

Sen. Larry Stutts has proposed a bill aiming to bring more family practice physicians to rural Alabama. See story Page 3.

Heart health awareness was the topic at last week's third annual 'Go Red' Luncheon. See story Page 11.



PRSR STD US POSTAGE
PAID Franklin Free Press
113 Washington Ave. NW
Russellville, AL 35663

New downtown restaurant offers fine dining at an affordable price

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Most couples go on a cruise to unwind, relax and get away from the daily grind of work. Most couples aren't opening a new restaurant in their hometown, though. When Trent and Michele Stephenson took a cruise last July, they had just made the decision to purchase a downtown Russellville building to construct their vision of a restaurant and hotel. Needless to say, their getaway turned into a working vacation.

"Just because we're in a small town doesn't mean we have to settle to be just good enough," chef Ryan Matthews said. "I want to serve the quality and caliber of food you'd find in New York City or anywhere else."

"The week before we went, we decided to go for it," Trent Stephenson said. "We paid some earnest money, and I took the plans we had on the cruise. We started

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The Bricks staff, from left: Amy Matthews, Ryan Matthews, Michele Stephenson, Trent Stephenson and Shelby Stephens.

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Students in Mrs. Coan's Parenting Class (like Priscilla Tristan, above) take home an automated baby that cries like a child. Students are graded on how they care for the child while they have the baby.

RHS ready to blaze new trail in Career Tech field

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Although the Russellville City Council adopted a resolution earlier this month recognizing February as "Career and Technical Education Month," Russellville High School Career Tech director Natalie Bendall's program continues to grow each and every month.

In fact, the biggest problem facing Russellville High's future with career tech is a lack of space. The CTE building has reached maximum capacity, and with each of the system's four schools bursting at the seams, there is simply no room for the program to expand.

Russellville City Schools superintendent Heath Grimes addressed the situation with CTE at a recent board meeting.

"We have a list of programs we'd like to offer, but we can not because we're so limited on space. That is definitely something we need to address," Grimes said. "We don't have a single space to put another teacher into or to

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Ollie Verdo Hallman, Russellville, age 82
Died Tuesday, February 13, 2018. Funeral held at Spry Memorial Chapel.
Interment in East Franklin Cemetery.

Hazel Geneva Hill, Russellville, age 82
Died Friday, February 16, 2018. Funeral arrangements had not been announced at press time. Pinkard Funeral Home of Russellville was assisting the family.

J.T. Holland, Russellville, age 78
Died Tuesday, February 13, 2018. Funeral held at Pinkard Funeral Home.
Interment in Crestview Missionary Baptist Church Cemetery in Russellville.

Catherine "Cathy" Hooker James, Russellville, age 71
Died Thursday, February 15, 2018. Funeral held at Pinkard Funeral Home.
Interment in Cherry Hill Cemetery.

Betty Bernice Lee, Phil Campbell, age 82
Died Sunday, February 11, 2018. Funeral held at Spry Memorial Chapel in Russellville. A visitation was also held at Love's Way Church in Lebanon, TN, with a graveside service following at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Lebanon, TN.

Carl Stephen "Too" Mitchell, II, Phil Campbell, age 24
Died Wednesday, February 14, 2018. Funeral held at Spry Memorial Chapel. Interment in Franklin Memory Gardens.

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Bill aims to bring more family doctors to rural AL

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A bill sponsored by Sen. Larry Stutts (R-Tuscumbia) could open the door for more family practice physicians in rural Alabama.

Senate Bill 210 would authorize the Alabama Medical Education Consortium to administer up to 25 scholarships annually to medical students who are on a family practice track and attend one of Alabama's four colleges of medicine. The scholarships would pay tuition for up to four years for the students, and in return the prospective physicians commit to family practice in a rural Alabama county for at least five years after completing their medical residency program.

"The scholarships are available to students who attend any of the four medical schools in Alabama," Stutts said. "By the federal definition of underserved areas for physicians, 62 of 67 Alabama counties meet the definition of marginally underserved and more than 50 meet the defini-

tion of significantly underserved.

"The aim of Senate Bill 210 is to incentivize our in-state medical students to stay in Alabama and practice medicine in underserved counties."

The bill caught the eye of Paul Storey, president of Helen Keller Hospital, who wholeheartedly supports the idea.

"It is imperative that we open up the recruiting pipeline of quality doctors to rural Alabama," Storey said. "I have been in healthcare for 26 years, and the challenge of recruiting physicians to rural areas has never been harder. I appreciate Senator Stutts carrying this legislation. It's an innovative idea that will increase the number of doctors practicing in rural Alabama."

A 2017 report from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) found that Alabama has only 76 primary care physicians per 100,000 people, a rate that's the seventh-lowest in the country.

AAMC's chief publicity officer, Dr. Atul Grover, said that creates a critical situation for the state.

"We do have concerns when the numbers get below 100 primary care physicians per 100,000 people," Grover said. "I'm worried people aren't going to have access to primary care."

The bill has 13 co-sponsors, including four Democratic state senators. It remains in the Senate's Finance and Taxation (Education) Committee awaiting a vote. The bill has met with opposition from officials with the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine and the University of South Alabama School of Medicine. This opposition, Stutts explained, was due to the inclusion of the state's two other medical schools, the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine in Dothan and the Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine in Auburn.

"When this bill was brought to me, I didn't want it to be for one particular school," Stutts said. "I want it to be for all medical schools in our state. Two

See 'DOCTORS,' Page 9

brainstorming."

The next eight months, right up until the day the Bricks Inn and Restaurant opened its doors Monday, saw the Stephensons make a second home at the 114 North Jackson Avenue location. Getting through a major renovation in a 7,400-square-foot historic building to prepare for a February opening was a full-time job and a family affair. Michele's daughter, Shelby Stephens, serves as the marketing manager, and Michele will handle the day-to-day operations of the business.

One of the most important choices the Stephensons had to make came in selecting their executive chef. Through a mutual acquaintance, they met Ryan Matthews, a long-time Florence resident who was working as a chef at a country club in Roanoke, Virginia. Matthews was looking for the opportunity to come back home, and he found it with the Bricks.

"My friend got in contact with me. I talked with Trent and Michele," Matthews said. "I liked what I heard, and I've always wanted to do this. I just didn't have the resources to do it myself.

"Small towns are reemerging in our country. Twenty-five years ago Florence was considered a small town, and now it's in the top ten cities in Alabama."

Matthews previously owned his own business, Steak-Out, in Florence, as well as a deli in east Florence. He worked for the Shoals Marriott for 11 years as a restaurant chef, banquet chef and executive chef, so he brings decades of culinary experience to Russellville.

And the menu at the Bricks incorporates his expertise and creativity in the kitchen, from the unique appetizer 'bites' to the dry-aged New York strip, pan-seared filet of beef and fresh fish dinner options to the heavenly sweet potato biscuit basket that greets every guest once they are seated.

"Nothing is prepared in advance. It's all from scratch," Matthews said. "The sweet potato biscuits are from a historical recipe site and originally came from Thomas Jefferson collection. I tweaked it to make it my own."

Matthews, who had complete creative control in preparing his menu, said he worked to find the right combination of fine food at a fair price.

"Just because we're in a small town doesn't mean we have to settle to be just good enough,"

'DINING,' from page 1

he said. "I want to serve the quality and caliber of food you'd find in New York City or anywhere else."

Matthews' wife Amy is also part of the Bricks' team. She serves as event coordinator and catering director.

Matthews wants prospective guests to know they can enjoy a fine meal and not have to break the bank to pay for it.

"People ask, 'Can I afford to eat here?' and I say absolutely," Matthews said. "Our menu is no more than what you pay at casual restaurants, and the quality of food is well beyond that."

The Bricks offers a separate lunch menu that includes different daily specials that include an entree and two sides or a four-vegetable plate for \$10.50. Tuesday's special features Southern-fried chicken, Thursday is catfish and grits, and Sunday features beef pot roast.

Daily plate specials will be available quickly to accommodate guests who may only have 30 minutes for lunch.

"I remember as a little girl at Christmas time when all the stores in downtown Russellville were decorated for Christmas and people walked up and down the street and shopped," Michele Stephenson said. "We want to be a part of that happening again here."

The Bricks restaurant will be open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m.-9 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday will feature a special brunch menu along with other limited menu items. The restaurant will be closed on Wednesday.

In addition to the lunch and dinner menu, the Bricks will offer several items from 2-4 p.m. in the afternoon as part of a limited mid-day menu.

Matthews plans to keep the menu fresh, with seasonal changes. He'll also partner with local growers and farmers to grow special ingredients he needs for his recipes.

Located on the second floor, the Bricks Inn features five hotel rooms and two banquet rooms. One, named the 'Speakeasy,' was actually operated years ago as a speakeasy and still features the original door. The other banquet room, the Rick Hall Banquet Room, will include memorabilia from Hall's celebrated musical career, and the room

includes a stage for entertainment.

The Bricks will be available to cater events of any size, and the facility offers the convenient combination of full-menu service, food, a bar and a banquet room all in one facility.

"We also want to do some off-site catering and be as much a part of this community as we can," Amy Matthews said. "That's part of the Stephensons' whole idea here. Russellville has never had anything like this before. We want to be a big part of our community."

Michele Stephenson said the Bricks features many of the aspects of dining out that she and Trent find effective.

"We enjoy going out to eat, and we know what we like," Stephenson said. "We know the type of service we want, the food we want and what the place should look like. It's going to be a fine-dining experience but at the same time, not stuffy."

Including four seats at the bar, the Bricks offers seating for 102 guests.

