

Roughly 130 Pilgrim's employees found a way to stay busy during shutdown. See story Page 9.

In its first year of rocketry competition, Tharptown is sending a team to nationals. See story Page 9.



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Russellville senior wins Bryant-Jordan Student Athlete Award

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Bryant-Jordan Student Athlete Awards, named after legendary coaches Paul "Bear" Bryant and Ralph "Shug" Jordan, recognize the accomplishments of high school seniors who are both superior athletes and superior students.

Only one student is selected from each of the Alabama High School Athletic Association's regions for Classes 1A-7A. Russellville senior Ashton Moore received the award and a \$2,500 scholarship as she was named the 2018 Class 5A Region 8 Bryant-Jordan Student Athlete of the Year at a banquet held April 9 in Birmingham.

Moore, the daughter of Barry and Deedra Moore, has a 4.54 GPA and is ranked first in her graduating class of 167 students.

Moore, who scored a 31 on the ACT, will attend the University of Alabama at Birmingham next fall to pursue a degree in biomedical engineering.

Factors considered by the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame selection committee for the Bryant-Jordan awards include scholastic standing, sports played, athletic honors, student leadership and civic/church leadership.



Ashton Moore

See 'AWARD,' Page 10

Vote **Barry Moore**
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Pd. Pol. by Barry Moore, 399 High Pine Dr., Russellville, AL, 35654

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COURTESY PHOTO

Secretary of State John Merrill (center) with Franklin County Schools superintendent Greg Hamilton and his wife Jessica.

Merrill returns to Franklin County

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

John Merrill has heard the criticism before. As Alabama's most active state elected official, Merrill's heard the murmurs from Montgomery insiders wishing he'd stay in his office more and not spend as much time traveling.

But Alabama's 53rd Secretary of State scoffs at those critics. Instead of listening to those complaints, he's taking note of who's not complaining about his traveling across Alabama—its residents.

"What I say to those critics is, 'You know who doesn't say that? People in Moulton, Heflin, Phil Campbell, Bay Minette, Robertsedale and other communities across our

See 'MERRILL,' Page 11

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Robin Beverly Fiser, Russellville, age 63
Died Friday, April 13, 2018. Funeral arrangements were not known at press time. Pinkard Funeral Home was assisting the family.

Nancy Lee Pounders Rice, Phil Campbell, age 83
Died Sunday, April 8, 2018. Graveside service held at Mountain View Cemetery in Phil Campbell. Spry Memorial Chapel of Russellville assisted the family.



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!

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Commission approves partial funding for SRO

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission approved partial funding for a school resource officer to be placed immediately into the Franklin County School system at its April 16 board meeting.

Commissioners approved \$8,100 to the Franklin County Sheriff's Department to help pay for an SRO for the balance of the fiscal year, through September 30. The remaining portion of the salary will be funded by the Franklin County Board of Education, if approved at its April 24 meeting.

The position will be full-time, and the officer, who will be employed by the Franklin County Sheriff's Department, will serve all of the county schools, according to Franklin County superintendent Greg Hamilton.

"We will have a set schedule per each nine-week period among the schools, and principals will have that schedule, and we'll go from there," Hamilton said.

Hamilton declined to offer specifics as to times the SRO would be at any certain school, citing safety concerns.

Hamilton said the officer will go through SRO training this summer but would begin his duties next week.

"This is not a cure-all, but it's a good start and it's one of the things I promised people we would try to get when I ran for office," Hamilton said. "It's not a total solution, but we now have one more SRO than we had when I took over."

"I appreciate the Franklin County Commission and Sheriff [Shannon] Oliver for their support in making this happen."

The \$8,100 will come out of the sheriff's funds, which are part of the county general fund budget. The funding runs through the current fiscal year, and the commission, sheriff and Franklin County Schools officials will revisit the funding for fiscal year 2018-19.

Oliver said he had been working with school officials for a while to figure out how to fund a SRO. He said this was a priority from people across Franklin County.

"It's been something we have needed for a long time but just now worked out where we could work together to secure the funding and get someone in there," Oliver said. "One doesn't sound like much, but we hope it's something we can build on over the next few years."

Oliver said he would open the position up to deputies already employed with the department, and once he or she is chosen, that position will be filled by a new hire.

In other action, the commission:

- Approved a budget amendment for the Franklin County Revenue Commissioner's office to reflect a pay grade increase to step 8 for Lori Penick, who recently passed the State of Alabama certification exam for appraisers.

- Declared a HP plotter owned by the Revenue Commission office, a plotter owned by the Franklin County Highway Department and a Dodge pick-up truck owned by the Solid Waste Department as surplus property and authorized their sale on govdeals.com.

- Approved the resignation of Tabitha Crowder from the Franklin County Sheriff's Department and the hiring of Samantha Hollins as a corrections officer/dispatcher.

- Approved the hiring of Barry Walker and Danny Morgan as temporary employees with the Franklin County Highway Department.

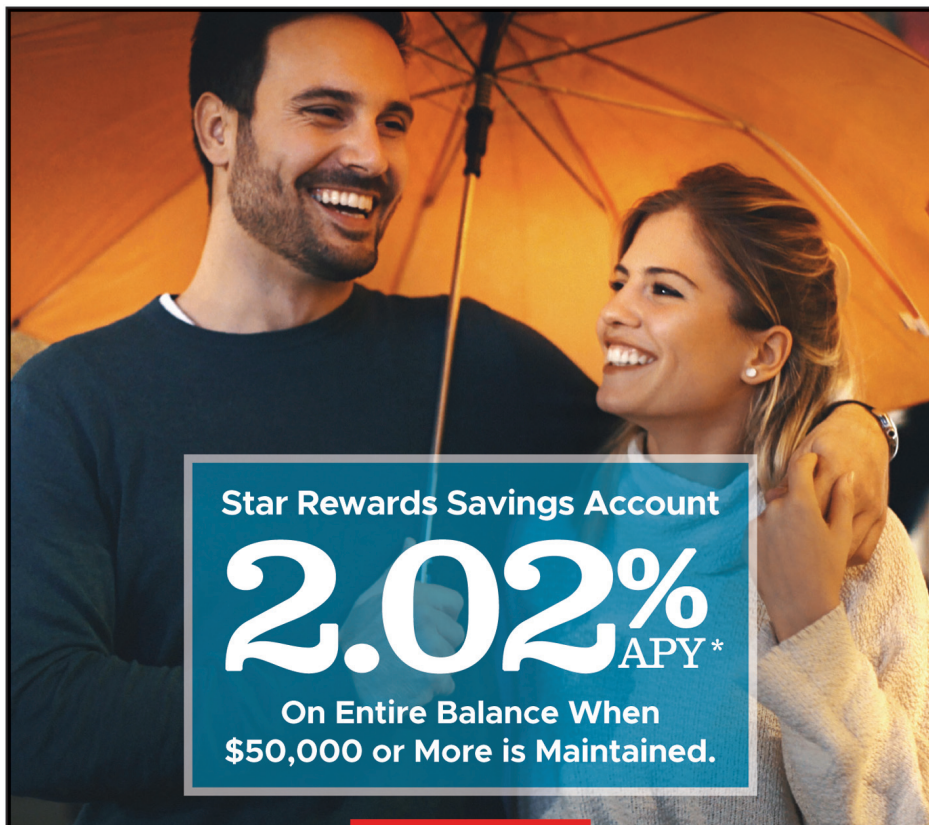
- Authorized probate judge Barry Moore to sign a contract with Civil Group for engineering services related to a 500 foot extension of the roadway into the Mike Green Industrial Park at a cost of \$29,960.

- Approved a resolution recognizing April as Fair Housing Month.

- approved mandatory wellness screenings for all county employees on May 17, 2018, at the commission annex. Employees may choose to take the form to their personal physician for completion.

- Approved a letter to be sent to Pilgrim's officials thanking them for donating 2,200 hours of labor from its employees during the week of April 9-13, 2018.

- Approved the administration of several grants, along with the North Alabama Highway Safety Office, from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs for a 17 county region Community Traffic Safety Program. Grant amounts include: \$182,837.72 (402 Administrative Grant); \$150,000 (402 STEP project); \$210,000 (402 STEP Project); \$50,000 (CIOT Law Enforcement Campaign); \$52,000 (Drive Sober Law Enforcement Program); \$147,000 (North Alabama Alcohol Hot Spot Sustained Enforcement Project).



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Month of May busy for Franklin County Schools

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The month of May will be a busy one for Franklin County Schools, with graduation and awards days on the calendar.

Franklin County superintendent of education Greg Hamilton said all five county high schools will hold graduation ceremonies on Thursday, May 24. Awards Days are set as follows: Tharptown, May 2 at 8:30 a.m.; Phil Campbell, May 4 at 8:30 a.m.; Belgreen, May 9 at 8:30 a.m.; Red Bay, May 10 at 6 p.m., and Vina May 17 at 9 a.m.

The last day of school for students will be a half-day on Thursday, May 24. Teachers will have a professional development day that afternoon for a half day.

Teachers will have a work day on Friday, May 25.

The full school calendar is available online at www.franklin.k12.al.us.

Honey Do List: Time for spring screening

Spring cleaning means spring screening. Torn window screen will let all kinds of critters in, so here are a few tips for replacing window screen.

The spline is the rubber tube that is pressed around the perimeter of the screen. Use the point of a utility knife to pry out one end of the spline. Grasp the end and pull slowly to remove it, and then pull out the old screen. The spline should probably be replaced. Cut off a short piece and carry it to the store so you'll get the right size.

