

Happier days finally return as area sports back on track

It was game time earlier this week at a baseball field in far Southwest Virginia. The sun was out, the players were upbeat and the green grass was a comforting sight. There was one big difference in the stands. After a year of sickness, heartbreak, anxiety and restrictions due to an invisible monster dubbed COVID-19, there was a sense of normalcy.

While the pandemic is not over and some area sports teams have recently been forced to cancel games due to new COVID issues, nearly all fans have shed their face coverings and returned to support their schools.

The past year has been brutal for athletes, coaches, athletic directors and parents at all levels, especially in spring sports. In the case of the 2020 class of seniors who never even got an opportunity to take the field, they will always be left to wonder what could have been. All those years of practices, games, tournaments and bonding on road trips came without a payoff.

Needless to say, it was a brutal lesson on how to deal with adversity.

That explains why so many current athletes have mentioned in interviews that they are competing for a higher cause this spring. By winning district championships and chasing



Allen Gregory
Commentary

See **GREGORY**, Page C6



Adam Vinatieri (right) and Doug Blevins pose in 1995 in Vero Beach, Florida, prior to the World League of American Football tryouts.

ADAM VINATIERI

The future HOFer came to Abingdon in 1995 to learn kicking from Doug Blevins

Adam Vinatieri officially announced his retirement from the gridiron a few days ago, slamming shut the book on a career that saw him kick his way to the top of the National Football League annals.

The tributes pouring in have detailed the numerous records he owns, most notably the 599 field goals he booted and 2,673 points he scored from 1996-2019 as a member of the New England Patriots and Indianapolis Colts.

The highlight packages featured a montage of Vinatieri's crucial kicks that won overtime thrillers, playoff games and two Super Bowls.

The talking heads on ESPN and the NFL Network rambled on about the accuracy of the ageless wonder, where he stands among the most clutch performers in all of sports, his eventual Hall of Fame induction and most agreed that those milestones he established



Adam Vinatieri kicked 599 field goals during his NFL career with the New England Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts from 1996-2019.

may never be broken.

Yet, only the most prolific of profiles throughout the years has delved into the turning point in

Vinatieri's path to the pros.

It took place over the course of several months in Southwest Virginia when an unheralded and undrafted 22-year-old kid from South Dakota State University arrived in Abingdon to learn from kicking guru Doug Blevins.

He lived in an apartment near Bella's Pizza.

Vinatieri paid for the rent by working as a server and bartender at the Martha Washington Inn.

He worked out religiously at Abingdon High School's football stadium, sending pigskin after pigskin through the uprights in rain, sunshine and snow.

The guy with NFL aspirations became a volunteer coach of sorts for the Abingdon Falcons, standing on the sidelines on Friday nights and rooting them on.

If you've been to the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, you've seen the photos that hang on its walls featuring the multitude of actors who honed their craft on the stage in the historic town well before they

See **HISTORY**, Page C4

SEC Baseball



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tennessee's Camden Sewell blanked Florida.

Vols beat Gators to reach title game

The Associated Press

HOOVER, Ala. — Camden Sewell allowed two hits and set career highs with six innings and six strikeouts to help No. 2-seed Tennessee beat sixth-seeded Florida 4-0 in the semifinals of the SEC Tournament on Saturday.

The Volunteers (45-15) advanced to Sunday's championship game for the first time since 1995 and will face top-seeded Arkansas. The Razorbacks won two of the three regular season games it played against Tennessee May 14-16, with all three games decided by a run.

Sewell (4-1), who has 18 relief appearances

See **SEC**, Page C6



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kyle Larson fist bumps a crew member after winning the pole on Saturday.

NASCAR Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte

Rick Hendrick hopes to pass Petty Enterprises for career wins

The Associated Press

CONCORD, N.C. — Those who've been around Hendrick Motorsports over the past few years know all about the record. It's impossible not to.

Car owner Rick Hendrick has made no secret to his employees about how badly he wants to surpass Petty Enterprises for the most Cup Series wins in NASCAR history. That long-term goal can become a reality Sunday when

INSIDE

» Ty Gibbs wins Xfinity race. C8

Hendrick goes for win No. 269 in the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

"We've had 268 circled for so long, I don't even know what 269 is going to be like yet," said Chad Knaus, vice president of competition at Hendrick Motorsports. "We're really excited to be right

there, close to being able to get that. The 600 would be an awesome time for us to get it right here in Hendrick Motorsports' backyard."

Hendrick's quest for history got off to a roaring start on Saturday when Kyle Larson captured the pole, while teammates Chase Elliott and William Byron qualified third and fourth, respectively.

