

Children receive gifts in annual Toys from Cops event in Sullivan

REGION » B1



N Dakota State ends ETSU's season with 27-3 victory

SPORTS » C1

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Tornadoes kill dozens in 5 states

Kentucky twister may rival longest on record

BY BRUCE SCHREINER and JIM SALTER
Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. — A monstrous tornado, carving a track that could rival the longest on record, ripped across the middle of the U.S. in a stormfront that killed dozens and tore apart a candle factory, crushed a nursing home, derailed a train and smashed an Amazon warehouse.

INSIDE
» Photos of storm damage. A4, A7
» How to help. A4

"I pray that there will be another rescue. I pray that there will be another one or two," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said, as crews sifted through the wreckage of the candle factory in Mayfield, where 110 people were working overnight Friday when the storm hit. Forty of them were rescued.

"We had to, at times, crawl over casualties to get to live victims," said Jeremy Creason, the city's fire chief and EMS director.

In Kentucky alone, 22 were confirmed dead by Saturday afternoon, including 11 in and around Bowling Green. But Beshear said upwards of 70 may have been killed when a twister touched down for more than 200 miles in his state and that

See **TORNADOES**, Page A4

COVID-19

PANDEMIC

LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	269,693,200+	5,301,100+
United States	49,884,500+	797,100+
Virginia	994,069	14,895
Tennessee	1,336,078	17,729

% FULLY VACCINATED IN VA.: 66.2%
% FULLY VACCINATED IN TENN.: 50.3%
SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

Thank you, **Linda Williams**, for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.

Weather » A12



44TH ANNIVERSARY OF CRASH



This was the scene near Evansville's Dress Regional Airport on Dec. 14, 1977, following the crash of a chartered DC-3 airliner in which 29 people perished. The entire University of Evansville basketball team was among the victims. Marion native Stafford Stephenson was on a recruiting trip.

TWIST OF FATE

Recruiting trip led to SW Va. native missing team's fatal 1977 crash

BY TIM HAYES
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

As the midnight hour passed on that winter day in 1977 and Tuesday, Dec. 13 morphed into Wednesday, Dec. 14, Stafford Stephenson finally plopped onto his bed at a hotel not far from the airport in Tampa, Florida, and prepared to catch some much-needed shut-eye.

The 30-year-old was in his first season as an assistant basketball coach at the University of Evansville and was on a recruiting mission, one of many he embarked on in the eight months since being hired by his friend and mentor, Bobby Watson.

The Purple Aces had made the transition from the NCAA's College Division (what is now referred to as Division II) to the Division I level and the team needed some major talent to fill the roster if they were to compete with the giants of the sport.

That is why Stephenson, along with fellow assistants Mark Sandy and Bernie Simpson, had been dispatched by their boss to scope out some high school standouts across the country on the same day Evansville's team was making the trip for a game against Middle Tennessee State University.



Stafford Stephenson, assistant coach of the 1977 Aces basketball team, hugs Angela Sartore, before the unveiling of the new memorial that honored the victims of the 1977 plane crash at the Ford Center in Evansville, Indiana, in 2014.

A Smyth County, Virginia, native, Stephenson was a serious student of the sport he loved with an unbridled passion and had carefully learned the nuances of the game.

He had been a top scorer for the Scarlet Hurricanes of

Marion High School, a reliable point guard at Emory & Henry College and his burgeoning coaching career had included a two-year stint as the man calling the shots for the John Battle High School Trojans.

The enthusiastic guy from

Southwest Virginia with a receding hairline was living his hoop dreams at a school in southwestern Indiana and was willing to help Watson build a star-studded roster.

See **FATE**, Page A6

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Fate

From Page A1

So, Stephenson settled into the bleachers on that mid-December day at a gym in Florida and closely watched a player whose name escapes him all these years later.

"The kid was a good player, not a great player, but for us it might be somebody we could recruit and have them get better," Stephenson said. "We didn't need to give up on him."

He sat beside this kid's parents during the game and hung around for a while following the contest chatting with the youngster's coach. Feeling famished after a busy day that began with a flight from Evansville's Dress Memorial Airport that morning, Stephenson stopped at McDonald's for a late supper.

