MARCH 14, 2018

ARTICLES OF INTEREST
MARCH 9, 2018 – MARCH 14, 2018

FOR SPECIFIC NEWS STORIES, SEE THE FOLLOWING PAGE NUMBERS:

NEWS ABOUT

STATE ISSUES 2

UA CAMPUS ISSUES 8

UAH CAMPUS ISSUES 13

OTHER STATE UNIV. 15

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BJCC car lease tax not a done deal

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A bill to impose a 3 percent tax on car leases and rentals in Jefferson County to help build a stadium and make other improvements at the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex has marched steadily through the Alabama Legislature but hasn’t reached the finish line.

Rep. John Rogers, D-Birmingham, said he will do all he can to block the proposal when it reaches the House floor. Rogers, a one-time proponent of a domed stadium in Birmingham, says the $300 million project would not be a good deal for the city.

Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills, sponsor of the bill, said the $175 million stadium and $123 million renovation of the BJCC Legacy Arena would pump life into north Birmingham the same way he said Regions Park and Railroad Park have brought condominiums and businesses to the south side.

"Nothing was happening until they built Regions Park and Railroad Park," Waggoner said. "The same thing can happen north of the Civic Center."

The open-air stadium would have a seating capacity of 45,000 to 55,000 and be home for UAB football.

"UAB will use it six times a year," Wag-
Cobb says Alabama can do better

The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — In a rally to kick off her campaign for governor, former Alabama Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb said Alabama is suffering from "failed leadership" and stressed her support for a state lottery.

"If you're tired of the corrupt politics that's been going on, join us. If you're tired of Alabama being at the bottom of all the good categories and the top of all the bad ones, join us," Cobb said in the speech March 5 at her campaign headquarters in Montgomery.

Cobb is proposing a state lottery to fund preschool, vocational training and other education programs.

"We've been sending our money to Tennessee, to Florida, to Georgia, have we not? People in Alabama think it's just plain stupid that we don't have a lottery," she said.

Cobb said the state needs to address the closure of rural hospitals. She said she also supports a raise in the minimum wage.

Cobb was one of the last Democrats to win statewide office in Alabama. She was elected as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court in 2006 and was the first woman to hold that post. She resigned in 2011.

Cobb faces Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox.

See COBB, B2
Spanish auto supplier opens first U.S. plant in Vance

By: Jason Morton

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey was among the 100 or so elected officials, business leaders and other dignitaries on hand in Vance on Friday for the official ribbon-cutting of Truck & Wheel USA, the latest automotive supplier to open in Tuscaloosa County.

“We are so proud to have y’all ...,” Ivey said in official welcome to the leaders of the Europe-based company. “Thank you for choosing to invest in Alabama.”

Formed in 1998 in Navarre, Spain, the $35.2 million, 127,000-square-foot plant is the company’s first manufacturing plant in the U.S.

Expected to create about 75 new jobs, official operations are set to begin April 2.

“Successful economic development occurs when you have commitment and teamwork, both of which are focused on getting results,” Ivey said, touting the state’s “pro-business” nature.

“Economic development happens when state and local officials collaborate with one another and with businesses who are attracted because of all that Alabama has to offer.

“At the state level, my team and I focus on making events like today the norm, not the exception.”

She was joined by Probate Judge Hardy McCollum, who is nearing 42 years in elected service; members of the Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority that granted $2.1 million in tax abatements to incentivize the project; and Vance Mayor Keith Mahaffey, who offered up a spirited Southern welcome to the European manufacturers.

“To all my newfound friends from Spain, buenas tardes, y’all,” Mahaffey said.

“I understand some of you have already met our local law enforcement,” the mayor said, drawing laughter from the crowd. “Please drive careful and drive slow and obey the laws.”

Construction on the Truck & Wheel plant broke ground in April 2017. The factory is set to be highly robotic and automated, attaching tires to rims, inflating them and running quality assurance tests for just-in-time deliver to the nearby Mercedes-Benz U.S. International plant.

The Wheel & Truck Group owns 26 branches and employs 1,500 people in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Mexico and, now, the U.S.

MBUSI President and CEO Jason Hoff was present to welcome the new Mercedes-Benz supplier and described the plant as “incredibly impressive.”
“What you see here is a what a lot the future of the automotive industry is going to look like,”
Hoff said. “It’s dynamic, it’s changing and it’s challenging.

“And, as much as you might think the assembly of a tire and wheel may not be the most difficult
thing ..., I can tell you that, in today’s day and age, the assembly of a tires and wheels is
incredibly important to the performance of a vehicle. Especially a vehicle to the caliber of a
Mercedes-Benz.”