Choose a screen material (aluminum or fiberglass), and be sure it matches the color of the other windows. Although you may be able to buy screening by the foot, you may save money in the long run by buying a roll. It's also not at all unusual for a beginner to accidentally tear the new screen during installation, so having a roll may save another trip to the store; and you'll have some on hand for future repairs.

Just make sure the roll that you buy is wide enough for all the windows, not just the one you happen

to be working on now.

Lay the new screen over the sash so it overlaps all sides at least one inch. Cut the screening with shears, or lay it over a piece of scrap lumber and cut through it with a sharp utility knife.

If you are repairing more than one screen and one is larger than another, do the large one first. Then, if you accidentally cut the screen when rolling it into place, you can roll out some new material for a second try and save the damaged piece for the smaller screen.

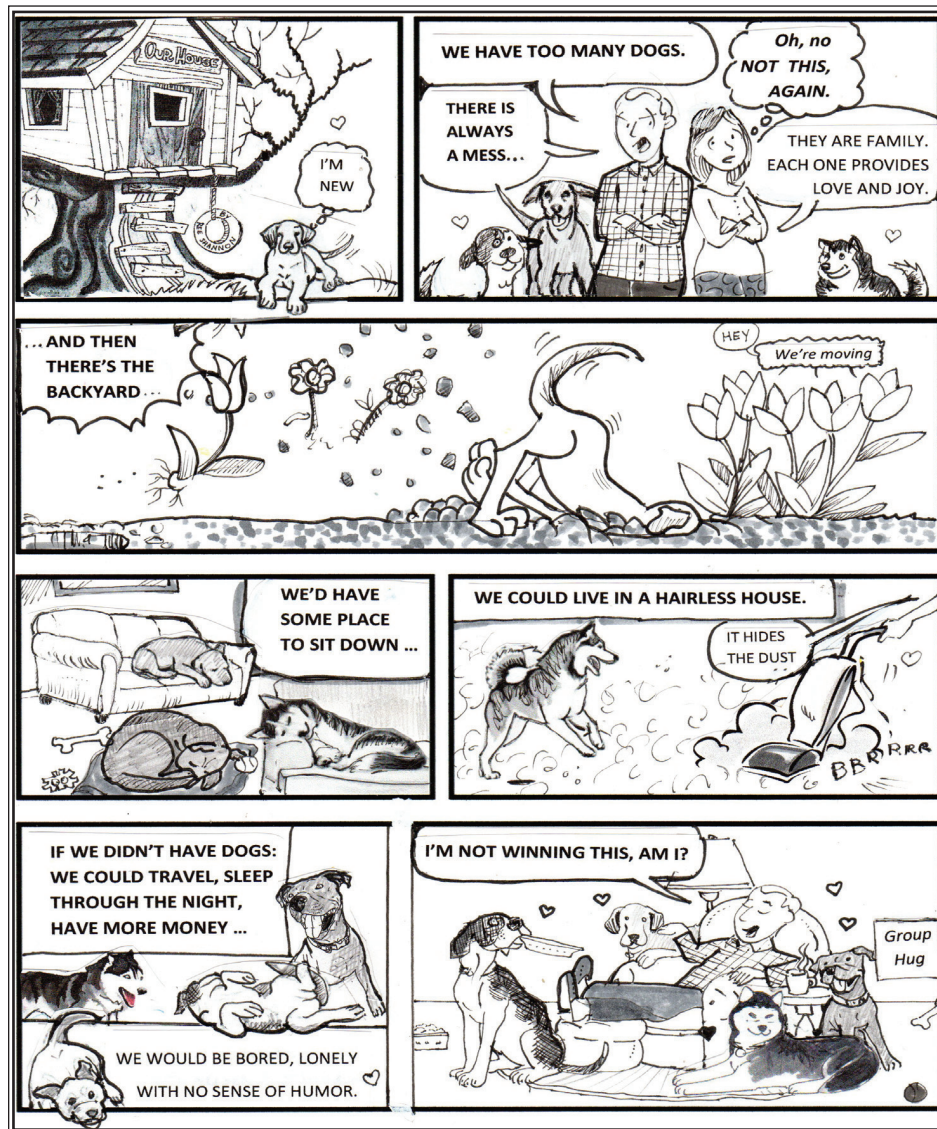
If you are using aluminum screening, roll the screen into the channel on one side of the sash using the convex wheel of your screen roller/installation tool. Place the palm of your hand in the center of the screen to keep it from shifting.

Roll lightly at first, and then more firmly to press in the screen in stages; otherwise, you may cut it. Complete one side at a time and

See 'SCREENING,' Page 5



Doug Green



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DAVE SAYS

Financial Straight-Talk

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by Dave Ramsey

Expenses, not income

Dear Dave,
I bring home \$4,100 a month in military disability pay and Social Security combined. My wife brings home an additional \$2,000 each month. Should we base our emergency fund level on her income only, since mine is guaranteed?

Lewis

Dear Lewis,
Your emergency fund shouldn't be based on income. I recommend folks have three to six months of household *expenses* set aside in an emergency fund. What would it take to operate your household for that length of time if one or both of your incomes disappeared?

I don't anticipate *your* income stopping, Lewis. But income loss isn't the only thing you're guarding against with an emergency fund. You're also guarding against things like an illness in the family, if the transmission in the car goes out, or your home's heating and cooling unit needs to be replaced. There are many more crises that can come upon a family other than a loss of income. I don't mind if you two lean toward the three-

month side of expenses, since your income is pretty stable. But always remember, an emergency fund should contain three to six months of *expenses*, not income.

Thank you for your service, sir.

Dave

What happens to the debt?

Dear Dave,
I've started your personal finance course in high school, so I'm asking this for the entire class. What happens to your debt if you pass away with no relatives or heirs to take responsibility for what you owed?

Elizabeth

Dear Elizabeth,
In many cases it simply does not get paid. Relatives or heirs of the deceased are not responsible for a friend or family member's debt, except in cases where they have been a co-signer on that debt.

Let's say someone's parents died, and at the time of their death they had \$100,000 in debt in their names only. The only way that debt will be paid is if they owned enough stuff—if they had enough in the way of assets—to pay the debt. If they owned a \$200,000 home, the house would have to be sold in order to pay the debts. Their estate would be the only thing standing good for the debt. If they owned nothing and had no co-signers on any of the debt, the creditor would not get paid. The bank lost that money.

Elizabeth, I hope that helped. Please tell your teacher I said thank you for leading the class!

Dave

*Dave Ramsey is CEO of Ramsey Solutions. Follow Dave on the web at daveramsey.com and on Twitter at @DaveRamsey.



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'SCREENING,' from page 4

then roll in the spline by pressing it over the screen and into the channel beginning about one inch from one corner. Then use the concave side of the roller to press completely into the channel.

Roll lightly at first to press the spline into the channel gradually. Rolling too hard tends to stretch the spline and increases the risk of having the roller slip off of the spline and cut the new screening. If you are using fiberglass screening, simultaneously roll the screen and spline into the channel in this step.

If you are repairing more than one screen and one is larger than another, do the large one first. Then, if you accidentally cut the screen when rolling it into place, you can roll out some new material for a second try and save the damaged piece for the smaller screen.

As you near each corner with the spline, use shears or a utility knife to make a diagonal relief cut from the outside corner of the overlapping screening toward the inside corner of the sash. This is one place where "cutting corners" is wise. It prevents the screen (especially aluminum) from bunching up in the corner as you press it in place.

The roller can't quite roll all the way into a corner, so use the tip of a standard screwdriver to press in the spline at the corners.

Use a utility knife to cut off the excess screening when the rolling is complete. To avoid accidentally cutting into the new screen, angle the blade outward and move slowly and steadily. Hold the frame securely with your second hand, but keep it a safe distance away from the cutting.

Reinstall the screen frame into its channel, and you are done. Remember, help is just around the corner at your local hardware store.

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EVENTS OF INTEREST • FAMILY REUNIONS • PLAYS • CHURCH GATHERINGS • EDUCATIONAL • CLUB MEETINGS


 **R**ussellville Masonic Lodge 371 is selling Boston butts for Memorial Day weekend. Butts are \$30. Pre-order at 256-810-1970. Pick-up will be Saturday, May 26 from 8-10 a.m. at the Masonic Lodge on Coffee Street.


 **S**iloam Missionary Baptist Church will hold revival with evangelist Bro. Randy Taylor this Wednesday-Friday, April 18-20, at 7 p.m. Pastor Bro. Jarrod Helms and congregation invite you to attend! Nursery provided.


 **K**indred 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.


 **T**he gospel group Purpose will be singing at Gray Rock FCM Church this Saturday, April 21 at 6:30 p.m. Everyone is invited! For more information, call 256-627-6404.


 **M**t. Hebron Baptist Church will hold "Friends and Family Day" this Sunday, April 22. Morning worship begins at 10:45 a.m., with special guests 11th Hour. There will be a fellowship meal following the morning service with more singing by 11th Hour beginning at 1:30 p.m. The church is located at the intersection of Cty. Road 26 and Highway 59 in the Spruce Pine community.


 **A**n unveiling of a historical marker honoring former Alabama congressman Carl Elliott will be held at the Vina Community Center this Sunday, April 22 at 2 p.m. The Red Bay Museum, which includes a display on Elliott, will be open after the ceremony. Among those speaking at the event will be state representative Johnny Mack Morrow, Mary Jolley and Julian Butler, who work as aides to Elliott and Carl Elliott III. For more information, you may call Scotty Kennedy at 256-356-8758, Cassie Medley with the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce at 256-332-1760 or Sue Raper at Vina City Hall at 256-356-4996.


