hill, so he's not one to up and go, and we needed someone who's going to be here a while and I expect he'll be with us for a long time," Guinn added.

"We are thrilled to welcome Coach Higgins and his family to Russellville and proud to have him here to lead our Golden Tigers."

Due to the weather, Higgins was unable to attend the Board meeting on Saturday, but the Franklin Free Press spoke to him over the weekend. For his part, Higgins said the decision to leave Mars Hill was a difficult one but the right one for him, his family, their future, and his career at this time.

"It was very hard to leave (Mars Hill). It's a special place and I had a very wonderful 10 years there," he said. "There were a couple factors: one is that I needed to get back in the state retirement system. I've got 22 years in the system and you've got to have 25 for full retirement, so I knew when I took the Mars Hill job at some point I'd have to go back (to a public school)."

"There's never a good time to leave, but I've had three kids go through there and my last son just graduated from there...and I guess the final piece was when the state separated the public schools and private schools," he added. "I had been praying for a sign and I took that as my sign that it was time to get back into a public school."

Higgins' previous 22 years in the public school system date back to his time at Deshler High School where he was an assistant football coach. Most of those years were spent as an assistant under long-time Deshler head coach John Mothershed, who won 201 games over 19 seasons in charge of the Tigers. (Mothershed is expected to join Higgins' staff as a part-time assistant.)

Higgins was Deshler's offensive coordinator for 12 seasons prior to taking over the Mars Hill program. In his time at DHS, Higgins helped the Tigers to seven state championship appearances, including back-to-back state titles in 1998 and 1999.

Higgins was named the second head coach of the Mars Hill football program, which started in 2014, ahead of the 2016 campaign. There Higgins had unprecedented success. He led the Panthers to a Class 1A state title in 2018, a 2A title in 2020, and back-to-back 3A championships in 2024 and 2025. Higgins holds a 29-5 playoff record and is the only coach in state history to win championships in three different classifications.

Higgins' success speaks for itself, but with all the changes taking place across the high school athletics landscape, including reclassification and Russellville's new region realignment, Guinn added the coach's ability to build a program, his leadership, his commitment, and his willingness to take on challenges all pointed to him being the right man to lead the Golden Tigers into the future.

"His success in building the Mars Hill program was a big factor," Guinn said. "When he got there 10 years ago, they had very little in place. But they had Dexter Rutherford (MHBS Principal) who knew how to do it right, and we watched Coach Higgins build this program from the ground up doing an outstanding job. And we have no doubt he'll do the same thing here."

"There are different types of leaders. The type of leader I believe will do well in this environment at Russellville is one who's a person of intelligence and faith, and an individual who doesn't mind working hard and doesn't see obstacles in front of them as anything but an opportunity to overcome. And that's what we've found in Darrell Higgins," Guinn added. "He has no qualms or equivocations about his commitment here. He's not one to run from a challenge. We used to play these teams like Muscle Shoals, Cullman, before so now we'll play them again and we'll rebuild this program."

As a long-time Deshler assistant and Mars Hill head coach, Higgins is probably about as familiar with Russellville as an opposing coach can be. He knows of the program's traditional success and said he is looking forward to the challenge of adding to that tradition.

"Russellville's always had a tremendous program, and I've always had a lot of respect for them. When we were at Deshler, we always started the season against Russellville and it was a huge game we knew we needed to prepare all summer for to have a good game. And when we went to Mars Hill I was really excited about getting Russellville on the schedule to see how we could line up and compete against such a program," he said. "Now, getting to be here myself, I'm just really excited to be a part of the school and the community and hopefully continue to build on what's already a great foundation."

The 2026 football season is still a full six or so months away, but it won't be long before preparations for it begin. For now, Higgins' message to the Golden Tiger community is a simple one:

"We're going to bring it every day in our workouts, and our kids are going to know how to compete," he said. "They're going to work as hard as anyone out there and then harder. It means a lot to me and everyone that I work with that we put a great product on the field and something that everyone can be proud of."

"I'm really excited about the job, and I can't wait to get started," he added.

