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UAB, pro soccer club to share field

Professional team will begin play in 2019

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

A professional soccer team will begin playing early next year on the BBVA Compass Soccer Field at the University of Alabama at Birmingham as part of an eight-year lease approved by UA System trustees on Friday.

"From the start, it seemed like the situation was going to be win-win for the city, win-win for our students, and win-win for UAB as a whole," said Ron Gray, UA System board president pro tempore. "And we are really excited about the partnership."

The initial lease will be for eight years with an annual payment by Birmingham FC LLC of $350,000. There are no renewal options included, and Birmingham FC has the option of terminating the lease after the fifth year with a fee of $1 million.

"We are just thrilled about this project on a couple of levels," said Jay Heaps, Birmingham Legion FC president. "We start with the stadium, then we are going to build a winner."

The Birmingham Legion FC pro team, which will share space on the field with the UAB collegiate teams, is expected to start playing in 2019.

UAB's teams will get schedule priority in the fall during collegiate season, said Allen Bolton, UAB vice president of financial affairs and administration. The club will get schedule priority in early part of the year during its season.

Bolton said the agreement will mean the field will get use year-round.

While the lease does not include renewal provisions, Bolton said the university would be open to discussions. Bolton acknowledged the club might outgrow the space in the next eight years.

In November 2017, the board approved UAB's plans to expand the soccer complex to accommodate the field's use by the club. UAB agreed to increase the seating capacity to 4,500-5,000 and add additional restrooms and concession stands.

The board on Friday authorized a construction contract with Duncan Thomas Construction Services of Birmingham for the next phase of the $7.1 million BBVA Compass Soccer Field project. The phase includes the grandstand, scoreboard, press box, restrooms and concessions.

Construction is expected to begin within 30-60 days following approval of the contract, Bolton said. Work would be completed in time for the club to begin play early next year.
UA System approves several projects

Construction-related items fill meeting

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

BIRMINGHAM — The University of Alabama System board of trustees on Friday approved a series of construction-related items, including an expansion at UA's nursing college building and a recruiting lounge in the Mal Moore Athletic Facility.

The board approved the projects at its regular February meeting.

The plans for the nursing school, designed to meet growing student demand, call for a $17.8 million addition to the west side of the building on University Boulevard. The three-story addition will add 32,000 square feet and include classroom, study areas, labs, examination rooms, dining, and office and conference space.

The university waived the consultant selection process to choose TurnerBatson Architects of Birmingham, which designed the existing seven-year-old nursing
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The recruiting lounge will be in 7,447-square-foot renovated space on the first and second floors of the Mal Moore Athletic Facility. The lounge will primarily be used for football recruiting.

The work will include upgrading finishes, enhancing audio/visual systems, new lighting, and new graphics and furniture. The preliminary budget is $2 million. The project will be funded with Crimson Tide Foundation funds. Davis Architects of Birmingham will design the renovation.

The university waived the consultant selection process to choose Davis Architects of Birmingham for the project.

Other action by the board of trustees:
- Authorized construction contract with Bailey-Harris Construction Co. of Auburn for the $22 million parking deck project at the corner of Second Avenue and Paul W. Bryant Drive.
- Approved executing construction contract with Bailey-Harris Construction Co. of Auburn for the $35.0 million renovation of University Hall, the former Bryce women's admission center.
- Approved architectural designs for $3.1 million, 6,000-square-foot addition to the Alpha Gamma Delta sorority house.
- Revised the scope of the aquatic center renovation and increased the budget by $6 million to $21 million to convert the existing indoor natatorium 25-meter pool to an outdoor facility.
- Approved negotiating an architectural agreement with Studio Z Design of Birmingham and Payne Design Group of Montgomery for the $9.4 million renovation of a series of buildings on the old Partlow campus for use by non-academic service departments.
- Approved preliminary plans for a $4.9 million project to renovate 10,458 square feet of the northeast medical building on the former Bryce Hospital campus for use by the Alabama Life Research Institute.
- Approved changing the name of the Culverhouse College of Commerce and Business Administration to the Culverhouse College of Business.
- Approved a revised budget of $1.75 million for the expansion of the central utility systems based on low bids. Authorized executing a construction contract with Russo Corporation of Birmingham for the project.
- Approved designs for the new track and field facility along 11th Street South.
- Authorized negotiating consultant agreements with architecture firm Goodwyn Mills & Cawood of Birmingham, geotechnical firm Bhate Geosciences of Birmingham and commissioning firm Environmental Systems Corp. of Huntsville for the new $60 million residence and dining hall.
- Approved preliminary plans for a $3 million renovation of the third and fourth floors of Roberts Hall and increased the budget by $700,000 to $5 million for asbestos abatement.

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The Tuscaloosa News
Friday, February 9, 2018

UA nursing school poised to expand

Pool of potential students outstrips building's capacity

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

BIRMINGHAM — The University of Alabama System board of trustees on Friday will consider a proposal to expand UA's nursing college building, a proposal propelled by a demand for space in the seven-year-old structure that outstrips capacity.

"The state of Alabama needs more nurses," said Suzanne Prevost, dean of the Capstone College of Nursing. "We have hundreds of students every semester who want to be nurses."

The pool of students interested in the program exceeds the college's capacity in its currently building, Prevost said Thursday.

Preliminary plans for a $17.8 million addition to the west side of the building on University Boulevard were approved by the board's Physical Properties Committee on Thursday.

The three-story addition will add 32,000 square feet and include classroom, study areas, labs, examination rooms, and office and conference space.

"We need a lot of office space," Prevost said.

The project would also add a dining venue for students in the building.

Funding for the project would be divided between gifts and university funds. Fundraising will provide $17.5 million of the cost with the rest coming from university funds.

UA is proposing waiving the consultant selection process to choose Turner-Batson Architects of Birmingham to design the addition. The firm designed the existing nursing building, which was constructed with a future expansion in mind, said Mike Lanier with HOAR Program Management.

The Physical Properties Committee also approved a proposal to revise the scope of Lakeside Dining renovation, to add new kitchen and dishwashing equipment and a 50-seat Latin-inspired street taco venue. The budget for the project would increase by $2.5 million to $7 million.

The trustees approved revising the scope of the latest phase of the east University Boulevard improvements to re-introduce work between McFarland Boulevard and Helen Keller Boulevard that was previously deferred. The budget would increase by $3 million to $16.5 million.

INSIDE

UA System trustees look at proposal for a new Alabama football recruiting lounge, C3

The committee also gave preliminary approval to the architectural designs for a $3.1 million addition to the Alpha Gamma Delta sorority house. The three-story addition to the 2012 house will add 6,000 square feet for more dining space and bedrooms.
New UA football recruiting lounge proposed

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

BIRMINGHAM — The University of Alabama System board of trustees will consider plans for a new recruiting lounge in the Mal Moore Athletic Facility when it meets Friday.

The new recruiting lounge, along with proposed revisions to the plans for the UA Aquatic Center renovation, were part of a series of construction items unanimously approved by the board’s Physical Properties Committee on Thursday.

“Nobody wants to tell Nick Saban no?” committee Chairman James Wilson III joked and the proposal for the lounge was quickly approved.

The plans for the recruiting lounge call for the renovation of 7,447-square-feet of the first and second floors of the Mal Moore Athletic Facility.

The lounge will primarily be used for football recruiting, according to Tim Leopard, associate vice president for construction.

The work will include upgrading finishes, enhancing audio/visual systems, and new graphics and furniture. The project will also address approximately $680,000 in deferred maintenance cost by replacing old lighting and finishes.

The preliminary budget is $2 million. The project will be funded with Crimson Tide Foundation funds. Davis Architects of Birmingham will design the renovation.

The lounge will include a showcase space to display the recent accomplishments of student athletes and alumni, according to the presentations.

The committee approved waiving the consultant selection process to choose Davis Architects of Birmingham for the project.

The plans for the aquatic center renovation were revised to include converting the existing indoor natatorium 25-meter pool to an outdoor facility. The proposed changes would increase the budget by $6 million to $21 million.

Mike Lanier with HOAR Program Management said the outdoor pool would be heated. It will be used as a warm-up pool for competitions as well as training.

As part of the planned changes, more landscaping would be added to screen the pool.
Jones' funding hit new heights

New senator's $22M in funds raised an all-time high in Alabama

Paul Gattis pgattis@al.com

Democrat Doug Jones was the underdog candidate from the underdog political party in the 2017 U.S. Senate special election who pulled the upset in defeating Republican Roy Moore.

At least, that was the perception.

The reality, largely unknown at the time, was that Jones was winning all along — at least when it came to fundraising.

No political candidate in state history is believed to have done what Jones did in his eight-month campaign. Jones, the former U.S. attorney, raised more than $22 million.

That's more money than any Alabama candidate is believed to have ever raised.

"There were no toys we could not afford," Wade Perry, Jones' campaign manager, told AL.com this week.

SEE JONES, A6
The final campaign finance numbers recently became available on the Federal Election Commission website, revealing Jones as a fundraising juggernaut who simply overwhelmed his competition when it came to money.

The result, of course, was a narrow victory over Moore in the Dec. 12 general election in the race to fill the seat vacated by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

How much money is $22 million? Not only is it unprecedented but it was about twice as much as Moore and Luther Strange — who held the Senate seat until the special election and lost to Moore in the GOP runoff — combined to raise.

"My jaw drops, my knees buckle," said Jess Brown, retired political scientist from Athens State University and a longtime state political observer.

Altogether, it is believed to make the Senate race the most expensive political race in state history in the context of money raised — and spent — by the candidates with well more than $32 million raised and spent.

According to FEC reports filed by the candidates, Jones raised $21.9 million in the reporting period between the start of his campaign on May 8, 2017, and Jan. 1, 2018.

Moore raised $6.3 million and Strange raised $5 million.

"For an Alabama race in a special election for an underdog candidate in the decidedly weaker of the two political parties, that’s a lot of money," Brown said of Jones.

Alabama, of course, has seen some prolific political fundraisers. Bob Riley raised more than $13 million in his successful 2002 campaign for governor. Riley defeated Gov. Don Siegelman, who raised almost $8 million himself.

Former Gov. Robert Bentley raised about $8 million when he won office in 2010.

U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby reported raising about $4.2 million in winning re-election in 2016 against an underfunded opponent, $6 million in 2010 and $8 million in 2004. Shelby reported at the end of 2017 having $9.9 million in cash on hand in his campaign war chest.


Perry said he believed Jones’ campaign received contributions from people in all 50 states.

"Early on, we started getting once a week, we would get an envelope, I believe the woman was from New Mexico, for like $4.35," he said. "But every time, it was addressed to 'Doug Jones for Jeff Sessions' Senate seat.' I never talked to the lady but, literally, it looked like she took whatever she had left over at the end of the week and sent it to us. Sometimes it was quarters and pennies."
Indeed, of the $22 million Jones raised, more than half came in small contributions. According to the FEC reports, more than $13 million was classified as “unitemized.” Contributions of less than $200 for an election cycle do not have to be itemized — which means that more than half of Jones’ support came in those small contributions.

“It still amazes me,” Perry said of the fundraising success. “But what’s really traditional fundraising is a candidate on the phone begging folks for $2,700 (the maximum allowed for an individual) or a $1,000 or begging PACs for $5,000.

“This was different in the way it was raised. This was primarily online fundraising from around the country. It was individuals donating $10 and $20 at a time all over the country.”

The circumstances of the race, of course, helped create that unique dynamic.

First, it was a special election. And as a race out of the regular election cycle, it was the most high-profile race in the country at that time.

Second, there was Jones’ opponent. Just as Moore’s supporters stood firm in their backing, opponents could be just as firm. Then there were the sexual misconduct allegations made against Moore about a month before the election, which Moore has repeatedly denied.

“The upside for Jones and raising money, it was a special election,” Brown said. “A lot of money, or some money, could be poured in from out of state to help him that if you were in a regular election cycle with other senate contests, that money would have gone somewhere else.

“The Alabama special election for Senate gained national attention. There were probably a lot of people, like in the fall of 2016, that ultimately gave money to Donald Trump to defeat Hillary Clinton. I imagine there was money sent to Doug Jones simply because he was running against Judge Roy Moore.”

The money at Jones’ disposal made running his campaign almost like a dream for Perry.

“Everything you’ve always wanted to do in a campaign, we were able to do,” he said.

What does that look like?

“It allowed us to do a historic job of getting the vote out on election day,” Perry said. “And, of course, it wasn’t just election day. It was the weeks and months leading up to election date to have field staffers and folks to lead the volunteers. We knocked on 350,000 doors in the final six weeks of the campaign. We had money to have regional offices around the state. We didn’t have to worry about our paychecks.

“But I think on election day, in addition to the volunteers — we had something like 7,500 volunteers around the state making phone calls and knocking on doors. But we also had darn near 800 paid staffers out going to voters we had identified as Doug Jones voters, knocking on their door, asking if they had voted, do you need a ride?”

It also perhaps signals that Jones’ victory was not a fluke and speculation he will lose re-election to a Republican in 2020 in a ruby-red Republican state is not a given.

“It’s a credit to the kind of candidate Doug was and the message that he had, that it resonated with folks all over the country,” Perry said. “We’re very proud to have had that much support from that many people and, further, to have been able to have done it with real people.”
LEGISLATURE

Education spending plan advances

Mike Cason
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A proposed budget that would boost education spending by about 3 percent next year, fund a pay raise for employees and expand the state's acclaimed prekindergarten program advanced Wednesday in the Alabama House of Representatives.

The Ways and Means Education Committee approved the budget and related bills with little discussion and no opposition one day after holding a public hearing.

The plan would increase spending from the Education Trust Fund by $216 million, to $6.6 billion, returning to about the same levels as before the 2007-09 recession forced deep cuts.

Employees in K-12 and two-year colleges would receive a 2.5 percent cost of living raise, their second raise in three years and third in the last decade.

K-12 schools will receive more money for classroom materials, technology, library enhancements, transportation and school nurses.

Rep. Bill Poole, R-Tuscaloosa, chairman of the committee, said it was important to invest more in personnel as well as operational costs for K-12 schools.

The state's two-year colleges and four-year universities will also receive an increase.

"I think this is a very positive budget across the board on every level," Poole said.

Poole said he expects the House to consider the budget next week, probably on Thursday.

The plan would allocate 69 percent of the money from the ETF to K-12, 25 percent to higher education and 6 percent to other purposes, according to the spreadsheet. Those percentages are the same as recent years.

Funding for the state's First Class prekindergarten program would be increased from $77 million to $97 million.

That would fund an additional 142 classrooms serving about 2,556 students, said Jeana Ross, secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education.

Alabama's First Class program is annually recognized for its quality in areas such as teacher education requirements, learning and development standards and class sizes.

This year, about 28 percent of 4-year-olds in the state had access to the program, according to the Alabama School Readiness Alliance, which promotes expansion of prekindergarten.
Education budget includes teacher raise

Legislation approved by House Ways and Means Education Committee

The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — Teachers and school employees could get a 2.5 percent pay raise later this year, under legislation approved Wednesday by the House education budget committee.

The House Ways and Means Education Committee approved the raise, which is popular with members of both parties, with little discussion. Committee members also approved an education budget that contains a $20 million expansion of the state's voluntary prekindergarten program. Currently, about 28 percent of eligible 4-year-olds attend.

Education employees at both public K-12 schools and two-year postsecondary institutions would receive the proposed raise. Educators last received a cost-of-living adjustment in 2016.

"This is a very positive budget for education across the board on every level," said Ways and Means Chairman Bill Poole.

Education funding has rebounded to prerecession levels, giving lawmakers an additional $200 million to spend in the proposed budget for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1. The proposed budget would also fund an expansion of the state's voluntary prekindergarten program.

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Tours home of world-famous Tuskegee Airmen

William Thornton  wthornton@al.com

Italy gave the Tuskegee Airmen a home. Now an Italian corporation hopes to make its home in Alabama for what could be a transformational project.