Carlos Llonis is the general manager of the logistics division of the Truck & Wheel Group. He’s
also the son of one of the co-founders of the company and also was in Vance on Friday to
officially open the company’s first U.S. plant.

“Twenty years ago, some great men decided to risk their savings and go into debt so that’s how
this enterprise could exist and profit,” Llonis said. “To be honest, I do not think there is a better
way to acknowledge this event and celebrate it with you in this very space open today.”
BP OIL SPILL

RESTORE Act funds to aid coast projects

$315 million in oil spill fines to aid long list of improvements

Lawrence Specker  lspecker@al.com

A whopping $315 million is coming to infrastructure, environmental restoration and economic development projects in Mobile and Baldwin counties, courtesy of the RESTORE Act and the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council.

It’s funding nearly 50 projects, some of which have obvious potential to change life on the coast. The biggest include $56 million for five major road expansion projects in Baldwin County, $28 million for a new facility at the Port of Mobile, $27 million for projects affecting Dauphin Island’s Aloe Bay and $21 million to redevelop the docks in Bayou La Batre.

Tens of millions of dollars will go to projects to improve water-sewer systems and eliminate sewage overflows.

The money comes from penalties paid by companies involved in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The RESTORE Act established a trust fund to hold much of that money aside for “programs, projects, and activities that restore and protect the environment and economy of the Gulf Coast region.”

SEE RESTORE, A11
RESTORE
FROM A1

Deciding where that money goes has been a complex multiyear, multi-agency process. On Wednesday the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council (AGCRC) announced the first round of funding, which may be the largest—but not the last.

"There are some really great ones," Eliska Morgan, the council’s executive director, said Thursday. "We’ve been working toward this end for some time."

Morgan said more than 400 projects were submitted by various organizations and governmental entities. Many that didn’t make the cut for this round may be eligible for future consideration, she said.

"Key points" in an AGCRC presentation include a statement that "(the) Council intends to distribute RESTORE Act funds between Baldwin and Mobile Counties on an equitable basis for projects deemed viable. While this equity may not be realized in the First Round, it will be achieved over time as amended plans are developed."

Mobile County had more requests, totaling nearly twice the money as Baldwin County requests, meaning more Mobile County projects were deferred until future rounds, according to the AGCRC presentation.

An upcoming 45-day comment period will give the public a chance to weigh in on the selected projects. A list of projects for which funding has been committed follows, with basic details. Grants are listed alphabetically by project name.

Baldwin County

- Alabama Point Seawall Repair (City of Orange Beach), $2,488,000
- Ambassadors of the Environment (City of Gulf Shores), $9,748,254
- Baldwin Beach Express i-10 to i-65 Extension Right of Way Acquisition (Baldwin County), $11,340,000
- Baldwin County ALDOT Capacity Improvements (Baldwin County), $56,800,000
- Canal Road Improvements East of State Road 161 (City of Orange Beach), $1,848,270
- Eastern Shore Sanitary Sewer Overflows (SSOs) Prevention Plan (City of Fairhope), $1,000,000
- Environmental Restoration of Cotton Bayou & Terry Cove (City of Orange Beach), $500,000
- Expansion of the Orange Beach Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Center (City of Orange Beach), $183,500
- Fairhope Area Community-Based Comprehensive Land Use Plan (City of Fairhope), $650,000
- Fairhope Sewer Upgrade Phase I (City of Fairhope), $10,000,000
- Fort Morgan Parkway Trail Extension (ADCRNR, State Parks), $4,433,600
- Gulf Coast Engineering Research Station (Auburn University), $9,000,000
- Gulf Coast Wildlife Recovery and Interpretive Center: Feasibility, Planning & Preliminary Design (City of Orange Beach), $275,000
- Little Lagoon Restoration Project (City of Gulf Shores), $5,995,686
- Longevity, Stability & Water Quality Improvements, Bon Secour DMDA (Baldwin County), $340,744
- Meaher Park Improvements (ADCRNR, State Parks), $3,450,000
- New Stream-Gaging Station on Fish River at Co Rd 32 (Baldwin County), $87,250
- Orange Beach North Sewer Force Main Upgrade (City of Orange Beach), $5,195,000
- Working Waterfront and Greenspace Restoration Project (City of Fairhope), $6,200,000

Mobile County

- AL State Port Authority Automotive Logistics/RO-RO Terminal (AL State Port Authority), $28,767,710
- Aloe Bay Harbour Town, Phase I (Town of Dauphin Island), $2,183,485
- Aloe Bay Harbour Town, Phases II & III (Town of Dauphin Island), $14,346,382
- Aloe Bay/Mississippi Sound Water Quality Enhancement Project (Town of Dauphin Island), $11,500,000
- City of Chickasaw Sewer Rehabilitation Project (City of Chickasaw), $1,250,000
- Collection System/Lift Station Upgrades (City of Bayou La Batre), $12,805,000

A total of $11,340,000 was included in the grants to aid the Baldwin Beach Express I-10 to I-65 Extension Right of Way Acquisition. The highway is shown in a 2016 photo.

