

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS **SPORTS** CONNECTION

August 2025 • Single Copy Free

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The start of a new school year still brings on a sense of excitement and anticipation

Greetings and welcome to the August issue of Southern Illinois Sports Connection! As always, thanks for joining us again this month!

On a variety of levels, this month will bring on a huge annual transition in the world of sports. First, school bells have already started ringing in many communities throughout the region, meaning the start of the high school and junior high sports calendar is upon us.

The always anticipated Friday Night Lights for the state of Illinois will kick off on August 29 and will begin the grueling nine-week grind that will then lead into those wonderful Saturday afternoon playoff games that we all look forward to each year.

And of course, we also have cross country, volleyball, fall baseball and softball, golf and just the excitement of another school year beginning. I think you'll agree with me that here in this region we all call home, most everything that happens within the community revolves around the school!

Regardless how old I am, the start of a new school year still brings on a sense of excitement and anticipation! I hope I never lose that! Prayers for all the youngsters heading off to school across the nation for a safe and wonderful school year!

In short, August in an exciting month, a month of new begin-



FROM THE PUBLISHER

BY JIM MUIR

nings and we are thrilled to see another one roll around!

Rarely, if ever, have I felt like a story needed an explanation, but our cover story this month does – a least a brief one! First, it's not a sport-related story - no ties, no links, no connection, nothing about it has to do with sports. I'm sure you're thinking, 'well, that is a little unusual for a sports publication.' OK, here comes the explanation.

After 35 years of writing every type of feature story, news story, column, editorial and human-interest story known to man, I feel like I have a keen eye for a story that is so unique and interesting that it has to be told to as many readers as possible. Such is the case of our cover story this month. I have known Roger Bennett, of Benton, longer than either one of us wants to admit. Our friendship goes back 50-plus years.

Recently Roger contacted me about a story that he wanted me to write. Admittedly, I was a little

hesitant simply because this publication or Facebook are the only outlets I have to publish a story.

And my hesitation came because Roger's story was not sports-related. But, after listening to the details of his amazing, once-in-a-lifetime story and then interviewing Roger and Mike Stewart for the story, I made the easy decision to push ahead, write the story and share it with the wonderful readers who enjoy SISC each month. I am not going to spoil the details of Roger and Mike's story here in this space, but I can guarantee that you will enjoy this amazing tale of "God's Grace...and lots of courage."

Our other two feature stories this month both gave me the "Wow" reaction after proof-reading them. The stories of Jalen Marshall, of Elkhartsville, and Cruz Harlan, of Centralia are stories of hard work, determination, grit and overcoming the odds.

I appreciate the detail that Davy Broy (Jalen Marshall story) and

Randy Olson (Cruz Harlan story) put into their respective stories. Both are a must read here in August!

And as always, we have our usual collection of columns ranging from the proper things (including mental toughness) needed to get started back to school, the success of summer camps and the proper way to hunt squirrel. How's that for a diverse list?

Finally, here in this wonderful transition month of August, I want to once again thank our faithful readers, the local businesses who allow us to put SISC on your shelves and our faithful advertisers that support us and keep this publication coming your way FREE of charge every month. Look at that last sentence again and pay attention to that word "FREE." Who gives you something FREE month after month after month? We do, that's who!

Thanks again for being a part of this amazing process every month! Thanks for taking the time to read this and God's blessings to you!

Jim Muir,
Publisher of Southern Illinois
Sports Connection

Launch pads!

Several years ago, my sons and I did some fishing in the salt water flats around Titusville, Florida. We spent most of the day fishing within eyesight of the space program launch pad at Cape Canaveral. We had a great day fishing that day but my thoughts drifted often to thinking about all of the space flights and missions through the years that launched right there in that location. That spot was the beginning of a lot of journeys!

We find various 'launch pads' throughout the Bible as well. Obviously, no space missions were launched in the Bible...but lots of "life missions" were launched in the Bible.

And most of the "life missions" had a starting point...a launch pad. One of the coolest launch pads we find in the Bible is in Acts chapter 2 as the Bible describes the scene of several followers of Jesus gathered together in a room in Jerusalem after Jesus's death, resurrection of departure from the earth.

In a sense, they were a little bit lost without their leader and weren't quite sure what to do next. In that moment, they had a very unique experience as God's Holy Spirit literally came to visit them in that place and 'rested on them' according to the Bible.

This 'coming of the Holy Spirit' signified a new era and a new reality in their lives! They received power, confidence and wisdom in that moment that would guide them in powerful ways moving forward. They were "launched" into the mission field of the world and into the rest of their lives! Now that's a launching pad!

Coaches and athletes experience various "launching pads" as well, through the ministry of FCA. One of the most powerful "launching pads" is FCA Camp.



The Williamson County Fellowship of Christian Athletes Power Camp that was held in Marion at Marion High School.



The Jefferson County Fellowship of Christian Athletes Power Camp that was held in Mt. Vernon at Mt. Vernon Township High School.

Throughout the summer, FCA has been hosting camps throughout Southern Illinois ranging geographically from Pana to Metropolis! Well over 1,300 5th-8th graders have had the opportunity to be powerfully impacted by the love of Jesus Christ at these camps, and many have surrendered their lives to Christ! FCA Camps serve to provide single moments in time of powerful Spiritual explosiveness in the lives of student-athletes.

Our prayer is that these "launch pads" will ignite something in the lives of these kids that will change them from the inside, out for the rest of their lives.

FCA Camps are an important part of the 'bigger-picture' FCA ministry that is on-going all year long in communities and on campuses throughout the state and the area.

They provide opportunities for student-athletes to be introduced to Jesus and what He wants to do in their lives, grow in their relationship with God, learn how to be bolder with their faith, receive a Bible and learn how to use it... and of course develop athletic skill through the coaching of many great coaches from around Southern Illinois.

They "launch" athletes into the mission field of the rest of their lives...just like those early Christ-followers. We are excited about camps!!

Our mission is to lead every coach and athlete into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church. And FCA Camps can be a very catalytic "launch pad" for that very important mission.

If you'd like to support the work of FCA or if you have questions, don't hesitate to reach out at bpankey@fca.org!



Left: A few photos from the Perry County Fellowship of Christian Athletes Power Camp. Top right: The Franklin County FCA Power Camp, which was held at Benton Grade School. Bottom right: The Jackson County FCA Power Camp was held at Unity Point School in Carbondale.



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God's Grace...and a lot of courage!

Roger Bennett and Mike Stewart share an unlikely and remarkable story about the horror of war and an unbreakable friendship.

(Editor's Note: *As you will notice as you read this story, there is no tie of any kind to sports. That's unusual for as sports publication, you might be thinking. Sometimes a story comes along that has to be written and shared as much as possible, and this is one of them. As I was contemplating on whether to run it in SISC or not, I thought of how much I love and respect the large audience that we have built through this monthly publication. So, based on that, the decision to run this non-sports-related story this month was relatively easy. Simply stated, I wanted to share it with people I hold in high regard! I know you will enjoy this unique and heart-wrenching story. Thanks much! — JM)*

Cover story • BY JIM MUIR

Earlier this year, two men sat across the table from each other in the kitchen of a beautiful home nestled on the serene shore of Lake Moses, located northeast of Benton, IL.

