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Massive Mercedes expansion on pace

New 1.3 million-square-foot facility to open next year

By Stephen Dethrage
Staff Writer

Fourteen months after its first column was installed, work continues on the massive new body shop at the Mercedes-Benz plant in Vance. The shop is at the center of the $1.3 billion expansion the company announced in September 2015. Most of the construction work there is finished, but there are still months of work to be done installing equipment and getting the shop ready to operate by sometime next year.

The expansion is another step up for Alabama's growing automotive industry. Since 1995, when Mercedes became Alabama's first automobile assembly plant, Honda, Hyundai and Toyota have also opened plants in the state. According to the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, the state now ranks fifth nationally in car and light truck production.

Architect Patrick Kaut took The Tuscaloosa News through the new 1.3 million-square-foot facility Friday and touted some of the more mind-boggling statistics about the plant expansion.

He said Mercedes built a small mountain out of the 1.3 million cubic yards of dirt they removed for this project. The body shop building features 13 million pounds of structural steel and more than 500 million pounds of steel deck. Thousands of trucks have laid 70,000 cubic yards of concrete - enough to pour 265 miles of 4-foot-wide sidewalk.

Jason Hoff, the president and CEO of Mercedes-Benz U.S. International, said team
EXPANSION

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members know the new shop is colossal.

"There's a joke we always share about that body shop," Hoff said. "If you stand at the north end and look to the south, you can see the Earth's curve.

The shop will also feature state-of-the-art technology. Nearly 1,000 robots will help assemble 300,000 vehicles a year there. Driverless, autoguided vehicles will use a network of 36,000 magnets embedded in the floor of the shop to deliver components and partially assembled vehicles from station to station. Hoff said that system will replace the traditional conveyor belt, save the company money and provide some much-needed flexibility in the body shop.

All this space and technology will eventually come together for the assembly of the next generation of SUVs built at the Mercedes plant, a line of cars identified internally only as "167." A few years from now, as the older models are phased out, the new facility will replace the existing body shop entirely.

"There are a few areas of the old body shop that will get use, especially at what we call the finish line, but the majority of the shop actually will be used as changeover space for some other, future project," Hoff said. "We like to have some space where we can introduce new things while other, existing shops are running."

Hoff said right now, 7,000 people pass through the plant's gates each day to work and 3,600 of those are full-time workers with benefits. Phasing out the old shop in favor of one filled with robots and self-driving vehicles may sound perilous for the Mercedes workforce, but Hoff said nothing could be further from the truth and the expansion is actually expected to create 300 full-time jobs at the plant.

He said automation has made a lot of new, exciting things possible, but ultimately they rely most on the human beings they employ.

"Our team, in the end, is what drives our success," Hoff said. "Despite the 966 robots going in the body shop, the building of cars is still very much a people business. You've got to have a good, motivated team that wants to come in every day and do a good job and work hard, and we have that here."

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Campuses work on funding model

Portion of revenues for community colleges may be tied to performance

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

An Alabama Community College System advisory council will spend the rest of the year developing recommendations to the Legislature for an outcome-based funding model for the system's campuses.

“This is something that we kind of expected here,” said Boone Kinard, special assistant for governmental affairs for the system. “More and more states are moving to some sort of system like this where at least a portion of funding is tied to performance and metrics of how the schools are doing.”

The seven-member advisory council was created by a resolution in late April. It includes System Chancellor Jimmy Baker, trustees Al Thompson and Blake McAnally, the executive director of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education; and members appointed by the Alabama speaker of the House, Senate president pro tempore and lieutenant governor.

The two-year board of trustees appointed Thompson and McAnally on Wednesday during its regular meeting.

The group is working on a model for the system's Education Trust Fund allocations that will align funding with the state's education goals and objectives. The council is to complete its work by January 2018 and provide recommendations to the governor and the chairs of the House Ways and Means Education Committee and the Senate Finance and Taxation Education Committee.

“I feel that we are fortunate with that,” Baker said. “Whether you disagree or agree with outcome-based funding, I would like to be

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in front of the train and deciding where we are going."

While the details of the model have yet to be crafted, it is expected to include aligning institutional funding with statewide priorities by encouraging and incentivizing programs and services focused on student success and progress toward statewide goals and employing appropriate productivity metrics that align with attainment of the goals and objectives.

The work by the committee is likely to be subdivided further into ad hoc committees which could include campus presidents and system employees, Kinard said.

The model developed by the council is required to include effectiveness, affordability, and efficiency metrics. They will include but are not limited to consideration of institutional missions, progress and completion of students’ education goals, institutional collaboration that encourages the successful student transfers, success in serving underrepresented students, and production of graduates in science, technology engineering and math (STEM) fields.

The system’s existing budgeting formula for operations considers historical funding, enrollment, credit hour production and other factors, he said.

“This would move it to obviously looking at the completion. Not only how many classes did they enroll in, but how they graduated,” Kinard said. “It is obvious that is where we are moving in the future.”

The council would provide the recommendation but it would be up to the Legislature to implement the plan, with a bill possibly coming during next year legislative session, Kinard said.
After only four years, state education officials are ready to change the standardized test taken by Alabama’s public school students.

At the April 26 work session, state superintendent Michael Sentance told board members it was time to “reboot,” and that includes finding a new test provider.

More evidence of plans to dump the test emerged with the state’s release of the 2017-18 testing calendar. The ACT Aspire is not on it.

SEE ASPIRE, A4
ASPIRE

FROM A1

Alabama's students have performed poorly on the tests, with proficiency levels not topping 50 percent in reading since the tests were first given in the spring of 2014. In math, the results have been a bit better. In science, proficiency levels ranged from 23 to 39 percent.

The ACT Aspire, given to students in grades three through eight and again in 10th grade, was originally touted as the test to help students prepare for college and career, aligned with The ACT college entrance exam (given to all Alabama 11th graders) and the WorkKeys credentialing tests (given to all Alabama 12th graders).

CONTENT COMPLAINTS

Alabama's public school students recently completed the spring 2016 administration of the ACT Aspire. Results are expected as early as July, but state education officials typically don't release those results to the public until fall.

State board of education members have been vocal about their displeasure for the ACT Aspire. Board member Ella Bell, D-Montgomery, has said repeatedly that she wants to get rid of the ACT Aspire. "Because the Aspire is so racially biased," Bell said at the work session, "I just find it absolutely unfathomable that we even talk about administering the test this year."

There have been constant complaints from educators that test results didn't come back quickly enough to allow them to change what they're teaching. ACT officials promised results back to schools by May 31 this year.

Questions about whether the test is aligned with what students are being taught surfaced as early as 2014, and Sentance has openly questioned whether the ACT Aspire is the right test for Alabama's students since being appointed last August.

It didn't help matters when federal education officials in January, as part of a routine review of assessments, asked for evidence of where Alabama officials determined the ACT Aspire was aligned to Alabama's academic standards.

ACT conducted an alignment study, Sentance said, but Alabama education officials should have conducted their own alignment study. He said there is no evidence the state did so.

Scott Montgomery, an ACT Government relations representative, told board members in March that they are "100 percent confident" that the ACT Aspire aligns with Alabama's content standards. The problem, he said, is that no independent review was conducted. Montgomery told board members he is in talks with federal education officials to assist Alabama with that assessment review.

"We believe that we are aligned to your content, we do believe the test measures what it is intended to measure, which is your core standards," Montgomery said, and if an independent review determines more needs to be done to fully align the test with standards, ACT is prepared to augment the test as needed.

NO TESTS FOR A YEAR!

Dr. Tony Thacker, research coordinator for the state department of education, said Sentance plans to ask federal education officials for permission to not test students for a year while Alabama decides which test is best.

Sentance said other states have been given waivers in the past while they reconfigured federal accountability measures.

State officials are already talking with state-level education organizations, Thacker said, including the Alabama Education Association and the School Superintendents Association, to determine what they want and need from a state-level assessment.

Thacker said the plan is to develop a detailed request for bid, to be released in June, for a new testing provider. The details have not been developed yet, he told board members, but he has already talked with six or seven providers about the need for a quick turnaround on the request.

The goal is to find a test that "meets the needs of Alabama's teachers, is aligned directly with Alabama's standards and is much easier to use for Alabama's schools and districts," Thacker said.

State officials have until July 1 to let ACT know if they plan to drop the contract, which runs through September.

Board member Mary Scott Hunter asked whether Alabama should develop its own test.

Sentance said that would take at least two years. He told the board that lawmakers need to agree and need to understand why a new test is needed. "It's not just to get away from accountability," Sentance said, "but it's frankly delving into true accountability, something that is owned by educators in Alabama."

Sentance and Thacker both said whatever assessment is chosen needs to be flexible enough to adapt to changing academic standards.

Sentance told board members that while the entire cost of providing statewide assessments is $77 million, the cost to give the ACT Aspire is around $9 million. The cost is $15 to $16 per test for the computerized version, and $22 per test for the paper and pencil version, he said.

Some states are paying more than twice that amount with other testing companies, Sentance said.

'TOO MUCH TESTING'!

"There's been a general sense there's been too much testing in schools," Sentance said. "We're trying to balance assessment and measurement and time for instruction, as well as cost."

Before the state adopted the ACT Aspire, more Alabama students may have appeared to have mastered basic subjects. But those higher proficiency rates were based on a state assessment.

Students took the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test prior to moving to the ACT Aspire. In 2012, the final year of the ARMT, between 80 and 90 percent of all students had reached proficiency in both reading and math in all grades, except eighth grade, where nearly 75 percent of students were proficient.

Alabama was the first state to adopt the suite of ACT tests for federal accountability purposes. Since that time, Arkansas is the only state to follow Alabama's path. According to an Education Week analysis from February, 30 states use a state-specific test, seven give the PARCC and 12 give Smarter Balanced assessments. The latter two tests are closely aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

Since his appointment as superintendent last August, Sentance has convened committees to review math, science, and reading standards, reorganized personnel at the state department of education, increased in Montgomery's schools, and dealt with the fallout of Alabama's artificially inflated high school graduation rates. A new strategic plan for education is being developed under his leadership as well.
Rumbling on the river

Wilder honored, 3 local boxers won matches

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

It wasn't a church service, but Deontay Wilder delivered a sermon Friday night at the Rumble on the River night of boxing at the Tuscaloosa River Market.

Wilder, freshly inducted as part of the inaugural class of the Alabama Boxing Hall of Fame, spoke of his blessings, reminisced about his beginnings as an amateur fighter starting off in Tuscaloosa and about the blessings he believes God has given everyone.

Then the heavy punches started flying.

When Wilder exited the ring, a pair of heavyweights entered it, one of seven professional fights during the evening.

The night featured three Tuscaloosans, including Thomas Knox, Deon Nicholson and Keandre Leatherwood. Tuscaloosa was represented proudly with three wins from native sons.

Knox won a unanimous decision over Anthony Retic of Birmingham.

Nicholson added another knockout to his resume, flooring Blake LaCaze twice in the opening round before his corner threw in the towel after two vicious body shots. Nicholson landed big shots to LaCaze's head and immediately followed with two heavy shots to the midsection. Both times LaCaze went to the mat in pain.

"I caught him with a straight right," Nicholson said. "I caught him with a straight right, and I was like, 'Yeah.' I was like, 'Stay right here. Stay right here on him.' "When you go hard to the head, I go right back down to the body, I go right back downstairs."

It was awkwardly looking fight with LaCaze having several inches in height over Nicholson. It didn't faze Nicholson.

"Actually I like fighting taller people," he said. "My strongest punch is my overhand. It's my overhand right, which I clipped him with that."

In the night's main event, Leatherwood won in a first-round TKO decision. Leatherwood (20-4-1) sent his opponent Dan Craycraft to the canvas multiple times in the first round. His speed was simply too much for the Ohio native.

Wilder was selected into the amateur category of the Alabama Boxing Hall of Fame. Former heavyweight world champion Joe Louis, born in Lafayette, Ala., was selected as the class' professional fighter. Petey Sarron was the class' "old timer." Eddie Suttrett went into the hall in the support personnel category.

Louis, who passed in 1981, was represented by his nephew.

The night's first fight featured Birmingham's Fred Weaver against Chris Polk. Weaver earned a TKO in the opening minute of the first round.

Greg Young Jr., also of Birmingham, won an unanimous decision over Ousmane Sylla in a slug fest. He improved to 3-0 in his young career.

In the first heavy weight fight, Willie Herring of Ocala, Fla., won a split decision over Jason Bergman of Pittsburgh.

Robert Alfonso won via TKO against Roberto Santos in the second round.

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Some say Bibb County residents' portrayal has left black mark on community

By Jay Reeves
The Associated Press

WOODSTOCK | Attention is often a hard-won commodity out in the country, and sometimes it's the last thing a little town wants.

Residents puff out their chests when a high school in a rural town upends a big-city rival to win a championship, but they're just as likely to be deflated by some dash of infamy - a tornado that wipes out a trailer park or a neighbor who winds up on a wanted poster.

A West Alabama community is grappling with a version of the latter -- the unwanted fame that comes from millions of people knowing it only as a lousy, scruffy place best described with an unprintable expletive.

Bibb County is the setting for the hit podcast "S-Town," with the "S" standing for a vulgar word for excrement. The seven-part show was produced by Serial Productions of the similarly popular podcast "Serial" and "This American Life."

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PODCAST

Continued from A1

Downloaded more than 40 million times in 114 countries since its release in late March, “S-Town” is the first podcast to reach that level of distribution so quickly, according to Podtrac, which analyzes podcasts. More than three-quarters of those downloads were in the United States, with the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia rounding out the top four.

The podcast focuses on the towns of Woodstock and Green Pond, where strangers now stop by occasionally to take selfies at locations from the show or put a dime atop the grave of the main character, John B. McLemore, who died before the show came out.

No one is complaining about that.

But having your hometown portrayed as a backward, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, corrupt backwater – at least one view expressed in “S-Town” – is wearing on folks, particularly those who understand that things can live forever on the internet.

“Nothing good will come of it,” said Keefe Burt, a county commissioner whose family is mentioned unflatteringly in the show. Repeatedly.

Some view the podcast and its name as a “black mark” on the community, said barber Robert Browning.

“There’s quite a few people who took offense to it, and there’s a lot of people who just don’t care,” said Browning, a professional crappie fisherman when he’s not cutting hair.

Bibb County officials have been working for years to shine a spotlight on their community. It’s home to about 23,000 residents, many of whom make an easy work commute to Alabama’s biggest city, Birmingham, or its flagship school, the University of Alabama, each less than 35 miles away but in opposite directions.

The only Mercedes-Benz car factory in North America is just a few miles away, and a supplier to the factory is moving into Bibb County’s new industrial park. Other companies are looking, too, Burt said, unfazed so far by “S-Town.”

In Woodstock there are medical offices and a grocery store and antique shops, making it a lot better off than many other towns its size. Unemployment isn’t bad in the county by Alabama standards – 5.4 percent last month – but that “S-Town” image is wearing on some people, and it all goes back to McLemore.

Without giving away too many spoilers: McLemore was a Bibb County native who sent an e-mail to producers of the “This American Life” program on National Public Radio with the subject line of “John B. McLemore lives in S-town, Alabama.” (But McLemore spelled it out.)

“S-Town” tells the story of an alleged murder and another death, and winds up focusing on McLemore’s tortured relationship with the town of Woodstock, his own inner demons, and a younger man named Tyler Goodson.

Goodson said he’s gotten used to people stopping on the road outside his home to take photos, just as people who live around McLemore’s old home sometimes have to avoid cars stopped in the road to take pictures of the locked gate. Reporters are a near-constant sight at Woodstock City Hall, where workers are happy to chat about the show as long as their names aren’t used.

If any place has become a pilgrimage site for fans, it is McLemore’s grave, atop a hill just inside the gate to Green Pond Presbyterian Church Cemetery. Goodson made McLemore’s tombstone, which has been decorated with coins, stones, a note, trinkets and a 45-rpm record in the weeks since “S-Town” was released.

“I don’t know who’s leaving all that stuff. It’s not me,” Goodson said at the graveside, where he’d stopped to pay his respects accompanied by uncle Jimmy Frank Hicks, another person featured on the show.

Just down the hill, Terry Fortenberry said he doesn’t know why people are going to the cemetery so often. Fortenberry, who doesn’t listen to podcasts and spends his days selling knick-knacks beside the road, said Woodstock and Green Pond seem nice enough to him, certainly not worth calling “S-Town.”