Regional Projects

- Alabama Gulf Seafood Marketing Program (Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources), $2,852,135
- Characterization and Delineation of Significant Sand Resource Areas Essential for Beach Restoration, Offshore Alabama (Geological Survey of Alabama), $922,500
- Development for a Regional Strategic Plan for the Coastal Alabama Region (Coastal Alabama Partnership), $562,500
- Planning Grant to Amend Multimodal Implementation Plan (Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources), $300,000
- Planning Grant to Amend State Expenditure Plan (ADCRNR), $300,000
- Replacement of Substandard Facilities at the ADEM Coastal Office & Mobile Field Office (Alabama Department of Environmental Management), $5,862,717
Public records should be open for the public good

I played the role of Atticus Finch for you by taking on an unpopular cause in court. I sued Harper Lee.

But unlike the attorney in Lee's famed novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird," I emerged on the winning side in a case that underscores the need for equal treatment under the law. It matters today as we observe Sunshine Week, which highlights the need for public records to be open for the public good.

Officially, I was the Alabama citizen who sought access to Lee's will, which Monroe County Probate Judge Greg Norris sealed from public view in February 2016 at the request of Lee's estate. Alabama law says "every citizen has a right to inspect and take a copy of any public writing of this state," but we've found that some state agencies sneak in the word "state" in front of "citizen" as a way to deny information to out-of-state residents and news organizations. Multiple state agencies have done this to avoid national scrutiny or state-by-state comparisons, slowing down the reporting process for organizations that include The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, ESPN and the Center for Investigative Reporting. It may take another lawsuit to close that invented loophole.

That invented loophole is why I was asked by The New York Times to attach my name to its March 2016 lawsuit asking that the case file be unsealed. The argument made on behalf of The Times by Alabama-based lawyer Archie Reeves: Public records are public records, whether you're a private citizen few people know or the state's most famous private person.

It took nearly two years before the estate dropped its defense in February.

Lee's estate argued that her will needed to be sealed because the judge was "no doubt aware" that Lee "highly valued her privacy." The Times called that a crummy argument, saying her estate "is no different from every other estate when it comes to the public's right of access." Lee's estate also argued that people named in it might be open to harassment, but it provided no evidence why that protection might have been needed.

Indeed, open access provides information that may be sensitive or embarrassing. That includes wills, which spell out how dead people give away their worldly possessions. Wills are open for public inspection to give

See ROBERTS, A11

See next page
people "who may have claims against the estate an opportunity to make those claims within the time specified by the laws of each state," Alabama Press Association lawyer Dennis Bailey said.

Public records also can yield important news, even though they may not have in this case. The Times' Feb. 27 story — "Harper Lee's Will, Unsealed, Only Adds More Mystery to Her Life" — provided little new information beyond further knowledge that Lee sought privacy and another turn of the screw in showing how Lee's lawyer tightly manages her finances. (In fact, having such little new information actually argues against any need to have hidden it in the first place.)

The document showed that her estate was placed in a trust that will remain secret. It named family members and others who will control the estate, all of whose names have been in the public eye before. (That is another reason it should not have been hidden in the first place.)

And we saw Lee's unsteady hand as she signed it eight days before she died, maybe the last thing Alabama's most famous author ever wrote.

Some critics called The Times' lawsuit a fishing expedition, and its story proof that The Times didn't catch anything. But there's nothing wrong with a fishing expedition when it comes to public records and journalism.

Anyone who has ever wet a line knows that fishing and catching are not the same thing. A fishing trip isn't wasted just because little ends up in the frying pan. The experience and the principle matter.

And so it is with public access to public records, which journalists (and anyone else) can use to understand their communities and how their governments work. Efforts by the powerful to exempt themselves from court rules that everyone else must follow is a bad thing.

The biggest example follows the criminal conviction of former Gov. Robert Bentley, whose efforts to lie and conceal included having a judge he appointed seal his divorce records. A collection of statewide news organizations had to sue before the records were open in September 2015. The filing showed the governor gave up more than a 50-50 split. That insight made more sense as more information became known about the relationship he lied about and ordered others to lie about. He resigned following a conviction 11 months ago, just the latest Alabama governor with a criminal record.

Sure, there's a difference between Lee's will and Bentley's divorce, but not in principle. In both instances, they cited family privacy as a reason. As the documents and later reporting showed, the arguments did not hold up. But without access to public records, we would never know.