Hotel rooms may be reserved online, at www.thebricksrussellville.com. Rooms include a queen room for \$109/night, a queen with fireplace for \$119 and a queen suite for \$129/night. Guests will receive a key code via email and will have pre-paid for rooms, so the need to check in is eliminated.

For special events like weddings or corporate events, all five rooms may be reserved along with banquet rooms to accommodate large groups.

The Stephensons invite guests to go on Facebook and like their page "The Bricks Inn and Restaurant," and visit them on Instagram at "the-bricksrussellville."

After nine months of planning and renovation, the grand opening came Monday. It was a day Michelle anticipated with a combination of excitement as well as a few nerves.

"When I thought last week we have one week to go, it's a little surreal. But we're ready to get rolling," she said with some nervous laughter. "We'll have some kinks, and we hope people understand we'll work through those."

"I remember as a little girl at Christmas time when all the stores in downtown Russellville were decorated for Christmas and people walked up and down the street and shopped. We want to be a part of that happening again here."

Honey Do: Tuneup time

The groundhog may have said spring would be delayed, but the buttercups certainly seem to disagree. To me, those sassy splashes of yellow are saying, "Spring is here," and I like it.

As an Alabama homeboy, I know those flowers can get fooled, and a dusting of snow and frigid temperatures aren't out of the picture. But I think it's time to get the lawnmowers ready. Those mean machines have probably been dormant for a few months, and they need a little TLC before they are put into service.

Remember, engines are much like us. They need proper nutrition (oil, fuel and grease), they need to be able to breathe freely (air filters), and they need regular checkups (blades, tires, etc.).

Hopefully you put some type of fuel additive in your tank last fall or drained the tank. Fuel is not fresh and should not be used in small engines after 30 days. Cranking the equipment periodically over the winter will help by circulating fuel through the carburetor and engine.

Consider draining the tank and adding fresh fuel. Check fuel filters for blockage and discoloration.

These filters are cheap and easy to change if there is any appearance

of blockage.

Change your oil and filter either in the spring or fall. Refer to your owner's manual for the proper oil for our area.

Many times dirty air filters are the sole reason for an engine to not run smoothly. If the filter appears clogged or dirty, change it. Again, it's an easy fix and inexpensive maintenance. Never run an engine without an air filter properly in place.

Tires that are underinflated will cause the mower to cut unevenly or scrape the ground. Also, look for cracks that may indicate dry-rotted tires that will probably go flat soon.

Clean the deck over and under. This will give the best air flow and move the grass clippings through the system. Blades should be sharpened or replaced for the new season. Don't forget the grease. Many machines have grease fittings on wheel hubs and spindles as well as blade housings. Refer to your owner's manual.

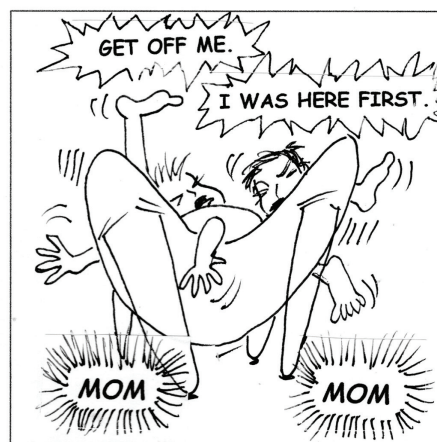
Here's to a new season of trouble-free cutting, and remember, help is just around the corner at your local hardware store.



Doug Green

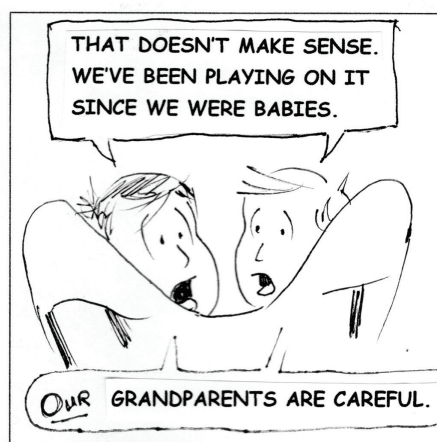
OUR HOUSE

By: Ree SHANNON



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When small cities separate to form new school systems, who benefits?

By Sen. Linda Coleman Madison

Alabama has 67 counties with 138 separate school systems. Currently, Alabama law states that a city with a population of 5,000 may form its own school system. Most of Alabama's schools are countywide and educational resources distributed equally so that all children have access to the same educational opportunities.

The Alabama Educational Trust Fund is the stable source of funding for all Alabama public school systems. Many cities, however, do subsidize their schools through local funding.

Still, when schools break away from an existing system, the state takes on the extra expense to provide facilities, administrators, teachers, equipment, transportation, extracurricular activities, technology and anything else needed by the system. This includes operations and maintenance of the entire school system, which creates a duplication of educational resources.

Currently, we have newly created systems which are three to five miles apart, each competing to offer a quality education to the students in the communities they serve. In these situations, classes could have been combined to educate all children and ensure that all children have equal access to a quality education.

In recent years, the State Board of Education has had to take over several school systems, which indicates the complexity of operating a school system and being able to provide a quality education to prepare children for productive employment while remaining financially solvent.

The question is, are we succeeding?

Alabama received a grade of C. Although it is an improvement from the previous 10 years, it is not information we can use to convince potential businesses that our state has a quality workforce.

We have much to overcome relative to education, and we must start looking at the root of the problems and work together to maximize resources to educate all children so that their future in Alabama will be bright. Over the last two decades several municipalities have separated and formed new school systems. This peeling away has eroded the overall quality of education for the state of Alabama as a whole, as the state struggles to create quality in every system.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a national service organization, brought this to the attention of the Alabama Legislature. These civic-minded leaders, most of whom are educators, brought this to light in a public forum related to the most recent separation case, *Jefferson County Board of Education v. Gardendale City Board of Education*, which will be decided by the courts.

Many of the parents of the outlying communities expressed frustration and betrayal because their children would be bused miles past the new Gardendale schools to another school farther away, leaving many in a state of uncertainty.

Additionally, Jefferson County's desegregation plan requires that Jefferson County Schools be designed to attract and serve a racially and geographically diverse student body to comply with the desegregation order by the court.



Your retirement, your money

Dear Dave,
I've been following your plan, and I'm ready to start investing. Do employer contributions count toward the 15 percent you recommend putting into retirement?

Brenda

Dear Brenda,
Investing 15 percent of your income in retirement accounts is Baby Step 4 of my plan. That means you've already paid off all your debt, except for your home, and you've increased your \$1,000 beginner's emergency fund to a fully funded emergency fund of three to six months of expenses. Way to go!
I want *you* to control your destiny, so employer contributions do not count toward the 15 percent I recommend setting aside for retirement. The first thing you should put money into is a matching retirement account. If you've got access to a 401(k)—and your employer offers a match—you should do that up to the match before anything else.

It's nice if your company will match up to a certain point, but chances are that will still mean you've got some work to do. To make up the remainder, you could look at a Roth IRA. Then if the Roth plus what you invested previously to get the match doesn't equal 15 percent, you could see about a 403(b) or go back to your 401(k) to complete the 15 percent.

You're doing great, Brenda. Keep

up the good work!

Dave

Precisely detailed

Dear Dave,
My mother wants everything, except for her home, left to my brother and me when she dies. She would like her long-time boyfriend to have her house. We don't have a problem with this, but it has not been written into her will. Her mind is still sound, so does she need to officially update the will?

Dawn

Dear Dawn,
Yes, the will needs to be changed to reflect her wishes where the house is concerned. Since she's still able to make decisions independently, the will should be legally updated to reflect *exactly* what she wants to have happen with every piece of her estate.

It's fine if she wants to give her boyfriend the house. It's your mom's will, and her estate, so she can do pretty much whatever she wants. She could also leave what's called a life estate that says her boyfriend gets use of the home while he's alive. Technically, in this kind of situation the house would be left to you, but he would legally have use of it during his life. Upon his death, the home could then revert to you or your brother.

Dave

**Dave Ramsey is CEO of Ramsey Solutions. He has authored seven best-selling books, including The Total Money Makeover. The Dave Ramsey Show is heard by more than 13 million listeners each week on 585 radio stations and multiple digital platforms. Follow Dave on the web at daveramsey.com and on Twitter at @DaveRamsey.*



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Russellville Masonic Lodge 371 will be selling hams for Easter. Hams are \$30 and may be pre-ordered by calling 256-810-1970. Pick-up will be Saturday, March 31 from 8-10 a.m. at the Masonic Lodge on Coffee Street in Russellville.

AARP Tax-Aide will be offering free income tax preparation at DHR on Thursdays from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. through April 12. You do not have to be an AARP member, be retired or be a certain age to use this service. Call Ben at 256-332-0252 for an appointment.

Kids and Kin dates for January through March in Franklin County are as follows and will be held at the Franklin County Baptist Association Building, 128 Guard Street NE, Russellville, AL: Thursday, February 22 at 5 p.m.—"Healthy Habits," Alisha Albright, Family Guidance Center of Alabama; Thursday, March 8 at 5 p.m.—"Ready or Not, Here I Come," Dee McNalley, UCP; Thursday, March 22 at 5 p.m.—"Ways Babies Learn When You Sing to Them," Alisha Albright, Family Guidance Center of Alabama.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans, Lt. Col. John W. Harris, Jr., Camp #1833 will meet Thursday, March 1 at 6 p.m. at the Russellville Rec Center on Ash Avenue. Camp #1833 meets the first Thursday of each month EXCEPT January and July. For more info, call 256-324-2317. Everyone welcome!