“It’s better than that. The people are better," said Fortenberry, 58.

Goodson, 26, isn’t so sure.

He faces felony charges related to something that happened while the podcast was being produced, with a court date set for next month, and he no longer has his old friend John B. McLemore to talk about it all with. “S-Town,” neither the community nor the podcast, have done him any favors, Goodson said.

“It’s a sad story,” Goodson said, “especially if you’re part of it.”
Carrington running for governor

Howard Koplowitz hkoplowitz@al.com

Jefferson County Commissioner David Carrington announced Monday his candidacy for governor in a ceremony at Vulcan Park.

"Today I'm announcing my run for governor. Not for me, but for us," Carrington told a throng of supporters.

The announcement included endorsements from some Jefferson County commissioners and a Theodore Roosevelt impersonator, who said "we must have men of integrity and leadership who are leading us," referring to Carrington.

Carrington, the commission's former president, said he will run on his record of helping Jefferson County emerge from bankruptcy, which it did a year ahead of schedule.

CARRINGTON
FROM A1

“I felt like solving problems in Jefferson County, which other than the state is the largest government in the state, I felt I’ve been gifted with the opportunity to solve some pretty big government problems,” the Republican told AL.com on Friday. “Jefferson County was a mess. It’s no longer. Montgomery's a mess and it doesn’t have to stay that way. Nobody else can claim that they actually fixed government.”

Aside from his role as county commissioner, Carrington is the president of RacingUSA.com, a seven-figure company that sells licensed NASCAR merchandise. It’s the largest independently owned NASCAR store in the world.

Carrington says his campaign platform will be improving education, stopping Alabama's brain drain and attracting businesses to the state by using tax incentives, and restoring trust in state government.

“I think what I’ve proven over time in business and government is that I have the confidence to be a trustworthy governor,” he said.

But the Jefferson County Commissioner said he wouldn’t make the elephants in the room — ex-Gov. Robert Bentley and former House Speaker Mike Hubbard — an emphasis in his campaign.

“I’m going to be more forward-looking,” he said.

On education and jobs, Carrington said those issues are connected to the prison construction plan currently being debated by Montgomery. But he said his solution gets at the core of the problem.

“One of the things I’d like to do is see us upgrade education in and up,” he said. “By in and up — I want to get people into the labor system and work with them to move up in the system. If you have too many adults in minimum wage jobs, it blocks young adults from getting work experience.”

Carrington said he would improve workforce development and fully fund pre-K and the Alabama Reading Commission.

“We need more trained Alabama working adults. We need more workers. You can’t start at kindergarten because that doesn’t solve the problem for 15 years,” he said.

As governor, Carrington said his goal would be to increase Alabama’s median income from the bottom 25 percent to the top 50 percent.

“I think we need a governor who’s willing to set those audacious, seemingly unachievable goals and working with others to achieve them,” he said. “That’s what we’re going do in the state.”
Harrison Taylor’s 24-year stint on City Council ends

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

On a warm May afternoon, friends, family and colleagues of Tuscaloosa City Councilman Harrison Taylor gathered at City Hall to honor him for his service and wish him well as his 24-year stint on the council comes to an end.

Over cake and refreshments, Taylor’s service was celebrated during a packed reception ahead of the City Council meeting on Tuesday.

"It tells me my home of Tuscaloosa is a great city," Taylor said of the reception. "We have come a long way together."

Taylor, 70, served six consecutive terms on the council. He was ousted from the District 2 seat in March by challenger Raevan Howard.

See TAYLOR, B4

Taylor sought one more term, campaigning on goals that included luring more investment and new development to west Tuscaloosa.

Taylor served as president pro tempore for three terms. The new council will be sworn in on May 22.

On Tuesday, his fellow councilmembers and the mayor praised his leadership, character and mentorship as the city navigated civil rights issues, the mundane business of running the city and moments of crisis like the April 27, 2011, tornado.

The moment was emotional for Mayor Walt Maddox, who choked up with tears as he recognized his friend.

"I struggled all day with this ceremony because quite frankly I didn’t want it to pass," he said.

The two served on the council together before Maddox was elected mayor.

"When I got elected mayor, I needed an ally, a mentor and a friend, and I got it in Mr. Taylor," Maddox said.

Taylor’s leadership will be missed, said Maddox, who read a proclamation recognizing the outgoing councilman’s service and unveiled a plaque renaming the city’s incident command center after Taylor.

"On behalf of the City Council, I would like to present this to you, my friend," Maddox said. "I love you."

The younger members of the council recalled his mentorship.

"You taught me a lot," District 4 Councilmember Matt Calderone said. "You were always patient with me."

"We can truly say you have been our friend," District 7 Councilmember Sonya McKinstry said.

District 6 Councilmember Eddie Pugh jokingly referred to Taylor and fellow member Phyllis Odom, as "the retirees" on the council. Pugh added that Taylor always represented the city well at various functions.

"He always represented Tuscaloosa in such a wonderful way," Pugh said.

District 3 representative Cynthia Almond, who succeeded Taylor as president pro tempore, said Taylor set a high bar.

District 5 Councilman Kip Tyner reflected on 20 years of service with Taylor.

"There is one thing we have in common. We have had the same goals for our district," Tyner said. "Mr. Taylor has been a tireless supporter of the West End as well as the city as a whole."

Taylor’s predecessor on the council, Tuscaloosa County District Court Judge John England, reflected on the progress of the community embodied in Taylor’s tenure.

"I served on the first council with Charles Steele. We thought we did it up," England said. "Harrison Taylor raised the bar. I am proud I was replaced by Harrison ‘Mailman’ Taylor," England said referring to Taylor’s nickname that reflects 27 years as a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service. "It never occurred to us that someone who looked like me and he would be the president of the council. That speaks volumes about the community."

Taylor noted he was drafted into the Army but volunteered to be a foot soldier in the civil rights movement.

"I loved my hometown before it loved me," he quipped.

Taylor, who shared hugs and handshakes at the reception, thanked the city’s residents — especially District 2 — and the mayor and council.

"I am going to miss this place," Taylor said.
Book details years of correspondence

By Drew Taylor
Staff Writer

For years, a professor at Auburn University exchanged letters with Harper Lee, with the subject of correspondence ranging from their mutual love of Southern literature to things happening in Alabama.


Flynt first met Lee, who he called "Nelle," in 1983 through her older sister, Louise. He kept nearly 100 letters that Lee had written to him every couple of months over the years, with the majority of the correspondence taking place between 2004 and 2016. The book also includes letters from Lee's oldest sister, Alice, and Flynt's wife, Dartie.

The idea for the book came a few months before Lee died, Flynt said, adding he was inspired by many books he loves that includes famous writers' correspondence, such as "Jane Austen's Letters." Flynt added that despite Austen's legacy as a writer, her letters lacked the excellence contained in her novels.

"I read this big tome of her letters and there wasn't one letter out of 100 that said anything meaningful and gave you any insight to the interior of her life," Flynt said.

For Flynt, Lee wrote much better letters than respected writers like Austen, revealing herself in a way she never did in the public eye.

"Before, everyone had written about her and her illness, claims of her being a recluse and so on," he said.

"What I wanted to do is let her speak for herself at long last, because she did not do that in any forum."

One part of the book details Lee discussing her friendship with writer Truman Capote, specifically how it enc. In the letters, Lee said t. relationship began to s in 1966, after his book Cold Blood did not recei

Wayne Flynt said that he witnessed how much empathy and compassion Harper Lee, shown in the 2007 file photo, had for oti. noting how she moved back to Monroeville at the height of her f. to take care of her dying father. [THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

See LEE, Bz
Pulitzer Prize. Five years earlier, "To Kill A Mockingbird" received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

"She said 'The jealousy just eroded our friendship. I never rejected him; he rejected me because of his own demons,' "Flynt said.

In addition, Lee also discussed her dislike of former Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore.

"She once wrote a letter that said 'The mail takes four or five days to get here from Monroeville. I wonder if Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore is interfering with my mail,' " he said.

Flynt and his wife were close friends with Lee’s sister, Louise, before he had ever met Lee. When Louise became sick in 2004, the Flynts would often visit her and help take care of her. During that time, Lee began corresponding with Flynt to see how her sister was since she was unable to visit.

Over the years, Flynt would occasionally visit Lee and the two became close. Through their friendship, Flynt saw how much empathy and compassion Lee had for others, noting how she moved back to Monroeville at the height of her fame to take care of her dying father.

"That’s the side of her that people just don’t know,” he said. “They see the person that won’t autograph books or won’t appear at ceremonies held in her honor, but there is definitely a kind, gentle, empathetic, caring side of her that is quite remarkable.”

The book comes nearly two years after the publication of "Go Set a Watchman," a manuscript Lee had written before "To Kill A Mockingbird" that some critics felt was published in an effort to capitalize on her name before her death.

Flynt said he is aware that some may think that he too is taking advantage of his relationship to Lee to make profit, but that he does not care what people think his motivation was in writing the book.

"What I would invite people to do is read the book and decide if the letters we had shared back and forth suggest any level of manipulation because I don’t think there’s one shred of that in the book,” he said.

Flynt said he took special care to respect her wishes, promising her he would not write about her during her lifetime.

"If she had ever said ‘I don’t want you to ever write about me,’ I would have never written about her,” he said. “It’s that simple.”

Hank Conner, Lee’s nephew and one of her last surviving members of her extended family, said Flynt has been a family friend for years and that he trusts him.

"People want to know about Harper Lee, so I think Wayne is a good source of them getting to know her," Conner said. “I have the greatest respect for Wayne and I know the book is a good book, even though I have just scanned it.”

Ultimately, Flynt hopes readers get to see who Lee really was.

"She was one of a kind,” he said. “She was authentic and her letters are classic examples of that.”

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"She was one of a kind. She was authentic and her letters are classic examples of that.”

Wayne Flynt
One man’s war on narcs

By: Stephanie Taylor

Ryan Orlando is almost certain of what led to his arrest on cocaine charges in November.

He hasn’t seen any legal paperwork to prove it, but he believes a woman he knows was working with narcotics agents. His lawyer asked him not to say too much about the pending cocaine possession charges, but he believes the woman asked him to give her drugs so police could collect evidence against him and have her own drug charge dropped.

Orlando, 31, has since launched a one-man campaign against the West Alabama Narcotics Task Force and the people who work with them. He’s operating a website where he posts the names of people he believes are working with narcotics agents. Last month, he drove a truck through downtown Tuscaloosa, pulling a billboard with the woman’s photo that proclaimed her a “narc.”

“The point wasn’t to humiliate the girl, the point is to expose West Alabama Narcotics,” said Orlando, who moved from Arkansas to attend graduate school at the University of Alabama nine years ago. “It’s to raise awareness and make college kids think ‘I don’t want to be on a billboard.’ At the end of the day, I think it’s going to prevent college kids from putting their lives in danger by being narcs.”

The use of confidential informants has been under increasing scrutiny in recent years, with critics saying agents put college students in danger when they coerce them into working off low-level charges by exaggerating potential legal consequences. But law enforcement maintains that it’s one of the best ways to conduct an investigation.

“We’ve got to start somewhere,” said Tuscaloosa Police Capt. Wayne Robertson, who heads the West Alabama Narcotics Task Force. “We have to start at street-level and our our way up, we can’t just walk out on the street and start buying from multi-pound dealers.”

The agency that investigates all drug crimes in Tuscaloosa County does have a reputation for being aggressive, and often surpasses agencies across Alabama with their annual number of drug arrests.

Robertson said their practices are above-board and don’t put anyone in danger.

“I think crime in our community would be a lot higher if not for our aggressive approach,” he said. “We would have a lot more burglaries, thefts and violent crimes like shootings. I don’t think my unit gets the recognition it deserves.”

The unit did get a lot of publicity, much of it negative, after a 2013 drug sweep that culminated with the arrests of 74 suspects -- 61 of them University of Alabama students. Many of those arrested had been implicated by their peers, who had been busted on low-level offenses and agreed to work with investigators.
Criticism leveled at the agency included assertions that the students were intimidated or frightened into working. But Robertson said that’s not true -- that everyone who works with agents is given a choice, he said, and not all are doing it to stay out of trouble.

“Informants come in all different types. Some are working off a charge, some just want to do it. Some are just good people who don’t want to see their communities go down,” he said.

Defense attorney Josh Swords represents different types of clients who face different types of drug charges. He said he’s dealt with many clients who must decide whether it’s in their best interest to cooperate with the narcotics agents.

Agents make offers to cooperate at the beginning of almost all investigations involving drug charges, he said, “no matter if it’s simple possession of marijuana or some type of distribution charge concerning drugs like prescription pills or cocaine. This goes for misdemeanors and felonies.”

The defendants don’t have long to decide whether to cooperate, he said.

“The time frame given to a person to decide whether to work or cooperate or narc is either immediate or very short and always controlled by the investigators or arresting officers,” he said. “By making the decision time or opportunity to avoid arrest so immediate, law enforcement is able to eliminate the person from really thinking through what he or she is about to have to do.”

That short time frame often keeps people from seeking an attorney’s advice, Swords said. The defendants are often afraid of being arrested or charged, whether innocent or guilty, he said. Many want to avoid having their mugshot being posted on the internet.

“Almost all individuals, including clients of mine, who have worked or attempted to work with law enforcement did so by their own choosing, but not because they wanted to or felt the need to make amends for their mistakes,” he said. “It was because they were afraid of what would happen if they didn’t.”

Robertson said that some informants have been working with the narcotics unit for as long as 20 years. Some are paid, some aren’t. They range in age from 18 to their 70s.

“We’ve spent tens of thousands of dollars paying informants just to cooperate,” he said.

About half are working to avoid prosecution, he said, and about 30 percent are paid. Around 20 percent of those he considers informants just provide tips.

Anyone who becomes an informant is given a 30-page informant package that covers what they’re allowed and not allowed to do, and spells out the specifics of their agreement with police.
"I think the biggest misconception is that when we get information that we just go in and make an arrest. We always corroborate it. We run criminal histories and conduct surveillance. We don’t just run out and arrest people," he said.

Allowing some offenders to avoid prosecution while drug agents go after bigger fish is a tactic that Robertson said makes sense.

“The person who has a gram of marijuana may have gotten that from an ounce-dealer, who got that from a pound-dealer who got that from a multi-pound dealer. We have to start at street-level and work our way up, we can’t just walk out on the street and start buying from multi-pound drug dealers.”

“We can’t just let someone go if they break the law,” he said. “But why would I want to clog the system with someone who just sells a gram of weed? This makes sense.”

Robertson said that the agents do advocate for some defendants to participate in pre-trial diversion programs for first-time offenders. But just because someone is arrested with a small amount of drugs doesn’t mean they should get just a slap on the wrist, he said. Small-time drug use can lead to big-time crime, he said, with robberies and violent crimes between dealers who operate on the trafficking level.

“If you’re breaking the law, you’re breaking the law. People need to stop blaming the police for doing something they knew was wrong,” he said. “If somebody’s in my neighborhood selling drugs, they can call me a snitch or whatever they want to do. I was raised to not let people destroy other people’s property or quality of life. More people need to start snitching.”

Swords said that 90 percent of the drug cases he handles, specifically with college students or first-time offenders, will end up dismissed through a diversion program. The rest either have their charges reduced or go to trial because they’re not guilty, he said. The entire process can cost a defendant between $60,000 and $70,000, Swords estimated. It’s around $2,000 for bond, $3,500 for an attorney and up to $3,000 for the cost of a diversion program and court costs.

“It makes no sense, in my opinion, for a college kid or a first offender to put themselves in the line of fire along with the brave men and women of our law enforcement for a drug charge that has a 90 percent chance of being dismissed by a judge or in court,” he said. “I believe that if the college kids or first offenders were advised by an attorney or knew they had a 90 percent chance of having their case or cases dismissed after arrest, 100 percent of them would not agree to work, cooperate or narc with law enforcement.”

Orlando said that the information he’s posting on his website and his efforts to make people think twice about working with police is a way to let defendants know that they have other options, and that their lives won’t be ruined if they refuse to cooperate. He echoed many critics of the practice of using informants by questioning whether it’s a safe practice.
"They put college kids in such immense pressure that they end up manufacturing crime," Orlando said. "Putting college kids in harm’s way like this is dangerous."