 **T**he Bay Tree Council for the Performing Arts presents its final production for the 2017-2018 season, "Southern Hospitality," by Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten and directed by Scotty Kennedy. The play will be presented Thursday, April 26 through Saturday, April 28 at 7 p.m. and Sunday, April 29 at 2 p.m. at Community Spirit Bank's Weatherford Centre in Red Bay. Tickets will go on sale at the Weatherford Centre Monday, April 16 from 2-4 p.m. weekdays. You can purchase your tickets there or reserve them by calling 256-356-9829. Tickets are \$8.00 each with open seating. Groups who are interested in coming may call Beth Hammock at 256-356-9286.

 **T**he Pebble Bluegrass Festival, sponsored by and held at Pebble Community Center (100 County Road 3423 in Haleyville) is set for Friday and Saturday, April 27-28. Rain or shine, held inside. Good, clean family entertainment from Rocket City Ridge, the Sparks Family and Tombigbee Divide. All bands and pickers welcome! Supper served from 4-7 p.m. on Saturday. Concessions on the grounds, free camping in the rough. Camper hook-ups: 30 Amp - \$12/day, 50 Amp - \$12/day. No drugs or alcohol allowed (enforced). Tickets are \$10 for the weekend, \$5 for Friday only (7 p.m.-until), \$7 for Saturday only (2 p.m.-until) and \$2 for children ages 6-12. Kids under six years old get in free with an adult. All proceeds go to Pebble Community Center. For info, call 205-269-2221.

 **T**he Russellville High School Class of 1988 presents the ninth annual Chucky Mullins Memorial Golf Tournament Friday, May 4, 2018 at Twin Pines Country Club. Tee-off times at 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. Lunch at 11:30 a.m. Three-man teams. Entry fee is \$225 per team. There will be cash prizes and door prizes. Proceeds go to the Chucky Mullins Memorial Scholarship Fund. For additional information, you may contact Deedra Seale Moore at (256) 412-5659 or Rosell Christian Hamilton at (256) 335-3663. Mail Donations to 399 High Pine Drive, Russellville, AL 35654.

 **O**sborn Hill Cemetery will hold Decoration Day on Saturday, May 5. The first Saturday of May has been observed as Decoration Day for well over 100 years. All old flowers will need to be removed off the graves. Please make plans for that special day to come to the cemetery. Also, it's time again for annual donations. If you would like to donate to the Osborn Hill Cemetery Fund, please send your donations to: Osborn Hill Cemetery Fund, c/o Mrs. Lana Duncan, 2330 Colburn Mtn. Road, Tuscumbia, AL 35674.

 **T**he Helen Keller Hospital Foundation is bringing a familiar face from Facebook and YouTube to the Marriott Shoals Conference Center on Saturday, May 5. Heather Land, known for her "I Ain't Doin' It" series of videos, is bringing her comedy and music show to Florence as a fundraiser for the Foundation. The show will begin at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are on sale by calling 256-386-4747. Ticket levels include: Bronze Level \$30; Silver Priority Seating \$40; Gold VIP Level \$100. The Gold VIP Level includes cocktail tickets, hors d'oeuvres, meet and greet with Heather Land, and a group photo. The proceeds from this event will benefit the Pediatric Unit at Helen Keller Hospital. For more information, call 256-386-4747.

 **SAVE THE DATE:** Saturday, May 12, for Pioneer Day, part of Franklin County's Bicentennial Celebration, from 9-5 in Russellville on the east side of Sloss Lake on Hwy 24. Living history demonstrations to show how people lived, worked and played 200 years ago. Actors will portray historical figures. Native Americans. War of 1812 soldiers. Civil war camp. Food and artisan products for sale. Free admission. Free parking in the field across Hwy. 24 from the entrance. Free shuttle bus service. Join in the fun and wear pioneer clothing, if you wish. For more information, email archive@hiwaay.net or call 256-332-8827 or 256-332-4085.



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Golden Tigers Soccer

Join us to watch our Varsity Boys Soccer Team take on East Limestone at 5:30 as they play for the Area Championship! This is a big game for our soccer team and we'd love to see everyone there wearing their black and gold.

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What you can expect at Russellville City Schools



Academics

- The system offers eight Advanced Placement courses in 10th, 11th and 12th grades, nine Pre-AP courses for 9th, 10th and 11th grades, and Honors and Pre-AP courses in 6th-8th grades.
- We also offer an Engineering and Manufacturing Academy, Pre-Med and Nursing Academy, and a Business Academy. These Career Academies, which are offered through the RCS Career and Technical Education Department, aim to prepare each student for career and academic success in a field they are planning to pursue.

Academics Con't

- Our system is proud to offer a chance for students to participate in top-notch extracurricular activities like our World Champion RCS Engineering Rocket Team, who will be returning to the national competition again this May!

Athletics

- Our athletic teams are second to none. RCS is home to the back-to-back-to-back state champion baseball teams and the 2015 state champion boys golf team as well as many other dedicated and outstanding sports teams who are learning the value of hard work, dedication and teamwork through participation in athletics at RCS.

PRE-K Registration

First Class Alabama's Voluntary Pre-K Program has already concluded registration for the 2018-2019 school year. However, registration forms can still be submitted online and applicants will be added to the waitlist for potential openings. Links to online registration forms can be found on the WES website or WES social media pages.

Enrollment is open to all children who will have had their 4th birthday on or before September 1, 2018 and are residents of the state of Alabama. The registered applicant must meet residency requirements and present the necessary documents set forth by the program and the district at the time of registration. Registration forms are available at the WES office and on the WES webpage

Russellville City Schools Admission Policy

Criteria and acceptance for Office of School Readiness (OSR) Pre-K program: The 18 Pre-K allocations for each OSR classroom will be designated for residents of Russellville. If, during registrations for the OSR program, the number of Russellville students does not reach the required student enrollment, the Russellville Board of Education may authorize the option of enrolling students outside the Russellville city limits.

*It shall be the policy of the Russellville City School System to provide nondiscriminatory basis educational opportunities for children. No person shall be denied the benefits of any education program or activity on the basis of race, color, disability, creed, national origin, age, or sex. Pursuant to the requirements of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, all homeless children, migrants, and English language learners must have equal access to the same free appropriate public education provided other children and youth. All programs offered by schools within the School System shall be open to all students in compliance with statutory and judicial requirements. The enrollment of homeless, immigrant, migrant, and limited English proficient children shall not be denied due to any of the following barriers: lack of birth certificate; lack of school records or transcripts; lack of immunization records; lack of proof of residency; lack of transportation; unaccompanied; no guardian.

Kindergarten Registration

West Elementary School will be holding Kindergarten registration for the 2018-2019 school year in RCS Board of Education Building on the following dates:

- April 18, 2018 - 8:30-11:30 and 12:30-2:00
Students with last name beginning A-H
- April 19, 2018 - 8:30-11:30 and 12:30-2:00
Students with last name beginning I-Q
- April 20, 2018 - 8:30-11:30 and 12:30-2:00
Students with last name beginning R-Z

Kindergarten registration is open to children who will have had their 5th birthday on or before September 1, 2018. If you have any questions regarding Kindergarten registration at WES please feel free to contact the office at (256) 331-2122.

Necessary documents needed for registration

- Birth certificate (not required) or other documentation of the child's date of birth and parent(s), custodial parent(s), or legal guardian(s)
- Updated Alabama Department of Health immunization record
- Social Security card (not required)
- Copy of custodial paperwork (if applicable)
- Deed, lease, or rental agreement for a property inside Russellville city limits in which the student resides with the parent(s), custodial parent(s), or legal guardian(s)
- Current utility bill with a matching address of the above stated deeded or leased property

For your convenience, all required registration forms are available online. If you have access to a printer, feel free to go ahead and print your registration forms and complete them beforehand. This will lessen your wait time upon arrival that day.

Parents/Guardians are asked to bring the child to registration in order to participate in a Kindergarten screening assessment at the time of registration. Certified teachers will assist with the assessment.

RCS continues to accept Out of District applications.



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Recent scam aims to exploit community support

Bogus 'All About Sports' company purports to be raising funds for RHS baseball

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When it comes to supporting its school, its students, organizations and athletic teams, the businesses of Russellville are there to answer the call.

Unfortunately, a recent scam by a company known as All About Sports seeks to exploit that community support by misrepresenting that it's benefiting the Russellville varsity baseball team.

Local businesses have been contacted recently about purchasing ads on a baseball poster with funds to benefit the Russellville High School baseball team. Once a business commits over the phone, it receives an invoice directing it to send payment to an address in Lemon Grove, California to All About Sports.

RHS varsity baseball coach Chris Heaps said he's never heard of All About Sports until last week, when he learned about a local business receiving an invoice from them. The top of the

invoice reads "Russellville High School 2018 Baseball Poster."

"We've never been contacted by any company about this," Heaps said, "and they are not affiliated with Russellville High School or the baseball team at all. We do our own fundraising, and this has nothing to do with our school or our team."

"We've never been contacted by any company about this," Heaps said. "They are not affiliated with Russellville High School or the baseball team at all. We do our own fundraising, and this has nothing to do with our school or our team."

In fact, the address listed on the invoice for All About Sports comes back to a Postal Xpress building in Lemon Grove. There is no business operating at that location. An internet search for All About Sports in California turned up nothing to show the existence of such a company.