To an outside observer this could have been two old friends, reminiscing over a cup of coffee or maybe just talking about sports, politics or life in general. But, this day, this meeting, this discussion went much, much deeper than casual conversation.

This day – May 8 – was a red-letter anniversary date that forever linked these two men – Roger Bennett, of Benton, and Mike Stewart, of Tacoma, Washing-



Mike Stewart, left, and Roger Bennett, right, are pictured on May 8, 2025 — the 57th anniversary of a grenade blast in Vietnam that changed both their lives forever.

ton – together forever. It's also a life-changing date that is seared in their minds forever. In 1968 the population of the United States was 200 million, and from that number Bennett, from the farmlands of the Midwest, and Stewart, from the sun and surf of California, shared a moment in time in the dark jungles of Southeast Asia.

It's a moment that has twists and turns, ups and downs and plenty of uncertainty.

In order to properly tell this story, you must first rewind the calendar back 57 years to May 8, 1968. The location is Vietnam, during the brutal TET Offensive, at perhaps the height of conflict

that all total claimed the lives of 58,000 American soldiers. Ironically, Bennett and Stewart had taken completely opposite paths that led them to this fateful afternoon on this scorching hot May afternoon. Bennett, a 1965 graduate of Benton High School, was working as an apprentice iron worker in St. Louis in 1966 when he was drafted into the U.S. Army. He turned 19 in September that year and was drafted the next month.

Bennett did his basic training at Fort Carson, Colorado and was then sent back there for tank training.

"I spent a year total (including basic training) at Fort Carson and

I was drafted for two years," Bennett said. "After a year had passed, I started thinking I might not go to Vietnam, and that would have been fine with me. And then two weeks later we got notice and they sent our entire outfit there."

Stewart enlisted in the Navy in 1963 at the age of 17 and was discharged at age 20.

Stewart said he left the Navy because they wouldn't send him to Vietnam. So, after his discharge from the Navy he enlisted in the Army and shortly thereafter found himself in Vietnam in the same unit with Bennett.

"I wanted to go to Vietnam," he said. "It was going on at the time and I felt like I had to go and see what it was all about."

When the conversation shifted to the importance of the meeting between Bennett and Stewart on the specific date of May 8, both men became emotional, stopping often to regain their composure and wipe away tears.

Clearly, for both men the emotions of that fateful day nearly six decades ago are still very close to the surface.

On the afternoon of May 8, 1968 Bennett and Stewart were given instruction to respond to help another unit that was hunkered down and under sniper fire. The plan was to take a tank into the area to give the other unit cover so they could escape the enemy fire.

Stewart was the tank commander and Bennett was at the controls and there was an infantry unit traveling on foot behind them.

Bennett said he had a “bad feeling” that “something wasn’t right” when the tank didn’t encounter any enemy fire, even after moving deep into the area.

What Bennett and the rest of his unit didn’t know is that the Viet Cong were waiting until the tank got in range of a rocket-propelled-grenade (RPG) to open fire.

“All total, we were hit five times by RPG and the last one is the one that got Mike,” said Bennett. “It came in through the turret and it really did some damage.”

A turret on a tank, is best described as the rotatable structure mounted on top of the hull, that houses the main gun and the crew responsible for operating it. It allows the gun to be aimed and fired in any direction without needing to move the entire tank.

“I looked and saw that Mike was covered in blood, there was

blood everywhere,” said Bennett. “I knew we had an infantry unit behind us, but I just threw it in reverse and floored it.”

After being hit in numerous places from the RPG, Stewart recalled those harrowing moments before he lost consciousness.

“I just remember that I was trying to talk...and couldn’t...and I was trying to move my arms...and couldn’t,” he said. “I thought I was either dying or I was already dead.”

In all, Stewart received wounds in the armpit area under both arms, in the back, the stomach and the crotch area. Stewart spent four months in the hospital, the first six weeks in and out of consciousness and near death. He had more than 40 inches of scars to close the wounds. After being released from the hospital, Stewart

was sent home and received his discharge from the Army in 1970.

Because communication in 1968 was nearly non-existent based on 2025 standards, Bennett’s attempts to find out how badly his tank commander had been injured were limited.

“I asked one of the medics how “Stew” was and his reply while he shook his head side-to-side was, “not good,” Bennett remembered. “That was usually the response we got when somebody didn’t make it. I saw them putting him in a body bag, so I thought he was dead.”

Bennett emphasized that his reaction to what he thought had happened to Stewart was not calloused, but simply the only way to deal with his current surroundings.



Mike Stewart as a 20-year-old in Vietnam.

see **COVER STORY** page 8

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COVER STORY

from page 7

“You couldn’t dwell on anything or be distracted because we had people trying to kill us every day,” said Bennett. “Everybody’s goal was to try and stay alive another day.”

After his discharge Bennett tried unsuccessfully a few times to find out any information about Stewart and for more than 50 years believed that the tall, curly-haired tank commander had been killed right in front of him.

In all, Stewart received the Silver Star, Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts because of his actions that day and the wounds received. Bennett received a Purple Heart and the Medal of Valor for climbing into the burning tank and getting Stewart out. Ironically, it was

the honors Stewart received that opened the door for Bennett to begin the task of trying again to find Stewart. During a conversation in 2018 with another veteran from his unit, Bennett was told about the Silver Star award and mentioned the name of Mike Stewart. Still not certain it was the same one, Bennett was able to obtain an address and promptly fired off a letter with the information he was looking for and he included his phone number.

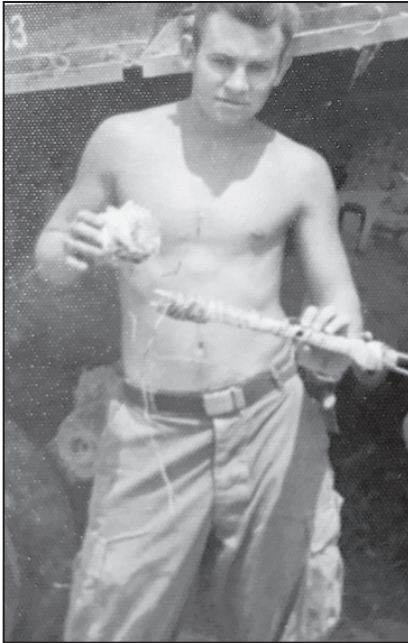
Bennett said he received a phone call from Stewart a few weeks later and even during the early minutes of the call he was not certain that the person he was talking to was the same person he had served with during his days in Vietnam. He said there was an amusing exchange during the early minutes.