Italian ambassador Armando Varricchio visited Moton Field in Tuskegee on Monday, touring the training home of the celebrated World War II fighter pilots.

Along with Varricchio was William Lynn III, CEO of Leonardo DRS, the North American arm of the Italian aeronautics and defense contractor.

The company plans to build the T-100 trainer jet for the U.S. Air Force at Tuskegee. But that's if the U.S. Air Force awards the contract for the project. Company officials believe that decision will come this summer.

Tuskegee surpassed — or perhaps flew over — many competitors to get to this point. The Macon County city beat out 142 sites for consideration, and one big factor was the history of the Tuskegee Airmen, who made their base in Italy during the Second World War.

Varricchio, who had never before visited Alabama, later had dinner with Gov. Kay Ivey in Montgomery. He came away impressed by Tuskegee, saying it is “perfectly matched and equipped to host a state-of-the-art new facility.”

He also praised local and state officials for their “determination, readiness and eagerness in building on the historic tradition of bonds between Italy and this part of the United States.”

State and local officials for more than a year have stressed the importance of the Leonardo project to Macon County and the region. The company plans a manufacturing facility with 750 workers at Moton Field with an initial investment of $200 million to $250 million. The company would build 350 of the jets over an estimated 20 years. The jet would replace a 50-year-old trainer jet now in use.

As with some of the state's other automotive and aerospace projects, the potential for supplier jobs is also great.

Joe Turnham, director of the Macon County Economic Development Authority, said a fully operational Leonardo plant in Tuskegee would translate, in about five to 10 years, into adding about $303 million to the county's GDP. For a Black Belt county with a population of around 20,000 and a poverty rate of about 30 percent, the effect can't be overstated.

But Varricchio said the importance for Italy is also crucial, given Leonardo's profile there.

"Leonardo DRS is one of the largest companies (in Italy) and very engaged in research and development," he said. "Working for the U.S. Air Force for my country would be very important. We are strong partners, we are strong allies in many fields, and we are engaged in many important operations overseas, and being able to share technology and new products is very important."

Lynn said getting the contract and locating in Tuskegee would be “game-changing” for his company.

"It establishes us at a new level and a different sphere," Lynn said. "We have a training aircraft that’s been in the international market, but bringing it here would expand and solidify our role. To bring that technology here would be fabulous."

In December, the Air Force decided to locate the new F-35A fighter jet program in Montgomery. Lynn said that decision “can’t be a negative” for Tuskegee's chances. For example, the T-100 trainer jet is already used to train Israeli pilots on their version of the F-35.

"We have already proved we can do the mission that the U.S. Air Force intends for this aircraft," he said.

Turnham said the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce and the City of Auburn have also thrown their support behind the Leonardo project. Winning the project would see a transformation to Moton Field, increasing the size of the runway and creating an adjoining aerospace park.

Tuskegee Mayor Tony Haygood said the project would allow the community to draw not only on the example of the Tuskegee Airmen, but on the heritage of Tuskegee University and the figures who have written the county's history.

"It could immediately launch us from a community that’s challenged economically, but thriving and setting an example and bringing others along," he said. "It’s always been a story of Tuskegee doing what couldn’t be done. If you tell us what needs to be done, and give us a fair chance, we’ll do what needs to be done."
The Birmingham News
Wednesday, February 7, 2018

Charles Barkley says he lost $4 million investment with lawyer Donald Watkins

By: Kent Faulk

Former NBA star Charles Barkley says he invested more than $4 million over the past decade in companies controlled by his friend, Alabama lawyer Donald V. Watkins Sr., but never got a dime back.

Barkley made the statements during a deposition in November as part of the U.S. Security Exchange Commission's 2016 civil lawsuit that claims Watkins defrauded investors, including current or former professional athletes. The SEC hasn't named the investors. Barkley's deposition wasn't placed into the online federal court file until Jan. 26.

Barkley said he invested in Watkins' companies because he trusted him.

"But the bottom line is I haven't gotten a dime back and we are proceeding -- this thing has been a shock to my system to be honest with you," Barkley stated. "I consider that Donald has always been a friend to me and this whole situation is really unfortunate. Because I've lost a lot of money," according to a transcript of his deposition.

Barkley declined comment for this story.

The SEC lawsuit claims Watkins spent much of investors' money on personal expenses, including on his girlfriend, alimony, past due taxes and credit card bills, according to a SEC press release and complaint. Here is the SEC civil complaint.

The complaint alleges that between 2009 and 2014 Watkins and his companies Watkins Pencor and Masada Resource Group, LLC fraudulently raised more than $6 million in investments related to those two companies' waste-to-energy conversion ventures.

Watkins and his companies misrepresented that the money would be used to fund the Masada ventures and would share in a percentage of the profits from the companies, the SEC stated. Investors also were misled that Waste Management Inc. was in the process of buying Watkins Pencor, Masada and its affiliates. Watkins told at least one investor that the sale would be in the range of $2 billion to $5 billion, the SEC stated.

Watkins, the banker and former attorney for Birmingham Mayor Richard Arrington and former HealthSouth CEO Richard Scrushy, issued a statement to AL.com Monday night regarding the deposition.

"On November 10, 2017, Mr. Barkley gave a deposition in the SEC case that was favorable to me and the other defendants. The deposition clarified earlier statements made by Barkley in an October 19, 2017, Declaration that was prepared by SEC attorneys and given to him to sign with no one present, except SEC lawyers," Watkins stated.

Watkins stated that Barkley and his financial advisor firm "conferred upon me in writing the power and authority to undertake every category of financial transactions that the SEC now challenges in its case. Also, Barkley's long-time financial advisor "was kept in the loop on the background information, terms and conditions, and proper documentation for the loans in question."
"The SEC has never publicly mentioned the prominent role of Mr. Barkley's financial advisor, or this advisor’s many dealings with me. To the contrary, the SEC has gone out of its way to falsely portray Mr. Barkley as a former professional athlete who was 'duped' by me. In truth, Mr. Barkley is an 'accredited investor', brilliant businessman, and personal friend and business partner of mine."

Barkley's deposition, however, didn't entirely put Watkins in a good light.

"When I signed that declaration (to the SEC), it was explained to me -- and I stick by it -- that the money that I gave Donald was for our business to grow, not any other personal, family friends, anything, and I stick by that," Barkley stated.

Barkley stated he wanted to move on with his life. "This is a waste of my time. I feel angry, mad, disappointed that I'm even in this situation." He said he just wants "this thing" to be over one way or another.

"If Donald did something wrong, that's on him. I got no control. I'm getting hit by friendly fire. I have done absolutely nothing wrong but invest and trust a friend," Barkley stated.

Barkley talked about information he learned from the SEC. At several points after the initial investment Watkins had come back to him for loans to help the companies, totaling millions, according to the deposition.

"There was -- every time I sent Donald a million dollars, it was gone the next day. And the SEC had -- I would send Donald a million dollars (and) 95 percent of it was spent the next day. I saw e-mails between Donald and his son saying we've got to get some more money from Barkley or the Barkley money came in, pay this bill, pay this bill, pay this bill."

Barkley acknowledged that his investment in Pencor and Masada involved a high degree of risk and was for people who could bear the loss of their entire investment. Those statements were in investor documents, but he doesn't recall reviewing them before signing.

Barkley also talked about how Watkins approached him about the investment.

"I think he said, hey, listen, I'm keeping this thing close to the vest. I'm letting close friends of mine buy in for a little more because I don't want it spread out with a bunch of people and would you want to invest more. I said 'you know what, Donald. I like you. I trust you.' So that's how it pretty much came to fruition," Barkley stated.

Barkley said he didn't know "why this thing didn't work."

Barkley said his first initial investment and conversation with Watkins involved an investment in an cargo company, Barkley said.

In 2008, pension funds for public works and public safety employees in Detroit sued Watkins after his air cargo company, TradeWinds Airlines, went bankrupt. Watkins had persuaded the pension funds to loan $30 million to the company, the lawsuit said. Watkins later agreed to a $4.25 million settlement with two pension funds in Detroit.

Barkley said he is no longer involved in investments with Watkins.
"Over the years, Donald has, say, moved the money around and put it under a different umbrella. And to be honest with you, I have pretty much proceeded like I'm never going to get any of this money back. Because it went from the thing in Detroit, to Masada, to Nabirm (an oil company)."

"But I haven't given him any more money," Barkley said.

He said he didn't want to be "bad-mouthing" Watkins. "Donald's always been a friend. But this thing is not looking good for him because, like I say, the proof is in the pudding. I've got over $4 million into this situation. This thing started in 2007. Most -- even my worst investments don't take 10 years to come to fruition."

While he calls Watkins a friend, Barkley said he is not sure now.

Barkley, who is from Leeds, said he met Watkins in Alabama, and at some point, became friends. Watkins had attended some of his charitable events, he said.

"So you do consider him a friend?" asked Watkins' attorney.

"That's a loaded question right now," Barkley replied.

Barkley stated he now tends to believe the SEC's allegations.

"And I have met with the SEC. I have talked to Donald. And I'm leaning toward believing the SEC to be honest with you because, number one, they showed me some things that really disturbed me," Barkley stated. "But also the bottom line is I've given Donald close to $6 million."

Watkins stated in a declaration in the lawsuit that "during the 2010 to 2013 period in which the SEC claims the defendants committed fraud against Barkley, DVWPC (Donald V. Watkins P.C.) brought in more than $7 million. This amount includes several million in legal fees."

A federal judge in Georgia recently tossed out Watkins' 2015 lawsuit against the SEC that had attempted to thwart the investigation, according to an Atlanta Journal Constitution story. That story also says Bryan Thomas, a former New York Jets linebacker who played college ball at the University of Alabama at Birmingham was apparently one of those also bilked.

Trust

Barkley said his investments with Watkins were just based on his friendship, and not e-mails and other documents. He said he just told his financial advisor to make the investment and he did.

Barkley said he gets 100 of investment offers presented each week to his office. "And we look at all of them and we probably look at five of them in the long run. But I get 100 proposals from all over the country, all over the world every week. And some of them have been great. Some of them have been pretty good. Some of them have been a disaster. But you always take a chance if you trust the people."

"My biggest concern is that Donald did not use the money to make the business grow. That's my biggest concern. If he made the -- tried to make the business grow and the investment didn't work, that's fine," Barkley stated.

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Watkin's lawyer asked if overall the business did grow because of other actions Watkins took, how would that change his opinion?

"It would be totally different," Barkley responded.

"I'm not here to bury Donald. I just hope the things that I hear aren't true. If they are, it's unfortunate. It's unfortunate I lost my money too. That's a lot of money. But like I say, man, I just -- this thing has been stressful and it's unfortunate."

FDIC

Meanwhile, Watkins also is fighting civil charges filed by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation involving his capacity at Alamerica Bank, a bank that he co-founded and is the largest shareholder.

The charges involve practices regarding loans that were unsafe or unsound and breaches his fiduciary duty to the bank, according to the charges. The FDIC on Dec. 15 filed the charges, saying Watkins had received financial gain or benefit from four loans in which as an officer he did not report to the bank in violation of banking rules.

One of the loans noted by the FDIC involved a $101,000 loan in 2010 to a close friend of Watkins. The name of the friend is primarily blacked out on the FDIC document with only the first and last letters of the name visible - R.A. Jr.

That loan was beyond the statute of limitations for the charges, the FDIC noted.

Watkins believes political motives are behind the FDIC charges.

"The FDIC matter at issue first arose in 2013 after I began to publicly criticize former governor Robert Bentley for his misconduct in office," Watkins stated. "Bentley, using his executive powers and influence over the State Banking Department, encouraged state and federal regulators to place Alamerica Bank and me under heightened scrutiny. For political reasons, federal regulators have taken the lead in trying to run me out of the banking business."

"The FDIC made trumped-up allegations against me that have zero merit. I disputed these allegations in 2013 and they are disputed now. At some point, these allegations will be heard in an administrative proceeding."

"I have already filed a formal answer to the allegations which denies all of the charges and asserts my affirmative defenses. I am highly confident that we will prevail in this dispute," Watkins stated.

"In making its unfounded allegations, the FDIC has refused to recognize well-known, codified exceptions to the general regulation it seeks to enforce in my case. My conduct is expressly covered and permitted by the published exceptions to this general regulation," Watkins stated.

The FDIC has never lifted a finger to help Alamerica Bank, or me. To the contrary, the FDIC has placed Alamerica Bank and me under a level of scrutiny that it would never imposed upon my white counterparts in the banking industry. Furthermore, the FDIC has tried every regulatory trick in the book to deliberately "fail" or "collapse" Alamerica Bank. Fortunately for the banking public and me, the FDIC has been unsuccessful in these improper efforts.
Alamerica Bank made it through the Recession without seeking or receiving any federal bailout money. Today, Alamerica is profitable and enjoys one of the highest Tier 1 capital ratios of any bank in Alabama."
New jobs come into tight labor market

High pay could lure workers from other sectors

By Marian Accardi
The Decatur Daily

DECATUR — Toyota-Mazda and Bocar plan new plants in north Alabama as jobless rates hover at 3.5 percent statewide and even lower in some places, but the state's top labor official believes recruiting should be successful for these high-paying, high-demand jobs.

"High-wage, high-skill jobs usually recruit well, despite low unemployment rates," Alabama Labor Department Secretary Fitzgerald Washington said. "These jobs will have high wages and good benefits. Employees from other sectors will likely be willing to shift into new industries if necessary in order to reap these benefits."

Toyota and Mazda announced last month they will invest $1.6 billion in a joint venture to build Toyota Corollas and a new Mazda crossover, with the plants expected to employ about 4,000 people, at an average salary of $50,000, not including benefits. A timeline shows operations to start in 2021.

And Bocar, an automotive supplier, last year announced its plans for a $115 million plant, creating about 300 jobs. At full production, the Germany-based company expects to have at least 305 full-time equivalent employees, earning an average hourly salary of at least $19.05, not counting fringe benefits. Construction at that facility is scheduled to start this spring.

Despite the low unemployment rates, "there are still tens of thousands of Alabamians without jobs, and even more who are underemployed," Washington said. "Some of the underemployed may simply need training or may already be trained but working at an unrelated job and would like to move into another industry."

Alabama Industrial Development and Training, an independent agency under the supervision and oversight of the secretary of commerce,
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has committed to help recruit, screen and train employees for the Toyota-Mazda plant, as part of an incentives package for Toyota-Mazda. The state's Labor Department provides tuition assistance, apprenticeship programs and on-the-job training to job hunters through its 49 one-stop career centers across the state, Washington said.

When estimating available labor force, you have to look at both unemployed and underemployed workers in the area, said Ahmad Ijaz, the executive director and director of economic forecasting in the University of Alabama's Center for Business and Economic Research. Even though the number of unemployed in Limestone County, for example, is 1,274, the number of underemployed — people who are working part time but would like a full-time job, and people who aren't satisfied with their current jobs — is much higher, he said.

"The number of underemployed and available labor force for Limestone is 11,456," he said.

Success in economic development does bring its challenges.

Brooks Kracke, president and CEO of the North Alabama Industrial Development Association, has heard that some 20,000 people across north Alabama and southern counties in Tennessee may be applying for the Toyota-Mazda openings.

And, as people apply for jobs at Toyota-Mazda and other new operations, seeking better pay, benefits and schedules, "that leaves existing industry with openings they have to backfill," Kracke said.

"That's not just an issue for north Alabama and the state, but across the nation as new companies move in.

"It's part of the evolution of growth," he said.

While located in Limestone County, the plants will need to draw workers from Morgan County, where industrial developer Jeremy Nails said recruiters will have to concentrate on secondary and post-secondary graduates, plus people who are underemployed.

"Given the ramp-up to production at Toyota-Mazda," Nails said, "we have time to be strategic with our various partners in our talent recruitment and retention efforts and prepare for these new jobs becoming available."