Higgins is expected on campus when classes resume this week. There will be a reception welcoming Coach Higgins and his family, sponsored by the Russellville High School Booster Club, at the RHS Field House Thursday afternoon.

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'PROJECTS,' from Page 1

- resurfacing and traffic striping of Hwy. 162 from Hwy. 58 to Hwy. 62 at a cost of \$153,709.39.
 - resurfacing and traffic striping of Hwy. 83 from Hwy. 81 to Hwy. 724 at a cost of \$860,044.03.
 - rehabilitation of a bridge on Highway 75 over Cedar Creek at a cost of \$175,000.
 - resurfacing and traffic striping of Green Road from Hwy. 524 to dead end at a cost of \$176,624.84.
 - resurfacing and traffic striping of Hwy. 21 from AL 247 to Hwy. 90 at a cost of \$160,473.71.
 - resurfacing and traffic striping of Hwy. 29 from AL 247 to AL 247 at a cost of \$109,407.61.
 - resurfacing and traffic striping of Boyd Road from Hwy. 28 to Hwy. 28 at a cost of \$49,850.32.
 - resurfacing and traffic striping of Hwy. 128 from AL 24 to Hwy. 28 at a cost of \$42,915.56.
- Other agenda items addressed by the Commission at its January 20th meeting included:
- approving an optional annual leave payout policy for Franklin County employees. To opt-in, employees must request annual leave pay by August 31, 2026.
 - approved a mileage reimbursement rate of \$72.5 cents per mile.
 - approved a proclamation recognizing the 75th anniversary of the Franklin County Cattlemen's Association by designating January 24, 2026, as a day of recognition for the Franklin County Cattlemen's Association, which has the largest membership of any Alabama county.
 - approved a low bid of \$21,632 from Mid America Roofing to repair the roof on the annex located behind the Franklin County Courthouse.
 - approved a contract for a storm water cross drain replacement on Highway 90 contingent upon the county receiving reimbursement for the work.
 - tabled the hiring of a non-certified real property appraiser in the Franklin County Revenue Commissioner's Office.
 - approved hiring William Vickers and Matthew Anderson as Corrections Officers/Dispatchers in the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, the termination of Corrections Officers/Dispatchers Chris Pierce and Justice Sharpe, advertising for a Corrections Officer/Dispatcher, hiring Austin Gerald as a Corrections Officer/Dispatcher.
 - approved a bid of \$74,408.94 for the purchase and installation of 50 cameras to be placed in and around the Franklin County Jail.
 - authorized Franklin County Solid Waste Officer Gene Ward to negotiate with the City of Town Creek for a small used Toyota truck to be purchased and/or swapped for a truck and other consideration.
 - gave Chairman Barry Moore authority to enter into a contract with Charlotte Williams for the euthanizing of stray and/or abandoned animals.



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Love 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.



The Franklin County Democratic Executive Committee invites you to 'Meet the Candidate,' Tuesday, February 17th, at the 43 Grill on Highway 43 to meet Democratic candidate for Alabama Governor, Dr. Will Boyd. The event starts at 6:30 p.m. For more information, contact Rick Neighbors at 205-306-1249. 43 Grill is located at 15110 Highway 43 in Russellville.



The Russellville First Methodist Church will have a 5th Thursday Food Giveaway on Thursday, January 29th, 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.


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Four qualify for Franklin County Commission District One Republican nomination

PAGE 7
JANUARY 28, 2026

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When Franklin County voters cast ballots in the May 19, 2026, Republican Primary, they'll find three contested local races in addition to those at the state and federal level.

Franklin County Republican Executive Committee Chairman Glenn Garrison said four candidates qualified for the special election for Franklin County Commission District One.

When Commissioner Michael Murray died last May, Gov. Kay Ivey appointed Murray's son Grayson to the position until there could be an election held to decide his successor.

The first opportunity for that comes on May 19th, so Republican Primary voters will choose among Grayson Murray, Curtis Baker, Joey Norton and Miles Gaston, the same four applicants who interviewed with Ivey's office last year.

There were no qualifiers in the Democratic Primary for Franklin County Commission District One or any other local office, so the May 19th Republican Primary will serve as the de facto election for Franklin County Sheriff, Commission District One, Franklin County Board of Education Place Three, Franklin County Coroner and Revenue Commissioner.

