

Pickleball

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Referee shortage causing football numbers crunch

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There are 33 football schools in the Appalachian’s jurisdiction, from Fort Chiswell and Galax to the east, up to Hurley to the north, over to Thomas Walker in Virginia’s western tip, back down to Bristol and Grayson County to the south and all points between.

With 83 registered officials at his disposal and five needed for every game (and generally between 14 and 17 local games on a Friday night), there isn’t much wiggle room for Davis.

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A four-man officiating crew wouldn’t be good for anybody.

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The referee shortage may be due to a couple reasons — the older set is retiring or about to retire after 40 and 50 years in the business, and the younger crowd is barely signing up.

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“Young people are just not getting excited and interested in officiating,” said Davis, a 23-year employee of the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, where he’s the director of the David J. Prior Convocation Center. “The younger people getting involved in officiating today are seeing the dollar signs, in my opinion, when it comes to youth sports.”

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Tiny Bethel’s run to glory still resonates 70 years later

By **TANNER COOK**
tcook@bristolnow.news

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So is the case for the basketball state championship run for the tiny Bethel Braves of Washington County in 1952.

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BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

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By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**
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EARNHARDT’S FIRST WIN

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The 1979 Southeastern 500 was the first of 76 career wins for Dale Earnhardt. Driving for California car owner Rod Osterlund, Earnhardt passed rival Darrell Waltrip for the lead on lap 474. Bobby Allison passed Waltrip for second but ended three seconds behind Earnhardt at the finish.



NASCAR

Track owners Lanny Hester, left, and Gary Baker, right, flank race winner Darrell Waltrip and wife Stevie after the 1978 Southeastern 500. The next Bristol race would be held under the lights.

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NIGHT

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him, Wallace got by Bristol master Darrell Waltrip for the race-winning pass.

Wallace, who cut his teeth on the ASA circuit in the Midwest, led the final 101 laps of the race. He would go on to have more of his biggest career moments at Bristol, including a milestone 50th career win in the 2000 Food City 500.

ESPN COMES ON BOARD

The track in Bristol, Tennessee, found the perfect broadcast partner with a fledging all-sports television network in Bristol, Connecticut.

While NASCAR became a mainstay on ESPN, there was no place that was as mutually beneficial as Bristol. In a famous 1985 segment, the ESPN crew put a Volkswagen Beetle at the top of then 36-degree banking and pushed the car over, where it barrel rolled down the track.

The network captured the excitement of Bristol like no one else. The races for both the Cup Series and Xfinity Series (then Busch Series) became can't-miss programming. The network broadcast both of the famous Earnhardt-Labonte finishes and other moments like Mark Martin pulling into the pits a lap early under caution, which cost him a Busch Series win.

ESPN was there for Michael Waltrip's horrifying wreck in a 1990 Busch Series race, where thankfully the driver emerged unscathed.

WALTRIP'S STREAK

Darrell Waltrip, Michael's older brother, is the all-time Cup Series winner at Bristol with 12 victories.

Seven of those came in a row between 1981-84 in Junior Johnson's cars. Waltrip has talked about how incredible a feat it was for anyone to simply finish seven races in a row in those days, let alone win them all.

He even won a rain-shortened race of 419 laps at the 1983 Night Race. Terry Labonte finally broke the streak in August 1984, a race in which Waltrip led 144 of the first 269 laps before being doomed with mechanical troubles.

WIN FOR THE LOCAL TEAM

Morgan-McClure Racing was based just a few miles away from Bristol Motor Speedway in nearby Abingdon when it won the 1990 Night Race, their first-ever as a NASCAR Cup Series team.

The team began by purchasing equipment from G.C. Spencer, a Jonesborough racer who had retired from the sport. They ran seven races in 1983, six with Mark Martin and one with Johnson City driver Connie Saylor.

Several other drivers piloted the No. 4 car, notably Ernie Irvan and Sterling Marlin, who captured three Daytona 500 victories for the team. However, coming to Bristol in August 1990, the team led by Kingsport crew chief Tony Glover on the pit box and the hard-charging Irvan behind the wheel was still looking for their first win.

It came in thrilling fashion with Irvan holding off Rusty Wallace in the final laps for the victory.

Johnson City opens 12 new outdoor pickleball courts

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The “addictive” game that won't stop growing was recognized this week by Johnson City commissioners, city officials and others who held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to christen 12 new outdoor pickleball courts.

The festivities at Memorial Park Community Center officially opened what is now the largest pickleball facility in the Tri-Cities and included an exhibition match, pickleball clinic and official public opening.

Nearly half the pickleball players in the Tri-Cities get their game on at MPCC, which prompted commissioners last year to vote to fund about \$100,000 for the conversion of four existing tennis courts. The expense covered resurfacing of the courts, restriping, installation of permanent pickleball nets and the reorientation of the courts toward Bert Street.

“Did we make the right decision here?” Jenny Brock, commissioner and former mayor, asked the large crowd gathered for the ceremony, followed by a hearty round of applause and cheers. “For the health and well-being of community members, this is just about the epicenter for staying active.”

The demand for courts in Johnson City has continued to blossom for years, and the sport's popularity is steadily surging nationwide. Johnson City's first-ever pickleball tournament was held indoors at MPCC in 2018, and the event had players, organizers and potential sponsors buzzing about its potential growth. The buzz has only increased.

“We have 234 players at MPCC, and this has been an increase from 64 players in 2015,” said



CITY OF JOHNSON CITY

Nearly 5 million people now play pickleball — almost double the number from just five years ago, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association.

Senior Services Manager Deb Fogle. “There are currently close to 500 players in the Tri-Cities region playing pickleball.

“It is not just a senior sport, and there is an opportunity for growth in young adults, teens and children. We have seen an increase of college-age students playing pickleball at MPCC's outdoor courts. This is a great sport for the family.”

With 4.8 million people now playing — almost double the number from just five years ago, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association — some of the sport's devotees are capitalizing on pickleball's spike in popularity.

Most of pickleball's core players are over age 65 and play more than eight times per year, but the game is getting younger, with the strongest growth among players under 55, according to USA Pickleball.

The game was created by three men in Bainbridge Island, Washington, who were looking to give their bored children something to do during the summer. The wife of one of the men named it pickleball after the “pickle boat,” the nickname for the last boat to come in with its catch after a fishing trip.

“I'm excited about everything this facility brings, and I want to recognize our Parks and Recreation Department for what they do,” said City Manager Cathy Ball.

Pickleball can be played by all ages, but the short court has attracted older players who may not be able to cover the ground on a full-size tennis court in as short a time as they used to. It's played in elementary schools, community and recreation centers, country clubs and many other locations. The game not only pro-

Fun facts

- » Pickleball is played with a plastic ball with holes in it and a racket about 8 inches wide and 16 inches long.
- » The court is 20 feet wide by 44 feet long.
- » Pickleball has two national professional tournaments.
- » Johnson City has 12 new outdoor pickleball courts at Memorial Park Community Center.
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- » There are nearly 500 pickleball players in the Tri-Cities.

vides exercise but also an environment extremely conducive to socialization. Played much like tennis with a ping pong twist, the sport combines the elements of those racket games, as well as badminton.

Pickleball is played with a plastic ball with holes in it and a racket about 8 inches wide and 16 inches long. The court — often adapted from a tennis court — is 20 feet wide by 44 feet long.

The game now has two national professional tournaments, both formed in the last four years, and pickleball organizers are courting corporate sponsors to help grow the sport in the U.S. and abroad as part of a bid for Olympic inclusion.

For more information about pickleball opportunities at Memorial Park Community Center, call (423) 434-6237 or (423) 434-5749.

BETHEL: Remembering the championship run 70 years later

From Page B1

start. The other county schools included Bethel, Greendale, Liberty Hall, Wallace, Cleveland, Valley Institute, Hamilton (Mendota), Glade Spring, Meadowview, Damascus and Konnarock.

The Bethel community is located off of Route 58 between Abingdon and Damascus. The school building is still standing but is used today as an antique store. Hagy estimates that when he was in school that there were around 120 students in attendance.

“We always played the games during school hours,” Hagy said. “They'd let the whole school out and come to watch us play. The girls would play first, and we'd always play second.”

Most of the schools didn't have an indoor gymnasium and every boys team except for William King — which was in a larger classification — played basketball in the fall and were classified as VHSL Group III.

William King was the only school in the county with a football team.

