

Marion squeaks past VHS, 46-44

BY ALLEN GREGORY
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. – Day after day, Marion junior basketball player Anna Hagy counted down the hours until her team could begin the season.

On Dec. 28, the Scarlet Hurricanes finally received approval to practice. Marion's first game followed on Jan. 5.

"All the teams around us have

up to three weeks of practices and games on us," Hagy said. "We worked hard to prepare, so we were real excited to finally start."

Behind a second half comeback and relentless defense, Marion earned its third win of the week Saturday afternoon with a 46-44 decision over the Virginia High Bearcats.

The extra preparation paid

Prep Girls Basketball

dividends for the 5-foot-4 Hagy. In addition to scoring 15 points Saturday, Hagy held VHS forward Dianna Spence to a season-low four points despite giving up nearly five inches in height.

Did Hagy have some extra motivation?

"Yes, I know that anything can

be taken away from us with all that is going around, so I pretend every game is for the championship," said Hagy, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. "Every play and shot counts."

Nothing came easy for Marion on this day.

Ignited by the traditional man-to-man defense orchestrated by VHS coach Kevin Timmons, VHS built leads of 5-0 and 26-16 in

the first half. The Bearcats (3-2, 3-1) did not allow a point until the 3:46 mark of the opening quarter when Hagy broke loose for a layup.

"Coach Timmons does an amazing job with pressure defense," Marion coach Sallie Moss said. "I did my best to get the girls ready for it, and they

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King University Basketball

Gillespie has his priorities in check

Jason Gillespie is a basketball coach.

He thought he was something else, but a year away from the game as a businessman taught him otherwise.

He's back, as the new head men's coach at King University, and while winning basketball games will be how he is judged, there are other priorities in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We want to win every game and we are going to try to win every game, but there are also very important things that everyone in this world are having to deal with right now," said

Gillespie, an assistant at King from 2000-03 before spending most of the next 18 years winning 280 games as a head coach at Cincinnati Christian, Bluefield and Reinhardt. "We have got to keep it in perspective, and hopefully this keeps sports in perspective for everyone."

Sports are a vital part of society. They serve as a diversion from the "real" world, which is needed more than ever in the political climate that has gripped our country in recent weeks.

Gillespie has it figured out. "Sports are very, very important, sports are not life and death," said Gillespie, whose Tornado will open the season on Wednesday by hosting Conference Carolinas foe Emmanuel. "There are bigger things that sports teams have to go through that help these guys deal with stuff down the road and be able to deal with things

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IN MEMORIAM



COACHING STAFF—(First Row) Curtis Burkett, Bob Buchanan (Head Coach), Mike Lethcoe, Berkley Clear. (Back Row) Ted Engle, Mike Hagy, Dean Bailey.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The 1977 Abingdon football coaching staff pictured in the Bristol Herald Courier with Bob Buchanan in his second season as head coach.

BOB BUCHANAN

Former Abingdon football coach, who passed away at 76, let his players bask in the spotlight

Los Angeles Dodgers scout by the name of Tommy Lasorda was among the large throng gathered at Abingdon's Latture Field on May 21, 1962, to take a look at the high school prospects playing in a marquee District Seven baseball clash between the

Abingdon Falcons and Damascus Indians.

Lasorda watched as Bob Buchanan, the ace pitcher for Damascus with the excellent curveball spun a complete game seven-hitter that day in being outdueling by Jimmy "Hawk" Henley of the Falcons in

a 3-2 setback.

"I've seen more enthusiasm here today than at any high school game in years," Lasorda told Gene "Pappy" Thompson of the Bristol Herald Courier. "These are two fine young ballclubs." Fourteen years later, Lasorda and Bu-

1979 ABINGDON FALCONS	
Regular Season	
Abingdon 7, John Battle 0	
Abingdon 18, Virginia High 16	
Abingdon 25, Lebanon 7	
Abingdon 20, Marion 3	
Abingdon 24, Richlands 8	
Abingdon 14, Gate City 12	
Abingdon 22, Grundy 0	
Abingdon 47, Tazewell 14	
Abingdon 35, Patrick Henry 0	
Abingdon 30, Graham 6	
Region IV Playoffs	
Abingdon 21, Blacksburg 6	
Abingdon 21, Narrows 0	
Group AA State Semifinals	
Jefferson Forest 10, Abingdon 7	

chanan would experience seminal moments as leaders of men.

Lasorda took over as manager of the Dodgers with four games remaining in the 1976 season after Walter Alston retired and the next year led the team

to a spot in the World Series with a Southwest Virginia native – former Fries High School and East Tennessee State University slugger Ed Goodson – on the roster.

Buchanan became the head football coach at Abingdon High School in 1976 and reversed the fortunes of a downtrodden program as the Falcons reached postseason play two years later for the first time in the modern playoff system.

The two men who both recently passed away couldn't have been more different in how they approached their jobs

Lasorda loved to bask in the glory, a California showman with an oversized ego.

Buchanan shied away from the spotlight as he was content with letting his players be the ones who shined under the Friday night lights in Southwest

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Bunch powers Union over Battle, 71-32

BY BRIAN WOODSON
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BIG STONE GAP, Va. – Bradley Bunch and his school of Bears look like the real deal.

Just ask John Battle, after Union took a 37-4 lead into halftime on its way to a 71-32 Mountain 7 District victory over John Battle that had the feel of a glorified scrimmage due to no more than 25 fans allowed in the seats. Just not to Bunch.

"Not really. We just create our own energy. That is how we

play," said Bunch, who led the Bears with 15 points and 14 rebounds. "It is a little strange, but I am just glad we get to play."

Union (3-1, 3-0) won its third game in a row, with the lone loss coming to Science Hill by three points.

"We are excited. I have told these guys just don't take it for granted," Union head coach Zack Moore said. "We are lucky, we are fortunate we are getting to play. Don't take these nights for granted, every night we get

Prep Boys Basketball

together and we get to play, it is a blessing. That is how we are trying to approach it and when we go out we try to play as hard as we can."

Union was led by the 6-foot-5 Bunch, who had a double-double while being the only player on the court to wear a mask while playing in the game.

"That is comfortable for me," Bunch said. "I wear a mask for a

personal reason and family stuff. It doesn't bother me."

John Battle (1-3, 1-3) came out cold and the Bears not only made their shots, but also forced 20 first half turnovers, building a 33-point halftime lead. That margin would grow to as much as 41 after the break.

"I would personally rather have a close game, but if it is like that, you have just got to keep the energy and keep going and play how we play," Bunch said.

The Trojans, who were led by

Noah Ratliff with eight points and seven apiece from Bryson Almany and Zack Smith, did play a better second half, which was a positive note made by John Battle head coach Steve Posey.

