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Tim Vines to lead state's largest health insurer

By: Lawrence Specker

Tim Vines has been elected as the new president and CEO of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama, the insurer announced Wednesday.

According to information released by Blue Cross and Blue Shield, Vines has a 24-year history with the company; past jobs have included president and chief operating officer, chief administrative officer and senior vice president for health management. He is a native of LaFayette, Ala., a Chambers County city east of Alexander City. He is a graduate of Auburn University and is the chair of the board of trustees at Samford University.

A company representative said that Vines is the first African American executive to hold the rank of president and CEO for the company.

His ascension to his new role has been expected since he was named president and COO in November. The company's board of directors made it official with a vote on Wednesday.

Vines will take office following the April 1 retirement of his predecessor, Terry Kellogg, who has been CEO since 2010. In an announcement released by the company, Kellogg described Vines as a leader who could "successfully move Blue Cross forward in an industry that faces constant change."

Wednesday's announcement didn't reveal Vines' salary. In 2014 it emerged that the top 10 executives at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama had collectively doubled their pay from 2011 to 2013. All 10 were making more than $1 million in 2013, and Kellogg's salary had risen from $2.5 million to nearly $5 million a year.

Following that round of headlines, in 2015 the Alabama Department of Insurance asked the legislature to end the requirement for health insurance executives' salaries to be made public. The legislature obliged the request, which "came from industry feedback" according to a Department of Insurance official.

Wednesday's announcement quoted Vines as saying that he was "extremely humbled and honored" to take the position. "Although the healthcare industry will continue to change, we remain committed to providing our customers superior service and access to quality, affordable healthcare."

Blue Cross Blue Shield is Alabama's dominant health insurance provider. According to corporate information, it covers more than 3 million people and employs more than 3,600.
Gambling magnate McGregor dies at 78

The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — Alabama gambling magnate Milton McGregor, who waged a legal war to keep his electronic bingo casino open and thwarted federal attempts to prosecute him, died Sunday. He was 78.

Public relations firm Direct Communications said McGregor died peacefully in his home in Montgomery.

An affable and charming fixture of the state's business and political worlds, he advertised his casino with the slogan, which he drewled in Southern baritone, "Come join us... you can be a winner too."

His business interests included banking and nursing homes, but he was best known for developing a dog track-turned-casino in the Bible Belt state. The operation at one point boasted 6,400 electronic gambling machines, more than many Las Vegas casinos.

Raised the son of a widow

See MCGREGOR, A5
who ran a small town grocery, McGregor began finding success in the 1980s at the start of the video game craze, with an arcade and a business leasing the games. He opened VictoryLand dog track casino in Macon County in 1984 and later acquired a defunct horse track in Birmingham for dog racing.

He then bet big on electronic bingo.

Alabama law allows bingo in some locations, including Macon County. McGregor invested millions of dollars in a VictoryLand expansion, filling it with machines that played lightning quick games of bingo electronically, but on the outside replicated the experience of playing a slot machine with whirling displays and chimes.

He added a swanky 300-room adjacent hotel and restaurants in an attempt to compete with neighboring Mississippi casinos. Macon County politicians praised McGregor for bringing jobs to the economically depressed county.

But not everyone in the conservative state was pleased by his efforts.

The state launched a still ongoing effort to close the casino, saying the slot machine-like games were illegal and not what was intended by the state laws allowing bingo.

McGregor came out on the winning side of a high-profile government corruption case in 2012. Federal prosecutors in 2010 indicted McGregor, another casino developer, lobbyists and politicians on charges that they orchestrated a scheme to buy votes at the Alabama State House for gambling legislation. Prosecutors said McGregor was trying to ensure the continued operation of the casino that they said profited $40 million in a single year.

A first trial ended with a hung jury. A second jury acquitted McGregor of all charges, and McGregor reopened the casino.

"Now I'm focused on getting 3,000 people back to work and charities and governmental agencies receiving revenue, as they should have been all the time," McGregor told The Associated Press after his acquittal.

McGregor is survived by his wife, two daughters and seven grandchildren.
Pouncey applies for state’s top education job

By: Trisha Powell Crain

For Jefferson County Superintendent Dr. Craig Pouncey, as the saying goes, the third time may be the charm.

Pouncey said he told Jefferson County board members on Monday that he applied for the state superintendent position, left open after Michael Sentance resigned in September. Interim state Superintendent Dr. Ed Richardson, who served as state superintendent from 1995 until 2004, is currently serving in the position.

This will be the third time Pouncey has applied for the job. Asked why he chose to apply, Pouncey said in a statement to AL.com, "I have always valued the importance of public education. It serves as the foundation of our democracy. If we hope to continue our successes as a state, we must ensure we produce an educated citizenry."

Pouncey has spent 38 years working in public education in Alabama and as Jefferson County's superintendent was named Superintendent of the Year in October by peers in the School Superintendents of Alabama organization.

From 2003 to 2014, Pouncey worked at the Alabama State Department of Education in administrative roles including Chief State School Financial Officer and Chief of Staff.

Pouncey became Superintendent in Jefferson County in 2014 in the midst of an effort by Gardendale to break away from the county to form a city school district. In February, after a federal Court of Appeals reasoned Gardendale should not be allowed to break away from the county, Gardendale officials gave up their effort.

The national firm conducting the search, Ray and Associates, set the deadline for applications today at 5 p.m.

The first time Pouncey applied, in 2011, he was a finalist alongside Dr. Tommy Bice when both worked in administration at the Alabama State Department of Education. Bice was ultimately appointed to the position, and retired four years later in March 2016.

A spokesperson for the Council of Chief State School Officers provided AL.com a spreadsheet showing the average tenure of current chief education officers across the country is around two and a half years. The longest serving state superintendent is Wisconsin's Tony Evers, who has been in the position for nearly nine years.

Pouncey again applied for the position and again became a finalist, but Sentance was appointed in a 5-4 vote in August 2016. A legislative committee conducted an inquiry into how education officials and the Ethics Commission handled an anonymous allegation that may have affected
Pouncey not being chosen. The committee reached no conclusions but turned over their findings to the state Bar in July.

The allegation that Pouncey used his office for personal gain was proven false prior to the board voting to appoint Sentance to the top spot, but some, including Pouncey alleged the mishandling of that complaint cost Pouncey the job.

In February 2017, Pouncey filed a civil lawsuit alleging state board member Mary Scott Hunter, R-Huntsville, interim Superintendent Philip Cleveland, General Counsel Juliana Dean and state department of education attorneys James Ward and Susan Crowther conspired to keep Pouncey from being appointed as state superintendent.

Circuit Judge Roman Shaul dismissed Cleveland, Dean and Crowther from the lawsuit in January, but the case is still pending.

On Friday, Dr. Carl Davis, Regional Search Director for Ray and Associates, couldn't confirm that Pouncey applied, but said there has been great interest in the position.

"We're very proud of the number of applicants for the job," Davis said.

Davis said they haven't yet reached the 70-plus number of applications they had hoped for, but there was still time, as the deadline for applications was Friday at 5 p.m.

Gary Ray, president of the search firm, told board member in January that a new superintendent could be seated by mid-April.

The next step, Davis said, is for the search firm to match the applicants to the criteria set by board members. He expects to bring eight to 10 candidates to the board for evaluation. Board members will then decide which candidates they hope to interview.

"There are some high-quality candidates," Davis said, "and all you need is one."
HARRIS

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SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said the awards allow them to celebrate faculty in the conference who've made meaningful contributions to students in their respective fields.

Harris and the other award winners will receive a $5,000 honorarium from the SEC and will be nominated for SEC Professor of the Year Award to be named in April. Whoever is chosen for that honor will receive a $15,000 honorarium.