By the time he got back to his room and turned on the television, the local newscast had ended and Stephenson scarfed down his fast-food meal as he watched "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" with Joan Embery of the San Diego Zoo showing off some exotic animals, Kelly Monteith cracking some jokes, Doug Henning performing some magic tricks and Tony Bennett belting out some tunes.

Stephenson soon dozed off as a busy day of observing more prospects in the Sunshine State awaited.

"Whipped, beat, tired," Stephenson said of that night. "I had to get some sleep so I could be fresh in the morning."

These were the days before phones were smart, cable TV news aired 24/7 and all the information you could need was at one's fingertips, so Stephenson had no idea what had happened back in Evansville.

At 7:22 p.m., Air Indiana Flight 216 had crashed just after takeoff and all 29 people aboard the Douglas DC-3 were killed. That was the plane carrying the Evansville Purple Aces to the airport in Nashville, Tennessee, for the next night's game against Middle Tennessee State.

An overloaded baggage compartment and the fact the pilot had not removed a couple of gust locks prior to liftoff were cited by the National Transportation Safety Board as the causes of the tragic events.

While Stephenson slept soundly that evening in Florida, he soon woke up to a nightmare.

'This is my team'

It was a ritual for Stafford Stephenson on those recruiting trips.

He'd venture to the lobby the first thing in the morning to grab a newspaper or two (he was a vociferous reader) and a cup of coffee.

When he got back in the room that day in Florida and laid the newspaper down (more than likely the Tampa Tribune or St. Petersburg Times), the large, bold headlines declaring a basketball team had died in a plane crash caught his eye.

"I said, 'Wow, that is awful' and I started looking and the first thing that hit me was the dateline said Evansville, Indiana," Stephenson said. "I was thinking, 'What team would be flying into Evansville?' Then I started seeing the names. It's hard to explain; it was hard to believe. I couldn't accept those names were in the paper. All of a sudden, it just kind of hit me that this is my team. This is who I am looking at."

He frantically reached for the phone and placed a call to his wife, Tess, back in Evansville.

She had been up to the wee hours of the morning calling hotels near the Tampa airport to reach her husband with no luck. The place he was staying had mistakenly told her a Stafford Stephenson was not registered.

"Tess asked me if I was OK and told me that I needed to call Jim Byers, the athletic director, immediately," Stephenson said. "I talked to him and told him I was coming back to campus right away. I threw all my clothes in a suitcase, checked with Eastern Airlines, and told them who I was, and they bent over back-



EVANSVILLE COURIER & PRESS ARCHIVES

The 1977 University of Evansville men's basketball team. Stafford Stephenson, assistant coach of the team, is seated second from the left.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stafford Stephenson (standing at right), assistant coach of the 1977 Evansville Aces basketball team, with members of the Evansville team during their last game against Indiana State in Terre Haute, Indiana, on Dec. 10, 1977.

Coaching Career

The following is a look at where Marion, Virginia, native and Emory & Henry College graduate Stafford Stephenson coached basketball over the course of his career:

- » 1969-1971 – Pulaski High School (Pulaski, Virginia), assistant coach
- » 1971-1973 – John Battle High School, (Bristol, Virginia), head coach
- » 1973-1975 – Wake Forest University (Winston-Salem, North Carolina), assistant coach
- » 1975-1977 – Wingate Junior College (Wingate, North Carolina), head coach
- » 1977-1981 – University of Evansville (Evansville, Indiana), assistant coach
- » 1981-1985 – Southern Illinois University (Carbondale, Illinois), assistant coach

“I want to have those kids still be remembered because they were special. I know that's easy to say, but they were a unique caliber of kids. Any time an opportunity comes up or people ask me about it, I want them to know what kind of players they were, but more importantly, what kind of people they were. You wonder what they would be doing today. They would have happy lives, I would think.”

– Stafford Stephenson, on the former Evansville players killed in plane crash

wards for me and even held the airplane for a few minutes so I could get through the check-in process. I got back to Evansville about 3 p.m. ... It was a dreary, dark, rainy, miserable day and that kind of started the next chapter.”

Stephenson attended Watson's funeral service in Pittsburgh.

He traveled to Tell City, Indiana; Indianapolis, Indiana; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Goldsboro, North Carolina for the burials of some of the players on the squad.

Thirteen players, one coach, various athletic department employees and members of the flight crew were gone. The remainder of the season was canceled.