At the bottom of the invoice, in small print, is a

statement reading "All About Sports does not have any special relationship with any school or organizations."

According to a statement from the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce, the solicitation calls indicate the company is conducting a fundraiser for the RHS baseball team. Chamber officials recommend you disregard any information or solicitations for money from the company.

A recent scam in Coronado, Colorado, also targeted businesses. A caller indicated businesses would be featured on a poster with athletic calendars for the local baseball team on it. The solicitation indicated the local school would receive part of the proceeds. But officials with Coronado High School knew nothing about the fundraiser or the company.

For more information about the scam, or to report suspicious fundraising activity, contact the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce at 256-332-1760.

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Dr. Sledge is now seeing patients every Wednesday at the Littleville clinic.

An Alabama native, Dr. Sledge completed his OB/GYN residency at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, TX (top 10 national medical residency programs). He is able to communicate with both his English and Spanish-speaking patients.



THS rocketry team qualifies for nationals

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

One hundred teams of high school students will soon travel to Washington, D.C. to compete in the next phase of the 2018 Team America Rocketry Challenge. These teams are the national finalists who posted the top qualifying scores from more than 5,000 student teams that competed.

In its first year with a rocketry team, Tharptown High School placed among the top 100 nationally, and five students will compete next month in the national finals.

Tharptown, which placed one of its two teams in the national finals, will be joined by three Russellville High School teams in the top 100.

Rocketry team sponsor Marsha Inmon will accompany THS students Annslee Bottoms, Perla Chavez, Alea Gaston, Destin Martin and Presley Laster to the nation's capital with a chance to move on to the international competition later this year.

Inmon has sponsored the THS robotics program for three years, but this was first year for the school to offer rocketry. Tharptown has two rocketry teams, with students ranging from grades 7-10, so the program should be strong in the coming years as well.

"We are excited. We have a really good group of kids," Inmon said. "I'd say the smartest kids in Franklin County are on our rocketry teams, and we have the best group of parents you could ask for. Everyone has really come together and helped us get to the point we are at now."

The team qualified by posting one of the 100 best scores nationally while launching a rocket to 800 feet within a 41-43 second period. Like the sport of golf, the lower the score, the better.

Bottoms, a sophomore who served as team captain, credits her teammates, Inmon and the team's two mentors for their quick success.

"Mrs. Inmon was there for me from the beginning. She invited me to join the robotics program, and that was very life-changing," Bottoms said. "When she asked me to join the rocketry team, I didn't know what to expect, but I was excited. The concept is something I never thought I'd grasp as a sophomore. We started out knowing nothing about aerodynamics and learned how to get something in the air."

"We were taught by Andrew Heath and Scarlet Studdard. They stayed involved, and we got better."

Each team member has specific duties related to the launch, from gauging weather conditions to watching for the rocket to land. In order to be a successful, qualifying launch, a raw chicken's egg must be aboard the rocket and still intact when the rocket lands.

Tharptown's other rocketry team includes captain Grayson Studdard, co-



COURTESY PHOTO

Tharptown rocketry team members pictured above are: Front row (L to R) - Mentor Andrew Heath, Alea Gaston, Destin Martin, Perla Chavez; Back row (L to R) - Annslee Bottoms, team sponsor Marsha Inmon. Not pictured is Presley Laster. The team will travel to Washington, D.C. next month to compete in the national finals.

captain Brayden Malone, Coleman Warhurst, Jaden Laster and Grace Beard. Although his team dealt with some uncooperative weather during their launch, Malone said he's thrilled to see his classmates advancing to nationals.

"Our main goal is to learn more about rocketry, and to do well in the competition," Malone said. "We work together really well and help each other out. We want to see them win the national competition."

The Team America Rocketry Challenge is the world's largest student rocket contest and is used as a platform to build a stronger American workforce in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It's sponsored by the Aerospace Industries Association and the National Association of Rocketry and was created in 2002.

For more information on TARC, log onto www.rocketcontest.org.

Pilgrim's employees stay busy during shutdown

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When management at Pilgrim's poultry plant in Russellville planned for a one-week shutdown to install new equipment, they wanted to give their employees an option to earn a paycheck for the week.

Pilgrim's officials teamed with the City of Russellville and Franklin County to arrange for employees to volunteer to work for the city or county last week. The employees who signed up would earn their regular paycheck by doing community service for the city and county.

More than 130 Pilgrim's employees signed up and spent last week working with City of Russellville and Franklin County employees in a range of jobs from pressure washing to painting to litter pickup to sidewalk washing.

"The mayor [David Grissom] told me it more than doubled the city work force," said Mollie Shirley, Pilgrim's Human Resources manager. "These employees volunteered their time to the city and county. They came in every day to the plant, got organized as to who would go where, and they remained on our payroll this week."

"This benefits the city and county. From all the information we've received, Mayor Grissom and [Franklin County commissioner] Chris Wallace were very appreciative of the employees for the great job they did."

Grissom expressed his appreciation to Pilgrim's officials and the employees who volunteered to work for the city.

"They got a lot accomplished this week and worked very well with our employees. This was a great community service by Pilgrim's and their employees," Grissom said.

Pilgrim's workers provided 2,200 man hours of labor to Franklin County during the week. The Franklin County Commission expressed its apprecia-

tion to the management and employees of Pilgrim's at its Monday meeting.

Pilgrim's employees helped patch potholes on approximately 60 miles of Franklin County roads and worked with the Franklin County Litter Control officer to pick up more than 8,680 pounds of garbage throughout the county.

Employees who did not participate in the city/county program were also able to do work around the plant, including painting and striping of the parking lot. Others chose to take vacation time.

The plant was closed in order to install new equipment as part of a \$3 million capital investment, Shirley said. A new wing segmenter and two new cage dump operations were installed. Pilgrim's Complex manager Kevin Touchstone said the new equipment will provide more automation without eliminating any jobs.

"We are moving 16 people from day shift to work elsewhere. Nobody is losing their job as a result of these efficiency measures," Touchstone said.

Shirley said the plant also is undergoing a \$250,000 rebranding/refurbishing, including a complete update of the employee break room and new signage throughout the plant. Lockers were removed and repainted. New vending machines were installed, and the break rooms were redone, she said.

Pilgrim's employees returned to their regular work schedules Sunday night. The plant employs more than 1,200 people and has a major impact on the local economy as Franklin County's largest employer.

Shirley said Pilgrim's employees worked more than 800 hours helping Russellville and Franklin County last week.

While employee turnover remains a problem at Pilgrim's, Shirley said the numbers show it's improving. Pilgrim's has reduced its turnover from 143 percent to 109 percent the last year.

"Labor is your most valuable resource. For a complex this size, this represents a big improvement," Shirley said.



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Yard Sale this Friday, April 20 at 315 Montgomery Street. Plus-size clothes and household items.

Yard Sale this Friday, April 20 from 7am-until at 901 Hwy 144. Dishes, glassware and misc.

Yard Sale this Friday & Saturday, April 20-21 from 7am-until at Russellville Free Will

Baptist Church. Household goods, some of everything. Multiple families.

Yard Sale this Friday & Saturday, April 20-21 from 8am-until at 4194 Duncan Creek Road. Five families. Follow the pink arrows from North Jackson. Lots of name-brand and boutique clothes, jewelry & housewares.

Yard Sale this Saturday, April 21 from 8am-5pm. 1 mile east on Hwy. 48 at Deb's Hair Shop. Furniture, appliances, tools, clothes and what-nots.

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White wedding dress. Size 22W. \$125 or best offer. Call 256-366-4340 (2).

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Russellville Utilities in Russellville, Alabama, is currently seeking

applicants for the Joint Office Manager's position with the following education and skill sets:

- A motivated person
- Degree in business or five years experience in office management desirable
- Working knowledge of computer information systems a plus
- Working with the public or customer service experience desired.

Russellville Utilities offers a competitive salary and benefit package.

All applications will be received through the Alabama Employment Service located at 500 South Montgomery Ave., Suite 102, Sheffield, Alabama 35660. If you can not apply at the Sheffield Location,

go to your local Alabama Career Center to obtain an application and fax to 256-383-4983, attention Andrea.

Applications will be received through April 23, 2018 at 5 p.m.

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'AWARD,' from page 1

"Ashton is truly a great student and athlete and a wonderful young lady," said Russellville City Schools superintendent Heath Grimes. "She represents her school, her family and our community very well. To be nominated is an honor, and to be selected as a regional winner and receive the scholarship is just amazing.

"We are very proud of her for receiving this recognition and for the honor she has brought to our school system."

Moore, who wants to enter the field of cancer research, credited her teachers throughout her education for inspiring her to reach her potential. But one of those teachers stands out to her.

"My school and my teachers helping me was a big part of this," Moore said. "I have really been inspired by Mrs. Nikki Watts. She teaches AP chemistry, and she's someone who just pushes us all to do our best."

"Ashton is truly a great student and athlete and a wonderful young lady," said Russellville City Schools superintendent Heath Grimes. "She represents her school, her family and our community very well."

Moore said her plans to do cancer research are derived from the pervasive nature of the disease.

"I want to help people in my career, and so many families suffer from cancer and are affected in some way," Moore said.

In addition to serving as president of the RHS FBLA, Key Club and Student Council, Moore is a talented golfer and a member of the RHS varsity girls golf team. Her mother, Deedra, serves as team coach.