The challenges are not just in Limestone and Morgan counties.

Dale Greer, director of the Cullman Economic Development Agency, said he remembers when, in the 1970s, Cullman faced a 22 percent jobless rate. Cullman County is now home to three top-tier automotive suppliers that employ more than 2,000 people, and a grand opening last week was held for Sequence Health's new medical call center, which is expected to bring in 128 employees over the next several years.

"It's a lot more fun to be at (a jobless rate of) 2.8 percent," he said.
Every year at this time, I like to look back at what I accomplished in the preceding year regarding our economy and the status of our state’s job market. I’m proud to say that 2017 was a record-setting year for the Alabama Department of Labor in many ways.

For many years, we talked about reaching a milestone -- a milestone that would mean Alabama was as close to what is known as “full employment” as it could be. You’d be hard-pressed to get any economist to give you a figure for an unemployment rate that defines full employment (mainly because of the many varying factors used in determining that rate), but it’s a little easier to determine full employment based on the number of jobs an economy is supporting.

Here in Alabama, that magic number is 2 million jobs. If our employers can support 2 million jobs, most will agree that we’re in a really good place. In fact, until last year, Alabama had only supported 2 million or more jobs for five months, way back in 2007, well before the Great Recession. So, for nearly 10 long years, that milestone was just a little glimmer, always seemingly out of reach -- until April 2017. In that month, our wage and salary employment (the number of jobs our economy is supporting, measured by employers’ payroll), reached 2,001,500. The milestone was now a reality. And we didn’t stop there. For every month that followed, our economy supported more than 2 million jobs, ending with December’s count of 2,023,100, the third highest in Alabama’s history. The highest was the month before, in November.

I can’t stress how important reaching this milestone is. It means our economy is strong enough to employ a record number of workers. At the beginning of 2017, I said I hoped to surpass economists’ predictions regarding the number of jobs our economy would add last year. We were predicted to add 18,700 jobs last year, and we added 32,500.

Along with this record-setting jobs number, our unemployment rate set record after record last year. In September, we tied our previous record low unemployment rate of 3.8 percent. Then, in October, we beat it, dropping to 3.6 percent. In November, it fell to a record 3.5 percent, which we maintained in December. In December, 75,698 people were counted as unemployed, the fewest ever recorded. Additionally, 2,093,063 people were counted as employed, the most ever recorded. People are working in Alabama at higher rates than ever before. Right now, you may be thinking: All that’s great, Fitzgerald. But what kind of jobs are they? Are they quality jobs? Let me answer that -- Yes, they are quality jobs. For example, one of our largest growth sectors in 2017 was manufacturing, with an annual gain of 5,800 jobs. Alabama had 266,000 manufacturing jobs in December 2017, the most recorded all year, and the most in nearly a decade. The average weekly earnings for those jobs is $1,049.33, up $64.12 a week from a year ago. The average hourly wage is $24.46, which is also up from last year.

Our construction employment, also a large growth sector, was up 4,400 over the year. Construction employment has always been an indicator of economic health. Wages in this sector also increased, with average weekly earnings rising to $954.30, up $64.07 a week from last year, with an average hourly wage of $23.68. Every industry that experienced growth in 2017 also showed wage growth. Statewide, workers saw their average weekly earnings rise by more than $30, over all industries.

The good news continues regarding our payments for unemployment compensation benefits. As our unemployment rate continued its decline, so did our initial claims. In 2017, Alabamians filed the least number of initial claims since 1973. Of those receiving benefits, most are doing so for less than 14 weeks, compared to the 99 weeks of availability during the Great Recession. Last year, I promised to work to keep 2017’s yearly average unemployment rate below 2016’s, which was 6.0 percent. We met that goal -- 2017’s annual average unemployment rate was 4.6 percent. Despite all the good news, we’ve experienced and records we’ve set over the past year, there is still a great deal of work to do. The 75,698 Alabamians who are unemployed would definitely agree with me, and we will not let them down. We are working closely and deliberately with Gov. Kay Ivey and her administration to make sure that those Alabamians have every opportunity to find work.

We are collaborating with other state agencies, county and municipal governments, and economic development groups to host job fairs across the state. In 2017, our regional job fair initiative drew more than 7,000 jobseekers. More than 600 employers participated in these events, including a first-ever Governor’s Disability Job Fair, held in Birmingham. We will continue to host these events in 2018, and we will focus on specific industries as well. We’re working to encourage both employers and jobseekers to participate in the state’s Apprenticeship Alabama program, which provides paid training for workers and allows employers to train their employees, resulting in long-term employment. Any Alabamian, either job seeker or employer, should visit one of our 49 career centers located throughout the state for free, personalized assistance. We offer assistance in résumé writing, interview skills, job searches, vocational and educational assistance, training programs, and more for jobseekers. For employers, we can help you post jobs, pre-screen applicants and obtain cost saving tax credits and other programs. Come out and see us. Find out more about any of our services at www.labar.gov.

Here’s to a great 2018!

Fitzgerald Washington is secretary of the Alabama Department of Labor.
Can Alabama keep its workforce pipeline flowing for new automakers?

By: Hanno van der Bijl

Over the past decade, Alabama’s automotive industry has grown at an exponential pace.

Mercedes, Honda and Hyundai have invested billions in upgrading and expanding their plants, including Mercedes’ recent $1.3 billion investment in electric vehicles and a logistics center that combined will add more than 600 jobs.

Autocar is building a $120 million plant in Center Point that will create 746 direct jobs and hundreds of supplier jobs.

Dozens of suppliers have followed the leads of those manufacturers, completing multimillion-dollar expansions of their own.

Thousands of jobs have been created – with much of the activity concentrated in Central Alabama. With Toyota and Mazda embarking on a joint manufacturing plant in Huntsville, even more jobs and suppliers are coming.

But at the same time, Alabama and states around the nation are facing severe workforce challenges across a spectrum of industries – and the rapidly evolving automotive sector is no exception.

State officials aren’t ready to say the challenge will make it difficult to fill the jobs at Toyota-Mazda or other auto assembly plants, but they acknowledge that Alabama is staring down a critical challenge at a time of tremendous opportunity.

If Alabama is proactive, experts say the state could further cement itself as a hub of the next generation of automotive manufacturing. If the state can’t address its automotive workforce needs, it could miss out on thousands of jobs and billions in additional investments.

The challenge

Industry and economic development leaders say the state, along with the rest of the country, has been caught off guard.

Over time, much of the nation’s education focus had shifted away from skilled and technical training. But the economy itself came to be driven more by advanced technology. With a greater focus on automation, electric vehicles and autonomous vehicles, that trend is expected to continue in the decades to come.

Decades of shifting away from training for trade skills has resulted in a workforce ill-equipped for today’s technologically advanced jobs. Much of the nation woke up to an economy for which its education system had not prepared it.
Alabama has earned praise from many in the economic development world for its AIDT program and its ability to address workforce needs.

"Think about it: back in '93, nobody built cars in Alabama," said Bill Taylor, former president and CEO of MBUSI and former president of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama (EDPA). "And we took a workforce that came from a lot of different backgrounds; through in-house training and AIDT and collaboration with the state, you can see the results."

The Mercedes plant has paved the way for other original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) such as Honda, Hyundai and now Autocar and Toyota-Mazda; and the Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) program Taylor cites is often credited as helping them get their start. It is regarded as one of the best of its kind in the nation, if not the world.

"Alabama’s workforce is loyal, committed, trainable and they have a solid work ethic," said Ed Castile, AIDT director and deputy secretary of commerce. "Can improvements be made? Sure."

And those improvements, experts say, are critical if Alabama wants to capitalize on its current opportunities – particularly in the automotive world.

"I think that there’s still a lot of work to be done to get that workforce at the level that we need them at," said Jason Hoff, chief executive officer of MBUSI. "I think there are certain areas of the state that are in a more challenging state than others, which I think is going to force companies to look for places where they can get the best available workforce. The people are there, the workforce is there — some of it’s training and some of it’s also getting them ready for jobs in manufacturing. I don’t want to paint a bleak picture, but I think we definitely have some challenges in front of us."

Kirk Atkinson heads up Adah International Inc., an industrial project management and engineering company in Birmingham. "Our clients’ needs," he said, "are almost always related to the lack of workforce, both skilled and unskilled."

"There are simply not enough warm bodies to train, let alone immediately fill highly skilled positions such as machine operators and maintenance technicians," Atkinson said. "Unemployment rates this low are a strain on employers," he continued. "Without a pipeline of young talent, education and dedicated to the manufacturing industry, we cannot keep up with demand."

This is a problem for the state economy, because there needs to be growth and movement within the workforce.

Right now, the state’s jobless rate is sitting at a record low level of 3.5 percent. But the state isn’t seeking a steady influx of new residents.

While state leaders are celebrating the record low rate, the reality on the front lines of the labor pool are complex.
"We have many people working in jobs that they are overqualified for, but took any job they could find in order to feed their families and pay their bills," Castile said.

There are a number of underemployed individuals across the state, and there are also many people who have exited the workforce – two factors that create challenges for hiring managers.

In some border markets, companies in neighboring states have also tapped into Alabama’s talent pool, which further thins out potential labor.

Birmingham leaders say boosting workforce participation in the area offers a chance to fill labor needs and grow the economy.

“I would rather have higher population and corresponding job growth with more people available in the workforce, which results in a higher unemployment rate — and on the surface not look as good — than to have a lower unemployment rate but it’s lower partially because we have workforce participation that is too low,” said Brian Hilson, president and CEO of the Birmingham Business Alliance.

Even with their concerns, Hilson and others say they aren’t currently worried about meeting the needs of the major automakers in the current climate. It’s the downstream suppliers and other companies in similar industries that could feel the brunt of the impact.

“I don’t really see it as a problem,” said Greg Canfield, secretary of the Alabama Department of Commerce. “It’s more like a challenge that I know we will be able to meet.”

The major companies themselves are not concerned either, because they look at other metrics such as the number of people employed in the types of jobs and the average wage rates of those jobs they are looking to fill.

“Even though the labor market is currently tight, we don’t anticipate that any of the large auto projects will have difficulty in filling the available jobs,” said Steve Sewell, EPDA executive vice president.

The auto manufacturing industry consists of a three-tier hierarchy: large OEMs, smaller parts suppliers, and then logistics and other service providers.

Since they are often located in close proximity, they all compete for the same workforce.

The large companies are able to provide more opportunities and better pay, thus attracting talented employees from the smaller suppliers and providers. These small companies are the ones who may stand to suffer most from the influx of new jobs and low unemployment numbers.

“Although it should lead to higher wages for employees, simply paying more, unfortunately, will lead to wage-wars and higher turnover,” Atkinson said.
Going back to school

While the state and nonprofit organizations seek to grapple with these problems, companies are most concerned with partnering to invest in their felt need: education and training.

The state has invested in getting the state’s workforce up to speed with AIDT, but the organization was not designed to do everything.

“AIDT is providing customized training for a specific company matching a trainee, a prospective worker with a specific job for a certain company,” Hilson said. “That’s different from workforce development and education in general where you are preparing yourself for the future world of work but not necessarily knowing what that company might be.”

To better align its educational and workforce development resources and connect employers and employees, Alabama has launched several initiatives: Apprenticeship Alabama, AlabamaWorks and 10 Regional Workforce Development Councils. In addition, several institutions have been established to keep up with new trends: the Alabama Robotics Technology Park near Decatur, AIDT’s Maritime Training Center in Mobile, and the Alabama School of Cyber and Engineering.

“I believe that our proven programs and promising new initiatives are working to position Alabama as a prime location for the technology-focused jobs that will continue to multiply in the future,” Canfield said.

Taylor feels the onus is as much on the educators and parents as it is on the industry itself to train its workers.

“Business has a key role to play in not just defining the needs, but also in-house programs to support the development of the skill-sets,” he said, “because the technology resides inside these companies—pretty hard to transfer those back into the classroom.”

For example, MBUSI is partnering with Shelton State Community College on the Mechatronics program, an apprenticeship program that provides a two-year technical degree and a job with Mercedes-Benz after graduation.

Companies, though, want to take it a step further by starting at the K-12 level. In a state with a low investment in public education and chronically low national rates, that presents some challenges.

In these programs, the companies would facilitate in the development of relevant curriculum in the schools closest to them. The schools would teach the curriculum with company experts, and the companies would provide on-the-job training, as well as a job before graduation. These programs are much more prevalent and well-established in Detroit, Germany and Japan.
Since both companies and schools often don’t have the time or resources to take on extra work, another option is to allow third-party companies to provide training that have experience in setting up such apprenticeship programs.

“The key is, ‘Don’t rest. Continue to push, continue to develop and look for programs that are gonna create those workers that you need in the future,’” Hoff said.

Key factor in decision making

As important as technical training is for Alabama’s economic well-being, the state’s success in ensuring the success of its host companies and landing future projects depends on its soft skills.

“If we can continue to have that positive working environment, where industry and government (are) working together to find solutions to issues and challenges — in this case, workforce development — then we got the right setup, and that’s the key,” Hoff said. “It’s both sides listening to each other and understanding what we need to do to fix it and improve things.”

The key factor in whether or not companies come and continue to invest in Alabama is the community of people they interact with.

“I emphasized team, because that’s so key that — not just the state but your local individuals and your local business folks — the collaboration of those individuals is so critical to land a Mercedes, a Honda, Hyundai — I’m sure the same applies up in Huntsville. So, people do make the difference,” Taylor said. “The challenge for us is to maintain the high standards that we’ve created.”
A simple letter grade does not reflect the challenges confronting our schools

Holding our public education leaders, administrators and teachers accountable is an absolute necessity. They receive our hard-earned taxpayer dollars and, in turn, have the awesome responsibility of educating our children and developing the future workforce. As members of the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama often remind our local education partners, the business community is the number one consumer of the education product. Having a high-quality public education system is fundamental to economic development and one that we, as a community, can't afford to miss on. To that end, education professionals should be challenged when student performance doesn't measure up to expectations and they should be celebrated when it does. Judging an entire school and an entire system by a single letter grade, however, as the state did for the first time last week, doesn't fairly portray what's really happening in local classrooms.

Schools and classroom teachers are confronted with more educational challenges than ever before. For example, many children are entering school lacking the basic social and behavioral skills needed for effective academic instruction, immediately exposing an in-classroom achievement gap between them and the other children who have had more early childhood development experiences. Another example is the fact that more than two dozen languages are spoken in the homes of the children in the Tuscaloosa City and County systems, with a significant number of those children first entering school with little to no understanding of the English language.

Far beyond dealing with behavioral or language barriers, though, the complex physical, mental and emotional needs of the children in local classrooms are an ever-growing challenge. When a child shows up to school hungry, like so many in our community do every single day, learning is the last thing on his or her young mind. Hundreds – yes, hundreds – of students in the Tuscaloosa City and County systems are considered homeless. Of those, it's hard to think about how many of them rarely get a good night's sleep in a warm, comfortable bed. Too many of our systems' precious children from broken homes bear witness to issues like domestic violence and drug abuse on a daily basis. Again, showing up to school under those conditions creates a barrier to learning before the bell even rings.

Those issues are the sad realities of numerous societal ills we all must face. Our educators are the ones on the front lines trying to deal with this, though, one child at a time. Many of them go above and beyond the call of duty or job description they signed up for. The individual stories of teachers and administrators becoming almost surrogate caregivers for children in need in their schools are too numerous to count. Despite that effort, however, educators are now the first to be labeled with a mediocre letter grade that sends a message to the outside world that their education system fails short of what is considered successful.