David Furr, a walk-on, had not made the trip due to an ankle injury. He died two weeks later in a car crash.

Stafford and Tess Stephenson tried to make the holidays enjoyable for their daughter, Megan, who was a toddler at the time amid the melancholy feelings.

"Starting with that Dec. 13 date, it was almost like there was a pall over the city," Ste-

phenson said. "That feeling when I got off the plane with it being dreary, cold, rainy. ... It was almost like those above us knew what we were going through and said, 'Get used to it, that's the way it is going to be for a while.'"

Losing one co-worker or pupil is heartbreaking.

How did Stephenson deal with the loss of so many that he held dear?

"I don't know really how to answer that," Stephenson said. "I was probably just in shock. I don't know any other way to describe it."

Losing battle

Stafford Stephenson has always approached things in a positive way, a glass half-full type of guy and that helped him make it through the tough times.

He played for respected coach Charlie Harkins at Marion and the Scarlet Hurricanes went 17-3 his senior year, winning the 1965 Southwest District regular-season title with him leading the way.

At Emory & Henry College, he was a cerebral 6-foot-1 point guard.

"Stafford was a very fundamental player and did everything well," said Pat Burns, a teammate of Stephenson's at E&H. "He didn't have a weakness. He handled it well, passed it well, shot it well. Everything nice you could say about a point guard, you could say about Stafford."

It was at E&H that Stephenson realized he wanted to coach the game as he learned a great deal from Tony Mandeville and Jimmy Hughes, his earliest mentors.

After two seasons coaching the junior varsity squad at Pulaski High School in Virginia, Stephenson was hired in 1971 to teach physical education, take over the hoops program and serve as an assistant baseball coach at John Battle High School in Bristol.

"When I got the job [previous coach] Jimmy Geiger told me it was a rough one," Stephenson said. "He said there was kind of a downswing in talent. We had some really good kids that were better baseball and football players than they were basketball players."

Stephenson went 2-18 that first season with both wins over the Holston Cavaliers.

"After the season, Dave Sparks [of the Bristol Herald Courier] interviewed me about the season, and in that interview I made the statement that we won't go 2-18 again," Stephenson said. "Well, we went 1-19 the next year. I kind of learned to be careful what you say."

Yet, Stephenson never got down on his squad.

"Coach Stephenson did not dwell on the negatives," said Mark Draper, who played on John Battle's 1972-73 team.

All three of Stephenson's wins against his 37 losses during his two seasons on the Battle bench ended up coming over Holston and newspaper accounts frequently used the terms hapless and lowly in regard to the squad. His final game at the helm of the Trojans was a 57-47 loss to Tazewell in the first round of the 1973 Southwest District tournament.

"He was all about hustle and technique," said Gary Boothe,

who played for Stephenson as well. "We just had no size. I was 6-foot-1 and a post player. He always worked with me on shooting with both hands inside. He tried to keep the team upbeat."

Boothe remembers his coach's generosity.

"I guess it was my senior year, and one day after school I was walking out to my car," Boothe said. "He had a pair of leather flip flops that he didn't like, and he gave those to me, and I must have worn those suckers for four years. That was just the kind of guy he was."

College try

A few months after struggling through a one-win season at Battle, Stafford Stephenson landed a gig as a graduate assistant for the Wake Forest University Demon Deacons of the Atlantic Coast Conference.

"When I tell people that I went from three wins in two years at John Battle to Wake Forest," Stephenson said, "it kind of blows their mind."

He had gotten to know Wake Forest head coach Carl Tacy really well when Tacy coached at Ferrum Junior College in Virginia for a few seasons in the late 1960s.

When Tacy gave Stephenson the opportunity to join the staff at Wake Forest and coach the program's junior varsity squad, he jumped at the chance.

"It was an eye-opening experience, and I really learned a lot," Stephenson said.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is where he first met Bobby Watson, and the two became fast friends while working together as assistants on Tacy's staff.

Stephenson later accepted the job at Wingate Junior College in North Carolina at Watson's urging.

Two years later, Watson hired his colleague at Evansville.

The dynamic Watson played basketball at Virginia Military Institute and had served two tours of duty in Vietnam.