Moore is active at North Highlands Church of Christ, where she and her family are members. She received a Presidential Recognition Scholarship at UAB based on her outstanding ACT score. That scholarship includes full tuition.

While many young people face trepidation at the thought of leaving home, Moore said she's looking forward to beginning her academic career in Birmingham.

"I'm definitely excited about it," she said. "My parents have always taught me all that I need to know. Birmingham's a lot different than Russellville, but I'm ready for it. I'm ready to move on to the next phase of my life."

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, visit us on the web at www.franklinfreepress.net!

'MERRILL,' from page 1

state," Merrill said. "The places I go and speak are places where they've never had statewide elected officials there, ever, and certainly nobody's come since the last election cycle.

"Those people don't ever ask why I'm not in my office. I've got a team in my office to do what we need to get done. There are no deadlines I've missed. There aren't any contracts not signed for the governor and no proclamations she's had to wait on me for. No meetings have been delayed because I haven't been there. That just hasn't happened."

Merrill visited the *Free Press* office last Tuesday during his third visit this year to Franklin County. Merrill was the keynote speaker at "Making a Difference for Franklin County's Children," a child abuse and neglect awareness conference held at the A.W. Todd Centre.

Merrill has a streak of six years and counting where he's visited all 67 Alabama counties. As of April 10, 2018, he's traveled to 34 counties this year for 127 unique visits to those counties.

"Nobody travels like I do across the whole state. I don't hear our constituents complaining about that," Merrill said. "They think we've set a new standard for accessibility for state public officials because of my travel, and because I give everyone my cell number."

Merrill will be on the June 5, 2018, Republican Primary ballot as he seeks a second term as Secretary of State.

"Nobody travels like I do across the whole state," Merrill said. "I don't hear our constituents complaining about that."

Defining the responsibilities of the office of Secretary of State isn't easy. There are more than 1,000 different duties delegated to the position under Alabama law, with most of those involving processing and filing documents that are public records.

The Secretary of State also serves as Alabama's chief election official. And it's with elections and voter registration that most Alabamians deal with Merrill's office.

"Before I became Secretary of State, the only time most people thought about voter registration was when election time came," Merrill said. "What we've done is to change the thought process by making sure people know they can register to vote all the time.

"We've had campaigns with Nick Saban and Gus Malzahn, Deontay Wilder and Charles Barkley, and this year we're using Rick and Bubba and Taylor Hicks. We've introduced an e-mobile app where you can register to vote on your phone or change your voter registration. Since January 2015, we've registered 948,101 new voters, and we now have 3,361,906 registered voters in Alabama. Those numbers are unprecedented in the history of our state."

While some critics have accused Merrill of making it more difficult to vote with the advent of photo identification requirements, the Secretary of State says those claims are unfounded.

"Not one time has it been recorded that a single individual has been denied access to the franchise when he or she went to vote because they didn't have ID," Merrill said. "We've been to people's homes to give them ID and will continue to do that. The mobile unit hits every county at least once a year."

If you type John Merrill's name into Google search, the auto fill comes up with the most popular searches with his name, including "John Merrill hockey (another Jon Merrill), John Merrill Twitter, John Merrill height (6'4" for the record) and John Merrill obituary (another John Merrill!).

What you won't find is 'John Merrill governor,' at least not in 2018. Merrill says he may one day have interest in Alabama's top office, but he remains grounded and realistic about where he stands politically.

"It's not lost on me that five years ago nobody knew who I was outside of Heflin [his hometown], Phil Campbell [his wife Cindy's hometown] and Tuscaloosa [where he served House District 62 after being elected in 2010], and the people who went to school with me," Merrill said. "It's not like I had much name recognition. For me to come in and serve one term in the legislature and one term as Secretary of State, even though it's been a meaningful term, would be bold to say everyone in the state knows who I am.

"I only have one goal. My goal was and is to do the very best job I could do while in this position. And, when I leave the job, for people to look at me and say he was the best Secretary of State Alabama has ever had. The things we've done are the results of hard work. It's not something I set out to do—it's something that happens as a result of hard work.

"Coach Saban doesn't start out saying he wants to win a national championship. He first wants to win every play. Then you win a possession, then a drive. Then you win a quarter, then a half, then a game. And if you win enough games, you win a title."

As always, Merrill invites anyone wanting to speak with him to dial his cell phone, 334-328-2787, or log onto www.sos.alabama.gov, for more information on the Alabama Secretary of State's duties and responsibilities.

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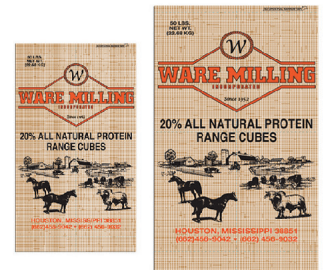


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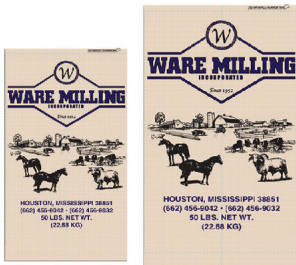
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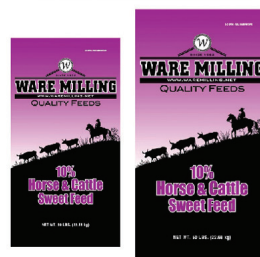
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Bulldogs make playoffs for first time since '98

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

Few people are more familiar with the baseball tradition at Shoals Christian School than Clint Isbell, who played in two state finals with the Flame in 2005 and 2006 and then served as an assistant under former coach Jason Anderson on the SCS teams that brought home three straight Blue Maps from 2010-12.

At the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of baseball pedigree is Belgreen, where Isbell is currently in his second year as head coach. The last time the Bulldogs qualified for the playoffs was 1998—that is, until last week, when they wrapped up their first postseason berth in 20 years with a two-game sweep of Class 1A, Area 13 rival Vina.

"Our guys were excited," said Isbell, who also coaches boys basketball at Belgreen and has guided the Bulldogs to back-to-back regional appearances in Hanceville. "Baseball has been one of those things where they had kind of gotten into the routine of not expecting as much, just doing it to pass the time. This group put in a lot of time and a lot of practice. They wanted more than to just go out there and play your set amount of games and then go home. "They wanted to do something special."

To Isbell's point, baseball may be our national pastime, but the Bulldogs' current players—especially their eight seniors, Payton Scott, Jake Taylor, Seth Taylor, Jacob Mayberry, Ashlee Britton, Eli Hiser, Mason Donahoe and Cameron Jarnigan—were no longer content with simply using the diamond every spring as a place to...well...pass the time between the end of basketball season and summer workouts. It was the commitment and determination of those eight seniors that led Isbell to believe this might actually be the year when Belgreen's playoff drought finally ended.

"Those eight seniors, for the most part, have been playing baseball at Belgreen a long time, since junior high," Isbell said. "They've put in a lot of work over the years, and I knew—with a senior-driven team—it could happen this year. A lot of those guys have been on the basketball floor with me as well, and they're used to winning. They wanted baseball to have the same type of mentality, to learn how to win. They've done a great job this year of making that happen."

The Bulldogs (9-10 overall through Sunday) swept Tharptown in area play but lost both games to No. 4 Hackleburg, the eventual area champion. They entered last week's series with Vina needing to take two out of three to

See 'BULLDOGS,' Page 14

Armed and ready

Healthy again after elbow surgery last June, Landon Ezzell delivered an outing for the ages as Russellville wrapped up a playoff spot

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - As part of their usual pre-game routine, the Russellville Golden Tigers spend a solid 20 minutes in the outfield simply playing catch. It's a concept as old as baseball itself, and a simple one at that—two players, two gloves, one ball and a steady rhythm of throw after throw after throw after throw.

Russellville's prep work is as detailed, extensive and advanced as anybody's around, but head coach Chris Heaps believes that baseball in its purest form boils down to a game of catch. [His favorite movie, not surprisingly, is *The Sandlot*.]

"Pitching and defense are an extension of playing catch," Heaps said. "I tell our guys all the time that playing catch in the outfield before a game is the most important thing we do all day."

It was not for nothing, then, that Heaps interrupted his players' daily ritual prior to last Tuesday's series opener against area rival East Limestone at Russellville Baseball Stadium. He had an important message—brief, but timely—to deliver.

"I walked out there," Heaps said, "and I told them, 'Hey, hold the balls. What are ya'll doing?' They just kind of looked at me and said, 'We're doing the most important thing we do all day.' I said, 'No, what are ya'll *doing*? Lawrence County just beat Brooks. We've gotta sweep East Limestone and win an area championship."

"The thing I always admired watching Cody pitch was the way he attacked," Ezzell said of Greenhill, a 2017 graduate of RHS who now pitches at Auburn University. "It didn't matter if it was the worst hitter in the lineup or the three-hole guy, he was always gonna attack. That's the mindset we try to have on the mound."

Indeed, the Red Devils, 0-4 in Class 5A, Area 16 coming into the day, had hit a pair of early home runs and ridden ace Cole Turner to a 4-3 win over the Lions, who came in tied with Russellville atop the area standings at 3-1. Brooks, which took two of three from the Golden Tigers the previous week, had arrived in Moulton last Tuesday firmly in the driver's seat with regard to the area race, but Lawrence County's win was a game changer. It dropped the Lions to 3-2 in area play and put Russellville in position to clinch a fourth consecutive area title with a two-game sweep of East Limestone.

Heaps' message had exactly the impact he hoped it would.



Confined to shortstop last year by an injury, Ezzell was better than ever on the mound last week when he struck out 16 Indian batters.