"I am grateful — and deeply humbled — by this recognition," Harris said. "It is only because of wonderful students and colleagues that I have been able to reach this point in a career that has garnered this award."
OUR VIEW

Tide basketball program headed in right direction

When it comes to college football, University of Alabama fans of a certain age — say, those younger than 16 — have memories of nothing other than the Crimson Tide's dominance on the gridiron.

If the time ever comes when Alabama suffers through a lean football season, those same fans might be dumbstruck. When virtually all they've seen is the Tide competing for a national title every year, anything less might seem like failure.

Conversely, Alabama's young fans have seen plenty of mediocrity in their lifetimes from the Tide's men's basketball team. Sure, the team made it to the NCAA Tournament in 2012, but it lost in the first round. And until this year, Alabama had not won a game in the tournament since 2006.

This season's journey into March Madness fulfilled a pledge made by Tide head coach Avery Johnson, who said when he arrived at UA in April 2015 that he would have his team in the tournament no later than his third year at the helm.

Johnson also told Tide fans to "put their seat belts on" in preparation for an exciting and successful brand of basketball — and the fans have responded. Johnson's three seasons rank in the top seven for attendance at UA home games, and season-ticket sales this season surpassed 6,000 for the first time since 2012-13, when Alabama was coming off its last NCAA appearance. That happened to be the third season for Johnson's predecessor, Anthony Grant.

The reality is, Alabama posted some solid seasons under Grant, including three straight years with 20-plus wins. But the team had just the one NCAA bid during his six years in charge, and making the Big Dance is the benchmark of success in college basketball. The Crimson Tide was 19-15 in Grant's final season, which compares well with Johnson's three seasons of 18-15 his first year, 19-15 last year and this year's 20-16. The difference is Alabama looks like a team on the rise.

Granted, Alabama was frustratingly inconsistent this year, but after a late-season slide the Tide pulled off some stellar victories, including a couple of must-win games in the SEC Tournament and a defeat of Virginia Tech in the first round of the NCAA tournament. Youth played a part in the up-and-down campaign, but Johnson has recruited some top-notch talent, and flashes of just how good this program can become showed in a double-digit, come-from-behind win at Florida and impressive home wins over Oklahoma and SEC regular-season co-champions Tennessee and Auburn.

Johnson said when he took the Alabama job that he believed the program has Final Four potential. That might have seemed like hyperbole, especially to young fans who haven't seen much success from the Tide. But for those who haven't yet learned their history, they should bone up. Alabama has a rich tradition in basketball, including seven NCAA Sweet 16 appearances, the second-best all-time conference record behind Kentucky and just 19 losing seasons in its 105-year history.

Congratulations to Johnson and the Tide on a successful season. We hope the best is yet to come.
UA partners with atmospheric group

Leaders say accord will expand research

Staff report

The University of Alabama is now officially a member of a national organization focused on research and training in atmospheric sciences.

At a Monday ceremony on campus, UA President Stuart R. Bell and the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research President Antonio J. Busalacchi signed an agreement that means the Capstone is a member of the consortium of 117 universities and colleges across North America.

Bell said the partnership will benefit students, the state and the nation.

"UA’s partnership with UCAR provides new opportunities for additional research into the atmospheric and related Earth system sciences, which is so vital for improving forecasts, protecting life and property, and fostering economic growth," Bell said.

The University Corporation for Atmospheric Research manages the National Center for Atmospheric Research under sponsorship by the National Science Foundation and through its community programs supports and extends the capabilities of its academic consortium.

UA was voted into the corporation at its annual meeting in October, along with six other institutions including Duke University and Louisiana State University.

"We are honored to have the University of Alabama join the UCAR community," Busalacchi said. "We look forward to collaborating with the university and their strong academic programs to advance our knowledge of weather, water, climate and other vital aspects of the Earth system for the benefit of Alabama residents and all of society."

UA will be able to further develop its programs in atmospheric sciences through access to the corporation's researchers, supercomputers, weather models and research aircraft, Bell said.

"The community models developed by NCAR and its university partners help keep Alabama citizens safe from hurricanes, tornadoes and other dangerous weather events, and UA researchers will be engaged in building the next generation of models," Bell said. "The Earth sciences research that we are conducting with NCAR and UCAR's member universities is vital for protecting lives and property, providing a major return on the investment by taxpayers."
UAB-Infirmary Health alliance could have big impact on Alabama care

By: Lawrence Specker

An alliance between UAB Health System and Mobile-based Infirmary Health clearly has potential to impact health care in Alabama, starting with the sheer throw weight of a $4 billion-per-year combined budget.

Top executives say the "strategic and operational affiliation agreement" announced in early March is designed to be a win-win-win deal: UAB and Infirmary Health will gain myriad benefits while preserving their independence, and more of the state's population gets access to more resources.

Potential benefits for patients include new services, access to specialists and the ability to participate in clinical trials of cutting-edge medicines. For the state at large, it's a big step toward a cooperative, truly statewide healthcare system.

Even if that no-pain-all-gain promise holds true, a deeper look shows that this union is something more delicate, and probably more complicated, than a corporate merger or acquisition. Either of those would create a common ownership structure, a common leadership hierarchy, a common workforce. This doesn't.

Instead it seems to be all about creating common opportunities. Identifying those might be relatively easy, but even so it'll take time to develop and implement real plans to pursue them. It may well be years before the full fruits are seen.

Nonetheless, leaders of the two systems say the benefits could be vast. And they say it could help Alabama brace for some disturbing trends in healthcare.

"You might not get a reduced bill today, but in the long run what that should do is slow the rate of the cost increase," Mark Nix, president and CEO of Infirmary Health System, says of spiraling healthcare costs.

Dr. William Ferniany, CEO of UAB Health System, says that by 2025 there could be a shortage of 60,000 doctors in the United States. Research released by the Association of American Medical Colleges pegs that shortfall anywhere from 40,000 to 105,000 by 2030, and Ferniany offers an unvarnished take on which end of the stick Alabama will get.

"You can be sure it's going to be more acute in Alabama, and more acute in rural areas," he says. He suggests that a partnership that helps train more doctors in Alabama might provide some relief.

'We don't have to be owned'

Dr. Gerhard Boehm, a Mobile surgeon who spoke at the press conference announcing the partnership, has a background that lets him see it from a few different angles.

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Boehm earned his degree at UAB in the mid-'70s and did a residency at Emory before moving to Mobile. Over the years since then the surgeon been the president of the alumni association for graduates of the UAB School of Medicine; spent a decade on the Mobile Infirmary board; served as president of the Infirmary medical staff; and worked as an adjunct professor at the University of South Alabama, a position he still holds.

He is unstinting in his praise for the Infirmary, which has grown to become not just one of the biggest medical systems in the state but one of the biggest employers in southwest Alabama, with a combined staff of more than 5,100 people. Its hospitals and affiliate locations include the 719-bed Infirmary in midtown Mobile, Thomas Hospital in Fairhope, North Baldwin Infirmary in Bay Minette, Atmore Community Hospital and numerous clinics, imaging centers and other facilities.

"It's a wonderful institution," Boehm says, "started by a number of civic-minded ladies over 100 years ago."

It was founded as a community-based nonprofit, which it still is. "Our money doesn't leave the area," Boehm says. "It stays right here."

For the Infirmary to be swallowed up by a bigger fish would no doubt be disturbing to many in the area, but Boehm says that fear is not justified in this case.

"I would say, no, that's not true," he says. "We're not invading them, we're not being invaded."