In addition to those social challenges, our educators also face a moving target of accountability from state and federal education departments. It's no secret that the Alabama Department of Education has been in a seemingly constant state of transition, if not turmoil, for the better part of two years. The seas appear to be calming under capable interim leadership, but it's just that – interim. Leadership changes, combined with legislative policies such as the new letter grade system, continually alter the metrics in which schools and systems are evaluated and you have to wonder if more modifications are on the horizon. True measurement of academic growth, which should be the intent of all such policies, is only effective when the long-term benchmarks are comparisons of apples to apples. Every central office employee, school administrator and classroom teacher must strive to do even more. But so should we. We must all commit ourselves to championing our schools and tackling the tremendous social challenges that enter the school doors each day. Let's use this as an opportunity – a call to action – to raise the bar. Our children deserve nothing less.

Jim Page is president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama.
ESPN, athletes coming to talk race

Birmingham conversations will air nationally next week

Cheryl Wray cwray@al.com

An ESPN project exploring the intersections of sports, race and culture will film "Dear Black Athlete," a series of conversations featuring prominent African-American athletes and civic and community leaders, in Birmingham on Wednesday.

The show — part of a project called "The Undefeated" — will air on ESPN at 7 p.m., Feb. 11.

The one-hour program will be taped in front of an audience at the historic Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. ESPN anchor Cari Champion will host and moderate the conversations, which will include Baltimore Ravens tight end Benjamin Watson, former NFL star Anquan Boldin, Connecticut Sun forward Chiney Ogwumike and Tampa Bay Rays pitcher Chris Archer.

According to Kevin Merida, ESPN senior vice president and editor-in-chief of "The Undefeated," the program is an important discussion of race and sports.

"This television special is an homage to one of the most admired leaders of the 20th century, and also a tribute to black athletes whose leadership and intellect are sometimes underappreciated," Merida said. "We are honored to anchor this series of conversations at the Sixth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham, where Dr. [Martin Luther] King spoke many times to mass rallies and courageously battled injustice."

"Dear Black Athlete" will be presented as part of ESPN's annual Black History Month programming and will culminate with the "State of the Black Athlete," a multi-platform collaboration between "The Undefeated" and ESPN The Magazine.
ESPN

FROM AL

It will include the athletes reading personalized letters that reflect their thoughts on being a black athlete in America today.

"It's a watershed moment in this country as black athletes are expected to use their platform to highlight social injustices," said Rosalind Durant, ESPN's senior vice president for college networks. "This conversation will give so many people a rare look inside the black athlete's journey."

"Dear Black Athlete" is an ode to "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr.'s spirited defense of nonviolent direct action against racism. Fifty years after King's assassination, African-American athletes have increasingly become vehicles in trying to bridge divisions in society.

The program follows up on previous taped conversations on other topical issues impacting the African-American community. In August 2016, "The Undefeated" held its first town hall in Chicago on guns, violence and law enforcement as the city reeled from record murder rates. Two months later, President Barack Obama headlined "A Conversation with the President: Sports, Race and Achievement" at North Carolina A&T.

ESPN anchor Cari Champion will host and moderate the conversations Wednesday at Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. She joined the network in 2012 and was promoted to SportsCenter anchor in June 2015.

ESPN will film "Dear Black Athlete" from 1 to 3 p.m. Wednesday at Sixth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham. Facebook

"I'm a firm believer that all people are born inherently good, and it takes a negative familial and friends environment to shape such aforementioned viewpoints." Tampa Bay Rays pitcher Chris Archer wrote for ESPN's "The Undefeated." Chris O'Meara, Associated Press

"I'm a Nigerian-American, which I consider the best of both worlds. I work like my parents and dream like my sisters. I was raised to defy expectations," WNBA player Chiney Ogwumike wrote for ESPN's "The Undefeated." Here she speaks onstage at The Women's Sports Foundation's 38th Annual Salute To Women in Sports Awards Gala on Oct. 18 in New York City. Nicholas Hunt, Getty Images for Women's Sports Foundation

Former NFL star Anquan Boldin created The Anquan Boldin Foundation, also known as Q18, in 2004. It's dedicated to expanding the educational and life opportunities of underprivileged children. John Salangsang, Invision for NFL

Benjamin Watson, a tight end for the Baltimore Ravens, is a finalist for this year's NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year award, which recognizes NFL players for their contributions on and off the field. Watson and his wife assist countless people through their One More Foundation. Facebook
Visit to the White House should not be politicized

It just wasn’t enough to ruin the professional football season with the interjection of political drama. It wasn’t enough that men who are paid to play a game for the public’s amusement were forced to take a political stand when the national anthem was played. Now, those who view politics as a zero-sum game want to use college kids as their political pawns.

So far, about 75,000 people have signed an online petition to “tell University of Alabama football coach Nick Saban to take a stand against Donald Trump’s racism. Disavow his hateful critique of NFL protesters who are speaking out against systemic racism and police brutality. Affirm your players’ right to protest and pledge not to take your team to the White House.”

The online petition was started by a liberal, or if you prefer, progressive, advocacy group. And it is so far off base with this stunt that it is worse than laughable. It is disgusting.

As we’re sure you’re aware, some NFL players chose to take a knee during the national anthem during the past season, joining former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick in a sign of protest. But now this group wants to use college kids to further its political agenda.

Regardless of how you feel about NFL players kneeling during the anthem, that’s not the issue here. The issue is that this group is needlessly trying to politicize the football program at the University of Alabama. It is unfair to Saban and his players.

Football is a demanding sport, both physically and mentally. College football players are also students, and most of them are very smart. Anyone who thinks football at the college or professional level is for stupid brutes clearly doesn’t understand the game. Football players, and everyone else, are entitled to any political views they hold. They also should be free to express those views, even if that expression is viewed as a form of protest. After all, students should be encouraged to form well-rounded viewpoints on issues of the day. But not everything has to fall into the political realm.
We are sure Saban and others involved in the UA football program have a range of opinions on political and social issues, and that includes varying views of President Donald Trump. We’re sure many of them had a variety of opinions on the four occasions that they celebrated the national title by visiting the White House when Barack Obama was president.

These are college students who have an opportunity to visit the White House. Their visit never has been and never should be seen as a political endorsement.

Shame on Credo Action for trying to steal from us one of the few distractions from political drama that we have left, and for trying to deny these young men an opportunity to visit the nation’s capital and be honored for all their hard work to get there.

Saban should take the team to the White House, and we hope they have fun.
The vessel sticker will cost $550 above the normal registration and annual renewal charges and is available for purchase yet but expected then soon if all the state stickers have not expired. The vessel sticker is sold at the local law enforcement office and is available for purchase at county department of revenue offices.

The collegiate vessel sticker will cost $550 above the normal registration and annual renewal charges and is available for purchase at the local law enforcement office.

The registration fee is $230. The sticker fee is $320, making the total cost $550 above the normal registration and annual renewal charges.

The vessel sticker is sold at the local law enforcement office and is available for purchase at the local law enforcement office.
Tide defensive lineman
a key cog in early ’90s

Creg Stephenson
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Twenty-five years after Alabama's 1992 national championship, defensive lineman Jeremy Nunley spoke of his cherished memories of that title season.

"I just couldn't believe it. I tried to take it all in," Nunley, a key performer on a defensive line that featured All-Americans John Copeland and Eric Curry, told AL.com in 2017 as part of an oral history project on the team.

"It's one of those things, for the rest of your life, nobody can ever take it away from you."

The former Alabama and NFL defensive lineman died Monday night of an apparent heart attack, AL.com has confirmed. He was 46.

Nunley was on the field for two of the more famous plays during that 1992 season, Antonio Langham’s game-winning interception return in the SEC championship game against Florida and George Teague’s miraculous strip of Miami's Lamar Thomas in the Sugar Bowl. Nunley can be seen in videos dodging to get out of Langham's way on the former play, but he said he never saw the latter one.

"I actually got my helmet ripped off on that play by (Miami tackle) Mario Cristobal ... I was trying to figure out where I was at, because he got a finger up one of my nostrils. I had a bloody nose. That's basically what I remember about that one," Nunley said.

Following Copeland and Curry's departure to the NFL, Nunley started for the Crimson Tide in 1993 and was an All-SEC pick. He later played briefly with the NFL's Houston Oilers, who drafted him in the second round in 1994.

Nunley was also well-known for a run-in with South Carolina quarterback Steve Tanneyhill during a 1993 game in Columbia (which Alabama won 17-6). Tanneyhill had been highly recruited by Alabama and did his share of trash talk in the days leading up to the game.

"I chased him down by his hair," Nunley said. "You know he had that long hair. I made sure I got ahold of that."
Higher-ed help

Alabama SBDC leveraging academic talent to improve business profit

At the core of any successful business are driven leaders, but passion isn’t enough to overcome all obstacles. While large companies have access to expertise and capital, smaller companies often lack these critical resources.

The Alabama Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Network levels the playing field by unlocking the potential of any business by providing business expertise normally reserved for large, established companies. Small businesses employ 772,214 people, or 48.1 percent of Alabama’s workforce, in over 380,000 establishments; their importance cannot be understated.

Since 1980, the Alabama SBDC Network has provided entrepreneurs with technical assistance and strategic advice to succeed. The SBDC Network is the state’s largest, most comprehensive resource for entrepreneurs: we are a partnership between higher education and the U.S. Small Business Administration — and hosted by the University of Alabama’s Culverhouse College of Commerce. The Network operates 10 full-time business centers based at Alabama’s leading universities, with 40 outreach locations. We are part of the America’s SBDC Network with 62 accredited networks nation-wide.

Since 2013, the Alabama SBDC Network has delivered:

» Training to 4,800-plus workshop attendees per year.

» 950-plus new business starts.

» More than $365 million in new funding.

» Almost $75 million in exports.

» Over 4,800 new jobs.

Last year, SBDC clients recorded annual sales and employment growth that was 10 times higher than the state average.

We are nationally recognized for our innovative delivery of funding solutions; our Alabama International Trade Center is noted for its pioneering work in global marketing for small business; we have a bid-matching system to help small business pursue government contracting opportunities. We are growing Alabama’s economy, one small business at a time.

Join us at asbdc.org.

Bill Cummins is executive state director of the Alabama SBDC Network.
In response to recent community pressure, Birmingham City Council has voted to approve a $350 million expansion of the BJCC, which city officials hope will make the venue more competitive in the tourism market. The expansion includes an additional 50,000 square feet of meeting space, a new ballroom, and an updated convention center. The project is expected to be completed by 2023, with construction beginning immediately. The expansion will also include improvements to the existing facilities, such as updated technology and enhanced security measures. The total cost of the project is estimated to be $350 million, with funding provided through a combination of local and state grants, as well as private donations. The BJCC is a key driver of the city's tourism industry, and the expansion is expected to attract more visitors and generate additional revenue for the city.
Funding builds, but what’s next for BJCC project?

Erin Edgemon eedgemon@al.com

With the Birmingham City Council lending its initial support to the expansion of the BJCC, there are still a number of necessary steps to make the new stadium a reality.

No firm has been hired to design the stadium for construction. After that, the BJCC will need seek competitive bids on engineering, architecture and construction firms.

Those two key pieces aside, many things have already taken place to get the project underway, while others are in the process.

BJCC Executive Director Tad Snider said the next step is to secure passage of state legislation that would enact a 3 percent car rental tax in Jefferson County. Revenues from the tax will go toward debt service on the BJCC project. The legislation should be introduced in the next two weeks, he said.

SEE STADIUM, A8
STADIUM
FROM A1

The Alabama Legislature authorized the tax in 2001, so city officials are hopeful the bill will pass this session.

If all promised funding is secured in the coming months, construction on a stadium could start by the end of the year, Snider said.

BJCC EXPANSION

The BJCC’s 20-year, $300 million master plan includes the construction of a $174 million open-air stadium, a Legacy Arena makeover and an outside piazza renovation. The stadium would have up to 55,000 seats and additional meeting and exhibition space.

In determining the feasibility of a downtown stadium, Snider said Conventions, Sports & Leisure International, a consulting firm, interviewed potential users and potential future users of the venue — including ESPN, Bruno Event Team, SEC, the Alabama High School Athletic Association and concert promoters — to determine the “sweet spot” for seating capability on a limited budget.

He said the stadium would be slightly larger than what UAB could likely construct on its own. The stadium would be large enough to accommodate the Magic City Classic, Birmingham Bowl and international soccer.

By comparison, Legion Field, where those events currently take place, has a seating capacity of 71,594.

Snider said a downtown stadium could be expanded if the demand for a larger venue grows.

The Legacy Arena renovation will include a modern facade, new entrances and a new suite level. The plan calls for more food and beverage options, too. Snider said the upgrades would be suitable for any potential user, including the NCAA and NBA.

The BJCC is projecting 32 new full-time employees will be added to manage the new facility, which will cause the creation of an additional 147 new full-time positions in the community.

To accommodate growth, the BJCC plans to construct an additional parking deck and develop a comprehensive parking plan.

MONEY

Sometimes this year, the BJCC anticipates securing a bond for an estimated $300 million to begin the construction project.

The BJCC said the new stadium could be ready in 2020 and in time for the 2021 World Games in Birmingham.

Before going to the bond market, the BJCC must work with the city of Birmingham “through the remaining due diligence process and begin to draft a document suitable for the mayor and council to formally consider a funding commitment toward the project,” Snider said.

On Tuesday, the Birmingham City Council approved a “resolution of intent,” an initial commitment to give $90 million — $3 million a year for 30 years — toward the debt service on the bond. The Jefferson County Commission has committed $30 million spread over the next three decades for the project.

Birmingham and Jefferson County have said their funding is contingent on construction starting before the end of the year.

FINANCIAL BREAKDOWN

Here is the breakdown of how the BJCC expansion will be paid for:

○ The Birmingham Jefferson Civic Center Authority will contribute $10.7 million in annual debt service. The BJCC’s funds come from its allocation of the Jefferson County beverage tax, lodging tax, tobacco tax, sales and use tax and onsite self-generated BJCC transactional taxes.

○ The rental car tax is anticipated to yield $3.5 million toward annual debt service.

○ Jefferson County has approved by resolution $1 million toward annual debt service.

○ The city of Birmingham is considering $3 million toward annual debt service.

According to the BJCC, the total annual debt service is projected to be $21.5 million. A 10-year taxable private placement secured by naming rights, sponsorships, corporate community contributions and UAB will provide $4 million per year for the first 10 years of operation.

Before securing a bond for the construction project, the BJCC board of directors will seek requests for proposals for underwriters, with specific requirements for minority firm participation in the underwriting team, according to the BJCC.

Porter, White & Company, a Birmingham-based investment bank, and Rice Advisory, a Montgomery-based municipal advisory firm, are serving as the BJCC’s financial advisors on the project.

According to the BJCC, Hobby Presley with Maynard Cooper, has been retrained as the bond counsel for the transaction.

Populous, a global architectural design firm specializing in stadium, arena and convention center design, was engaged to update the BJCC’s master plan and make budget estimates on renovations and building a new stadium.
Pay up or punt the new stadium

Roy S. Johnson
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It’s been so long since Birmingham began talking about building a new stadium, the young men and women comprising the Class of ’18 in the city’s schools were not yet born, downtown was still near desolate and Nick Saban was Michigan State’s head coach.

Indeed, in August 1998, 56 percent of Jefferson County voters chose not to increase the county sales tax by a penny to fund a proposed domed stadium. Interestingly, 80 percent of African-American voters were in favor of it, while 80 percent of whites were not. Anyone really surprised?

In 1965, local newspapers touted the “New Birmingham.” That “new” was supposed to be 1971.

Well, now, the time for talking, debating and ego-wrestling is over.

If Birmingham is to build its proposed $175-million, up-to-55,000-seat open-air stadium in the area adjacent to Uptown and the BJCC in time for the opening game of the UAB’s 2020 season, or even for the opening of the 2021 World Games the following summer, the Birmingham City Council must decide the city’s funding commitment at its next scheduled meeting, Feb. 6, or very, very soon thereafter.

On Wednesday, Mayor Randall Woodfin, in the first major initiative of his still-nascent tenure, asked council members to commit $3 million annually for 30 years towards servicing the bond needed to construct the stadium.

The plan also includes the much-overlooked $123 million renovation of Legacy Arena.