In 2008, a recent Florida State University graduate was shot and killed while acting as an informant for police, who had sent her with $13,000 to buy 1,500 Ecstasy pills, two ounces of cocaine and two handguns. The woman, 23, had been arrested for selling marijuana and agreed to work with police to have her charge disappear.

The dealers she was sent to meet changed the location at the last minute, taking her out of sight of police. She was shot five times when they discovered a wire. Her killing prompted legislation in Florida that requires stricter policies on the use of confidential informants and police training.

Practices at the University of Mississippi in Oxford were called into question a few years ago, after a BuzzFeed investigation and subsequent “20/20” report aired that detailed how officers recruited college students to act as informants, requiring them to provide evidence against 10 people to work off a charge. Students interviewed for the show said they didn’t know that many people, which forced them to entice their friends into buying or selling drugs just to meet their quota.

Robertson said that the agents have procedures they follow when handling confidential informants.

“We’re responsible once somebody signs up with us, when they say they’re going to cooperate, we make sure of their safety,” he said.

“We’re not going to send somebody who buys meth in Brookwood to go buy cocaine in west Tuscaloosa,” he said. “People aren’t going to sell to people they don’t know.”

If anyone is putting others in danger, Robertson said, it’s Orlando.

“You’re not helping someone by plastering them on a billboard,” he said. Robertson said that the woman Orlando believes worked with police on his case actually did not. “If you want to help them, you don’t have to put names. I can see saying ‘Here are some other options you’ve got, here is the law.’ To me, this just sounds like retaliation.”

Orlando said he plans to continue his campaign to educate students about their options in case they’re arrested. He’s ordered armbands advertising his site that he plans to hand out at some local bars and said he’ll continue to use mobile billboards.

“I may go with a megaphone up to the department after they’ve done a bust,” he said. “I want to let these kids know what they’re getting themselves into.”
About the West Alabama Narcotics Task Force

The multi-jurisdictional task force consists of the Tuscaloosa Police Department, Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Northport Police Department and University of Alabama Police Department.

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Source: West Alabama Narcotics Task Force  GATEHOUSE MEDIA
The Tuscaloosa News
Saturday, May 6, 2017

Senate OKs general fund budget as tempers flare

By Kim Chandler
The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — State senators on Thursday approved an Alabama general fund budget after a debate where tempers flared multiple times.

The budget passed 23-4. The House of Representatives had previously approved the $1.8 billion spending plan. The bill now returns to the House where representatives will decide whether to go along with mostly minor Senate changes.

"Who knows why things go sideways sometimes? The important thing is we got back on track," Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh said. Democratic Sen. Rodger Smitherman sharply criticized one senator's unsuccessful proposal to take $600,000 from Birmingham tourism projects to boost spending on veterans.

"I'm tired of you picking on us. I'm sick of it," Smitherman said. The budget debate came after a redistricting plan filled with partisan rancor over how the Birmingham area was divided.

Senators also rejected an amendment that would have cut state agencies' funding by 3.4 percent to in order to boost highway spending by $63 million. Republican Sen. Paul Sanford of Huntsville said he wanted to return money that had been shifted from the highway department to other government spending. Sanford argued that was a better alternative than the gas tax increase that some lawmakers have proposed this session.

Opponents said the crowded prison system and the state Medicaid program could not absorb the cut.

Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, asked Sanford if he thought the prison system could withstand the financial blow.

"I believe they can," Sanford said. "Which inmates are we going to let go?" Ward retorted.

Sanford delayed a budget vote for about two hours by having the bill read aloud on the Senate floor.

Instead of spending all the money available, lawmakers are attempting to keep about $90 million in reserve. The state is about to exhaust oil spill settlement funds that are currently propping up the Medicaid budget and there are also unknowns about what changes the Trump administration and Congress might make to Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

The Senate also zeroed out Serve Alabama, a small state agency that became part of scandal surrounding the state's former governor.
The University of Alabama now expects to make a hire by the fall in the search for its first chief diversity and inclusion officer.

The university originally sought to fill the new position by the spring following on-campus forums with finalists in March.

"We are still doing our due diligence and hope to have someone on board by the fall semester," said Monica Greppin Watts, associate vice president for communications. The finalists on campus in March were Wanda R. Head­­ing-Grant, vice president for human resources, diversity and multicultural affairs at the University of Vermont; Bryan K. Fair, the Thomas E. Skinner Professor of Law in the UA School of Law; Shakeer A. Abdullah, assistant vice president for equity and diversity at the University of Minnesota; and Christine Taylor, former vice provost for diversity and inclusion at Purdue University.

The vice president and associate provost for diversity, equity and inclusion will be tasked with establishing the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, which will collaborate with and serve as a creative resource for diversity-related initiatives and activities at UA. Responsibilities will also include development and coordination of a five-year strategic diversity plan.

A consultant, the Desir Group, has been assisting a 15-member committee of UA faculty, staff and students with the search.

Reach Ed Enoch at ed.enoch@tuscaloosanews.com or 205-722-0209.
Staff report

A new sculpture of the late Crimson Tide and NFL fullback Kevin Turner crafted by a friend and teammate is now on display at the Paul W. Bryant Museum at the University of Alabama.

The piece titled "Open Field" was created by artist and former running back David Greico. The sculpture was donated by Halo Zappa and Arrow Zappa is on display in the "Tide Through Time" exhibit.

Turner, who died in 2016 at 46 of complications from Lou Gehrig's disease, was posthumously inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame as part of the 2017 class on May 13.

"I created the sculpture of Kevin Turner as a loving memorial in art to my close friend and former teammate," Greico said. "I loved football, but my heart was calling me to follow this passion in sculpting. Kevin provided huge encouragement to me in my decision to end my football career in order to follow my dream of being an artist."

The sculpture captures Turner in mid stride.

"I know what it is like when you break all the tackles and the only thing ahead of you is the end zone, the freedom and the power that you feel is truly like nothing else. I wanted Kevin to have that moment forever," Greico said.

Turner, a Prattville native, played for the Crimson Tide from 1988-91 before being drafted into the NFL. He spent eight seasons with the New England Patriots and Philadelphia Eagles before retiring after the 1999 season.

Turner was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, also known as ALS, in 2010, and he later became involved in research and support through the foundation he started. In 2012, he was the subject of the documentary "American Man."

The Bryant Museum is open daily from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. For more information, call toll free 1-866-772-BEAR (2327) or visit bryantmuseum.com.
Speakers advise students at Westlawn Middle

By Drew Taylor
Staff Writer

It took a long time for Glen Coffee to find his true self. Coffee, a former running back for the University of Alabama football team, spoke Thursday to students at Westlawn Middle School about how he decided to interrupt his football career to find out what he really wanted out of life.

"At that age, all I wanted to do was play football, but as I got older, I realized that you have to figure out what you really want to do for yourself," Coffee said. "I realized football wasn't the only thing I loved or had a passion for."

Coffee’s story was part of the “Saving Our Sons” initiative, a morning-long discussion involving more than 200 Westlawn Middle students. The discussion featured black professionals who focused on the importance of decisions in shaping one’s life.

“This is all about you,” said Tiffany Davis, Westlawn’s principal. “This is about making you better for

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Throughout the morning, the students heard from speakers such as Coffee and Mansfield Key, a motivational speaker and strategist with Ole Pete Key Inc. The students also attended sessions that covered a number of subjects, such as financial literacy, the importance of having a vision and social media.

Coffee said that as a young man, he saw football as a way out of a dangerous neighborhood, so that was what he put his focus into. However, that passion took a toll on his academic life. "Because of that, I didn't get any offers from the schools that I wanted, like Florida or Florida State," Coffee said.

Early in his career at Alabama, he suffered a knee injury that caused him to sit out the 2006 season. During that time, Coffee said he felt lost without football, but that after getting involved with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, he became a Christian and found more contentment outside sports.

In 2009, Coffee was drafted by the San Francisco 49ers, but only played for one season. Coffee said that despite the sizable NFL salary and playing time, he still was not happy. "I realized football was not my dream," he said. "A lot of people think I quit to join the Army or become a pastor, but I quit because I didn't want to play football anymore."

Coffee said that after leaving the NFL, he spent a lot of time by himself, which he credited with ultimately finding contentment in life. "For the first time in my life, I could just be myself," he said. After a few years as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army, Coffee has now found football fun again and is training to potentially rejoin the NFL. This time, he wants play on his own terms. "I'm still on that journey and I'm still searching,"

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Coffee said, "I still don't know where I'm supposed to be, but I'm going to strive to be myself."

Key's message included a performance showing how decisions can affect a person's life, as well as the importance of looking to the future.

"If there's one thing I want them to get, it's to get a picture of their life beyond their circumstances, beyond their family, beyond anyone and anything that they have been exposed to," Key said. "They need to see it before they can be it."

Eric Hines, assistant principal at Westlawn, said there are more options for young black men than they may realize.

"We're tired of seeing young black men being incarcerated and we want to do something about that," Hines said. "There are successful African-American men in Tuscaloosa."

Rodney Pelt, director of the mentor group Mind Changers, said it is important to educate young people on how to make better choices in life and think about their futures.

"It's critical that young men start thinking about their lives and future because if they start thinking now about what's going to happen later in life, the choices they make will be better so they can be greater successes in life," Pelt said. "We need to start getting into their lives the younger they are so we can start imparting more wisdom and more knowledge into them so they can be productive citizens later in life."

Coffee said any man can find his way to a better life.

"Never put yourself in a box," he said. "Never doubt your abilities."

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The University of Alabama School of Law and the American Bar Association Journal have announced the finalists for the 2017 Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction.

The finalists are “Gone Again” by James Grippando, “Small Great Things” by Jodi Picoult and “The Last Days of Night” by Graham Moore.

The prize, created to honor Harper Lee, is given annually by the UA School of Law and the ABA Journal to a booklength work of fiction that features the role of lawyers in society and their power to effect change. The winner is chosen based on a panel of judges and online voting by the public.

The judges are Deborah Johnson, winner of the 2015 prize; Cassandra King, author of “The Same Sweet Girls Guide to Life;” Don Noble, host of Alabama Public Radio’s book review series; and Han Nolan, author of “Dancing on the Edge.”


The 2017 prize will be awarded at UA for the first time. Previously, the award has been presented in Washington, D.C., at the Library of Congress in conjunction with the National Book Festival.

The winner will be announced before the ceremony and will receive a copy of “To Kill a Mockingbird” signed by Harper Lee.
Program aims to bolster science teaching

UA students will work in high schools

By Drew Taylor
Staff Writer

During the next few years, educators hope a partnership with the University of Alabama and local schools will bring more science teachers into the classroom.

Starting in the 2017-18 school year, a number of Tuscaloosa city and county schools will be taking part in the Developing Leaders in Science Teacher program, in which UA students will be brought into the classroom to shadow science teachers and later become teachers themselves.

The program will include 15 scholarship students who will spend the first year completing a fast-track Alternative Teacher Certification master's degree program while spending time at different schools. After the first year, the students will spend the next four years teaching biology, chemistry and physics in high school. The students will be those who are already majoring in different science fields as undergraduates.

"They will either be assigned to the city or the county for those four years," said Dennis Sunal, director of the local program.

As an incentive, each student will receive about $17,100 in scholarships. Once each student is working in a high school, they will each receive a $10,500 supplement in addition to their regular salary. The students will also be involved in the Alabama Science in Motion program, which pairs teachers with mentors to assist with both equipment and curriculum needs.

The program is funded through a nearly $2 million grant from the National Science Foundation. The program is funded to run through 2023.

Sunal, a science education professor at the

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University of Alabama, said that across Alabama and the rest of the country, finding certified science teachers is difficult in schools and that many who graduate from college last no longer than five years in academia.

"If you consistently lose a number of teachers, there won't be enough teachers to fill those positions," Sunal said.

Finding teachers with science backgrounds has been an issue for school systems across the country.

According to a story published in 2011 by U.S. News and World Report, 30 percent of chemistry and physics teachers in public high schools did not major in those fields or completed certificates to complete those programs.

At Tuscaloosa City Schools, incentives have been offered to bring in certified teachers. Last year, the school board approved giving certified math and science teachers a $1,667 bonus per year and a $1,334 bonus per year for with alternative baccalaureate certification.

Allison Mays, senior director of human resources at the Tuscaloosa County School System, said she hopes the program serves as a pipeline to bring in more science teachers that will stay in the community.

"We're excited for the possibilities this has for our students," Mays said.

Avis Williams, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at Tuscaloosa City Schools, was also involved with Mays and Sunal in the design of the program.

Attempts to reach Williams Wednesday were unsuccessful.

Reach Drew Taylor at drew.taylor@tuscaloosanews.com or 205-722-0204.
Battle to receive honorary degree

Former UA athletics director stepped down in January

Staff report

Four NCAA champions, 20 All-Americans and former University of Alabama Director of Athletics Bill Battle are receiving degrees this commencement weekend.

Battle, a former UA football player who stepped down as AD in January, will receive an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the College of Human Environmental Sciences during Saturday's 6 p.m. ceremony at Coleman Coliseum.

During his time as a player for legendary coach Paul W. "Bear" Bryant, Battle earned a bachelor's degree in biology in 1963. A year later, he earned a master's degree in education from the University of Oklahoma. He was named director of athletics following the death of Mal Moore in 2013.

"I am humbled by this truly amazing honor," Battle said in a news release announcing the athletic degrees. "To be recognized in this manner is tremendous and I am beyond proud to stand among so many of our student-athletes who are receiving their degrees this weekend."

On April 7, the UA board of trustees approved the honorary degree for Battle, who now serves as a special assistant to UA President Stuart Bell.

"For many of us here, it has been an honor of a lifetime to work with him and to be friends with him during his highly successful tenure. He has served with great personal..."
We are very proud and pleased to have such a large and accomplished group of graduates this spring who are ready to do just that."

The 22 All-Americans included among the Tide’s May graduates are: Bailey, McKee, Oslin, Reed, Rivers and Routliffe and Tony Brown (men’s track and field), Vanessa Claveaux (women’s track and field), Kyle Feipel (men’s track and field), Justin Fondren (men’s track and field), Alex Gholston (women’s track and field), Angelo Goss (men’s track and field), Alex Gray (men’s swimming and diving), Jeremiah Green (men’s track and field), Elias Hakansson (men’s track and field), Caroline Kost (women’s swimming and diving), Antibaah Kosgei (men’s track and field and cross country), Tadashi Pinder (men’s track and field), Marisa Runyon (softball), Bailey Scott (women’s swimming and diving), Brittany Thomas (volleyball) and Joe Williams (men’s track and field).

Of the student-athletes going through commencement this weekend, eight earned graduate degrees in May. They are: Thomas, Williams and Corban Collins (men’s basketball), Chandler Dare (softball), Cammie Gray (women’s golf), Jordan Meier (soccer), Mike Oczypok (baseball) and Robby Prater (men’s golf). Nine members of the Crimson Tide’s most recent College Football Playoff and SEC champion football teams also are among the May graduates, including starters Tony Brown, Bradley Bozeman and Shaun Dion Hamilton, as well as four members of the men’s basketball team, including team captain Jimmie Taylor.

There was a commencement ceremony on Friday at 4:30 p.m. as well as three on Saturday at 9 a.m., 1:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. The University of Alabama School of Law will hold commencement at 2 p.m. on Sunday.

The ceremonies will be broadcast live at www.ua.edu/commencement and will be archived on the same page for 30 days following the ceremony.
Patriot's path to graduation

After a 20-year military career, Robert Brackbill III earns a UA degree

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

University of Alabama student Robert Brackbill III, born on the 4th of July, always felt the tug of patriotism.

As he joined the Army in 1995, it was the storied history of the 82nd Airborne Division that drew him to the elite unit.

"I was like, I wanted to be there," he said.

After a 20-year military career, it was a similar storied legacy that helped draw him to Tuscaloosa as he looked at universities.

Brackbill retired from the Army as a staff sergeant on Oct. 31, 2015, after a career that included posts at Fort Bragg, Fort Drum and overseas in South Korea. He deployed multiple times between 2002 and 2013 to Afghanistan and Iraq.

The 39-year-old's backpack, clad in the Army's ACU camo pattern, is adorned with combat patches for the 82nd Airborne and 10th Mountain Division as well as a parachutist badge.