The others echo that thought. "We don't have to own somebody else, and we don't have to be owned by somebody else," says Nix.

"We're not on their board, there's no margin sharing or anything like that," says Ferniany.

Big as it is, the Infirmary can't be all things to all patients, Boehm says. Some of the cases it sees, such as some cancer cases, require that the patient be referred to a facility that can offer advanced or specialized care. UAB was already an option and having a built-in relationship could streamline that process.

Boehm says that as it stands, such patients in the area may think first of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. A foothold in southwest Alabama helps UAB solidify a regional reputation.

"There's really no reason why UAB shouldn't be their first choice," says Boehm. "In my opinion they can get the same expertise in Birmingham and travel a lot less."

"We don't want referrals, if we can help it, going to Texas" or elsewhere, says Ferniany.

"From a patient perspective, there are something like over 100 procedures that UAB does ... that no one else in the state does," says Nix. In a way, an alliance puts those procedures in Infirmary Health's portfolio.

Residency and recruiting

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The alliance isn't just about programs. It's about people, and on that point both the smaller Infirmary Health and the much larger UAB system have something to offer that the other dearly covets.

UAB educates students who need to serve residencies bridging the gap between medical school and full professional certification. There are a limited number of openings, and a relationship with the state's biggest nonprofit, nongovernmental healthcare institution guarantees that a lot of newly-minted UAB doctors will have places to start their careers.

"We are very excited about working with Mobile Infirmary to enhance the residency programs in the area," says Ferniany.

Boehm says that that two of UAB's biggest programs are internal medicine and emergency medicine. And emergency doctors don't just provide immediate care for critical cases: They're also gatekeepers who make important decisions about who gets treated and sent home, versus who gets admitted. A pipeline of personnel trained in this specific discipline will be a big asset to the Infirmary, he says.

Nix is looking at the long term. "The biggest piece from my perspective is the ability to recruit and retain physicians," he says. Having residents spend time in the Mobile area means exposing them to the charms of the Gulf Coast. "Hopefully they'll want to live here," he says.

The allure of a UAB connection might also make the Infirmary more appealing to established medical professionals considering a career move, Nix says.

"When we go out and recruit, we can do that under the UAB name," Nix says.

'We're not closing the door'

Mobile already had a medical school and two university hospitals. So what does it mean for the University of South Alabama medical program to have UAB planting its flag in Lower Alabama?

Proponents of the deal say they have the utmost respect for the USA Health System's strengths, which they say include trauma care, burn care and gynecological oncology. "They're doing an excellent job in those areas and have been for many, many years," says Boehm.

They're not standing still either: USA Medical Center is in the process of a multi-million dollar upgrade and expansion of its Level 1 trauma center, which already was one of only three in Alabama.

"This is not about hurting others, it's primarily about creating opportunities," says Ferniany. "I want to emphasize this is not targeted at beating up someone else."

Nix says that Infirmary Health has worked with USA Health, including a temporary cooperative agreement on cancer care. But they found there were challenges.

"It's very difficult to partner on one service line and compete on all others," he says.

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As they announced the deal in early March, Nix and Ferniany said they were open to the possibility of other participants. Ferniany reiterated that. "We ... would love for USA to join with us," he says. "I have sent a formal invitation."

What position USA will take has yet to be seen. Requests for comment had drawn no response as this story was published.

"We're not closing the door on anything," says Nix.

Boehm says that comparing a partnership with USA to one with UAB is apples and oranges. Right now Infirmary Health wants the orange, in part because it's a whole lot bigger.

"South Alabama is a new medical center," says Boehm. "UAB is a well-established old medical center that's got a national and maybe even international reputation."

UAB also brings in half a billion dollars a year in research funds, Boehm says. Infirmary Health wants a piece of that research, and the resulting medicine.

The impact on care

For patients walking into Infirmary Health hospitals, changes brought by the partnership may be subtle at first, though Nix and Ferniany are enthusiastic about the possibilities.

In the near term, patients may benefit from an increased use of telemedicine, as UAB specialists consult on difficult cases via online conferences that virtually put them in the room with Infirmary doctors. (There's a hierarchical effect to such technology-driven collaboration: Nix says Infirmary Health also will provide more telemedicine services in the future to its smaller associates.)

Cancer patients and those needing transplants may benefit from quicker, smoother referrals to UAB. Nix is also excited about the possibility that they and other patients may soon be able to participate in clinical trials being run out by UAB, giving them access to promising, cutting-edge medicines.

"That's part of the plan here," says Boehm.

"I think they want to establish a transplant center here," adds Boehm, raising another possibility. He doesn't mean that UAB would perform organ transplants in Lower Alabama, but that it would establish a site for follow-up care. That would be a boon to transplant patients in the area, cutting their need to travel for post-surgical care.

"We want the ability to run clinical trials," says Nix. The next wave involves genetics, tailoring medicines to work on a specific patient, he says. It's heavy lifting, and having a heavyweight partner such as UAB gets Infirmary Health into the game.

"We can almost predict which medicines will work on you that will not work on me," Nix says. "They are in the middle of that research."

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If Infirmary Health seems like the beneficiary or junior partner in most of those areas, it does bring benefits for UAB to the table. Not least of which is its buying power, which may help purchasing talks on items ranging from pacemakers to hip implants to MRI scanners. Nix says Infirmary's budget is around $800 million per year, roughly a 25 percent addition to UAB's $3.2 billion.

"When we can take a $4 billion company to the negotiating table," says Nix, "we have a lot more clout."

However, they can't negotiate combined deals with insurers. "These aren't those kind of relationships," says Ferniany.

A relationship with Infirmary Health also helps Ferniany advance a goal dear to UAB: building a cooperative network of hospitals throughout the state and even beyond its borders. The vision is for UAB to sit at the center of a confederation, taking in patients referred by its partners but also providing expertise and services that helps strengthen those partners in an era when small hospitals and health systems, particularly rural ones, are under pressure.

"We have a lot of affiliates," Ferniany says, and those affiliations take different forms and sometimes involve management agreements. They include relationships with Baptist Health Montgomery, Eliza Coffee Memorial Hospital in Florence, Northeast Regional Medical Center in Anniston, Russell Medical Center in Alexander City, Whitfield Memorial Hospital in Demopolis and LV Stabler Memorial Hospital in Greenville. In February UAB announced a management agreement with John Paul Jones Hospital in Camden. The 30-bed institution had previously said financial pressures would force it to close; local leaders hope UAB's intervention will prevent that.

UAB also works with other hospitals that aren't under the UAB Health System umbrella, Ferniany says.

"Our goal is to enhance the health of the people in Alabama," says Ferniany. "We try to fill gaps. We're very careful not to ... we're not there to compete."

Over the months to come, the details of UAB-Infirmary programs will be worked out at meetings and conferences and they'll gradually begin to be put into effect. Over the years to come, leaders at both institutions will have to evaluate whether the relationship is living up to its potential. Nix says the terms leave some room for adjustments.

"You want to put a program in place that has the flexibility to allow future leaders to do what they need to do," he says. But at the same time, he adds that he's not describing an easy escape hatch. This is a commitment, he says.

"We didn't enter into it with the thought of getting out of it," Nix says.

This isn't just a deal between two institutions. Like Ferniany, he describes it as a piece of a wider vision, one that's already reaching into Mississippi and the Florida Panhandle.

"We want to be part of something bigger altogether," he says.
Officially installed, Auburn's president calls for 500 new faculty

By: Lawrence Specker

As he was installed Thursday as Auburn University's 19th president, Steven Leath unveiled a vision that includes hiring 500 new tenure-track faculty members over the next five years.