In both cases:

• It took news organizations going to court.
• Some criticized those organizations who fought powerful people seeking special treatment.
• News organizations won when the other side gave up before going to trial.
• People who sought to hide information knew they could not win.
• Former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis' statement proved correct: "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman."

And in both cases, the power of open records laws meant that everyone was treated equally under the law.

Atticus Finch might be proud.

Chris Roberts is an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media at the University of Alabama. He was a reporter at multiple weekly and daily newspapers in the state. Readers can email him at croberts@ua.edu.
UA students help others on alternative spring break

Staff report

The University of Alabama's Center for Service and Leadership has sent eight teams made up of more than 100 UA students and leaders on Beyond Bama: Alternative Breaks.

Teams left Saturday for Managua, Nicaragua; Los Fieros, Nicaragua; Esteli, Nicaragua; Greensboro; Guin; Atlanta; Washington, D.C.; and Orlando, Florida. The teams will return March 18.

The teams traveling to Nicaragua will work with Panorama Service Expeditions: Nicaragua Compact. The UA center joined the Nicaraguan Compact in 2014 with 15 other universities. The three teams will focus on developing a community school as well as furthering economic development of an all women's coffee collaborative and access to healthcare.

This initiative sends U.S. university and college students to help with the long-term development of Nicaragua through social-justice-based direct service projects.

Panorama Service Expeditions, a nonprofit organization focused on developing grassroots sustainable social and economic development projects; and Break Away, the national nonprofit for alternative breaks, are committed to long-term sustainability and service in Nicaraguan communities.

The team traveling to Orlando will serve at Give Kids the World, an 84-acre nonprofit resort in Central Florida that provides week-long, cost-free vacations to children with life-threatening illnesses and their families.

World Village and its community partners provide children and their families accommodations in furnished villas, transportation, tickets to theme parks, meals and daily entertainment.

The team traveling to Guin will work with Habitat for Humanity Northwest Alabama. These students will serve alongside Teressa Clark and her local community. This trip is a part of the Southeastern Conference Compact that was created after the 2011 tornado by schools in the SEC.

"Beyond Bama: Alternative Breaks program is one of the most rewarding and transformational programs that the CSL has to offer students," said Courtney Chapman Thomas, director of UA's Center for Service and Leadership.

"Students who participate in these programs experience the lives and perspectives of their fellow man through service. They get to spend a week walking alongside their neighbor. Students walk away more compassionate and caring, and, most importantly, they walk away with the call to action to be a change agent."

To learn more about the trips, go to www.uacsl.wordpress.com. Students will blog daily about their experiences. For more information about the center's Beyond Bama: Alternative Break program, go to www.volunteer.ua.edu or phone Chapman Thomas at 348-2865 or 713-818-8712.
Muscle and brains

By: Ed Enoch

The white Chevrolet Camaro with the University of Alabama script A on the front still sounded like the muscle car that the name implies as it sped around the airport tarmac Friday, but under the hood, its guts have transformed during the last four years as a team of students converted it into an electric-hybrid.

“When you think of a muscle car, you don’t think of electricity. You think of power and burning gasoline,” junior electric engineer major Jacob Machnica said. “But this is a muscle car.”

Where once there was a six-cylinder gasoline engine, now there is a smaller four-cylinder and two electrical motors connected to a bank of lithium-ion batteries in the trunk.

Machnica, who led the sub-team of students working on the electrical systems, and his teammates are part of the final UA team working on the EcoCar3 challenge. The contest, co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy and General Motors, calls for teams to redesign a Camaro donated by the automaker into a high-performance hybrid-electric car, with goals of reducing its environmental impact while maintaining its muscle-car performance.

The University of Alabama is among 16 universities nationwide where teams of students have spent the last four years designing, developing and integrating the electric motors into the Camaro to achieve the goal.

The EcoCAR3 teams were announced in 2014 in Washington, D.C. The contest concludes in May after a series of final tests and presentations in Arizona and California, culminating with the announcement of an overall first-place team.

The UA team was conducting skid-pad testing on Friday at the Tuscaloosa Regional Airport ahead of the May review to see how the car’s handling feels as it accelerates and turns. Catherine Meyn, a 21-year-old junior in mechanical engineer, feels good about the team’s chances.

“We went from October not having an engine in the vehicle to doing zero to 60 mph (in the spring),” she said.

Meyn said much of the last year of the competition has been fine-tuning the two computers that control the functions of the car — everything from acceleration to when the air conditions comes on. The team writes code to fine-tune the performance.

“There are definitely a lot of challenges,” Meyn said.

The goal is to produce a production-ready vehicle for a car buyer who wants both performance and fuel efficiency, she said.

See next page
The car components have changed over the years as the students have integrated batteries and new motors. Last year, the team added a carbon-graphene hood to save weight. The team built new motor mounts for the Camaro out of steel but is considering casting aluminum versions, which would save additional weight, Meyn added.