American Legion Post 64 meets the second Thursday of each month at the Chamber of Commerce office on Jackson Avenue. Meal served around 6 p.m., meeting at 7 p.m. Next meeting will be March 8.

The Kerry Gilbert Band will perform a benefit concert at the Roxy Theatre in downtown Russellville on Saturday, March 10 at 7 p.m. General admission seating. Doors open at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for children ages 6-12, and free for children under 6. Call 256-335-4356.

Kindred Hospice (formerly Gentiva Hospice) offers a grief support group, "Grieving Well Together," that meets the third Thursday of each month at 10 a.m. in the Lenox room at Calvary Baptist Church in Russellville. You are invited to attend.

The Spruce Pine Historical Society will be having Craft Night on the third Thursday of each month at the Spruce Pine Community Center at 6:30 p.m. For more information, please call Kim at 256-436-3992.

A benefit golf tournament for David Boutwell will be held Friday, March 30 at Twin Pines Country Club. Registration and lunch starts at 11 a.m. with a 12:30 p.m. shotgun start. The tournament is a four-man scramble with a donation of \$240 per team. For more information, contact Ernest Presley at 256-460-5805 or Ronnie Boutwell at 256-324-0960.

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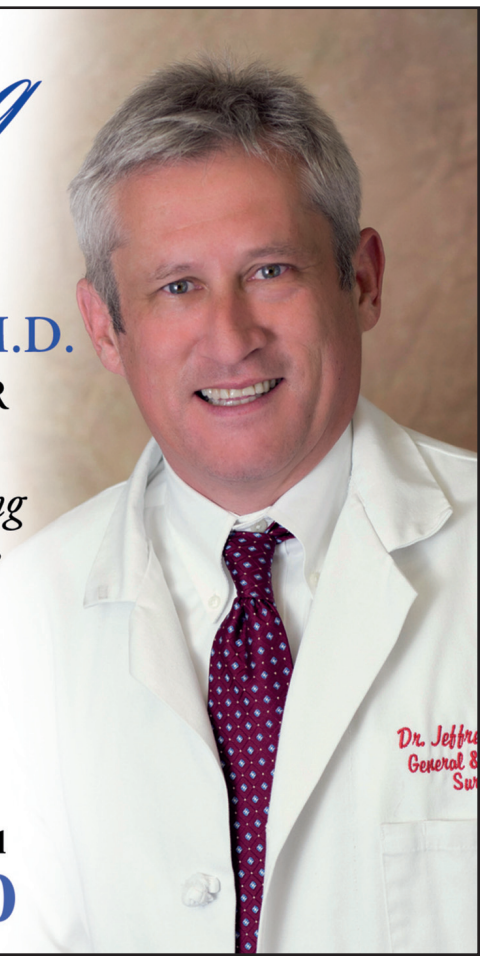
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Mansell enters race for office of probate judge

Submitted to the FFP

My name is Joe Mansell. After much prayer and support from family and friends, I feel that this is the right time to announce my candidacy for probate judge of Franklin County.

When I decided to run, I was often reminded that our forefathers fought for the freedom of the common man to run for public office and to vote our conscience. Those freedoms are still being fought for today. The freedom to speak our mind has always been the cornerstone of our Republic, but too often the election process tends to divide us on our differences instead of uniting us on our common beliefs.

So, as we begin this journey, let us not forget that our main goal is to secure a brighter future for the citizens of Franklin County. I promise to always put God in every decision and will always believe that the best days of Franklin County are in front of us.

I promise to work hard each and every day and will always try to accomplish our common beliefs.

I hold the belief that proper planning is essential to preserving the integrity of our county, promoting economic development and ensuring that we have a stronger county.

We will always make sure that every citizen in this county, regardless of who you are, should always be safe from crime, fire or any other emergency. This county is blessed with an outstanding Sheriff's Department and fire departments. I will work closely with the Sheriff and each fire department to make sure they have the tools and funding necessary to carry out their duties.

I have a strong belief in our children, and I know that one day they will be our leaders. So I will work closely with our superintendent to make sure our kids have the opportunity for the best education and safest environment possible.

I feel that with the increasing growth from Huntsville to Blue Springs, MS, Franklin County is sitting perfectly with a chance for growth. I will work hard each and every day to attract new industry but will work just as hard with the great companies we already have in this county. We will work on trying to promote some of our hidden treasures, such as the lakes, and will make our road improvements a primary focus. We must have a strong infrastructure to be able to attract new industry to this county. I will work closely with all the mayors and city councils in the county to ensure that all of the needs of our citizens are addressed.

I have lived my entire life in Franklin County and have worked for the City of Russellville (Fire Department) for the last 26 years. I am a member of the Gideons, Franklin East Camp and have served on the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce.

My wife is Shae Quinn Mansell, and we have three children. Connor is 22 and is married to Emily Hallman Mansell. Caleb is 21 and is engaged to Jennifer Stovall, and Sarah is 12 and attends Russellville Middle School. My parents are Barbara Humphries Mansell and the late Johnny Mansell. I have one brother, Paul Mansell, who is a United States Border Patrol Agent. My grandparents are the late Charles Bud Mansell and Dessie Byrd Mansell, Varness Hacker Warhurst and the late Avo Humphries.

It would be an honor and a privilege to serve this county as probate judge, so I ask for your support for the Republican nomination in the June 5, 2018, primary.



COURTESY PHOTO

Pictured above are Joe Mansell and family. Mansell is seeking the Republican nomination for the office of probate judge in Franklin County.

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Robertson running for House seat in District 7

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Proncey Robertson's professional career has seen him serve the public as a police officer since 1990. Now, Robertson hopes to take his public service to the next step as a member of the Alabama House of Representatives in District Seven.

Robertson is scheduled to face Rep. Ken Johnson (R-Moulton) in the June 5 Republican Primary. District Seven includes portions of Lawrence, Morgan, Winston and the eastern part of Franklin County.

Robertson is a lieutenant with the Decatur Police Department, where he serves as Homeland Security Coordinator and Public Information Officer. After his honorable discharge from the United States Air Force in 1990, Robertson's law enforcement career began in Russellville, Arkansas. He moved to the Decatur Police Department in 1994. He is a graduate of the Arkansas and Alabama police academies. Robertson served in the Persian Gulf War while in the Air Force.

Robertson's duties with Decatur Police Department also include supervising the School Resource Officer Program for Decatur City Schools. He is the School Safety Liaison Officer for DPD.

After last Wednesday's mass school shooting in Parkland, FL, Robertson said in a press release that he would make it a priority as a member of the Alabama House to bring school resource officers to every Alabama school.

Franklin County Schools do not have officers in their schools. Superintendent Greg Hamilton's campaign included a pledge to work to bring SRO's to all Franklin County Schools.

"It's time we ensure the safety of our children and create an environment where teachers can do their jobs," Robertson said. "In the State House, I will work to install trained, professional school resource officers at every school in the state. When elected, this will be one of my top priorities. We can no longer sit by and wait for this to happen to Alabama children."

Robertson has been honored with the Decatur's Medal of Valor, the



Proncey Robertson

highest award given by the department. He also was named the 2003 American Legion Law Enforcement Officer of the Year for the State of Alabama.

"I have spent my entire career and life serving the public, and now I want to bring that leadership and dedication to our state government," Robertson said. "I decided to run because I believe that families and communities should be strong and free from government intrusion. Government should be smaller, smarter and more efficient.

"Hardworking families are taxed enough, and it's time to cut the wasteful spending. I believe in our conservative values and that life should be protected. Our children deserve the best education possible and should never be left in failing schools. My career in law enforcement and conservative politics has prepared me for this opportunity, and I look forward to getting our message out over the next several months."

Robertson serves as the chairman of the Lawrence County Republican Executive Committee, and he's a member of the Alabama Republican Party Executive Committee.

He's been inducted into the Alabama Special Olympics Hall of Fame as a result of his volunteer and fundraising efforts to help children and adults with developmental disabilities.

Robertson and his wife Kristi have been married 14 years. Kristi has two adult sons, Jacob and Daniel. Robertson and his wife are members of Mt. Hope Baptist Church, where they sing in the choir, and have taught and assisted with young ministers for 13 years.

Robertson has set up a campaign Twitter account, @PronceyTGDN, and a Facebook page, "Proncey Robertson for State Representative District 7."



Letters
to the
Editor

We love to hear from you! Send your guest columns, recipes, cartoons, letters to the editor and other creative submissions to franklinfreepress@yahoo.com.

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, don't forget to check us out online at franklinfreepress.net!

'DOCTORS,' from page 3

years ago, I counted seven doctors on staff at Helen Keller Hospital who had children in medical school, and six of the seven were in one of the osteopathic schools. I've had osteopath students do rotations in my office over the last 20 years.

"Dr. Brent Boyett in Hamilton went to osteopathic school in Kansas City and did his third and fourth year rotations in Alabama, including an OB/Gyn rotation in my office. Dr. Jeff Hovater is one of the best orthopedic surgeons in the state and is the team doctor for the University of North Alabama. He's a top-notch orthopedic surgeon, and he went to osteopathic school."

The bill caught the eye of Paul Storey, president of Helen Keller Hospital, who wholeheartedly supports the idea.

"It is imperative that we open up the recruiting pipeline of quality doctors to rural Alabama," Storey said. "I have been in healthcare for 26 years, and the challenge of recruiting physicians to rural areas has never been harder. I appreciate

Senator Stutts carrying this legislation. It's an innovative idea that will increase the number of doctors practicing in rural Alabama."

The scholarships, up to 25 per year, will be administered by the Alabama Medical Education Consortium (AMEC). Applications would be received by AMEC's board, and the board will decide on the scholarship recipients.