Leath was hired in March 2017 after a process in which the roster of candidates wasn't revealed to the public. He succeeded Jay Gogue, who held the post since July 2007 and retired in summer 2017. Leath had previously been president at Iowa State, which set fundraising records and increased research spending during his tenure.

The ceremony was attended by Gov. Kay Ivey, among other dignitaries.

In general terms, Leath said his aim is for Auburn to become "a world-class academic, research and service university in the true spirit of our land-grant heritage." He said the three core components of that land-grant spirit were the education of its students, the research and scholarship done by its faculty and the pursuit of outreach and engagement beneficial to the larger community.

"We're doing well in every area, and doing exceptionally well in some," he said. He said that "solid" and "sound" performance in scholarship and research leaves "room for growth and improvement."

He said an ongoing internal reorganization -- such as splitting responsibility for economic development between two vice-presidents -- will streamline the university's efforts and help it make the most of its resources. But it also needs more resources, he said, particularly when it comes to faculty.

"Quite simply, we need to increase our faculty and give these new hires and their peers on campus the resources they need to succeed," he said. "We intend to transform Auburn into a top-tier academic, research and service university by hiring more than 500 tenure-track, research- and scholarship-focused faculty by 2022."

According to information provided Thursday by Auburn, the net increase in faculty size will be significantly smaller: "The total number of tenured and tenure-track faculty is expected to grow from 1,144 in 2018 to an estimated 1,250 by 2022 after accounting for typical faculty retirement and attrition patterns."

New facilities including housing and labs also will be needed, he said. He acknowledged the effort will be expensive, but said he believes Auburn is "well-positioned" following a recent successful fundraising campaign. "Sources of funding for new facilities and expansions of existing facilities will be considered in collaboration with the governor and our development partners as we flesh out our needs," he said.
He also suggested marketing would be a big part of the effort, saying that "It's important that we raise Auburn's profile because we'll need that higher visibility" as the university recruits new faculty and partners.

"I'm not advocating that we brag or boast," he said. "I learned quickly that's not the Auburn way. But there's nothing wrong with Auburn getting its fair share of well-deserved recognition for our tremendous abilities and accomplishments."

"Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to accept this challenge with me," he said. "Together, we can achieve it."
Jacksonville State gives students option not to return to campus after tornado

By: Paul Gattis

Students at tornado-ravaged Jacksonville State University may not have to return to campus for the rest of the spring semester.

The school posted an update on its website Saturday outlining options for students - including taking the grades they currently have as their final grades or taking "incompletes" in classes.

The options came two days after school president John Beehler announced that the school would complete the spring semester.

The school in northeast Alabama is recovering from an EF-3 tornado that slammed into campus buildings and nearby apartment complexes on March 19. There were four injuries attributed to the storm, according to the National Weather Service forecast office in Birmingham.

The weather service said in its storm survey that the tornado - with peak estimated wind speeds of 150 mph - "affected the entire campus" and that "several buildings sustained significant damage."

Classes would typically be resuming Monday after students were away last week - during the tornado - for spring break.

In a statement addressed to students posted on the school website, Timothy King, vice president for student affairs, said that the administration "heard your concerns about being able to complete the semester."

As a result of those concerns, the school is providing students three options:

- Use the current grade earned as the final grade for all classes or for select classes.
- Take an incomplete in all or select classes and finish the class(es) through the applicable incomplete procedure.
- Complete the semester for all or select classes and complete course requirements.

"Each student's situation is different; therefore, it is imperative that students make these decisions wisely and with input from faculty and academic advisers who are very knowledgeable about degree and accreditation requirements," King wrote.

King also wrote that the administration still must develop a procedure for students who wish to return to their studies in the spring semester. He said an update is expected late Monday afternoon.

The school's marching band has also announced that its annual Honor Band festival, scheduled for May 10-12, has been canceled due to tornado damage on campus.
Final Four connections to Wimp Sanderson

The Wimp Sanderson coaching tree, not talked about in the same terms as Dean Smith's, perhaps, but certainly representative of Sanderson's long run of college success, has made it back to the Final Four.

Porter Moser, the head coach at Loyola-Chicago, was an assistant under Sanderson from 1997 through 1999, not in Tuscaloosa but at Arkansas-Little Rock. He's now headed to San Antonio after the long, circuitous route that college basketball coaches sometimes take, only to find himself the first Final Four coach in history who is less recognizable in public than his own team chaplain.

"Barry (Sanderson, Wimp's son and also a basketball coach) was the one who talked me into hiring him, and he did a good job for us," Sanderson said. "He'd been at Texas A&M with Tony Barone. We had a good run at Little Rock."

Ultimately, Sanderson retired and UALR brought in Arkansas legend Sidney Moncrief. That's "playing

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Moser won 18 games a year for three straight years at UALR. He went from there to Illinois State, where he was fired after four years. The ISU athletic director who fired him, Sheahon Zenger, is now the AD at Kansas, which might make for an awkward reunion at the Final Four. From there, Moser went to work as an assistant under his mentor, the late Rick Majerus, at St. Louis and it was Majerus who helped him land the job at Loyola. After seven seasons (admirable administrative patience in these times), he led the 2018 Ramblers into the NCAA Tournament — and history.

He's not the first Sanderson assistant to reach the Final Four. In fact, he had to squeak past another to make it to San Antonio.

"He had to get past Rick Barnes," Sanderson said.

Barnes, an assistant at Alabama under Sanderson in the 1980s, had been to the Final Four as Texas' head coach and had a strong
chance with Tennessee this year — until Loyola came along.

"I watched the game," Sanderson said. "The shot that Loyola made to beat Tennessee was just one of those things. It bounced off the rim, straight up in the air and fell through. I used to hate buzzer-beaters like that. The same thing happened to our best team in Little Rock. A guy from New Orleans made a buzzer-beater in the conference tournament finals to beat us — in our gym. Knocked us out of the NCAA.

"I thought Rick did a great job with Tennessee this year," Sanderson said. "In the preseason, I thought they'd be awful. I told Barry, "They're not going to win any games," and then they won 26."

In addition to Barnes and Moser, Sanderson also had one of his former UA players, Mike Davis (also a Final Four coach), make the tournament and lead Texas Southern to its first NCAA win in school history.

Another, Mark Gottfried, will try to make it from a new spot next year, having just taken the job at Cal State-Northridge.

"I still watch the games," Sanderson said on Monday. "I watched Duke and Kansas last night. I think it will be a good Final Four."

For the third time, it will be one with at least a drop of Sanderson influence. Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
Clark sees improvement as spring practice reaches midpoint

Evan Dudley  For AL.com

UAB reached the midway point of spring practice this week, beginning the homestretch to the Green and Gold game on April 7.

Blazers head coach Bill Clark was pleased with what he saw in the first two sessions back after the break.

"I thought we made some progress today," Clark said Thursday. "Like I always say, one day I'm mad at the offense and one day I'm mad at the defense. Today I thought they both brought good energy."

A lot of that energy came on the offensive side of the ball during the viewing session.

Running back Kingston Davis, a former Prattville star and Michigan transfer, showcased a brutal running style, consistently breaking multiple tackles to gain yards after contact. He has entrenched himself among the other top backs, including 2017 C-USA Freshman of the Year Spencer Brown and Ole Miss transfer Jarrion Street.

Senior running back James Noble III has been seen in the backfield in more wide-open packages.

The offensive line lost only one starter from last year, so it has held intact with returning starters James Davis at left tackle, Lee Dufour at center, Malique Johnson at right guard and Justice Powers at right tackle.

Richard Cook, who logged four starts at guard in 2017, has taken up the left guard position vacated by outgoing senior Chris Schleuger. The entire offensive line, with the exception of Dufour, are seniors.