See **NASCAR**, Page C8

ACC Baseball

PGA Tour



Duke's Joey Loperfido celebrates his double behind Virginia's Max Cotier.

Duke tops Virginia, 4-2

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Joey Loperfido hit two home runs with a double and a base hit to help lift Duke past No. 8-seed Virginia 4-2 on Saturday to send the Blue Devils to their first-ever ACC Tournament championship appearance.

The ninth-seeded Blue Devils (31-20) now have won 11 straight and advance to play third-seeded North Carolina State on Sunday.

Loperfido, a leadoff left-handed senior, started the game with an opposite field homer and proceeded to do the same thing in the top of the third inning. It was the first multi-homer game of his career.

Ethan Murray followed Loperfido's homer with his

own solo shot to give Duke a 3-0 lead.

Alex Tappen put the Cavaliers (29-23) on the board with a solo shot in the bottom of the third, and an inning later reduced the deficit to 3-2 when Logan Michaels singled through the right side to score Kyle Teel. The inning ended when Tappen flied out to right field with runners on second and third.

Luke Fox spread eight hits over seven innings and struck out seven without a walk for the Blue Devils.

N.C. State 8, Georgia Tech 1

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Tyler McDonough and Luca Tresh hit home runs and No. 3-seed North Carolina

State beat second-seeded Georgia Tech in the ACC Tournament semifinals on Saturday.

N.C. State will face ninth-seeded Duke (31-20) in the championship game on Sunday. The Blue Devils are on an 11-game winning streak and will be making the program's first championship appearance.

Starter Sam Highfill (6-2) gave up a run and four hits in 6 1/3 innings for the Wolfpack (30-16). Evan Justice took it from there for his ninth save of the season.

Kevin Parada appeared to have helped the Yellow Jackets (29-23) close the deficit to 4-3 on a two-run home run in bottom of sixth, but it was ruled a foul ball after video review.

SEC

From Page C1

in 2021, was making his third start of the season for Tennessee.

Liam Spence went 2-for-3, walked twice and scored two runs for Tennessee. Drew Gilbert, Evan Russell and Jordan Beck each had an RBI. Beck doubled in the fourth inning and scored on a wild pitch.

Florida starter Brandon Sproat (2-1) gave up three runs in 3 2/3 innings for the Gators (38-20).

Arkansas 3, Ole Miss 2

HOOVER, Ala. — Cullen Smith hit his eighth home run of the season and top-seeded Arkansas beat fifth-seeded Mississippi in the SEC Tournament semifinals on Saturday.

The Razorbacks (45-

10) seek their first SEC Tournament championship and will face No. 2 seed Tennessee on Sunday. Arkansas won two of the three regular season games it played May 14-16 against the Vols, with all three games decided by a run.

Smith's homer gave the Razorbacks a 2-0 lead in the first inning. Ole Miss tied it on Jacob Gonzalez's two-run double with one out in the fifth.

Gregory

From Page C1

state titles, the 2021 class can honor those 2020 seniors.

In most cases, fans at various sporting events have adopted a humbler and more understanding approach. Following endless days of isolation and worry, most folks seem to appreciate the green light to support their hometown heroes without having to worry about limits on stadium attendance or other safety precautions.

That same level of appreciation and fellowship has also been evident at area motorsports facilities in recent weeks.

From Wythe Raceway in Rural Retreat to Mack Shupe Field in Wise, the fear factor has lifted and happier days are here.

Any true sports fan can remember their first trip to a Major League Stadium, especially the initial sensation of seeing the field. Those sights, sounds and smells are the stuff of lifetime memories.

That's why the opening day of baseball season has long been considered a time of renewal, hope and dreams.

The magical feeling can

be captured at venues across far Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee.

In some ways, the summer of 2021 represents a time of ultimate renewal.

Thanks to the wonders of medicine and science and the wisdom of citizens who are fully vaccinated, we can now gather

in groups, shake hands and celebrate.

And for many, there is no better place to celebrate than a ball field.

It might not be opening day, but it's definitely a new day. Finally.

agregory@bristolnews.com | Twitter: @Greg_BHCSports | (276) 645-2544

Custom Floor Coating advertisement with contact info and images of finished projects.

Resurgent Spieth leads in Colonial

The Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Jordan Spieth knows how to finish out of the rough, and still had the lead after three rounds at Colonial.

After hitting his final drive Saturday into the thick grass on an incline right of the No. 18 fairway, Spieth recovered with an approach to 8 feet before rolling in the birdie putt that gave him the solo lead again over playing partner Jason Kokrak in the final group at the Charles Schwab Challenge.

Spieth had his second consecutive round of 4-under 66 to get to 15 under at Colonial. That put up one stroke ahead of Kokrak, who had matched him for the lead with four birdies in a six-hole stretch before a closing par in his round of 66.