“He asked me what the guy

named Mike Stewart he served with looked like,” said Bennett. “I told him he was tall and curly-headed and a nice-looking guy,” said Bennett. “When I said that, he said ‘and he’s still a nice-looking guy.’ When I told him the guy I served with had been in the Navy before enlisting in the Army, we pinned it down that he was in fact that same guy.”

Bennett said it was a surreal moment to go from believing Stewart had been dead for 50 years to talking to him on the phone.

“When I found out “Stew” was alive I was thrilled,” Bennett said. “I thought he was dead for 50 years. We were only together for a short time but he was the tank commander and he kept us alive. So, when I found out he was alive the first thing I wanted to do was get in contact with him and make



Roger Bennett, 19, is pictured as he looked in May 1968, serving as a tank driver in Vietnam.



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a plan to get together.”

Stewart said he and Bennett talked on the phone a couple times a year during the past seven years – always on May 8 – but decided this past year to hold a reunion. Stewart and his wife Karen traveled by train from Tacoma to Benton to spend a few days with Bennett and his wife Robin.

While Bennett and Stewart took different paths to get to Vietnam, they also took very different paths after they were discharged from the military. Bennett worked 10 years for Best Buy in sales and then took a job in sales with Reader's Digest, where he became one of the top salespersons in the nation. Roger and Robin are the parents of two children, Christian and Courtney.

For Stewart, the path was not as easy and putting Vietnam and his near-death experience behind

him became a daily battle.

“You can't block out what happened to you,” Stewart said, his voice cracking with emotion. “I can drop back into that time in a moment. I would get very angry, very easily. People would say, ‘why don't you just forget that war?’ It wasn't quite that easy. You came home and we were looked down on because we had been in Vietnam. We were never debriefed. I went to Vietnam by myself and I came home by myself. They didn't send you in units like they do now, they sent you one person at a time. I couldn't turn it loose.”

And from those emotions came other battles as Stewart fought drug addiction, which eventually led to a 42-month stint in federal prison for drug trafficking. He was released in 1977 and has had no issues since.

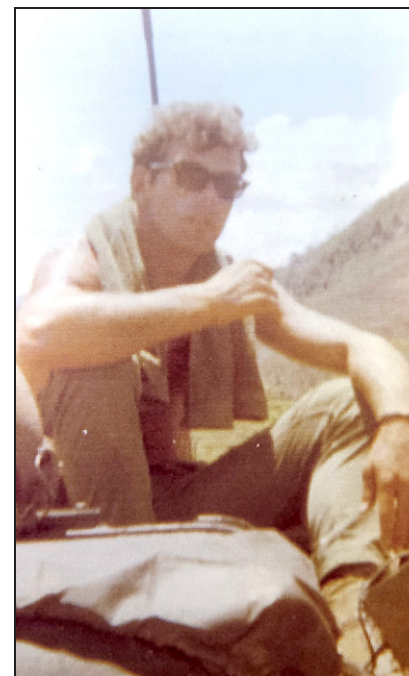
Bennett said he also had dif-

ficulties making the adjustment back to civilian life.

“I was angry when I got home and I became angrier when I learned that the war was more political than anything else,” said Bennett. “I tried to put it behind me as best I could. I remember when I came home, I was walking on the Benton Public Square and a car backfired and I hit the ground. I remember walking through the airport in San Diego and somebody shouted ‘baby killer’ at me. There was certainly no warm welcome when we got home.”

Bennett said he also has experienced issues through the years about the “why” question of how he survived Vietnam.

“There was 12 of us that went to Vietnam together and only two of us came back home,” he said.



Mike Stewart sitting atop a tank in Vietnam in 1968.

see **COVER STORY** page 10

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COVER STORY

from page 9

"These were guys I had been with every day for a year and they got killed over there. I see their faces every single day. Why did I come back and they didn't? You can't get those thoughts out of your mind, no matter how hard you try."

Through a trembling voice, Bennett then recited the last names of all those killed. "Yeah, let's just erase it and forget about it...you can't."

Stewart said finally reconnecting with Bennett after nearly 60 years has been a "wonderful blessing."

"It's bringing back a lot of

memories but also establishing a friendship I never did get to follow through with," said Stewart.

"What Roger has given me by this meeting is something I really needed and it's something very special. His actions that day saved my life and is the reason I am here today."

Bennett said when the entire story is put together, the reunion of two old Vietnam veterans is "nothing short of remarkable."

"You have to keep in mind that I spend almost my entire life thinking 'Stew' was dead, the last time I saw him they were putting him in a body bag," Bennett said.

"And then to get to meet him and share stories and memories is a tremendous blessing."



Left: Roger Bennett received a Purple Heart and Medal of Valor for helping save Mike Stewart's life during a rocket-propelled-grenade attack on May 8, 1968. Above: Roger Bennett is pictured on top of a tank in Vietnam.

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Elevating to the next level

From JALC to Coastal Carolina, Centralia's Cruz Harlan takes his game to the next level

BY RANDY OLSON
AreaSports.net

Centralia High School Alum, Cruz Harlan, just enjoyed a remarkable freshman baseball season at John A Logan College in Carterville, where many would say he was one of the best overall players on the roster.

Harlan also played baseball this summer for the Thrillbillies Prospect League team in Marion, and he was looking forward to his sophomore year of college baseball at JAL where he loved playing for Coach Kyle Surprenant.

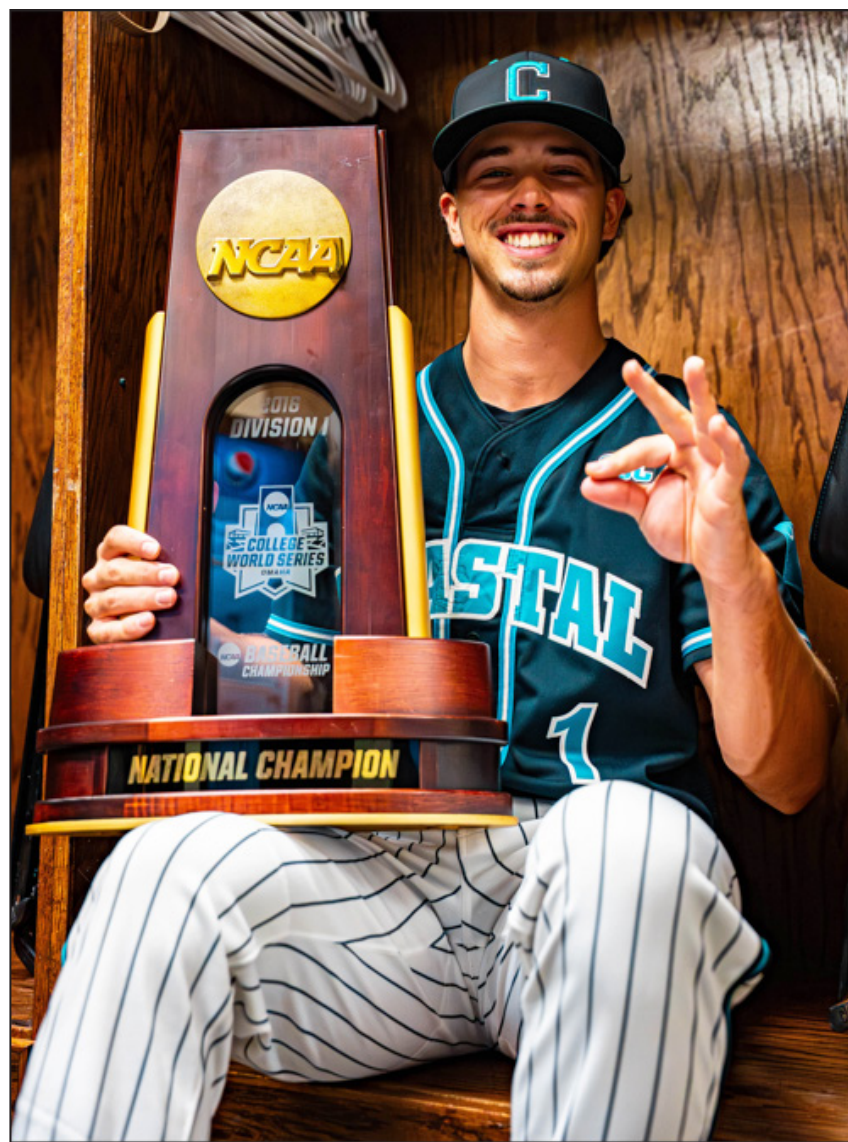
But, during the two-week summer recruiting window, a few phone calls from some Division I schools came in that suddenly changed Harlan's plans and the trajectory of his baseball career.