But incumbent Revenue Commissioner Stratt Byars did not have anyone qualify against him, so his name will not appear on the May 19th ballot. That's the same situation for incumbent Franklin BOE Place Three member Pat Cochran, who will serve another term.

Incumbent Sheriff Shannon Oliver will face Republican opposition from Brian Shackelford. Coroner Charles Adcox will be challenged by Jeff Clark.

Voters will decide both a United States Senate race and the race for United States Congress Alabama Congressional District Four.

Sen. Tommy Tuberville is giving up his Senate seat to run for governor, and seven Republicans and five Democrats are vying to fill the position.

Republican qualifiers include Seth Burton, Dale Shelton Deas, Jr., Jared Hudson, Steve Marshall, Barry Moore, Morgan Murphy and Rodney Walker. Moore has been endorsed by President Donald Trump.

On the Democratic side, primary voters will choose from Dakarai Larriett, Lamont Lavender, Kyle Sweetser, Everett Wess and Mark S. Wheeler II.

Rep. Robert Aderholt, who represents Alabama's Fourth Congressional District, will face a primary opponent in Tommy Barnes. Two Democrats, Amanda Puszczek and Shane Weaver, are also running.

Additional state qualifiers for the May 19th Primary include:

Governor: Republican Ken McFeeters, Tommy Tuberville, "Alabama" Will Santivasci. Democrat Will Boyd, Jamel J. Brown, Yolanda Rochelle Flowers, Doug Jones, Chad Chig Martin and Nathan Nate Mathis.

Lt. Governor: Republican Wes Allen, George Childress, Pat Bishop, Dean Odle, Rick Patge, Dr. Stewart Hill Tankersley, Nicole Jones Wadsworth and John Wahl. Democrat Phillip Ensler and Darryl D. Perryman. Attorney General: Republican Pamela L. Casey, Jay Mitchell and Katherine Robertson. Democrat Jeff McLaughlin.

Secretary of State: Republican Caroleene Dobson, Christopher Christian Horn, Glenda Jackson. Democrat Wayne Rogers.

State Treasurer: Republican Young Boozer, Steve Lolley. Democrat Rosilyn Houston.

State Auditor: Republican Derek Chen, Andrew Sorrell. Democrat Violet Edwards.

Commissioner of Agriculture & Industries: Republican Corey Hill, Christina Werner McInnis and Jack Williams. Democrat Ron Sparks.

Public Service Commission Place One: Republican Matt Gentry, Jeremy Oden. Democrat James O. Gordon, John Northrop, Jeff Ramsey.

Public Service Commission Place Two: Republican Priscilla Andrews, Chris Beeker, Jeffrey M. Boyd, Brent Woodall, Jim Zig Ziegler. Democrat Sheila McNeil.

Associate Justice Alabama Supreme Court Place Seven: Republican-Brad Mendheim.

Alabama Court of Civil Appeals Place Four: Republican Ben Bowden.

Alabama Court of Civil Appeals Place 5: Matt Fridy.

Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals Place Four: Republican Mary Windom.

Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals Place Five: Beth Kelly's, Riggs Walker.

Alabama State Senate District Six: Republican Larry Stutts. Democrat Bobby Martin.

Alabama House of Representatives District 18: Republican Jamie Kiel.

Polls will be open 7-7 on Primary Day. Tuesday, May 19., 2026, across Alabama.



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Russellville City Council approves purchase of two new garbage trucks

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

At its January 20th meeting, the Russellville City Council approved the purchase of two new garbage trucks expected to be delivered by next month.

Council members unanimously approved the purchase of two Heil ASLs on Freightliner Chassis at a cost of \$604,730 for both. Additionally, the council declared a 2014 Freightliner M2 and a 2021 International HV607 trucks as surplus property and authorized the sale of the same on govdeals.com.

According to the vendor, Ingram Equipment Company, one truck will be delivered by the end of January and the other unit next month. In other agenda items at its January 20th meeting, the council:

—authorized payment to the Municipal Workers Compensation Fund in the amount of \$56,264.45 for workers compensation insurance premium costs.