University of Alabama graduate and retired U.S. Army veteran, Staff Sgt. Robert Brackbill, wears a bracelet with a dog tag symbolizing his service in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom during his 20-year military career at Houser Hall on the UA campus in Tuscaloosa on Friday.

Saturday, he graduates with a bachelor's degree in operations management. Brackbill is among 5,300 graduates at UA this spring. Brackbill has applied to the graduate program at UA and is preparing for an internship with Mercedes-Benz U.S. International in Tuscaloosa County.

"My goal from the get-go was to get an MBA," Brackbill

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Continued from A1

Brackbill settled on operations management after arriving at UA and talking with an adviser about his military experience. Brackbill served as an ammunition specialist for the 82nd Airborne, a logistics job for the paratrooper unit. His logistics background aligned with the degree's focus. As he listened to lectures in class, the veteran could relate with practical examples from his military experience.

"I knew I made the absolute best decision with operations management," he said.

Brackbill, a native of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, settled in Alabama with his family following his retirement. The family currently lives in Gardendale.

"From early in my career when I first set foot in Alabama, I kept coming back, something kept bringing me back," he said.

Brackbill went to jump school at Fort Benning, which straddles the border between Alabama and Georgia. He also trained at Redstone Arsenal. His wife, Meta, is from Alabama.

"She opened my eyes to the world that is the storied history of Alabama," he said, laughing.

Brackbill said he fell in love with UA the more he researched.

"I determined this was the only university I wanted to go to," Brackbill said.

Reach Ed Enoch at ed.enoch@tuscaloosanews.com or 205-722-0209.
Tide’s APR scores points toward a positive trend

16 UA teams matched or bettered 2014-15 scores

By Cecil Hurt
Sports Editor

The University of Alabama men’s and women’s athletic teams continued to perform solidly in the NCAA release of APR (Academic Progress Rate) data for the 2015-16 measuring period, a span covering academic performance from 2012-2016.

Five UA programs — men’s cross country, women’s tennis, women’s golf, women’s swimming and diving and gymnastics — received perfect scores of 1000. The Crimson Tide football program received a score of 980, tied for second place (with Auburn and Florida) in the 14-member Southeastern Conference. Vanderbilt led the SEC football programs with a 992 score.

Nationally, both Northwestern and Air Force posted 995 scores, tying for the top spot. The UA men’s basketball program (979) and baseball program (990) both bettered the national average in those sports.

The 990 score for baseball was second-highest in the SEC, behind South Carolina (1000). Softball posted a 997 score, also good for a second-place ranking in the SEC.

"I am pleased that we continue to post strong numbers when it comes to the NCAA’s Academic Progress Rate," UA Director of Athletics Greg Byrne said via a University release. "The vast majority of our teams are well ahead of the national average for their sports. Our success in this area is built on the strong collaborative effort between our student-athletes, coaches and support staff, an effort that is a source of great pride."

Overall, 16 Crimson Tide teams posted scores above the national average in their respective sports, including eight that bettered the national average in their sport by 10 points or more.

Alabama was one of four SEC schools to have more than four teams receive public recognition from the NCAA for their APR scores. A total of 16 Alabama teams either matched or exceeded their APR from the year before.

"To have this many teams above 980 and to have this many teams in the top two in the SEC is a very good thing," UA senior associate athletics director for student services Darrell Byrd said in the UA release. "Our APR report is a strong indicator that we’re doing things the right way and continuing toward our ultimate goal of graduating student-athletes who are prepared for the next chapter of their lives."

The Academic Progress Rate measures the eligibility, retention and graduation of student-athletes competing on every Division I sports team.

It also serves as a predictor of graduation success. The NCAA’s Division I Board of Directors set a score of 930 (out of 1,000) as a threshold for teams to meet or face possible immediate and historical sanctions.

An APR of 930 translates to approximately a 50 percent Graduation Success Rate (GSR).

Few SEC schools veered near a 930 (penalty) score, although Missouri men’s basketball (934) narrowly missed penalties that could have included a one-year postseason ban.

Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
Alabama AD Greg Byrne named in lawsuit

Report details Arizona student-athlete's allegations against coach

By Cecil Hurt
Sports Editor

University of Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne was mentioned Sunday in a lengthy ESPN investigative report on the relationship between a student-athlete and her assistant track coach at the University of Arizona during Byrne's tenure as the athletic director in Tucson. The investigative report was aired by ESPN's "Outside See BYRNE, A5
The relationship has resulted in both criminal charges against the assistant coach and a civil suit alleging that Arizona failed to protect the student-athlete from rape, harassment and other threats. Byrne is included as a defendant in a civil suit filed by the athlete, Baillie Gibson, in October of 2015.

Gibson was involved in a sexual relationship with Arizona assistant track coach Craig Carter, one that Carter contends was consensual. Gibson maintained that she was coerced into the relationship by death threats and other threats of violence, including rape. There were further threatening communications when Gibson sought to end the relationship, including an email obtained by ESPN in which Carter threatens to rape and kill Gibson’s mother. Carter has been indicted by a Arizona grand jury on four felony counts, including aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and stalking. He is free on a $40,000 bond while awaiting trial.

The 2015 civil suit filed by Gibson under the name “Jane Doe” alleges that Carter, Byrne (in his role as athletics director), head coach Fred Harvey, the University of Arizona and its board of regents and the state failed to protect Gibson from “acts of rape, assault, inappropriate sexual conduct and abuse.”

A University of Alabama spokesperson told The Tuscaloosa News that Byrne could not comment on any aspect of the case due to the ongoing litigation.

The University of Arizona released an official statement to ESPN arguing that officials had acted in accordance with that school’s guidelines.

“As soon as the student athlete informed us of Carter’s actions, we immediately turned that information over to law enforcement and suspended him,” the statement said. “University staff then worked with the student and her advocate on accommodations for her education and well-being. Based on the information it received, the athletics department began the termination process against Carter, who resigned his position during that process.

“The UA athletics staff were shocked and horrified when they were informed of Carter’s actions towards a valued member of the Track and Field family,” the statement continued. “The University and the athletics department condemn his behavior and the impact it had on the student.”

ESPN also noted that Byrne had been in contact with University of Arizona attorneys before meeting with Carter and immediately reported information to that school’s Office of Institutional Equity, which oversees Arizona’s Title IX compliance. That office then took over the investigation.

The ESPN report was written by investigative reporters John Barr and Nicole Noren.

Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
Tuscaloosa man shot to death after parking lot brawl

By: Ken Roberts

A 23-year-old man died early Sunday morning after a shooting across the street from a Tuscaloosa nightclub, according to Capt. Gary Hood, commander of the Tuscaloosa County Metro Homicide Unit.

Markis Russell, a 26-year-old Tuscaloosa man, has been charged with murder in connection with the shooting, Hood said.

Officers from the Tuscaloosa Police Department and the University of Alabama Police Department responded to reports of a shooting at around 2:15 a.m. at a parking lot in the 600 block of Paul W. Bryant Drive.

Hood said officers found Branden Moss, who had multiple gunshot wounds, lying in the parking lot. Moss was taken to DCH Regional Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead.

Several witnesses told officers that a fight broke out in the parking lot across the street from the 3000 Bar, which closed at 2 a.m., Hood said.

The witnesses said four men assaulted another man in the parking lot. Moss gave aid to the assault victim and then walked to a car and began talking to one of the men who assaulted the victim, Hood said. A man armed with a handgun, who was not involved in the assault, walked up behind Moss and fired several shots at close range, Hood said. Moss ran about 75 feet before collapsing.

After interviewing the witnesses and reviewing video footage, officers developed Russell as a suspect, Hood said. Russell was taken into custody Sunday morning after officers found him at his girlfriend’s apartment.

In addition to the murder charge, Russell faces charges of shooting into an occupied vehicle and a pistol possession violation. Russell’s bail was set at $195,000.

Moss’ death marked the second fatal shooting in Tuscaloosa this weekend. Early Saturday morning, 21-year-old Elancheus Deshawn Prince was shot and killed at University Manor Apartments on 29th Place. Tamir Sabree Melvin, 40, was taken into custody and charged with murder and second-degree assault/domestic violence.
Jury: Foundation, UAB neurosurgeon must pay $5 million for patient's severed nerve

By: Kent Faulk

University of Alabama Health Services Foundation and an UAB neurosurgeon must pay $5 million to a 60-year-old Tennessee woman who suffered a severed nerve during surgery more than five years ago, a Jefferson County jury recently ruled.

"We are disappointed in the outcome and disagree, and we are exploring our legal options," Bob Shepard, UAB Office of Public Relations, stated in an email this week to AL.com on behalf of the foundation and surgeon.

Efforts to reach an attorney representing the foundation and surgeon were unsuccessful.

Amanda Bennett, of Dunlap, Tenn., claimed in her lawsuit that she had surgery on Nov. 30, 2011 to remove a non-cancerous, fatty tumor from the back of her head. During the operation, a sub-occipital nerve was severed, the lawsuit states. The lawsuit names Dr. Kristen O. Riley and the Foundation as defendants. Another doctor was removed from the lawsuit a few years ago.

"If, as Dr. Riley told Ms. Bennett and her husband, the nerve was biopsied, the decision to biopsy was negligent or reckless, as was the performance of the biopsy," the lawsuit stated.

A mistrial was declared in July 2016 after a jury could not reach a verdict. Jefferson County Circuit Judge Elisabeth French set a new trial for May 1. The trial lasted five days.

Documents on the jury verdict did not appear in the online state court system until Wednesday.

Attorneys for UAB argued at the end of the trial on May 5 that the judge should rule in their favor because, among other things, they say Bennett failed to provide substantial evidence to prove her claim. French denied the motion.

"I think it was a very fair verdict for what she (Bennett) is going to have to go through the rest of her life," said Bennett's attorney, Steve Heninger.

Heninger said that Bennett faces a lifetime of "incurable chronic pain" because of the severed nerve.

Bennett originally came to UAB to get the lipoma, a piece of fat on her scalp, removed. During the surgery, however, Riley decided to biopsy a piece of the nerve, he said. A medical expert from UCLA testified on behalf of Bennett.

Bennett has had two surgeries to try to correct it, Heninger said. And she wears two pain patches, takes oral medication and "all it does is take the edge off," he said.

On her best days on the pain scale of one to 10 she is at a five, Heninger said.
More gun violence, yet rates of survival soar, too

Faster transport of patients, advances in technology and medical care among factors

Carol Robinsoncrobinson@al.com

It’s no secret violent crime has risen across much of the Birmingham area in recent years.

Homicides in Birmingham alone have jumped 60 percent since 2010, and 150 people were killed in all of Jefferson County last year.

But the number of dead paints only part of the picture, for far more people were treated at UAB Hospital for gunshot wounds than any time in recent history. And of those treated, nine out of every 10 survived.

Nearly 550 shooting victims were taken to UAB last year, an increase of 130 percent from 2010. Of the 484 whose injuries were possibly survivable, 94.4 percent did, indeed, survive.

It is a story of both an alarming increase in shootings and a stunning ability to treat the wounds of violence.

“It’s sad to see how violence has increased in our society, but it is remarkable to look at the survival rates now compared

See next page
SURVIVE
FROM AI

to past years," said Jefferson County sheriff's Chief Deputy Randy Christian. "That's a real tribute to emergency responders and the advances made in the medical profession. Truly remarkable."

INSIDE THE RISING NUMBERS

Numbers provided by UAB Hospital make it clear just how many lives are saved by Birmingham-area first responders and emergency medical professionals.

Of the nearly 55,000 UAB Hospital admissions each year, 3,000 to 3,500 of those patients are trauma cases. And, of those, almost one-seventh are gunshot wounds.

"It's a big part of what we do," said Dr. Jeff Kerby, UAB's director of trauma surgery. "We're only losing 5 percent of the patients if they make it here alive, and that's really good. That's a lot of patients that walked out of here alive that may not have."

Last year, 547 gunshot victims were transported to UAB Hospital, and that number doesn't include the younger victims taken to Children's of Alabama or less-serious wounds treated by on-scene medics or taken to other area medical facilities.

While UAB Hospital takes in patients from around the state, the majority of those victims are from the Birmingham metropolitan area.

Last year was one of significant bloodshed in Birmingham, leaving the city with a triple-digit homicide tally for the first time in 10 years. There were 104 homicides in the city, of which 92 were deemed criminal by authorities. In all of Jefferson County, there were 151 homicides, up from 144 the previous year. Birmingham police said they investigated more than 600 assaults in 2016, a number that not only includes shootings, but also stabblings and blunt force trauma.

The increase, experts say, is a nationwide trend. The number of murders in Chicago, the nation's third-largest city, jumped from 478 in 2015 to more than 700 last year. By all accounts, gun violence is at epidemic levels.

"Nationally and particularly in larger cities, the trend appears to be the continued prevalence of gun violence. It's frustrating from a law-enforcement standpoint because these issues cannot be fixed by the police alone," said Hoover police Capt. Gregg Rector. "Values, self-respect, respect for others and self-restraint are clearly not being taught today like they were years ago. Young men are settling arguments with guns, when a generation ago that argument would have been a fistfight as the worst-case scenario."

"It's just mind-boggling to see one of our local hospitals treating over 500 gunshot victims in one year."

In 1997, UAB treated 148 gunshot victims, of which 134 survived. Those numbers rose and fell over the following dozen years, rising to a high of 321 gunshot victims in 2007 and falling to 277 in 2009, according to Russell Griffin, an assistant professor with UAB's Department of Epidemiology.

During those years, the hospital's survival rate stayed steady — with a range in the mid-80 to low-90 percentile.

When the now-closed Carraway Methodist Medical Center stopped treating the most serious trauma cases in May 2002, UAB and Children's became the only Level I trauma centers for all of central Alabama. To achieve Level I status, hospitals must have a variety of surgeons and specialty doctors on call or on duty 24 hours a day, among other requirements.

See next page
On March 7, 2016, a man was shot five times in the Morton Simpson Village of Birmingham's Kingston community. Carol Robinson / crobinson@al.com

"We're doing all we can to prevent death and disability," says Dr. Jeff Kerby, UAB's director of trauma. Right, the trauma and burn unit.

Cooper Green hospital also treated gunshot victims before it closed in 2012, but it was not a Level I trauma center.

FACTORs FOR SURVIVAL

Despite the increase in the number of gunshot victims, as well as the severity of wounds from increased firepower, survival rates are as high as ever. The reasons, experts say, are faster and more deliberate transport of patients and advances in technology and medical care.

In 1973, the Birmingham Fire and Rescue Service started its paramedic program. In 1993, BFRS stopped waiting for ambulances and started transporting the most critical patients with its own rescue units. The city added more rescue units in 1999, and began to transport all patients itself.

In 1996, the Birmingham Regional Emergency Medical Services System began providing trauma routing for the seven counties in the Birmingham area — Blount, Chilton, Jefferson, St. Clair, Shelby, Walker and Winston. Through that program, paramedics contact the control center in Birmingham, which locates the closest hospital best able to take patients with life-threatening injuries; and hospital availability is updated every minute.

In addition to faster transport during the "golden hour" — the crucial period after suffering violence — medical advances also have boosted the survival rate. Kerby said that in about 2010, they started with massive transfusion protocols.

"Before, we gave them all this saline and lactated ringers and then we would give them some blood and then we would give them some plasma," he said. "But we really changed our practice based on the military's experience. We started giving blood and plasma in higher doses up front trying to replace what they lost early on."

"What we saw was the jump from 90 percent to 94 percent (survival rates)," he said. "A lot of that can be attributed to how we are more focused on that initial resuscitation. More people are surviving gunshot wounds as a result of it."

Kerby said they treat every patient the same way. It is a methodical, step-by-step evaluation and treatment process. "We have a system in place," he said. "We drill it. We practice it."

"If you get five or six patients at once, it's chaos," he added. "It's organized chaos, but it's still chaos."

There is a trauma surgeon at UAB Hospital 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

"I don't think that's something people understand. When they're coming here, they're coming to the trauma center," Kerby said. "It's surgeons meeting them at the door."

"We're doing all we can to prevent death and disability," he added, however, "we really need to focus on prevention, and raise awareness about gun violence and the effects it has."

Birmingham police Chief A.C. Roper couldn't agree more. "We are extremely fortunate to have an outstanding medical system in the Birmingham metropolitan area. Lives have been saved and families reunited due to cutting-edge first response and hospital treatment," he said.