"It's never easy to win out here. It's a Saturday," Spieth said. "It's one of those where you would like to separate yourself and get a big lead, but then he's going to go make those putts on the back nine, and he's a player that plays with a lot of confidence. Colonial is a great setting for a good finish."

The resurgent Spieth has the 54-hole lead for a PGA Tour best-matching fourth time this season, all in a span of 11 tournaments. That stretch in-



Jordan Spieth leads Jason Kokrak by one stroke.

cludes his win at the Valero Texas Open, the first time he had won since the 2017 British Open.

They will play again in the final group Sunday, when Kokrak will be going against the local favorite who won Colonial in 2016 and has been the runner-up there two other times.

"Jordan birdied 13, the par 3 and I walked off the green, I was like, 'Well, I'm definitely not the favorite here this week.' He's a Texas guy. I'm an Ohio guy. It's fun," Kokrak said. "The crowds are crazy. But it's fun to have a local kid and play well and him be in the last group, and I'd be more than happy to spoil it for him tomorrow."

The 36-year-old Kokrak got his first career victory in the CJ Cup at Shadow Creek in Las Vegas in October. That was after he tied for third at Colonial last

June, when the Charles Schwab Challenge was played without spectators while marking the PGA Tour's resumption of competition after a 12-week pause because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sergio Garcia, who was 21 when he got the first of his 11 PGA Tour victories at Colonial 20 years ago, was alone in third at 10 under after a 68 with one bogey.

Ian Poulter had the best round of the day with a 64 after getting started with four birdies in a five-hole stretch on the front nine, moving up 26 spots into a tie for fourth at 8 under with Sebastian Munoz (70). Two-time heart transplant recipient Erik Compton was tied for sixth at 7 under with Brendon Todd and Patton Kizzire.

Midway through the round, Spieth had another recovery out of the right rough, almost as impressive as his final hole even though that was only a par.

Coming off his second bogey of the day, Spieth pulled out a driver and missed the fairway, leaving no shot to the No. 9 green fronted by water. He punched a shot safely into the fairway, pitched over the water to 12 feet and rolled in the par putt.

KOHLER Walk-In Bath advertisement featuring a woman in a bathtub and a man in a polo shirt, with promotional text and contact information.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY MASON THOMAS / KING UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS

King junior lefthanded pitcher Drew Moore has been the leader on the mound for the Tornado this season.

King baseball settling into swing of season after 2020 campaign was canceled

BY BRIAN WOODSON
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

BRISTOL, Tenn. – Baseball is a game of repetition.

The opportunities to swing bats was limited over the past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It takes time to adjust to playing baseball again, and King has learned that the hard way.

“A lot of things got lost with everything getting canceled last year and a lot of summer leagues getting canceled and the limitations that were put on us in the fall as far as small groups,” said Blaine Brown, in his 10th season as King’s head baseball coach. “Really the first team organized practice stuff this spring is the first a lot of guys have had in over a

year. You have got to take into consideration big picture of what has been going on in the last year and what experience and playing time guys had.”

King was in the midst of a promising 2020 season with a 15-9 record, including a 7-2 mark in Conference Carolinas, but then the campaign was abruptly canceled due to the coronavirus.

“There is reason that guys spend so much time in the minor leagues because it takes a lot of repetition and reps to get where you want to be,” Brown said. “When you lose that it is difficult because you can’t just go right back in and expect the

King University Baseball

INSIDE

» MLB OPENING DAY. B3

same results.”

King is currently 10-12 this season, with a 9-10 mark in Conference Carolinas, which places the Tornado in sixth place out of nine teams. The goal is to work their way into the top four, which will put them in the double-elimination portion of the conference tournament slated for April 28-May 2 in Wilson, S.C. Eight teams will make the postseason event, but the lower four will have to play a single-elimination game to qualify

See **SWING**, Page B3

Commentary

Dirt racing in Bristol is met with rave reviews

There were plenty of skeptics entering Monday’s NASCAR Cup and Truck double feature at Bristol Motor Speedway.

For two days, fans and racers endured rain, hail, floods, high winds, dust and mud.

Then, something magical happened on the Tennessee clay.

Thanks to a mix of ingenuity, talent and daring from track officials and teams, both events generated star reviews from dirt racing diehards and traditional NASCAR fans.

Instead of cruising around generic tracks and calculating fuel mileage with their engineers, drivers focused on wrestling their bulky 3,400-pound machines around the high banks.

If you didn’t appreciate at least form of the drama, you simply don’t like hard racing.

Check the stats.