Woodfin argued the long-discussed and debated projects will generate an additional $9.9 million in annual tax revenues for the city once completed, as well as $5.5 million in tax revenues during the construction phase — so as soon as 2019.

A total of $21.5 million annually will be needed to service the debt on the bonds raised to fund the projects (including a 2015 bond).

Of that amount, $10.715 million comes from the BJCC (the city already contributes $5 million annually to the facility); $4 million from a “taxable placement leveraged by revenues secured by UAB and corporate partnerships” (read: UAB’s rental fee and naming rights); $3 million by the city of Birmingham; $2.8 million from the Jefferson County delegation of the Alabama State Legislature (a 2001 bill earmarking money collected from a 3-cent car rental tax for a “multi-purpose facility” must be amended before the money may be collected); and $1 million from Jefferson County, which confirmed its commitment earlier this month.

UAB has heretofore been the dragon in the room, having been all but silent — at least publicly — about its specific financial contribution (only stated it as agreed to a long-term lease and would consider sponsorship) when it is clear that if not for UAB and its revived football program, the stadium might not be being built at all.

The legislative dollars are not 100 percent certain either. State Rep. John Rogers, D. Birmingham, who sponsored the 2001 bill, said last week he’s no longer in favor of the stadium and would introduce another in an attempt to redirect the funds (now about $20 million) towards the Birmingham Water Works to help pay off a bond debt and potentially help lower consumer heating bills.

How the council will ultimately vote is far from certain. Although many councilors will whisper their support for the stadium, few will say so publicly.

After Wednesday’s meeting, City Council President Valerie Abbott said she felt “much better” about the stadium proposal.

Councillor Darrell O’Quinn, however, had more questions, including why surrounding municipalities are not contributing to the cost. “They’ll benefit, too,” he says.

The mayor’s pitch was the most important salvo in this long, weary debate — a debate that must end soon, whether Birmingham is ready. Or not.

Johnson writes opinion columns for AL.com.
Surgeons use Facebook to try to stop bleeding

Erin Edgemon
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Do you know what to do if you find yourself in an emergency situation where first responders can’t immediately get to trauma victims?

The national Stop the Bleed campaign was created to teach bleeding control techniques to the public for potential use in the event of mass casualty incidents like Sandy Hook and the Pulse nightclub and Las Vegas concert shootings.

Action reports noted that some victims bled out before first responders could get to them. They indicated that having tourniquet kits in public areas, along with trained bystanders, could save lives.

UAB trauma surgeons will use Facebook Live at 1 p.m. today to teach some bleeding-control techniques. Find it at facebook.com/UAB.edu.

According to UAB, surgeons will use a mannequin to demonstrate the techniques, while also discussing the need for this campaign.

"With shooting scenes on lockdown and shooters still on the loose or unaccounted for, there is all too often a delay in emergency personnel reaching the injured," Dr. Jeff Kerby, director of the UAB Division of Acute Care Surgery in the School of Medicine, said last year.

Bleeding victims can quickly die from uncontrolled bleeding, as soon as five or 10 minutes after injury.

Kerby said Stop the Bleed is advocating that trauma kits containing instructions, tourniquets, gauze and gloves be located at public places such as courtrooms or schools, and that the public become educated in their use.

Staff from the UAB trauma service can assist with training locally, he said. Currently, UAB is training local teachers and providing each classroom with a tourniquet kit. Training has taken place in a number of Homewood schools so far, according to UAB.
The Earth's magnetic field may flip, and that doesn't sound so good

By: Lee Roop

Moving up on the list of things that could "end the world as we know it" is something called a global magnetic field reversal.

What's that, you ask? Grab a cup of coffee or tea and get comfortable. Here's the story of a thing some scientists are worried about, followed by things other scientists say we really should worry about, instead.

First, the magnetic fields. The Earth's iron core is surrounded by a "fluid ocean of hot, liquid metal," NASA says, and that moving metal ocean acts on the core to generate magnetic lines. Think of a giant bar magnet running through the middle of the Earth, and now think of that magnet flipping.

It's happened before, and it may be happening again. But slowly. Very slowly. So, definitely buy your season football tickets and keep that condo reservation at Gulf Shores.

So why worry at all? Scientists say the field gets weaker as it flips, and that could mean - among other things - that more radiation from space reaches earth. That could mess with navigation systems and electricity transmission. And maybe with us.

Since early last year, stories about the possible flip and the possible effects have appeared with increasing frequency.

It's fine, says Dr. Dennis Gallagher, a NASA physicist in the Space Plasma Physics Group at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville. He discussed magnetic fields - and things worth worrying about - this week at his office in the National Space Science & Technology Center on the campus of the University of Alabama in Huntsville. "The population seems intent on having a Doomsday (scenario) every year or two," Gallagher joked, "and if we don't have one, we feel like something's wrong. They're not telling us about the Doomsday this time."

It's easy to go from observing a phenomenon to a full freak-out, Gallagher said in slightly more scientific terms, because "humans seem to be built well to connect the dots. But do they connect or not?"

An interesting aside here: That question - do they really connect? - is what makes scientists "such odd balls," Gallagher said. "They will see a thing happening in front of them and realize they're seeing a thing, and they can't just take what they interpret visually, because there may not be the connection that seems obvious. You actually have to have measurements. Something that provides and unambiguous and honest, candid interpretation."

Asked about the magnetic field by AL.com, Gallagher did some research. The field has reversed in the past, he said, based on rock samples that have retained the orientation of past fields. "There's every reason to think that the field will reverse again," he said.

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Gallagher noted that the sun's magnetic field reverses every 11 years. Mars had a global planetary magnetic field, too, but it doesn't any longer. "Presumably the rock that is Mars cooled enough that you're not getting the circulation outside the interior core that is thought to lead to a global magnetic field," he said. Maybe the Martian core is still turning, and maybe it isn't. "We need to put seismometers there and make the measurements," he said.

As for the threat of cosmic radiation bombarding the Earth when the magnetic field reverses, Gallagher said, "Magnetic lines are open out into interplanetary space" at the poles now, "and cosmic radiation has free access to the atmosphere." It hasn't been a big problem for people living there, he said.

"Atmosphere provides most of the protection against cosmic radiation," he said. "What the magnetic field does is protect us from the lowest energy cosmic radiation. The highest-energy cosmic radiation doesn't give a fig about the magnetic field. It's not strong enough to keep it from getting to the atmosphere. Some of it reaches the ground. And some of it causes problems with electronics on the ground."

"The magnetic field could reverse," Gallagher said. "But you know, Yellowstone could blow. There could be a really big rock with our name on it. These are real. We know there are really big rocks and they fly around the Solar System and we've seen them fly into Jupiter a couple of times. We've got a record of them having fallen into ours. That's pretty real."

"The rock, I'm more worried about," he said. Yellowstone's blown before, he said, and, oh, by the way, there's an upheaval in Yellowstone right now. Scientists know the ground is rising there, even if it doesn't appear to be, because they've measured it. And they'll stay on it.

"So, there's lots of things in life that could cause problems," Gallagher said, "and I would be more worried about texting and driving, frankly, because that's like now and real and demonstrated that it's real."
USRA Scientists Part of Team Selected for Bruno Rossi Prize in Astrophysics

By: Universities Space Research Association

Five scientists from the Universities Space Research Association (USRA) and their colleagues from the Fermi Gamma Ray Burst Monitor team, led by NASA astrophysicist Dr. Colleen Wilson-Hodge, received the prestigious Bruno Rossi Prize from the American Astronomical Society.

The team was recognized for the discovery of the first electromagnetic counterpart to the gravitational wave signal from the same cosmic event -- the collision of two neutron stars in a distant galaxy.

This discovery confirmed that some short gamma ray bursts are caused by the merging of binary neutron stars that helped spawn the largest world-wide follow up campaign in the history of astronomy. The ability to observe the universe simultaneously with gravitational waves and electromagnetic waves enables new insights into previously unanswered questions.

The members of the Universities Space Research Association team included William Cleveland, Valerie Connaughton, Adam Goldstein, William Paciesas and Oliver Roberts. Other team members included the University of Alabama in Huntsville, the Center for Space Plasma and Aeronomic Research (CSPAR) and the Department of Space Science.

Dr. Nicholas White, Senior Vice President, Science, at USRA, stated, “Congratulations to Colleen Wilson-Hodge and the Fermi GBM team for this award which recognizes the many years of planning and preparation to catch this breakthrough multi-messenger event.”

Dr. Scott Miller, Director, USRA Science and Technology Institute commented, “This honor is very well deserved by the Fermi GBM team! The team is such an exceptional collaborative group, and the multi-messenger observation of an electromagnetic radiation counterpart to a gravitational wave event is such an exciting scientific achievement, I could not be more happy for their success and for their receipt of the Rossi Prize.”

The Rossi prize is awarded annually by the High Energy Astrophysics Division of the American Astronomical Society for a significant contribution to high energy astrophysics with particular emphasis on recent, original work, and is among the highest honors bestowed in this field.

The prize is in honor of Professor Bruno Rossi, an authority on cosmic ray physics and a pioneer in the field of X-ray astronomy. It includes an engraved certificate and a $1,500 award. The team will receive the award at the American Astronomical Society’s meeting in January 2019.
DesignCon Engineer of the Year Builds on Foundation of Astrophysics

By: Charles Murray

Winner of the DesignCon 2018 Engineer of the Year Award, Intel Fellow Mike Peng Li has served the conference for two decades with technical publications and tutorials on test and measurement. But he originally earned his Ph.D. in space physics.

After serving on countless DesignCon technical program committees and delivering 19 years worth of tutorials and technical papers, Mike Peng Li says the conference has become a part of him.

“It takes a bit of energy and passion to do it,” he told Design News recently. “It becomes so much a part of your life, it’s hard to separate yourself from it.”

Indeed, Li and the conference have become integral parts of each other, which is why it’s appropriate that the Intel Corp. Fellow has been selected by his peers as the DesignCon 2018 Engineer of the Year. The award is a deserving highlight for Li, who delivered his first DesignCon technical paper, “Signal Integrity: How to Measure it Correctly,” in 2000. He has since produced approximately 30 more highly cited DesignCon papers, including one that received the conference’s Best Paper Award in 2007, and another that was a Paper Award Finalist in 2009. He has also delivered annual tutorials since 2004, has written a book (Jitter, Noise, and Signal Integrity at High Speed), and has served as a contributing author to four other books during the past 20 years.

For Li, however, the prodigious list of achievements is a far cry from where he started. As a child growing up in China, Li laid the foundation for his career with a burning desire to learn about space technology. “I began wondering about it when I was kid,” he recalled. “I was intrigued by the sun. There were so many wonderful things and I wanted to understand them.”

At 16, he took his first big step toward space by traveling 1,000 miles from his home to attend the University of Science and Technology of China. There, he earned a B.S. in space physics. His passion for space tech unabated, he then moved to the US to attend the University of Alabama in Huntsville, near NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center. At UAH, he earned an M.S. and Ph.D. in physics, along with a separate master’s degree in electrical and computer engineering, focusing on fiber optic communications.

Unbeknownst to him at the time, however, it was the M.S. in electrical engineering that would play the bigger role in his long-term future. After doing post-doc work in astrophysics, he gradually migrated toward test and measurement technology. He served as a staff engineer for Schlumberger ATE, and later as a senior scientist at Wavecrest Corp., a maker of test equipment.

“Getting into test was somewhat by accident,” he told us. “My first job was at Schlumberger, where I could use my physics for analysis and my EE background for hardware and instrumentation.”
The move suited him well, however. At Wavecrest, Li started his association with DesignCon, began publishing widely, earned numerous patents, and worked his way up to chief technology officer. He later moved to Altera Corp., where he oversaw prototyping of the world’s first optical FPGA, and was eventually named a company Fellow. When Altera was acquired by Intel Corp. in 2015, Li was again designated a Fellow.

The arc of his career since moving to test has been nothing short of amazing. During those 20-plus years, Li has published approximately 110 technical papers, has earned 30 patents, has been named an IEEE Fellow, and has guided thousands of engineers, scientists, and students with his books and tutorials, especially in the area of jitter.

“Mike has demonstrated leadership in the industry on developing interest and understanding around jitter topics for nearly two decades,” noted one colleague who nominated him for Engineer of the Year.

As winner of the DesignCon Engineer of the Year award, Li will be able to continue that emphasis on leadership and teaching. He received a $10,000 grant/scholarship, which he has designated to his alma mater, the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

In the coming years, he plans to continue in that leadership role, and hopes to keep working at the same torrid pace. “I want to continue attacking the most outstanding problems in high-speed I/O,” he said.

Not coincidently, DesignCon will likely be moving in that same direction. “I suppose to some degree they are related,” he noted. “Highly related.”

Somehow, that seems appropriate.
Alabama native wins prestigious Schwarzman Scholarship

By: Shelly Haskins

It's a long way from Gadsden, Alabama, to Beijing, China - 7,128 miles to be exact.

Kevin Ferguson II can't do anything to shorten the distance between the place he was born and the place he'll be spending a year studying global affairs in 2019. But as one of only 200 worldwide recipients of the prestigious Schwarzman Scholarship - it's been called the Rhodes Scholarship of the 21st century - Ferguson hopes he can at least help his fellow Americans better understand China, its people and its culture.

Ferguson, 27, was raised in Gadsden, graduated from Gaston High School, and then graduated from Alabama A&M University in Huntsville in 2012 with a degree in engineering.

His engineering professor at Alabama A&M, Stoney Massey, boosted his confidence by telling him he had "the chops" to go to the likes of Harvard, or any other school he desired to attend. He also drew inspiration from being a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, which includes as its brothers "transformative" men like Martin Luther King Jr., Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and W.E.B. Dubois.

So after working as an engineer for Chevron in Texas for a while, Ferguson enrolled at Harvard Business School, where he now serves as co-president of the student body.

In a recent class on global economics, he spent two days studying China and its growing international importance.

"I became increasingly aware that China is going to play a significant role in the world economy in my lifetime and my children's lifetime," Ferguson said. "I want to understand China from an immersive standpoint -- its people, its culture, its government.

"Many Americans may have a viewpoint of China that's 20 years old. I kind of want to serve as a bridge," to update that understanding, he said.

That's the goal of the Schwarzman Scholarship, to create "a global network of the world's most talented young leaders, helping to build stronger links between China and a rapidly changing world," according to the organization's mission statement. The scholarship is named for its benefactor, billionaire businessman and philanthropist Steven Schwarzman, CEO of the global private equity firm, The Blackstone Group.

Ferguson is no stranger to adapting to new surroundings and learning how to thrive in them. At Gaston High School, he was one of only three black kids at the school. At Alabama A&M, a historically black university, he was surrounded primarily by African-American students.

At Harvard, "my classmates' families are, in many case, multi-millionaires." Those experiences have exposed him to many different people, "but in reality, we're all pretty much alike."

Before Ferguson decided to change the world on a global scale by applying for the Schwarzman Scholarship, he began doing what he could to change his little corner of it.

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In 2012, he and his father, Kevin Ferguson Sr., started The Ferguson and Son Foundation, which provides scholarships, ACT preparation and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) workshops to local kids who might not otherwise have those opportunities.

They started with $500, and through help from the Gadsden City Council, fundraisers through his church and at Harvard, this past year the foundation was able to raise $10,000 to help Alabama kids get the skills they need to succeed.

"Technology is rapidly changing this world, so we need to have programs in the Deep South that expose these kids to that technology," Ferguson said.

Ferguson attributes his accomplishments to three things: Having a strong father figure, having good teachers, and having friends and church family who supported his ambitions.

His father "has these three pillars," that are the base of his and his family's life: "First, always give honor to God. God giveth and God taketh. Second, family is your strength. If my older sister opens up a business, I should be the first in line to be a customer. Third, whatever community you are a part of, you should always try to give more to that community than you take.