Harlan popped up on the radar of multiple colleges due to some lofty numbers he put up for the Volunteers at Logan.

He had a batting average of .391 with nine home runs, 43 RBI's, scored 75 runs, stole 26 bases, and had an on base percentage of .523 in the 56 games he played in. Cruz is a switch hitter, which makes him more in demand. As a middle infielder, he also played stellar defense.

Coach Kyle Surprenant at John A Logan is no stranger at developing players for the next level. Since joining the Volunteers program in 2010, "Coach Sup" (as many call him) and the staff have helped over 150 former Volunteers continue their career at a four-year school.

"Coach Sup is hands down the best coach I have ever had," said Harlan. "He helped me fix my



During his official visit to Coastal Carolina, Centralia native and John A. Logan College product Cruz Harlan held the coveted national championship trophy.

swing, improve my infield skills, taught me how to effectively steal third base, and he helped me so much in the recruiting process this summer.

"This whole thing just kind of came out of nowhere, and it would not have happened without him. He's a very selfless guy who really cares about his play-

ers. His assistant coaches were super helpful to me too, and fun to be around. I cannot say enough positive things about the baseball program at John A Logan."

Back in June, much of the College Baseball World Series was viewed on television by Harlan, including the World Series Championship match-up between Coastal Carolina University and LSU. Little did Cruz know it at the time, but Coastal Carolina would soon reach out to John A Logan College a few weeks later and talk to Coach Surprenant about his talented infielder.

"I was not expecting to learn that major college programs like Coastal Carolina and Arizona had interest in me, but it was exciting," said Harlan. "I had conversations with Coach Sup and he helped guide me through the process. I decided to make visits to both universities in a short time span, so it was really kind of a whirlwind that happened really fast."

Coach Surprenant at John A Logan College was not surprised that some big-time college teams took notice of his talented infielder.

"I knew when the first phone call came in that we were probably going to lose him. Yes, his statistics with us were impressive, but above and beyond that was the impact on his teammates because of the work ethic he displayed," said Surprenant.

"Despite being just a freshman, Cruz emerged as a leader for us, and not because he was trying to be a leader, but because of the way he quietly went about his business each day.

“Cruz always put in the work and took practice seriously each day, he was early to the weight room, and the other players took notice of his work ethic. Even the sophomores looked up to him, he earned respect. Cruz was easy to coach and a pleasure to coach because he was always working hard to get better each day.”

Upon arrival in Conway, South Carolina, it did not take long for Harlan to feel comfortable with Coastal Carolina University and ultimately make the decision to leave John A Logan and transfer out east for an opportunity to compete and potentially play Division-1 baseball for the team he had just watched on television a few weeks earlier during the College Baseball World Series.

“As soon as you pull into their campus in Conway, you see this massive baseball facility with the Chanticleers mascot and logo on it. You immediately know that this place is all about baseball,” said Harlan. “I got to meet just about every coach on their staff, and I just got good vibes from everyone I met. They are all super personal, down-to-earth guys that you know you want to be around. I was so impressed with the facilities too, including a top-notch indoor facility, and their main playing field, Spring Brooks Stadium is great. Everything just felt right to me.”

Despite his success with the Volunteers at John A Logan, Harlan is not naive enough to think that he is just going to show up in Conway and be a regular on the Chanticleers roster.

“I know it’s not going to be easy, everyone is very good at this level, and I know that there will be at least two or three guys competing for every position on the field, but I am excited about the opportunity,” said Harlan. “Even though I’ve always played on the left side of the infield, I am flexible. I will play anywhere they want me to play and do anything I need to do

to get better, compete, and be a part of the roster.”

While visiting the baseball program at Coastal Carolina University, Harlan was able to put on a Chanticleers uniform and pose for some photos, and they gave him an opportunity to hold the National Championship Trophy that the baseball program won in 2016.

“It was a thrill to hold that trophy and visualize perhaps holding one during my playing days someday, but I gotta be honest, I was scared to death that I was going to drop it,” said Harlan.

“But that is everyone’s goal to get to the World Series in Omaha, and perhaps someday get to hold one of those National Championship trophies with your teammates and coaches.”

The rise of Cruz Harlan in the baseball world did not happen by accident. He was always a hard worker, and he successfully played multiple sports at Centralia High School. Harlan had impressive career baseball numbers for the Orphans, which certainly led Coach Surprenant and John A Logan to pursue his services. In high school, Harlan had a career batting average of .386 with 5 homers, 58 RBI’s, scored 95 runs, and he swiped 49 bases. Cruz still holds single season records for the Orphans in runs scored and walks.

The Harlan genes might also benefit Cruz as his father, Derek, was a very good high school player at Mt Vernon, and an outstanding college baseball player at Quincy University in the late 90’s, where he is a member of their Hall of Fame, while setting some school records.

Cruz’s older brother, Brooks, attended Duke University on a running scholarship, so the east coast has some appeal, and it has been good thus far to the Harlan family.

see **HARLAN** page 14



Cruz Harlan is pictured at Springs Brooks Stadium, at Coastal Carolina University, a spacious facility that holds more than 5,300 fans.