The second grouping that has been observed includes redshirt freshman Patrick Nuss at right tackle, sophomore Greg Fecanin at right guard, junior David Galten at left guard and 2018 signee Andrew Smith at center and Colby Ragland at left tackle.

Everyone who caught a pass last year is back, but 2018 junior college transfers Austin Watkins and Kendall Parham have been observed getting reps in the receiver rotation. Donnie Lee finished the 2017 season behind Brown in the running back pecking order due to his blocking ability and soft hands out of the backfield, and has translated that into a move to tight end where he has impressed through the first few practices.

The offense is coming along nicely with new offensive coordinator Bryant Vincent, and Clark is starting to see the upperclassman step up and take ownership of the offense.

"I think when you start looking at day seven, day eight, day nine, that's when you really got to do a good job as coaches motivating," Clark said. "Hopefully we're learning how to motivate ourselves. We got a big senior class, you're expecting leadership out of those guys and learning how to self-motivate. That's key right here in the middle of it.

"We're also looking at guys that maybe can play. Maybe it's a guy we didn't know about who's had a great offseason. I tell them everyday that depth chart changes and you have to keep proving yourself. We're looking for those guys who may be the first backups."
With another title, UA men’s wheelchair team back on top

By Mathew Speakman
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

Nestled in the northwest corner of the University of Alabama’s campus stands Stran-Hardin arena, a $10 million facility dedicated to Alabama’s Adapted Athletics program.

The arena features a silver-toned concourse, a full-length basketball court, workout stations and training rooms. It has wheelchair-accessible bleachers on both sides of the court.

On the left side of court hang nine national championship banners for three different sports -- men’s basketball, women’s basketball and tennis.

Two months after the opening, Alabama’s men’s wheelchair basketball earned a 10th banner.

It defeated UW-Whitewater in a come-from-behind effort to capture the men’s team’s second national championship and the 10th for the adapted athletics program.

With the opening of the facility and the pressure of achieving success at a school known for athletics, the wheelchair basketball team had no choice but to bring home hardware to prove itself.

“To get recognized in title town you have to win titles,” coach Ford Burttram said. “It shows our guys that all the hard work for all of these years has paid off.”

Then new facility only made things easier.

They didn’t have to get up at 5 a.m. for practice. They didn’t have to go through the rec center to book a time for practice.

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anymore. The team could practice whenever it wanted and for however long it wanted.

They had access to new ways of training and workouts. It took the team to new heights when the facility opened in January. The players could work harder without having to worry about going through a middle man. It took away the stress.

“When you have this facility that you can call your own, you can get the time in that you need,” said DeQuel Robinson, who scored 21 points in the national championship game. “You could practice whenever you wanted outside of practice. We put that time in by ourselves and had goals.”

The arena didn’t open until midway through the season, but from the start, Alabama wanted to prove itself.

The confidence needed to make a run at championship came as early as the first tournament of the season. Alabama defeated No. 1 UW-Whitewater and No. 2 UT-Arlington in the same weekend, a feat it had not accomplished until then.

Heading into the season, a national championship was on their minds. That weekend showed them they could pull it off if they stayed the course.

“Those wins early in the season gave us confidence that we could play with and beat anyone in the country,” Burtrtnam said.

The success continued. Alabama defeated Auburn and Missouri to reach the finals after a 27-3 regular season.

In the title game, the team faced two double-digit deficits, but did not panic. Forward Michael Auprinse was a force, scoring 31 points and earning MVP honors.

When the team returned home from the tournament in Minnesota, people started to recognize them for their efforts.

“I went to go get groceries after we got back, and I was mobbed by like 20 or 30 people,” Auprinse said. “It was crazy. I think within five minutes of getting off the bus, people were coming up to us and congratulating us.”

In just eight years, the wheelchair basketball team has two titles. With a new facility and players like Auprinse and Robinson coming back next year, it is primed to carry this success.

To be recognized in Tuscaloosa a team has to win titles. Alabama adapted athletics is holding up its end of the bargain.
Arnold Palmer Cup has UA flavor

By: Ian Thompson

This summer’s Arnold Palmer Cup is being played outside Paris, France, but will have a distinctly University of Alabama flavor to it.

UA’s Davis Riley, Lauren Stephenson and Kristen Gillman are all playing for Team USA; UA assistant women’s golf team coach Susan Rosenstiel is assistant coach for the U.S. team; and future UA player Jiwon Jeon has been selected for the International team, along with Auburn’s Jovan Rebula.

They will all compete in this annual Ryder Cup-style competition to be played July 6-8 at Evian Resort Golf Club in Évian-les-Bains, France. This year’s event will be the first using the expanded format of U.S. men’s and women’s collegiate golfers versus their counterparts from around the world. It was co-founded by Arnold Palmer and The Golf Coaches Association of America in 1997.

“It’s a tremendous honor for Lauren and Kristen to be named to the first women’s Palmer Cup roster,” Alabama women’s golf coach Mic Potter said. “They are putting together fantastic seasons and careers at Alabama, and couldn’t be more deserving of this honor. Congratulations to both of them!”

Jeon, who hails from Daegu, South Korea, is the first junior college golfer to be selected to participate in the Palmer Cup in the 21-year history of the event. She will join the Tide from Daytona State (Fla.) College in the fall. She finished third at the 2017 NJCAA National Championship as a freshman and has five tournament wins to her credit in her junior college career. She was a first-team NJCAA All-American in 2017.

“We are proud and excited that Jiwon played her way into position to be selected for the International Palmer Cup team,” Potter said. “She has worked hard for this opportunity and put together a tremendous resume. It will be exciting to see her go up against Lauren, Kristen, Davis and Susan this summer.

“I also want to again congratulate Susan Rosenstiel on her selection as the first Palmer Cup women’s assistant coach. She’s the best in the business and most deserving of this recognition.”

“I am so proud of Davis making the team,” Alabama men’s golf coach Jay Seawell said. “This team represents the best in college golf and Davis has established himself as one of college’s elite players. This will be an experience that Davis will remember for a lifetime and it is a dream of his to make this team. There is no greater honor than playing for the USA and Davis will be a great representative.”

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Rebula, a native of South Africa, has also been putting together a very fine season for the Tigers.

“I’m really happy for Jovan. It is indeed an honor for him to be chosen to the Palmer Cup,” Auburn head coach Nick Clinard said. “He’s played extremely well and I’m just thrilled for him to represent himself, his family and Auburn University at such a worldwide prestigious event. It’s a well-deserved honor and an event that will create lifetime memories for him.”

Rebula’s uncle is World Golf Hall of Fame member Ernie Els and, in due course, he will certainly hope to replicate a career anything remotely like the “Big Easy’s” storied one.

Cecil Ingram and friends...

I mentioned a few weeks ago that former University of Alabama golfer Cecil Ingram was organizing a reunion long weekend for fellow UA golfers who played under legendary head golf coach Conrad Rehling.

To be held April 19-21 over the A-Day Game weekend, he has the following 40 former players committed to come to Tuscaloosa for golf and social activities. It’s quite the list:


Hard to believe, but McRoy turns 50 on May 20 and plans to play on the PGA Tour Champions as soon as he is eligible.

And Ingram is still trying to get Jerry Pate and Steve Lowery to attend, plus some others.

I’ll have a follow-up column after the event.
UA women's basketball team completes back-to-back 20-win seasons

By Drew Hill
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

There are too many positive memories from the 2017-18 women's basketball season for Alabama coach Kristy Curry to mention just one. The same goes for moments of disappointment, but Curry was proud of the way her team responded to adversity this season.