"I try to deliver on those principles," Ferguson said.
COMMENTARY

ESPN special connects MLK, Kaepernick

Joseph Goodman  jgoodman@al.com

The loudest applause during ESPN's visit to Birmingham on Wednesday for Black History Month wasn't for the athletes. It was for the writer. It was for speaking truth to power.

It was for Jemele Hill, Birmingham residents praised Hill during ESPN's town-hall style production inside Sixth Avenue Baptist Church first when she mentioned blackballed NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and then again when she reiterated a refrain that has made her a powerful voice in these divisive times.

"Now is not the time to be silent," she said. Hill is the ESPN television anchor who called President Donald Trump a white supremacist surrounded by white supremacists. She recently moved from ESPN's SportsCenter to a position with the network's socially conscious website, The Undefeated, and thank goodness for that. A brilliant columnist before transitioning to TV, Hill's real talents as a reporter were being wasted on sports highlights.

Now, hopefully, she can speak without censure.

The ESPN television special, hosted by Cari Champion, featuring Hill and presented by The Undefeated, will air at 7 p.m. on Sunday. Entitled "Dear Black Athlete," it is a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail," and also a commentary on the role black athletes play in today's society. The show will feature a series of insightful panels from the sports world, but Hill's presence elicited the most response from an engaged and passionate room inside Sixth Avenue Baptist Church.

Without giving anything away, it was a beautiful event that honored Birmingham's important role in the Civil Rights Era while tying it to the present-day struggle facing America, and, more specifically, the black community.

Addressing the audience before the event, Champion, the show's host, set the tone for the production: "This is an extremely important time. If you don't speak, you are in agreement."

That concept and other lessons from King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail" are outlined throughout the show. This is the 50-year anniversary of King's assassination, but his 1963 "Letter From Birmingham Jail" is just as relevant today as it was decades ago.

SEE GOODMAN, B3
GOODMAN
FROM B1

It's the wrong protest. It's the wrong place. It's the wrong time.

King faced those criticisms during his time in Birmingham, and those are the same things we all heard when Kaepernick first began kneeling during the National Anthem to draw attention to police brutality in America. Kaepernick picked the wrong place and time to protest.

But here is what we know about protest, or what we should know as Americans: in this country's most defining hours, it has been built and shaped by protest time and again.

There is never an appropriate time for protest. There is never a convenient moment for change. There is never a perfect person for revolution.

In 1963, there was a place that needed it, though, and so Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth called on the young Dr. King to help his struggle for civil rights in Birmingham. “As goes Birmingham, so goes the Nation,” Shuttlesworth famously wrote to his fellow pastor.

King came to the aid of Birmingham’s black citizens in the form of organized peaceful protest, and Birmingham’s police threw him in jail. It’s there where he wrote one of the greatest pieces of American prose this country has ever produced.

“My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” King began his letter. “While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’”

It was the wrong protest. It was the wrong time.

“You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham,” King goes on to write. “But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes.”

Sound familiar?

All Kaepernick did was make people uncomfortable to raise awareness for an issue that is gravely concerning to the black community. That’s it. Is our country so segregated now that one group of people can’t even take the time and listen to something so concerning to another group that a man making millions of dollars would risk it all just to be heard?

And it’s actually much deeper than police brutality, if we really want to study the social history that now finds us today so apart. Over 65 years after King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” many older people of color feel like “time has run out,” according to David Williams, Vanderbilt’s vice chancellor of athletics. Williams participated in “Dear Black Athlete,” and (as always) enriched the conversation with his perspective and intellect.

“The fact of the matter is, I think people are becoming a little bit more disillusioned with what I would say is the promise of tomorrow,” Williams said in an interview after Wednesday’s event. “And you start to see that because...I can really see it as people get older. They’re concerned about the fact that the promise of America was not delivered.

“I would also say there is becoming a real concept of time has run out.”

Williams delivered one of the town-hall meeting’s most thought-provoking ideas: change is not the same thing as progress. Yes, many black athletes have become rich because of the money now in professional sports, but “we still live in a very segregated society in this country,” Williams said after the taping of the show.

“People don’t want to accept the fact that at a minimum,” Williams said, “there are two cultures that exist in this country and maybe more. And I think people are starting to say, I don’t think that’s changing.”

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Through the difficult and dangerous work that started with Shuttlesworth, King, John Porter and so many others, the federal government forced the South to integrate. In many ways, though, places like Birmingham (and everywhere in this country, really) are still separated by race. That separation, it can be argued, has led to over-policing and mass incarceration.

Have we progressed or just changed?

"Today was extremely interesting, but isn't it interesting that the concept of America and all of its battles about things, we all come back to faith and Christianity," Williams said. "We're all Christians. We got faith. But even faith in this country is segregated. So, that's why I say change doesn't necessarily mean progress.

"Progress means there probably was some change, but change doesn't mean progress."

Joseph Goodman is a columnist for Alabama Media Group. He's on Twitter@JoeGoodmanJr.
Blazers focus on local defensive talent

Evan Dudley  For AL.com

UAB finished up signing day just in time for lunch Wednesday as head coach Bill Clark announced the addition of five players who signed letters of intent for the 2018 recruiting class.

They’ll join the 11 players UAB signed during the inaugural early signing period.

All five National Signing Day signees are from the defensive side of the ball with three from the Birmingham area.

“Having four of our five players sign from the state of Alabama today shows that they believe in the vision of UAB football,” Clark said. “Including the December signees, this entire class will make immediate contributions to our team and we couldn’t be more excited about the signing class of 2018.”

The Signees

Xavier Lanier, Gordo: Lanier was the first signee of the day, a two-star prospect and the 90th ranked player in Alabama. The 6-foot-2, 185-pound cornerback helped lead the Green Wave to a 35-4 record in his three years on the field. The Blazers get an instant boost of speed from Lanier, who played both receiver and defensive back in high school and ran the 40-yard dash in 4.35 seconds at the Blue-Grey All-American Combine.

Adarius “Fish” McWilliams, West Florida: The long-time UAB commit with an endearing aquatic nickname was the second signee of the day for the Blazers and a two-star prospect out of West Florida High School in Pensacola. The 6-foot-1, 270-pound defensive tackle had 51 total tackles, nine sacks, five forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries in 2017 and helped lead the Jaguars to a 12-2 record and a spot in the Florida Class 5A semifinals. He had a season-high 11 tackles in an early season loss and recorded at least one sack in five games.

Starling Thomas V. Ramsay: UAB held back a late-push from Florida Atlantic to sign Thomas as one of five defensive backs in the 2018 recruiting cycle. A three-star prospect, Thomas is the 53rd ranked player in Alabama and participated in the Alabama-Mississippi All-Star Game. Thomas finished his career with 24 tackles, an interception and helped lead the Rams to a 14-2 record and the 2016 Class 6A state title during his junior season.

UAB’s early signees

- Dylan Hopkins, 3-star LB (6-2 / 200) Maryville | Maryville, Tenn.
- Jaylen Key, 3-star S (6-2 / 185) Amos P. Goodby | Tallahassee, Fla.
- Antonio Moultrie, 2-star DE (6-5 / 290) NE Mississippi CC | Pensacola, Fla.
- Deshaun Oliver, 2-star S (6-3 / 185) Ramsay | Birmingham, Ala.
- Kendall Parkham, 2-star WR (5-10 / 179) Jones County JC | Ellisville, Miss.
- Colby Ragland, 3-star OT (6-6 / 295) Jones County JC | Raymond, Miss.
- Andrew Smith, 2-star OT (6-1 / 285) Jones County JC | Mt. Olive, Miss.
- Jarrian Street, 3-star RB (6-1 / 211) Ole Miss | Trussville, Ala.
- Austin Watkins, 2-star WR (6-3 / 200) Dodge City JC | N. Fort Myers, Fla.
- Carter Wood, 2-star OL (6-5 / 275) Miss. Gulf Coast CC | Starkville, Miss.

CD Daniels, Homewood: Clark made it his mission to sign some of the best local defensive talent and Daniels is a huge victory in that campaign. The three-star prospect from Homewood is the 26th ranked player in Alabama, was named First Team All-State by the Alabama Sports Writers Association and played in the Alabama-Mississippi All-Star Game. He had 81 total tackles, eight interceptions, a sack and a forced fumble during his career and led the Patriots to a 10-2 record and the second round of the 2017 Alabama Class 6A playoffs.

Jalen Rayam, Thompson: One of the biggest pickups for UAB is Thompson’s Rayam. The 6-foot-2, 230-pound outside linebacker is a three-star prospect, the 45th ranked player in Alabama and played in the Alabama-Mississippi All-Star Game. Rayam had 143 tackles, including 28 for loss, along with 7.5 sacks and four interceptions in leading the Warriors to a Class 7A Region 3 title this past season before falling to Hoover in a semifinal rematch.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The Blazers targeted and signed the majority of their needs in this recruiting class, which included three of the top 50 players in Alabama.
Expectations high, again, for UA golf

By: Ian Thompson

I checked in last week with longtime University of Alabama head men’s golf coach Jay Seawell to see how things are shaping up for the spring season.

If they go anything like the fall, it should be a very good spring. In the fall, they won three events: tied-first in the Carpet Capital, first in the Steelwood Collegiate and first in their own Jerry Pate National Intercollegiate played at Old Overton Club. They have owned the Pate, winning five of the last six and nine overall. They also finished second at Olympia Fields.

As always, he was enthusiastic, upbeat and very gracious with his time.

His team enters the spring, just like UA’s women’s team, as the No. 1 ranked squad in the country.

There are three polls: Bushnell/Golfweek Coaches Poll, Golfweek/Sagarin Rankings and Golfstat Rankings. They all have merit, but Golfstat is used by the NCAA for seedings in postseason play and thus carries the most weight at the conclusion of the regular season.

Whichever way you slice it (not a great analogy for golfers, I know), they will have a big target on their back.

“Our fall gives us a lot of hope and enthusiasm. It makes the start of this semester exciting and we can certainly build off it, but can’t rely upon it. It’s part of our resume, but the rest is up to us and hard work,” Seawell said.

He noted his starting three will be Davis Riley, who posted four top 10s in the fall, including a win at Olympia Fields, and is the No. 2-ranked player in college golf after Southern Cal’s Justin Suh; Lee Hodges, who had two top 10s, including a third-place finish at the Pate; and Jonathan Hardee, who also had two top 10s, including a tied-second at Steelwood.

Competition is ongoing for the four and five spots, with Davis Shore and Steven Setterstrom leading the way after the fall.

Jake DeZoort, Ben Fuller, Wilson Furr, Alex Green, Tyler Hitchner and Josh Sedeno will all hope to make some noise in ongoing qualifying and force their way onto the travel team.

A significant new dynamic this year is that coaches may substitute a player for any reason at the conclusion of any postseason round. Initially brought in just for injury reasons, it has been broadened to be completely at the coaches discretion.

“We will travel to every event this spring, except Las Vegas (Southern Highlands Masters), with six players. This is to get used to traveling with six. (The sixth player will play as an individual).

“It’s brand new for everyone. This means added competition and the one’s that cope the best with a player (the substitute player) looking over their shoulder, will fare the best.”

UA begin their season in the sunny climes of the Puerto Rico Classic in Rio Del Mar, Feb. 18-20, where they have had much success.

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Then comes Las Vegas, followed by repeat trips to the Linger Longer Invitational in Greensboro, Ga., Vanderbilt’s Mason Rudolph Championship in Nashville, Tn., and the SEC Championship in Sea Island, Ga. Then comes NCAA Regionals and Nationals. In-between the Linger Longer and Mason Rudolph tournaments they travel to Bryan, Texas for the Aggie Invitational hosted by Texas A&M, with everything pointed towards NCAA Nationals, May 25-30 in Stillwater, Okla.

Seawell also noted he has two very strong signees coming in the fall with the highly-ranked Frankie Capan and Prescott Butler inked.
MR. GOLF

Could be special season for Tide women

Ian Thompson

The University of Alabama's women's golf team heads to Palos Verdes Estates, California, on Friday to begin its spring semester schedule at the Northrup Grumman Regional.

I caught up with head coach Mic Potter late last week.

Always articulate and thoughtful, he, and his longtime assistant coach, Susan Rosenstiel, are looking forward to seeing what their Crimson Tide team can produce. If their fall season is anything to go by, it ought to be pretty special.

Alabama won once and finished second three times and is ranked No. 1 in the country.

“This fall was, at times, mind-boggling to Susan and I. The team was 99-under-par for 11 rounds,” Potter said.

“Back in 1986 when I was getting started (as the coach) at Furman 300 (an average of four rounds of 75) was a good team score. Now, that gets you last.”

He knows his very talented squad has a target on its back as the No. 1 team, but this is nothing new.

“We have three of the top 10-ranked amateurs in the world. We ought to be pretty good.”

See TIDE, B4
This year’s NCAA national championship will be played in May in Stillwater, Oklahoma, known for high winds and a tough course. Potter is determined his team will be ready. After the California event, the Crimson Tide travels to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, home of former UA superstar Stephanie Meadow, then March 18-20 sees the Evans Derby Experience hosted by Auburn and named after former coaches Kim Evans and Virginia Derby Grimes. Next they play in Athens, Georgia, before playing much closer to home with the SEC Championship once again at Greystone Golf & Country Club in Birmingham April 20-22, with NCAA Regionals May 7-9.

Looking ahead, Potter has two highly touted freshman inked for next year: incoming freshman Carolina Caminoli from Italy and South Korean Jiwon Jeon, who will transfer from Daytona State Community College, where she has already won four events, all against Division I opposition, and is thus very much a proven entity. She will enter UA as a junior.

“We are very excited about both these ladies. We saw Carolina play in the Annika Sorenstam Invitational in Orlando (early last year), when we were there to also watch Angelica. Carolina is almost six feet tall and has a beautiful golf swing. We also watched her in the European Girls Championship in Austria last summer.

“Jiwon went to high school in Australia and then came over to go to Daytona State. She is a proven player, very impressive indeed.”

Ian Thompson has been writing about golf in Alabama for over 24 years. His weekly “Mr. Golf” column concentrates on golfers, golf events and people associated with the sport of interest to the Tuscaloosa and Birmingham areas. Reach him with story ideas at thompsonettesoff@gmail.com.
Largest margin of victory over an AP top 15 team

By Cecil Hurt
Sports Editor

Those other six days of the week have been pesky, but the Alabama men’s basketball team sure seems to have Saturday figured out.

The Crimson Tide clicked all afternoon on offense and defense, dominating the nation’s No. 15 team, the Tennessee Volunteers, to take a 78-50 win, the largest home-court margin of victory over UA’s orange rival in the 50-year history of Coleman Coliseum.

It was also Alabama’s largest victory margin ever against an AP top 15 team.

As a measure of the day’s dominance, Alabama (16-9, 7-5 SEC) shot 57 percent from the floor — including seven dunks by Donta Hall — and limited UT to 27 percent.

“They have some players on their team that are problems,” Alabama coach Avery Johnson said. “We identified the problems and did a pretty good job against them. We carried over a lot of situations and details from practice. We were a lot more fun to watch.”

See HOOPS, C5

Alabama forward Braxton Key (25) dribbles the ball in front of Tennessee guard Jordan Bowden during the first half at Coleman Coliseum on Saturday. The Crimson Tide defeated the Volunteers 78-50. [STAFF PHOTO/VERIN NELSON]

HOOPS

From Page C1

The Crimson Tide led by as many as 13 points in the first half, held that advantage at 10 points (37-27) at the intermission and started the second half with another spurt that buried the Vols.

Donta Hall had the best out of many impressive individual performances for UA.

“We didn’t want to settle for jumpers,” Johnson said. “We wanted to run our offense from the inside out. But our guards did a good job of penetrating.”

Crimson Tide guard Collin Sexton had an efficient 16-point, four-assist effort while playing 24 minutes.

“We were just running,” Sexton said. “I feel like when we’re running, we’re at our best.”