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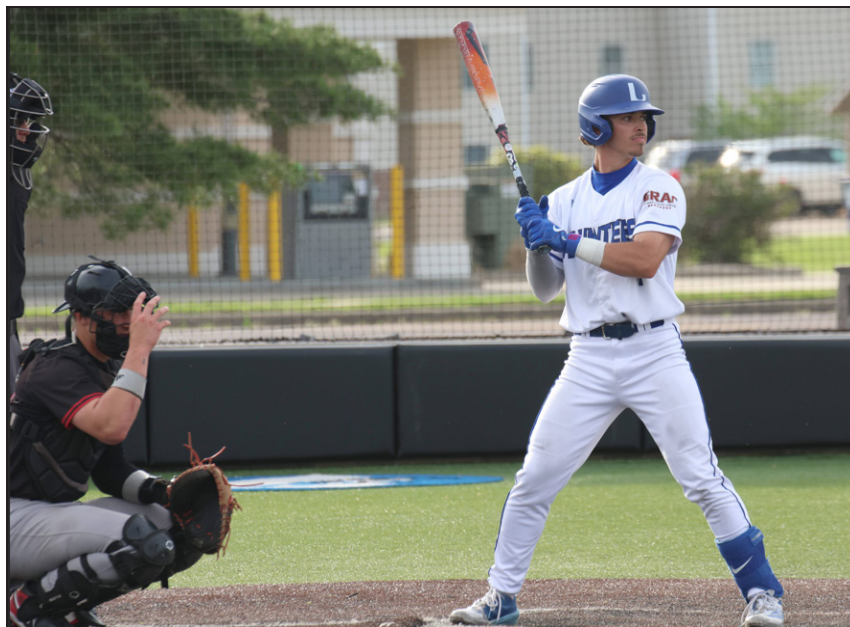
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A black and white photograph of a person in a clown costume. They are wearing a tall top hat, a ruffled collar, and a dark jacket. They are pointing their right index finger upwards.



HARLAN

from page 13

The nickname/mascot at Coastal Carolina University is the Chanticleers, so they all wear a “C” on their cap. For those who don’t know, the Chanticleer is a particular rooster, known for its dominance in the barnyard.

The university adopted the Chanticleer as their mascot because it embodies the qualities of pride, fierceness, and respect that the athletic teams aim to portray. Their primary school color is Teal, which is also unique. Their home field, Springs Brooks Stadium, seats 5,300 fans.

Harlan has an amazing opportunity to join a baseball program that is at the top of their game. Coastal Carolina had a nation-leading and school record 56 wins this past season.

Along the way, they won the Sun Belt Conference Championship, Sun Belt Tournament Championship, the Conway Regional Championship, the Auburn Super Regional Championship, and they made a 3-0 run in Omaha to the Men’s College World Series Championship Final.

In the first three games of the College World Series, they beat Arizona 7-4, edged Oregon State 6-2, and defeated Louisville 11-3. They came up a little short, falling 5-3 to LSU in the World Series Championship.

Over the last quarter of the season, Coastal Carolina posted a 26-game winning streak, which is the fourth-longest winning streak in D-1 baseball in the last five years.

“I think that Coastal Carolina will be a great fit for Cruz,” said Coach Surprenant. “I know the guys on that coaching staff, and I know that they were impressed when they saw him play with us during the season. The Chanticleers have the type of culture and mindset that will give Cruz an opportunity to blend in well. Replacing his offensive statistics will be a challenge for us next season, but what we will really miss is his leadership. I know that Cruz will go in there at Coastal Carolina and work his tail off.”

— You can listen to the full audio interview with Cruz Harlan as recorded and uploaded on the [AreaSports.net](https://www.areasports.net) YouTube page.



Above left: Cruz Harlan digs in at the plate during a Volunteers game at Carterville. Harlan had an outstanding first year at Logan, which got the attention of several D-I schools. Above right: Along with his stellar offensive skills, Cruz Harlan is also a top-notch infielder.

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Rend Lake College Hall of Fame Coach Dave Ellingsworth receives 'Coaches Legacy Award' from the NJCAA Foundation

Rend Lake College Media Services

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Hall of Fame Coach Dave Ellingsworth has been named a recipient of the NJCAA Foundation's first ever Coaches Legacy Award.

"Receiving the NJCAA Coaches Legacy Award is more than a personal feat—it's a milestone to the players, assistant coaches, and the community that helped shape my journey," said Ellingsworth. "I'm proud to represent Rend Lake, and even prouder that my legacy continues to inspire future generation of student athletes."

Ellingsworth was recognized on June 17 during the 2025 NJCAA Hall of Fame and Awards event, along with nearly 200 coaches across 28 different sports. The Coaches Legacy Award recognized the all-time winningest coaches in NJCAA history and their contributions to college athletics. For Ellingsworth, his award recognized the 800-plus softball wins under his leadership as head coach.

"Being able to recognize our coaches, past and present, is a wonderful thing for the NJCAA, our member institutions, the coaches, and their families," said Dr. Christopher Parker, NJCAA President and CEO. "We look forward to having many of these coaches come together for us to celebrate their accomplishments and contributions to the NJCAA later this year."

A decorated Vietnam War veteran, U.S. Army gunship pilot, and esteemed educator, Ellingsworth was recently welcomed into the RLC Sports Hall of Fame as the 24th Class of inductees at the annual induction ceremony thanks to his Hall of Fame credentials, outstanding teams, and standout players.

Ellingsworth built a winning culture at RLC both on the softball field, with a coaching record of 945-752, and in the classroom. His teams excelled in competition and academics, embodying the dual pillars of NJCAA excellence.

Ellingsworth's accolades also include Region 24 Coach of the Year, two GRAC Coach of the Year, Region 24 Championship, and two Conference Championships.

Ellingsworth retired from RLC after the 2020 campaign was halted early by COVID-19. His 945-752 (.557) record in 26-plus campaigns ranks 15th all-time in terms of victories among his National Junior College Athletic Association peers (No. 2 in Illinois), only four of whom did it in fewer seasons. His 1995-96 national qualifiers finished 46-21 after advancing to the NJCAA Fast-Pitch Championships, followed by a record 61-21 campaign.

Ellingsworth's legacy continues to inspire athletes and students. This award spotlights not only Ellingsworth's achievements but also the values that the RLC athletics program upholds.



Dave Ellingsworth with his Coaches Legacy Award.

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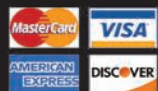


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SLEEP: Oh, the dreaded bedtime. Loved by parents, loathed by many children. But much like adults, children and their brains need rest. Sleep is the time for restoration and for children's bodies to recharge and retain the information they have learned throughout the day. It's like hitting the "reboot" button on their bodies and minds. When possible, try to go to sleep and wake up around the same time each day.

Did you know? During deep non-REM sleep, the body's energy is restored, growth and repair occur, and important brain development hormones are released.

NUTRITION: Whether it be a sack lunch or a school-provided lunch, a balanced diet can provide the necessary nutrients for brain development, cognitive function, and overall well-being. These are all important for academic success. Focus on fruits, veggies, and whole grain foods when possible. Cut back on sugary sweets and caffeinated drinks.

Did you know? Diets lacking in nutrition can lead to cognitive delays, lower test scores, and behavioral issues.