"However, we have too many people resorting to gun violence to resolve simple disputes. We are proud of our doctors and medical staffs, but the key to a safer community is not medical treatment, but violence prevention and proper conflict resolution."
UAH discusses future growth and development with city leaders

By: Sarah Macaulso

The University of Alabama in Huntsville invited influential voices in the future of the University for a leadership breakfast Tuesday morning.

It's a special day when both Huntsville and Madison city leaders are in one room. UAH officials briefed them on what types of changes are taking place on campus and what is in store for the coming years.

"We're growing enrollment, on pace at about 8% a year," said UAH President, Robert Altenkirch.

The University hopes to reach 10,000 students by the fall of 2018 and to accommodate those demands, build more residence halls.

Next on the list, expansion.

"We're in the process of finishing off a purchase of 58-acres next to campus, across Sparkman called Executive Plaza," said Altenkirch.

The land will be used for University expansion and mixed-use development. Mayor Battle said the new development will not only help the University, but city too.

"Going a little bit further to the east, we're now going to redevelop the corridor of Sparkman and University Drive and then we'll move in and redevelop a few other parcels, which really gives us a whole corridor that is a very viable retail corridor and also provides for services throughout the area," said Battle.
Aerojet Rocketdyne gives $1 million to UAH to establish space science chair

By: Jeff Martin

Space and defense company Aerojet Rocketdyne announced Monday that they would be funding a $1 million endowment at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. The endowment will fund the Aerojet Rocketdyne Chair in Space Science.

“Aerojet Rocketdyne is proud to be able to partner with The University of Alabama in Huntsville on numerous R&D initiatives related to propulsion and space science,” said Eileen Drake, CEO and President of Aerojet Rocketdyne in a statement.

Dr. Gary Zank, the university’s director of the Center for Space Plasma and Aeronomic Research and chair of the Department of Space Science will be named to the endowed chair. He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences, a distinguished professor, and a UAH eminent scholar.

“Becoming a leader in the field of space science is one of the strategic priorities for the university, and this endowment will go a long way toward helping us achieve that objective,” said UAH president Dr. Robert Altenkirch in a statement. “We are grateful to Aerojet Rocketdyne for their support of our Department of Space Science – and our university as a whole – as we seek to grow our contributions to such a vital field of academic research.”

Drake also talked about the recent Huntsville expansions that Aerojet Rocketdyne has announced, including the move of the company's Defense Business Unit and the Defense Advance Programs unit, known as the "Rocket Shop" to Huntsville. In addition, the company will bring 800 new jobs to Huntsville with the construction of a rocket engine factory.

"We have a brand new business sector, and its defense, and we looked around, and this was just the obvious spot" Drake said at a news conference. "As we relocate and we hire people in these very important technical positions, we want to show that we have people and we have professors and we have universities in the area that support the technical capabilities that we need."
Middle School athletes learn how to play wheelchair basketball

By: Aaron Cantrell

A wheelchair basketball scrimmage was held today between the Liberty Middle School basketball team and a wheelchair basketball team sponsored and coached through UAH.

The scrimmage gave the basketball team a glimpse of what it was like to be play a sport they loved from a wheelchair.

Several current LMS students play now for the wheelchair basketball team sponsored and coached by UAH.

UAH coach David Kyle brought enough wheelchairs for both teams so the non-handicapped LMS Lions could learn how it feels to shoot and play from a wheelchair as they scrimmage.

Recently the UAH-based team of youngsters just won the National Championships in Kentucky.

The scrimmage was thought of by LMS student Evan Lott when Liberty Middle School was brainstorming ways to honor their two wheelchair students on the championship team.

Eighth grader Jackson Quarles said wheelchair basketball looked easy but it was hard. He said because of the game him and his teammates have so much more respect for those who don’t have the ability to walk. “Wheelchair people in general, they have it hard, seeing how they do things makes you respect them cause they are good at it,” Quarles said.

Quarles enjoyed playing wheelchair basketball, but said he will probably not do it again anytime soon.
Shelton State still in search of president

Interim has led college since 2015

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

The Alabama Community College System chancellor has yet to recommend a finalist to the board of trustees in the Shelton State presidential search.

Chancellor Jimmy Balcer has made no decisions about the finalists in the search for the next leader of Shelton State Community College, according to Trish Jones, governmental and academic affairs coordinator for the system. Jones did not have a list of the finalists.

Baker will recommend a candidate to the trustees for approval. The system began advertising the job in January and encouraged applicants to submit resumes by March 3 for best consideration.

The Myers McCrae Executive Search firm is assisting with the search to fill the position. An advisory search committee appointed by system trustees and the chancellor assisted with reviewing applicants and conducting interviews.

Interim President Cynthia T. Anthony has led Shelton State since September 2015, following the departure of Andrea Mayfield, who left to become executive director of the Mississippi community college system. Mayfield served just more than a year at Shelton State.

Shelton State has more than 4,800 students enrolled in some form of coursework at its two Tuscaloosa campuses, the Martin Campus and the C.A. Fredd Campus. The college has 91 full-time and 119 part-time faculty.

In addition to 25 long- and short-term certificate programs, Shelton State offers an associate in arts and associate in science degree programs and 26 associate in applied science degree programs.

In the 2015-16 academic year, the college awarded 503 associates' degrees, 118 long-term certificates and 66 short-term certificates.
High school students can earn college credit this summer

By: Drew Taylor

This summer, Shelton State Community College will host a dual enrollment program for high school students who are interested in career technical education fields.

Tuscaloosa City Schools students who sign up for dual enrollment will be eligible to earn college credit without having to pay tuition. The fields include the automotive industry, engineering, health care and others.

The deadline to apply for the program is May 23. Space is limited to rising high school juniors and seniors.

“It’s an excellent opportunity for students who are not planning to attend college to get their feet wet in their own career,” said T.J. Smith, director of recruitment for Shelton State. “It also benefits those who are thinking about getting their hands on a program early before college.”

Shelton State and other colleges have put more focus in career tech fields since 2015, when the Alabama Legislature approved a plan to set aside an additional $5 million in funding for dual-enrollment programs across the state.

“It’s evolved simply because of the funding,” Smith said. “They are trying to find skilled workers to meet labor demands by 2018.”

According to a statement sent out by TCS, students who complete the program could potentially enter careers with salaries as high as $80,000 per year.

“This partnership represents our efforts of increasing student engagement through the strategic plan,” the statement read. “Through this dual enrollment scholarship, your child can attend high school and earn college credit at the same time, tuition-free.”

Attempts to reach someone at TCS who is involved with the program were not successful Friday.

For more information on how to apply and what is offered through the program, visit www.tuscaloosacityschools.com/sheltonstate.
AROUND ALABAMA

50 STATES, 50 LAWNS

Alabama A&M student embarks trip to help elderly, veterans

Anna Claire Vollers
avollers@al.com

In between college classes, Rodney Smith Jr. can usually be found mowing lawns.

On the surface, his schedule doesn't look much different than it did a year ago, when he mowed lawns between classes for his undergraduate degree in computer science at Alabama A&M University.

And yet for the 20-something immigrant from Bermuda, everything has changed.

"I believe God gives you what you can handle, and I can handle this," said Smith.

His organization, Raising Men Lawn Care Service, isn't yet two years old. Smith and dozens of kids he mentors have mowed hundreds of yards at no charge for the elderly, disabled, veterans and single mothers in North Alabama who don't have the ability or resources to keep their yards clean.

Raising Men Lawn Care Service is part lawn care, part youth program. Last April, Smith had about 20 kids, age 7-17, cutting lawns and working through a mentoring program where they learn the value of developing a strong work ethic, self-esteem and high moral standards.

Then a photo he posted on social media, of himself and his partner with an elderly woman whose yard they'd just cut, went viral. National news outlets picked up his story: a college student who served the community by cutting lawns for free and by encouraging youth to get involved.

Today the program has more than 60 kids in the Huntsville area, and it's growing. Chapters have opened in Texas, Tennessee, Ohio, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Michigan. Smith said he gets contacted by people as far away as Australia who are interested in starting their own chapters.

He's determined not to lose that momentum.

Wednesday he packed his lawnmower and yard tools in the back of his car. He's heading on a one-man, 50-state mission spread the lawncare gospel: That a simple act can make a huge impact on the most vulnerable in a community.

MOWING AND MENTORING

It all started in the fall of 2015, when Smith saw an elderly man mowing grass in front of his home. He appeared to be struggling.

"I was watching him and it just hit me," he said. "I could..."
do something about it.”
He asked friends for names of people who were elderly or disabled and needed their grass cut. He didn’t have his own lawnmower, but he challenged himself to cut 40 lawns by the winter. He searched Craigslist for a used lawnmower so he could cut grass for people who didn’t own mowers.

He reached his goal by October. A month later, he’d cut 100 lawns. WHNT News Channel 19 gave him a $319 grant as part of a “pay it forward” segment and he launched Raising Men Lawn Care Service.

Today, the kids in the program — many of whom are considered at-risk youth — cut grass, rake and bag leaves, and use weed eaters and trimmers. They visit their clients every couple of weeks to make sure their lawns stay tidy.

The program uses colored shirts in a karate belt-style system. Kids start out with a white shirt. Once they’ve cut 10 lawns, they get an orange shirt. Another 10 they get a green, then blue. Once they’ve cut 50 lawns, they get a black shirt and a new lawnmower, paid for through donations to the program.

“The kids are learning teamwork and learning how to interact with different people from different backgrounds,” Smith said. “It’s like a brotherhood, where they learn leadership and so many other skills.

“A lot of kids have told us that if it wasn’t for us, they’d be getting caught up in trouble.”
Smith said sometime around the fifth lawn the kids start to understand the importance of what they’re doing.

“We don’t have to call them,” he said. “They call us up and want to do it every weekend. That’s a great sign of the impact we have in their life.”

CHANGE OF COURSE
Smith is from Bermuda, where “everybody helps everybody if they can.” His father built houses for a living, and Smith thinks his father’s love of helping others rubbed off on him. He came to the United States in 2009 and earned an associate’s degree, then a bachelor’s degree in computer science.

After he started Raising Men Lawn Care Service, he knew the course of his life was going to change.

“I found my true passion,” he said. He’s currently working toward his master’s degree in social work at Alabama A&M and plans to graduate next May.

Smith’s organization has attracted the attention of other businesses.

Last December, Smith’s truck was totaled in a wreck while he was out mowing lawns. Local dealership Woody Anderson Ford gave him an F-150 pickup truck to haul his mower so he could continue mowing lawns.

Briggs & Stratton, the lawn mower engine company, featured Smith in a video for its You.Powered campaign last year. Since then, Briggs & Stratton has contributed funds and a lawnmower for Smith’s 50 States 50 Lawns tour.

“Rodney and Raising Men Lawn Care Service are living a mission that’s making a difference in peoples’ lives on a daily basis,” said Rick Carpenter, vice president of corporate marketing at Briggs & Stratton, in a statement. “That unbridled passion to help others is the essence of You.Powered and Rodney embodies it in the truest sense.”

HITTING THE ROAD
Smith left Wednesday on his two-month tour of the United States. His first stop is Fultondale, Miss. and his last stop will be in Wetumpka, Ala. after flying to Alaska and Hawaii. He has lined up at least one lawn in each state to mow. A map of his route is on his website, 50states50lawns.com and Smith will chronicle his journey on his Facebook and Instagram pages.

He’s already had kids from other states send him photos of themselves with lawnmowers, holding signs that say “I accept the 50-yard challenge.” He hopes to meet some of them on his tour and encourage others to mow lawns in their communities at no charge.

His ambitious goal for next year is to mow lawns on all seven continents.
Softball shocker

Alabama softball to host regional, but is paired with third-ranked Minnesota

By Tommy Deas
Executive Sports Editor

The University of Alabama softball team got the coveted home regional that it wanted when the NCAA Tournament bracket was revealed Sunday night, but the Crimson Tide drew the toughest path of any seeded team in the entire tournament.

The Crimson Tide was awarded the No. 16 overall seed and will host for a 13th consecutive year, but it will have to contend with Big Ten champion Minnesota to advance. And the winner of the Tuscaloosa Regional will have to play No. 1-ranked Florida in the super regional round if the seeds hold.

Conference USA champion Louisiana Tech is the third regional round, and Minnesota vs. Alabama not receiving a top-16 seed was the shocker of the bracket. The Golden Gophers are ranked No. 3 and carry a 54-3 record.

Alabama is 42-16 and ranked No. 15 in the USA Today/NFCA coaches poll.

If Alabama wins its regional, it will play the winner of the Gainesville, Florida, Regional in the best-of-three super regional round. If Florida wins its home regional, UA will have to travel.

The eight super regional winners will advance to the Women's College World Series, which will begin June 1 at ASA Hall of Fame Stadium in Oklahoma City. Alabama is playing for a fourth straight trip to the World Series, which would be a school record.

Alabama has won all home regionals during its current streak of hosting in NCAA Tournament play. All-time UA has won 13 of 14 host regionals. The last time it had to travel for a regional was in 2004, when it lost to UCLA in the regional final.

See SOFTBALL, C3

"I guarantee that nobody is going to want to see us in their bracket."
Patrick Murphy, Alabama head coach
**SOFTBALL**

*Continued from C1*

This marks Alabama’s 19th consecutive bid to the NCAA Tournament.

UA is also the only team to make it to the super regional round in each year since that format was adopted in 2005.

Before the SEC Tournament, UA head coach Patrick Murphy said his team will be a dangerous one in the postseason.

“I guarantee that nobody is going to want to see us in their bracket,” he said.

Other SEC teams chosen to host regionals were seventh-seeded Auburn, No. 8 seed Tennessee, No. 9 seed Texas A&M, No. 12 seed Ole Miss, No. 13 seed LSU and No. 14 seed Kentucky.

All 13 SEC teams earned bids to the NCAA Tournament, the first time that many teams from the same conference have ever advanced to the national title event.

*Reach Tommy Deas at tommy@tidesports.com or at 205-722-0224.*
Osorio powers Tide to SEC semi

No. 16 Alabama upsets No. 11 Texas A&M with 2-1 win

By Tommy Deas
Executive Sports Editor

KNOXVILLE, Tennessee — It was the kind of game the University of Alabama softball team has lost all too often: a low-scoring affair with some late adversity.

Only this time the Crimson Tide didn't falter. Instead, it focused. Alexis Osorio didn't blink: she bucked down.

No. 16 Alabama upended 11th-ranked Texas A&M, winning 2-1 in 10 innings Thursday at Sherri Parker Lee Stadium to advance to the semifinal round of the SEC Tournament.

Alabama (42-15) prevailed on the strength of a commanding performance from junior ace pitcher Osorio, who took a no-hitter into the seventh inning. She gave up a game-tying home run to low-scoring affair with some late adversity.

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"It starts with her," Alabama coach Patrick Murphy said of the pitcher.

Murphy related that UA head football coach Nick Saban had spoken to the team recently. The softball coach said he had never asked Saban before to address one of his teams, but with UA struggling, Murphy made that call.

Osorio took Saban's message to heart.

"Coach Saban came and talked to us and said, 'Are you going to dominate for half a game, three quarters, 58 minutes or are you going to dominate for 60 minutes?' She dominated for 10 innings, and it was just incredible to watch," Murphy said.

Alabama took the lead in the third inning when center fielder Elissa Brown reached on a leadoff single, advanced on a groundout and scored on an RBI single from Marisa Runyon.

It looked like that would hold as Osorio tore through the Aggies' potent lineup. She finally allowed a baserunner when she walked a batter in the fifth inning, but Alabama turned a double play to snuff out that threat. A leadoff walk in the sixth was erased by catcher Reagan Dykes, who threw the runner out on a steal attempt.

Texas A&M first baseman Tori Vidales, who hit three home runs in a single game last Sunday against Tennessee, cranked a solo shot to left to tie the game in the top of the seventh.

Osorio responded with a strikeout, then issued another walk.

It was the kind of thing that had allowed other close games to get away from Alabama, a small mistake with large consequences.

"I think the main thing that I needed to do was stay focused and relax and not to allow that home run to affect me," Osorio said.

It didn't. She retired 11 of the last 12 batters, allowing a bloop single in the bottom of the 10th inning. In extra innings, she threw a first-pitch strike to nine of the 10 batters she faced.