“Weight savings are a huge thing,” she said. “We’ve put 400 pounds of batteries in the back of the vehicle.”

Meyn, who is the co-lead for the mechanical team, joined the team last year.

“I knew how a car operated, but I didn’t know anything that went into (the design process),” Meyn said.

She has spent the last year immersed in that process.

“It is fun to do, honestly,” she said.

The contest, which has had two previous rounds, is the latest in a series of Advanced Vehicle Technology Competitions by the U.S. Department of Energy aimed at developing the next generation of automotive engineers. The announcement for EcoCar4 is expected soon.

After this year, 15 former students from the UA teams will have gone on to work for GM. Others were offered jobs but had other plans, said Paul Puzinauskas, an associate professor of mechanical engineering and team adviser.

EcoCar3, because it mirrors GM’s design process, lets the students to know what to expect from a job at the automaker and provides the company confidence in the young engineer it is hiring.

The EcoCar3 program is a chance for the students to experience and lead a design process that is typically led by senior engineers with decades of experience.

“Now, they get to do it while they are learning,” he said. “It’s practical experience students can take into the workplace as graduates.”
Urbanization impacts storms, rainfall despite surroundings, studies

By: Tech Explorist

According to 2 different studies conducted at Purdue University, urbanization changes to storm patterns and rainfall amounts. It also highlights the requirement of urban planning and infrastructure design that considers how the landscape will affect the weather.

Scientists analyzed the patterns over the coastal megacity of Mumbai, India, and the mountainous city of San Miguel de Tucumán, Argentina. By doing this, they determined how urban development affected storms in those regions.

The Mumbai examination was done as a team with the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, while the investigation in Argentina was finished with the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

The scientists anticipated that would see that Mumbai’s additional warmth and structures altogether upset tempests. However, they anticipated that would see a little effect in San Miguel de Tucumán since the landscape around the city is tough, which likely makes the tempests turbulent before they achieve the city.

Dev Niyogi, Indiana state climatologist said, “In Mumbai, the urban landscape disrupted rainfall, creating pockets and ribbons of rain that would intensify downpours in some parts of the city. Mumbai and other Indian cities have experienced significant flooding in recent years, possibly exacerbated by the way the cities affect storms.”

“The researchers also found the storms organize themselves over the city in clusters. This organization showed that meteorologists should focus on small, 100-kilometer-squared areas with rain gauges or satellite images to best model future storms.”

Scientists used satellite data to track storm examples and model the manners by which Mumbai was adjusting those examples. The outcomes feature the need to see how sprawling urban scenes will influence extreme climate, illuminating surge checking endeavors and future basic framework choices.

Satellite data and models showed that urbanization resulted in 20-30 percent less precipitation downwind of the city and an eastward shift in precipitation upwind. Again, Niyogi said the effect cities will have on rainfall changes needs to be taken into account before large-scale developments continue in the mountain regions where water is already a scarce resource.

Niyogi said, “Understanding how these storms are changing by interacting with a city helps improve forecasting. But it also gives an idea of how infrastructure design will need to be considered since cities will change their own rainfall patterns. We may need to think about things like storm water drainage and the location of drains, for example. Certain parts of a city might receive more rainfall, and that could lead to flooding if proper planning isn’t considered.”

“Even in complex terrain, we see really significant changes coming from the effects of the city. In the long term, as these mountain communities evolve and they try to balance development and water needs, their landscape changes will have a profound impact on water availability.”

See next page
Despite differences in each storm studied, precipitation in Mumbai and San Miguel de Tucumán both fell into fairly predictable patterns—ribbons or pockets of heavy rain in India and a skirting of the city in Argentina.

“These are very complex environments, yet we see that these storms beautifully organize themselves into nice structures that we can understand,” Niyogi said. “Almost everything around us seems chaotic and unpredictable, yet we see these patterns emerge in the natural systems. That means that we don’t need to study every storm in every situation. Solutions can emerge from snapshots of our understanding and perhaps have universal validity. This similarity helps develop models and guidance that can have broad utility as we design prediction systems for the next generation of cities and their infrastructure.”
College receives $3.6 million gift for business school

The Associated Press

SUNDAY, March 11, 2018

MONTEVALLO — The University of Montevallo received the largest gift in the school’s history going toward a new building for its business school.

A $3.6 million gift was donated to the University of Montevallo’s Stephens College of Business, according to an article published on AL.com. The school announced the gift on Jan. 25.

The college is named after Michael E. Stephens, who died last year. The college of business was named in his honor in 1997. Stephens bequeathed the money to the school of business for the facility.

Dean Stephen Craft said building a new business building was always a “dream” for Stephens.