HYDRATION: Adding just a few glasses of water to your daily intake can have a positive effect on your emotional stability, your ability to focus, your cognition, and even help combat feelings of anxiety. Snacks such as watermelon, cucumbers, strawberries, and cantaloupe are also good for hydration.



Did you know? Even mild dehydration can affect your mood, concentration, and reaction time.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: Exercise not only improves physical health, but it also enhances cognitive function. Regular physical activity helps lower levels of cortisol, the body's stress hormone. Aim for at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day. If possible, participate in sports, outdoor play, and even walking or biking to school.

Did you know physical activity can help improve your attention span and memory?

BE SOCIAL: Having fun with friends doesn't mean you have to forget about maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Go to the park, go hiking, play volleyball or even host a neighborhood wiffleball tournament. Friends make fitness so much more enjoyable! Also, when going out and about with friends, make mindful decisions about food and drinks.

Did you know? It has been proven that the socialization skills learned in school have a profound impact on students' personal, social, and academic development. It is also key in shaping their identities and future relationships.

REDUCE SCREEN TIME: Kids spend much of their day sitting in the classroom, so parents can

help children spend less time in front of the TV, computer, and video games by making time to have fun as a family. Parents, be good role models. If you reduce your screen time and move more, your kids will too!

Did you know? Eating together as a family without distractions such as television allows for more meaningful conversations and shared experiences which can strengthen family bonds.

MAKE A SCHEDULE: All humans need some kind of a routine to stick to. A planner or calendar can help keep the entire family organized, but it can help students manage and plan their time whether it be school events, practices, doctors' appointments, homework assignments, and tons of other stuff your child might participate in.

SMART SHOPPING: Ok, stay with me here, but I know how exciting back to school shopping can be. Even as an adult, I get a little overly excited about new pens and notebooks. While parents often find themselves complaining over extensive and expensive classroom items on the back-to-school list, remember these are investments in your child's education. And trust me, plenty of teachers spend their own hard-earned money on items to make their classrooms fun, friendly, and

safe. Here's a few tips that may help you not take out a second mortgage on your home in order to keep everyone happy when it comes to buying school supplies:

*Look around your house. Chances are there may be packs of pencils and pens from last year. *Wash and reuse backpacks and lunchboxes.

*Bargain shop—look for discount days or grab a friend (or a few) and buy in bulk and divide the materials and costs.

*Make a budget and stick to it, teaching your child how to manage money and determine which items are worth spending a little more on.

HYGIENE: Last but not least, make this school year a healthy one. Remembering to wash your hands often is crucial to keeping children and staff healthy during the school year. Remind children to keep their hands off their mouth and face and to also keep their hands to themselves. Hand sanitizer or my kids once called it "Han-i-tizer" is readily available in most areas of the school.

And my final back-to-school instruction for this year — Have a Happy & Safe School Year!

— **Lindsey Cox** is married to Eli, a Benton native. Along with their two children, Jilianne and Crosby and dog, Lucky, they enjoy a pretty simple yet busy life. Enjoying and juggling work and life, including their kids' sporting events and involvement in the fine arts. They are members of First Christian Church in Benton. Lindsey's first book, "Last Damn Call," is due out in August and discusses her past struggles in hopes of helping others still struggling with a message of hope and humor.



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Against all odds

Elverado's Jaylen Marshall left her mark both on and off the field

August feature •
BY DAVY BROY

Some young student-athletes have to overcome more adversity than others. Elverado High School's recent 2025 graduate Jaylen Marshall is a perfect example. Despite having serious health problems since she was very young, Marshall showed great determination, perseverance and faith as she was one of the best student-athletes in school history.

Not only was Marshall a solid multiple sport athlete, she stood out in the classroom with her leadership ability and high, grade point average.

During all four years, Marshall was a high honor roll student and in the end she was ranked fourth academically in her senior class with a 3.86 GPA.

Marshall was very active as she competed in volleyball and softball for four years and basketball for one year. She was also involved with several other school related activities.

During both her freshman and sophomore years Marshall was selected Honorable Mention All-Conference in softball as a good hitting shortstop. During Marshall's junior year she was selected 1st team All-Conference in both softball and volleyball (Libero).

During her junior year she was selected as the Elverado High School Prom Queen and she was also a Marshall at the 2024 grad-

uation.

Because of her excellent attitude and leadership ability, Marshall received the "Sportsmanship Award" for basketball and the "Good Samaritan Award" for softball during her senior year.

In all four of her years at Elverado, Marshall was involved in the Beta Club, the Family Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). During her junior and senior years, she was on the Yearbook staff and in her senior year she was the Beta Club President.

At the end of her senior year Marshall earned an amazing eight scholarships towards college. They included the 2025 Village of Elkhville, Oren E. Doffer Memorial, Jeff and Margo Lestz, Booster Club, Jacob E. Brandon, Jim Piper Memorial, Connell F. Smith-Homer Brown.

She was also honored to receive the prestigious John A. Logan College Foundation Academic Scholarship.

Athletically, Marshall's ability as a softball player stood out at an early age as a power hitting infielder. As a member of the Blitz travel softball team for eight years, she was one of the better players in Southern Illinois and some of her extremely long home runs from the time she was 10 to 13 years old are still talked about.

Marshall's health problems got worse when she was 14 years old, which is about the same time that she started high school.

Still, her desire to play softball was too strong to give up the sport. The determination and perseverance that she showed while competing in high school sports is something that was greatly admired by those close to her.



Left: Jaylen Marshall turning a double play at her shortstop position for Elverado High School. Right: 2024 Elverado High School Prom Queen Jaylen Marshall.

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Jaylen Marshall's softball career began at a young age for Elverado.

Marshall's health problems started with her vision. She began wearing glasses in second grade because of severe nearsightedness. Due to allergies, she was diagnosed with Giant Papillary Conjunctivitis which caused wearing contacts very painful at times.

At a routine eye exam during her junior year of high school, a retinal detachment was found in her right eye. This caused eye floaters which she has battled the past two years.

Decisions were made to hold off on surgery for the retinal detachment and monitor it closely so that she could get through high school. In a recent interview with Marshall, she said this.

"Due to answered prayers, the detachment has stabilized and not progressed in the past three months so surgery is still on hold."

At the age of five, Marshall started being treated for severe allergies and asthma. By the time she was in junior high school she was taking multiple medications and injections to treat the illnesses.

To make matters worse, Mar-

shall suffers from Inflammatory Joint Disease (Psoriatic Arthritis) which causes pain, swelling, and stiffness in some of her joints, especially in her knees.

The fact that she was able to continue to compete in sports as a high school athlete is a miracle in itself.

Through it all, Marshall not only showed great resilience, she was also one of the most selfless and caring students during her 13-year (K-12) career in the Elverado School District.

Connie Clendenin was Marshall's principal from her sixth through eighth grade years at Elverado. She had great things to say about one of her favorite students.