The Food City Dirt Race featured 10 cautions, six different leaders, an overtime finish and a masterful piece of driving from dirt newcomer Joey Logano.

In the Pinty’s Truck Race on Dirt, there were 12 cautions along with six leaders and several temper tantrums.

Unlike many events held on larger tracks, there was action throughout the pack on every lap.

During the latter stages of the Cup race, there were complaints about the dusty track conditions. But most of those gripes appeared to come from

viewers watching the event from the comfort of their living rooms.

From the perspective of the press box, actual spectators of all ages were having a grand time.

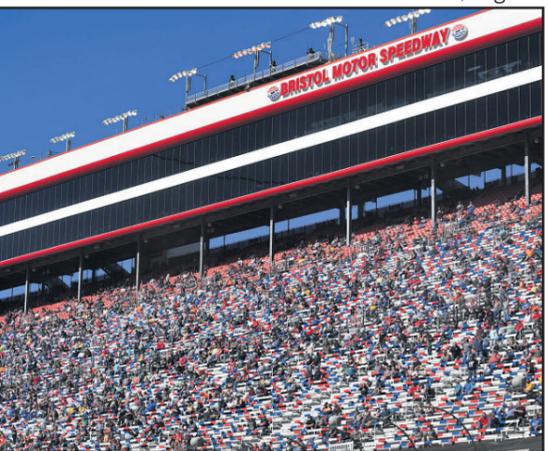
Sure, some drivers were not thrilled about the lack of vision in their cars. But Cup regulars earn millions for a reason. Real racing is supposed to be more challenging than video games or simulators.

The dirt weekend at Bristol was a refreshing salute to the blue-collar fans in a sport ruled by the rich and powerful.

See **GREGORY**, Page B8



Allen Gregory
Commentary



DAVID CRIGGER / BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Those spectators that withstood a difficult weekend of weather were rewarded with a pair of competitive and action-filled races on Monday at Bristol Motor Speedway.

Black Diamond District Football



DAVID CRIGGER / BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Grundy’s Ian Scammell takes the direct snap on a designated sweep during the Golden Wave’s 19-12 non-district loss against Virginia High at the Stone Castle earlier this season. Grundy meets Honaker tonight with hopes of claiming the Black Diamond District championship. However, the Golden Wave doesn’t appear to have a route to the Region 1D playoffs.

Chasing a crown

Grundy could claim Black Diamond District title, but the postseason won’t be part of the prize

BY TIM HAYES
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Grundy High School’s football team can clinch the Black Diamond District championship with a win over Honaker tonight at Nelson Memorial Field in Buchanan County, but a playoff berth won’t go along with that prize.

In this truncated 2021 Virginia High School League gridiron season held in the spring after the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic meant no games in the fall, the regional playoffs will feature just four teams and those squads qualify based on their standing in the playoff power points rating scale.

Grundy (3-2) currently sits in sixth place in Region 1D behind Holston, Patrick Henry, Castlewood, J.I. Burton, Eastside and Rural Retreat.

Barring some unforeseen circumstances like the rash of positive COVID-19 cases and exposures that have wreaked havoc on the sched-

See **CROWN**, Page B4

THURSDAY PREP FOOTBALL PREDICTIONS

BLACK DIAMOND DISTRICT

Honaker at Grundy

Today, 7 p.m.

Last meeting: Honaker 50, Grundy 26 (Sept. 27, 2019 in Honaker, Va.)

Grundy (3-2) can clinch the Black Diamond District title with a victory, but the Golden Wave will likely not qualify for the VHSL Region 1D playoffs unless something weird, wild and wacky happens. ... Honaker (1-4) has struggled in what

has been a rebuilding season, but there have been some bright spots for the Tigers. Dylan Barrett, Trevor Miller, Jayson Mullins and T.J. Hubbard have been the leaders of the team’s defense, while Skylar Miller, Aiden Lowe and quarterback Sean Gill have improved offensively over the course of the season. ... Honaker has had two weeks to prepare for this one after a bye week. ... Ian Scammell has led Grundy’s rug-

ged rushing attack, while Hunter Scarberry might be the BDD’s best tackler. “Grundy is very good offensively with some very quick backs, the defense reacts to the ball well and they tackle well,” said Honaker coach Doug Hubbard. “We will have to play well in order to have a chance to win.” ... Honaker piled up 452 rushing yards in hammering Grundy in the previous matchup

See **PREDICTIONS**, Page B4

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Opening

From Page B4

Darvish takes on Arizona and the matchup in Washington is max effort: Jacob deGrom of the Mets vs. Max Scherzer of the Nats, the pair combining to win five Cy Young trophies.

A year after no fans were allowed during the virus-shortened 60-game season, every stadium is open, in varying degrees as teams adhere to coronavirus protocols.