“We were down at Valley Institute one time, and the superintendent of schools was there,” he said. “When we tried to dribble the ball one time, the dirt was so thick that it flung up in our faces. He later said that if we were going to play basketball in Washington County that we were going to play indoors.

“That's all we ever knew was playing basketball in the fall. The only other sport we had was baseball.”

FALL OF '52

Here's how much the country has changed in 70 years: Gas prices hovered around 20 cents per gallon, and the average cost of a home was about \$7,500.

“We lived about 4 miles outside of (Abingdon) on Walden Road,” Hagy said. “Whenever we'd tell the city kids where we went to school, they'd give us a funny look like we went to school out at

one of those rinky-dink places.”

The Braves were hot going into the postseason but were not considered one of the favorites to win the coveted Washington County tournament crown.

That distinction belonged to Wallace almost year in and year out, coached by the legendary E.W. Hurt. The Warriors had represented Southwest Virginia in the Group III state tournament the previous two seasons, falling short both times.

“They were cutthroat,” Hagy said. “His wife coached the girls. Coach Hurt was always out to win, and nine times out of 10, they'd beat you. He always wore a suit like he was going out later.”

The tournament took place at the old Martin-Brock Gymnasium on the campus of Emory & Henry College. Admission Monday through Friday was a whopping 40 cents and was up to 50 cents for the girls game on Saturday afternoon and then to 75 cents for the boys in the evening.

It wasn't the first time that the Braves had played on an indoor court, but it was still a foreign concept to them.

“The first time that I can remember playing indoors was at Virginia High, which is now the Virginia Middle School,” he said. “We were used to playing on little short dirt courts, and it seemed like it was 9 miles long. We felt like we were going to die.

“The old gym at Emory had a balcony that went all the way around the court. If you shot a ball from one of the corners, a lot of the time, it would get blocked by the overhang.”

Bethel did come out on top and earned an automatic berth into the regional. There, Bethel was supposed to meet Nickelsville for the right to go to the state tournament.

The Bulldogs, however, had a sickness running through the team and could not play the game.

“(Nickelsville) called coach (Clyde) Price and said that they couldn't come, so we ended up going to the state tournament,”

Hagy said. “We used to have basketball tournaments back in those days with the snow piled up to the doorstep of the school bus. We didn't cancel a lot of games.”

Ironically, Nickelsville would win the state championship the next season.

“To prepare for the state, Price scheduled a couple of scrimmages, and one of them was against Holston Valley,” Hagy said. “Harmon Peters was the coach down there at the time, and they beat us so badly that the game was pretty much over by halftime.

“One of our guards was so flustered that he went up and scored two for the other team by accident during the second half.”

The Braves loaded up a couple of cars and meandered their way up Route 11 to Virginia Military Institute in Lexington for the three-day state tournament.

“It really didn't take all that long to get there,” he said. “The interstate wasn't there yet. I can remember when (President Dwight) Eisenhower put plans in to build the interstate.”

TITLE GAME

Up first for the Braves was Halifax.

Bethel sophomore guard Bruce Millsap poured in 17 points in a little more than two quarters of action to help his team win, 57-36. It was the 20th straight win for the Washington County squad and the first time all season that Bethel had surrendered more than 32 points.

McKenney of Dinwiddie County dispatched Broaddus Wood of Albemarle County in the second semifinal game, setting up a matchup with the Braves on Saturday night in the VMI Fieldhouse for the title.

“There were not a lot of people that watched either of our games,” Hagy said. “I don't think any of our fans went, and the other teams may have had a dozen or so people there. There was one game where two Keydets walked in to watch our game.”

In the title game on Dec. 6, Bethel jumped out to an early lead despite being at a height disadvantage.

“I remember when (McKenney) walked out on the court that they had a bunch of guys that were taller than 6 feet,” he said. “Our tallest guy was maybe 5 feet, 10 inches. We beat them with speed and skill.”

Bethel maintained a 27-20 lead at halftime, but McKenney trimmed the lead to 40-38 with a minute and a half remaining.

The Braves outscored McKenney 4-1 down the stretch and held on for the win.

Lowell “Cotton” Hensdel led the attack with 16 while Millsap netted 14.

“I don't remember much about the game, but I know we were all really excited to win,” he said. “It was a pleasure to watch them win because I was just a freshman at that time and didn't play a whole lot.”

Bethel is the last Washington County team to win a boys state basketball championship. Abingdon made finals appearances in 1965 and in 2021 while Battle made the finals in 1998.

“As I recall, there were a couple of ladies at the school that made us a big meal, but that was about it,” Hagy said. “We didn't get any rings or even a banner at the school. Times were just different back then.”

Nearly 70 years after Bethel's triumph, most of the team members are gone. But for those like Hagy who remain, the victory all those years ago will always hold a special place in their memory.

“I really enjoyed getting to be on that team and seeing those guys play,” he said. “I watched them all that year, and they were really, really good for how small of a school we were.

“We didn't really have one good player. There was no selfishness on that team, and they worked together like a machine.”

You can reach Tanner by email at tcOOK@timesnews.net.

REFEREES: It's never too late to come on board and help fill the shortages of officials

From Page B1

“When they can go to Sugar Hollow or a school that has rec leagues and work three or four games at \$40 or \$50 a pop, they can work from 9 'til 2 and make \$150 or \$160. A lot of young people are choosing to do that instead of traveling after work on a Friday.”

But that segment of officials miss out on the camaraderie that longtime veterans value most.

“I don't do it for the money,” said Davis, a 19-year official. “For me, it's more about getting away after a long week and getting to work with the same four guys out on that football field.

“I stay pretty busy with my job

— I'm a workaholic — and to be able to get away from it one day a week is therapeutic. Even if I'm getting yelled at by fans or a coach, it's still therapeutic.”

Danny Wilson, in his 42nd year of officiating, is going again this fall despite a tricky knee. He wouldn't have it any other way if he can help it.

“We look forward to working a game and seeing the coaches and players, and we get a charge walking into the stadium,” the Abingdon resident said. “We still get that adrenaline rush, be it for a little single-A game over in the coalfields or a state championship.”

“We do it for fun and to be

around each other and to enjoy our friends. We get to go out and have something to eat together after the game and just enjoy each other's company.”

And getting to see some pretty good football is part of the package as well.

“Most of us played, and it still keeps us connected, and it kind of gives us some motivation to keep in shape a little bit,” Wilson said. “And we get to see some good football.

“There's some good talent in this area — this is football country down here. We don't have any great big schools, but we've got some great big players who come

through here at times.”

The experience of Wilson and comrades like Wayne Austin, Scott McCracken, Roger Stevens, Jerry Taylor and Ron Johnston is hard to beat, but it's never too late to come on board.

Art Lowe did not start until he was 51, but the Bristol man now has 13 or 14 years in the books.

“My work didn't really allow me to do it until then, but eventually I figured I wasn't getting any younger, so I just decided to go with it anyhow,” Lowe said. “I'd wanted to do it for years.

“It's just a lot of fun, and you get to build relationships with the coaches. It's time consuming, and the money's not really there,

but I missed it terribly when I was out a year (with a foot injury).”

As the older guys wind down their officiating careers, Davis is happy to see any new blood.

“We do have five to seven new officials, so I'm glad for that,” he said. “I hope to be able to have some chances to get out and see some of them officiate, but if we're short, I'll have to work myself and end up watching a lot of film, which I'll do anyway.

“I told the officials that I'll provide a lot of feedback, both positive and constructive. Because my job is to try and continue to make our association better for all the schools we represent.”



'Kid' McKinney learning on the job at Battle

It's not every day that a 24-year-old "kid" gets to be head coach of a high school basketball program, but Sydney McKinney is no ordinary kid.



Johnny Wilson

All grown up now, McKinney is the new girls coach at John Battle, and the former Union High School and Emory & Henry College star hopes to bring what it takes to lift the Trojans into the upper half of Virginia's best Class 2 league, the Mountain 7 District.

She replaces Jeff Adkins, who retired after 41 years on the sideline. He, too, was a pup when he got his first head position, at age 23, at old Whitewood High School in Buchanan County.

"Coach Adkins was great to me," said McKinney, who joined Battle's staff a year ago, as head JV coach and varsity assistant, after a season as a graduate assistant at E&H. "We worked together in the PE department and then in coaching last year. I learned so much.

"I still call him probably daily as I try to figure out what I need to do here and there, asking him questions. He's always just a phone call away. I still use him just like I did when he was here."