In addition to Hall and Sexton, UA got 14 points from freshman John Petty.

Grant Williams led the Volunteers (18-6, 8-4 SEC) with 16 points. He was the only UT player in double figures.

“With this group, I didn’t think we could be that bad,” said UT coach Rick Barnes.

“That’s taking nothing away from Alabama. They just did what they wanted to do. We just didn’t compete and we aren’t built that way, but that’s taking nothing away from Alabama.

“I’m baffled by it, to be honest, but we got what we deserved.”

Alabama will be back at home on Tuesday hosting LSU. But Johnson was quick to tap the brakes on overexuberance after the big win.

“I was on TV after the game and they asked me about ‘Final Four,’” Johnson said. “Final Four? We’re just trying to get four possessions in a row right in practice.”

Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
Instead of comparing greatness, just recognize and appreciate it

Cecil Hurt

The best way to approach greatness is simply to appreciate it. That doesn’t dispel the natural inclination of the human race to compare, contrast and rank things, even such concepts as “greatness,” or “love,” or “genius.” By their very nature, such things are relative. “Greatness” in athletics can have certain statistical parameters but in any endeavor, the “greatness” of a man or woman must have context. There is a historical component and a contemporary component.

It can be hard enough to determine if something or someone qualifies as “great.” Even when someone is widely accepted as “great” in his or her own way, there are different criteria for different observers. To take that and then try to make comparisons across time is, or should be, too complicated.

That doesn’t stop us, of course. We love to compare, as if every human activity were the high jump and greatness could be determined by a tape measure. Hence, the debate rages as to who the greatest University of Alabama football coach — and, by extension, the greatest football coach of all time (and that’s not just in the eyes of Alabama fans) — might be.

Paul W. “Bear” Bryant? Nick Saban?

Before we proceed, let’s return to the top. It is a remarkable stroke of fortune that for 35 of the past 60 years, the Alabama football program has been led by one of these two men, Bryant from 1958 through 1982 and Saban from 2007 until today. That 60-year span has included 12 national championships, six for Bryant, five for Saban (he has a sixth from his time at LSU; Bryant came close at Kentucky and Texas A&M, but accumulated his total in Tuscaloosa).

Gene Stallings, a Bryant disciple, won the other title in that time span. There is, of course, no way to calculate how many Saban might win in the future, or whether one of his many proteges will come back to Tuscaloosa and win another. That’s another one of the elusive qualities of greatness — there is never really a point where it stops.

Having started the column with a spoiler — there is no way to take a coach from an earlier time in college football (and America) and “rate” him against a current coach — let’s look at one aspect in which both Bryant and Saban excelled: national championships.

Immediately, we find ourselves back in a thicket with at least two kinds of thorns. First, while championships are important, are they the only measure? Do we immediately acknowledge, for instance, that Gene Chizik was a greater Auburn coach than Pat Dye because Chizik won a universally recognized title and Dye did not? Is simply “winning the Natty” more impressive than winning eight SEC titles in a row, than Bryant once did? Do you discount the fact Saban’s teams have been ranked No. 1 in the nation at some point in each of the last nine seasons?

Also, national championships were determined in one way for Bryant and another for Saban. Bryant’s teams were chosen by voting from either sportswriters, or coaches, or both. Saban’s all came in some form of playoff, either the BCS or the current College Football Playoffs. Would all of Bryant’s title teams have won a playoff? At least twice, in 1964 and 1973, Alabama lost in the postseason after being awarded the title. On the other hand, who’s to say that Alabama might not have won a playoff in 1966 or 1977 with great teams that dominated their bowl opponents but didn’t win at the ballot box?

See next page
By the same token, would Alabama have won a “poll” taken at the end of the 2017 regular season? Probably not. But it would have won a poll taken at the end of 2016. The point is, even when we are discussing something that seems quantifiable, like “number of national championships won,” we have an apple in one hand and an orange in another.

How would Saban have handled coaching at Alabama during the civil rights era? How would Bryant have handled the overwhelming media demands that Saban navigates on a daily basis? We’ll never know, although it is a fair guess that both would have figured something out and been successful.

So instead of trying to come out with a formula that crowns one or the other and, strangely, relieves one to some sort of “second-best” status, let’s recognize the greatness of both, and their one overriding similarity.

Both believe or believed absolutely in their ability to win. Both have the power — and that word isn’t used lightly, it is a power — to make other people share in that absolute belief. Certainly, past success earns them credibility but it is also an integral part of the personalities of the two men. It’s one thing to believe in yourself, and another thing entirely to win an entire group over to that same belief.

That’s the essence of greatness. Numbers are fascinating and can be revealing. But when the positive human impact is incalculable, numbers can only tell a small part of the story.

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See recruiting, pg 5.

By Steve Megargee

Change in recruiting calendar makes February less frantic
RECRUITING

From Page B1

Alabama has posted the nation's No. 1 class, according to the 247Sports Composite, each of the last seven years but currently ranks sixth in the team standings.

Simmons said the reigning national champions still have a remote chance at finishing first in the recruiting standings but added it would "be a pretty big upset" if anyone other than Ohio State or Georgia ended up No. 1.

Georgia already has signed seven players rated as five-star prospects by Rivals and remains one of the top contenders for Tyson Campbell, a five-star cornerback from American Heritage in Plantation, Florida. Rivals director of recruiting Mike Farrell said if Georgia signs eight Rivals five-star prospects, it would match the record set by Southern California's 2004 class.

Some of the five-star recruits in that 2004 USC class included eventual first-round NFL draft pick Keith Rivers and second-round selections Fred Davis and Deuce Lutui.

Still, Alabama remains one of the main stories heading into the final days of the recruiting season because it remains in play for many of the top uncommitted recruits.

"Alabama's interesting because they're involved with all the (uncommitted) five-stars but not the favorite for anybody," Farrell said. "But you know they could pull one or two of them easy."

Some things to watch as the remaining unsigned high school seniors prepare to finalize their college decisions.

FOCUS ON FLORIDA:
The top three uncommitted prospects are all from the state of Florida. Patrick Surtain Jr., a cornerback from Plantation American Heritage, appears to have LSU and Alabama atop his list. Offensive tackle Nicholas Petit-Frere of Tampa's Berkeley Prep is considering Florida, Notre Dame, Ohio State and Alabama. Campbell, also from American Heritage, is choosing among Georgia, Alabama and Miami.
Several challenges for Tide with recruiting this year

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

It was a strange recruiting cycle for the class of 2018.
Not just for Alabama, but for every coaching staff learning to navigate an early signing period and all that that entailed for the first time. But UA’s class and the situations surrounding it were different than their counterparts.

Nick Saban faced the challenge of recruiting to an early signing period while also preparing for the College Football Playoff all the while facing massive staff changes. Alabama lost both coordinators (Jeremy Pruitt and Brian Daboll) and a position coach (Derrick Ansley) before National Signing Day.
Lessons were learned.
“Well I think every year is going to be different with the recruiting cycle,” Saban said.
“I think this year was probably a little different because there were so many (head) coaching changes. So those coaching changes were much more aggressive in the late signing period because they got their staffs together and, in some cases, created new opportunities for players.”

Alabama was already faced with a numbers crunch in this class, only able to sign 22 players due to three back counters signed the year before. The team fell short of that number when prospects opted for other schools Wednesday.

Two players UA coveted headed out of state. Malik Langham from Lee High School in Huntsville chose Florida and the state’s top-rated prospect Justyn Ross decided for Clemson. Alabama signed only two in-state players, the fewest in the history of the program in a single recruiting class. Part of the reason is simply that the state doesn’t produce the same number of prospects as does Georgia or Florida. However,

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CHALLENGES

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UA did miss out on players it wanted like running back Asa Martin and defensive lineman Coynis Miller to go along with Langham and Ross.

The coaching turnover played a part with some prospects and not with others.

"Well, I don’t think there’s any question that there may be some prospects out there who were being recruited by someone who left and maybe that was a little bit of an issue with them, but I do think that the coaches that we hired certainly did a great job of going out there and trying to develop relationships with the players that we were recruiting," Saban said. "In some cases maybe it had an affect, but in other cases I don’t think it did. So I can’t really answer that emphatically to tell you whether it did or didn’t. But, I think in recruiting — especially when you start recruiting guys two years in advance — that when they feel comfortable and develop relationships with people, it certainly can have some effect on how comfortable they feel with the other folks."

Learning how to balance how aggressive to be in determining how many players to take in the early signing period was one takeaway from the recruiting period. More than likely, though, what happened in this year’s class has little to do with what happens in 2019. Each recruiting class and player presents their own challenges.

"Maybe next year it won’t be that way," Saban said. "You could say ‘Well, if you had signed more guys early, it would have been better this year’, but maybe next year it wouldn’t be. But I do think that it does accelerate the recruiting calendar, I think you have to have more guys visit early, you have to get on top of people early. If they’re going to early sign, you have to identify that and recruit to that timetable. And the guys that are going to stay until the end, you certainly have to be very conscious of doing a good job with those guys as well. We don’t put a lot of pressure on guys to commit and we continue to recruit guys whether they are or they aren’t. I think a lot of other people try to manage it the same way."

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Learning from our mistakes in higher ed

Mitch Daniels

Just for fun, let’s design an economic sector guaranteed to cost too much. Then you guess what it is. For openers, we will sell a product deemed a necessity, with little or no option for the customer to avoid us altogether. Next, we will arrange to get paid for inputs, not outputs — how much we do, not how well we do it. We will make certain that actual results are difficult or impossible to measure with confidence. And we’ll layer on a pile of complex federal regulations to run up administrative costs.

Then, and here’s the clincher, we will persuade the marketplace to flood our economic Eden with payments not from the user but from some third party. This will assure that the customer, insulated from true costs, will behave irrationally, often over-consuming and abandoning the consumerist judgment he practices at the grocery store or while Internet shopping.

Presto! Guaranteed excessive spending, much of it staying in the pockets of the lucky producers. You say, “Oh, sure, this is American health care.” As soon as we took the fatal misstep of untaxed health insurance — compounding the error of World War II-era wage and price controls with a greater mistake — we were doomed to a future of overly expensive medical care.

Your answer is correct but incomplete. It worked so well in health care, we decided to repeat the formula with higher education. Some sort of postsecondary education is, in fact, necessary for a fully productive life in this economy, but by evading accountability for quality, regulating it heavily, and opening a hydrant of public subsidies in the form of government grants and loans, we have constructed another system of guaranteed overruns. It is the opposite of an accident that the only three pricing categories that have outpaced health care over recent decades are college tuition, room and board, and books.

Health care has been crab-walking its way toward a modicum of consumerism through higher co-payments, deductibles and health savings accounts. Foolishly, the federal government has generally thrown obstacles in the path of these adjustments, but it has tried in its own clumsy way to effect some cost reduction by putting providers at some risk for poor performance and results.

In much the same manner, a promising movement is advancing in education to put some of the risk of lousy results — students who do not graduate or who graduate without having learned enough to earn their way in the world — on the institutions that “educated” them. It is about time. This game has been skinless far too long.

Various approaches are being examined as Congress advances a long-overdue rewrite of the Higher Education Act. As a condition of participating in the federal student aid programs, universities could be required to either guarantee a percentage of the dollars loaned to their students, or be penalized a specified amount based on default rates. Or be charged a yearly premium for an insurance fund that would, at least partially, protect taxpayers against what has turned into the latest massive driver of national debt.

With more than $1.4 trillion in student debt, and nonpayment rates climbing past 45 percent, the multibillion-dollar write-offs we have seen already are just the leading edge of what is coming.

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MISTAKES

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All these approaches have merit, and any of them would be a huge improvement over the built-for-excess model under which we’ve been operating. Just as health-care spending can be adjusted for the health status of a given population, schools’ exposure or premiums could vary with the characteristics of their student bodies. My guess is that even a small degree of risk-sharing in higher education would cause significant behavior change. While the hydrant gushes unimpeded, schools have been free to duck hard choices — or even modest priority-setting. Most practice “incremental budgeting,” an unintentionally self-indicting term that indicates that each year’s budget spreads additional funds around evenly, with no serious thought given to ending obsolete or useless programs, and no meaningful prioritization among existing activities. Even a small charge, plus the embarrassment of its public announcement, would probably jar many schools from their complacent ruts. Better counseling of students and their families, more attention to reducing the time it takes to earn a degree and, most straightforward of all, controlling how much is charged in the first place would all likely become more common. Progress is not impossible; at Purdue University, these actions in combination have reduced total student debt by 37 percent over the past five years. Some of my higher-ed colleagues have recently described themselves as “blindsided” by growing criticisms of our sector. In the case of student debt, everyone should have seen the issue coming. An important secondary feature of the at-risk reforms is that they have attracted a unique level of support across our fractured political spectrum. Members of Congress and think-tank scholars from both sides are actively advocating these changes in one form or another. These days, when a proposal leads people to lay down their partisan cudgels and cooperate, it must be an exceptionally good idea.

Mitch Daniels is president of Purdue University and a former governor of Indiana. He wrote this for The Washington Post, where he is a contributing columnist.
Harvard, Facing Tax on Endowment, Picks President With Management Expertise

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Harvard University's next president will be Lawrence S. Bacow, a former president of Tufts University and a top academic officer at M.I.T., who was chosen for his diplomatic and leadership skills at a time when higher education is under fire, the university announced on Sunday.

The departure of Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard's first female president, who is stepping down after 10 years, created an opportunity for Harvard to choose a leader who would reflect the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements that have shaped campus dialogue in recent years.

Instead, it chose Mr. Bacow, 66, who is better known as a manager and institutional leader than as a scholar. His selection reflects Harvard's need for a steady hand at a time when the university must navigate the difficulties of dealing with the Trump administration's antagonism toward elite universities like Harvard that have large endowments.

That was clear at the news conference on Sunday to announce the appointment. William F. Lee, senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation and the chairman of the search committee, described Mr. Bacow as the right leader "at a moment when the value of higher education is being questioned, at a moment when the fundamental truth of fact-based inquiry is being questioned and called into doubt."

Speaking to reporters, Mr. Bacow described growing up in Pontiac, Mich., as the son of immigrants. His mother was 19 when she reached the United States on the second Liberty ship carrying refugees from Europe after the war, and was the only member of her family to survive Auschwitz, he said. His father, born in Minsk, was brought to America as a child to escape pogroms.

"Where else can one go in one generation from off the boat, with literally nothing, to enjoy the kind of life and opportunity that I and my family have been fortunate to enjoy?" Mr. Bacow said. "It was higher education that made this all possible."

Now, for the first time in his life, he said, people are questioning the value of going to college, and some of the criticism is fair.

"I think academic institutions, including Harvard, need to pay more attention to those in this country who've been left behind in this economy," he said.

The university is facing a number of immediate challenges. Like others in its league, it is facing a new 1.4 percent excise tax on the investment returns of endowments that amount to more than $500,000 per student. Harvard administrators have said the tax could cost the university around $43 million a year, and would weaken Harvard's ability to support students and research.

Harvard is also facing an investigation by the Justice Department into its affirmative action policies and whether they discriminate against Asian-American applicants, as well as a lawsuit making the same claims in federal court in Boston.

Mr. Bacow will take over on July 1, becoming the 29th president of Harvard. He is now the Hauser leader in residence at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government's Center for Public Leadership.

He was president of Tufts University for 10 years, until July 2011. The Harvard announcement said he was known there for increasing collaboration across schools and disciplines. Before that, he was on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 24 years, where he served as chancellor, chair of the faculty and a professor of environmental studies.

Although his undergraduate degree is from M.I.T., he has three Harvard postgraduate degrees: a law degree and a master's and doctorate in public policy.

Mr. Bacow was originally part of the university's presidential search committee, which considered more than 700 candidates. Mr. Lee said, before deciding that the right leader was in plain sight.