Hemphill, who had hit a solo home run against Arkansas in Alabama's opener on Wednesday, blasted one onto the top of the broadcast-booth tent in center field to lead off the top of the 10th.

"I was just attacking the strike zone instead of looking for a walk or anything," Hemphill said. "I was just attacking strikes."

Alabama will face 18th-ranked Ole Miss, an upset winner over top-ranked Florida, on Friday at 2 p.m. CT. The Rebels took two out of three games from UA in Oxford, Mississippi, two weekends ago. Texas A&M fell to 42-10.

"Reach Tommy Deas at tommy@tidesports.com or at 205-722-0224."
SOFTBALL

Alabama will need to carry the momentum from its end-of-the-regular-season victory over Auburn and do some damage in the SEC Tournament. A one-and-done would probably not bode well for UA’s fortunes when the 64-team field for the national championship tournament is revealed on Sunday.

“We don’t want that,” Alabama coach Patrick Murphy said.

Alabama swept Arkansas over three games to open SEC play two months ago, winning 9-0 in five innings by the mercy rule, 4-3 in extra innings and 5-0 in six innings (in a rain-shortened game). Murphy isn’t putting a lot of stock in those results.

“It seems like we played them a year ago,” Murphy said. “I know their lineup is totally different. It looks like a totally different team. Ours is, too.

“It’s really hard to beat somebody four times in a season as well.”

Arkansas is a program on the rise. The Razorbacks have missed the postseason the last three years.

“They’re hitting the ball a lot better,” Murphy said. “They’re playing much better defense than they ever did. They’ve got a deeper pitching staff.

“I’m sure it’s going to be a great game, because they’re going to be excited getting back there.”

Alabama has a lot to play for and also has its back against the wall. Players know the stakes and want to play at home again. To do that, they have to win.

“Usually it’s like, ‘We’re going to play regionals here, we’ll be back in two weeks,’” Murphy said. “It’s a different feeling for sure.”

Reach Tommy Deas at tommy@tidesports.com or at 205-722-0224.
SPORTS DIGEST

Five UA crews advance to Grand Finals

OAK RIDGE, Tenn. – The University of Alabama rowing team opened action at the Big 12 Championships Saturday at Melton Hill Lake, qualifying all five crews to Sunday Grand Final events and posting top-three finishes across the board.


The Crimson Tide competes, in rowing only, in the Big 12 as the Southeastern Conference does not sponsor the sport.
Alabama wins NCAA Athens Regional

Staff report

No. 2 Alabama won the NCAA Athens Regional Wednesday, posting a 4-under par 284 team score.

The Crimson Tide (289-284-284/857) finished the tournament at 7-under par, 14 shots ahead of second place Northwestern (293-295-283/871), which finished at 7-over par after a five-under par third round. Michigan State finished third at 8-over par (284-297-291/872). Baylor (295-282-299/877) was fourth at 13-over par. Clemson (304-282-298/884) finished fifth at 20-over par and North Carolina (302-297-287/886) finished sixth at 22-over par. All six teams advance to the 2017 NCAA Women's Golf Championships.

Sophomore Cheyenne Knight (71-71-69/211) was the Tide's low finisher on Wednesday, carding a three-under par 69 to tie with teammate Lauren Stephenson (59-70-72/211) for second place at 5-under par. Freshman Kristen Gillman (73-70-71/214) tied for fifth at 2-under par.

The Crimson Tide will make its 12th consecutive NCAA Women's Golf Championship appearance May 19-24 at Rich Harvest Farms in Sugar Grove, Ill.
Oczypok got tough when going got rough

Senior pitcher to be honored this weekend

By Ben Jones
Sports Writer

Think of the times when Mike Oczypok could have walked away from baseball.
It could have been in 2015, when he graduated from the University of Alabama with degrees in management and marketing. It could have been 2014, when he tore his UCL twice in the same year and underwent two Tommy John surgeries on his throwing arm. It could have been 2011, when he was cut from the Alabama baseball team in walk-on tryouts that fall.

He never did quit. But his playing career is likely coming to a close now. He'll be honored at Alabama's Senior Day this weekend against Florida.
"I just love the game so much," Oczypok said. "I probably would have quit after getting cut in the first year of freshman tryouts if I didn't love the game."

Oczypok has spent six years at Alabama, including the last five on the baseball team. He has never been a star for the Crimson Tide, with a fastball in the high 80s and a 4.41 career ERA. But he's among the most accomplished athletes in the history of Alabama. He has three degrees from UA. He finished his double major in undergrad two years ago. He did it in UA's honors college and while completing pre-med requirements. Oczypok was on the SEC's Academic Honor Roll in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016. The 2017 honor roll will be announced this summer. He earned his MBA this spring. Oczypok is believed to be the first UA student-athlete to complete his MBA during his playing career.

All of that was made possible by the challenges he faced earlier in his career. Teammates refer to the 24-year-old as "grandpa." His lengthy

See OZYPK, C5
If you go
No. 5 Florida at Alabama
Schedule: Friday at 6:30 p.m., Saturday at 6:30 p.m., Sunday at 3:00 p.m.
Where: Sewell-Thomas Stadium
Records: Alabama 19-29 (5-19 SEC), Florida 35-14 (16-6 SEC)
TV: SEC Network (Sunday only)
Radio: 102.9 FM

He felt a pop in his right elbow during a scrimmage two weeks before the 2014 season. He tore his UCL, among the most significant injuries possible for a pitcher. The whole season was lost, then the 2015 season was lost when he tore it again that fall.

"Tearing it once has opened up some doors, but honestly, tearing it twice has opened up a whole lifetime of doors," he said.

The injury extended his eligibility and eventually allowed him to complete his MBA. That couldn't have happened in a shorter time frame.

He was also able to direct his focus on pursuits outside of baseball. Oczypok volunteered through UA in a program called Al's Pals, working with elementary school students in Tuscaloosa. He earned two summer internships with Nike in Portland, Ore., planning and executing a marketing plan for the 2016 Olympics. He built a relationship with softball coach Patrick Murphy that he's maintained years later.

"He's the epitome of a great student-athlete," Murphy said. "That's what it's all about is him. Maybe he's not going to go pro. He might not be an All-American. He's just an awesome kid and he represents Alabama to the best of his ability ... I wouldn't doubt it if he's the governor of Alabama in 25 years. I'm serious. I'd vote for him right now." That was all happening as he kept up a relentless pace in the classroom. Ron Dulek, one of Oczypok's professors in undergraduate and MBA classes, didn't even know he was a baseball player until they stumbled across it in conversation one day.

Oczypok never missed an assignment or turned in an assignment in late. Baseball was just one more part of his larger college experience.

"When you talk to Mike about baseball, you see his true love and passion for the game," Dulek said in an email. "He would not have gone what he has gone through injury wise if he didn't love the game. But then you talk to Mike about business strategy and you see a similar love for learning. I suspect that he truly is what some call a 'student of the game.' But his game is both baseball and education."

His role on the team changed after he returned from Tommy John surgery. Oczypok became a veteran arm out of the bullpen for the Crimson Tide in the last two seasons.

"Competitive, intense, but also a guy you'd want your daughter to bring home," head coach Greg Goff said. "He's just a tremendous young man and has a bright future. He's talked about going into coaching. I can't think of any other guys on this team that would be a better coach than what that guy would be."

Pursuing a coaching career would mean foregoing some other opportunities in the business world that have already been available to Oczypok. But he's still not ready to walk away from the game.

Oczypok has worked with two baseball coaching staffs, and also learned about the profession from his time with Murphy. The softball team won a national championship in 2012 - Oczypok's first year at UA - and he's taken some lessons from the culture of Murphy's program and his leadership. Murphy is impressed with Oczypok as well.

"I think he's one of those guys that would absolutely do whatever the coach would ask him to do," Murphy said. "He has all this experience, not only as a player, but he has his MBA. He could help to market the program. To me, he'd be very, very marketable as a young coach."

Six years is no small amount of time for a college student or a college athlete. Oczypok's career spanned four university presidents and three athletics directors. He's endured, accomplished and experienced so much in that time.

His time left is scarce. But his time that has passed has been richer than he ever could have imagined.

"It's crazy to think how quickly it flew by," Oczypok said. "Six years ago I was walking into the same building, sitting in my econ class, being like 'What am I doing here? I feel like I should still be in high school.' Then I blink, and I'm graduating with my MBA. It's flown by and it's been a great experience here."

- Reach Ben Jones at ben@tidessports.com or 205-722-0106.
UA men 3rd, women 7th at SEC Championships

Staff report

COLUMBIA, S.C. — The University of Alabama men's track and field team posted four top-three finishes on the final day of the 2017 SEC Outdoor Track and Field Championships on Saturday to finish third in the team standings with 103 points. The Alabama women's team had three top-three finishes on the final day to place seventh in the final team standings with 57 points. Texas A&M won the men's team championship. Arkansas won the women's league title.

“I'm proud of the way we competed,” head coach Dan Waters said. “I don't think there was anyone who didn't give 100 percent effort. That's what we asked them to do and that's what you have to do to win championships. I'm proud of our champions and the number of All-SEC performers we had. I know we'll use this as motivation next year because we feel like we'll continue to improve.”

Robbie Farnham-Rose finished second in the men's 1,500 meters in 3:53.36. Will Herrscher finished second in pole vault with a clearance of 17-1 1/2. Jereem Richards placed third in the 200 meters in 20.22. Alabama's 4x400-meter relay team of Will Allen, Richards, Skyler Bowden and Steven Gayle finished third in 3:02.75. Also at the championships, Alfred Chelanga won the 10,000 meters-run, Joe Williams placed second in discus, Antibahs Kosgei placed second in steeplechase, and McLean Lipschutz finished third in javelin. The top three finishers all earned All-SEC honors.

The Alabama women had three top-three finishes on Saturday. Domonique Williams finished second in the women's 400 meters in 52.54. Stacey Destin finished third in the women's high jump with a clearance of 6-0 1/2. The 4x400-meter relay quartet of Alex Gholston, Diamond Gause, Symone Darius and Williams finished third in 3:30.94. They all earned All-SEC honors, as did previous days finishes by Quanesha Burks who won the SEC long jump championship and Haley Teel who finished second in shot put.

Alabama now prepares for the May 25-27 NCAA East Regional which will be hosted by the University of Kentucky.
All Alabama-Auburn rivalries aren't created equal

By: Kevin Scarbinsky

It took 15 innings, 20 runs - 10 of them in extra innings - 567 pitches and a pair of obviously blown calls over six hours and 36 minutes before Alabama outlasted Auburn 11-9 Sunday to complete a shocking three-game sweep on the Plains.

It was a game that had everything.

It just didn't mean everything.

The impact wasn't insignificant. Title-contending Auburn dropped two games behind Mississippi State in the SEC West, fell from No. 4 to No. 13 in the nation in the Baseball America poll and damaged its chances to host an NCAA Tournament regional. Cellar-dwelling Alabama snapped its 13-game SEC losing streak in a memorable way.

But neither the game nor the series is going to be the story of the season for either team.

Auburn (32-17, 14-10) is still a lock to reach the SEC and NCAA Tournaments and a threat to reach the College World Series for the first time since 1997.

Alabama (18-29, 5-19) is still in last place in the SEC West by six games and in the overall league standings by two games, giving the Crimson Tide an uphill climb to reach the SEC Tournament.

The lesson: Alabama and Auburn fight like cats and dogs every time they compete, but nothing in the rivalry rivals the Iron Bowl football game.

Lose that game, and you're probably not going to win the SEC West, play in the SEC Championship Game and reach the College Football Playoff. See 2013 when Alabama won every regular-season game until the last one in Jordan-Hare Stadium. One loss by one score on the final play, which began with one second on the clock, didn't just provide a feel-good moment for the Auburn family. It didn't just send the Tigers toward an SEC title and the BCS Championship Game.

It ended Alabama's chance to win a third straight national championship. Nick Saban says it's one of those games he'll never get over.

Fast-forward to Sunday, a very good day in the stick-and-ball sports and the rivalry for Alabama. After losing the first two games to lose the softball series, the Tide avoided a sweep and its first losing SEC season in history by beating Auburn 3-2.

It was big in the moment, but it won't be the most prominent memory of the season for either team.
Auburn (45-9, 17-7) finished second in the league by winning a series in Tuscaloosa for the first time in program history. The Tigers will get a first-round bye as the No. 2 seed in this week's SEC Tournament.

Alabama (40-15, 12-11) is still a lock to make the NCAA Tournament as usual, but the Tide is 4 1/2 games behind Auburn in the standings and will be the No. 5 seed in the SEC Tournament.

Getting to the College World Series and winning a national championship is still the goal for both softball programs, the sport in which both schools excel the most as a pair at the moment.

The Iron Bowl of softball doesn't define either program. Neither does the baseball series or the men's basketball series, which Auburn swept this season only to see Alabama finish six spots higher in the standings.

The original Iron Bowl - the only game that deserves the name, according to the hard-liners - is the only regular-season meeting between the rivals that truly has the ability to make or break the season.

It's mathematically possible otherwise, but realistically, the Tide and the Tigers have to go through each other to get where they want to go in football. If this Auburn baseball team gets to Omaha, or if these Auburn and Alabama softball teams get to Oklahoma City, they'll little note nor long remember what happened this past weekend.

As memorable as those six games were for their own sake.
No. 1 seed Alabama heads to Athens Regional

By: Ian Thompson

It’s time for postseason play in college golf, with women’s play beginning today and men’s next Monday.

All local eyes will be on Athens, Georgia, for the Athens Regional featuring the University of Alabama, the No. 1 seed, along with Auburn and Troy University.

There are four regionals across the country, with the low six teams and three individuals not on an advancing team moving on to Nationals. The format for regionals is three rounds of stroke play.


The University of Georgia Course is one that is very familiar to the Tide as Georgia annually hosts the Liz Murphey Collegiate. Just last month, UA lost in the final match of this stroke play then match play event to UGA.

As Tide head coach Mic Potter noted after the fields for the regionals were announced:

“We were hoping for Athens simply because of proximity and familiarity. The University of Georgia golf course is a great one. The greens are fast and undulating, so you have to be precise and putt well when you play there. The course will play a little different from our trip earlier in the year for the Liz Murphey. We just need to do our job.”

For Potter, the regional berth marks the 24th consecutive postseason appearance by a team under his direction. The Hall of Fame coach has now led a team to a regional bid each season since the current format came into existence in 1993.

He certainly takes a team brimming with confidence, led by SEC Player of the Year sophomore Cheyenne Knight, who is the No. 2-ranked player in the country according to Golfstat; SEC Freshman of the Year and former U.S. Amateur champion Kristen Gillman; and fellow SEC First-Team selection Lauren Stephenson. Add in experienced junior Lakareber Abe to the mix and they have a top four that is hard to match. And senior Mia Landegren rounds out their starting lineup.

And it’s hard to believe that it is already a year ago that Shoal Creek hosted a women’s regional, which was won by Northwestern, and from which UA advanced to nationals.

For the men, there are six regionals across the country, each featuring 13 or 14 teams. The top five teams and one individual not on an advancing team will move on Nationals, May 26-31, also at Rich Harvest Farms.

See next page
Like the women, all regional play is stroke play, but nationals will feature both stroke and match play.

The state is well represented with Jacksonville State and Alabama State heading to the LSU Regional, along with UAB’s R.J. Keur playing as an individual.

Auburn are playing in the Purdue Regional, with Vanderbilt, the No. 1 ranked team in the country coached by former University of Alabama assistant coach Scott Limbaugh and paced by Birmingham sophomore Patrick Martin, who played for Spain Park High School, and Troy University both in the Middle Tennessee State University Regional.

And the University of Alabama travels all across the country to Sammamish, Wash. for the University of Washington Regional. The Crimson Tide are the No. 6 seeds and will play at a new venue to them, Aldarra Golf Club. UA’s starting line-up most likely won’t be announced until the end of the week.
The best of the best?
There's one clear choice

Michael Casagrande mcasagrande@al.com

This is where things really get tricky.
Just picking the best players from Nick Saban's Alabama decade at certain positional groups proved difficult. Now, the overall best of the best? It's a question you could take in multiple directions based on how things are being graded.
But if we're serious about this, it has to be the player that you just couldn't remove from a given roster. His ability to single-handedly change a game would have to be a touch above the rest.
That doesn't bode well for offensive linemen. And the balance of Alabama's best defenses made it harder for individuals to stand out that far above the crowd.
That's why it has to be Derrick Henry.
For the 2015 season, the subtraction of the 6-foot-3 running back would've completely changed the dynamic of a Crimson Tide team that won the national title. The sheer fact he got 395 carries — the most in program history by 93 — speaks to the value coaches placed on his ability. Henry ran it 90 times in the two-game span featuring Auburn to close the regular season and Florida in the SEC title game.