"These are people who have a vested interest in getting primary care to rural areas of Alabama," Stutts said. "They are from across the state. Between 65 and 70 percent of people end up practicing in the area where they received their medical training during residency."

"The intent is to get home-grown doctors in Alabama. We'll grow them here, train them here and place them in Alabama. It benefits a kid who is smart and can make it academically but doesn't have the financial resources to pay his or her way through school."

Because the bill involves the use of state funds,

Stutts said he would amend SB 210 to include a provision that the President Pro Tempore of the Alabama Senate and the Speaker of the House each can appoint two members to the scholarship board to make sure there is legislative oversight over the state funds.

At least one media report regarding SB 210 criticized Stutts for introducing a bill that placed control of the scholarship program with AMEC, which along with the Houston County Healthcare Authority, formed a partnership that created the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine in 2010.

Stutts said the bill doesn't provide for any exclusivity or favorable consideration for students of the the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine over any of the state's other three medical schools. Stutts' son recently enrolled in the Dothan-based medical school, but Stutts said his son would not qualify for, nor would he apply for, one of the need-based scholarships.

'CAREER,' from page 1

expand this program at all."

Bendall, who serves as RHS assistant principal and CTE director, said her program offers 10 business- and industry-certified programs in eight career clusters at Russellville High School and two more at Russellville Middle School.

Russellville's CTE program offers dual enrollment courses in partnership with Northwest-Shoals Community College in the programs of Welding and Emergency Medical Services. And Russellville City Schools partners with the Franklin County Career Tech Center in Belgreen to offer RHS students the opportunity to take painting and refinishing courses. Franklin County students come to RHS to participate in Automotive Tech and the Junior ROTC program.

Bendall said more than three quarters of RHS students participate in the career tech program. As school officials make parents and students aware of the career tech opportunities, that number will continue to grow, she explained.

"We have to look at what's coming in the future with jobs. We have to be proactive," Bendall said. "When we stop being visionary, we stop growing and stop being successful. I want my grandkids and great-grandkids to have the opportunity to go to school here and have Russellville High School be a thriving school, as it is now."

"A lot of it is making students aware of opportunities we have for them," Bendall said. "We're doing that through our courseLINK activities that introduce them to career tech programs and Advanced Placement [AP] courses."

RHS will host courseLINK for students during activity periods February 20-22, and for parents on the evening of February 22. The event, set to take place in the RHS Fine Arts Building, will also be open to the public after the parent program on February 22.

Report cards from the State of Alabama were recently released for all Alabama public schools. A major criteria of those grades is based on how college- and career-ready students from a high school are when they graduate.

With that goal in mind, RHS began its Academy program, where students can become career/college ready through CTE dual enrollment opportunities and/or earning credentials in CTE classes.

Once students choose an Academy to partici-

pate in, they select three courses in that career area. Academies include Engineering, Computer Science, Pre-Med, Agribusiness, Automotive, Business, Cosmetology, Fine Arts, Healthcare, Human Services, Leadership/JROTC and Manufacturing.

Bendall recently spoke with parents of Russellville Middle School eighth-graders about the course opportunities they have available at RHS.

"Some of them are having trouble deciding what their kids will do, because we offer so much at RHS," Bendall said. "Working with local business and industry, we looked at areas we needed to grow and what we needed to change."

"For example, we needed to develop a Computer Science Academy. We had one course in that area but not a Computer Science Academy. Now, we have a job opening for a Computer Science Academy teacher. And we'd like to see that program expand into cyber security."

According to a recent Alabama Works study, the top three high-demand occupations in the next decade in Alabama are software development/application, registered nurse and computer system analysts.

Dr. Stephanie Oliver, who is in charge of Russellville High School's Academy of Pre-Med, hopes to offer a certified billing and coding course next year in response to a need for jobs in that area.

Bendall hopes to see additional instructors from NW-SCC come onto Russellville's campus and teach courses to high school students. A new Emergency Medical Services program is led by a NW-SCC instructor at no expense to Russellville City Schools. Nineteen students signed up for that program in its first year.

"Northwest-Shoals sends the instructor. Those kids will have college credit in those courses, and it's paid for," Bendall said. "A new list will be available February 28 and we'll see what other programs may allow additional instructors."

In order to see a new facility come to life, Bendall believes a team effort is needed among Russellville City Schools, the State of Alabama and the City of Russellville.

"Career and Technical Education is building human capital and preparing kids to go to work, and if we don't prepare those kids we won't have industry here," Bendall said. "Career Tech can do

that two ways: One, kids are ready to work when they graduate (welding certificates, for example), and two, kids go on to college and want to come back home to start and support their families.

"We'll have a lot of kids leaving here who can go do patient care immediately. That's what we need. An investment in Career Tech is an investment in our state and in our city."

Russellville City Schools opened its Career Tech Building in the fall of 1968. At the time, it was heralded across Alabama as a state-of-the-art facility and was only the second CTE center in the state. Bendall believes it's time for Russellville to blaze a new trail in the growing area of Career Tech Education, and that must include additional space for the program to grow.

"We have to look at what's coming in the future with jobs. We have to be proactive," Bendall said. "When we stop being visionary, we stop growing and stop being successful. I want my grandkids and great-grandkids to have the opportunity to go to school here and have Russellville High School be a thriving school, as it is now."



Theran Pounders and Mikey Love sew in Mrs. Coan's Family and Consumer Science class.



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BCDA board approves five-year strategic plan

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

There are 10,000,000 people within a four-hour drive of Northwest Alabama's Bear Creek Lakes system. When the Tennessee Valley Authority began construction in the late 1960s on the Bear Creek Water Control Project, it formed the Bear Creek Development Authority (BCDA) to oversee and control the four-lake system.

Recently, the Bear Creek Development Authority Board of Directors realized that it wasn't doing enough to promote the development aspect of its responsibility. With that in mind, the board held a retreat in late October to develop a strategic plan that included a mission statement, five-year vision statement, goals and strategies, both long-term and short-term.

The result was a plan that was formally approved by the board at its February 9 meeting.

The new mission statement for BCDA is as follows: "Bear Creek Development Authority is responsible for the development of the natural resources within the Bear Creek Watershed Area.

"Our mission, on behalf of our communities, is to create, preserve and grow these quality of life assets in order to provide the best economic development, recreational and educational experiences for everyone."

The board also adopted a vision statement, which reads: "Bear Creek Development Authority—Where the heritage of the past and the adventures of today make the memories of tomorrow."

Board members identified strengths and weaknesses of BCDA and analyzed how those various

strengths and weaknesses affect the day-to-day operation and long-term goals for BCDA.

Included among the strengths were: BCDA Administrator, waterways, geographic location, quality of cabins and campsites, clean water, room for expansion, wildlife and affordability.

Listed weaknesses included: Lack of support from TVA, wintertime lake levels, lack of promotion of BCDA facilities, no state funding, no local earmarked or line item funding, limited staff and equipment, lack of technology, the closed Bear Creek Education Center, lack of nearby dining options, lack of trails available and limited campsites and cabins.

The BCDA Board of Directors realized that it wasn't doing enough to promote the development aspect of its responsibility. With that in mind, the board held a retreat in late October to develop a strategic plan that included a mission statement, five-year vision statement, goals and strategies, both long-term and short-term.

The board approved a list of seven goals to be accomplished within a five-year period, including:

- Establishing an environment of participation, engagement and support of the administration by the board of directors. Strategies to accomplish this goal include creation of BCDA advisory boards or councils, creation of an evaluation process for the general manager and his staff, establishing an orientation and accompanying notebook for board members and creation of a \$700,000 reserve account within the next five years.
- Establishing a superior external communications program. Strategies to accomplish this goal

include creation of a new website, additional social media, increased earned media, speakers, signage and additional unearned media.

•Creating and building better partnership with our vision partners. The board's strategies to accomplish this goal include working more with the Alabama Mountain Lakes Association and building a better relationship with TVA and its new director.

•Prioritizing community outreach. The board's strategies to meet this goal include developing plans for school fishing tournaments, church events at BCDA properties, 4H events, Scouts and additional public tracks/trails.

•Increasing revenue. The board hopes to bring in additional revenue through state education budget appropriations, city and county appropriations and/or earmarks, bottled water sales, increased user fees and state agency grants. Specifically, the board plans to raise \$1 million through timber sales, real estate sales, partnerships and corporate naming rights.

•Expanding and upgrading facilities. Through new equipment, additional cabins and campsites, better roads, more trails and construction of a frisbee golf course, the board hopes to meet this goal.

•Reopening Overton Farms/Bear Creek Education Center. While the board believes this must be a goal and priority for BCDA, there were no specific strategies in the plan to accomplish this step. It will remain a work in progress for the BCDA board.

For more information on the Bear Creek Development Authority, its facilities and user information, visit www.bearcreeklakes.com.

Annual 'Go Red' Luncheon promotes coronary health

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A diet in moderation, with portion control, reasonable caloric intake and a variety of nutritious foods, along with daily physical activity.

That's the basic goal for coronary health, and the message shared by Florence cardiologist Dr. Ajit K. Naidu to senior citizens last Thursday at the third annual Go Red Luncheon, an event to promote awareness of heart health sponsored by the Foster Grandparent Program and the Franklin County Cooperative Extension System.

"When it comes to your diet, moderation is the key, along with some sort of physical activity," Naidu said. "That's what is best for your heart."

Naidu leads the professional staff at the Cardiovascular Institute of the Shoals. Naidu was the first physician in northwest Alabama to offer radial artery cardiac catheterizations and coronary interventions, laser varicose vein ablation and advanced techniques in peripheral vascular intervention. He spoke to a crowd of more than 150 seniors, most of whom were dressed in red, as part of the third annual Go Red event.