McKinney certainly has a lot to learn, but she's had more than a few strong influences beyond Adkins, including former Emory & Henry coaches Anne Crutchfield and Jaclyn Dickens, as well as her old high school coach at Union, Kory Bostic.

At this point, McKinney is like a sponge, soaking up any seasoned advice she can get.

"Pretty much, yeah," McKinney said. "I reach out to them whenever I have a question on how to do about this or that."

Interestingly, Bostic and McKinney will now be rivals in the ultra-tough Mountain 7, which has merely produced eight of the last nine state champions on the Class 2 level.

When she takes her team to Big Stone Gap to face her old mentor on Jan. 31, chances are good that it may feel a bit surreal.

"It'll be pretty tough, I think," said the 5-foot-9 McKinney, a 1,000-point scorer at both Union and E&H. "But it will also be a fun matchup for us. We still have a good relationship. Union has all of its players back, and they should be pretty good.

"I still reach out to Bostic even though we're in the same conference, asking him his personal opinions on this and that. He's still there for me and helping me out."

Dealing with Union and league affiliates Wise Central, Gate City, Abingdon, Ridgeview and Lee will present plenty of challenges for McKinney and her Trojans, who finished 10-16 a year ago.

See **MCKINNEY**, Page B2



CONTRIBUTED

Sydney McKinney was a star at Emory & Henry College and now steps into the role of girls basketball coach at John Battle High School.

Tennessee High takes down Dobyys-Bennett

BRISTOL NOW

Tennessee High beat the defending state champion Dobyys-Bennett 81-64 in a nonconference win on Thursday inside Viking Hall in Bristol, Tennessee. Creed Musick led all scorers with 31 points, followed by Brandon DuFrore (24 points) and Colin Brown (23).



EDDY GRAY/BRISTOL NOW

Gallishaw 'blessed to be at Virginia High'

By **TREY WILLIAMS**
FOR BRISTOL NOW

Phil Worrell could've guessed Julius Gallishaw would be a good head basketball coach.

He wouldn't, however, have thought it would take so long for him to get the opportunity.

Gallishaw was the proverbial coach on the court while helping Worrell's Virginia Intermont (VI) Cobras advance to two NAIA national tournaments in the late '90s. He played with the likes of Kendall Dancy; Ryan Arnold; and Phil Morant, the uncle of Memphis Grizzlies guard Ja Morant — after playing with Hall of Famer Ray Allen on a state championship team at Dalzell Hillcrest (Sumter, South Carolina).

So Worrell wasn't surprised when Gallishaw led Virginia High to the state quarterfinals last season during his first full campaign on the Bearcats' bench.

"Ju really has a perception of the game, and he's likable," Worrell said. "So I knew that he could do well with the respect of his players. And, you know, I was frankly disappointed it wasn't sooner in his career that he got a break like this because I knew all along that he could coach.

"He actually stayed on and was a student assistant with me one year because he still needed credits to graduate. And even with the guys he'd played with the year before, he still was not bashful about doing coaching responsibilities."

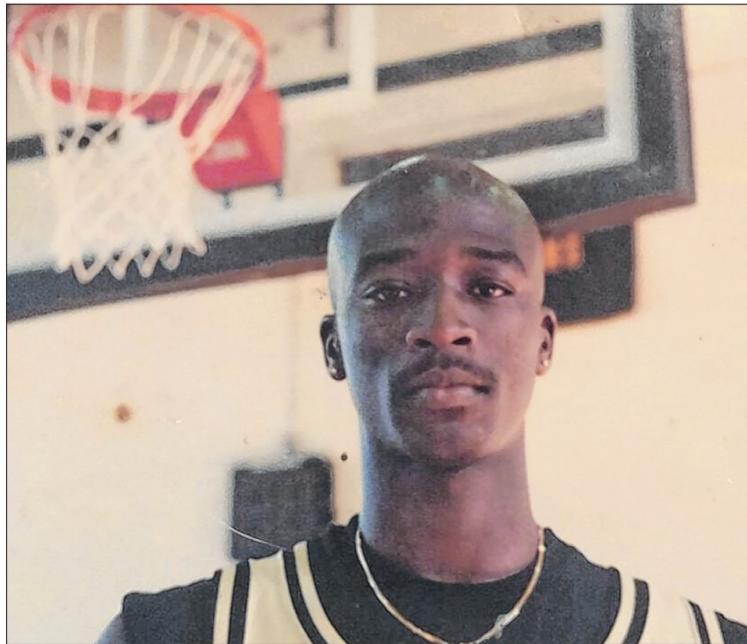
Gallishaw was beginning to lose hope, if not faith, in recent years.

"I was very disappointed," Gallishaw said. "I got passed up on a couple of jobs, but I understood that there was a process. And I remember not getting a job at one particular time that I thought I really was a shoo-in of getting, and I kind of got



CONTRIBUTED

Julius Gallishaw led Virginia High to the state quarterfinals last year. His former coach at Virginia Intermont, Phil Worrell, says he always knew Gallishaw would make a great coach.



CONTRIBUTED

Julius Gallishaw as a player at Virginia Intermont in the 1990s, playing in two NAIA national tournaments.

emotional, and I talked to my mom about it. And I remember vividly she said, 'Julius, God's timing. God's timing.' That stuck with me.

"And that next school year, I got the job at Virginia High. It just kind of fell into place, and I remembered my

mom's words on that day, man. And that's what I said during my first interview, you know, 'God's will. God's timing.' So that helped me during that time, but I can't lie, I got discouraged because I felt like I paid my dues as an assistant coach and was

ready for it."

Opportunity did knock after Gallishaw's final rejection. George Pitts hired him as an assistant at King University.

"I thoroughly enjoyed working under Coach Pitts," Gallishaw said. "That's where I got my

philosophy from. Attention to detail. Practicing and playing with a sense of urgency.

"Coach Pitts was a stickler on the small details of the game. Also, he always pushed players to compete on a high level in practice and games."

Gallishaw fell in love with Bristol while playing with Allen and Ronnie "Tee" Morant (Ja's father) in the 1992 Arby's Classic. Hillcrest defeated Tennessee High in its opener and lost to Albany (Georgia) in the second round. Gallishaw forced overtime with a jumper to win Hillcrest's third Arby's game that year.

"(Albany) had a 6-6 point guard, Melvin Drake (Georgia, VCU)," Gallishaw said. "And, golly, they were good. We ended up losing, but it was a battle, and it was packed. I remember coming out of the locker room, and there was little kids there getting autographs."

One of those youngsters was Adam Hughes, who went on to play at Sullivan East and now plays pickup with Gallishaw at the YMCA.

"It's crazy," Gallishaw said. "He still has my autograph in his Arby's Classic book. He showed it to me. Man, it brought tears to my eyes."

Despite the allure of the Viking Hall crowds, it was the small-town feel that helped sell Gallishaw on Bristol.

"When we came to the Arby's, Bristol was quiet," Gallishaw said.

"And I liked that. I wanted something quiet, and I wanted something that felt like home to me because, where I'm from, Sumter, it was quiet and pretty much everybody knew everybody. I wanted that family atmosphere as well.

"So when I came to Bristol and saw that, it intrigued me a lot. So coming to the Arby's and seeing Bristol and liking the atmosphere, it

See **GALLISHAW**, Page B2



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50 years ago, Randy Smith laid out a course of history

Have you ever push-mowed 6 miles? Randy Smith has, and he loved every minute of it.



Johnny Wilson

Well, he really didn't have to mow the entire 6 miles, but he would have if needed. Some of the terrain was back in the woods, so he wouldn't have had to mow in there. Regardless, Smith was all about getting it done back in the fall of 1973 — whatever the chore.

In this case, he was designing a 5,000-meter course to run at Sugar Hollow Park, which is in its 50th season of hosting cross-country events for high school runners far and wide.

Last week, 38 schools and 757 runners competed in the 16th annual Randy Smith Classic at Sugar Hollow.

"I used to mow the course in those early days with a push mower," Smith said. "I wanted the path to be at least 48 inches wide, so I had to mow it twice (up and then back) to get that width." Smith wanted his brainstorm to turn out as well as possible.

"It was kind of my baby in a way," said Smith, now 71.

Smith was there during the infancy of local cross-country, starting the program at John Battle in August 1973, his first year out of Appalachian State. He remembers it as if it were last week.

"When I came to John Battle, we did not have a cross-country team, nor did many of the schools in the area," said Smith, a Winston-Salem native who ran cross-country in high school before playing soccer in college. "Marion, I think, had one under Buddy Brockman and maybe Tennessee High or D-B or a couple others. A number of schools started up that fall or in '74.