"They are a good ball club, well coached, they play well together," Posey said. "From the get-go, we were just out of sync. They put some pressure on us, we sort of backed down a little bit, but the second half, I challenged

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Woodson

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they are going to see later on with their families and that is more important.

“Hopefully while we win every game they learn as we go.”

Gillespie knows all about the adversity caused by the coronavirus. He has had it, and most of his team has dealt with it as well.

“Pretty much two-thirds of our guys have had it at some point. We have had to shut down twice,” he said. “There was a time when we only had seven [players] available to practice. Then there was a time when we got it back up to 12. We have had 33 practices [since September], but probably only 12 of them with everybody that wasn't hurt.”

It hasn't just been the King men's team. The King women, including head coach Josh Thompson, have had to deal with the coronavirus too.

“Early on my team got quarantined right when we first started practice just because of symptoms...,” said Thompson, whose team, like the men, went nearly five weeks without a practice before Thanksgiving and the return from Christmas break. “I had COVID so that complicated things back before Thanksgiving so that got my team quarantined so we missed out on about a week and a half of practice before they had to leave for the Christmas break.”

Three players are still out,



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

New King University basketball coach Jason Gillespie begins his first season at the helm in the world of COVID-19.

with Thompson hopeful that as least two of them will be available on Wednesday for the season opener against Emmanuel at home.

Thompson has recovered from his bout with the virus, but it took a while for the symptoms to leave.

“I had a cough linger for a little while afterwards and that was like the final symptom,” he said. “It wouldn't go away, but now it has finally kind of seceded.”

King is following strict protocols for combating the coronavirus, even not allowing fans at home games until at least Jan. 19.

“We are testing two times a week, masking up, we are staying away from each other the best we can on the court,” said Gillespie, who is trying

to replace four starters that departed after last season.

“We haven't been able to do anything team bonding wise, which is a thing for everybody so it is not like it is a detriment. It is kind of a detriment to a new coaching staff and guys who have a decent number of new players. It is more of a struggle getting to know each other.”

It has even closed one of the most sacred bastions for building a team.

“That has changed things a lot. Our benches, we will be doing some different things with the benches and trying to stay apart. We haven't been able to use our locker room, which is kind of a weird thing for any team, but especially a college basketball team,” he said. “There is a lot of stuff

that is good and bad, but mostly good happens in the locker room. You get to talk and kind of decompress and come together as a group and we haven't had that.”

King doesn't return to classroom instruction until Jan. 19 so the Tornado has been able to play catch up since returning to campus on Dec. 28.

“We have had some five hour days of having them on the court in the morning for individual [workouts] and back in the afternoon and practicing in the evening. It has been fun,” Gillespie said. “We have been trying to make up some ground. They haven't had to worry about class, they just get to focus on basketball and that has been beneficial for us.”

Like any coach, Gillespie's players are like his family. His style of play, which allows players to run up and down the floor and score points, is popular among today's college basketball players.

“I would rather watch that as a fan. I enjoy it as a fan and always my thought process was I want to coach kids the way I wanted to play and be coached,” he said. “We are going to care about them, we are going to love them. They are the most important people in your lives other than my own family.”

“We want them to have the experience of being able to play the type of game they want to play and we try to recruit guys that are going to try to thrive in that system as well. That is where high basketball

IQ guys help us out, they can make plays without having something drawn up for them or when we do have a set play, they can see some different things that we encourage with them.”

Gillespie has other concerns outside of basketball. While living in Georgia, his wife, Cindy, worked as a nurse at a hospital. She has made a delayed move to Bristol, but still returns to Georgia on the weekends to assist in the same hospital that been overrun by a surge of coronavirus cases.

They are parents of three children, ages 16, 9 and 2.

He has a prayer request, not just for her, but all health care workers. They need it and deserve it.

“She is an ER nurse and they have been inundated right now and they are just packed in their ERs down there so the appreciation level when you are married to someone who is going through that is off the charts,” Gillespie said. “She is exhausted and she is working her tail off to try and make sure and help take of people the best she can.”

“If it is something people do, I would encourage prayers and reaching out to front-line workers in the medical field to make sure they are appreciated because they have got a lot on them right now. It takes a physical toll and I am sure it takes a mental and spiritual toll on people as well.”

Amen.

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History

From Page C1

Virginia.

“I never heard him use the word I when we had success,” said former Abingdon quarterback Sam McKinney. “It was all the players. The only time we heard I was when something went wrong.”

Not much went wrong for Buchanan during his four seasons leading the football team at AHS from 1976-79 as the Falcons compiled a 33-11 record, made two playoff appearances, won a Region IV championship and reached the VHSL Group AA state semifinals during that successful span.

Buchanan, who died the day after Christmas at the age of 76, is fondly remembered by those who knew him.

“Well organized, all business, humble, no ego,” McKinney said.

Buchanan had been a multi-sport star at Damascus and as an offensive lineman for the Indians helped pave the way for talented running back Tommy Francisco, who rushed for 4,097 yards over the course of his high school career. Buchanan was an honorable mention all-state selection on the O-Line in 1962. “All those years we went to school together and played ball together, I can say that Bob was just a wonderful, wonderful person,” Francisco said. “I loved Bob like a brother and I am sure that he will always be remembered by all that knew him as a good man.”

Francisco and Buchanan both received football scholarships to Virginia Tech and their high school coach – Emory Hill – said that one of his biggest thrills was watching his former pupils compete in a game for the Hokies' freshman team against West Virginia University.

Buchanan transferred to Emory & Henry College to continue his football career after one season in Blacksburg. He entered the coaching profession and served as an assistant grid-iron coach at AHS under Casto Ramsey and Larry Bales before taking over the struggling program himself.

“About five years ago, I went by and saw him and he told me something that I didn't realize,” McKinney said. “My sophomore year, we had just gone 1-9 and had been 2-8 my freshman year and things didn't look like they

were going to get much better. We still played at Latture Field, the Little League program was only three years old and our weight room was a universal weight machine.

“Jerry Bishop was the athletic director and at the time and he and Coach Buchanan had coached baseball together for several years. Jerry knew what type of person and coach Bob was, so he went to Bob and told him, ‘Mr. [Ken] Mathews, the AHS principal, is going to present your name to the school board to be the next head football coach at Abingdon.’ Coach Buchanan's reply was ‘Jerry, I don't know about that. I am not sure I am ready.’ Coach Bishop said, ‘You are ready, and by the way, the newspaper will probably call you tonight.’”

Buchanan's first game as the boss of the Falcons was a 14-7 triumph over the John Battle Trojans, who were coached by Phil Robbins. Buchanan and Robbins had been teammates at E&H.