SEE SABAN, B6
The 200-yard games against Texas A&M, LSU, Mississippi State and Auburn were deciding factors in games with ranked teams. The 210-yard, 38-carry pounding delivered to LSU was the statement that changed the Heisman talk from all Leonard Fournette to why not Henry?

Was the passing game consistent enough to win a national title without Henry in 2015? Probably not. It was solid in a complementary role, but not enough to carry through the 15-game haul with one survivable loss.

Kenyan Drake was a strong backup, though it's hard to see him having the same impact on defenses Henry had that fall. His size alone played a role in beating down the opposition, grinding away on the clock and limiting opportunities for comebacks.

In all, Henry ran for 2,219 yards on 395 attempts (5.6 average) with 28 touchdowns. He evaporated practically every major rushing record at a school known for running the ball.

The can't-live-without-him standard is also met by a few others, just not to the same degree.

A year before Henry's outburst, Amari Cooper was the centerpiece of Lane Kiffin's offense. The Miami product made a rare trip to New York as a receiver who was a Heisman finalist. Not winning a title hurt the case since Ohio State eliminated his big-play potential to a long catch of 15 yards in a Sugar Bowl loss.

It's also fair to say the rushing attack on that 2014 team was more capable of sharing the burden than the passing game of 2015.

Mark Ingram and Julio Jones were also generational tal-
Who missed the cut says more about the Nick Saban era than who made it

Kevin Scarbinsky  kscarbinsky@al.com

Reuben Foster didn't make the cut. We voted and settled on two inside linebackers for AL.com's All-Saban team, our collection of the best players from Nick Saban's first decade at Alabama, and Foster wasn't one of them.

Our "starters" were Rolando McClain and C.J. Mosley. Foster was on the outside looking in. He ended up on the short list of those also receiving votes. Nothing, and I mean nothing, says more about the last decade of Alabama football than that.

If he term embarrassment of riches didn't already exist, someone would've invented it to describe the assembly line of talented players that's been constructed and maintained in Tuscaloosa.

SEE SCARBINSKY, B4

SCARBINSKY
FROM B1

Foster was a Butkus Award winner as the best linebacker in college football. He was a late first-round NFL draft choice who could've, would've and perhaps should've been among the top five or 10 players selected if not for a succession of circumstances, some of them of his own doing, some not.

Yet we, the AL.com staffers who cover Alabama football, judged him no better than the third best inside linebacker of the last decade. If you compiled a similar list for more than a few of Alabama's SEC rivals, Foster would've been a no-brainer No. 1.

That's just one of the lessons to take away from our All-Saban All-Everything extravaganza. It's been an interesting off-season exercise considering the coach is still at work and just signed a new eight-year contract.

We reinforced the obvious conclusion that kicker has been the weakest position at Alabama during Saban's tenure. Leigh Tiffin was an All-American, but he was the only worthy candidate at that position.

We almost started a fight over running backs. Heisman winner Derrick Henry was an easy selection, but Heisman winner Mark Ingram was not. Some of us believe Trent Richardson was better and more valuable than Ingram during their Alabama careers.

As for Saban and Alabama, it's possible we could update this exercise five or 10 years from now, if he actually does retire one day.

That's not a knock on Ingram. It's a tribute to Richardson. Alabama beat Texas for Saban's first national title with the Crimson Tide because each of them rushed for more than 100 yards and scored two touchdowns in the BCS Championship Game against the Longhorns.

With 10 years complete, about five more than most people expected at the start that Alabama would get out of the famously restless Saban, it seemed like a good time to take a fun look at the best of the best. We even compiled an All-Saban coaching staff.

I voted for Jim McElwain as offensive coordinator and Lane Kiffin as quarterbacks coach — even though Saban has combined those positions on his staff — but the final choice went the other way. Not sure how you give Kiffin the OC nod when he couldn't/wasn't allowed to finish the job, but that's just me.

In case you wondered, we haven't done an All-Gus team because Gus Malzahn has been the Auburn coach for only four seasons. We probably would've done an All-Tubs team in 2008 if Tommy Tuberville hadn't departed the Plains in a less-than-celebratory way after his 10th season.

Imagine the running back debate there. Pick two among Rudi Johnson, Ronnie Brown, Kenny Irons and Cadillac Williams, who's rightfully being inducted Saturday night into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame.

As for Saban and Alabama, it's possible we could update this exercise five or 10 years from now, if he actually does retire one day. How many current and future Crimson Tide players will kick their predecessors to the curb? How many of our selections will never be challenged?

At the moment, there's another debate waiting to be ignited. Would our All-Saban second team beat our All-Saban starters? Imagine Foster meeting Ingram in the hole to take out his frustration at not making the first cut.

At the least, there's a Tecmo Bowl matchup waiting to happen.
ALABAMA FOOTBALL

‘Human battering ram’

Karl Dunbar had an early career as undercover officer with an evocative nickname

Matt Zenitz mzenitz@al.com

A shootout in 1996 was the final straw for Karl Dunbar’s wife, a drug bust that turned into a gunfight between Dunbar, other Opelousas, Louisiana, police officers and those they were looking to arrest.

While Dunbar wasn’t injured, his wife was tired of the constant danger her husband faced as an undercover narcotics officer and demanded he find another job. Dunbar obliged and started coaching the Opelousas High School freshman team that following Monday.

Years later, Dunbar is one of the nation’s top defensive line coaches, a respected veteran entering his second season with Alabama after stints with the Minnesota Vikings, New York Jets and Buffalo Bills. Most don’t know that Dunbar was once an undercover police officer known as the “Human Battering Ram” because of his ability to break down doors.

The former LSU criminal justice major began working with the Opelousas police department not long after finishing college in 1990, helping the department while also pursuing a professional football career that started with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 1990 and lasted through 1995.

“It was dangerous what he did, but he helped to clean up this city,” said former Opelousas police chief Larry Caillier. “He was very instrumental. When he came here and we became friends and he worked undercover, he was very instrumental, and

SEE DUNBAR, B3

Long before he was an assistant coach at Alabama, Karl Dunbar was the Opelousas police department’s “Human Battering Ram.”

Vasha Hunt vhunt@al.com

See Next Page
DUNBAR

FROM BL

that was the beginning of the end for the drug dealers in the city of Opelousas."

Cocaine was a "monster" of a problem in Opelousas back then, according to current police chief Donald Thompson.

Dunbar helped with that, assisting with about 60 drug-related arrests before that 1996 shootout that led to him leaving police work for coaching.

Drug dealers were familiar with Dunbar as a local football star who played at nearby LSU and at the time was in the NFL. Upon his initial contact with the dealer, Dunbar presented himself as a failed football player who had turned to cocaine. Dunbar would then report back to Caillier, sharing information about the dealer and how much cocaine they had to sell. When Dunbar went to meet with the dealer again, he wore a wire, took marked money and had a secret password to indicate to nearby officers when the deal was done. Caillier and others would then bust in and make the arrest.

"He was a great asset for this police department," said Thompson, a detective at the time Dunbar was with the department. "We made a bunch of drug cases because of Karl."

For years, Caillier struggled to catch a particular dealer that he remembers being "super, super evasive."

Police finally got him, largely aided by Dunbar. It was one of Dunbar's first cases, so Caillier was surprised and impressed when Dunbar baited the dealer into making a deal after going to where the man operated.

In 1991, one of the drug dealers sought revenge. A hit was ordered on Dunbar's life right around the time he was getting married, so a large group of police officers had to attend Dunbar's wedding simply for protection.

That wasn't the last time someone ordered a hit on Dunbar. There were other dealers and other ordered hits, which contributed to Dunbar's wife finally demanding he leave the force following the shootout in 1996.

"He put his life on the line, and the department will always be appreciative for what Karl did," Caillier said.

It didn't take Dunbar long to rise up the ranks after transitioning from undercover cop to coach.

After coaching at the high school level for two years, Dunbar got his first college job in 1998 as the defensive line coach at Nicholls State. Two years after that, he linked up with Nick Saban at LSU as a strength and conditioning coach. From there, Dunbar was the defensive line coach at Oklahoma State (2002-03), with the Chicago Bears (2004), at LSU (2005) and then with the Vikings (2006-11), Jets (2012-14) and Bills (2015). He reunited with Saban in Tuscaloosa last May.

Former NFL star Jared Allen posted 22 sacks under Dunbar's tutelage in 2011 — tied for second-most in a single season in NFL history and 6½ more than Allen had recorded in any of his first seven NFL seasons.

In his first year at Alabama, Dunbar's defensive line was the strength of a defense that's widely considered one of the best in recent college football history. Two of his defensive linemen, Jonathan Allen and Dalvin Tomlinson, were taken in the first two rounds of the 2017 NFL Draft.

"Coach Dunbar is a great coach, a great defensive line coach," Tomlinson said late last season. "He helps everyone up front, even the outside linebackers, with our pass rush game. He's made us a lot more effective pass rushers. He's one of those coaches who brings stuff to the table you've never seen before — a lot of different pass rush moves, how to read the offensive linemen, how they set. He's made it so that we can read the offensive line a lot better when we pass rush and keying things before the snap, small details that help out a lot."

After the season, Dunbar visited Opelousas and met up with Caillier and Thompson.

Inside Thompson's office, the three traded stories about the lives they led two decades ago. They talked about Alabama football and the defensive line group Dunbar now leads at college football's pre-eminent program.

They talked about the incredible journey of the man once known as the Human Bat-tering Ram.
The cost of winning

Expense outweighs revenue in Crimson Tide's CFP run

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

It's not cheap to operate the nation's most dominant football program. A postseason run to play for the 2016 national championship, in fact, cost the University of Alabama considerably more than it generated in revenue.

The UA athletic department spent $2.6 million more on expenses than it took in in revenues during its run through the CFP, according to documents obtained by The Tuscaloosa News through open-records law requests.

Alabama totaled nearly $7 million in expenses - ranging from transportation to lodging, meals, entertainment, bonuses and more - while bringing in more than $4.3 million in reimbursements and its payout for the two playoff games.

Of the $6.94 million spent during the two games of the CFP, bonuses that come with that from an exposure and recruiting standpoint, not only for athletics but also for the institution as a whole.

Alabama paid $1.838 million in bonuses for reaching the CFP, and that doesn't include just football assistant coaches, although they represent a large amount of the total. Sixty-four athletic department members, including coaches, were awarded bonuses. That amount doesn't include the $458,423.46 in bonuses from the SEC Championship Game win awarded to the football coaches and select staffers.

UA head coach Nick Saban, per his contract, earned a total of $425,000 in postseason bonuses - $125,000 for winning the SEC championship and $300,000 for playing in the CFP Championship Game.

Alabama remains generous to its employees compared to other top programs. According to a report from CBSsports.com, Alabama paid 62 employees a bonus following the 2016 CFP compared to 34 at Clemson, 29 at Michigan State and 11 at Oklahoma.

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Of the $6.94 million spent during the two games of the CFP, bonuses that come with that from an exposure and recruiting standpoint, not only for athletics but also for the institution as a whole.
COST
Continued from C1

represented the second-highest expense behind meals/transportation/per diem, which cost a total of $1.97 million for the two games.

Tickets absorbed totaled the third-largest expense (12.4 percent) at $862,130. The category is slightly misleading. The cost didn't result from tickets unsold; in fact, quite the opposite. The tickets absorbed - paid for by participating schools - are for players' guests and families and for comps to UA staff. Those tickets would not otherwise have been made available to the public, and they are not tickets that went unsold from the batch allotted to be sold through UA to its season ticket holders, fans and students.

UA spent more money in Tampa ($2,692,805) than in Atlanta ($2,418,719), despite spending fewer days there.

The main discrepancy in spending between the semifinal and championship game came in tickets absorbed, which cost the athletic department $100,970 more in comped tickets for Tampa than the semifinal game in Atlanta. Transportation costs were considerably higher for trip of nearly 1,200 round-trip miles to Tampa than for the 400 round-trip miles to Atlanta. The difference totaled $188,914 more in travel expenses.

The team spent $176,738 on entertainment both trips. One night in Atlanta the players traveled to Topgolf for a night away from practice and meetings.

The program's sources of revenue during the CFP came exclusively from travel reimbursement and bowl payouts disbursed through the SEC, per league guidelines.

The conference distributed $2.025 million to Alabama for participating in the CFP semifinal and an additional $2.125 million for the CFP Championship Game. This money goes to the participating school out of the $6 million payout to the conference from the CFP, with the remainder split among the 14 SEC schools and the SEC office in 15 equal shares. Additionally, the SEC receives a payout of approximately $55 million as its share of the payout from the CFP's major bowls, also split evenly among the league's member schools and conference office.

In addition, the SEC provided to UA a travel allowance (determined by distance to the hosting venue) of $50,750 for the semifinal and $146,500 for the championship game.

The university chartered eight planes (four each for the semifinal and championship games), carrying 157 to Atlanta on the official team charter and 238 to Tampa (serviced through Delta Airlines), according to information obtained through an open-records request. A university-owned jet carried three passengers to Atlanta and six to Tampa. The UA president's party and board of trustees consisted of 87 passengers traveling to Tampa, while the number of passengers traveling to Atlanta was not available.

- Reach Aaron Suttles at aaron@tidesports.com or at 205-722-0229.

Alabama head coach Nick Saban claps after Alabama running back Bo Scarbrough's first touchdown of the College Football Playoff National Championship in Tampa, Florida, on Jan. 9. Clemson won, 35-31. Saban, per his contract, earned a total of $425,000 in postseason bonuses - $125,000 for winning the SEC championship and $300,000 for playing the in the CFP Championship Game. [STAFF PHOTO/ERIN NELSON]
### Championship bonuses

Here is a list of bonuses received by the University of Alabama staff from the SEC Championship Game and the College Football Playoffs.

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**TOTAL:** $458,423.46 $1,838,386.31 $2,296,809.77

Source: Open-records law request

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*The Tuscaloosa News*  
Sunday, May 7, 2017
A dismal month for some UA teams

By: Cecil Hurt

April is the cruelest month, as T.S. Eliot assured us, and University of Alabama athletics fans would confirm, as far as 2017 goes.

Perhaps May holds a bit more promise.

Things weren't quite the wasteland that Mr. Eliot describes. Football had a good month. The A-Day game was both entertaining and encouraging, if encouragement was necessary. The NFL Draft came two weeks later, and Alabama received heavy coverage as the sheer volume of selections, including four in the first round, led to new draft records for most selections in the first 55 picks and again in the first 80 selections.

There are Alabama fans for whom only football matters. They feel little angst, as much as they like to generate worry for themselves, or set standards in which an incredibly successful decade isn't satisfactory. Leaving them aside, some (not all) of the other sports had a very difficult month.

That's not over for basketball. Avery Johnson and his staff spent a good part of April wondering whether SEC All-Freshman team forward Braxton Key would be a part of the 2017-18 team, and might have to spend the month of May wondering as well. Key was not invited to the NBA Draft Combine but could still try to arrange individual workouts with teams, or explore options overseas. He has until June 12 to decide. Despite Alabama's deservedly ranked recruiting class, there is no way Johnson will know exactly what cards he holds in his hand for an upcoming season of great expectations until Key makes his call. In the meantime, Key has maintained radio (or at least social media) silence.

Things have been tougher on the diamond, for the men and women. April was the worst month, record-wise, for Alabama baseball and softball combined since the softball program was formed. There's not a common thread linking both, other than coincidence. Each has its own issues. Alabama is in a transition year under new coach Greg Goff and the adjustment seems to have been rocky at times. The best moment of the season, though, came on Saturday as Alabama swept a doubleheader at Auburn. That's a real credit to the players who have continued to complete despite the disappointments of the year.

Patrick Murphy, one of the best coaches in the college game, heads the softball program. However, offense has been a yearlong problem and since second baseman Demi Turner suffered a broken orbital bone in a fluke play at Missouri (she was hit in the face by a teammate's throw), that hitting drought has turned into an arid Sahara of scoring.