"Phil Robbins wanted us to start one because he was the head track coach at Battle, and obviously if you can have a strong cross-country program, at least some of that would carry over to the spring for events like the 800 and longer distances."

And the rookie cross-country coach with shoulder-length hair — who has said, "They all probably thought I wandered in from Woodstock" — desired a home course.

"I wanted to be able to run some home meets," Smith said. "So I got right to work on it."

The layout served well enough for a couple years, until Ron Helmer campaigned for a change.

"The original course went more back into the park, almost to the creek, if you know where that is back there," Smith said. "We sort of wound through the woods and came back across the dam, so it was a little bit different.

"When Ron came to Virginia High (in) 1975 or '76, his concern was with the loop that went back through the woods and all of that. You might lose control of things a little bit (with the runners out of sight), and you've got tree roots and things like that back there." Smith had mixed feelings.

"Coaches kind of differ on this, but I was always of the mindset that if it's cross-country, then it ought to be cross-country," he said. "I mean, over in Europe, they jump over hay bales and run through creeks and everything else on a cross-country run. So that was more my idea, to not turn it into 'spring track on grass' or something like that.

"But I knew Ron had a good point, too, and he'd been a runner himself at a small school (Southwestern College) in Kansas known for its distance runners. And, of course, he's proven to be an excellent coach for a long, long

See **SMITH**, Page B2

Past and present intersect at Randy Smith Classic

By **TANNER COOK**
tcook@bristolnow.news

Oh, the stories the pine trees at Sugar Hollow Park cross-country course in Bristol could tell if they could talk.

They'd speak of the early days when legendary John S. Battle coach Randy Smith was laying out the course back in the early 1970s.

They'd rave about the torrid pace that the likes of Virginia High's Frankie Nunn and Maria Large set on their way to course records at the 1980 Region IV meet under the direction of the legendary Bearcats coach Ron Helmer.

They'd quibble for hours on end if Marion's Greg Hoofnagle really tied Nunn's record just two years later.

Then they'd praise Marion's Fleet Hower for when he finally surpassed the old record and established a new standard on the historic 3-mile course in 2001.

But last Thursday's Randy Smith Classic would be one that those trees would jabber about until the end of days. The meet is most certainly the largest ever staged at the park and is believed to be the largest ever in Southwest Virginia as over 40 high schools from five different states and over 1,000 runners toed the line.

For someone like Smith, who has seen the course change and evolve over 50 years, the meet was a culmination of the many days of hard work.

"We've run some regionals here, and we used to host something called the Southwest Virginia Jamboree, but neither of those were ever this big," Smith said. "There's a lot of my former runners here, and that really is humbling. I never thought of myself as some great cross-country coach. I was just a guy who enjoyed it, and I loved being around the kids."

The course — which is one of Virginia's oldest continually used treks — celebrated its golden anniversary in style with clear blue skies and a crowd that will probably never be topped.

"The course has changed three or four times," Smith said. "But it has been essentially the same for 50 years. It's very humbling and gratifying to see something last this long."

In the crowd were numerous former runners, including some who had not been back to the hallowed grounds in nearly four decades.

Todd Tipton — a former Battle record-holder that lives out west — made the journey back east to honor his former coach and pay homage to the course on its greatest day.

"This is the first time I've been back to this course in 40 years," Tipton said. "(John Battle co-coach) Dwayne Ball called me and said it was the 50th anniversary of the course and that he'd like for me to come in.

"I wanted to come in and see it. I appreciate cross-country because it's something you can carry with you for the rest of



TANNER COOK/BRISTOL NOW

Former John S. Battle coach Randy Smith is credited with founding the course at Sugar Hollow Park in 1973. Smith coached at Battle for over 25 years, bringing up numerous all-state runners in his time. On Thursday, he was honored with a plaque and a picture of the first Battle team in 1973.



TANNER COOK/BRISTOL NOW

Three of the course's all-time best runners were honored at Thursday's event as (from left) former Marion runner Greg Hoofnagle, former Virginia High runner Frankie Nunn and former Marion runner Fleet Hower were given plaques. Nunn and Hoofnagle are tied for the old course record (14:40), and Hower holds the current course record (14:26).

your life. I'm 57, and I ran this morning, and I'll be racing next month."

What made Thursday special for area running nerds was the intersection of history as Nunn, Hoofnagle and Hower were in the same place at the same time.

"It's a real throwback being back here again and not having to compete," Hower said.

"There's a lot of great memories, and it's great to have a really big crowd."

One of the best sights was the top three — in terms of all-time bests on the course —

talking about the old days with former Marion coach Gene Walker and how running has changed.

"It's a lot of fun to come back because I haven't been back here in almost 40 years,"

See **CLASSIC**, Page B2



TANNER COOK/BRISTOL NOW

The varsity boys start the race at Thursday's Randy Smith Classic at Sugar Hollow Park. Abingdon's Rives Boltwood won the race by covering the 3-mile course in 16:03.9.

SMITH

From Page B1

time — good grief, he coached at Georgetown (for 20 years), and this year he's retiring (after 15 years as head man) from Indiana University."

Smith credits Helmer as the chief figure who put Southwest Virginia on the state's cross-country map, his boys and girls combining to earn four Group AA championships and four runner-up finishes from 1977-82, as well as winning five individual titles.

"Ron Helmer and the standard he set influenced the quality of cross-country in this area more than anyone," said Smith, who produced four state

runner-up teams and two individual champs himself during the 1980s. "If you didn't want to get 15'ed (where Helmer's runners took the first five places, totaling a minimal 15 points), then bring your A game, or you'd be embarrassed."

So the course was changed after a couple seasons to basically what it is today. But there was a slight miscalculation (161 meters) with the make-over.

"Ron asked if he could lay out a course, so he did," Smith recalled. "But then, when we measured after he laid it out, it came up 3 miles (instead of the standard 3.1). But people liked the new layout so much that we just decided to keep it like it was at 3 miles.

"It's been modified over the years as they've added parking lots, but we've always double- and triple-checked the distance to keep it 3 miles. Because I think it's important that kids today can make a comparative analysis with what kids ran 10, 20, 30 years ago."

In the earliest days, cross-country was a boys-only sport.

"We had a couple girls who came out and ran with our boys that first fall, but girls didn't run separately until 1974, I think it was," Smith said. "But even then, they only ran 3,000 meters because of the prevailing myth that girls weren't as strong as boys and would have a hard time running 3 miles. And the truth is, they're better at it than

guys, at least proportionately.

"I vividly remember Maria Large setting the record at Sugar Hollow (in 1980). ... I can see her rounding the corner and hitting that last little stretch of 50 yards like she was gliding, that long, blond hair floating behind her. I was at the finish line with a stopwatch, and I said, 'My gosh, guys, she's going under 17.' And when she came in at 16:58, we were just in awe."

Smith is proud of the fact that he helped convince the VHSL to recognize girls cross-country on a regional and state level beginning in 1980, just as he's proud of the course at Sugar Hollow.

"It's set on a TVA dam, which is neat," said Smith, who last coached

in 2000. "So it's very scenic. In fact, at one time the kids wanted to print a T-shirt that said, 'Sugar Hollow — best course by a dam site,' but I thought the central office might frown on that."

"The course is spectator-friendly, and it has those hills to challenge runners while offering flat ground across the dam to where you can open it up to gain time. And there's also a strategy for gaining 3, 4, 5 seconds running down the hills, too, so it's a great mix."

Smith will soon move back to North Carolina to enjoy his golden years with Mary Sue, a Meadowview girl and his wife of 51 years. But he'll always be known for leaving his fingerprints all over the cross-country

scene of Southwest Virginia — and Sugar Hollow.

For one thing, every year they hold a meet there that bears his name.

"When (Battle coach) Whitney (Ball) first told me (in 2007) that they were going to have a meet named after me, I said, 'Don't you have to die for that to happen?'" Smith joked. "But she said that it wasn't 'in memory of,' it was 'in honor of.' And I am honored.

"A lot's happened in 50 years — I used to be taller than the pine trees at the finish line, but now they're 50 feet high — and it boggles my mind it's passed all so fast. But it's good. Whenever I get to talk about cross-country and Sugar Hollow, it all makes me smile."

CLASSIC

From Page B1

Hoofnagle said. "The trees are a lot bigger, and the memories start to come flooding back. Once you start walking out on the course, it all seems

fresh again.