—approved a logging permit submitted by Farm and Land LLC for a project on Highway 43 at the intersection of Courtland Road.

—accepted a letter of resignation from Russellville Police Department Patrol Officer Brenda Sombra, effective January 12, 2026, declared a vacancy for Patrol Officer and authorized advertisement for the position to solicit job applications.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be February 2, 2026, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.

Three local area students recognized on Wallace State Community College Fall 2025 President's List and Dean's List

Submitted

Wallace State Community College congratulates the 862 students who were named to the President's List and Dean's List for the Fall 2025 semester. To earn a spot on the Wallace State President's List, students must maintain a perfect 4.0 GPA for the semester while taking a course load of 12 or more hours. Placement on the Dean's List is awarded to students maintain at 3.5 GPA or higher while also taking a course load of at least 12 hours.

"Congratulations to all our students who earned a place on the President's and Dean's lists this fall," said Kristen Holmes, Vice President for Students. "Your hard work, resilience and commitment to excellence continue to inspire us. We are proud to celebrate your achievements and look forward to supporting you as you continue pursuing your goals at Wallace State."

Area students who were recognized include:

Giselle Torres of Phil Campbell, AL - President's List

Madilyn Calderon of Russellville, AL - President's List

Autumn Chandler of Vina, AL - Dean's List

The Spring 2026 semester is currently underway, with the Mini Term II classes beginning on March 5. For more information, visit www.wallacestate.edu, call Lion Central at 256.352.8236 or come by the Hanceville or Oneonta campus centers. Current and incoming students may schedule an advising session with the Center for Student Success at www.wallacestate.edu/advising.

Barnes qualifies for Congressional District Four in the May 19th Republican Primary

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Colbert County Commissioner Tommy Barnes qualified recently for the May 19th Alabama Republican Primary for the office of United States Congress, District 4.

Barnes will face 15-term incumbent Congressman Robert Aderholt for the Republican nomination. Barnes has served on the Colbert County Commission for 10 years. He retired from his position as civil operations manager at Sheffield Utilities last year.

As do many candidates facing long-time incumbents, Barnes will attempt to sell voters on the need for a leadership change. Barnes said his campaign will focus on issues including health care and the uncertain future of rural hospitals. Additionally, Barnes said he will consider reducing funding for the Tennessee Valley Authority, saying it has avoided funding cuts he believes are overdue.

He also committed to serve no more than three two-year terms if elected.

Alabama's Fourth Congressional District includes Franklin, Marion, Cullman and Fayette Counties along with portions of Lauderdale and Tuscaloosa Counties.





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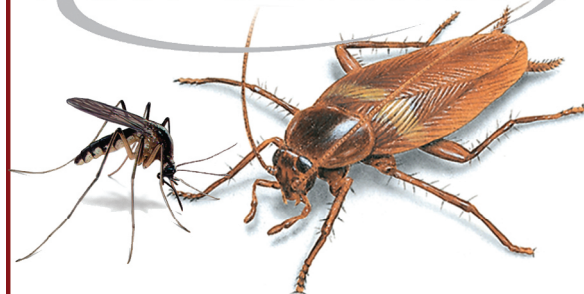
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S H E R I F F





Tharptown girls come from behind to beat area foe Covenant Christian 43-37

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The Tharptown High School varsity girls' and boys' basketball traveled to Tusculum on January 23 to face area foe Covenant Christian. The THS girls came away with a 43-37 win while the Tharptown boys were routed by the Eagles 74-39.

The Lady Wildcats and Lady Eagles tipped off first.

Both teams started slow. At the end of the first quarter the game was tied 3-3; Covenant's Saydee Coan hit a three-pointer while Tharptown's Alyssa Fischer had a field goal and Paisleigh Carr hit one free throw.

Things picked up a bit more in the second quarter, though, as the hosts outscored THS 16-10 to take a 19-13 lead into the locker room at halftime.