Naidu said that when it comes to heart health, too many people are reactive rather than proactive, often waiting until heart disease has done significant damage to their bodies.

"It's an obvious problem, more of an educational problem than anything else," Naidu said. "A lot of factors contribute to heart disease, and if you ignore those factors you get caught behind the eight ball."

Naidu said there is no substitute for

physical activity.

"It's about doing more than you're doing today," he said. "People in America think taking a pill will change them, but it won't. Heart health is like a grind and not something achieved in one day. The most important thing to do is to be happy, be alive and be active. It can be simple things like walking outside or walking around a mall. Just do something. Laying down and watching *The Price is Right* isn't going to do it."

Naidu said the biggest contributors to heart disease include smoking, hypertension elevated cholesterol and diabetes.

"If we could eliminate those, we'd eliminate 80 percent of heart disease," Naidu said.

Sonya Faulkner, an RN, spoke about stress and its effects on the human body prior to lunch being served. Franklin County probate judge Barry Moore spoke briefly, as did Franklin County Extension coordinator Katernia Cole-Coffey.

"This event is all about women's heart health," Cole-Coffey said. "We're trying to educate women about heart health and knowing the signs and risks. If you're educated about it, you lower your risk of dying of heart disease and stroke."

Jessica Latham, Foster Grandparent Program director, said the large turnout was a good sign that seniors were getting something beneficial out of the program.

"With our Go Red campaign, we encouraged everyone to wear red today," Latham said. "We are very pleased with the response, and we had more than 150 people here today."

'SCHOOL,' from page 4

It became evident that something needed to be done to address the situation, and the Birmingham Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta embarked on a statewide petition to stem the tide of break-away schools by raising the city population threshold from 5,000 to 25,000 as a requirement before a new school system would be able to separate from the existing system through a statewide petition.

The group also approached Alabama legislators in an effort to get a law passed. As a result, I have introduced SB44 and Rep. Merika Coleman has introduced HB250, bills that would make the 25,000-resident requirement mandatory throughout the state and establish criteria for which a city may form its own school system. Furthermore, SB44 includes the existing state mandate that new school systems have a three-month financial reserve fund as previously determined by the State School Board. The bill also addresses the issue of property acquisition and reimbursement to the parent system. Systems that already exist will be grandfathered.

This legislation is not intended to penalize or stop cities from forming their own school systems. This legislation is put forth to ensure that the law is brought up to date based on current standards, requirements for a school system and financial obligations. Legislation SB44 will make sure that cities wanting to form a new school system are financially able to support that system, without it being a burden on the state. It also places the authority with the State Board of Education to determine said financial ability.

Sen. Linda Coleman Madison

11 South Union Street, Suite 738, Montgomery, AL 36130

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Bobcat Baseball

Phil Campbell returns to the diamond this week. See story Page 19.

Here to Stay

Red Bay's second-half rally fell short in a loss to Mars Hill, but the Tigers proved Hanceville-worthy. See story Page 14.



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Belgreen boys can't close out R.A. Hubbard

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

HANCEVILLE - Six minutes. That's how long it took for everything Belgreen's boys had worked so hard to accomplish this season—a 25-5 record, an 11-game win streak stretching all the way back to January 15, a second consecutive Class 1A, Area 13 championship leading to a second consecutive sub-regional win and a second consecutive trip to Hanceville—to come unraveled.

Leading No. 6 R.A. Hubbard 33-30 at the half of last Friday's regional semifinal showdown at Tom Drake Coliseum, the eighth-ranked Bulldogs opened the third quarter in fine fashion, fully intent on wiping away the memory of last year's Sweet 16 loss to South Lamar in the very same building. Junior Mason Bragwell, fresh off a 13-point first half, glided around a Chief defender on Belgreen's first possession with the kind of agility and body control 6'6 post players aren't supposed to have, finishing

See 'BELGREEN,' Page 18



PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

Up seven in the second half, Clint Isbell (left) and the Bulldogs were poised for a 12th straight win and a regional final berth before the Chiefs mounted a comeback.

Dare to Dream



On the heels of a last-place finish in area play, Phil Campbell's girls were bold enough to set their sights on Birmingham. Their reward? A trip to the Final 4 for the first time in 31 years.

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

HANCEVILLE - If you take Craig Thomas at his word [and you should, seeing as how Phil Campbell's fourth-year head coach is every bit the straight shooter now that he was during his playing days as a high-scoring point guard at PCHS in the late 1980s], the Lady Bobcats have had their sights set on Birmingham for quite a while.

"All summer long," Thomas says, "we preached on going to the Final Four, Final Four, Final Four, not getting beat."

Birmingham—not Hanceville, mind you, but Birmingham—was a lofty goal, to say the least, for a team coming off a season in which it lost more games than it won. But if you're doubting Thomas, listen to Abby Davis.

"That was our goal all year," the junior post player says. "Make it to Birmingham."

Again, it's worth pointing out that the opening round of the area tournament [which is where a frustrating season for Phil Campbell ended a year ago] is a long, long way from the Magic City. Upon further review, however, perhaps all that Final Four talk by Thomas and his team this summer

See 'DREAM,' Page 16



PHOTOS BY KYLE GLASGOW

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON - Craig Thomas (above, middle) has the Lady Bobcats in the Final Four for the first time since 1987, when his dad, Jerry "CT" Thomas, was coach. With regional MVP Kallie Allen (above, 15, and top of page) leading the way, Phil Campbell will face top-ranked Samson next Monday in Birmingham.

Red Bay rally falls short against Mars Hill, but Tigers prove they belong in Hanceville

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

HANCEVILLE - After a tough first half in last Thursday's Class 2A Northwest Regional semifinal against No. 9 Mars Hill, Red Bay's Gath Weatherford was in dire need of a pep talk.

He got a good one, too, from the person who holds Weatherford to a higher standard than anybody else.

Himself.

"I was sitting in the locker room at halftime, just kind of talking to myself," said Weatherford, who came into the day averaging a team-best 16.3 points per game but had managed only two on just three shot attempts in the first half. "I knew I wasn't playing near to my potential. I was letting my team down, my coaches down and our fans down. I knew I had to play better."

Weatherford's self-motivational ploy worked like a charm. The 6'3 junior connected on his first shot of the third quarter, a three-pointer from just to the right of the top of the key that banked off the glass and in. ["Sometimes it helps just to see the ball go in," Weatherford would later say.] He went on to

finish with 18 second-half points on 7-for-13 shooting, spearheading perhaps the best 16 minutes of basketball Red Bay has played all season. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough.

"Like I told our guys, Red Bay boys basketball has been an afterthought for a while," said Torisky. "It's been a long time since we've been to Hanceville, but today we proved we belong here. Guys like Gath, he's been with me three years now. We won two games last year, but they just kept believing. This year, we were happy just to make it here, and whatever happened beyond that was a bonus. But we showed today that we can play with anybody."

The Tigers, making their first regional appearance in 23 years, trimmed a 16-point fourth-quarter deficit all the way down to two in the final 30 seconds, but Mars Hill made enough clutch free throws down the stretch to hold on for a 62-58 win and earn a date with Tanner in Monday's regional final.

"Hats off to Red Bay," said head coach Jim South, whose Panthers improved to 20-9 on the

season. "They're a hard team to beat. They fought back. They had a great season. I know this was the first time they'd been here in quite some time. You have to give them a lot of credit. They played their guts out."

In the end, a frustrating first half in which the Tigers (18-13) shot just 4-for-18 from the field proved too much to overcome.

"I was telling David [Corum, an assistant coach], that was probably our worst first half of the year," said third-year head coach John Torisky, whose team trailed 24-13 at the break. "We've shot the ball well all year, especially in the playoffs, but we just couldn't get anything to fall in the first half. I think a lot of it was just jitters and getting used to a new environment, but Mars Hill did a good job defensively, too."

The two teams had only one day between last Tuesday's sub-regional round and Thursday's regional semifinal to prepare, but that was sufficient time for Mars Hill to identify the three-point shot as one of Red Bay's chief weapons. [The Tigers had made 167 threes on the season, including 54 by Weatherford.]

See 'BELONG,' Page 15



PHOTOS BY KYLE GLASGOW

Gath Weatherford (15) sparked the Tigers' comeback with 18 second-half points and finished with 20, hitting that mark for the 11th time this season and upping his final season average to 16.5 points per game. The junior big man will return next season, along with sophomore guard Clay Allison (1), junior guard Colton Corum (opposite page) and every other player from the Tigers' first regional team since 1995.



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'BELONG', from page 14

"We definitely wanted to take away the three-point shot and make them put the ball on the floor as much as we could," South said.

The Panthers were on point in the first half, permitting Red Bay only three attempts—and zero makes—from beyond the arc. Weatherford's bank job at the 6:15 mark of the third quarter must have broken the seal. The Tigers hit five threes (three by Weatherford and one each by Clay Allison and Braden Ray) in the second half, shooting a sizzling 58 percent (18-for-31) from the floor overall and scoring 45 points. They also went 4-for-4 from the foul line and turned the ball over just three times, playing darn near perfect basketball on the offensive end.

"We turned the ball over a few times, so they got some easy looks off that," South said. "And they made some threes. The shots started falling. The Weatherford kid is a tough matchup for anybody, because he likes to face up so much. They like to take those two dribbles toward the basket, and when you help off the opposite side, they know how to find the open shooters."