“He was an outstanding coach and genuine person,” Robbins said. “He was a true believer in the split-back veer offense and the 4-4 defense. Bob was a good friend of mine.”

The Falcons went 5-5 that first season and improved that mark each of the next three seasons as Buchanan and assistant coaches such as Curtis Burkett, Berkley Clear and Mike Lethcoe went to work and raised expectations.

“The talk in close games went from ‘We can't blow this game’ in a negatively reactive sense versus ‘We're OK, let's talk about what just happened and fix it,’” recalled former AHS star Wade Lopez. “The entire environment was just better, especially when it came to handling adversity – just a huge culture change.”

Buchanan and his coaches meticulously watched film of games following those Friday night clashes against Southwest District rivals.

“We used to love Monday's and watching game film,” Lopez said. “He had a great way of showing the little things that happened to make a play work that gave credit to everyone from the guard reaching out on a difficult angle to cut off the linebacker or the wideout holding his block 10 yards downfield or a defensive guy making a play 15 yards downfield after he had gotten knocked off his feet, but didn't stop. He just kept everyone grounded and made it so no one individual was bigger than

the team.”

There was another particular aspect of those film sessions that made them memorable.

“It was always funny to see who, or how many of us, were going to get the coal bucket label,” Lopez said. “He would be reviewing film with us and would say offhanded, ‘Watch this coal bucket go the wrong way here’ or ‘Look at this coal bucket lining up offsides’ and we would literally have to bite our lips off to keep from laughing out loud in the meeting room.”

“I think four coal buckets was the most I can remember anyone ever getting in one session. But honestly, when the coaches handed out stars for wins and meeting certain goals, I think we talked more about how many coal buckets we were called out on more than how many stars we were putting on our helmets. That pretty much described Coach Buchanan's style – he could be critical in a way that made you not want to be a coal bucket, but that you were almost proud of because you knew he caught it and it wasn't acceptable. But you also knew if you were going to be a coal bucket the next week, it better not be for the same reason. And it usually never was.”

Steve Knight's football career took him from Abingdon to the University of Tennessee to the NFL's Indianapolis Colts. A crucial decision made by Buchanan prior to the 1977 season marked a key moment in his path to the next level.

“In my sophomore year I was living out of town for the summer, debating on moving to Philadelphia or New York with my uncles and I wanted to get a better opportunity in sports,” Knight said. “I ended up coming back to Abingdon two weeks too late for the summer workouts. Coach Bob Buchanan did not allow me to play on the team that year. What it did for me was it taught me a lesson and fueled my fire to become a better athlete and be better the next year, which was my junior year.”

“I switched to basketball and worked on my footwork and quickness and became a much better athlete. Coach Buchanan fueled the fire that's still lit on the inside of me. He was one of my favorite coaches and had lots of integrity and drive.”

His teams had plenty of depth as Buchanan used a platoon system and had very few guys start on both sides of the ball.

“If we had 50 players and that 50th player's biggest job was to hold a tackling dummy,” McKinney said. “Coach Buchanan expected that player to do it right. ... Everyone contributed.”

Francisco remembers his former teammate recalling such a circumstance.

“He was telling me about one young man who played for him who had a lot of desire, but very little ability at the beginning of the season,” Francisco said. “A lot of people wanted him to take the kid out, but he stuck with him and by the end of the year turned out to be one of their best players. He liked players that had desire.”

He had plenty of those in 1979 when Abingdon put together the best season in school history.

The Falcons swept through the regular season unbeaten in claiming the SWD championship.

They beat Blacksburg and Narrows in the playoffs en route to the Region IV title, the latter win avenging a 20-13 playoff loss to the Greenwave from the year before.

The 12-1 campaign ended with a gut-wrenching 10-7 state semifinal loss at Jefferson Forest. The Falcons allowed just 82 points in 13 games that season and no AHS team has reached the state semifinals since.

Steering the ship was a steady captain.

“Coach Buchanan was not very emotional, so it was fun to watch him get excited when he was particularly pleased with someone's effort, so he got a shuffling gait or hop, threw his hat down and then sprinted to you, grabbed your helmet and got a small smile through gritted teeth and a gleam in his eye,” recalled Doug Gardner, whose senior season was 1978. “It sure made you want to try harder to get to see him do that again.”

Buchanan resigned his post following that '79 season and that turned out to be his only stint as a head football coach at the high school level.

He remained in education and continued making an impact, however.

Jamie Harless was a star player at Abingdon in the 1990s, an All-American at Emory & Henry College and is now the head football coach at VHSL powerhouse Lord Botetourt High School in Daleville, Virginia.

He fondly remembers the eighth-grade math class he took that was taught by none other

than Bob Buchanan.

“Coach Buchanan asked me the first time I met him who Festus Hagen was,” Harless said. “I said ‘He's a character on Gunsmoke. Who wouldn't know that?’ He grinned at me and said ‘We're gonna get along just fine.’ I had a 104 average in his Algebra class and he constantly encouraged me, even though he had given up coaching.”

“I saw him at [legendary Emory & Henry College] Coach [Lou] Wacker's funeral [in 2019] and first thing he says to be me is ‘Who is Festus Hagen?’ I grinned at him and he gave me a big firm handshake. I loved the guy. He was a great man.”

A sentiment shared by many.

The following is a look at high school basketball moments which occurred this week in history:

Jan. 11, 1949

Tennessee High overwhelmed Erwin, 59-29, as Charlie Nickels and Manuel Garrison scored 17 points apiece. ... Lonnie Quillen's 29-point performance highlighted Norton's 61-37 beat-down of Clintwood. ... Phil Long scored 15 points and Bunny Saltz hit the go-ahead free throw with 15 seconds left in Virginia High's 46-45 victory over Happy Valley.

Jan. 8, 1952

Howard Tester scored 13 points as Bluff City leveled Lynn View, 51-34. ... Bill Allen erupted for 43 points in St. Paul's 63-55 victory over Pound. ... Jay Baumgardner scored 15 points as Tennessee High bombed Erwin, 46-39.

Jan. 9, 1968

Jeff Snider led the way with 18 points as Marion earned a 68-53 victory over Virginia High. ... Mike Cheek (22 points) and Coy Pendleton (19 points) set the pace in Thomas Walker's 71-55 trouncing of Jonesville. ... Behind 22 points from Larry Davis, Castlewood collected a 75-71 victory over Honaker.

Jan. 9, 1979

Brad Goff tossed in 36 points to highlight Grundy's 66-60 victory over John Battle. ... Doug Anderson scored 19 points for Clintwood in the Greenwave's 67-44 win over Appalachia. ... Terry Hartsock (18 points) starred as Twin Springs recorded a 66-63 triumph over Rye Cove.

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A prep sports season like no other is finally over

Have you hugged your athletic director today?