The weekend games against Auburn at home were supposed to be a chance to break out for the Alabama bats. That didn’t happen. Now, the Crimson Tide’s streak of hosting NCAA Regionals (and usually super-regionals as well) seems over, not officially but for practical purposes. That
will mean an uphill road struggle and a slim chance at making it to Oklahoma City, even with WCWS-quality pitching.

A bad month, though, is just a bad month. Also, it would be wrong to overlook the dominant spring of the women’s golf team, an excellent season in progress for the track and field program, and gymnastics keeping its string of Super Six appearances alive.

Still, May may never have been more welcome at Alabama — if only as a break from April.
Rift in school choice movement exposed

By Geoff Mulvihill
The Associated Press

For two decades, a loose-knit group that includes some of the country's wealthiest people has underwritten the political push for school choice, promoting ballot initiatives and candidates who favor competition for traditional public schools.

But when a member of this elite group was elevated to education secretary, the appointment opened a philosophical schism that now threatens to shatter the alliance, turn billionaires against each other and possibly lead some school-choice advocates to join with teachers' unions, their archenemies.

Fueling the split is the anticipation of a plan from President Donald Trump's administration that could offer parents federal dollars to send their children to private schools, including religious and for-profit institutions.

"As much as we are aligned on change, we aren't always aligned on how much change or how. Sometimes we fight," said Derrell Bradford, executive vice president of the school-reform group 50CAN.

The movement has been cleaved into two camps: those who want to use choice to improve public schools and others, like Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, who want to go further by allowing tax money to flow to private schools through vouchers, government-funded scholarships or corporate tax credits.

The differences that once seemed minor are at the heart of a potential seismic shift in the school-choice movement.

School-choice programs were first proposed in the 1950s by Nobel Prize-winning free-market economist Milton Friedman. Since the beginning of this century, they have grown quickly, although the overwhelming majority of students still attend traditional public schools.

Thirty states plus Washington, D.C., have some combination of vouchers, government-subsidized education savings accounts or tax credits that help families afford private schools, tuition or encourage private groups to fund scholarships, according to EdChoice, an advocacy group founded by Friedman and his wife.

Still, less than 1 percent of children in kindergarten through high school used vouchers to attend private schools in 2015, just 5 percent of students were in charter schools that year, when charters were operating in more than 40 states. That's up from about 3 percent in 2008, according to the Department of Education.

Charter schools are public but in several states are not held to the same accountability standards as traditional schools, which in theory gives them more freedom to innovate. When standardized test scores of children who switched to charter schools or used vouchers are compared with those of students who remained in traditional public schools, some results have been promising. Other studies have shown little effect or even worse outcomes.

Heart of the debate

For the past decade, school-choice supporters have split over the merits of private-school vouchers versus public charter schools, according to William Oberndorf, a San Francisco investor, major contributor to the movement and chairman of the American Federation for Children, which was led by DeVos until last year.

He urged all school-choice advocates to drop their divisions and support the core belief that choice in any form is a good thing if it lets parents make decisions about what is best for their kids.

"Most Americans have that already," Oberndorf said in an interview. "They have that if they have enough money to move to a good school district or send their kids to private school. It's really only poor people who don't have choices."

In a statement to the AP, a representative of the Waltons said the family is concerned about improving education quality for all children. It is not focused so much on how that is done.

"There have always been tensions in some quarters over the best ways to offer educational options to families," said Marc Sternberg, senior education adviser to the Walton family. "School choice is a means to an end and not the end in itself. It is about making sure those options - including schools within traditional school systems - offer the kinds of high quality, diverse educational opportunities so that every child has a real chance to succeed in life."
SAT prep industry tested by free competition

Associated Press

Is there a price that a worried parent wouldn’t pay to help a child do well on college admissions tests? The good news is that test preparation doesn’t have to be expensive anymore.

The multimillion-dollar coaching industry is facing competition from free or low-cost alternatives in what their founders hope will make the process of applying to college more equitable. Such innovations are also raising questions about the relevance and the fairness of relying on standardized tests.

The online education platform Khan Academy has partnered with the College Board to provide free coaching for the SAT test. Top commercial programs cost around $1,000.

According to a study released last week by the College Board, 20 hours of free online learning at Khan Academy led to an average gain of 55 points on the 1,600-point test scale compared with students who didn’t engage in the program. The College Board, a non-profit organization, owns the SAT.

“We need to start to level the playing field,” Khan Academy founder Salman Khan told The Associated Press. “It is never OK that some students have access to some tools that other students do not.”

The study, shared with the AP ahead of publication, compared 250,000 students from the graduating class of 2017 who took the practice PSAT test, linked their Khan Academy and College Board accounts and participated in the free prep to some 840,000 students in the same class who did not spend any observable time on Khan Academy test prep or didn’t link the two accounts.

While students in the second group had an average gain of 60 points from their practice test to the SAT, students in the first group had an average gain of 115 points, or an additional gain of 55 points.

There are no rigorous, recent studies of test gains made by students who took test prep courses outside the College Board program.

But a study of commercial test prep courses released by the National Association for College Admission Counseling in 2009 reported an average gain of some 30 points. That study analyzed prep programs for the previous version of the SAT. The new streamlined exam launched last year removes penalties for guessing, eliminates arcane vocabulary and focuses more on what students are supposed to learn in high school.

Derek Briggs, an education professor at Colorado University, Boulder, who authored the NACAC report, welcomed the Khan Academy results with cautious optimism. “That’s a real step in the right direction,” Briggs said. “It’s certainly larger than what I would have predicted.”

Raising some questions about the methodology, Briggs said the gains could be attributed to the students’ motivation rather than the learning tool. Also, it is unknown whether students in the study group used additional resources, such as commercial courses or private tutoring.

But Khan said the fact that gains were consistent across all demographic groups, including different income, race and gender, showed that tutorials were a significant factor.

Diana Antunez, 17, a senior at Oak Ridge High School in Orlando, Florida, improved 130 points between two SAT tests. She said the platform analyzed her initial results and gave her problems in areas where she had made mistakes.

“It’s like I had a teacher right there with me,” Antunez said.

Other free SAT tutorials can be found on Number2.com, FreeTestPrep.com and other websites.

Large commercial test preparation companies such as Kaplan and the Princeton Review, which offer personalized live instruction for $800 to $1,100, say they are not threatened by free alternatives because many students need additional motivation.

The U.S. test prep industry was worth $328 million in 2016, according to IBISWorld, an industry research company.

“Khan Academy is the free fitness app. What we do is really provide motivation and structure and support,” said Lee Weiss, vice president of college admissions at Kaplan.

Kaplan and Princeton Review don’t disclose the average gains made, but guarantee higher scores to individual students if they complete all the assignments.

The partnership with Khan marked a major turnaround for the College Board, which had long insisted that the SAT is designed in such a way that coaching is of little use. A 1998 study of prep courses conducted by the organization found that coaching is unlikely to bring substantial gains. Critics say remodeling the test and partnership with Khan Academy may be an attempt to compete with the rival test, the ACT.

Some are questioning the very premise of such tests. The watchdog FairTest, which campaigns to make standardized testing optional, has compiled a list of over 950 colleges and universities in the United States that no longer require test scores for admission. Many are small institutions or have a specialized focus; some, like George Washington University, are big schools.

Jonathan Supovitz, professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, says some kind of a standardized testing is still necessary to evaluate students, given the differences in the quality of high school education. He added that the SAT is only good at predicting grades during a student’s freshman year, but not their overall college readiness.

That is why college admissions officers must pay equal attention to a student’s grades as well as letters of recommendation and extra-curricular activities, said David Burge, the incoming president of NACAC.

“There are different types of students and you need to take a truly holistic approach,” Burge said.
How ESPN's struggles could derail college football's exploding revenue

By: John Talty

Familiar faces that resided on your television screen for years, talent like Ed Werder, Trent Dilfer and Andy Katz, all received pink slips from ESPN last week.

The most common explanation for why ESPN laid off as many as 100 employees, many of them well-respected in the journalism industry, is "cord-cutting" has taken a machete to ESPN's subscriber numbers, and most importantly, its profits.

Cord-cutting isn't a new concept -- the trend of consumers dropping their cable packages has been happening for years -- but Wednesday represented a watershed moment as a sports media behemoth had to shed talented, popular journalists to keep up with the changing times.

As subscriber numbers precipitously dropped in recent years, the television rights deals it signed at the peak of its power look more and more like albatrosses. ESPN will spend $8.1 billion on programming costs in 2017, according to SNL Kagan, yet has lost more than 10 million subscribers since 2013. A lot of that loss has been attributed to non-sports fans dropping cable or choosing lighter bundles that don't contain the sports channel. But given that cable subscribers pay more than $7 a month for ESPN alone, whether they watch the network or not, that's a loss of more than $1 billion annually in subscription fees.

At some point that could force the market to correct itself and the money that grew and grew for each media rights deal could finally come back down to earth. That would have far-reaching implications across sports including potentially in college football. Television money, particularly from ESPN, has dramatically changed the college football landscape over the last decade. It was the engine behind conference realignment, exploding coaching salaries and ostentatious facilities upgrades. It is the defining reason the gulf between the Power 5 and Group of Five keeps growing wider.

The major question is what happens when ESPN and other TV networks decide they don't want to keep upping the ante each time a rights deal comes up for renewal?

Just look to Conference USA for how that could play out.

No conference has been impacted worse by the ramifications of television money than Conference USA over the last 15 years. In 2005, Louisville, Marquette, Cincinnati and Texas Christian were all members of the conference only to leave for greener pastures in the Big East. That process happened again and again as bigger conferences looked to bolster their attractiveness for TV money by plundering CUSA. UAB and Southern Miss are the last of the founding members still in a conference that now features schools like Texas at El Paso and Texas at San Antonio.
When CUSA's TV rights deal expired in 2016, the market had dried up. It wasn't as attractive as it had once been despite adding several schools in large TV markets and television networks weren't as needy for inventory. Only a few years after aggressively trying to add live sports TV rights for its fledgling FS1, FOX didn't even bother trying to re-up with Conference USA. While other conferences saw their rights deals skyrocket in previous years, CUSA received millions less. Its schools went from making $1.1 million annually from TV money to a meager $200,000.

Conference USA commissioner Judy MacLeod says cord-cutting absolutely played a role in the smaller deal.

"When we were out, there was so much uncertainty in the market, and it impacted it a lot," MacLeod said. "I'm still not sure everybody knows what exactly their plans are, but they have an idea where they are going. Some of our partners like Bein have done a great job digitally. It's definitely a different world out there."

CUSA has cobbled together deals with multiple companies including ESPN, CBS Sports Network and now-defunct American Sports Network. The conference has been proactive in working with digital companies like Campus Insiders as it fights for exposure in addition to revenue, but it's been a work in progress. CUSA signed short-term deals so that it will hit the market again next spring, but there's little reason for confidence that the conference will be able to command significantly, let alone any, more money in a new deal.

The loss of significant revenue as costs continue to rise through cost of attendance and other measures has made it difficult for CUSA schools to be competitive nationally. Consider this: Nine SEC assistants made more in 2016 than Rice's David Bailiff, the conference's highest-paid coach, who made $903,000. Even MacLeod admitted the loss of revenue was a concern, saying "one of our major roles is to find as much funding as you can, and there's never enough."

Could cord-cutting and other issues eventually negatively impact the more powerful Power 5 conferences? In theory, absolutely.

If ESPN continues to lose subscribers at its current rate, it might have no choice but to pass on expensive college rights given its billions of dollars of overhead for NFL and NBA media rights. The company has already made small cost-saving measures like last week's layoffs, but if it wants to save significant money, it'll have to reevaluate its right-securing process. Live sports television has long been considered the antidote to cord-cutting, but any time even a non-sports fan drops cable, ESPN feels it.

If ESPN isn't as interested or as aggressive as it has been, it lowers the demand and likely reduces the cost of the rights. That'll mean less TV money for university athletic departments to bankroll new facilities, $5 million coaching salaries and other major rising expenses. It should come as no surprise that 13 of the 20 highest-paid football coaches reside in the SEC and Big Ten, the two conferences that receive by far the most TV money.

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That would likely be years off, though, as the next Power 5 conference to hit the market again, the Big Ten, won't do so until 2022-23. The SEC (2033-34) and the ACC (2035-36) are locked into deals for nearly two more decades. Even if it wanted to, ESPN can't get out of those long-term contracts.

The Big Ten should be an interesting bellwether for an evolving market. When it agreed to a deal in 2016, media observers believed ESPN might not bid on the rights given its shrinking distribution. ESPN ultimately decided to pay an average of $190 million annually but for a lesser package after reportedly bidding low on the initial package that went to FOX. Given the way the industry has changed so quickly, ESPN could be in a significantly different place, for better or worse, when the Big Ten's rights come up for bidding again.

Adam Gajo, the sports business analyst for SNL Kagan, doesn't expect demand to crater, though.

"Growth may slow a bit, depending on a number of factors, but the values will continue to grow, especially for top tier programming like the Power 5 conference rights," Gajo said. "As the rights continue to increase, they may continue to be shared by multiple networks."

Each Power 5 conference could be impacted by the trends differently. The Pac-12, which has retained ownership in its conference network, could be well-positioned if over-the-top platforms like Sling TV keep growing. The Pac-12 has had major problems with distribution, leading athletic directors to grumble about less revenue compared to other conferences, but the Pac-12 isn't as tied to the cable subscription model as many of its peers. Still, the demand for the Pac-12 channels in an a la carte model would likely be significantly less -- meaning it'd have to charge less -- than its Power 5 conference peers.

The ACC, teamed with ESPN, is slated to get its linear network in 2019 though there are questions about whether that will come to fruition given the current landscape. The conference has publicly been optimistic about its upcoming network, but there are those in the industry who believe it may have waited too long to launch. No one expects there to be as much demand for an ACC Network as there was for the SEC Network when it launched in 2014. ESPN could decide there isn't enough demand to create an ACC Network channel which would limit revenue growth for the conference's schools. A more optimistic outlook is the ACC Network could take a spot on ESPN's lineup currently held by ESPNU, ESPNClassic or ESPNNews.

If not the Big Ten, the SEC could be in the most stable position. It is already generating huge money from TV -- the league listed $420 million in revenue from TV, radio rights in its 2016 filings -- and can always bank on a large, passionate fanbase wanting its product. The league's deal with CBS runs out after the 2023 season and the SEC should certainly be able to get more than $55 million annually for its weekly game of the week.
The downside for the SEC is that it doesn't own a stake in its network -- ESPN maintains 100 percent ownership -- and instead agreed to split revenue at a rate believed to be less than 50-50 for the conference and its members. The SEC is the Power 5 conference most tied to ESPN given it leveraged ESPN's distribution model for massive early success rather than maintain ownership but that is still far more beneficial than detrimental at this point. The SEC Network is the strongest of the three conference networks -- its average subscriber cost is more than three times the Pac-12's -- and as long as it keeps showing football games, that doesn't figure to change.

"Even in the midst of cord-cutting, we've seen progression in revenue," said SEC commissioner Greg Sankey. "I think there's actually more good news there than there is anything that's problematic for us."

Another important factor to consider is that as the market evolves, new potential distributors will pop up. Twitter and Amazon have both shown an interest in live sports programming, signing deals to stream some of NFL's Thursday Night Football package. It's certainly conceivable that a digital operation like Amazon or YouTube could make a play for college sports rights if ESPN and other traditional companies shy away. Thus far only smaller conferences like CUSA have opted for non-traditional partnerships, largely out of necessity, though if the money and platform is good enough, eventually bigger conferences could be enticed.

The passion for college sports, and subsequent strong viewership, will always make it attractive to rights-holders. It's properties like college football that earn companies significant money through both subscription and advertising revenue. Even if ESPN, FS1 and other companies continue to see significant subscriber losses, the market for college media rights isn't going to suddenly evaporate.

"One theory out there is there is a sports bubble that is about to burst for properties, but I don't see that as being the case," said Dan Shevchik, vice president of Sports Media Advisors. "Maybe there is greater margin pressure for people who distribute the content."

A financial doomsday isn't likely for college football's premier conferences though they could be dinged. If anything, it'll be a course correction as media companies try to be more financially prudent when securing rights.

But the trends negatively impacting ESPN and other media behemoths could one day trickle down to your favorite college football team.

Just ask any fan of a Conference USA school.