"I think this team's legacy will be that they left (the program) a whole lot better than they found it," Curry said. "I think they deserve a lot of credit for that."

Alabama came up short in its goal of getting the six seniors to the NCAA Tournament. Instead, the Crimson Tide finished its season the same way it did last year, with a road loss in the quarterfinals of the WNIT.

Almost there

Pessimists would look at the season as no steps forward, no steps back, but not Curry. The coach finished her fifth year with the Crimson Tide optimistic, yet gutted for her six seniors who missed the opportunity of playing in the NCAA Tournament.

UA finished 7-9 in the SEC, matching Curry's best conference record in her five-year span with the Crimson Tide. The team also earned Alabama's first-ever win in Knoxville over Tennessee.

The Crimson Tide was in the hunt for an NCAA Tournament bid for the entire regular season, but dropped its final two games in overtime to ranked opponents. As the coach pointed out many times, teams have made the

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NCAA Tournament with a conference record of 7-9 in the past, however, Alabama’s RPI fell outside of the range generally considered for an at-large bid.

“To put ourselves in a position for the postseason is always a positive,” Curry said. “We were on the verge of being in the NCAA Tournament, and that’s certainly a step in the right direction for our program. To have another 20-win season back-to-back shows progress forward.”

Goodbye seniors

Ashley Williams, Hannah Cook, Quanetria Bolton, Meoshonti Knight, Coco Knight and Alana Da Silva will move on as the first senior class with back-to-back 20-win seasons since 1999. Together the group of seniors tallied 5,303 career points, 2,551 rebounds, and added three new members (Meoshonti Knight, Cook, and Williams) to the prestigious 1,000-point club.

Not only did this group contribute to two of UA’s most productive seasons in the past 20 years, but Curry credits the seniors for changing the culture surrounding the program. Many of the players were part of Curry’s original recruiting class at the university.

“They conducted themselves away from the court in a way that represents how we want to be,” Curry said. “That affects 94 feet — So just the overall culture, they really set the tone every day.”

Williams, Alabama’s only fifth-year senior, was the last remaining player from Curry’s first team at UA. The “mother hen” of Alabama’s team will have an impact that lasts longer than the five years she had to offer.

“When we accepted the job there was Nikki Hegstetter and Ashley Williams,” Curry said. “Beyond that there were a few others, but the position the senior class beyond Ashley was put in — normally you don’t get thrown in the fire that quickly, but they were.”

The future

The loss of six players will hurt, but the future of the program is in good hands with returning starters Jordan Lewis and Shaquera Wade. Lewis, a sophomore, led the team in minutes, points and assists during conference play this season. She also made significant improvements from long range, shooting 42 percent from behind the 3-point line. The point guard battled injury at the beginning of the season, but still finished with double-digit points 13 times.

“I’m really, really excited about (Lewis’) direction and where she is going in the future,” Curry said. “She is exactly what we thought we recruited and has just been amazing.”
Shaquera Wade sets up to be Alabama's only senior receiving significant minutes next season. The former Miss Basketball in the state of Alabama averaged just under seven points and four rebounds this season, and excelled on defense with 46 steals.

Transfers Amber Richardson and Jasmine Walker should also be back for the Crimson Tide, along with freshman forward Ariyah Copeland. The three newcomers performed well in added minutes during the WNIT, especially Walker, who scored 39 points across the four games.

"You look at Jasmine Walker, who over the last four games averaged 10 points and seven-and-a-half rebounds in 20 minutes against quality opponents. ...We had a lot of positives in our postseason experience for our returnees."

**Up next**

Headlining what Curry called her most talented recruiting class she's had at Alabama is Shelton State Community College star Cierra Johnson. She averaged 22 points per game for the Lady Bucs this season, and led her team to the semifinals of the NJCAA Division I Women's National Basketball Tournament. Johnson finished her Shelton State career by scoring 47 points in the third-place game.

"I'm very excited," Johnson said. "I feel like I still have a chip on my shoulder. I feel that my only goal is to carry Alabama as far as I can take them or as far as they can go. I want to make the SEC Championships and on, but my only goal is to take them as far as I can take them."

Four-star commit Gabby Crawford, and three-star commits Megan Abrams, Hannah Barber, De'Sha Benjamin, Allie Craig-Cruce and Taniyah Worth will round out the rest of Alabama's incoming players.

ESPNW ranks Crawford as the No. 16 forward in the class of 2018, and the No. 89 player overall.
Tide concludes season at 20-14 after falling short in the WNIT quarterfinals

By Jordan Hutchinson
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

BLACKSBURG, Va. — For the second time this year, Alabama and Virginia Tech’s basketball teams faced off in the postseason. The first time, in the NCAA tournament, Alabama’s men took out Virginia Tech, 86-83. On Sunday afternoon, a much different result. The Crimson Tide were outclassed by Virginia Tech in the quarterfinals of the WNIT, 74-67. The loss drops Alabama to 20-14 overall and ends its season, but the Crimson Tide earned its third 20-win season in this century.

“The senior class, that’s extremely upset in that locker room right now, left Alabama a whole lot better than they found it,” said Crimson Tide head coach Kristy Curry. “With back-to-back 20-win seasons and so many firsts, they have laid the foundation for future generations in our program.”

Alabama was led by sophomore forward Jasmine Walker, who scored a team-high 16 points, while grabbing eight rebounds. Senior forward Ashley Williams racked up a double-double, her eighth on the year.

Over the last five minutes in the second quarter, Alabama went on a 16-5 run, giving it a one-point lead at the half. In the third quarter, though, the Hokies outscored the Crimson Tide by 10, giving them an insurmountable lead.

“Just credit to Virginia Tech, I thought they had four See WNIT, C3

WNIT

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in double figures that did a really nice job spreading the floor today like we knew that they would. We just couldn’t get stops at critical times and critical moments,” Curry said.

On the way into Blacksburg, it appears as if the Crimson Tide had quite a rough journey. Curry says that the team stayed in two separate hotels an hour away after the team bus was hit three times en route.

“We were hit three times in one bus, everybody’s fine though and we’re good. It was minor, everybody is safe and fine. No excuses we just tried to make the most of okay and thankful everybody was okay yesterday,” she said.

The win for Tech pushes it to 22-13 on the season and into the semifinals of the WNIT. Virginia Tech’s 22 wins are the most since 2003-04, when the Hokies lost in the second round of the NCAA tournament.

Guard Taylor Emery had a game-high 19 points on 12 shots, while freshman Aisha Sheppard scored 17 on as many shots.

Redshirt-junior guard Rachel Camp had 17 points on just seven shots, as she made 13 of her 14 free throws from the charity stripe on Sunday. Her teammate, forward Regan Magarity had a double-double, scoring 12 points while securing 10 rebounds.

Virginia Tech will await the winner of the St. Johns-West Virginia game, and the game location is still to be determined.
UA sets school records for attendance this season

By Tommy Dews

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RECORD

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support for the sport and willingness to come out to cheer on a winning product.
Johnson pledged when he was hired in the spring of 2015 to deliver Alabama basketball to
the NCAA Tournament within three seasons and made good on that promise.

"It's all about building relationships and partnerships and building those relationships and partnerships in a way that is sustainable," said Johnson, who came to UA with no previous collegiate coaching experience but a resume that included National Basketball Association Coach of the Year honors for leading the Dallas Mavericks to the 2006 NBA finals. "The main thing is that our strong relationship with our fan base - some who've been around the program for a long time, others that are new -- has shown signs of being sustainable, and because of that the interest in basketball here at Alabama is just off the charts right now."