"Jaylen is truly an exceptional young woman. Throughout her time as a student, she consistently demonstrated dedication and a strong work ethic in everything she did. As an athlete, her resilience was remarkable — she faced health challenges with determination and never let them hold her back.

see **MARSHALL** page 24

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MARSHALL from page 23

“On the field, she was a stand-out shortstop making plays that seemed impossible. I can still picture her snagging balls that I was sure would make it through the gap. But what stands out most about Jaylen isn’t just her athletic or academic achievements—it’s her character. She has always shown kindness, inclusiveness, and a genuine care for others. She made everyone around her feel seen, valued, and like they truly belonged. Jaylen has a heart of gold, and it’s that rare quality that makes her unforgettable.”

Elizabeth Thompson, who is a teacher in the Elverado School District, was also Marshall’s assistant softball coach from her sixth-grade year through her senior year. Thompson had this to say about one of her favorite players.

“I met Jaylen when she was a sixth grader and I knew from the moment that I first watched her practice that she was one of a kind. Jaylen is a hard worker; even when the odds are against her, she pushes through her toughest obstacles to achieve greatness in everything she does. There are many qualities Jaylen possesses that I hope her teammates and peers have learned from her, such as dedication, perseverance, open-mindedness and motivation.

“My favorite thing about Jaylen is that on the field, she completely zones in; there are no distractions. I’m sure that I could say the same about her in school, too, as her outstanding grades from her high school career allowed her to earn many scholarships for the next chapter in her life. Jaylen was always the perfectionist of our team. If she got a ground ball (whether it was in practice or

warming up before a game) and she didn’t field it clean enough for her liking, it was always ‘Can I go again?’ and she would go again and again until she got it just right.

“This not only shows perseverance, but also her willingness to not give up. I believe that these qualities not only appeared on the field but also in Jaylen’s academic career as well. There is no doubt in my mind that Jaylen will be successful and achieve anything that she puts her mind to.”

Blitz travel softball coach Scott Williford worked with Marshall for several years. He had this to say about that experience.

“I had the privilege of coaching Jaylen for eight years on our Blitz softball team. She was a quiet leader who led by example, both on and off the field.

“Jaylen wasn’t just a talented athlete — she was also incredibly coachable and consistently



Jaylen Marshall on the night of her Elverado High School graduation.



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demonstrated a strong work ethic. Her positive attitude and wonderful personality made her an outstanding teammate.

"I'm confident that Jaylen will excel in college and in life. She is a remarkable young lady with a supportive and loving family behind her. I look forward to witnessing all that Jaylen will accomplish."

Steven Bridgman was Marshall's Art teacher since third grade and also the Elverado High School yearbook advisor. He holds Marshall in high regard.

"Let me start off by saying Jaylen is an exceptional young lady. I taught her in Art from third grade through high school and she also took my yearbook class in high school. This class designed and put together the yearbook each year.

"It has been a pleasure to watch Jaylen grow as an artist as well as a young lady. Over the years, Jaylen has not only developed impressive

artistic skills but also blossomed into a thoughtful and dedicated young lady. Her contributions to both the art program and the yearbook have been invaluable.

"Jaylen will go far beyond what is required of her in order to make sure that she always produces the best product possible in everything she does. She is one of the students that I will miss having in class."

Jaylen Marshall had this to say about her experience as a student-athlete at Elverado.

"I started playing softball for Elverado at the age of six. A couple of my teammates from that summer and I continued to play sports together until it ended this past spring.

"The memories I have made during this time I will always cherish. My coaches, teachers, and friends have impacted my life by helping me build my confidence and believing in my abilities.

"Because of health issues, sports were never easy for me but I continued to try hard because of the support from my parents and doctors. At times something just as simple as running the bases became very difficult for me. Thankfully, my asthma/allergy doctor (Dr. Jeff Lehman) got me on the right medicine that has changed my life. For that I will always be grateful.

"Whenever things got really hard, I leaned on my faith. As a young child, I was taught to trust and believe that God had a purpose for my life. I needed to trust him and his timing.

Sometimes even before a game or during I would repeat the verse Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Because of her health problems, Marshall chose not to continue her athletic career after high school

and instead just totally focus on her college degree.

Her plan is to attend JALC for two years and then transfer to SIU-C and work towards a Master's Degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders.

She eventually wants to work as a speech pathologist for local schools.

Jaylen Marshall is without a doubt the type of person that is respected and admired by her teachers, coaches, friends and anyone else she meets.

Despite the adversities that she faced, she left a legacy at Elverado High School as an outstanding student-athlete, a leader and a kind hearted young lady who did not let anything get in her way of achieving her goals.

There's no doubt that she will continue to do great things as she begins her college journey this month.

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Find your family!

The word family is commonly associated with the idea of a unit of people, typically parents, grandparents, children, aunts and uncles.

For many, including myself this form of family is simply something I've always known and found myself surrounded by. When taking a step outside of relation, in many environments we find ourselves immersed in units of people who over time and through shared moments, become new forms of families for us to be a part of!

Being a part of a family looks different for all of us, for no two people or even moments are the same, allowing us to create beautiful relationships of our own. These special bonds for me were formed nearly 13 years ago when my journey with my classmates that soon became friends and ended up as my family, first began.

From friends to teammates to even sports rivals, my family is a big bundle of incredible people. In a blink of an eye that journey ended and now, I find myself under a week away from college move in, an event and point of life that has always seemed so far in the future that it never quite seemed to be real!

From spending years with the same friends, routines and experiences to now watching as we all take a step off our shared path to start our new journeys has been hard. All throughout summer I have found myself at one second so incredibly excited for what lies ahead in college, and a moment later, so fearful of the unknown.

In truth, I believe the unknown is what drives our fears in many aspects of life. The uncertainty of



OPEN & HONEST

BY MAYA ROUNDS

forming new relationships, in a new place, with the idea of doing it all alone at times can take away from the excitement I have for what lies ahead. The unknown can be and is intimidating, but having people, places and memories to miss, reminds me how lucky I was to have them in the first place. To have all of these things to miss, is a great blessing, that has shown me how important it is to appreciate my people. Not only has this time reminded me that even in places where we may seem alone, someone may be in the same place you are, and all it takes is one moment to start a great connection.

While I know that as my life continues to change, the family I have built, from relatives to friends will change, but will never be lost. Soon, my normal will change from being in a familiar classroom or walking up the driveway, to long car rides and even states away.

But, one thing I know is certain is that the love I hold for everyone will never change. As I look back on my experiences that have shaped me and led me down this exciting path, I can say that without a doubt, forming connections has blessed me greatly. So, while these changes

bring much uncertainty, remembering the importance of finding your family wherever you go can bring a little light to the darkness.

Knowing that the "family" I

have built may be changing, I simply cannot wait to dive into the unknown to have the chance to grow it even more. Through life's changes and challenges, hold tight to who you are and always know that wherever you go, find people you love and value them as you grow your own "family."

— **Maya Megan Rounds**
recently graduated from Sesser-Valier High School, where she was a three-sport athlete. She is signed to continue her track and field career at SIU-C.