“Michael Stephens has made yet another transformative impact on the school that bears his name,” Craft said. “Every time we met, Mike spoke at length about the Stephens College faculty and students - their happiness and well-being were always on his mind and in his heart. I am very pleased that we will see Mike’s vision of a new home for the Stephens College of Business realized.”

Craft added that Stephens was the executive director of Lakeshore Hospital, founder and CEO of ReLife and worked through the Lakeshore Foundation with disabled people.

School officials have not indicated when the building will begin construction.

Severe diving accident.

Severe diving accident.
Alabama's Osorio earns national, SEC honors

By Tommy Deas
Executive Sports Editor

Alexis Osorio etched her name into the NCAA record book last weekend when she struck out 21 batters in a seven-inning game. On Tuesday she received recognition for that achievement as she was named USA Softball Player of the Week, NFCA Pitcher of the Week and SEC Pitcher of the Week.

Osorio became just the second player in NCAA history to strike out 21 batters in a seven-inning contest, joining Cal’s Michele Granger, who did it in 1991. In addition to fanning those batters in a game against Fordham, Osorio threw a no-hitter the night before against Boston College, and earned a save the next day against Samford.

Osorio, a two-time All-American from Riverside,

See SOFTBALL, C3

Alabama is ranked No. 12 in the USA Today/NFCA coaches poll, and 15th in the ESPN.com/USA Softball Top 25.

The Crimson Tide (17-5) will visit Georgia Tech on Wednesday for a 5 p.m. CT game. Alabama will open SEC play at Auburn in a three-game series that starts Friday.
SEC basketball coaches deserve to bask

By: Cecil Hurt

The Southeastern Conference basketball coaches on Monday’s telephone press conference all took a moment to pat each other and the league office on the back. Sometimes that can seem self-serving and annoying. On Monday, it was deserved.

With eight teams chosen for the NCAA Tournament and two more selected for the NIT — it would have been three but Georgia players voted to decline an NIT bid after the firing of head coach Mark Fox — the league stood alongside the other Power 5 conferences (or above them) as basketball equals. It’s been a league priority for several years now, with leadership urging teams to upgrade coaching and facilities, which in turn helps to improve recruiting. The SEC has also provided help with scheduling, which made a big difference when Selection Sunday came around. There were, for example, teams that had better overall records than Alabama but had accumulated preseason wins against softer schedules. The committee made a statement that 19 wins against a Top 5 schedule was better than 21 or 22 wins against a tray of Christmas cupcakes.

Will this turn into a sustained run of success that will cover several years? Time will tell. You don’t immediately turn success into tradition, even though it is a necessary first step. You plant the seeds, and the harvest comes later. But this year’s seeds are being placed in fertile ground. When the majority of teams in a league are in the tournament, the teams that aren’t won’t just sit still. That effect has already started.

Mississippi State fell just short this year but is returning enough perimeter power — the Weatherspoon brothers and the gifted guard Lamar Peters — to be a preseason Top 25 team. Hopefully, Ben Howland will do the one thing he neglected this season and will assemble a non-conference schedule to match his talent. (That helps all his peers in the league, in the long run.)

Two of the other teams that didn’t make it, LSU and Vanderbilt, have Top 5 recruiting classes — that’s national Top 5 — coming in. That’s going to create quick expectations, the same sort that Alabama had going into this year. There will be new coaches at Georgia and Ole Miss, and both will aim high. There are even rumors that one of the teams that made the NCAA field will consider a coaching change if their team makes an early exit.

At Alabama, though, the atmosphere is good. As Avery Johnson put it on the Monday teleconference, “However we got in, we’re in.” Suddenly, Alabama basketball fans are engaged in the national basketball conversation, a feeling they haven’t had in six long years. Nothing increases basketball interest like being in the bracket.
The next step, of course, is winning some games. The SEC did that last year, with less teams. There’s not an easy draw among the eight teams that got into the field this year, but there will be some teams that shine.

“This league will do damage,” Kentucky coach John Calipari said. “It’s been doing damage. They just haven’t let more teams in. We have teams borderline that should have advanced that didn’t get in. Now we have eight teams in.”

That’s worth a pat on the back, even if it comes from the coaches themselves.
As Final Four returns to Texas, college hoops finds itself on shaky ground

By Eddie Pells
The Associated Press

Tuesday with opening-round games featuring a matchup of bubble teams UCLA and St. Bonaventure, then kicks into full swing Thursday and Friday at eight sites around the country.

The Final Four is March 31 and April 2 in San Antonio. Shortly after that, a commission led by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is expected to deliver recommendations from an investigation triggered by an FBI probe that led to charges last fall against assistant coaches, agents, employees of apparel companies and others.