EARLY TESTS

The Washington Nationals will be short-handed due to a positive coronavirus test for the second straight season opener.

After Juan Soto was sidelined the day of Washington's first game last summer, five Nationals players will miss Thursday night's game against the Mets — one due to a positive test, the others because of contact tracing. General manager Mike Rizzo did not reveal who the five players were, and the only certainty as of Wednesday night was that opening day starter Max Scherzer wasn't one of them. The right-hander told reporters he wasn't on the team flight where the close contact occurred.

The positive result came from a test conducted Monday, while the Nationals were still in Florida for spring training. Word of the test came a little after 1 a.m. Wednesday, after the team already had traveled home to the nation's capital, Rizzo said. Four players and a staff member were identified as having close contact with that person en route to Washington.

ACE HIGH

A decade ago, when they were teammates in high school at Harvard-Westlake in Los Angeles, pitchers Lucas Giolito, Jack Flaherty and Max Fried probably just hoped for a chance to make it to the majors. Imagining what's about to happen? Now that would've seemed pretty far-fetched.

But in a what-are-the-odds moment, all three are set to start on opening day.

Fried is scheduled to go first, pitching for the At-

lanta Braves at Philadelphia. Flaherty is up next, starting for the St. Louis Cardinals at Cincinnati. Giolito closes out the trio, starting for the Chicago White Sox in Anaheim against Mike Trout, Shohei Ohtani and the Angels.

"That's crazy," Fried said a week ago. "I'm really happy, really excited for those guys. They worked extremely hard to put themselves in that position. To be pitching the same day as those guys is pretty cool."

MITTS AND MITTENS

Nolan Arenado, Kris Bryant and Miguel Cabrera will be wearing gloves on opening day. So might the fans who will be watching them in person.

The start of the season can always be tricky when it comes to the weather. That's true again this year, with chilly temperatures on deck in some spots.

It's predicted to be in the 30s with gusty winds when the Pirates take on Bryant and the Chicago Cubs at Wrigley Field. Might also be in the upper 30s in Cincinnati, where Arenado and the Cardinals play the Reds, and in Detroit, where Cabrera and the Tigers host Cleveland.

Rain is in the forecast along the East Coast, which could affect games at Fenway Park, Yankee Stadium, Citizens Bank Park and Nationals Park.

PLAQUE CRACK?

As a rule, the Hall of Fame doesn't alter a plaque once it's made. The numbers cast on there, they stand.

Then again, there's never been a case quite like this one with Tony La Russa.

Inducted into Cooperstown in 2014, his plaque honors him for managing teams to 2,728 wins, noting it's the third-highest total for a skipper. Those numbers are likely to change soon, however, as the 76-year-old La Russa returns to the field to guide the fortified Chicago White Sox.

La Russa's last time in the dugout was Game 7 of the 2011 World Series. He's only 35 wins from matching John McGraw for the second-most wins; Connie Mack is a bit more out of range, posting 3,731 victories in an amazing 53 seasons.



DAVID CRIGGER / BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Kyle Larson, one of the pre-race favorites in the Food City Dirt Race, finished 29th on Monday at Bristol Motor Speedway. Joey Logano finished first. Martin Truex Jr. won the Pinty's Truck Race on Dirt.

Gregory

From Page B1

The suits in the suites may not have been enthralled by the spectacle, but this multi-million-dollar experiment was healthy in several regards.

After too many years of stagnation, NASCAR is making bold steps with new races in new markets and a contingent of phenoms are eager to take their places on the main stage.

Young people, raised on high-tech video games and streaming devices, are also eager to connect with an activity that fits their need for instant gratification.

When Bristol Motor Speedway general manager Jerry Caldwell announced over the public address system that the dirt will return to the World's Fastest Half-Mile next year, fans reacted with loud cheers.

The love affair with dirt will surely grow later this month when BMS hosts a pair of shows with the World of Outlaws Late Model Series and the ultra-fast World of Outlaws Sprint Car Series.

Imagine the big potential for little Bristol. Combine the iconic Night Race in September with the dirt showcase in the spring, and Bristol could regain its place as one of the hottest hotbeds in all of motorsports.

Now that Speedway Motorsports officials have mastered the complexities of crafting a dirt track while enduring nasty weather extremes, anything is possible at Bristol Motor Speedway.