"It's great to see all of these people honored. It really takes great people to make a great course. Frankie was one of my idols because I was just a freshman when he was a senior."

Even runners who pre-date the current course

showed up for the first time in some years. Pat Henner — a former Virginia High runner who helped lay the foundation for the Bearcat dynasty in the early '80s and a current University of Georgia coach — came up on a recruiting visit and was stunned by the size of

the meet.

"It's amazing being back here, and I absolutely love this place," Henner said. "It's mostly about the people. I got to see Gene Walker and Randy Smith, who I probably haven't seen in 30 years."

"The old course that I ran still holds a lot of the

same elements and atmosphere of being hilly and tough with a lot of changes of momentum. It sticks to the original intent."

Helmer and Large could not be at the ceremony due to some conflicts but were honored with plaques. Still, the day was

a massive success, and to have a lot of the course's history come out for a celebration speaks volumes.

"When you get old like I am, you can look back, smile and feel good about it because you feel like you made an impact on someone. It all comes full circle," Smith said.

Abingdon sweeps Randy Smith cross-country titles

By TANNER COOK
tcook@bristolnow.news

BRISTOL, Va. — The grounds of the 3-mile cross-country course at Sugar Hollow Park have seen numerous historic days over the last 50 years.

The 16th Randy Smith Classic on Thursday will go down as one of its biggest, as more than 40 high schools from five states were represented and more than 1,000 runners competed. It is believed to be the largest meet ever staged at the park and in Southwest Virginia.

And all the accolades went to Abingdon — one of the region's historically dominant programs.

Senior star Makaleigh Jessee took her second win of the season with a quick time of 18:14.2 and led the Lady Falcons to a low score of 29 points.

On the boys side, junior Rives Boltwood led the charge for the Falcons with a winning time of 16:03.9. The defending Class 3 state champion Falcons took the team crown with 33 points.

JESSEE GOES WIRE-TO-WIRE

Jessee took the lead from the start and virtually ran the entire race by herself.

It was her second individual title at the meet, matching the one from the spring season of 2021. Her time on Thursday was a personal best for the course, but it is still well off of the school's all-time best mark on the course of 17:28.0 set in 1986 by Katrina Berkley.

"I wanted to go out pretty fast, and I did, but the wind and a lot of spectators on the course today ..." Jessee said. "The race went OK, but the conditions weren't the best."

Rounding out the team scoring for Abingdon were Josie Jackson (fourth, 19:20.4), Amanda Ferrante (fifth, 20:03.9), Cecelia Johnson (12th, 20:25.1) and Aleah Dorn (15th, 21:05.5).

It was a good team effort for the Lady Falcons, who currently lead all of Class 3, as Jessee is the top individual.

"It's great to have competition out here, and especially being on a course that we know so well," Jessee said.

"It's good to see where everyone is at this point in the season. We have some pretty big goals for the team

this year."

George Wythe — which finished fourth with 129 — has won the last three Class 1 state titles and will again be the favorite in November.

Jefferson Christian Academy's Violet Wall finished runner-up in 18:47.1 while Tennessee High's Zoe Arrington was third in 19:13.7.

North Buncombe (North Carolina) finished as team runner-up with 50 points while Volunteer was third with 100.

The Lady Falcons got a solid performance out of Jacie Begley, who finished eighth in 20:16.0.

BOLTWOOD BREAKS EARLY

The junior Boltwood has led the Falcons all season in the absence of Jack Bundy and finally got the opportunity to shine on Thursday with the win.

"I would've loved to have gone sub-16, but it is what it is," Boltwood said. "I'm very happy to finally win on this course, though. I've run on this thing what seems like 15 times, and the best I had ever done was second or third. A win feels pretty great."

The Falcons were also able to put the entire team together for the first time this season.

Bundy returned from a stress fracture in his foot while Todd Pillion II returned from a rib injury.

"It feels great to have our top seven back together for the first time this season," Boltwood said. "It's crazy that it's this late in the season."

The scoring for Abingdon was rounded out by Gregory Poisson (third, 16:22.2), Bramley Childress (fifth, 16:31.4), Bundy (ninth, 17:08.1) and Pillion (17th, 17:29.1).

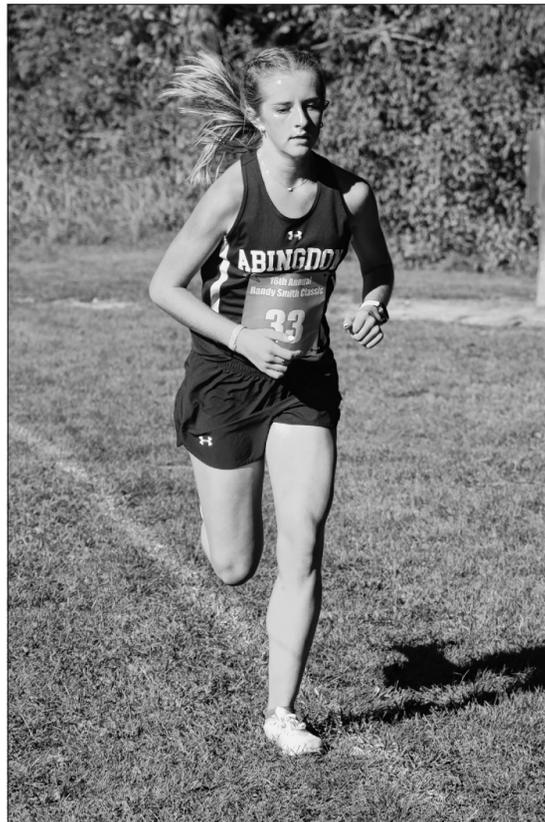
The team competition was deep, as defending Class 2 state champion Union was runner-up with 138, and Class 1 state favorite Lebanon was third with 153.

"There are some really good runners here, and this was by no means an easy race," Boltwood said. "I managed to pull out the win, though."

Derek Mitchell led the way for the Pioneers with a runner-up finish in 16:14.5 while Dorian Almer led the Bears with a 10th-place showing (17:16.9).



The Abingdon cross-country teams swept the titles at Thursday's Randy Smith Classic. The girls set a meet record low 29 points while the boys scored 33.



Abingdon senior Makaleigh Jessee ran away with Thursday's Randy Smith Classic individual title, running 18:14.2. It was her second win of the season, following her Fender's Farm crown two weeks ago.



Abingdon junior Rives Boltwood runs toward the finish with wide open arms en route to the win at the Randy Smith Classic at Sugar Hollow in Bristol, Virginia. Boltwood's time was 16:03.9.

Results

16th Randy Smith Classic
Sugar Hollow Park, Bristol
3 miles
Thursday, Sept. 29

Girls
Course Record: Maria Large, Virginia High (16:58.0 in 1980)

Meet Record: Kelsey Harrington, Virginia High (17:43.0 in 2019)

Team Results
1 Abingdon 29, 2 North Buncombe (NC) 50, 3 Volunteer 100, 4 George Wythe 129, 5 Grundy 154, 6 Tennessee High 156, 7 John S. Battle

183, 8 Virginia High 226, 9 Sullivan East 264, 10 Union 294, 11 Rural Retreat 303, 12 West Ridge 316, 13 Providence Academy 330, 14 Rye Cove 358, 15 Marion 380, 16 Richlands 392.

Top 15 Individual Finishers

1 Makaleigh Jessee (A) 18:14.2, 2 Violet Wall (JCA) 18:47.1, 3 Zoe Arrington (THS) 19:13.7, 4 Josie Jackson (A) 19:20.4, 5 Amanda Ferrante (A) 20:03.9, 6 Avery Mays (NB) 20:06.4, 7 Abigail Rhudy (Taz) 20:09.8, 8 Jacie Begley (Vol) 20:16.0, 9 Eowyn Warner (WolfHills) 20:20.0, 10 Jessi Looney (Gru) 20:21.8, 11 Katie Johnson (NB) 20:22.4, 12 Cecelia Johnson (A) 20:25.1, 13 Eden Barnwell (NB) 20:43.9, 14 Alexis Porter (Gru) 20:45.8, 15 Aleah Dorn (A) 21:05.5.