Down by six going into the second half, the Lady Wildcats needed to commence the comeback effort; their performance in the third period helped tremendously to that effect. Carly Cason, who finished with a team-high 15 points, scored nine of those points in the first eight minutes after halftime, helping Tharptown outpace Covenant Christian 19-14 and cut the deficit to just one point as the game entered the final quarter of regulation.

The Lady Wildcats' momentum, carried over into the fourth quarter, helped them to

See, 'THARPTOWN,' Page 14

AHSAA announces championship restructure, reclassification for 2026-27 and 2027-28 school years

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The much-anticipated Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) announcement regarding reclassification, delayed by the AHSAA from December to January, was announced Friday morning, and it included a massive change to the structure of postseason play beginning next year.

In a press release by the AHSAA, the organization announced that public and private schools will, in the future, compete in separate divisions; public schools have been organized into six classifications (1A-6A) and private schools have been placed in two classifications (Single-A and Double-A). Public and private schools, while still able to compete against one another in the regular season, will now compete in their respective divisions for state championships. The 1.35 multiplier and the competitive balance factor applied to private schools have been removed.

"The landscape of education-based athletics in Alabama is changing, and the AHSAA must continue to adapt," said AHSAA Executive Director Heath Harmon in the press release. "After careful review—and after listening to our public and private school members—the Central Board determined that now is an appropriate time to restructure championship play, resulting in restructured championships for public and private schools. This model will be implemented for the next two years.

See, 'AHSAA,' Page 12

Russellville girls earn season sweep of rival Lawrence County, clinch 2-seed for area tournament

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville High School varsity girls' and boys' basketball teams traveled to Moulton to face rival Lawrence County in their regular season area finale January 22 seeing mixed results.

The RHS girls came away with a scrappy 53-44 victory to claim the No. 2 seed in the upcoming Class 5A Area 15 tournament; meanwhile, the boys from Russellville fell to the Red Devils 67-41 to fall to 0-4 in area play.

In the first game of the evening, the Lady Golden Tigers got off to a quick start, jumping up on LCHS 8-0 in the first quarter. Russellville was able to maintain that advantage throughout the first half, taking a 35-27 lead into the halftime break.

There were a lot of fouls in the first half, and that edge continued in the backend of the contest as the physicality turned to chippiness late in the game.

Russellville, which held a six-point, 43-37 lead going into the final eight minutes of play, continued to stave off Lady Red Devils runs, but the battle between the two rivals became heated in the fourth quarter.

At the end of one play, two players tangled up with each other and emotions boiled over. Pushing and shoving ensued, the floor had to be cleared of players and fans, and three technical fouls were issued—two to Russellville and one to Lawrence County—resulting in two technical free throw attempts for LCHS.

Russellville senior Laila Hill, who was involved in the incident, also left the game; she finished with six points for the Lady Golden Tigers.

See, 'RVL HOOPS,' Page 13

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'AHSAA,' from Page 11

"The Central Board has approved a championship alignment model that applies only to post-season play. Its purpose is to expand opportunity and strengthen the overall championship experience for student-athletes across Alabama. All championships will be played together at our championship venues," Harmon added.

The public-private school split, or something approximating it, was rumored for weeks after the AHSAA delayed its reclassification announcement.

The split divisions for public and private schools also played a big role in the reclassification equation and region, area, and section alignment for the 2026-28 seasons. The alignments announced Friday apply to the sports of football, volleyball, flag football, cross country, and swimming and diving. Alignments for winter and spring sports will be determined following completion of those championship seasons.

Class 7A has been eliminated and public schools will now compete in Classes 1A to 6A. For local schools in Franklin County, this has brought about some big changes: Red Bay and Belgreen both dropped down from Class 2A to 1A, and Phil Campbell dropped from 3A to 2A. Russellville (5A), Tharptown (2A), and Vina (1A) stayed put.

"Classification is based on Average Daily Membership (ADM) figures furnished by the State Department of Education for public schools for grades 9 through 11 plus eighth-grade hold-back students. Member private schools report that same data directly to the AHSAA. This accounting process was followed by AHSAA private school members, as well," the AHSAA's press release stated.

According to enrollment numbers released by the AHSAA, Russellville will be the 10th smallest school in 5A, Phil Campbell among the biggest schools in 2A, and Red Bay the biggest school in 1A.