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VHSL BASKETBALL STATE SEMIFINALS

Parry McCluer tops Burton, 51-46

BY BRIAN WOODSON
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

NORTON, Va. - Spencer Hamilton stands out for more than just his height. He can also play. The 6-foot-11 junior tallied 31 points, 10 rebounds and five blocked shots to lead Parry McCluer to a thrilling 51-46 Class 1 state semifinal victory over J.I. Burton on Wednesday night at Richard "Stan" Wilson Gymna-

sium. "I don't try to do too much," said Hamilton, a NCAA Division I prospect with offers currently from Old Dominion and Mount St. Mary's, in addition to Emory & Henry College, among others. "I can always rely on my teammates, no matter what in tough games. We probably played 30 tough games, AAU, regular season so I always rely on them and

they make it easier." J.I. Burton (14-3) hung in there despite missing two starters, including Zac Campbell, who re-injured his knee in the Region 1D championship game against Holston and will have surgery next week. "I couldn't be more proud, I have no negatives, we gave it everything we had for 32 minutes and it just didn't go our way,"

J.I. Burton head coach Caleb Church said. "Their size on us was tough, we have been out-sized all year. We expected it, 6'11 is hard to play against when your tallest guy is 6'2." Hamilton took control from the start around the basket, not only scoring 10 points in the first quarter, but adding four of his five blocked shots, pulling the Blues ahead 13-5. That mar-

gin would grow to 24-16 at the break, with Hamilton scoring 19 of those points. "The kid had 31, but he is right there at the rim," Church said. "I thought everyone stepped up tonight, every single person that we played stepped up and they played as hard as they could and that is all I wanted."

See **BURTON**, Page B7



DAVID CRIGGER | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Abingdon's Jake Thacker drives for a shot against Liberty Christian's Haddon Smith and Tanner Thomas.

MAKING HISTORY

Abingdon tops LCA, 58-55, to earn first trip to state finals since 1965

BY TIM HAYES
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

ABINGDON, Va. - They refer to the town of Abingdon as historic and the high school boys basketball team in the community continues to make some hardwood history of its own. Evan Ramsey, Jake Thacker, Chase Hungate and company delivered once again as the Abingdon Falcons earned a thrilling 58-55 win over the Liberty Christian Academy Bulldogs on Wednesday in the semi-

finals of the VHSL Class 3 state tournament. Abingdon will host Hopewell in Saturday's state finals, the first time the boys hoops program at the Washington County school has reached this point since finishing as VHSL Group II runner-up to James Blair in 1965. The Falcons (14-1) will try to finish the deal 56 years later. "It's crazy to even think we're here," said Thacker, a senior guard who scored a game-high 22 points and connected on

numerous clutch buckets. "It's unreal. We've all bought in and that's why we've gotten this far. We're all as one." Every single player who saw the floor contributed in some way to the victory. LCA led 23-14 with 6:09 remaining in the third quarter on a 3-pointer by Haddon Smith. Abingdon responded by ripping off a 9-2 run to close the first half, drawing within two points

See **ABINGDON**, Page B7

Gate City girls crush Glenvar

BY JOHNNY WILSON
SPORTS CORRESPONDENT

GATE CITY, Va. — Don't look now, but Gate City is back at it again. That old-time football power in Scott County has all but become a basketball school these days, now that Gate City has earned yet another a shot at a VHSL state championship with a 55-38 dusting of visiting Glenvar in girls Class 2 semifinal play Wednesday night. The defending Class 2 champion Blue Devils (17-1) get their chance at a repeat title Saturday at 7 p.m., when they host the unbeaten (12-0) Luray Bulldogs, semifinal winners over King William by a ridiculous 82-23 count. Not quite 12 months ago, Gate City beat the same Luray team 64-54 in Richmond to win the 2020 state championship. "We'll have to play really well to beat them, and we know that," said 14-year Gate City coach Kelly Houseright. "I think it'll be

a good game. Their coach and I said last year that we hope to see each other again, so here we are." Over the last four seasons, Gate City's boys and girls have now reached the Class 2 final twice each, each capturing a championship. Winning never goes out of style at a school that's won a bunch over the years. "We don't look at it that way," Houseright said. "We've just had really good kids along the way and this year, too, and they've all bought-in to what we want them to do. When you have that mix, you can be successful." The Region D champion Blue Devils, piloted all season by 2020 Class 2 player of the year Sarah Thompson, got it done against the Region C champion Highlanders (7-5) with terrific team play — on both ends of the floor.

See **GC**, Page B7

At least schools in SWVa played

It's five minutes before the start of the regional basketball championship at a school in far Southwest Virginia. The players are eager to continue a quest that began in elementary school and the coaches are anxious to see if years of planning and development will result in a big trophy. Only one element was missing from this scrapbook worthy moment last week. A group of only 25 family members of athletes were allowed into the gym. There were no cheerleaders, no pep bands

and no big-game atmosphere. Such is the surreal life during the COVID-19 nightmare. It could be worse. In other parts of Virginia, including the Roanoke Valley, school systems did not give the green light for games until mid-January. And those schools could only compete against schools within their

See **GREGORY**, Page B3



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NASCAR

McDowell was 0-357 before Daytona win

The Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Michael McDowell was best known for years as the guy who barrel-rolled eight times at Texas while trying to qualify for just the second race of his Cup Series career.