If not, do it. They deserve it. How about your head coaches, assistant coaches, game officials, maintenance folks, administration, anyone associated with sports at your high school of choice in the two-state region?

Oh yeah, don't forget the student-athletes. They are the reason high school sports even exist. If not, do it. They deserve it too.

Perhaps you are a little nervous about hugging

Commentary

in this COVID world? They will accept a fist pump, elbow bump or simply a thank you. A handshake - remember those - would be nice too.

It was a year like no other in high school sports. Let's not do it again, please.

When school classrooms turned virtual and sports were canceled last spring, there were serious questions about what high school sports would be like during the 2020-21 school year.

Would they even be held at all?

Yet, here we are, a year since Tennessee schools were finally allowed to prepare for another season. That began with no balls - basketballs, footballs or other balls - just conditioning drills while wearing masks and learning to socially distance, a definite foreign term for kids who were used to being up close and personal.

Virginia schools had to wait a while longer to get back to work.



Brian Woodson
Commentary

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Auto Racing

Ganassi sells entire NASCAR team to Trackhouse Racing

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Chip Ganassi sold his NASCAR team to Justin Marks, owner of Trackhouse Racing, and declared Wednesday that he will pull out of the nation's top stock car series at the end of this season.

Ganassi fields two cars in the Cup Series but will transfer his North Carolina race shop and all its assets to Marks for 2022.

"He made me a great offer that required my attention. The team wasn't for sale," Ganassi told The Associated Press.

"I'm not out of racing, I'm just out of NASCAR," Ganassi said. "I still have an IndyCar team. I still have an IMSA sports car team. I still have a Formula E team. I had an offer that I was required to consider."

The sale was announced at the NASCAR Hall of Fame, where Ganassi said "if I was trying to sell my team, I would have talked to everybody that was looking for a charter or looking for a team or looking to get involved in the sport. I did not. I talked to one person."

Marks said he called Ganassi out of the blue to make his pitch.

"I think there's a lesson here that sometimes you just have to make the call and that's what I did, I said, 'I'm in the process right now, we're at a point in time where I'm trying to identify opportunities to gross in this space and to create a great future for Trackhouse,'" Marks told AP.

Marks, who drove 22 Xfinity Series races for Ganassi from 2016 through 2018, said the team owner was intrigued.

"He was interested in hearing what I had to say," Marks said. "I think maybe he didn't know how serious I was. We had a great conversation that day."

A pair of charters went for at least \$10 million each two weeks ago, but in addition to two charters Marks also gets the Ganassi shop and assets inside the building. Marks declined to discuss terms of the deal, which was completed last week.

Ganassi said NASCAR has had an infusion of new interest from younger owners, citing Marks but also Denny Hamlin and Michael Jordan at 23XI Racing. Jeff Gordon last week was given a new role at Hendrick Motorsports that positions the former champion driver to eventually take over NASCAR's winningest team. Brad Keselowski at the end of this season is expected to move to Roush Fenway Racing in a role that gives him an ownership stake.

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Car owner Chip Ganassi, right, and driver Jamie McMurray, left, celebrate after winning the Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 2010. Ganassi has sold his NASCAR team to Trackhouse Racing, and will pull out of the nation's top stock car series at the end of this season.



DAVID CRIGGER / BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Bristol State Liners catcher Tommy Beres prepares the place the tag to retire Chenar Brown of Danville at the plate during the State Liners' 8-4 Appalachian League comeback victory over the Otterbots on Wednesday night at DeVault Stadium.

Malfunction

DeLisi has rare rough outing, but State Liners rally past Otterbots, 8-4

Appalachian League

BY TIM HAYES
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Va. — Jake DeLisi's summer in the Appalachian League will also double as a farewell to Bristol for the 20-year-old right-handed pitcher.

DeLisi put his name in the transfer portal after appearing in 17 games over the course of the 2020 and 2021

seasons for the King University Tornados on the Tennessee side of town. "I mainly left to be closer to home," DeLisi said.

DeLisi has been right at home on the mound for the Bristol State Liners as he's performed to the tune of a 1-0 record, one save and 3.12 ERA.

He had mixed results over two innings on Wednesday in Bristol's 8-4 comeback win over the Danville Otterbots at DeVault Stadium.

Taking over on the bump for Michael Fowler of the LSU Tigers, DeLisi worked a scoreless fourth

See **MALFUNCTION**, Page B3

Brewers win wild one over Cubs

The Associated Press

MLB

MILWAUKEE — Highly touted Milwaukee prospect Aaron Ashby got hammered for seven runs in the first inning of his big league debut, but Luis Urias homered twice as the Brewers rallied to rout the Chicago Cubs 15-7 Wednesday for their eighth straight win.

The Brewers swept the three-game series and increased their NL Central lead to six games over Chi-

cago. The Cubs lost their sixth in a row.

Willy Adames hit a grand slam during an eight-run burst in the fourth inning that put Milwaukee ahead 14-7. His error at shortstop helped the Cubs break loose at the start against Ashby.

Called up from Triple-A to start, the 23-year-old Ashby — and neph-

ew of two-time All-Star pitcher Andy Ashby — was in trouble right away.

Willson Contreras led off the game with a single and the Cubs loaded the bases with no outs. Javier Baez hit a two-run single, Adames' misplay let another run score and bunt single produced a run.

After a double steal, a run-scoring

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NCAA clears way for athlete compensation as state laws loom

The Associated Press

DALLAS — The NCAA Board of Directors approved one of the biggest changes in the history of college athletics Wednesday, clearing the way for nearly a half-million athletes to start earning money based on their fame and celebrity without fear of endangering their eligibility or putting their school in jeopardy of violating amateurism rules that have stood for decades.

The decision, expected for months as state after state passed laws intended to render NCAA rules moot on the topic, came on the eve of the market opening Thursday for athletes in a dozen states, including giants like Texas and Florida.

“This is an important day for college athletes since they all are now able to take advantage of name, image and likeness opportunities,” NCAA President Mark Emmert said.

The decision effectively suspends NCAA restrictions on payments to athletes for things such as sponsorship deals, online endorsements and personal appearances. It applies to all three divisions or some 460,000 athletes.

The NCAA will also allow athletes to enter into agreements with agents, though all athletes are expected to keep their school informed of any and all NIL arrangements. The NCAA said schools are responsible “for de-

termining whether those activities are consistent with state law.”

The NCAA had hoped to have broad NIL rules in place months ago, but that process bogged down, as did efforts on Capitol Hill to have Congress pass a law addressing the issue. Emmert said the NCAA will continue to push for a federal law to “provide clarity on a national level.”

The NCAA was forced to seek a temporary solution rather than have athletes in some states eligible for compensation while others were not. More than 10 states have laws set to go into effect Thursday that would have undercut or simply declared inert existing NCAA rules regarding NIL earnings.