In the new football alignment, Russellville will compete in 5A Region 7 which includes Muscle Shoals, Athens, Austin, Decatur, East Limestone, Florence, and Hartselle. Six of those seven schools competed at the Class 6A or 7A levels last season.

Phil Campbell moves into 2A Region 7, which includes teams like Sheffield, Lexington, Colbert County, Winston County. Red Bay and Belgreen, which is playing its first official varsity schedule next year, are in 1A Region 7.

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'RVL HOOPS,' from Page 11

Play eventually continued and the Lady Golden Tigers, who led the entire game, were able to put the hosts away with nine points to spare. The result improved RHS to 2-2 in area play, gave the Lady Golden Tigers the season sweep over Lawrence County, and clinched the team the two-seed for the area tournament, meaning the Lady Golden Tigers will host the Lady Red Devils again in the tourney semifinal.

Junior guard Ella Copeland, coming off a career-high 38 points in the Lady Golden Tigers' previous game against Florence, scored a game-high 28 points against Lawrence County. Angeleah Smith also hit double figures for RHS with 11 points.

The win improved the Lady Golden Tigers to 13-11 overall. Their next game will be played at home against Haleyville on Thursday, January 29.

In the nightcap game between the Russellville and Lawrence County boys, the Golden Tigers fell behind by double digits early and could not recover.

The hosts stormed out to a 17-3 lead by the end of the first and held a 36-17 advantage at the intermission.

In the second half, Lawrence County continued to extend its lead over the Golden Tigers, ultimately winning by 23 points. The defeat dropped RHS to 4-18 overall this season.

Sir Williams was Russellville's top scorer in the loss with 12 points.



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'THARPTOWN,' from Page 11

finish strong. The visitors held the Lady Eagles to just four points in the final eight minutes, and they dropped 11 on the hosts to complete the comeback victory.

In addition to Cason's 15 points, Raeleigh Harrell also hit double figures for the Lady Wildcats with 10 points.

The result improved the Tharptown girls' record to 1-3 in Class 2A Area 14 play.

In the ensuing boys' game, Covenant Christian went up by 10 early and expanded that lead as the game went on.

At halftime, the Wildcats trailed 47-21, and by the end of the game the Eagles had put THS into a 35-point hole.

The defeat dropped THS to 0-4 in area competition.

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Willingness to: work overtime, irregular hours, weekends and holidays; travel and attend seminars and workshops.

QUALIFICATIONS and SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS:

Possession of a high school diploma or GED

Minimum of 21 years of age

Must meet or exceed the minimum requirements established by the State of Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission

Possession of a valid Alabama Drivers License

Possess the ability to obtain an Alabama Police Academy diploma or its equivalent

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Goodwin: 'No regrets' about returning home to lead Demopolis football program

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Although his two-year stint at Russellville didn't end the way he wanted, Dustin Goodwin has no regrets about returning to Demopolis High School to lead his alma mater's varsity football program.

Goodwin's last official day with Russellville City Schools was January 16th. The Demopolis City Schools Board of Education formally introduced Goodwin as its new varsity football coach January 15th, also introducing former RHS varsity football coach Mark Heaton as the new Athletics and Facilities Director for Demopolis City Schools the same day.

Goodwin was hired as Russellville High School varsity football coach in the spring of 2024 following the resignation of John Ritter. The Russellville City Schools Board of Education then hired Goodwin as athletic director before the 2024 school year began.

Goodwin's two year record leading the Golden Tigers was 14-9, 1-2 in playoff games. Russellville finished as 5A Region 7 runner-up in 2024 and 2025.

Any time a coach leaves for another job, it can be an uncertain time for players and assistant coaches, but Goodwin had a plan how he wanted to handle the transition.

Goodwin wanted to personally let his players and coaches know about his decision to leave Russellville, but as news of his departure spread across the community like wildfire earlier this month, it didn't allow for the smooth closure sought by the young coach.