Weatherford followed up his banked-in three with another triple just 30 seconds later and then found the freshman Ray open underneath for an easy layup. Allison's lefty drive and finish at the 4:10 mark gave the Tigers more points (14) in the first four minutes of the second half than they scored in the entire first half, pulling them to within seven at 34-27.

"Resilient is a good word to describe these guys," Torisky said after his team trimmed a 16-point fourth-quarter deficit all the way down to two. "They're like pests. They don't go away. They've been doing it all year. We were down 17 at the half against Central and came back to win on a last-second shot. When we got down today, it was fight or flight, and these guys kept fighting."

"Coach has preached to us all year not to let the outcome of your shot affect the way you play," Weatherford said.

Mars Hill answered Red Bay's charge with a quick 9-0 run, getting a three-point play from Joseph Hanson and then two huge shots from junior guard Avery Thrasher. The first was a step-back three from well beyond the arc (Thrasher's fifth trey of the night), and the second was a driving scoop shot for a three-point play that gave the Panthers their largest lead of the game at 43-27.

Weatherford came right back with a three-point play of his own, but Mars Hill's lead was still 16 points after a driving basket by Chandler McDaniel to open the fourth quarter. It seemed as though Red Bay had made its run, the Panthers had regained control, and that was that.

The Tigers, however, had other ideas.

"Resilient is a good word to describe these guys," Torisky said. "They're like pests. They don't go away. They've been doing it all year. We were down 17 at the half against Central and came back to win on a last-second shot. When we got down today, it was fight or flight, and these guys

kept fighting."

Allison and Weatherford connected on back-to-back threes, and then a lefty layup by junior guard Colton Corum cut the lead to 10 at 50-40 with 5:40 remaining. Moments later, after Weatherford took a charge on the defensive end, Corum found Ray for a three from the top of the key to make it 51-43.

Hanson made a layup for Mars Hill, but Corum converted a three-point play to cut the lead to 53-46 with 3:42 to go. The Panthers missed a couple of key free throws on their next two trips, and Red Bay just kept coming. Ray dropped a dime to a cutting Weatherford for a layup, and then Weatherford drained a fadeaway from the left elbow to make it 54-50 with 2:40 left to play.

Hanson scored to push the lead back to six, but the fleet-footed Allison raced coast to coast for a layup just five seconds later to get the Tigers back within four. Red Bay had two chances to pull within a single point, but three-pointers by Weatherford and Ray missed the mark. Thrasher went 2-for-2 at the line to make it 58-52, but Corum answered with a pair of free throws to cut it back to four with 53.8 seconds left.

Mars Hill ran some time off the clock on its next possession before Red Bay freshman guard Jalen Vinson—perhaps the best pure athlete on the team already—swooped in from who-knows-where in the blink of an eye to steal the ball from Thrasher and take it the other way for a layup, cutting the lead to 58-56 with 24.8 seconds remaining.

The Tigers immediately fouled McDaniel, who calmly sank two free throws to push the lead back to four. Weatherford missed a three on Red Bay's ensuing trip, but he chased down his own rebound and put it back in to make it 60-58. McDaniel was fouled again with 3.8 seconds on the clock, and the junior forward again made both free throws to seal the deal.

Red Bay's comeback fell short, but the Tigers officially served notice on Thursday: After going from a 2-24 record last season to 18 wins and a breath away from the Elite Eight this season, after toiling for years in the shadow of Hall of Fame coach Donnie Roberts and the multi-time state champion Red Bay girls, the boys program is alive and well, and it's not going away any time soon.

"Like I told our guys, Red Bay boys basketball has been an afterthought for a while," said Torisky, who is married to Roberts' youngest daughter, Leah, and served as his assistant on the 2015 state championship team before taking over the boys program the following year. "It's been a long time since we've been down here, but today we proved we belong here. Guys like Gath, he's been with me three years now. We won two games last year, but they just kept believing."

"This year, we were happy just to make it here, and whatever happened beyond that was a bonus. But we showed today that we can play with anybody."

Weatherford finished with 20 points last Thursday, hitting that mark for the 11th time this

season. Allison, a sophomore, added 13 points and three assists, and the 6'2 Ray scored 11 points on 4-for-6 shooting and also grabbed four rebounds. Corum scored all seven of his points in the fourth quarter and also finished with four boards and three assists.

Junior post player Peyton Green had three points and five rebounds, and Vinson and Tanner Hamilton each scored two.

The other three boys teams (Mars Hill, Tanner and Sulligent) in the 2A bracket in Hanceville had a total of 16 seniors on their respective rosters; Red Bay had none. The Tigers will bring back everyone, and reinforcements are coming from both a junior varsity team and a seventh-and-eighth-grade team that won county championships this season. The future is bright, and last week's Hanceville experience will be immensely valuable going forward.

"It's gonna help us a lot," said Allison, a Vina transfer who finished second on the team in both scoring (9.1 points per game) and threes made (37) in his first season at Red Bay. "We were just happy to get here this year, but getting this experience is huge for us."





PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

BIRMINGHAM BOUND - The Lady Bobcats will ride a 16-game win streak into the Final Four after handling Mars Hill and Cold Springs in Hanceville.

'DREAM', from page 13

wasn't as far-fetched as it seemed. Clearly, he knew some things.

For starters, Thomas knew that things were changing at area rival Red Bay, where Hall of Fame coach Donnie Roberts was retiring and perennial All-State players Allie Kennedy and Darby Madden were moving on to the college ranks. The Class 2A, Area 14 title was essentially there for the taking.

Secondly, Thomas knew that his team was better than its 14-15 record last season.

"We were pretty good last year," he said. "We played a very tough schedule."

Finally, Thomas knew better than anyone how determined his team was to improve and put that disappointing season behind them. He saw it every day.

"The girls worked hard this summer," he said. "We absolutely *worked*. Everybody showed up every day. Their work ethic...this senior class has the best work ethic of any class I've had since I've been at Phil Campbell."

With a talented group of veterans led by Davis, fellow junior Dakota Elliott and seniors Darby Elliott and Chloe Roberson coming back, not to mention another impact player joining the fold in freshman guard Caitlynn Mills, Phil Campbell was undoubtedly going to be better this season. Maybe even a lot better.

But *Birmingham* better? With perennial powers Mars Hill, Tanner and Cold Springs all lurking as potential roadblocks? Surely the Lady Bobcats were over-reaching.

Enter Kallie Allen.

Allen, a long and athletic 5'9 guard with a diverse skill set on both ends of the floor, transferred from Russellville to Phil Campbell prior to this, her sophomore season. The moment she walked through the gym door, Birmingham suddenly seemed a whole lot closer.

"Kallie transferred in and let us put a few people in the right spots to make us a little bit better," Thomas said in what has to qualify as the early

front-runner for Understatement of the Year.

Allen instantly became Phil Campbell's most dangerous perimeter shooter, but her greatest value lies in her versatility. Need a big-time rebounder? An on-ball defender? Someone to handle the ball and initiate the offense? Another quick-twitch athlete to create havoc on the press?

Allen is all those things wrapped up in the same player—the very definition of a difference-maker.

"Kallie hustles when someone can't score," Darby Elliott says. "She's there to pick up the other person and make some shots."

"I guess it was toward the fourth quarter when I realized how much we were up by," Davis said, "and I got so excited. And you're just, like, amazed. I've been playing since my eighth-grade year, and that's what I thought back to. I've never got to have that feeling of 'Hey, we're going to Birmingham. We just won the championship game.' It was an awesome feeling to have."

Monday afternoon's Class 2A Northwest Regional final at Tom Drake Coliseum on the campus of Wallace-Hanceville offered a prime example of Allen's importance. She scored six first-quarter points to get the Lady Bobcats out to an early lead, but Cold Springs rallied to go in front 11-10 on a three-point play by sophomore star Elizabeth Hill with 6:01 remaining in the first half.

Davis, coming off a 22-point effort in the regional semifinal win over third-ranked Mars Hill, had been whistled for her second foul just moments earlier and was fastened to the Phil Campbell bench. The Lady Bobcats typically run their offense through Davis—the team's leading scorer coming in at 14.4 points per game—in the high post, but Thomas didn't panic. He simply moved Allen to Davis's customary spot just above the foul line and let her go to work.

After assisting on a jumper by Mills that put Phil Campbell back on top, Allen reeled off the Lady Bobcats' final eight points of the half in impressive

fashion: First, a right-hand drive around Hill from the high post for a layup to make it 14-11; then, a lefty finish off another drive at the 3:50 mark to push the lead to 16-12; on the next possession, a running bank shot from the right side of the lane; and finally, an 18-footer from the top of the key that sent Phil Campbell into the locker room up five at 20-15.

It was a stretch so pivotal as to challenge Thomas's vocabulary.

"Kallie was...what would be a good word? She played *big*," Thomas said. "They went to a box-and-one on Abby, which we sort of felt like they would do early in the week. We started practicing for it. We put Kallie in there and worked her in the middle a little bit, and she stepped up when she had to."

Rest assured, she had to. While the rest of the team endured a 3-for-21 performance from the floor in Monday's first half, Allen shot 6-for-8 and scored 14 points. She would finish with a game-high 20, earning tournament MVP honors as the Lady Bobcats wrapped up their first regional championship and punched their ticket to you-know-where with a 46-29 win.

"It was really fun," said the soft-spoken Allen, who finished 9-for-13 from the field and also pulled down eight rebounds while upping her season average to 12.5 points per game. "I did it for my team. It took all of us, not just me."