Annette Gordon-Reed, a Harvard professor of legal history who is known for her scholarship on Thomas Jefferson and his relationship with Sally Hemings, his slave, said Mr. Bacow was a good choice. "Larry has impressive credentials, numerous ties to Harvard, and from what I know of him, he has great values, including a commitment to diversity," she said.
Parents whose children died take aim at hazing

By Susan Snyder
The Philadelphia Inquirer (TNS)

PHILADELPHIA — They found Debbie Smith’s son in the squalid, cold basement of a rogue fraternity house at California State University at Chico. He wasn’t breathing, and by the time he arrived at the hospital, he had gone into cardiac arrest.

“Matt’s not going to make it,” the hospital social worker told her.

In an instant, her happy family of four had become a grief-stricken family of three. Smith let out a

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HAZING

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blood-curdling scream, “like my entire insides came out,” she recalled.

In the weeks that followed, she would learn the horrifying details of Matthew Carrington’s death during a hazing ritual.

That was 2005.

Since then, Smith has been making documentaries, speaking to every audience that would listen, getting laws changed, and launching a nonprofit aimed at educating children and parents about hazing’s dangers. She’s had help from the most unlikely of allies — one of the fraternity brothers convicted in her son’s death and the former president of the college where her son went.

Later this month, she’ll get a new set of partners: other parents who have lost children to confirmed or alleged hazing over the last two decades, all of them young men and most of their deaths involving fraternities.

In an inaugural meeting, parents from California, Louisiana, New Jersey, Texas and other spots around the country — representing a minimum of 15 children who have died — will meet in South Carolina for two days to discuss how their children died and what can be done to protect others from the dangers of hazing.

“It puts a bigger face on the story,” said Leslie Lanahan, whose son, Gordie Bailey Jr., the captain of his high school football team, died after an alcohol-saturated fraternity event in 2004 at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

“I don’t think it has ever gotten the attention it deserves collectively.”

Hazing has been a problem for decades. In a national 2008 study of more than 11,000 college students, 55 percent of those involved in clubs, teams and organizations said they experienced hazing. Dozens of students have died, including four in 2017.

But the fledgling network has one tool grieving parents like Lanahan did not: a more interconnected world that so effortlessly brings together advocates. Some of the attendees at next month’s inaugural conference met on Facebook, where they first conceived of a meeting. They’ve even set up a hashtag, #ParentsUnite2StopHazing.

The group plans to strategize on how to accomplish several key goals, including getting better educational programming on hazing in middle and high schools, strengthening state and federal laws on hazing, and changing the culture on college campuses, said Smith, a San Francisco Bay area resident, who uses the initials “MM” after her name for “Matt’s mom.” The parents have invited anti-hazing advocates and college student affairs administrators to speak. There are no plans to raise money, but that could change once a platform is developed, Smith said.

Cindy Hipps, whose son

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Tucker died in 2014 while on a group run with members of a fraternity he was pledging at Clemson University, first suggested and will help host the meeting in the town where she lives. The family has maintained that hazing led to her son’s fatal fall while on the run.

Other parents who have been working independently for change plan to attend, including California couple Gary and Julie DeVercell, whose son Gary Jr., a student at Rider University in New Jersey, died in 2007, and who have been pushing for federal legislation on hazing.

For others, the loss is more fresh. Jim and Evelyn Piazza, parents of Tim Piazza, who succumbed Feb. 4, 2017, to injuries after a booze-fueled fraternity party at Pennsylvania State University, also expect to be there.

So do Stephen and Rae Ann Gruver, whose loss is even fresher: Their son Maxwell, a student at Louisiana State University, died in September.

While planning the meeting, Lanahan began to realize other parents have been working independently to effect change.

“I didn’t know some of these people were doing the same things,” she said. “We can work together and be a little bit of a louder voice.”

While fraternity members charged in her son’s death were found guilty of giving alcohol to a minor, she said, the family did get a financial settlement from the fraternity and several of its members, which was used to start the Gordie Foundation. The fraternity as part of the settlement acknowledged her son was hazed. The foundation has since become the Gordie Center at the University of Virginia and does outreach to youth on hazing and alcohol poisoning, she said.

“We’re really proud that Gordie’s name continues,” said Lanahan, of Dallas.

The family also in 2008 produced a documentary, “Haze.”

Lanahan and Smith said consequences for hazing have to be stiffer and law enforcement has to take a tough stand. Schools also must offer anti-hazing education, they said.

“When you talk to 1,000 kids in an auditorium, that’s just 1,000,” Smith said. “And there are millions we need to reach.”

Her son’s death followed three nights of fraternity “Hell Week,” when he had to perform calisthenics in a frigid basement with raw sewage on the floor and a fan blowing cold air on him. Then he had to stand on one foot and answer questions, all while being told to drink copious amounts of water.

Even when he had a seizure, no one called for help, she said.

He died of water intoxication. The excess water caused a deadly imbalance in his electrolytes and caused his brain and lungs to swell.

Smith’s work to prevent other deaths has been relentless. She’s helped produce documentaries for other countries; in one, her voice was dubbed over in French.

“You are just never done,” she said. “You’ve got to get justice. You want to make a difference.”
Dear Condoleezza Rice:
Good luck fixing the cesspool that is the NCAA

Mitch Daniels

Dear Condi,
That invitation to speak on our campus still stands, but I see that you'll be a little too busy this spring, now that you've accepted yet another "service opportunity" as chair of the new commission tasked by the NCAA to help it reform college basketball. You've always been a sucker for a good cause; and if ever a cause qualified, this one does.

When the FBI revealed its findings about the corrupt connections among shoe companies, agents, a few big-time college programs and coaches, and the Amateur Athletic Union or AAU (the first "A" increasingly looks like a misnomer), no one near the sport was shocked. The existence of this part of the cesspool has been in plain view for years. Those in a position to stop the scandals spawned by the "one-and-done" era — in which many top-tier players were required to enroll in college for one year before bolting for the NBA — have been either powerless to do so or actively interested in perpetuating the status quo.

When it was discovered that, at what we've always considered an academically admirable school, championships had been won by teams loaded with players who took completely phony classes, most of us were sincerely shocked. We were stunned again when, after years of cogitation, the NCAA delivered a penalty of . . . nothing. It was a final confession of futility, confirming the necessity of this special commission, if any meaningful change is going to happen from the collegiate end.

If the NCAA is impotent to stop the abuses, the NBA is all but an unindicted co-conspirator. The current arrangement works out beautifully for the league: It gets a free minor league player development system, a massively televised showcase for its next round of stars, and one less argument with a players union that prefers to limit, through its ineligible-until-age-19 rule, the number of competitors for the few hundred NBA roster spots. The league has every incentive to keep dragging its feet, so the most promising avenue for reform is to make the college game inhospitable to NBA exploitation and the rotten collusion that the one-and-done world fosters.

As for solutions, one can start by observing that almost no change could make things worse. I don't pretend to know the single best answer, but it's not hard to list a number of possibilities.

We could require a "year of readiness," meaning that freshmen could practice but not play while they became

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acclimated to college life. This was the NCAA rule for many decades, and it makes great sense unless a “student” really has no intention of pursuing a real education.

Or the NCAA could simply use the rule already in effect for baseball, which gives young aspirants a choice between going professional straight from high school or entering college and staying a minimum of three years. Either of these approaches separates those seriously interested in higher education from those forced by the current system to pretend they are.

Another idea would be to allow players to depart early for the NBA, but the scholarships they received would be required to remain vacant for the balance of their four-year terms. Coaches who want to chase that next championship with full-time players masquerading as students could do so, but the following few seasons might be tough with rosters filled with walk-ons.

I’m convinced the college game would be more, not less popular, if a handful of would-be pretend students, whose names fans barely get a chance to know, instead went straight from high school to some sort of professional league. Doing so would certainly bring more parity and fairness to the college game. The play would still be

obviously problem in your own backyard, you’re clearly never going to fix it on your own.

So thanks for serving, Condi, and best of luck.

If you thought Iranian sanctions or North Korean nukes were hard problems, wait until you try this one. And take your time about that invitation. Go save us from ourselves.

Mitch Daniels is president of Purdue University and a former governor of Indiana. He wrote this for The Washington Post.
Michigan State's Defender Led Review of Abuse

By MONICA DAVEY
and MITCH SMITH

As reports against Dr. Lawrence G. Nassar flooded in a year ago, besieged officials at Michigan State University announced they had ordered an internal review. Overseeing it would be Patrick J. Fitzgerald, a former federal prosecutor whose reputation for investigations into mobsters, terrorists and corrupt politicians led admirers to deem him a modern-day Eliot Ness.

Five women have said in lawsuits that they reported sexual abuse by Dr. Nassar to university coaches, trainers or counselors as early as the late 1990s. In 2014, a woman complained to the head of the university's sports medicine clinic that Dr. Nassar had inappropriately touched her, prompting an earlier inquiry, not involving Mr. Fitzgerald, that concluded that his actions were "not of a sexual nature," based on consultation with the doctor's colleagues.

Yet just last month, Mr. Fitzgerald — whom the university portrayed as reviewing the Nassar cases, even while he was defending Michigan State from lawsuits — wrote that no one at the university understood what Dr. Nassar was up to until the victims began going to the police in 2016.

"While many in the community today wish that they had identified Nassar as a predator, we believe the evidence in this case will show that no one else at M.S.U. knew that Nassar engaged in criminal behavior," he wrote in a letter to the state's attorney general, who had asked to see Mr. Fitzgerald's report.

Mr. Fitzgerald added: There was no report.

As Michigan State finds itself under intense scrutiny for its handling of Dr. Nassar, critics of the

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Michigan State’s Defender Led Review of Abuse

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Under the terms of the law
firm’s contract, the lawyers were
to defend the university in civil
lawsuits, facilitate “cooperation”
with law enforcement and provide
“counseling on any internal re-
views conducted to make sure
they are carried out in a manner
that will best assist the univer-
sity’s response.”

Though some women say they
told university employees about
abuse years ago, Mr. Fitzgerald
wrote in December that no one
who knew Dr. Nassar believed he
could be capable of such behavior.
“It is clear that Nassar fooled ev-
everyone around him — patients,
friends, colleagues, and fellow
doctors at M.S.U.,” Mr. Fitzgerald
wrote.

Over the months since they
hired Mr. Fitzgerald, 57, and his
team of lawyers, Michigan State
officials have highlighted his re-
view — sometimes noting Mr.
Fitzgerald’s involvement by name
— as a sign of the seriousness
of their response. Lou Anna K. Si-
mon, who resigned as president
on Wednesday, had portrayed the
university’s review as a robust
and “tireless effort” that would go
on as long as needed. “Even as we
examine — through both criminal
investigations and a thorough in-
ternal review — how something
so abhorrent happened here and
went on for so long, we are taking
action,” she said last April.

Dr. Nassar was sentenced to 40
to 175 years in prison on Wed-
day, after days of wrenching testi-
mony from more than 150 women

Siewr Friess, Anemone Hartocollis
and Brian M. Rosenthal contribut-
ed reporting. Susan C. Beachy con-
tributed research.
who have accused him of molesting them while he was a doctor for Michigan State and the national gymnastics team. The president stepped down hours later.

By week's end, Michigan State's athletic director, Mark Hollis, had also resigned. And two outside agencies — the federal education department and the Michigan attorney general — had begun what the university's critics hoped would be truly independent investigations into its handling of Dr. Nassar.

On Friday, Joel I. Ferguson, a Michigan State trustee, said he agreed with criticism that "we have the person who was defending us investigating us."

"There was a conflict," he added.

But Brian Breslin, the chairman of the board of trustees, said that he had "every confidence" in Mr. Fitzgerald's interviews and information. "He never developed a report and was never asked to," he said.

Asked whether there was a conflict in employing the same person to both defend and review the institution, Mr. Breslin said he had no comment.

Michigan State was dealing with a public relations crisis and a growing number of lawsuits when it hired Mr. Fitzgerald, who as the United States attorney in Chicago had built a reputation as a meticulous, unyielding foe of crooks.

Declaring that the corruption would "make Lincoln roll over in his grave," Mr. Fitzgerald oversaw the prosecution of Rod R. Blagojevich, the idiosyncratic former governor of Illinois accused of trying to get something in exchange for an appointment to the United States Senate seat that Barack Obama vacated when he was elected president.

Mr. Fitzgerald drew national attention by getting a conviction in a C.I.A. leak case against I. Lewis Libby Jr., the former chief of staff for then Vice President Dick Cheney. And he had worked on high-profile terrorism cases from New York, including the trials of four defendants in connection with the 1998 bombings of United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

"As far as investigating something, there's absolutely nobody better," Sam Adam Jr., one of Mr.

Critics say a truly independent inquiry was needed.

Blagojevich's defense lawyers, said, "As a criminal defense attorney, I can tell you, he was so good at applying pressure to people."

But Mr. Fitzgerald's role in the Michigan State case is not as prosecutor. Since 2016, Michigan State's trustees have paid him and his law firm, Skadden, Arps, along with other lawyers, to deal with the Nassar case and to respond to litigation against the school. The true scope and purpose of the lawyers' internal review have become a matter of fierce debate in recent days, but the trustees last February said the lawyers' role was to "represent the university in all aspects of this matter," adding, "This representation will include conducting the factual review necessary to address the allegations being made and to assess Nassar's former work at the university."

A Michigan State contract with Mr. Fitzgerald's firm included an hourly rate of up to $990. The ABC affiliate in Detroit reported this month that Mr. Fitzgerald's firm
has billed the university nearly $4.1 million.

"The public relations team at Michigan State gave the impression that he was going to do some sort of dispassionate, independent investigation, and that simply was not true," said John C. Manly, a lawyer for more than 100 of the women who have sued or made claims against Michigan State.

Mr. Manly said that no one from Michigan State or their legal team had sought to interview his clients about what had happened. Mr. Fitzgerald said that his team took "affirmative steps" not to interview victims of the abuse because of ethics rules restricting contact with plaintiffs in civil cases.

Among the women suing are five who reported feeling uncomfortable or violated to coaches, trainers and counselors in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

One of the women, Larissa Boyce, said she was molested by Dr. Nassar for over two years, beginning at age 16, while training with Michigan State's youth gymnastics program in 1997 and 1998. Ms. Boyce said she had told the women's gymnastics coach at the time, Kathie Klages. But instead of helping, the coach explained to Ms. Boyce that she was probably "misunderstanding" the situation and implied Ms. Boyce would get in trouble if she filed a more formal complaint, according to a lawsuit.

Another gymnast said she had also told Ms. Klages about abuse by Dr. Nassar around that time. Ms. Klages retired last year amid the scandal. Her lawyer declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Michigan State's policies require all employees to promptly report any sexual misconduct that they learn about involving a faculty member, staff member or student. But it is not clear that any of the people who heard the complaints in the late 1990s and early 2000s reported it to university administrators.

In a court motion two weeks ago seeking to dismiss the case against the university and its employees, including Ms. Klages, Michigan State said supervisors did not even know there were allegations against Dr. Nassar until 2014, when another woman complained to the head of the university's sports medicine clinic, Jeff Kovan, that Ms. Nassar had massaged her breasts, buttocks and vaginal area.

In that case, an investigator consulted with three doctors and a certified athletic trainer, who backed Dr. Nassar's explanation that his actions were medically appropriate to treat the patient's pain. Each of the four had a connection to Dr. Nassar: One of the doctors studied under him and was a colleague and friend, the investigative report said; one had known him since 1988 and was a classmate and teaching colleague; one had known him since 1996, and he had treated her daughter; and the trainer worked regularly with Dr. Nassar in the training room, an average of four hours a week for 17 years.

The university found that Mr. Nassar's actions were appropriate and "not of a sexual nature."

Dr. Nassar continued to molest patients, according to lawsuits, and even as late as August 2016, just before victims began to go public, some Michigan State employees told gymnasts that Mr. Nassar's methods were appropriate. The employees also sternly warned gymnasts not to speak to the media, according to allegations in court filings.