That interest began to build before the first jump shot of the season. Alabama signed a top-10 recruiting class that included Collin Sexton, a projected first-round selection if he decides to enter the NBA draft. Fans reacted to the high expectations brought on by the incoming recruits at the box office: UA topped the 6,000 mark in season ticket sales for just the third time in the last 10 years, and the first time in five years, according to data obtained by The Tuscaloosa News under an open records
law request.

Alabama sold 6,015 season tickets, up nearly 5 percent from the previous season and more than 14 percent from the last year under Johnson's predecessor, Anthony Grant.

"Everywhere we went, whether it was to the grocery store or a restaurant, in airports or just messages on social media, we understood the hype and energy that surrounded
that recruiting class," Johnson said.

"Attendance has grown over the course of Johnson's three seasons -- each ranks in the top seven in school history in average and total attendance -- but the coach knew there had to be a payoff. In essence he made a pact: if the fan base would show up and support the program, he would get Alabama back to the NCAA Tournament.

"This is a results-driven business. We understand that," he said. "In our first three years we've struck out on some recruits and some other recruits we've had some where we've also hit it out of the park. We've won some games and upset some teams and we've obviously had a losing streak here or there. We think overall we delivered by us getting to the NCAA Tournament and advancing."

Byrne wants to keep attendance trending upward. Part of that effort will include scheduling: Arizona will play at Coleman Coliseum next season as the return game of a home-and-home series. UA has played games in Birmingham in recent seasons against big-name opponents including Texas, Clemson and Oregon.

Alabama's coach and athletics director want to see more of those games at home.

"Avery and I have had some discussion about some home-and-homes that we do want to do for Tuscaloosa," Byrne said. "Obviously the Birmingham market is important to us and we will continue to go there when the schedule allows, but having the chance to have some of those marquee non-conference games on campus is important as well."

Playing in front of a packed house, Johnson said, was a factor in Alabama's success.

"It's such a great feeling," he said. "Even some of the nights where maybe the house wasn't packed, our fans -- whether season ticket holders or students -- made us feel like the place was packed. We had some incredible crowds this year."

"The Tennessee game or the Auburn game or the Oklahoma game, the Texas A&M first game of conference play, it felt like we had 20,000 fans in Coleman Coliseum. Because of that, they really inspired our players to play at their maxmum best."

Johnson openly courted students, speaking at the Ferguson Center student union and to classes around campus. He encouraged his players to urge their classmates to come to games, and to mix with the students for high-fives and selfies after home victories. The results of those efforts showed.

"We had more students-
attend our games this year, I think, than in our first two years combined,” he said. “They’re really invested. They’re on their feet the entire time. Our student section was loud, rowdy and proud.”

The Crimson Tide program is far from devoid of basketball history. This year’s appearance in the NCAA Tournament was Alabama’s 20th, with seven of those including runs to the Sweet 16 and one to the Elite Eight, in 2004. But after six appearances in the national championship event in the 1980s and five each in the 1990s and 2000s, 2012 had been the only trip to college basketball’s big dance in the current decade.

For the first time in a long time, Tuscaloosa got to experience March Madness. Byrne, who was hired in January 2017, noted the difference from the previous season.

“Last March when I was in town we were playing in the NIT and obviously we appreciate that opportunity to be there, but at the same time there’s nothing quite like March Madness and being part of the NCAA Tournament,” he said. “So for us to be part of that, you could certainly feel that vibe throughout the community and throughout the state.”

Alabama coaches and players felt the buzz, especially around campus.

“We were off on spring break here (when the NCAA Tournament bid was announced), so when we found out we didn’t have any students on campus,” Johnson said. “But then that’s where the social media presence comes in and the text messages that we received from family and friends, we felt that excitement.

“Then when our students got back on campus on Monday, it was crazy. Some of the messages and T-shirts and stuff that they had on their cars all around campus, they were really fired up.”

Alabama’s job now is to sustain the success, and to build upon it.

“Obviously the next step is seeing if we can keep a large portion of this roster together and have the best continuity we’ve had in our three years,” Johnson said, “and hopefully those will continue to work in the offseason and develop and get better.”

Said Byrne, “You’ve got to keep climbing. ... Tickets is an important part of that, marketing and promoting the program, and then also looking at our infrastructure and seeing what’s ahead for us there.”

Reach Tommy Deas at tommy.deas@tuscaloosanews.com or at 205-722-0224.
UA football switches things up

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FOOTBALL

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obviously likes, but he's been with the second organizational grouping. He and Wills are two maulers on the offensive line, and they've earned the respect of the veterans.

"Both are obviously very talented players, very capable, and we're going to try to use them in every way we can this year and try to find a spot," Pierschbacher said. "So for them, they've got all the ability in the world, it's just (about) trying to find guys, mix and match, and try to find the best five like Coach (Nick) Saban said. Those guys are very talented just naturally, so it's fun to watch those guys in film and practice."

Saban highlighted both during his opening remarks of spring practice.

"We think (Jedrick) and Alex both are really good players, I mean, Alex played great in the national championship game when he had to go in there for Jonah," Saban said. "This probably won't be the first experiment we have in the offensive line in terms of who plays where. We feel Alex and Jonah both can play left tackle, but I think Alex can play someplace else, and I think Jonah can play someplace else. I think Jedrick Wills may be able to play somewhere else. So the goal is always to get the best five players on the field and we may experiment with somebody else playing center at some point in time as well. I just really like both of those young players (Leatherwood and Wills). I think you hate it when a player's not out there competing and playing like Matt won't be able to do this spring, you hate to see guys get injured, but he'll be back in the fall and I think this will just give these young guys more reps and a better chance to sort of make progress themselves and acquire more knowledge and experience that's only going to help them get better."
A deal is in the works

Alabama negotiating with Notre Dame, Texas for home-and-home-series

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

Alabama is negotiating to schedule a home-and-home football series with Notre Dame, The Tuscaloosa News has learned. Alabama is also working on a home-and-home deal with Texas.

The Crimson Tide last participated in an out-of-conference home-and-home series in 2010-11 against Penn State, hosting the Nittany Lions in 2010 and traveling to State College, Pa., in 2011.

UA Director of Athletics Greg Byrne would not confirm the schools are in talks, but did say the athletic department is pursuing future two-game deals that would have Alabama play a game at Bryant-Denny Stadium and also play on the opposing school’s campus.

“I'll say that we are exploring some home-and-homes,” Byrne said.

If the Notre Dame series comes to fruition, it would not likely take place until well into the next decade because Notre Dame has several other contracted high-profile games in future years.

Notre Dame plays SEC opponent Vanderbilt in 2018, will visit Georgia the following season, hosts Arkansas in 2020 and plays a home-and-home with Texas A&M in 2024 and ’25, according to the

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ALABAMA

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website FBSchedules.com. The Fighting Irish also have a deal to play several Atlantic Coast Conference opponents on a rotating basis and regularly play Southern Cal and Stanford.

Other schools, like Purdue and Navy, are also regular staples on the Notre Dame schedule.

In the Nick Saban era (2007 to date), Alabama has participated in the home-and-home with Penn State and concluded the Duke home-and-home series by traveling to Duke in 2010.

Over the last decade, Alabama has been more inclined to play high-profile neutral-site games in locations like Atlanta and Arlington, Texas.

The program has made tens of millions of dollars for season openers against the likes of Clemson, Virginia Tech, Michigan, Southern Cal, Florida State and others. UA coach Nick Saban has touted the advantages of such games in terms of exposure and in motivating players in the offseason by having a high-profile game to start the season.

Last September, Saban confirmed on his radio show that he and Byrne discussed scheduling future home-and-home series.