It was—as all championships are—a team effort. Darby Elliott harassed Cold Springs sharpshooter Camryn Crider all over the floor and also scored nine huge points in the third quarter, helping Phil Campbell (26-5) put its 16th straight win on ice. Dakota Elliott was primarily responsible for holding the 5'11 Hill—coming off a 30-point outing in the regional semifinals against Lamar County—to just nine points on 4-for-10 shooting. [A second-quarter injury to her left arm that caused Hill to miss the start of the second half and ultimately ended her night prematurely also played a role.]

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Mills played major minutes on the big stage for the second straight game and finished with five points, and Roberson chipped in with four points and five rebounds. Davis battled through foul trouble and a tough shooting night to finish with 10 rebounds, two assists, one steal and one block. But it was Allen who cut Cold Springs' heart out.

"We hadn't seen her play like that," said Lady Eagles' coach Tammy West, whose team lost to Phil Campbell 67-59 in a Thanksgiving tournament at West Point way back on November 20. "She had a great game. They're absolutely much better than the last time we played them. They played with a lot of confidence today."

Asked if her team guarded Allen in the high post the same way they guarded Davis in the high post, West couldn't suppress a smirk.

"Obviously, we didn't," she said, resisting the urge to glance down at the stat sheet in front of her. "We were supposed to. But we didn't."

After Allen carried the Lady Bobcats to a halftime lead, Darby Elliott took over offensively in the third quarter. The senior guard buried a three—just her third of the season—off a nice kickout from Davis, then pulled up on the fast break to drop in a floater and make it 25-15. Crider got loose for a three-pointer to cut the lead back to seven, but Elliott rebounded a miss a few moments later and raced coast-to-coast for a layup to make it 27-18.

Allen tacked on a driving basket at the 3:00 mark, and then Elliott assisted on a layup by Mills. A couple of trips later, Elliott picked Crider's pocket for the second time on the day and went the other way for an easy layup to cap off an 8-0 run and push the lead to 33-18.

After Allen drove the lane for a lefty layup to close out the third quarter and make it 35-20, eight minutes and a handful of free throws were all that separated the Lady Bobcats from the destination they'd been dreaming of since last summer. Birmingham was so close that Davis—a four-year varsity veteran with 1,328 career points—could practically reach out and touch it.

"I guess it was toward the fourth quarter when I realized how much we were up by," she said, "and I got so excited. And you're just, like, amazed. I've been playing since my eighth-grade year, and that's what I thought back to. I've never got to have that feeling of 'Hey, we're going to Birmingham. We just won the championship game.' It was an awesome feeling to have."

It must be an incredible feeling, too, for Thomas, who was a ninth-grader at PCHS in 1987 when his father Jerry "CT" Thomas led Phil Campbell's girls to their most recent Final Four berth. [The Lady Bobcats lost in the Class 3A state championship game in both 1986 and '87, to Tanner and Lauderdale County, respectively.] Now, 31 years later, the younger Thomas will take Phil Campbell back to the Final Four in search of the program's first state title.

"Wow. Back in '87, when my dad was coaching, I was there for the whole ride," said Thomas, whose team will take on top-ranked Samson (29-3) in the state semifinals next Monday at 3 p.m. at the BJCC. "I didn't get to see him much, I'll tell you that. He stayed busy. He has mentored me over the past four years on how to prepare these girls. He's got 35 years in coaching, so he's been here and done it. There's a lot of difference in someone who can just tell you something and somebody who's actually been there and done it. "He keeps me in line," Thomas added with a smile, "thus I keep the girls in line."

True to form, Thomas was still coaching his rear end off in the final minutes of Monday's win, well after the starters had headed to the bench and the outcome was decided. Cold Springs reserve Prisca McAnnally got loose for a transition basket, and Thomas—literally moments away from a landmark win, a trophy presentation and a Final Four berth—couldn't help himself.

"If we get beat down the floor again," he threatened, "all five of you are coming out."

One assumes that such defensive lapses will be cleaned up during practice this week. The Lady Bobcats have six days to prepare for No. 1 Samson and a game 31 years in the making.

"It'll be a new atmosphere," said Darby Elliott, who finished with 13 points on 5-for-7 shooting in Monday's win. "But we all want to win. We're determined to win."

Thomas took it a step further.

"Everybody wants to win," he said. "These girls have the *will* to win. They stepped up and took charge and did what it took to win. When it gets tough like that, you just gotta have the will to win. These girls showed that. They stepped up down here [in Hanceville]. They've been playing good all year, but they stepped it up another notch when we came down here.

"What they're doing right now shows what they accomplished over the summer with all the work we did."

In just one short year, Phil Campbell's girls have gone from a losing record and a first-round loss to Red Bay in the area tournament to the brink of history. They're two wins away from doing something that no team in program history has ever done. There's only one thing Thomas can do next week in Birmingham to one-up CT.

"I'm gonna have to win it, man."



PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

After scoring 10 points in last Thursday's semifinal win over Mars Hill (above), Dakota Elliott (left) helped hold Cold Springs star Elizabeth Hill to nine points in Monday's final.

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Abby Davis

Junior Forward, Phil Campbell

Davis delivered on the big stage last week for the Lady Bobcats, helping them continue their postseason run. The 5'11 junior scored 19 points last Monday in a sub-regional rout of Cleveland as Phil Campbell punched its ticket to Hanceville. She followed that up Thursday with a dominant effort in the regional semis against Mars Hill, scoring 22 points and pulling down 10 rebounds in a 55-46 win.

Davis grabbed 10 more boards in Monday's final and was named All-Tournament following Phil Campbell's 46-29 win over Cold Springs.



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'BELGREEN', from page 13

at the rim to extend the lead.

Junior guard Brant Bragwell rebounded a miss by Russell Orr, Jr. on the other end and fired the ball up the floor to senior guard Eli Hiser, whose lefty layup made it 37-30 just 40 seconds into the second half. More than 15 minutes of game time remained, but the Bulldogs—shooting 55 percent from the field at that point and holding their own against Hubbard's pressure defense—seemed poised to take control and punch their ticket to Tuesday's regional final.

Over the next six minutes and change, however, it all fell apart.

The Chiefs turned up the heat defensively and hit Belgreen with a quick 9-0 run that took all of 57 seconds, surging to a 39-37 lead on a three-point play by 6'1 sophomore Montoya Kellogg at the 4:36 mark. Things gradually worsened from there, and by the time senior guard Jacob Mayberry made a free throw at the 1:01 mark, the Bulldogs had endured a scoreless stretch of 6:19 during which they missed all seven of their shots from the floor and turned the ball over eight times.

"We tightened up defensively," said Hubbard coach Milton Conwill, whose team ran off 14 straight points during Belgreen's drought to go from seven down to seven up and eventually pulled away for a 66-51 win. "We got a couple of steals and a couple of easy baskets, and that helped us get the lead. I don't think we trailed after that. [They didn't.] We thought our speed might create some problems for them. They handled it well in the first half, but the press gave them a little more trouble in the second half. I don't know if fatigue set in or what.

"The press saved our lives again, because we weren't making very many shots."

Conwill was right about that. The Chiefs (26-6) hit just 33 percent from the floor in the first half (compared to 52 percent by Belgreen), but they attempted 11 more shots than the Bulldogs (36 to 25). Those extra possessions were largely due to offensive rebounds, of which Hubbard collected eight before the break.

"We got caught up under the goal a few times," Belgreen coach Clint Isbell said. "We didn't hold our box-out far enough out away from the basket. They got a lot of those rebounds in the mid-lane area. We just got caught up underneath too much."

The Bulldogs (25-6) also turned the ball over 12 times in the first half, but it never felt as though they were coming undone against Hubbard's pressure. That changed in the third quarter, when Belgreen had twice as many turnovers (10) as points scored (five).

"They started out not pressuring us in the third quarter," Isbell said. "We took a seven-point lead, and maybe we got back on our heels a little bit. We



PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

Mason Bragwell (right) posted a double-double for Belgreen with 17 points and 12 boards, but only four of those points came after halftime as Hubbard tightened the screws on the defensive end.

weren't as aggressive, thinking they might stay back. Then all of a sudden they jumped back in it, and it caught us off guard. That seven-point lead dwindled, and then they went in front. I think they caught us off guard with it.

"They picked up the pressure, too, in the second half. They put together some tighter traps, and they put some bigger guys in the traps to make it harder for us to pass out of them."

"They picked up the pressure in the second half," Isbell said. "They put together some tighter traps, and they put some bigger guys in the traps to make it harder for us to pass out of them."

The Chiefs out-scored Belgreen 16-5 in the third and then closed things out efficiently down the stretch, shooting 6-for-7 from the field in the fourth quarter and 8-for-12 from the foul line. The Bulldogs shaved a 16-point deficit down to nine on a few occasions late, but they never truly recovered from that fateful six-minute stretch.

"It's disappointing," Brant Bragwell said at the post-game presser. "We relaxed in the third quarter, and it cost us."

Hubbard worked the offensive glass early, jumping out to a 13-7 lead, but a steal and layup by Mayberry sparked a 10-4 run by Belgreen to close the first quarter. Mason Bragwell scored eight points in the first, the last two of which came off a nice drive and dish from Brant Bragwell and tied the game 17-17 at the end of one.

The 6'6 Bragwell scored five more points in the second quarter and had 13 by halftime on 5-for-8 shooting; he managed only five shot attempts in the second half, making two of them and scoring just four points.

"We did a better job in the second half of pressuring them on the perimeter and making it harder for them to get the ball down to him," said Conwill, whose team held the Bulldogs to just 7-for-23 shooting in the second half. "They were getting the ball to him a lot in the first half on dribble penetration. We weren't doing a very good job stopping the drive, but we did a better job taking that away in the second half."