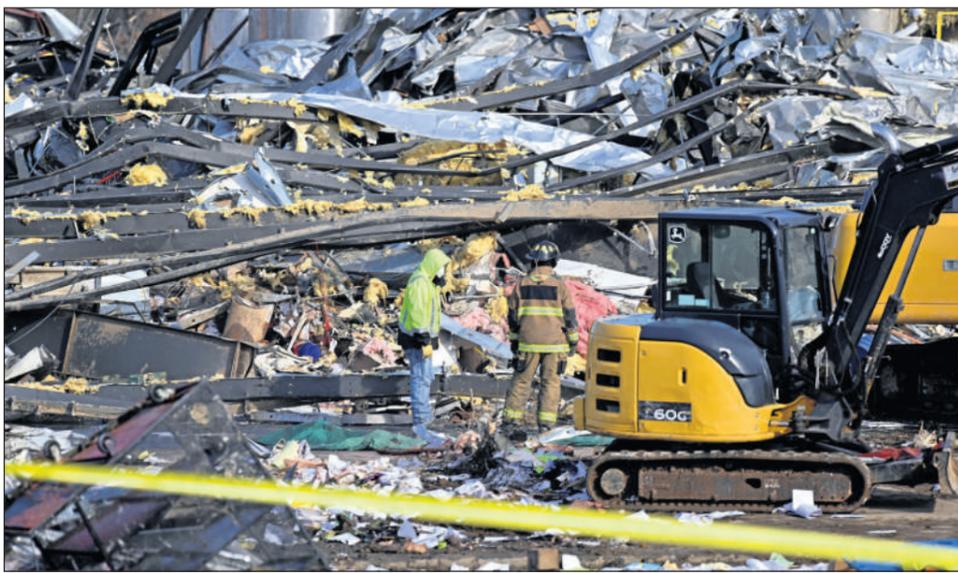
"Bobby did become my mentor," Stephenson said. "He was one of the good, and truly unique, people on the face of the Earth."

Bridging the gap

Three days before the crash, Evansville suffered a 102-76 loss to the Indiana State Sycamores, who featured a superstar named Larry Bird.

"They beat us every way there was to beat us," Stephenson said. "Larry Bird was unbelievable. Bobby walked into the locker room after the game, looked at everybody and said, 'We will not do this again. Don't get used to it.' He was really hot and really upset with all of us — players, coaches, himself."

Watson had said before the season that he wanted his three assistants to be present and sitting on the bench during the first four games against Western Kentucky, DePaul, Pittsburgh and Indiana State to gauge what caliber of players Evansville would need to acquire to compete at the DI level.



Scenes of devastation

Emergency personnel and residents returned to scenes of devastation and businesses on Saturday after an overnight tornado that carved a long path of destruction. Dozens were killed by a twister that could rival the longest on record. The storm may have touched down for nearly 250 miles.

AP PHOTOS



Crash

From Page A6

They might have to miss some games or road trips while out recruiting, but so be it.

That plan turned out to save Stephenson's life.

He was among the applicants to apply for the vacant head-coaching position after the plane crash as he looked to become Watson's successor.

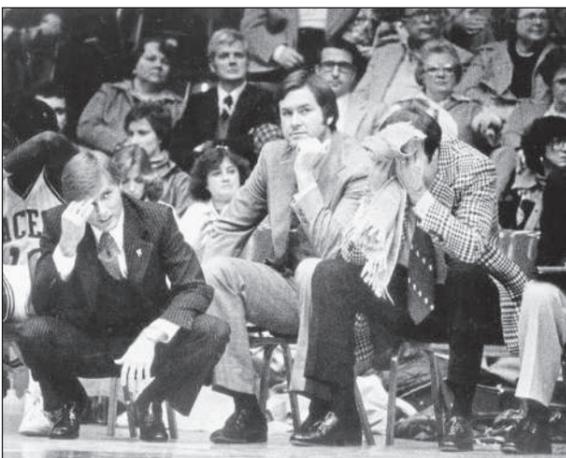
Stephenson was a finalist for the position (Milligan College coach Phil Worrell, who later coached at Virginia Intermont College, was also an applicant), but the job went to Dick Walters, who had built a small-school powerhouse at the College of DuPage in Illinois.

"I was disappointed, but there were no sour grapes," Stephenson said. "I wanted to stay on at Evansville and wanted to be a part of putting it back together. I told Dick that I would support him every step of the way regardless and that he would not hear a negative thing coming from me."