Without NCAA action, athletes in some states could be making money without putting their college eligibility in jeopardy while their counterparts in other states could be in danger of breaking NCAA rules.

The NCAA’s stopgap measure comes less than two weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the association in a case involving education-related benefits.

That 9-0 ruling is expected to impact issues related to compensation for athletes.

While the NCAA has been fighting court battles and debating rules for

compensation for years, the sudden pivot is jarring, if not perfectly clear on how it will affect recruiting and competitive balance.

For now, the NCAA has largely left the issue in the hands of more than 1,100 member schools.

“The current environment — both legal and legislative — prevents us from providing a more permanent solution and the level of detail student-athletes deserve,” Emmert said.

In a letter to member schools last week, Emmert stressed the high court still puts authority to govern college sports in the hands of the association. However, he warned schools that “existing and new rules are subject to antitrust analysis and we should expect continued litigation, particularly in the area of ‘play for pay.’”

The NCAA said the temporary policy addresses “play for pay” and the continued ban on improper inducements tied to choosing a school.

“The new policy preserves the fact college sports are not pay-for-play,” said Division II Presidents Council chair Sandra Jordan, chancellor at the University of South Carolina-Aiken. “It also reinforces key principles of fairness and integrity across the NCAA and maintains rules prohibiting improper recruiting inducements.”

Antetokounmpo doubtful tonight

The Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo is doubtful for Game 5 of the Eastern Conference finals on Thursday after undergoing an MRI on his injured left knee.

Bucks officials said the two-time MVP hyperextended his left knee in the third quarter of a 110-88 game 4 loss to the Atlanta Hawks on Tuesday night. The Bucks announced Wednesday that an MRI confirmed that diagnosis and said he’d be listed as doubtful for Thursday’s game.

“We’ll just take it day by day and see how he’s doing,” Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said.

“When you talk about the range of possibilities, I think where this has landed has to be looked at as a positive,” Budenholzer added. “It’s still a really difficult fall.”

Antetokounmpo was attempting to block a dunk attempt by Atlanta’s Clint Capela when he landed awkwardly. He clutched his knee in obvious pain and remained down for several minutes before walking slowly to the locker room.

He briefly went back to the Bucks’ bench and then returned to the locker room shortly afterward.

The Bucks and Hawks are tied at two games apiece in the Eastern Conference finals heading into Game 5 on Thursday in Milwaukee.

Antetokounmpo has been averaging 28.2 points, 12.7 rebounds and 5.2 assists in the post-season. Milwaukee went 6-5 in the 11 regular-season games Antetokounmpo missed, including a stretch of six straight games in April when he also was dealing with an injured left knee.

“Guys get a chance to step up,” Bucks guard Jrue Holiday said after Game 4. “Guys get a chance to make big plays and on the biggest stage.”

DeChambeau aims to repeat in Detroit, hopes luck on his side

The Associated Press

DETROIT — Bryson DeChambeau is shooting to be a repeat champion for the first time on the PGA Tour.

And he’s hoping to be more fortunate than the last time he defended a title.

The big hitter is back at Detroit Golf Club — where he won the Rocket Mortgage Classic last year by three shots — after collapsing with a chance to win the U.S. Open in consecutive years.

DeChambeau has had nearly two weeks to analyze why he

went from leading with nine holes to play at Torrey Pines to plummeting to a tie for 26th, nine strokes behind Jon Rahm.

So, what went wrong? “Just luck,” he told reporters Wednesday.

DeChambeau nodded without saying a word and punched his right hand into his left palm when asked a follow-up question. Minutes later, he was more forthcoming when the topic was broached again and went into hole-by-hole detail about his U.S. Open meltdown.

Golf

“It’s just things compounding on each other that you just can’t necessarily control fully,” he said. “You hit a great shot, nothing happened for you.”

“That’s luck.” DeChambeau acknowledged he got some breaks during his breakthrough performance at Winged Foot last year when he won the U.S. Open.

“People don’t realize how much luck plays a big factor,” DeChambeau said. “You can

control a lot, but at the end of the day still, luck is a huge component of it.”

Apparently, Patrick Reed counts himself among the people who do not think luck is a pivotal factor that determines who wins on the PGA Tour.

“The guy who wins golf tournaments is usually the guy who’s playing best that week and is out there doing everything a little better than everyone else,” he said. “That’s what it takes to win golf tournaments. Four days, 72 holes, you’re going to get good

bounces, you’re going to get bad bounces.”

Tournament officials are desperately hoping weather conditions go their way after a storm flooded sections of a highway and scores of homes near Detroit Golf Club during the Motor City’s rainiest day in 80 years.

Before he arrived in town, Reed was stunned by the images of the course.

“When they showed me a picture off of 10 tee, you saw the tee box and it just looked like a lake,” he recalled.

Woodson

From Page B1

Let’s all breathe a big sigh of relief.

Believe me, there have been plenty of those since the last spring sports champions were crowned on Saturday in both baseball and softball in Virginia. It was a two-year wait for those sports to be able to complete a spring sports season.

Both the TSSAA and VHSL — who are normally treated like punching bags for most of their decisions — had to make tough calls with the advice of government officials to decide whether to play on, delay seasons for a while longer or just not have them at all.

Each school had to follow whatever protocols were given.

In the end, TSSAA decided to start pretty close to on time. The VHSL waited until the end of December and squeezed shortened seasons in over a six-month period.

Imagine how strange it was for students on the Virginia side to sit around waiting for December, while Tennessee schools played on. Over the last month, Tennessee kids were done, while Virginia had another month to go.

Which was the right move? That is largely based on your political opinion, but you don’t care what I think, even if I am right. Call me crazy, but sports needs to stay out of politics. It’s a no-win proposition.

Either way, both states made it to the end.

It wasn’t all smooth sailing. There were positive COVID tests that forced the cancellation or postponement of practice and games, the athletes started out having to wear masks during much of their competition, while spectators were limited, especially in Virginia, where Union won a state basketball championship with 25 people in the seats in their home gym.

That wasn’t the ideal situation, and no one wants to go through that again.

It ended with packed baseball stadiums in both Lebanon and Abingdon, the way high school sports were meant to be played.

Through it all, the athletic directors and their staffs at their individual schools did their best to make it happen. These folks are the unsung heroes of sports programs. They have so many responsibilities on and away from the athletic venues, and then have to deal with the media, parents and so many others always wanting their time as well.

Yet, they made it through. Tennessee was able to finish like it normally does on Memorial Day weekend, while Virginia went to the end of June, a couple of weeks longer than normal.

Five days later, July is here.

That means we are less than a month from another fall season of sports, which includes football, volleyball, cross country, golf, and girls soccer in Tennessee.