"It was like we were getting ready to go to war, and all of a sudden there was this big 'Oorah!'" Heaps said, mimicking the battle cry of the United States Marine Corps. "Our guys were excited."

It wasn't as though Russellville's Game 1 starting pitcher, senior ace Landon Ezzell, needed any extra motivation. For one thing, last Tuesday was Senior Night, and Ezzell would be taking the mound in his home park for the final time (during the regular season, at least) as a Golden Tiger. For another thing, Ezzell knew that a member of the Shelton State coaching staff—along with two of his former teammates, current Buccaneer pitchers Austin Bohannon and Austin Kitterman—was in attendance to do a little scouting.

"Yeah, I was aware," Ezzell said later. "Bohannon and Kitterman told me they were coming."

With a playoff berth hanging in the balance, an area championship suddenly back on the table and an opportunity to better his chances of playing at the next level, Ezzell rose to the occasion—and then some. The hard-throwing righthander blew away his previous career-high with 16 strikeouts, walking just one batter and holding the Indians to three hits in an overpowering 8-1 win.

"The sixteen strikeouts are impressive," Heaps said, "but the key there is one walk. He had great command tonight. He commanded his fastball and his breaking ball down in the zone. When you keep the ball down and locate, I'm telling you, it's hard for hitters to lift it."

Simply putting the ball in play was a monumental task for the Indians against Ezzell (5-3 through

See 'ARMED,' Page 14

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'BULLDOGS' from page 13

finish as runners-up. Isbell's team ended the playoff drought in emphatic fashion, routing the Red Devils 23-4 last Tuesday at Belgreen and then riding a big first inning to a 13-2 win at Vina on Thursday in the clincher.

"We swung the bats really well," said Isbell, whose team finished 4-2 in area play. "What it boiled down to, though, was our pitchers threw strikes and gave us a chance. If our pitchers give us a chance and we make the routine plays behind them, we're gonna be pretty good. We've done a good job for the most part all year of swinging the bats and putting some pressure on opposing defenses. We swung it pretty well both days last week."

Mayberry provided his usual spark in the leadoff spot last Tuesday in Belgreen's 23-run outburst, going 2-for-2 with three walks and two RBIs. Donahoe, the team's first baseman and three-hole hitter, went 2-for-4 and drove in two runs. Scott, who bats fifth, was 2-for-4 with a triple and four RBIs. Junior Gaven Taylor went 2-for-3 with three RBIs, and outfielder Kostner Bryant was 2-for-4 with a double and an RBI.

Seth Taylor, who bats second in the order, led the way in game two of the series on Thursday, going 3-for-4 with three RBIs in the 13-2 win. Donahoe had another big day, going 2-for-4 and driving in two runs. Cleanup man Jake Taylor was 2-for-3 with a pair of doubles and an RBI. Gaven Taylor went 2-for-3 with two doubles and four RBIs, and Scott was 2-for-3. Mayberry drove in two runs, and Bryant and Luke Henson each had one hit.

Seth Taylor picked up the win in Tuesday's Game 1 rout, striking out six and allowing just one hit in 4.1 innings. Henson was dominant in relief, striking out four in 1.2 scoreless innings. Scott went the distance in Thursday's playoff clincher, striking out eight and holding Vina to two hits in five innings.

Isbell said the strike-throwing Mayberry is typically the team's go-to reliever. Designated hitter Britton and freshman catcher Koby Collins also play key roles in the everyday lineup.

It's only fitting that the team waiting to welcome Belgreen back to post-season play after a two-decade absence is none other than Shoals Christian, which will host the Bulldogs in a first-round series starting this Friday at 4:30 p.m. in Florence. This Flame team may not be of the same vintage as the championship-caliber squads Isbell was a part of in the program's heyday, but they did beat Covenant Christian last week to wrap up the Area 16 title.

"We're gonna have to go in and play well and get after it," said Isbell, who left SCS for a teaching job at Arab in the summer of 2012. "It's gonna be fun. I played there, I coached there, and going back is always fun. It'll be an exciting atmosphere. Shoals Christian does a great job, and they have a good tradition there. We just have to go in and play our game and not get overwhelmed by the situation and the atmosphere. As long as we're able to settle in and play, I feel like we can have a chance."

Isbell said his players are at least somewhat familiar with Shoals Christian's recent storied history, but he doesn't expect them to quake at the sight of those state championship banners on Friday.

"They're aware of it," Isbell said, "but they've really gotten into a good mindset, a good attitude this year. They know who Shoals Christian is and who they have been, but our guys also expect to go over there and compete. They don't expect to go over there and just hand it to them because of their tradition. They believe we can compete with whoever we play, with the main goal of trying to get a win."

The Bulldogs have gotten more wins than usual this year, and Isbell credits its first-year assistant coach Nathan Vincent—a former Russellville standout—with helping the program take significant steps forward.

"He's been outstanding," Isbell said of Vincent, who graduated from RHS in 2011 before playing college baseball at Wallace-Hanceville and UAB. "He knows the game really well, and he does a good of relating to the kids. The kids enjoy him. They've really taken to him this year. He does a great job with our junior high program. He's the head jayvee coach, and we run our practices together. We don't separate varsity and jayvee."

"I know he's helped out at Russellville in the past, and he's doing a great job here. He's learning a lot toward becoming a head coach one day. He's a guy I trust putting the kids out there with. He's gonna teach them the right things, the correct way to do things, and on top of that he's a high-character guy. I think a lot of him."

Isbell has many fond memories of Shoals Christian's baseball facility, none more so than the third and deciding game of a second-round series with Hackleburg in 2006, when he delivered a walk-off RBI single to break up a tie game and send the Flame to the state quarterfinals. Those are precisely the kind of memories that can only be made in the do-or-die, high-stakes environment of the playoffs, and the Bulldogs will have a long-awaited opportunity to make a few of their own this weekend.

"These guys are very excited about it," Isbell said. "They'll always be known as the team that broke the twenty-year drought. People will remember that, and it'll be something to talk about for a long time. They really wanted to make the playoffs this year, and they got the job done. It means a lot to them."

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Former RHS stars help Auburn rally past MSU

Staff report

Former Russellville baseball stars Cody Greenhill and Judd Ward were front and center on Sunday at Auburn's Plainsman Park, helping the Tigers beat Mississippi State 7-5 in the decisive third game of a weekend series.

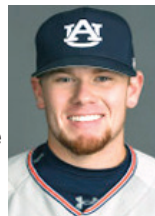
Ward, a 2017 graduate of Russellville High School, split time between left field and center field on Sunday, finishing 2-for-4. The 6'1, 195-pound freshman delivered an RBI triple and then scored a run to cap off a seven-run rally by Auburn in the bottom of the sixth that put the Tigers on top for good.

Greenhill, also a true freshman, continued his outstanding debut season on Sunday afternoon, working 4.1 innings in relief of former Decatur High School standout Tanner Burns. Greenhill (2-1) earned the win, holding the Bulldogs to two earned runs on five hits while striking out five. He threw 54 of his 78 pitches for strikes and did not issue a walk.

Through Sunday, Greenhill had made 10 appearances (all in relief) for Auburn and was leading the staff with a 1.42 ERA. Despite missing a significant chunk of the season while recovering from a bout with mono, the 6'4, 216-pound righthander was second on the team with three saves and fifth with 25.1 innings pitched. He had struck out 27 and walked nine while allowing 19 hits and holding opposing batters to a .202 average.

Ward, meanwhile, had played in 15 games through Sunday for the Tigers (25-12, 6-9 SEC), making seven starts. The sweet-swinging lefty was batting .345 (10-for-29) with two doubles, five RBIs, five run scored and a .406 OBP. He had also played errorless ball in the outfield, posting a perfect 1.000 fielding percentage on the season.

Auburn was scheduled to host UAB in a single game on Tuesday evening and will travel to Tuscaloosa for a three-game series with rival Alabama this weekend.



Greenhill

Ward and Greenhill were both three-time All-State selections by the Alabama Sports Writers and three-time state champions at Russellville, helping the Golden Tigers win Class 5A titles in 2015, 2016 and 2017.

Ward was chosen as Class 5A Player of the Year as a junior in 2016 and finished his Russellville career batting .467 with 207 hits, 10 home runs, 18 triples, 43 doubles, 114 RBIs, 189 runs scored and 63 multi-hit games in three seasons at the varsity level.

Greenhill, the Class 5A Player of the Year as a senior in 2017, finished his four-year varsity career at Russellville with a 39-9 record and a 1.33 ERA. He ranks among the state's all-time leaders in wins and strikeouts (375 in 305.1 innings). In 15 career playoff starts, he was 13-1 with a 1.48 ERA, nine complete games and 99 strikeouts in 84.2 innings.

Greenhill also set a single-season school record for hitters with 16 home runs as a senior in 2017.