Boys

Course Record: Fleet Hower, Marion (14:26.0 in 2001)

Meet Record: Brad Swiney, John S. Battle (15:09.0 in 2014)

Team Results

1 Abingdon 33, 2 Union 138, 3 Lebanon 153, 4 Volunteer 161, 5 North Buncombe (NC) 181, 6 Sullivan East 196, 7 Tennessee High 197, 8 Jefferson Christian Academy 207, 9 Wolf Hills Home School 228, 10 Providence Academy 288, 11 Grundy 342, 12 Tazewell 404, 13 Carroll County 405, 14 Auburn 434, 15 Virginia High 451, 16 Marion 473, 17 John S. Battle 481, 18 Princeton Sr. (WV) 501, 19 Oak Hill Academy 506, 20

Unicoi County 515, 21 West Ridge 541, 22 George Wythe 544, 23 Lee High 560, 24 Eastern Montgomery 566, 25 Gate City 600, 26 Rural Retreat 805, 27 Rye Cove 810.

Top 15 Individual Finishers

1 Rives Boltwood (A) 16:03.9, 2 Derek Mitchell (Leb) 16:14.5, 3 Gregory Poisson (A) 16:22.2, 4 Kaleb Elswick (Gru) 16:30.2, 5 Bramley Childress (A) 16:31.4, 6 Adam Gibson (CW) 16:35.0, 7 Alec Deekard (Leb) 16:46.3, 8 Roman Borghetti-Metz (Vol) 16:53.3, 9 Jack Bundy (A) 17:08.1, 10 Dorian Almer (U) 17:16.9, 11 Charlie Wilson (Vol) 17:18.0, 12 James Stalnaker (JCA) 17:24.0, 13 Keyston Hartford (Gru) 17:24.5, 14 Chad Douglas (U) 17:24.7, 15 Eli Taylor (Leb) 17:25.1.

Pickleball

The “addictive” game that won't stop growing was recognized by Johnson City commissioners, city officials and others who held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to christen 12 new outdoor courts. — Page B2



Referee shortage causing football numbers crunch

Sometimes they're booed and disrespected, but football referees are the gatekeepers of the game. And they are irreplaceable.

No officiating crew, no game. And it's trending in that direction.



Johnny Wilson

Nationwide. Oh, there will always be “zebras” for the rude and obnoxious to heckle, but the institution of high school football is certainly feeling a big-time numbers crunch these days.

“I've got a buddy in San Antonio saying they're to a point in Texas that they're playing a varsity football game at 4 o'clock on a Friday so the crew working that one can get an 8 o'clock game at another school,” Chris Davis said last week. “It's everywhere.”

Davis is the new man in charge of the local Appalachian Football Officials Association, and the rookie commissioner from Wise, Virginia, has a big job in front of him.

There are 33 football schools in the Appalachian's jurisdiction, from Fort Chiswell and Galax to the east, up to Hurley to the north, over to Thomas Walker in Virginia's western tip, back down to Bristol and Grayson County to the south and all points between.

With 83 registered officials at his disposal and five needed for every game (and generally between 14 and 17 local games on a Friday night), there isn't much wiggle room for Davis.

Do the math — if there are 17 games scheduled, his association would be two officials short. Or even if there are 15 or 16 games, COVID sickness and other issues arise from time to time.

“I am blessed that we had two schools in Week 1 willing to move to Thursday night and two in Week 2 willing to do the same,” said Davis, 44. “And thankfully as we get to Week 3 and Week 4, there are only like 14 games scheduled because of byes and teams playing out of state. But then in Week 5, we jump back to 17 games for that Friday night.”

“Ultimately that week I'll have to find some schools willing to move (to another night) just so we can cover those games. I don't want to get to a point that I'm sending four officials out there.”

A four-man officiating crew wouldn't be good for anybody.

“Twenty years ago, when it was four yards and a cloud of dust, it would've been easy enough to cover with four,” Davis said. “But the game's changed so much, with teams now throwing a lot, that you can't afford to lose a set of eyes downfield.”

“A lot of teams run the spread offense today and get on the corner with the jet sweep, and a four-man crew could be in a world of hurt at certain moments. You really need that back judge.”

The referee shortage may be due to a couple reasons — the older set is retiring or about to retire after 40 and 50 years in the business, and the younger crowd is barely signing up.

A lot of the young adults are looking to make a quick buck by calling rec league games.

“Young people are just not getting excited and interested in officiating,” said Davis, a 23-year employee of the University of Virginia's College at Wise, where he's the director of the David J. Prior Convocation Center. “The younger people getting involved in officiating today are seeing the dollar signs, in my opinion, when it comes to youth sports.”

See **REFEREES**, Page B2

Tiny Bethel's run to glory still resonates 70 years later

By **TANNER COOK**
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The lifeblood of small communities is often the local high school sports teams.

It's evident today, but it was even more so over 50 years ago when it seemed like every little part of the county had a school.

Often, the success stories from smaller schools get lost in time, but they live forever to those who experienced them.

So is the case for the basketball state championship run for the tiny Bethel Braves of Washington County in 1952.

“All of the guys on the team pretty much grew up together and were really good friends,” team member Jim Hagy said. “They played like a family. They never raised their voices, and we all just did our jobs. There weren't too many times where our guys wouldn't go down the court, cross the time-



CONTRIBUTED

The Bethel Braves of Washington County won the 1952 VHSL Group III state championship by defeating McKenney of Dinwiddie County in the title game 44-39. The squad was (first row, from left): Bruce Millsap, Jack Selfe, Monte Stamper, Dexter Widener, Lowell Hensdell. Second row (from left): George Mullins, Kelly McElyea, Fred Trent, James Hagy, Hugh Van Huss. Third row (from left): Coach Clyde Price, Irvin Hyder and Hugh McCall.

“I really enjoyed getting to be on that team and seeing those guys play.”

— Jim Hagy

line and pull up for a two-handed set shot. They all played great defense, too.”

BACK IN THE DAY

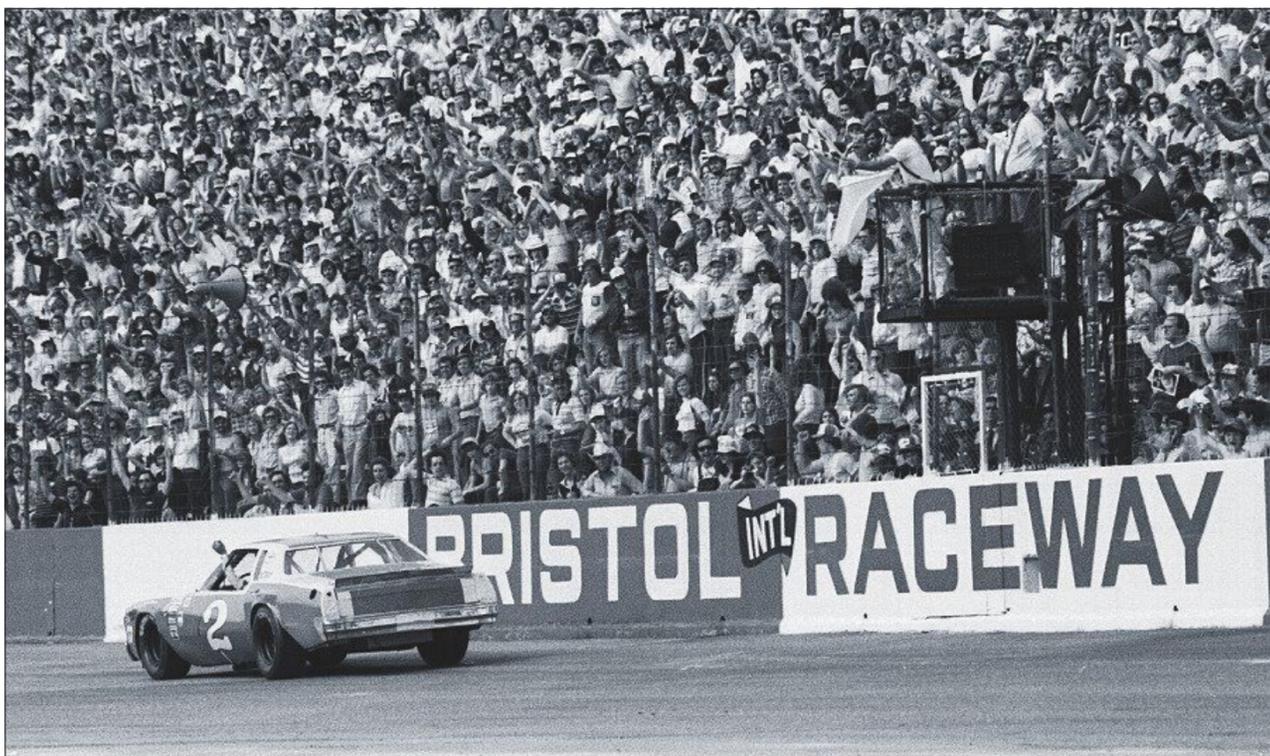
Before the Washington County school system began consolidating in 1959 into the four schools it has today — Abingdon, Holston, John S. Battle and Patrick Henry — almost every part of the county had a school.