Russellville City Schools Superintendent of Education Tim Guinn said Goodwin told him he was leaving for the Demopolis job on Monday, January 5th, the same week he accepted the Demopolis job, and that Goodwin intended to use vacation days through his final day of employment, January 16th.

RCS Board members were also taken by surprise with the news their football coach, who was hired at Russellville from a pool of applicants that included some championship pedigrees, would be resigning effective immediately.

A knowledgeable source confirmed to the FFP that Goodwin gave board members no indication he was considering another job until the week of January 5th, after he received a verbal job offer from Demopolis.

Goodwin declined to provide specifics, but he takes issue with suggestions that he didn't inform RCS officials of his plans.

"I tried to give everyone a heads up administratively and I put a plan in place to do this the right way," Goodwin told the FFP. "But, obviously the news got out faster than I would have liked for it to and I wanted my players and coaches to hear it from me first. Unfortunately, some other people had some other plans and, well, it is what it is.

"But I definitely wanted my coaches and kids to hear it from me though, not from hearsay around town," he added.

Goodwin returns to a program he graduated from in 2003, where he earned All-State recognition in football and baseball. His father Doug coached Demopolis for eight seasons, including a state championship in 2004.

In addition to his two years at Russellville, Goodwin served as varsity head coach at Plainview and Chelsea High Schools. His composite record as a head coach is 50-48.

Anticipating the Alabama High School Athletic Association's reclassification announcement on January 23rd, some have speculated Goodwin wanted to leave before Russellville was placed into what could be a challenging 5A region that includes former rivals Muscle Shoals, Cullman, Decatur and others. But Goodwin reiterates he wasn't looking to leave and realignment isn't a factor.

"This decision has nothing to do with realignment or whether Russellville is placed in a more competitive region," Goodwin said. "We've talked all along that all we can do is coach the best we can and maximize the ability of the players we've got and other things are out of our control.

"We believe in and love our kids at Russellville and we still do. And whoever they decide to take my place, everyone is replaceable. I hope they find someone who can build off some of the good we were able to do and fix some of the bad," he added.

Goodwin moved to Demopolis at the end of his eighth grade year when his father took the reins of the varsity football program there. His ties



The FFP Athlete of the Week for January 12-17 is Belgreen's Randi Terry. During the Franklin County Tournament, Terry was the Lady Bulldogs' top scorer with 40 total points; she hit 8 three pointers and had 8 steals and 4 assists, as well. In the tourney championship vs. PCHS, she scored 16 points and was named the tournament MVP after helping BHS win its third straight county title.

'GOODWIN,' from Page 15

there remain strong, as his wife Sara's parents still call Demopolis home.

"I'm very connected to Demopolis. Of course my in-laws are here and we spend a lot of time with them hunting and fishing," Goodwin said. "And we will be able to do things on a week night that we've not been able to do with the exception of 3-4 times a year to this point. It's the first time since 2013 we've had family in the same town where I'm coaching and we're really excited about that."

Sara, a guidance counselor for Russellville City Schools, will join her husband in Demopolis later this spring and the family's four children will eventually all be enrolled in Demopolis City Schools once the family's Russellville house is sold and the move can be finalized.

Things happen fast in coaching, as opportunities come and go rapidly, and unexpectedly. But Goodwin believes he made the decision based on God's plan for his family.

"This wasn't something I had intentions of doing and it hasn't been easy to leave. Our kids were upset. Heck, I was too. I wish I could take every one of them with me, players and coaches alike, but that's just not the way this business works," Goodwin said.

"As time goes on, most of them understand and have reached out through texts to offer some encouragement. The fact is I didn't chase after this opportunity. If we planned to leave we never would have purchased a home in Russellville.

"But I felt like God's been calling me to do this for quite some time now. I really believe we were led to come home by God and this is a true Homecoming," Goodwin said.

The varsity football coaching job was posted on the Russellville City Schools' website after Goodwin met with his players and coaches, Guinn said. Choosing not to comment on how Goodwin's departure unfolded, Guinn is instead focused on moving forward and finding the right fit in a new coach who wants to lead the Golden Tiger football program.



Former Russellville High School head football coach Dustin Goodwin on the sideline during a game in the 2024 season. (Courtesy photo)



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