Offseason workouts have begun, with official prac-

tices slated to begin at the end of this month.

It is now time for everyone involved just to take a break. Don’t blame any of these folks for taking a few days or weeks simply to get away from it all. They have earned that right.

Who knows what will wait when another school year begins.

Most thought the pandemic was over until North Carolina State had to forfeit its final College World Series game in Omaha, missing out on a possible chance to play for a national title.

Four of those players who tested positive for coronavirus had been vaccinated. The Wolfpack had to leave,

yet the CWS was slated to set an all-time attendance record on Wednesday night.

Does that make sense? Let’s just say we have a ways to go.

Hopefully the school year ahead will be less about protocols and more about the competition.

We all love our sports, just let the kids play.

This is meant simply as a thank you to all those out there who made this most unusual of high school sports seasons a success. You did it. You made it to the end.

Thanks for all you do. It was much appreciated by all. bwoodson@bristolnews.com | Twitter: BHCWoodson | (276) 645-2543

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MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL



Hunter Stratton, pitching for the Sullivan East Patriots in 2013, is now climbing the minor league ladder.

BHC FILE PHOTO

DOUBLE THE FUN

Former Sullivan East pitcher Hunter Stratton will begin season at Double-A for Pirates

BY TIM HAYES
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

When Altoona Curve manager Miguel Perez needs to call on the bullpen this season, his options will include two pitchers from Northeast Tennessee.

Right-handers Hunter Stratton (Sullivan East) and Will Gardner (Morristown West) will both begin the 2021 campaign with the Double-A affiliate of the Pittsburgh Pirates after

sterling spring training performances.

Stratton only gave up two hits in five preseason outings and continues his climb up the minor league ladder. He is 11-11 with a 4.32 ERA in 67 games (34 starts) during previous stops in the minors with the rookie-level Bristol Pirates, Low-A West Virginia Power and High-A Bradenton Marauders.

After the coronavirus (CO-

VID-19) pandemic canceled the 2020 season for minor leaguers, Stratton used the break to recharge, refocus and reevaluate.

"I'm kinda glad I got the extra time away from baseball," Stratton said. "I really needed it so I could fix some things mechanically and that's the main reason I made the Double-A team. I mostly did dry rep drills to get

See **STRATTON**, Page B4

High School Baseball

Baseball returns to SW Virginia and that's good

Baseball is back in Southwest Virginia, and that is a good thing.

"It is amazing, it is a pleasure of mine," John Battle junior John-Alan Richardson said. "I love it so much."

John Battle baseball returned to Battle Hill for the first time in 690 days on Friday, and there was a definite excitement in the air, from the players, who were eager to finally play the game they love again, to the spectators, who filled the area around Battle Field anxious to watch baseball once again.

Even in the press box, there was an anticipation of hearing those famous words, "Play Ball."

"It was crazy," Richardson said. "When we were warming up it is just the most surreal feeling knowing that we are playing baseball for John Battle again. It felt nice."

While the COVID-19



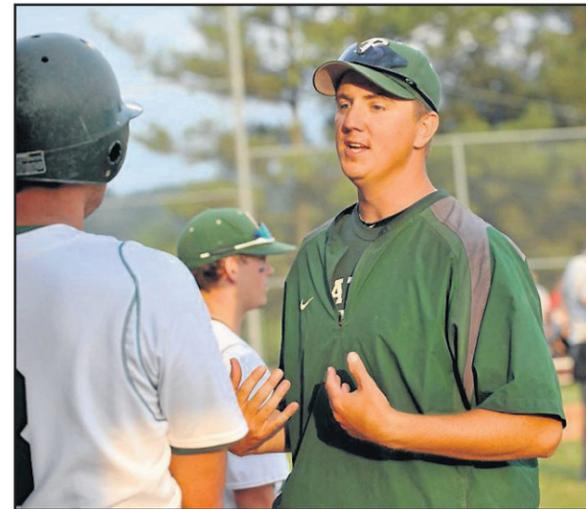
Brian Woodson
Commentary

pandemic wiped out the 2020 baseball season, a few players from John Battle and Gate City had played

some baseball, but they hadn't worn the school colors with the school name on the front of their jerseys. Gate City actually played Tuesday, but the Trojans had to wait even longer to play again.

"I do think some of our guys were able to do the travel ball, but they were all separated so two here, four here, so that is part of the process where we are still understanding who we are," said John Battle head coach Jimmy Gobble, whose Trojans won the opener, 8-7 in eight innings over the Blue Devils. "There are a lot of

See **WOODSON**, Page B4



John Battle baseball coach Jimmy Gobble says there is something special about high school baseball.

BHC FILE PHOTO

NASCAR at Kansas



Kyle Busch gave himself the perfect birthday present on Sunday.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kyle Busch celebrates 36th birthday with win

The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — Kyle Busch thought he had a third-place car Sunday. His crew chief, Ben Beshore, though it was good enough for second.

Both of them turned out to be wrong.

Instead, Busch was perfect on a pair of late restarts and won a two-lap sprint to the finish at Kansas Speedway, becoming the 10th different winner through the first 11 races of a topsy-turvy NASCAR

Cup Series season.

On his 36th birthday, no less.

"We ran up front all day," Busch said. "Just trying to make adjustments all day long to get it where we wanted. The final adjustments were a positive for us. Didn't necessarily take us from a third-place car to a winning car but the restarts did."

Busch had stalked Kyle Larson all afternoon before beating him on a late restart to take the lead.

Then, after another caution in the closing laps, Busch followed up his Truck Series win Saturday night by earning another trip to victory lane.

"That's a Kyle Busch win right there," he said with a smile.

It's his 17th straight season with a win, tying David Pearson for second on the all-time list and moving him within one of Richard Petty's record streak. It also

See **NASCAR**, Page B4

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Woodson

From Page B1

pieces here that are new, but it is nice to have [Bryson] Almany behind the plate, it is nice to have Zach [Smith] and [Jacob] Hutton kind of holding that together.

“Our juniors did really well today and we had some freshmen hopefully understanding a little bit about varsity baseball.”

Few appreciate high school baseball more than Gobble, a former pitching standout at John Battle, who rode his powerful left arm to a seven-year major league career. Following his retirement in 2010, he began serving as an assistant coach in 2012 and took over as head coach six years later.

“It’s different when you play in front of your school,” Gobble said. “Everybody talks about travel ball, but I am telling you, I have played everywhere and done just about everything anyone could do on a baseball field. There is something special about high school baseball in this area that I get to enjoy for about three or four months out of the year.

“It is really special for them and I am pleased for them and pleased for the guys that came back and watched too.”