No fewer than a dozen teams in the tournament have been named either in the FBI investigation or in media reports that allege coaches and others have directed payments and

See HOOPS, C4
HOOPS

From Page C1

improper benefits to recruits and players — thus, breaking rules that go to the core of the amateur-sports code that defines both the NCAA and the "student-athletes" who make this billion-dollar business run.

They range from teams that made it into the tournament off the so-called bubble — Alabama — to one of the best teams in the country. Arizona, a No. 4 seed in the South, has been roiled by a report that wiretaps caught coach Sean Miller discussing a $100,000 payment to freshman Deandre Ayton. Miller has strongly denied the accusation, though the story line figures to follow the Wildcats through what could be a long run in the tournament.

The chairman of the NCAA selection committee, Bruce Rasmussen, has said the investigations played no part of the bracket-filling process.

And yet, it’s hard to imagine there weren’t some sighs of relief in the NCAA offices when some bubble teams’ names were left out of the field. For instance, Louisville has lost its coach (Rick Pitino), athletic director (Tom Jurich) and latest national title (2013) in the culmination of scandals that have slammed that program for the better part of this decade.

Given the widespread nature of this corruption, there’s at least a chance that whoever cuts down the nets in San Antonio could eventually suffer the same fate as the Cardinals.

More certain is that once this party is over, change of some sort will be coming.

"I don’t think it’s just going to be a little blip on the radar," said John Tauer, the championship-winning coach at Division III St. Thomas in Minnesota, who doubles as a social psychology professor. "I think this runs deep enough and involves enough people in

See next page
programs that something's
got to change."

For now, though, hoops — and there was plenty to
discuss after the Big Reveal:

The region to watch is
the Midwest, which is top
heavy with Kansas, Duke
and Michigan State, who
were ranked in the top 4
in the AP preseason poll.
It also features arguably
the nation's most electric
player in Trae Young, who
led Oklahoma in as a No. 10
seed despite going 2-8 down
the stretch. Questioned by
Charles Barkley during the
selection show about the
Sooners, Rasmussen said:
"Games in November and
December count the same
as games in February and
March."

**Snubbed:** St. Mary's
missed despite a 28-5
record. It's only big win
this season: at Gonzaga in
January. ... Louisville, with
an RPI of 39, became the
highest-rated team in that
index to miss the tourna-
ment, backing the concept
that the selection commit-
tee would look more heavily
at other factors. ... Notre
Dame got no love either for
its deep run into the ACC
tournament or the return
of its best player, Bonzie
Colson.

**Place to be:** Try Boise.
It features a possible sec-
ond-round South matchup
between No. 5 Kentucky
and No. 4 Arizona, each of
which won their conference
tournaments. "I had to ask
my guys, 'How many of
you know what state Boise
is in?''' coach John Cali-
pari said of the long trip his
team faces. Also in Idaho
are defending national
runner-up Gonzaga, which
would have a home-court
advantage of sorts in a sec-
ond-round matchup against
either Ohio State or South
Dakota State.

The ACC led the way with
nine teams in the tourna-
ment, matching a record
the ever-expanding con-
ference set last year. The
SEC sent eight teams and
the Big 12 sent seven. The
Big Ten only sent four and
the Pac-12 only had three in
down years for both mar-
que conferences.
Tide leaves St. Louis improved, confident

ST. LOUIS

Late in Saturday’s SEC Tournament semifinal game, as Kentucky continued to put shots into the air and, inevitably, into the basket, you could see the frustration on the faces of the Alabama players — Collin Sexton, John Petty, Braxton Key and others. They weren’t in St. Louis simply for a pat on the back and a little positive publicity.

For three games, from buzzer-beating drama to, finally, disappointment, they displayed three days of wanting to win.

Was Alabama perfect? No, of course not. But consider where this Alabama team was less than a week ago, when it boarded a plane for Missouri. The regular season had ended with five straight losses.

At least one prominent NCAA bracketologist, Jerry Palm of CBS, deemed the Crimson Tide was so far off the so-called “bubble” that it wasn’t even worth discussing UA’s chances. There was a debate among some Alabama fans — not all, but a few — as to whether UA should turn down the NIT bid that was looming ominously on the horizon.

By Saturday, even allowing for the pain of another Wenyen Gabriel 3-pointer raining down from the top of the Gateway Arch, Alabama was in a different place. It had beaten Texas A&M on a buzzer-beater that made national headlines and gave UA its most memorable postseason moment in a decade or more.

Then came a win against Auburn, a victory that didn’t mean a championship but does allow the Crimson Tide some floating rights with a winning record against the Tigers for the season.

More importantly, perhaps, it was yet another Quadrant A win for Alabama, the eighth of the season, a mark that seemed to change the Crimson Tide’s NCAA hopes from “gone” to a foregone conclusion.