It was a classy move by a classy individual.

"Stafford Stephenson was a real bridge between the Bobby Walters team and the Dick Walters era, a steady presence in the midst of complete catastrophe," said Steve Beaven, who wrote the book "We Will Rise" about the crash and its aftermath. "He was respected in the community, the players liked him, and he was a terrific recruiter. I really admire the way he handled things after the crash."

By late January, Stephenson was back on the road recruiting, and he



EVANSVILLE COURIER & PRESS ARCHIVES

University of Evansville coaches, including Stafford Stephenson (with the towel) have a bad night during the 1978-79 season. The entire team and the head coach died in a plane crash in December 1977.



Stephenson

said it was therapeutic in many ways.

Players tended to gravitate toward the laid-back

Stephenson.

"Stafford was a very respectful, meek and mild-mannered assistant coach," said Steve Sherwood, a 6-foot-8 center at Evansville from 1979-1982. "He was a great mentor to me as I was someone who was learning to adjust to the college basketball life and pace, coming from the rural, northern Illinois community. He always had the patience and time to talk with me about how to improve my basketball skills."

Sherwood also remembers that Stephenson was true to his Southwest Virginia roots in regard to some mountain music.

"He was involved in coordinating the team's public appearances, which during our first year were numerous," Sherwood said. "I think

the university wanted the team to appear within the community as much as possible to help with the healing process.

"I recall that whenever I traveled with Stafford to those meet and greets, he loved to listen to country music. He always had country music playing on the radio when possible. That was the old style of country music, not the country music as we know it today."

Just like his musical preference, Stephenson's work ethic and attention to detail never waned.

"He was a Gary X's and O's guy," said Gary Marriott, who was an assistant on Walters' staff with Stephenson. "He could come back with a scouting report, and you'd know when the other team went to the bathroom at half-time. He was a very smart basketball mind. He was up front, honest and there was no B.S. His office was right next to mine, and he was always there bright and early every day working. He was a dedicated family man."

Stephenson departed

Evansville after the 1980-81 season for a job as an assistant at Southern Illinois as it was a bump in pay. The Purple Aces would make the NCAA Tournament in 1982 as Stephenson had helped get them on the right track.

He would spend four seasons there before resigning following the 1984-85 season as the Salukis were caught up in a scandal that led to star player Kenny Perry being accused of getting payments from one of the team's boosters.

"It was one of those things where there are two sides to every story," Stephenson said. "That's all I can say. It was unfortunate. ... The people at Southern Illinois were good to me, but I could see the handwriting on the wall."

The road of always being on the road and the demands of college coaching when it wasn't nearly as lucrative as it is now and with a wife and kids at home, Stephenson decided to leave coaching and enter the insurance business.

Now retired and residing in High Point, North Carolina, Evansville is never far from the 74-year-old Stephenson's mind. A photo of the 1977-78 squad hung on the wall of his State Farm Insurance office for years.

Lasting legacy

On Nov. 14, 1970, an airplane carrying Marshall University's football team crashed on the way back from a game in North Carolina and all 75 people onboard were killed.

The list of deceased included Rick Tolley, Marshall's 30-year-old head coach. Tolley had been a teacher and coach at John

Battle himself for a couple of years in the 1960s.

Seven years later, a twist of fate kept a 30-year-old former Battle teacher and coach from dying in another one of sport's biggest tragedies.

"I remember that Marshall plane crash, but it didn't have much impact on me at the time, because there was nothing to compare it to at that point," Stephenson said. "Since then, I've become very aware of that."

Monday marks the 44th anniversary of the event in Evansville.

Stephenson has been back to the city a few times since he coached there, and he spoke at a memorial several years ago when the Purple Aces moved into their new arena and dedicated

a wing to those in the crash.

The events of Dec. 13, 1977, and the ensuing dark days still remain vivid in Stephenson's mind as do memories of those who were lost.

"I want to have those kids still be remembered because they were special," Stephenson said. "I know that's easy to say, but they were a unique caliber of kids. Any time an opportunity comes up or people ask me about it, I want them to know what kind of players they were, but more importantly, what kind of people they were. You wonder what they would be doing today. They would have happy lives, I would think."

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