"I would like to do that," he said. "We played Penn State home and home when I was here and it was a good game here, it was a good game there, great crowd and all that. It's better for our fans if we play at home, I get that."

Alabama will open the 2018 season against Louisville in Orlando, and the following season opens with Duke in Atlanta.

UA has a storied history with Notre Dame. Although the programs have previously met only seven times, when they do it's usually a big game.

The teams met three times in the 1970s — twice in bowl games — all close, painful losses for the Crimson Tide.

Alabama claimed its first victory in the series in 1986, and, most recently, won the 2012 BCS national championship game over the Irish in a blowout 42-14 win. Notre Dame leads the series 5-2.

Alabama last played Texas in the 2009 BCS Championship Game.

Reach Aaron Suttles at aaron@tidesports.com or at 205-722-0229.
Former Boss of Disgraced Doctor Faces Charges of Sexual Abuse Himself

By STEVE FRIESS
and MITCH SMITH

EAST LANSING, Mich. — The investigation began with the goal of uncovering how Michigan State University officials had failed to prevent Dr. Lawrence G. Nassar from assaulting hundreds of young women over decades. But the inquiry took a stunning turn on Tuesday when a university dean was accused not just of facilitating Dr. Nassar’s abuse, but of committing sexual misconduct himself.

Dr. William D. Strampel, who worked as Dr. Nassar’s boss at the College of Osteopathic Medicine, was accused by investigators of grabbing the buttocks of two female medical students. He suggested that one young woman leave school and become a “centerfold model,” investigators said. And he stored nude “selfies,” apparently of Michigan State students, on his work computer, court documents say, along with a video of Dr. Nassar performing “treatment” on a young patient.

“As dean of the college, Strampel used his office to harass, discriminate, demean, sexually proposition and sexually assault female students,” a detective from Michigan’s statewide police agency wrote in an affidavit.

The arrest of Dr. Strampel, who is 70 and was for 15 years the highest-ranking official at the osteopathic college, compounded the crisis facing Michigan State. It has seen its reputation devastated in recent months as scores of women recounted abuse by Dr. Nassar, a longtime university sports doctor. Women have described a corrupt culture at the university that diminished or ignored the complaints some of them made about Dr. Nassar as far back as the late 1980s. Michigan State’s president, Lou Anna K. Simon, left under pressure in January and trustees have faced calls to resign, even as the state’s criminal investigation into the university was expected to continue and additional charges were possible.

“This is another blow to the university,” Tom Leonard, the speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives, said of the charges against Dr. Strampel. “It’s an absolute disgrace.”

Dr. Strampel — who stepped down in December from his job as dean, where he made more than $383,000 annually, according to MLive, a local news outlet — was charged with misconduct of a public official, a felony, and three misdemeanors, including fourth-degree criminal sexual conduct and two counts of willful neglect of duty. Dr. Strampel was jailed on Monday, and appeared in court via video on Tuesday afternoon wearing a gray sweatshirt, his hands cuffed in front of him. A personal recognizance bond was set at $25,000, and Dr. Strampel was ordered not to contact current or former students, and not to leave the state.

John Dakmak, a lawyer for Dr. Strampel, said his client planned to fight the charges and denied all of the counts against him.

“My client denies that he ever engaged in any inappropriate touching of anyone, any student or otherwise,” Mr. Dakmak said. “He denies that there was any quid pro quo for sexual favors in exchange for any type of standing within the university or the medical school.”

The charges against Dr. Strampel come as prosecutors pursue a sprawling investigation of the university, which began after Dr. Nassar, a longtime physician for Michigan State and for U.S.A. Gymnastics, admitted sexually abusing young women and was sentenced to prison in hearings that drew international attention. Dozens of women, including Olympic gymnasts, described assaults committed under the guise of medical care. At least 265 people have said they were abused by Dr. Nassar.

Prosecutors said Dr. Strampel failed to take steps to protect patients from Dr. Nassar when allegations of abuse emerged. He neglected, the prosecutors said, to follow a set of protocols that would, for instance, have required Dr. Nassar to conduct exams only with other staff members present. “Despite his representation of his (and the college’s) intended response to the allegations against Nassar, Strampel did not actually enforce or monitor these protocols, nor did he alert other employees in the Sports Medicine Clinic about the existence of the protocols,” the charging documents said.

The police detective’s affidavit outlining the charges also described a series of disturbing interactions between Dr. Strampel and four female medical students, none of whom were named publicly. In several of the cases, the women said they had gone to meet with Dr. Strampel to discuss their academic work but that he had turned the conversation to other topics.

One woman who said she had...
been summoned to Dr. Strampel's office after falling asleep in class and said that he told her to "turn around in a circle twice so that he could observe her body," and that he said that she was "never going to make it in the profession if she didn't dress sexier." When she was later called to a dinner honoring scholarship recipients at a club on Michigan State's golf course, she said Dr. Strampel reached around and gripped her buttock as they posed for photos, according to the affidavit.

Another student who had failed a medical school test said she was required to meet with Dr. Strampel, who asked her what her "Plan B" was since "she could not cut it in medical school." The student said Dr. Strampel told her he would do her a favor by letting her take the exam again, but that she would then be required to do anything for him. "Given the context," the affidavit said, the woman "understood that she was being asked to do anything he wanted sexually in exchange for the favor."

In an interview, Dr. Nicole Eastman, who graduated from the school in 2010 and who said that she was interviewed by investigators in the case, said that Dr. Strampel made inappropriate sexual remarks, beginning soon after she started school in 2006.

At one point, he told her, laughing and boasting, that it was easy to get women drunk, she said. Another time, she said, he grabbed her buttock at a crowded event, in full view of his wife, who was standing nearby.

"I just remember how humiliating it was," Dr. Eastman said. "People knew about his behavior, and even if they weren't inappropriately touched by him, they knew. And now we know that his behavior enabled Larry Nassar's behavior."

Dr. Eastman said she told a Michigan State employee while she was in school about Dr. Strampel's behavior. The employee looked resigned, Dr. Eastman recalled.

"She said, 'Everybody knows about his behavior and nothing ever changes,'" Dr. Eastman said. "It seemed like a defeated kind of tone. When I think back to that, it was like she felt powerless."

The charging documents said Dr. Strampel also made graphic sexual comments, solicited nude photos from at least one student, and stored dozens of pornographic images and videos on a computer in his office, including many images that appeared to be of Michigan State students.

Rachael Denhollander, who said Dr. Nassar abused her, said Tuesday's charges reflected a systemic failure at Michigan State.

"This is shocking but it's not shocking," Ms. Denhollander said. "Someone like Larry doesn't get away with becoming the worst sexual abuser in history in plain sight if he were not surrounded by people who had no problem with his conduct and did not think it was a big deal."

Michigan State's interim president, John Engler, last month took steps to start the process of revoking Dr. Strampel's tenure. University officials did not answer questions Tuesday about the status of the revocation, and did not respond to a request to interview Mr. Engler.

For years, university officials largely dismissed reports that Dr. Nassar had assaulted women, even though some women said they had reported abuse years ago to coaches, trainers or counselors.

On Tuesday, State Senator Margaret O'Brien, a Republican, said "this university needs to own up to what it did."

Dr. Strampel, who could face up to nine years in prison if convicted of all charges, arrived at his home outside Lansing after his court appearance on Tuesday afternoon. A woman who came to the door declined to comment.

Aly Raisman, an Olympic gymnast who said Dr. Nassar abused her, wrote on Instagram that the charges against Dr. Strampel were "yet another painful example" of how so much had been mishandled.

"At this point, it's clear that failing to investigate and understand how this abuse could go on for so long is just asking history to repeat itself," Ms. Raisman said.