Bragwell, averaging a team-best 18.5 points per game coming in, finished with 17 points and 12 rebounds on Friday. He shot 7-for-13 from the floor and 3-for-4 from the line, but none of those free throw attempts came in the second half. In fact, Belgreen shot just four free throws in the second half, compared to 21 by Hubbard [they made 14 of them].

Afterward, Isbell said the Chiefs changed tactics defensively against Bragwell after halftime—in a couple of ways.

"They started face-guarding him," Isbell said, "and it got pretty physical. We didn't get any calls by any means. There was a lot of cheap stuff going on, grabbing jerseys and things the officials just didn't see. There were some different things there that could have helped us out, but we weren't getting [the calls].

"Sometimes it goes that way. Sometimes the officials don't make calls, and that's the way it goes. Our guys kept battling and tried not to fall into that [kind of] game."

Hubbard finished plus-six (33-27) on the boards, with 11 of those rebounds coming on the offensive end. Malik Bynum, a 6'4 junior, grabbed four offensive boards and finished with 14 points on 7-for-8 shooting. Junior guard Riley Evans, Jr. led the Chiefs with 20 points, shooting 7-for-12 from the floor and 5-for-6 from the line. Kellogg added 13 points, and Tyson Garth shot 7-for-10 from the line in the fourth to finish with 11 points.

Hiser finished with 10 points for Belgreen on 4-for-6 shooting, including a pair of threes. Mayberry added seven points, four assists and three steals. Brant Bragwell had six points, four rebounds and three assists, and Seth Taylor scored five points. Payton Scott chipped in with two points, five boards and two assists, and Caleb Pinkard and Jake Taylor also scored two apiece.

In the end, the Bulldogs were left with a sour taste for the second straight year after failing to hold on to a lead in the regional semifinals—10 points in the first half against South Lamar last season, seven points in the third quarter on Friday.

"It sucks," Mason Bragwell said, "blowing it like that."

Seniors Scott, Pinkard, Hiser, Mayberry, Jake Taylor, Seth Taylor and Ashlee Britton played their final games for Belgreen last Friday. They'll be moving on after helping the Bulldogs win 47 games, two county titles and two area championships over the past two seasons. The team's top two scorers, Mason Bragwell and Brant Bragwell (12.2 points per game), will return next season, looking to lead Belgreen to a third straight regional berth—with a different result in mind.

"These two guys are great players," Isbell said, seated next to the Bragwells in the interview room after Friday's loss. "We look forward to them coming back. We've got a lot of work to do, though. We're losing seven guys, and they're seven guys who have contributed a lot. These guys will have to step up and lead the team next year. That'll be their job, and I think they're gonna do a fine job of it."

Bobcats have deep pitching, must replace key bats

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

Following the graduation of a handful of veteran hitters who played key roles on last year's 26-win team, Phil Campbell will have to rely more on pitching and defense this season in its ongoing quest to make a deep playoff run.

And that suits head coach Jonathan Raper just fine.

"I think our pitching and defense will be our strength this year," said Raper, whose team won an area championship last season and advanced to the second round of the Class 2A playoffs before falling to Mars Hill. "We have a good core group of players coming back to build around, and most of them have been starters for several years. They're hard workers and good leaders for the other players coming up. I think we have a chance to have a competitive team."

Senior Peyton Thomas is still the straw that stirs the drink for the Bobcats, and he returns in his role as staff ace following a junior season in which he went 8-1 with a 2.10 ERA, 80 strikeouts, 17 walks and 46 hits allowed in 60.1 innings. Thomas completed seven of his 10 starts and pounded the zone with his fastball-curveball combination, posting a strike rate of 65 percent.

"Peyton does a good job of helping us have a chance to win whether he's on the mound or at the plate," Raper said. "He makes his teammates better by being around him and feeding off his experience and his confidence in our team. They see how hard he works at baseball, and his work ethic fuels his teammates to work hard also during practice and on their own time."

"The team believes that if Peyton is pitching, we have a good chance to win if we can play good defense and give him a few runs to work with."

Left-hander Hayden Copeland and righty Nick Swinney must be replaced after combining for more than 70 innings and 11 wins last season, but Raper is confident that senior right-handers Chase Hutchens and Joe Hardy are ready to take on larger roles on the mound. Hutchens worked 34 innings last year across 11 appearances, including four starts, and Hardy could potentially fill the role of closer when he's not holding down his customary spot behind the plate.

"Joe looked really good during the summer for us on the mound," Raper said. "He may actually get to pitch more this year for us. I don't know yet if we'll use him as a starter or maybe someone to come in and close games. He's like a bulldog out there on the mound."

"Chase Hutchens is a senior that I believe is ready to have a good season for us on the mound. He pitched a lot last year and gave us a lot of quality innings and always gave us a chance to win."

Junior right-hander Nate Owens is also back after going 3-1 with a 3.14 ERA in 29 innings last year as a sophomore.

"Nate is an 11th-grader who should really push to be an area game starter or start at least one game a week for us," Raper said. "He had some games last year where he really pitched well. He just needs to become more consistent and believe in his stuff more."

Junior Cole Motes, healthy again after returning last year from an arm injury, and freshman Ridge Raper, who impressed last season in nine innings of work (one win and two saves with two earned runs allowed, 10 strikeouts and only one walk) provide even more depth on the mound.

"Cole pitched mostly jayvee games last year,

with a few varsity games late in the season," Jonathan Raper said. "He's looked really strong early on this year. He's really worked hard in the weight room this offseason, and I think you'll be able to notice the difference in him this season on the mound and at the plate."

"Ridge pitched well for us last year at the end of the season. He had a couple of starts and a save at the end. He was really starting to push some of our other guys for innings last year, and he had a good summer. He just needs to keep working hard and continuing to improve. He could be a starter [on the mound] for us this season."

The same goes for senior right-hander Brody Nix and freshman Brett Saint, both of whom could fill key roles on the mound this year.

"Brody couldn't stay healthy for us last year, pitching-wise," Raper said. "We were planning on him having a big role last year on the mound, but back problems kept him from pitching. He's back and healthy this year. I think he'll help us as a starter or reliever this year—maybe in a closer role if he doesn't start."

"Brett Saint pitched very well for us this summer. He's a young kid who I think will pitch for us this year on the varsity level. I think he has a chance to be a weekend starter for us. If not, he could definitely handle a relief role for the varsity."

Others who could make an impact on the mound for the Bobcats include senior lefty Brandon Thomas, senior righty Daniel Smith, senior righty Mike Wrona, sophomore righties Rilan Garrison and Tyler Weeks, and freshman righties Levi Crittenden and Austen Baker.

"We've gotta continue to have good pitching and play good defense for us to return to the playoffs," Raper said. "We're gonna have to find some offense from some of the new players that are coming up this year. Everybody has to learn their role on the team and be able to accept their role. We have to learn to be a team together this year, and learn to trust and believe in each other."

As is the case on the mound, everything starts for Phil Campbell at the plate with Peyton Thomas, an extra-base-hit machine and the reigning Class 2A Hitter of the Year. The 6'1, 200-pound shortstop batted .433 as a junior with 12 home runs and 12 doubles, giving him 22 homers and 38 doubles in three seasons at the varsity level. He drove in 33 runs last season and scored 48 while drawing 29 walks, striking out only nine times and reaching base at a .585 clip.

Thomas, a UNA signee, is a fearsome hitter, but the Bobcats must find a replacement in the leadoff spot for Copeland, who batted .415 last season and ignited the offense with 37 walks, 28 stolen bases and 46 runs scored. Raper said that Motes and senior centerfielder Mike Wrona, a varsity veteran, are candidates to hit atop the order. So is Hardy, who caught fire late last season and batted .419 with 21 RBIs in 15 games after April 1.

"As of right now, I'm not sure who will bat leadoff for us," Raper said last week. "We have several players that I think are capable of doing it. We just need to find out who likes the role and can handle it. Cole Motes and Mike Wrona are two players who may take on that role. They both have improved at the plate from last year, and both are capable of stealing some bases for us."

"Joe Hardy has hit leadoff for us in the past and did a very good job in that role. He may be there also. He does a very good job at finding a way to get on base."

In addition to Copeland, the bats of Swinney, Gage Roberson, Colby Baker and Nick Taylor must also be replaced. Nix returns after hitting .296 last season with four doubles, three triples, 22 RBIs, 29 runs scored and a .408 OBP. Raper batted a solid .289 in 38 at bats, driving in nine runs, scoring 12 and reaching base at a .453 clip.

Owens figures into the mix at first base, along with Brandon Thomas and also Hutchens, who can play either corner infield spot. Motes will see time in the middle infield and the outfield, and Smith can play in the outfield or behind the plate.

Rilan Garrison can also catch or play third, and Austin Baker could see time at a number of spots. Junior Trent Gonzalez is also in the mix in the outfield.

"We'll have to have some players step up offensively for us this year that don't have much experience," Raper said. "We will have the most team speed we've had in a while. We just have to continue to work hard as a team and not live on last year's success."

"I think we've been real close at making a long run in the playoffs, but we've been beaten by some really good teams. I think we've been maybe a hit away or a defensive play away from making that happen."

Phil Campbell was scheduled to open the 2018 season at home against Hamilton on Tuesday. The Bobcats will host Marion County on Thursday and Haleyville on Friday.



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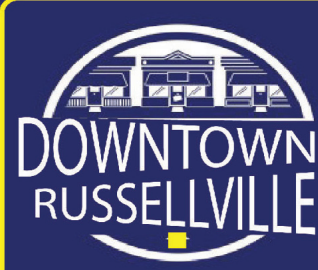
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