He'd driven through the remnants of an oil spill when McDowell's car made a hard right turn into the wall. The car rebounded, flipped on its roof and went airborne for eight rolls before the flaming wreckage finally came to a stop on its wheels.

"It's just one of those things that happened," McDowell said. "But you definitely hope that people would know you for something better than that."

It took 13 years for him to change the narrative: McDowell is now a Daytona 500 champion.

The journeyman earned the first win of his career — he was 0-357 before Daytona — by zipping past two crashing cars on the final lap. McDowell led for less than a mile in the wee hours Monday morning but it was all he needed to validate a career spent driving inferior cars.

Daytona is unlike any race on NASCAR's schedule in that underdogs have a chance if they can make it to the finish. It takes understanding the nuances of



Michael McDowell led for less than a mile on his way to winning the Daytona 500.

superspeedway racing — managing the draft, knowing who to push and how to do it, and using instinct to plot strategy at almost 200 mph.

McDowell has had the hang of it since at least 2013, when he scored his first career top-10 finish at Daytona. He has been a fixture near the front of the field since, particularly after he moved to Front Row Motorsports in 2018.

Although FRM is considered one of NASCAR's third-tier teams, it has a strong program for superspeedways and road

courses, circuits that somewhat level the playing field. In four Daytona 500s driving the No. 34 Ford, McDowell finished fifth, ninth, 14th and, finally, first.

"This is definitely no fluke," said three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin. "I've said many times this is a skill game. He's got the skill set to win these, and he finally got it done."

The victory was just the third in 17 years for Front Row and owner Bob Jenkins. David Ragan won FRM's first race, in 2013 at Talladega Superspeedway, and Chris Buescher won at Pocono

in 2016.

Jenkins doesn't think the sporadic success is indicative of the team he's built.

"I know the average fan is surprised when we win a race, but it never surprises me," Jenkins said. "It's taken a long time to get our third win and our first Daytona 500 win, but people don't realize this is our third top-five in the Daytona 500. You want to win championships, but you've got to win races first."

McDowell earlier this month said he doubted FRM could make the 16-car playoffs on points, so the priority had been earning an automatic berth via a race win. The schedule this year has a NASCAR-high seven road courses — the first is this Sunday at Daytona — and four superspeedways, which theoretically gave FRM a fighting chance to compete against NASCAR's elite.

FRM now has its first playoff berth in team history. More important, crew chief Drew Blickensderfer has 25 weeks to prepare for the championship rounds. He can overhaul his strategy to fixate less on decent finishes and instead aggressively chase stage points and victories in hopes of a deeper playoff run.

"All that matters right now is

winning the stage or winning the race for us," Blickensderfer said. "In the past, if you're running at Pocono and you're running seventh or eighth like we were last year, we were super happy to finish there."

"But right now seventh or eighth doesn't do any better for us than 15th. So why not take a gamble and see if you can either steal another (win) or you can put yourself up in position to at least get some more points."

McDowell will have a different approach to racing the rest of this season. He certainly wants to win more races, but he's got his Daytona 500 trophy now and can focus on helping FRM's growth.

"I think that you always have the fire and when you win that fire gets deeper, but we all know that's not an every week thing for us and our race team right now," McDowell said. "We know that on 26 of the racetracks, we'll be happy to be in that top 10."

"I think this definitely gives us a lot of confidence. You always want more, but I am so thankful that I am not going to go my Cup career without a win. It's such a relief to know that I won't go 400 starts without a win. I've always said I want one, and I've got one now and obviously we want two, right?"

A's Murphy sidelined with collapsed lung

The Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Oakland Athletics catcher Sean Murphy will be sidelined for several weeks with a collapsed lung that required surgery but is expected to be fine and fully recovered by opening day.

"I don't think he liked the idea of just sort of being out there in the world not knowing if this was going to happen again, so he got the surgery done, took care of it and it's only going to set him back a few weeks," general manager David Forst said Wednesday following the team's first spring training workout for pitchers and catchers.

"It's one of those things that popped up. We're glad he got it taken care of, got the surgery done."

The 26-year-old Murphy woke up a few weeks ago with the spontaneous issue, according to Forst — perhaps caused from a strong coughing episode while sleeping.

"It's kind of a freak thing," Forst said, noting Murphy chose to go to the emergency room when he didn't feel right.