This was a fun game to watch. Gate City was a worthy opponent, having had high hopes dashed last season when the coronavirus ruined one final season for six seniors, including talented catcher Jon Compton who signed with Walters State Community College.

“It was exciting just to be out here on the field seeing the boys compete and getting after it,” Gate City head coach Jonathon Salyer said. “I was excited about that team we had last year, we had six seniors on that team. COVID hit and shut us down and it was hard on us.

“Our catcher last year, four-year starter, went to Walters State, losing him. We are learn-

ing on the fly behind the plate. He is a freshman.”

From seniors to freshmen, all contributed for both teams in an action-packed high school game that featured 15 runs, 21 hits, seven errors and a slew of big plays, many of which were made right at home plate. It even went eight innings, and honestly it could have gone on all night and few would have complained. (Other than me, I had deadlines to meet).

“We got to play Tuesday, but haven’t played in a year in a half until Tuesday and then we get to come out and play today and play in a great game like that, it was pretty fun,” Salyer said. “They made one more play than we did.”

Richardson certainly had a good time. Playing shortstop and third base for the Trojans, he reached base four times, driving in the Trojans first run with a double in the first. He also had two walks and reached on an error in the eighth, two batters before Nolan Sailor hustled home with the winning run on a wild pitch.

“Throughout the whole game we try to keep our energy up because once your energy goes down your team goes down,” said Richardson, who was constantly in motion, bumping his fists, yelling encouragement to teammates and just generally being a kid. “We had a bad start, but we were able to keep our energy up, we were able to stay in it and eventually win the game.”

Gobble said jokingly after the game that he wasn’t sure how much fun it was.

“I don’t know if you call that fun,” he said. “Holy moly, as a head coach who has done a lot of baseball, I will tell you, hats off to Gate City, that was one heck of a ball game.”

He is still making the adjustment from player to coach. He has to remember that not everyone can do what he did.

“Yes, it is hard because of what you see things in kids. It

is not about baseball, it is not about winning or losing, but it is about the overall aspect of understanding how your attitude reflects what you do here,” Gobble said. “Seeing little things like that and seeing the Zach Smiths of the world and the Bryson Almanys who came from freshmen, who were shy and timid, to what they are doing now and able to go on collegiately. That is more enjoyable. The baseball intangibles, you really try to coach in practice.”

Practice is to prepare for games. Yet, there were coaching moments for both coaches that took place during this 3 ½ hour thriller of a baseball game.

“Like I told them in the huddle, if I am talking to you during a game it is probably not a good thing,” Gobble said. “I really want them to understand that. If they are doing their job and having the energy and intent that they need, mistakes will happen.”

Gobble has seen how baseball is played at the highest level. Sometimes he has to step back for a moment and realize these are 14-to-18-year-old kids who are still learning to play the game.

“That is probably the hardest part for me playing in the big leagues as long as I did is seeing what they are capable of, but taking so long to get it out of them,” he said. “It is not anger because you know they have something and you know they know how to compete, but it’s like when they get here, they want to do it in the shadows and not under the lights.

“That is probably the biggest part of about high school baseball. I think right when I retired I came out and started. I tell you with coaching, those kids have changed my life. Coaching is special if you have the time to do it.”

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Stratton

From Page B1

my arm in a repeatable pattern and did a lot of throwing into a wall or screen. Altoona was the goal for sure this spring.”

The last time Stratton pitched in a game where there was a large crowd in the stands, the statistics counted and the outcome was reflected in the standings was Aug. 25, 2019, in Bradenton, Florida.

“I’m pretty excited to be back in front of fans,” Stratton said. “They seem to give you those extra miles-per-hour you’ve been looking for all spring. What I think will be the biggest help for a successful season is staying focused on what I can control and not allowing outside things to distract me from my target.”

Stratton will be reunited with Perez, his skipper during his first professional season with the Bristol Pirates in 2017.

“Miggy is one of the best managers the Pirates have,” Stratton said. “Everyone who plays for him knows he truly cares for you on and off the field.”

Stratton will share a clubhouse and field with a fellow Northeast Tennessean in Gardner. Both are 24-years-old.

“Will is great and is going to be a good arm for our bullpen,” Stratton said. “We have a few friends in common so it’s nice to have something to talk about from back home.”

Gardner was 3-3 with seven saves and a 2.57 ERA in the previous two seasons with the Bristol Pirates, short-season advanced West Virginia Black Bears and Low-A Greensboro Grasshoppers.

“After losing the season in 2020, I knew I needed to have a strong spring to be able to skip High-A,” Gardner said. “This was probably the most beneficial spring training I’ve had because I really needed to see hitters and work through some stuff with the huge time gap in the last time I’ve played in a game. Success in 2021 for me is going to be cutting down the walk rates and staying healthy.”

Altoona opens the season on Tuesday against the Bowie Baysox, a Baltimore Orioles farm team featuring pitcher Reed Hayes. Hayes was a star at Science Hill High School.

Another familiar face in a league that will be referred to as Double-A Northeast is former Tazewell High School and West Virginia University slugger Chase Illig. Illig is a catcher for the Somerset Patriots in the New York Yankees farm system.

Right-handed pitcher Will Carter (Science Hill) has been assigned to the Birmingham Barons, the Double-A affiliate of the Chicago White Sox. Carter was 1-0 with an 18.00 ERA in five spring training outings with the big-league club.

The Triple-A ranks will include first baseman Will Craig (Science Hill) with the Indianapolis Indians in the Pittsburgh Pirates chain and pitcher Andrew Lee (Morristown West) with the Rochester Red Wings in the Washington Nationals system. Craig made his MLB debut with the Pirates last season and is trying to hit his way back to another stint in the bigs.

Craig’s brother-in-law and fellow Science Hill grad, Landon Knack, will pitch for the High-A Great Lake Loons in the Los Angeles Dodgers system. Knack had a 4.91 ERA and one save in four outings with the big-league team in spring training. Trey Cabbage (Grainger) will start the season with the High-A Cedar Rapids Kernels in the Minnesota Twins system.

Ex-Elizabethton High School star Evan Carter will make his pro debut with the Low-A Down East Wood Ducks. Carter, an outfielder, was the 50th overall selection in the 2020 MLB Amateur Draft by the Texas Rangers.

Justin Grimm is with Mariachis de Guadalajara of the Mexican League as the veteran right-handed pitcher tries to work his way back to the majors. Manager Benji Gil said that Grimm will be the closer for the squad.