William King operated as the city school in Abingdon and was a larger school from the

See **BETHEL**, Page B2

Under the lights

Night racing at BMS turned into quite the spectacle



BRISTOL MOTOR SPEEDWAY

Dale Earnhardt flashes under the checkered flag on his way to winning the 1979 Southeastern 500 at Bristol. It was his first NASCAR Cup Series victory.

By **JEFF BIRCHFIELD**
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Editor's Note

This is the second of a four-part series on the history of Bristol Motor Speedway.

The nighttime turned out to be the right time for Bristol Motor Speedway.

BMS founder and owner Larry Carrier sold the track to Lanny Hester and Gary Baker late in 1976. The most significant change during their time as owners was necessitated by the summer heat. They made the decision to change the Volunteer 500 in August to a night race.

It immediately created a buzz and eventually turned what had been just another race on the NASCAR schedule to the sport's most popular race.

During the early '80s, the track went through other ownership changes. Hester sold his half of the speedway to California businessman Warner Hodgdon in 1982. Nearly a year later, Hodgdon purchased then Bristol International Raceway and Nashville Speedway from Baker.

In 1985, Hodgdon filed for bankruptcy, and Carrier once again took possession

of the track.

It's hard to overstate what the move to nighttime meant to Bristol. It turned into a spectacle, although it was a familiar name who dominated the first race. Cale Yarborough led 327 of the race's 500 laps and won by 16 seconds over runner-up Benny Parsons.

EARNHARDT'S FIRST WIN

While the spring race remained in the day, it became a significant part of NASCAR history.

The 1979 Southeastern 500 was the first of 76 career wins for Dale Earnhardt. Driving for California car owner Rod Osterlund, Earnhardt passed rival Darrell Waltrip for the lead on lap 474. Bobby Allison passed Waltrip for second but ended three seconds behind Earnhardt at the finish.



NASCAR

Track owners Lanny Hester, left, and Gary Baker, right, flank race winner Darrell Waltrip and wife Stevie after the 1978 Southeastern 500. The next Bristol race would be held under the lights.

Not as well publicized but a stronger performance, Earnhardt repeated as the race winner in 1980. It was his second win in his first of seven championship seasons. He led a race-high 208 laps that day and finished nearly nine seconds ahead of Waltrip.

Bristol was the site for

another NASCAR Hall of Famer's first victory in 1986. Rusty Wallace, who would go on to match Earnhardt and Yarborough with nine Bristol wins, drove the No. 27 Pontiac to nearly an 11-second win over Ricky Rudd in the Valleydale 500. Like Earnhardt before

See **NIGHT**, Page B2

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NIGHT

From Page B1

him, Wallace got by Bristol master Darrell Waltrip for the race-winning pass.

Wallace, who cut his teeth on the ASA circuit in the Midwest, led the final 101 laps of the race. He would go on to have more of his biggest career moments at Bristol, including a milestone 50th career win in the 2000 Food City 500.

ESPN COMES ON BOARD

The track in Bristol, Tennessee, found the perfect broadcast partner with a fledgling all-sports television network in Bristol, Connecticut.

While NASCAR became a mainstay on ESPN, there was no place that was as mutually beneficial as Bristol. In a famous 1985 segment, the ESPN crew put a Volkswagen Beetle at the top of then 36-degree banking and pushed the car over, where it barrel rolled down the track.

The network captured the excitement of Bristol like no one else. The races for both the Cup Series and Xfinity Series (then Busch Series) became can't-miss programming. The network broadcast both of the famous Earnhardt-Labonte finishes and other moments like Mark Martin pulling into the pits a lap early under caution, which cost him a Busch Series win.

ESPN was there for Michael Waltrip's horrifying wreck in a 1990 Busch Series race, where thankfully the driver emerged unscathed.

WALTRIP'S STREAK

Darrell Waltrip, Michael's older brother, is the all-time Cup Series winner at Bristol with 12 victories.

Seven of those came in a row between 1981-84 in Junior Johnson's cars. Waltrip has talked about how incredible a feat it was for anyone to simply finish seven races in a row in those days, let alone win them all.

He even won a rain-shortened race of 419 laps at the 1983 Night Race. Terry Labonte finally broke the streak in August 1984, a race in which Waltrip led 144 of the first 269 laps before being doomed with mechanical troubles.

WIN FOR THE LOCAL TEAM

Morgan-McClure Racing was based just a few miles away from Bristol Motor Speedway in nearby Abingdon when it won the 1990 Night Race, their first-ever as a NASCAR Cup Series team.

The team began by purchasing equipment from G.C. Spencer, a Jonesborough racer who had retired from the sport. They ran seven races in 1983, six with Mark Martin and one with Johnson City driver Connie Saylor.

Several other drivers piloted the No. 4 car, notably Ernie Irvan and Sterling Marlin, who captured three Daytona 500 victories for the team. However, coming to Bristol in August 1990, the team led by Kingsport crew chief Tony Glover on the pit box and the hard-charging Irvan behind the wheel was still looking for their first win.

It came in thrilling fashion with Irvan holding off Rusty Wallace in the final laps for the victory.

Johnson City opens 12 new outdoor pickleball courts

CONTRIBUTED

The “addictive” game that won't stop growing was recognized this week by Johnson City commissioners, city officials and others who held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to christen 12 new outdoor pickleball courts.

The festivities at Memorial Park Community Center officially opened what is now the largest pickleball facility in the Tri-Cities and included an exhibition match, pickleball clinic and official public opening.

Nearly half the pickleball players in the Tri-Cities get their game on at MPCC, which prompted commissioners last year to vote to fund about \$100,000 for the conversion of four existing tennis courts. The expense covered resurfacing of the courts, restriping, installation of permanent pickleball nets and the reorientation of the courts toward Bert Street.

“Did we make the right decision here?” Jenny Brock, commissioner and former mayor, asked the large crowd gathered for the ceremony, followed by a hearty round of applause and cheers. “For the health and well-being of community members, this is just about the epicenter for staying active.”

The demand for courts in Johnson City has continued to blossom for years, and the sport's popularity is steadily surging nationwide. Johnson City's first-ever pickleball tournament was held indoors at MPCC in 2018, and the event had players, organizers and potential sponsors buzzing about its potential growth. The buzz has only increased.

“We have 234 players at MPCC, and this has been an increase from 64 players in 2015,” said



CITY OF JOHNSON CITY

Nearly 5 million people now play pickleball — almost double the number from just five years ago, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association.

Senior Services Manager Deb Fogle. “There are currently close to 500 players in the Tri-Cities region playing pickleball.

“It is not just a senior sport, and there is an opportunity for growth in young adults, teens and children. We have seen an increase of college-age students playing pickleball at MPCC's outdoor courts. This is a great sport for the family.”

With 4.8 million people now playing — almost double the number from just five years ago, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association — some of the sport's devotees are capitalizing on pickleball's spike in popularity.

Most of pickleball's core players are over age 65 and play more than eight times per year, but the game is getting younger, with the strongest growth among players under 55, according to USA Pickleball.

BETHEL: Remembering the championship run 70 years later

From Page B1

start. The other county schools included Bethel, Greendale, Liberty Hall, Wallace, Cleveland, Valley Institute, Hamilton (Mendota), Glade Spring, Meadowview, Damascus and Konnarock.

The Bethel community is located off of Route 58 between Abingdon and Damascus. The school building is still standing but is used today as an antique store. Hagy estimates that when he was in school that there were around 120 students in attendance.

“We always played the games during school hours,” Hagy said. “They'd let the whole school out and come to watch us play. The girls would play first, and we'd always play second.”

Most of the schools didn't have an indoor gymnasium and every boys team except for William King — which was in a larger classification — played basketball in the fall and were classified as VHSL Group III.

William King was the only school in the county with a football team.

“We were down at Valley Institute one time, and the superintendent of schools was there,” he said. “When we tried to dribble the ball one time, the dirt was so thick that it flung up in our faces. He later said that if we were going to play basketball in Washington County that we were going to play indoors.