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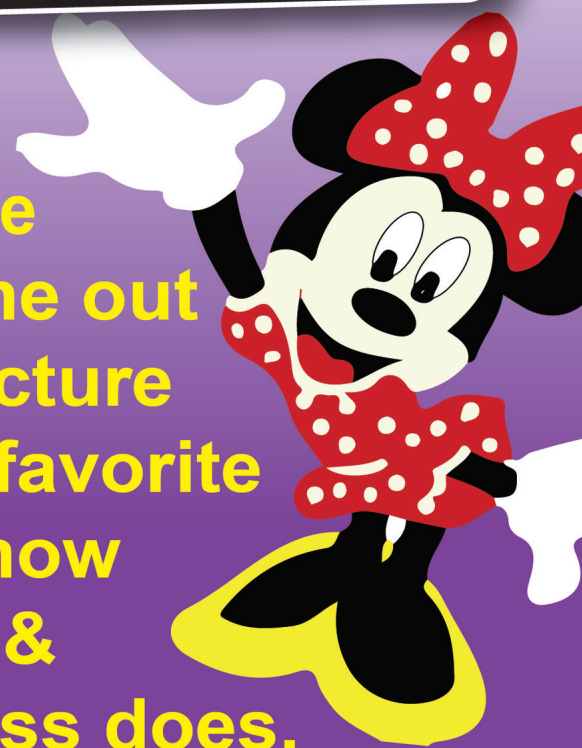
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Thomas was perfect at the plate last week in a two-game sweep of Sulligent, going 6-for-6 with two home runs, two doubles and six RBIs. The 6'1, 200-pound senior was nearly as good on the mound, striking out 11 Blue Devil batters and holding them to three hits in five innings in a 13-1 win last Tuesday in the series opener.

Through Sunday, Thomas was batting .429 on the year and had gone deep eight times, giving him 30 homers in his varsity career. He had thrown 47 innings on the season, going 5-3 with a 0.74 ERA, 71 strikeouts and just 23 hits allowed.



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Clutch performances on the mound punch Tigers' playoff ticket

Mike Self
Franklin Free Press

When Red Bay scored five runs in the bottom of the fifth inning last Tuesday to finish off a 10-0 rout of Lamar County, every Tiger fan in attendance knew it was a significant development.

Richard Maggerise may have been the only person to realize exactly *how* significant.

Sure, the big fifth inning—which included RBI singles by Luke Rooker, Max Bullen and Skylar Brazil, as well as a two-run double by Alex Burroughs—secured the Tigers' second area win of the season and moved them a step closer to clinching a playoff spot. Peel back the layers, though, and it might have been the most important half-inning of Red Bay's entire season.

Senior pitcher Hayden Murray—the staff leader in wins, starts, innings, strikeouts, ERA and complete games—was on the mound and had turned in five very good innings, holding Lamar County to just two hits and striking out four. Of greater interest to Maggerise, however, was Murray's pitch count, which stood at a highly efficient 57 after the top of the fifth.

Due to wet weather the previous week, the second game of Red Bay's area series with Sulligent had been postponed and was scheduled to be made up last Saturday, April 14. The Tigers, who needed to at least take two of three from Lamar County to remain in the playoff hunt, were looking at playing four area games at three different sites in a span of five days, with nothing less than their season on the line.

"I was nervous as a cat all week," said Maggerise, Red Bay's fifth-year head coach. "We knew we had to beat Lamar County, and then we had the rainout game with Sulligent to make up. We weren't exactly sure how our pitching plans would shape up."

Maggerise ultimately settled on a plan he felt pretty good about. Murray would make his customary Game 1 start against Lamar County on Tuesday, with lefty Chase Allen and hard-throwing junior Kolby Bragwell lined up (with the order TBD) for Games 2 and 3 on Thursday. Murray could then come back on a full three days rest and pitch the potentially pivotal makeup game against Sulligent.

"This is great for Hayden," Maggerise said, "a guy who's bounced around a few schools and has never had the opportunity to go to the playoffs. It was quite a feat, for him to get the ball in the clinching game and go the distance on short rest. He's the only guy on our staff who could have come back on short rest like that, because of how well he takes care of his arm."

It was a sound plan, but not even hyper-obsessive baseball coaches [is there another kind?] can control the weather. Maggerise had peeked at the forecast for Saturday, and it didn't look good. It looked, in fact, like Red Bay and Sulligent would be playing their makeup game a day earlier, on Friday, depriving Murray of the state-mandated rest he would require to take the ball against the Blue Devils.

There was a catch, though. Murray had been so economical with his pitches through five innings against Lamar County that, should the game end then and there, he would only need *two* days rest before he could take the mound again. Hence, Red Bay's five-run rally in the bottom of the fifth couldn't have come at a better time.

And Maggerise knew it.

"Immediately," he said. "I was telling our guys in the dugout, 'We've gotta get five [runs]. We've gotta get five.' I knew if we could run-rule them, then Hayden goes Friday and we're in the playoffs. I knew the outcome I wanted in my head, and that's how it worked out."

Murray wasn't exactly lights-out in Friday's makeup game at Sulligent, allowing nine hits and striking out just one batter. But the 5'7 righthander did what he pretty much always does: He got ahead in the count, throwing first-pitch strikes to 19 of the 28 batters he faced; he filled up the strike zone with fastballs in the 78-81 mile-per-hour range and an assortment of breaking balls and off-speed deliveries, throwing 57 of his 79 pitches for strikes and issuing just one walk; and he went the distance, tossing his fifth complete game in eight starts and his third in a row.

Oh, and—most importantly—he won, giving up just a single (unearned) run in a 4-1 victory that improved his season record to 7-2 and punched the Tigers' playoff ticket.

'TICKET', from page 16

"Talk about gutting it out," Maggerise said of Murray, who went 3-0 in three critical area starts down the stretch while allowing just four earned runs in 19 innings. "Hayden didn't have his best stuff last week, but he's a baseball player. That's the best way to describe him. He might not have the physical tools or the high ceiling some kids have, but he's an absolute baseball player. He's not 6'3 like Kolby with an upper-80s fastball. He's gonna throw 78 to 81, he's gonna locate, he's gonna battle, he's gonna read guys' swings—he's like a coach on the field.

"He's not big at all, but he's getting some NAIA offers. If we was 6'2, he'd be big-time."

Murray, who had a 1.90 ERA through Sunday with 57 strikeouts and just 15 walks in 58.2 innings, fronts a Tiger pitching staff that got a major boost last week with the return to full duty of Bragwell, a legitimate ace when healthy. Due to nagging arm trouble, the 6'3 righthander had only pitched in short bursts this season before Maggerise turned him loose last Thursday. Bragwell merely responded by throwing a no-hitter in an 11-0 Game 3 rout of Lamar County, striking out six in seven innings and pitching Red Bay to the brink of the postseason.

"Kolby is Kolby," Maggerise said on Sunday. "He's one of the most talented kids I've ever coached, no doubt about it. He's probably been a hundred percent [healthy] since after we played Phil Campbell [in late March], but we kept the reins on him just to hold him back and make sure. The idea was we would only use him when we needed him, and we were able to do that. He pitched phenomenally last week."

After Bragwell got the Tigers to the doorstep of the playoffs, Murray took them across the threshold with his latest complete game win. A former Vina Red Devil who was briefly enrolled at Russellville at one point, Murray will now get a chance to pitch and play in the postseason for the first time.

"This is great for Hayden," Maggerise said, "a guy who's bounced around a few schools and has never had the opportunity to go to the playoffs. It was quite a feat, for him to get the ball in the clinching game and go the distance on short rest. He's the only guy on our staff who could have come back on short rest like that, because of how well he takes care of his arm.

"Getting to the playoffs is a huge relief for us. We were supposed to go last year [the Tigers entered the final day of area play with a chance to clinch an area championship and wound up missing the postseason altogether after getting swept in a doubleheader by Lamar County]. We had a lot of expectations, and people expected us to make some noise and maybe go on a deep run with the pitching staff we had. But last year it just seemed like we never got any breaks, offensively or defensively.

"This year's group has gotten along really well, and it's a testament to them that we were able to break through and get all three wins this week. We battled through some stuff. Most of our guys didn't get home until midnight on Thursday, and then we had to turn around and go to Sulligent on Friday. It was very tense. We were mentally drained and tired. In fact, I ran through two pots of coffee on Friday morning just to try and get going."

Now that they're in, the Tigers are preparing for a first-round series this weekend at Area 15 champion Section, a team that Maggerise said can really bring it on the mound.

"They've got two really good arms—one guy in the mid-80s, another guy in the upper-80s," he said. "But one thing about them, based on what I've been told by other coaches, they're not always consistent strike throwers. They're not like [Phil Campbell ace] Peyton Thomas, who's gonna throw in the mid-to upper-80s and never walk a guy.

"We've heard that if your guys are willing to be patient and work the count, you can have some success against these guys."

Working the count happens to be a strength of this Red Bay team, which had drawn a whopping 129 walks and been hit by a pitch 37 times through Sunday, an average of nearly seven "freebies" per game. The Tigers, who sport an impressive .472 OBP as a team, know how to get on base, and they know what to do when they get there, having stolen 155 bases in 168 tries through Sunday.

"Everybody outside of Kolby Bragwell has the green light to steal a base at any time. And they can all fly," Maggerise said of his team. "We work as much on base running as we do anything else—reading pitchers, reading counts, reading their hips, taking any advantage we can get. We work on it a lot, and it's really helped us this year. This team has bought into that."

Bragwell may not have the green light to run whenever he wants [he was still 17-for-18 in stolen bases on the year], but there should be a flashing caution light to warn any opposing pitcher entertaining the idea of throwing him a pitch across the plate. Through Sunday, Bragwell had collected multiple hits in 14 games and was batting .551 (43-for-78) on the season with five home runs, 29 RBIs and 32 runs scored. The slugging infielder had struck out only four times all year while drawing 19 walks and reaching base at an absurd .646 clip.

game. Leadoff man Alex Burroughs was batting .405 through Sunday with a .521 OBP, 21 stolen bases and 24 runs scored. Senior Skylar Brazil brings a .311 average and a .440 OBP to the two-hole, and Murray was batting an even .400 with 19 RBIs and a .516 OBP in the cleanup spot behind Bragwell.