Such things don’t happen simply because Avery Johnson pushed a magic button or said a secret password that Nick Saban

See HURT, C3

See next page
HURT

From Page C1

provided for him, although Johnson did say Saturday that Saban had given him “one really good tip” about the basketball team earlier in the week. Johnson declined to divulge what that tip might have been.

Alabama appeared to have worked on some problem areas. Sexton's role seemed more clearly defined, and that in turn seemed to make Dazon Ingram more effective. Rebounding was still an issue against towering Texas A&M but was much improved in the games against Auburn and Kentucky, two teams that dominated Alabama on the glass during the five-game skid.

Perhaps an even better sign was that Petty gave a glimpse of his firepower potential in the second half of the UK game. If he is once again a consistent 3-point threat after a long shooting slump, that changes the way that upcoming opponents must prepare.

The absence of Donta Hall, out with a concussion, was problematic Saturday, both offensively and, especially, defensively. It wouldn't be fair to dismiss Kentucky's great shooting performance as a function of Hall's absence, but it did leave Alabama without a shot-blocking presence at the rim.

What's more, consider this from UK coach John Calipari: when Gabriel was on his second-half 3-point binge, he was actually playing center for the Wildcats (a luxury of talent is that Kentucky could surround him with forwards at 6-foot-9 and 6-foot-10). That meant that either Galin Smith or Daniel Giddens had to guard the quicker player 20 feet away from the rim, far from their comfort zone. Hall might have fared better.

Alabama didn't leave St. Louis transformed, just improved. There are still issues that must be handled (Hall’s return is a necessity), but at least the Crimson Tide seems to be walking confidently into the post-season instead of slouching to an unwelcome fate.

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Alabama enters spring drills with Jalen Hurts, Tua Tagovailoa battling for starting job

By Aaron Suttles
Sports Writer

Spring football starts in less than 10 days, and the main topic, which will go unanswered, throughout the combined 15 practices and scrimmages is who will be the starting quarterback.

Alabama coach Nick Saban is no hurry to answer the question and rightfully so. Why answer the question when it doesn't yet need to be answered, especially when the disclosure could cause him to lose either to-be junior Jalen Hurts and to-be sophomore Tua Tagovailoa.

Saban recently broached the subject in an interview with espn.com in which he said he hasn't ruled out the possibility of playing both quarterbacks. Saban's history shows that's not a likely scenario that will play out, but he said it's possible.

"The most important thing is to play the best guy, and if both guys can play winning football, it's not out of the question that we'll find a role for both guys in fairness to both guys," Saban said in the interview with ESPN. "I don't know that there's any more to it than that."

Hurts is 25-2 in two seasons as a starter, but in the Crimson Tide's last game against Georgia in the College Football Playoff National Championship Game, he gave way to Tagovailoa, who saved Alabama with three second-half passing touchdowns, including the game-winning 41-yarder in overtime.

See DECISION, C4

DECISION

From Page C1

Saban said he inserted Tagovailoa against Georgia to jumpstart the passing game. Hurts was just 3 of 8 passing for 21 yards in the first half.

Former Alabama quarterback Blake Sims, who led the team to the CFP in 2014 as the starting signal caller, said Hurts has handled the situation nearly perfectly.

"He dealt with it better than I would've, most definitely," Sims said. "To know that you only lost two games your whole (career) and you get pulled, I was very surprised to see a smile on his face, because what player would you see with a smile? I hope that showed everyone that he's more about the team than himself, and that he wants to be a winner. You can't do nothing but respect that. That's my little bro. Tua's my little bro. I want to see them be the best that they can be. I told them they've got to help each other because we all wear the crimson. That's the motto right now.

"They're two great guys. It's just how life works. Sometimes God puts you in spots to see how strong you are, to see how big he is. Maybe that's just a test for both of them for God to see how far he can push them."

Calvin Ridley joked during Pro Day this week he'd be happy with a two-quarterback system that could utilize the skill set of both players. Beyond that, he doesn't have an opinion on who the starter should be.

"I wish I was playing here to tell you, but I ain't here," Ridley said. "I don't know. They're going to find some way to get both of those great football players to be playing and helping this team."

Sims thinks it could work.

"I think that would be very good," he said. "I think it would be harder for the defense to prepare for our games because both quarterbacks' strengths are different. You've got to be aware of what you get, and Coach Saban's the GOAT, man, so he'll make sure we do the right thing. I'm looking forward to this season. I'll be there every game, too."

Saban will likely grow weary of discussing the quarterback competition, but, for now, he's encouraging both guys to do just that: compete.

"We're always looking to create competition on the practice field, and it shouldn't be any different at quarterback," Saban said.

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