“That's all we ever knew was playing basketball in the fall. The only other sport we had was baseball.”

FALL OF '52

Here's how much the country has changed in 70 years: Gas prices hovered around 20 cents per gallon, and the average cost of a home was about \$7,500.

“We lived about 4 miles outside of (Abingdon) on Walden Road,” Hagy said. “Whenever we'd tell the city kids where we went to school, they'd give us a funny look like we went to school out at

one of those rinky-dink places.”

The Braves were hot going into the postseason but were not considered one of the favorites to win the coveted Washington County tournament crown.

That distinction belonged to Wallace almost year in and year out, coached by the legendary E.W. Hurt. The Warriors had represented Southwest Virginia in the Group III state tournament the previous two seasons, falling short both times.

“They were cutthroat,” Hagy said. “His wife coached the girls. Coach Hurt was always out to win, and nine times out of 10, they'd beat you. He always wore a suit like he was going out later.”

The tournament took place at the old Martin-Brock Gymnasium on the campus of Emory & Henry College. Admission Monday through Friday was a whopping 40 cents and was up to 50 cents for the girls game on Saturday afternoon and then to 75 cents for the boys in the evening.

It wasn't the first time that the Braves had played on an indoor court, but it was still a foreign concept to them.

“The first time that I can remember playing indoors was at Virginia High, which is now the Virginia Middle School,” he said. “We were used to playing on little short dirt courts, and it seemed like it was 9 miles long. We felt like we were going to die.

“The old gym at Emory had a balcony that went all the way around the court. If you shot a ball from one of the corners, a lot of the time, it would get blocked by the overhang.”

Bethel did come out on top and earned an automatic berth into the regional. There, Bethel was supposed to meet Nickelsville for the right to go to the state tournament.

The Bulldogs, however, had a sickness running through the team and could not play the game.

“(Nickelsville) called coach (Clyde) Price and said that they couldn't come, so we ended up going to the state tournament,”

Hagy said. “We used to have basketball tournaments back in those days with the snow piled up to the doorstep of the school bus. We didn't cancel a lot of games.”

Ironically, Nickelsville would win the state championship the next season.

“To prepare for the state, Price scheduled a couple of scrimmages, and one of them was against Holston Valley,” Hagy said. “Harmon Peters was the coach down there at the time, and they beat us so badly that the game was pretty much over by halftime.

“One of our guards was so flustered that he went up and scored two for the other team by accident during the second half.”

The Braves loaded up a couple of cars and meandered their way up Route 11 to Virginia Military Institute in Lexington for the three-day state tournament.

“It really didn't take all that long to get there,” he said. “The interstate wasn't there yet. I can remember when (President Dwight) Eisenhower put plans in to build the interstate.”

TITLE GAME

Up first for the Braves was Halifax.

Bethel sophomore guard Bruce Millsap poured in 17 points in a little more than two quarters of action to help his team win, 57-36. It was the 20th straight win for the Washington County squad and the first time all season that Bethel had surrendered more than 32 points.

McKenney of Dinwiddie County dispatched Broaddus Wood of Albemarle County in the second semifinal game, setting up a matchup with the Braves on Saturday night in the VMI Fieldhouse for the title.

“There were not a lot of people that watched either of our games,” Hagy said. “I don't think any of our fans went, and the other teams may have had a dozen or so people there. There was one game where two Keydets walked in to watch our game.”

Fun facts

- » Pickleball is played with a plastic ball with holes in it and a racket about 8 inches wide and 16 inches long.
- » The court is 20 feet wide by 44 feet long.
- » Pickleball has two national professional tournaments.
- » Johnson City has 12 new outdoor pickleball courts at Memorial Park Community Center.
- » Johnson City now has the largest pickleball facility in the Tri-Cities.
- » Memorial Park Community Center has 234 pickleball players.
- » There are nearly 500 pickleball players in the Tri-Cities.

vides exercise but also an environment extremely conducive to socialization. Played much like tennis with a ping pong twist, the sport combines the elements of those racket games, as well as badminton.

Pickleball is played with a plastic ball with holes in it and a racket about 8 inches wide and 16 inches long. The court — often adapted from a tennis court — is 20 feet wide by 44 feet long.

The game now has two national professional tournaments, both formed in the last four years, and pickleball organizers are courting corporate sponsors to help grow the sport in the U.S. and abroad as part of a bid for Olympic inclusion.

For more information about pickleball opportunities at Memorial Park Community Center, call (423) 434-6237 or (423) 434-5749.

In the title game on Dec. 6, Bethel jumped out to an early lead despite being at a height disadvantage.

“I remember when (McKenney) walked out on the court that they had a bunch of guys that were taller than 6 feet,” he said. “Our tallest guy was maybe 5 feet, 10 inches. We beat them with speed and skill.”

Bethel maintained a 27-20 lead at halftime, but McKenney trimmed the lead to 40-38 with a minute and a half remaining.

The Braves outscored McKenney 4-1 down the stretch and held on for the win.

Lowell “Cotton” Hensdel led the attack with 16 while Millsap netted 14.

“I don't remember much about the game, but I know we were all really excited to win,” he said. “It was a pleasure to watch them win because I was just a freshman at that time and didn't play a whole lot.”

Bethel is the last Washington County team to win a boys state basketball championship. Abingdon made finals appearances in 1965 and in 2021 while Battle made the finals in 1998.

“As I recall, there were a couple of ladies at the school that made us a big meal, but that was about it,” Hagy said. “We didn't get any rings or even a banner at the school. Times were just different back then.”

Nearly 70 years after Bethel's triumph, most of the team members are gone. But for those like Hagy who remain, the victory all those years ago will always hold a special place in their memory.

“I really enjoyed getting to be on that team and seeing those guys play,” he said. “I watched them all that year, and they were really, really good for how small of a school we were.

“We didn't really have one good player. There was no selfishness on that team, and they worked together like a machine.”

You can reach Tanner by email at tcOOK@timesnews.net.

REFEREES: It's never too late to come on board and help fill the shortages of officials

From Page B1

“When they can go to Sugar Hollow or a school that has rec leagues and work three or four games at \$40 or \$50 a pop, they can work from 9 'til 2 and make \$150 or \$160. A lot of young people are choosing to do that instead of traveling after work on a Friday.”

But that segment of officials miss out on the camaraderie that longtime veterans value most.

“I don't do it for the money,” said Davis, a 19-year official. “For me, it's more about getting away after a long week and getting to work with the same four guys out on that football field.

“I stay pretty busy with my job

— I'm a workaholic — and to be able to get away from it one day a week is therapeutic. Even if I'm getting yelled at by fans or a coach, it's still therapeutic.”

Danny Wilson, in his 42nd year of officiating, is going again this fall despite a tricky knee. He wouldn't have it any other way if he can help it.

“We look forward to working a game and seeing the coaches and players, and we get a charge walking into the stadium,” the Abingdon resident said. “We still get that adrenaline rush, be it for a little single-A game over in the coalfields or a state championship.

“We do it for fun and to be

around each other and to enjoy our friends. We get to go out and have something to eat together after the game and just enjoy each other's company.”

And getting to see some pretty good football is part of the package as well.

“Most of us played, and it still keeps us connected, and it kind of gives us some motivation to keep in shape a little bit,” Wilson said. “And we get to see some good football.

“There's some good talent in this area — this is football country down here. We don't have any great big schools, but we've got some great big players who come

through here at times.”

The experience of Wilson and comrades like Wayne Austin, Scott McCracken, Roger Stevens, Jerry Taylor and Ron Johnston is hard to beat, but it's never too late to come on board.

Art Lowe did not start until he was 51, but the Bristol man now has 13 or 14 years in the books.

“My work didn't really allow me to do it until then, but eventually I figured I wasn't getting any younger, so I just decided to go with it anyhow,” Lowe said. “I'd wanted to do it for years.

“It's just a lot of fun, and you get to build relationships with the coaches. It's time consuming, and the money's not really there,

but I missed it terribly when I was out a year (with a foot injury).”

As the older guys wind down their officiating careers, Davis is happy to see any new blood.

“We do have five to seven new officials, so I'm glad for that,” he said. “I hope to be able to have some chances to get out and see some of them officiate, but if we're short, I'll have to work myself and end up watching a lot of film, which I'll do anyway.

“I told the officials that I'll provide a lot of feedback, both positive and constructive. Because my job is to try and continue to make our association better for all the schools we represent.”