Chase Allen was hitting .349 through Sunday with a .475 OBP and 26 RBIs, second-most on the team. Kaleb Bragwell bats .281 with 16 RBIs, and senior outfielder Luke Rooker was hitting .293 with a .453 OBP, 15 stolen bases and 19 runs scored.

Speedsters Max Bullen and Colbie King were tied with Burroughs for the team lead in stolen bases with 21 apiece, and Bullen had posted a .461 OBP through Sunday while drawing 19 walks and scoring 26 runs. Cade McKinney (.314 average through Sunday) is another weapon on the bases, swiping 16 bags and scoring 21 runs.



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'ARMED', from page 13

Sunday). After giving up a leadoff single to Sawyer Stevens in the top of the second, Ezzell fanned the next three batters, starting a string of 11 consecutive outs recorded via strike three. He pitched around a pair of errors in the third by striking out the side and then struck out all three men he faced in the top of the fourth, giving him 10 K's for the game. He got numbers 11 and 12 in the fifth, struck out the side for the fourth time in top of the sixth and then froze Brady Kassay with a knee-high fastball to start the seventh.

Two batters later, Ezzell missed with a 3-2 pitch to leadoff man Tyler Wagnon (the only East Limestone batter he failed to strike out on the night), issuing his first and only walk. Brock Carter followed with a single to right, but Ezzell got Payton Jackson on a fly ball to center to finish off the most dominant outing of his career—a performance that ranks right alongside the best work of former Golden Tiger studs like Bohannon, Kitterman, Chad Wray, Jacob Green and even Cody Greenhill, the foremost practitioner of the high-strikeout, no-walk masterpiece.

"The thing I always admired watching Cody pitch was the way he attacked," Ezzell said of Greenhill, a 2017 graduate of RHS who now pitches at Auburn University [see story, Page 15]. "It didn't matter if it was the worst hitter in the lineup or the three-hole guy, he was always gonna attack. That's the mindset we try to have on the mound."

That's exactly the mindset Heaps saw from Ezzell, who entered the game with the best strike rate (65 percent) on the staff and proceeded to take things up a notch or three, throwing an astounding 86 of his 115 pitches for strikes.

"I love the attack mentality," Heaps said. "The velocity is nice, but when you talk about the three pillars of pitching, command is first on the list. Then it's velocity, and then it's the ability to get swings and misses with deception. Rudy

[Fernandez] has been the best at that for us this season, but Ezzell was pretty special tonight."

If there's a fourth pillar to Heaps' pitching philosophy, it would probably be the ability to stay out of 3-2 counts, where the advantage begins to tilt toward the hitter. So sharp was Ezzell's command last Tuesday that, during long stretches, it seemed as though every East Limestone batter came to the plate already in an 0-2 hole.

"I just wanted to fill it up as much as I could," Ezzell said of the strike zone. "My catcher [junior Hunter Briles] did a good job getting me a few strikes, and I was able to get ahead in the count. I threw some pretty good breakers, but most of the strikeouts I got just came from locating the fastball."

Indeed, the scouting report on the Indians coming in was that they struggled with velocity, and Ezzell—who topped out at 86 miles per hour in the preseason—seemed to have a little extra juice last Tuesday.

"We were sticking with the fastball," said assistant coach Eli Fuller, who calls pitches for the Golden Tigers.

Last Tuesday's performance was exactly the kind of night Ezzell envisioned when he underwent a procedure on June 6 of last year to repair a partially torn ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) in his right elbow. An All-State linebacker as a junior, he knew the surgery would likely cost him his entire senior football season [it did], but he was determined to get back on the mound after being restricted to position-player status in 2017.

"It wasn't easy missing football," Ezzell said, "but at least I got to spend the fall with my baseball guys. The way it's worked out, it was definitely worth it."

Following the surgery, Ezzell resumed throwing within the first week or two of school starting back in the fall. He began working through the rigorous American Sports Medicine "Return to Pitching" throwing program, designed and endorsed by world-famous orthopedic surgeon Dr. James Andrews of Birmingham.

"It's a lot of throws," Heaps said. "He got to the day where he was supposed to do 75 throws at 180 feet, and I threw with him. I remember thinking, 'Man, after this, I may need arm surgery.'"

Ezzell was essentially back to a hundred percent by the time the season started, and he opened the year with a streak of 26 straight innings without allowing an earned run. He'd dropped three straight decisions heading into the East Limestone series, though, and his previous season-high in strikeouts was a modest eight. He had eclipsed that by the fourth inning against the Indians, and his 16 K's by night's end were more than Green, Bohannon, Kitterman or even Greenhill ever posted in a single game at Russellville.

The Golden Tigers gave Ezzell all the support he would need in the bottom of the first inning, when senior second baseman Brock Malone came through with a two-out, two-run single down the right-field line. Russellville scored twice more in the bottom of the third, getting a big hit from Houston Kitterman and a two-out RBI single from Tom Barkley Scott that made it 4-0,

East Limestone got on the board in the top of the sixth on an error and an RBI double by Jackson. Ezzell struck out Stevens with a curveball, but then Zach Pyles reached on another error to bring the tying run to the plate. Ezzell struck out Cameron Johnson and then blew a fastball by Carlton Schmeider to end the inning and preserve the lead.

The Golden Tigers took advantage of six walks

in the bottom of the sixth to score four runs and put the game away. They had only one hit in the inning—a two-run single to right by Scott, who finished 2-for-4 with three RBIs. Fellow senior Rudy Fernandez walked four times on the night and scored three runs.

Ezzell's Game 1 performance put the Golden Tigers in position to wrap up the area championship last Thursday in Athens. They did exactly that, slugging four home runs and blasting East Limestone 19-8 in game one of a doubleheader.

With the wind blowing out at the Indians' hitter-friendly home park, the Golden Tigers (20-13 through Sunday, 5-1 in Class 5A, Area 16) went deep in each of the first three innings, getting a two-run homer from Kitterman in the first, a solo shot from Fernandez in the second and a three-run blast from Ezzell in the third on their way to building an 11-0 lead.

East Limestone got a three-run homer from Jackson in the bottom of the third, scoring six runs to get back in the game. Jaret Ward relieved Fernandez with two outs and runners at second and third, retiring Brady Kassay on a grounder to second to end the inning.

Scott launched a long home run to left in the top of the fourth, making it 12-6, and Russellville put the game away with a seven-run fifth inning highlighted by Devin Buckhalter's two-run single. The Indians scored twice in the bottom of the fifth, but Ward retired Jackson on a groundball to second to seal the win and clinch the area title.

The Golden Tigers, ranked No. 7 in Class 5A by the ASWA, will host No. 6 Etowah (24-9 through Sunday) in a best-of-three first-round series starting with a doubleheader Friday at Russellville Baseball Stadium. [See below for details.] Area 16 runner-up Brooks (18-15 through Sunday) will travel to face Area 13 champion Boaz (24-7, No. 5 in Class 5A) in round one.

Class 5A Playoffs - First Round

**No. 6 Etowah (24-9) at No. 7 Russellville (20-13)
Friday, April 20 at Russellville Baseball Stadium**

Etowah Blue Devils

**Runs Scored - 233 (7.1 per game)
Runs Allowed - 131 (4.0 per game)
Team Stats - .357 BA, 10 HR, 57 DB, 91-97 SB**

Top Hitters

**Austin Young - .422 BA, 22 RBI, 35 runs, 15 SB
Jarren Wright - .396 BA, 33 runs, .496 OBP
David Rutledge - .436 BA, 2 HR, 17 DB, 32 RBI
Bryson Bone - .380 BA, 1 HR, 8 DB, 28 RBI
Dylan Robinson - .351 BA, 1 HR, 21 runs, 15 SB**

Top Pitchers

**Kameron Wilson: 6-1, 2.33 ERA, 33 IP, 34 K, 5 BB
Will Hotalen: 4-0, 1.11 ERA, 43.2 IP, 49 K, 19 BB
Austin Watts: 3-2, 3.62 ERA, 29 IP, 35 K, 6 BB
Zack Jones: 1 SV, 0.54 ERA, 12.2 IP, 20 K, 4 BB**

Russellville Golden Tigers

**Runs Scored - 190 (5.8 per game)
Runs Allowed - 128 (3.9 per game)
Team Stats - .262 BA, 16 HR, 38 DB, 37-43 SB**

Top Hitters

**Rudy Fernandez - .343 BA, 5 HR, 6 DB, .460 OBP
Landon Ezzell - .248 BA, 5 HR, 9 DB, 20 RBI
Houston Kitterman - .306 BA, 3 HR, .421 OBP
Devin Buckhalter - .344 BA, 19 runs, 10 SB
Brock Malone - .277 BA, 17 RBI, 18 runs, 14 BB**

Top Pitchers

**Landon Ezzell: 5-3, 1.14 ERA, 43 IP, 46 K, 9 BB
Caden Parker: 5-2, 2.02 ERA, 44.2 IP, 30 K, 16 BB
R. Fernandez: 3-2, 4.60 ERA, 35.1 IP, 42 K, 13 BB
Jaret Ward: 4-1, 2 SV, 1.65 ERA, 34 IP, 20 hits**



PHOTO BY KYLE GLASGOW

Parker has provided a major lift for Russellville at the plate and on the mound this season, reaching base at a .446 clip through Sunday while leading the pitching staff in innings (44.2) and wins (five).

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