Chase Cunningham (Tennessee High) will pitch for the Southern Illinois Miners of the

IN THE MINORS

The following is a look at where some local minor league baseball players will start the 2021 season:

Trey Cabbage

Position: Outfielder
High School: Grainger
Team: Cedar Rapids Kernels
Class: High-A
Affiliate: Minnesota Twins

Evan Carter

Position: Outfielder
High School: Elizabethton
Team: Down East Wood Ducks
Class: Low-A
Affiliate: Texas Rangers

Will Carter

Position: Pitcher
High School: Science Hill
Team: Birmingham Barons
Class: AA
Affiliate: Chicago White Sox

Will Craig

Position: First Base
High School: Science Hill
Team: Indianapolis Indians
Class: AAA
Affiliate: Pittsburgh Pirates

Chase Cunningham

Position: Pitcher
High School: Tennessee High
Team: Southern Illinois Miners
Class: Independent
League: Frontier

Clint Freeman

Position: Pitcher/Infielder
High School: David Crockett
College: East Tennessee State
Team: Long Island Ducks
Class: Independent
League: Atlantic

Will Gardner

Position: Pitcher
High School: Morristown West
Team: Altoona Curve
Class: AA
Affiliate: Pittsburgh Pirates

Justin Grimm

Position: Pitcher
High School: Virginia High
Team: Mariachis de Guadalajara
Class: Independent
League: Mexican

Reed Hayes

Position: Pitcher
High School: Science Hill
Team: Bowie Baysox
Class: AA
Affiliate: Baltimore Orioles

Chase Illig

Position: Catcher
High School: Tazewell
Team: Somerset Patriots
Class: AA
Affiliate: New York Yankees

Micah Kaczor

Position: Pitcher
College: East Tennessee State
Team: New Jersey Jackals
Class: Independent
League: Frontier

Landon Knack

Position: Pitcher
High School: Science Hill
College: East Tennessee State
Team: Great Lakes Loons
Class: High-A
Affiliate: Los Angeles Dodgers

Andrew Lee

Position: Pitcher
High School: Morristown West
Team: Rochester Red Wings
Class: AA
Affiliate: Washington Nationals

Hunter Stratton

Position: Pitcher
High School: Sullivan East
Team: Altoona Curve
Class: AA
Affiliate: Pittsburgh Pirates

Frontier League, while ex-East Tennessee State University ace Micah Kaczor will do so for the New Jersey Jackals in the same league.

Clinton Freeman (David Crockett) will return to the Long Island Ducks of the independent Atlantic League, where he both pitched and played the infield during the 2019 season.

Meanwhile in Altoona, Stratton and Gardner are ready to go. “I actually met Stratton at a Pirates pre-draft workout in 2017,” Gardner said. “It’s really cool to see a couple of guys from really small towns continue to creep closer to the big leagues.”

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NASCAR

From Page B1

was his first with Beshore calling the shots from the pit box, and it gives Joe Gibbs Racing three drivers qualified for the playoffs along with Martin Truex Jr. and Christopher Bell.

“I felt like we were a second-place car to the 5 car all day, to be honest,” Beshore said. “Kyle just did an amazing job on the last couple of restarts there, taking the lead and then keeping it on the last couple.”

Kevin Harvick overcame a tire mishap on a late pit stop and took advantage of some chaos on the final restart to finish second. Brad Keselowski dominated the early laps before following his win at Talladega last week by finishing third, and Matt DiBenedetto and Chase Elliott rounded out the top five.

Larson led a race-high 132 laps before his day ended in 19th place and bitter disappointment.

Even after he was beaten by Busch on that late restart, he had another chance when Bell got sideways in Turn 4 to bring out another caution. But on the restart with two laps to go, Larson got trapped behind Ryan Blaney and wound up getting him sideways while trying to give him a push, taking both of them out of contention.

“I planned on pushing Blaney as hard as I could,” Larson said, “and I guess I was pushing too hard.”

It was nearly a perfect finish for his team owner, Rick Hendrick, whose late son Ricky won his only Truck Series race at Kansas in 2001. Just as Larson did in winning at Las Vegas, he was driving the red, white and blue paint scheme that was nearly identical to the one Hendrick drove 20 years ago.

Ricky Hendrick died along with nine others in a plane crash on Oct. 24, 2004, near Martinsville, Virginia.

Denny Hamlin, also searching for his first win, had a similarly frustrating finish. He had taken the lead on a restart with 32 to go before Larson applied pressure from behind and Hamlin wound up slapping the wall to bring out a caution.

“He’s had a bunch of seconds, but this is a long, hard season,” said Coy Gibbs, the vice chairman and chief operating officer at Joe Gibbs Racing, who remains confident that the fourth car in his stable will reach victory lane soon.

“I think it’s important to get on a roll and carry that into the playoffs,” Gibbs said. “That’s kind of what we’re looking at.”

WHO’S HOT: DiBenedetto has quietly stacked up three straight top-10 runs for Wood Brothers Racing. He was ninth

at Richmond and nearly won at Talladega before finishing fifth. His fourth-place run Sunday was his best of the season.

WHO’S NOT: For one thing, crew members responsible for controlling tires on pit road. Harvick and Tyler Reddick spent most of the day running in the top five before pit stops when awry, forcing both to serve penalties in the waning laps. Daniel Suarez also had an uncontrolled tire when he would have been the recipient of a free pass.

MORE PENALTIES: Ross Chastain and Erik Jones had to start at the back after twice failing inspection, and Anthony Alfredo was sent there for unapproved adjustments. Ryan Newman had a forgettable day celebrating his 700th start when a crew member was seen modifying the body on the No. 6 car during a competition caution — he was never a factor after the penalty.

UP NEXT: It’s the annual Throwback Weekend at Darlington, when teams roll out old-school paint schemes for the Cup Series race on Sunday. Among those so far revealed: Larson in his first go-kart’s colors, Elliott in the Hooters colors of Alan Kulwicki, Joey Logano honoring Mario Andretti’s first F1 win in 1971 and William Byron paying homage to Neil Bonnett.

Braves put two catchers on IL

The Associated Press

DUNEDIN, Fla. — The Atlanta Braves put catchers Travis d’Arnaud and Alex Jackson on the injured list Sunday.

D’Arnaud was placed on the 60-day IL with a left thumb sprain after getting hurt on a tag play at the plate in the sixth inning of Saturday night’s game against Toronto.

d’Arnaud in the game, went on the 10-day IL with a strained left hamstring.

Catcher William Contreras was recalled from the Braves’ alternate site and started Sunday against the Blue Jays. Catcher Jeff Mathis had his contract purchased from alternate site.

D’Arnaud has a .220 batting average with two homers and 11 RBIs in 23 games. Jackson was 1

for 23 (.043) in 10 games.

Contreras, 23, made his major league debut last season, going 4 for 10 in four games. He was the 27th man for Atlanta’s doubleheader on April 25 against Arizona.

Mathis, 38, spent the previous two seasons with Texas. The 16-year veteran known for his defense has a career .194 batting average in 945 games.