He will drive to Arizona in the coming days to join the team with the hopes of resuming baseball activities around March 1 then playing Cactus League games by mid-month.

"The prognosis as we sit here sounds good," manager Bob Melvin said. "Our training staff believes we'll get him here in time in spring at some point, obviously a little bit delayed, but the timetable is for him to be ready for opening day. It sounds pretty dramatic and it certainly did to me as well, but they think the procedure went well and the prognosis is good."

Murphy appeared in 43 games for Oakland during the shortened 60-game 2020 season, batting .233 with seven homers, five doubles and 14 RBIs with 39 starts behind the plate.

Gregory

From Page B1

county. Seasons of five games or less were common.

Unlike far Southwest Virginia, all players on some teams around the state wore facial covering throughout games.

Saturday's VHSL state title contests will not be held at the 7,500-seat Siegel Center in downtown Richmond. Instead, the dramas will unfold at home gyms where a limited number of fans from both teams will be allowed.

For many parents and fans, the 2020-21 basketball season has been viewed through the prism of the NFHS Network, which is a joint venture between National Federation of State High School Associations, its member state high school associations, and Atlanta-based PlayOn! Sports.

Schools such as Abingdon and Gate City have done things in a professional manner with announcers, stats and local sponsors. Other schools have simply offered live streaming with no announcers, scoreboard graphic or background sound.

Again, things could be worse. Consider that many schools around Virginia, such as 2020 Class 2 state champion John Marshall from Richmond, saw their seasons canceled entirely.

Also consider that basketball teams in West Virginia only received clearance to begin practice Monday, with the first games set for March 3. By that time, most football teams in Virginia will have already played two games. Yes, football.

For good reason, parents and fans from basketball teams in far Southwest Virginia have expressed frustration and anger at school administrators and state officials in recent weeks. They want inside the gym to watch their kids compete, and they want that access now.

The coronavirus has created frustration, anger, misery and death for countless families across the region and nation.

At least, high school basketball teams in far Southwest Virginia were able to have a season. Spring sports athletes in Virginia never even got the chance to take the field in 2020.

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Major League Baseball



New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone says the past year has been a learning experience.

Players return to COVID protocols as training starts

The Associated Press

One year later, players and managers say they have a better understanding of what it takes to play baseball through a pandemic.

Pitchers and catchers around the game reported to spring training Wednesday saying they appreciate what's at stake as they try to make sure the season starts on time. The protocols have been tightened even further from what they experienced during the abbreviated 2020 season.

"We've all gone through a year of this, of living through this," New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "And so I think we're a little, much better equipped of how to handle ourselves, how to conduct ourselves, how to make good use of our time."

New standards agreed to by Major League Baseball and the players' association require players, staffers and other team personnel to wear electronic tracing wristbands for ballpark access. Players underwent a five-day at-home quarantine before reporting, with exceptions for essential activities and approved outdoor workouts and exercise.

They'll need to stay in their

living quarters throughout spring training except for baseball activities, medical care, grocery shopping, take-out food pickups and outdoor physical activity. Outdoor dining will only be allowed if they get permission beforehand.

"Between the players' union and MLB, the agreement I think is pretty rock-solid when it comes to player safety, staff safety," Chicago White Sox pitcher Lucas Giolito said Tuesday. "There's going to be a few things that are a little more, what's the word for it, given more importance. I think some of the workouts are going to be in smaller groups, a lot more on point with mask wearing and things like that. I don't think it will affect our work too much. We'll certainly be able to get done what we need to get done."

But the restrictions will make it more challenging to get ready for the season.

Catcher James McCann faces hurdles this spring trying to bond with an entirely new pitching staff after signing a \$40 million, four-year deal with New York Mets. Normally, the veteran backstop would invite pitchers to dinner, set up play dates for their kids, go

out and grab a drink — anything to help develop those relationships.

Forget the off-field meetups. Under MLB's protocols, even getting together at the team's Florida complex is more difficult. Gathering in places like the video room — usually a convenient spot for 3-4 players to meet — is a no-no.

"Nobody likes to wear a mask and sit and talk 6 feet away from each other," McCann said. "A lot of different things I guess we took for granted."

MLB is hoping to have a full season after playing a 60-game schedule last year that included no fans in the stands until the postseason. The Miami Marlins and St. Louis Cardinals both dealt with COVID-19 outbreaks that resulted in multiple postponements.

"We're the lucky sport to have 162 games, but with that obviously comes a lot of thoughtfulness and dedication and commitment," new Marlins general manager Kim Ng said. "To play this game, you have to be absolutely committed, especially this team with them going through what they went through last year. People understand how it can decimate."