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Putting kids first

I had an awesome conversation recently with a long-time coach and friend who I have great respect for. It's a touchy subject with some people, but he and I are both in agreement and feel very strongly about the fact that regular season records are very over-rated in high school and junior high sports.

I want to emphasize junior high and high school because college sports are a much different situation. Players are still developing at a high rate in junior high and high school which makes their competition level extremely important.

Some junior high and high school coaches (and their athletic directors) like to play a fairly weak regular season schedule and run their win total up which is very deceiving.

It might make the coach and AD look good, but it does nothing but hurt their teams and athletes as far as full development. I believe strongly that a weaker regular season schedule also hurts a team in the postseason when it counts the most.

Teams who play "up" with a challenging regular season schedule are usually the ones who have the most success in the postseason. History proves it.

That proof goes for all sports, but here's a good example. In the 1960s there was just one class in IHSA sports.

During that decade the very strong South Seven Conference had a representative at the boy's IHSA state basketball tournament Elite 8 every year except one. West Frankfort went in 1960, Benton in 1961, Centralia in 1962 and also in 1963, Marion in 1965, Benton in 1966, Carbondale in 1967 and also in 1968 and Mt. Vernon in 1969. In my opinion, the very

SPORTS REFLECTIONS

BY DAVY BROY



Dustin Hill (left) and Chris Dexter (right) chat during a recent Thrillville Thrillbillies game. The two men run a pair of popular Facebook pages that highlight local sports.

strong competition (conference and non-conference) that those 1960s South Seven teams played during the regular season is the No. 1 reason why they advanced to the state basketball tournament Elite 8.

Because of conference schedules and other factors almost every junior high and high school team have to play a few

weaker teams, which is unavoidable. Unfortunately, some schools like to load up their schedule with weaker teams which is avoidable. A win against a weak team means very little.

You can't be afraid of a possible loss against a good team even if it hurts your win total. It's just my opinion and everyone rightfully has one.

In my July column last month, I mentioned the athletes and coaches from our area (that I could remember) who lifted Southern Illinois into the national sports spotlight like Texas Tech head coach Gerry Glasco did this year in the College Softball World Series. I kept it local (deep south) and did not include the metro east area. Two days after the July publication went to print, it hit me that I left out Hoyelton native Kirk Rueter who went to Nashville High School.

Rueter made Southern Illinois proud with his 13-year career as a major league pitcher which included four years with the Montreal Expos and nine years with the San Francisco Giants. Rueter saw action on the mound in the 2002 World Series for San Francisco. The Giants lost the World Series that year to the Anaheim Angels in seven games.

I also forgot to mention Herrin native Steve Fisher, who in 1989 was the head coach of the University of Michigan basketball team who won the NCAA National championship. He also led Michigan to the tournament championship game in 1992 and 1993 when they lost to Duke and North Carolina respectively.

Fisher was a good basketball player for Herrin High School where he graduated in 1963. He went on to play at Illinois State. Fisher had a great career as a coach including stints as an assistant coach at Western Michigan (1979-1982) and Michigan (1982-1989) as well as head coaching stints at Michigan (1989-1997) and San Diego State (1999-2017). He was also an assistant coach in the NBA for the Sacramento Kings in 1998-1999.

Fisher's overall record as a college head coach was an outstanding 495-288.

—
In my column two months ago, I highlighted the large number of 2025 seniors from Marion, Benton and Johnston City who received college scholarships to compete in sports next school year. At the time that the June edition of the SISC was published, Johnston City had nine seniors who received scholarships, but since then three more have signed. Aidan Eberhart will play baseball at Shawnee College, Sydney Pietrantoni will compete in softball at Southeastern Illinois College and Cannon Ashmore will play baseball at Rend Lake College.

That now makes 12 out of the

79 graduates which is 15 percent of the recent Johnston City High School graduating class. I have no way of proving it, but I doubt if any other high school in the state had 15 percent of their senior class receive college sports scholarships. Congratulations to all 12 of those Johnston City 2025 graduates. They are definitely strong representatives of the school district and community.

—
In closing, I want to give a big shout out to two of my friends Dustin Hill and Chris Dexter. What they do with their Facebook pages "Tee Pee Talk" and "Southern Illinois Sports with Chris Dexter" is a great service to so many people.

Dustin and his wife Shawna

promote everything about Johnston City and the JC School District and they do it in a sincere and positive way. We live in a somewhat negative world, so any type of positive promotion of a community and in particular young student-athletes is a blessing. With that being said, Johnston City is fortunate to have Tee Pee Talk.

Chris Dexter and his wife Ashley, who live in Pulaski County, put in a huge amount of time promoting student-athletes from throughout Southern Illinois. They write about so many athletes and events that take place on a daily basis, I sometimes wonder how they find the time to do it all.

There's no doubt that they do it because they both have huge

hearts and they understand how important it is for young student-athletes to be recognized for their hard work.

Yes, we live in a somewhat negative world, but it's a bit brighter because of "kids first" good hearted people like Dustin and Shawna Hill along with Chris and Ashley Dexter.

— **Davy Broy** is a lifelong resident of West Frankfort and a long-time sports fan, coach, and local sports historian. He served on the Frankfort School District Board of Education for 16 years (1983-1998). His column appears monthly in Southern Illinois Sports Connection. He also owns the website www.westfrankfortsports.com.



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Illinois public land squirrel hunting

Squirrel hunters prowling the woods of southern Illinois' public land will find ample action. There are, after all, some half million acres of public land in the southern nine counties of the state.

The perception of over hunted public land leads hunters to ignore some areas. Many hunters refuse to accept that there is good hunting on public land.

Good squirrel habitat is all over these southern counties. Much of squirrel territory is in the control of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Other lands belong to the U.S Forest Service and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. There are site-specific regulations and the hunter must check them before taking to the field.

Copies of the regulations are available from the site superintendents at the areas involved or from the IDNR in Springfield.

The address of the latter is Office of Public Information, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 627021271. Just request a copy of the Illinois Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations and any information on the specific area you wish to hunt.

The following southern Illinois areas are open to squirrel hunting. Sometimes the hunter signs in on a clipboard and out as he leaves. Hunters record the bag numbers as they leave and the information helps to study the squirrel numbers of the area. The data supplements other studies to help the IDNR biologists maintain healthy populations in balance with the habitat.

Because public lands are areas



available to hunting, sometimes there is a crowd. The wily hunter will use this hunter pressure to his advantage.

It may be wise to find an area with squirrels and take a stand. Then other hunters distract the game as they move through the area. As the squirrels move through the treetop canopy to evade hunters, they can move into the range of the stationary hunter. Moving hunters also force squirrels into the thicker areas of land. Smart hunters will start hunting there instead of sticking to well-worn trails.

An area with many trails into hunting areas is the Shawnee National Forest. The forest spreads over parts of Jackson, Union, Alexander, Johnson, Williamson, Massac, Pope, Hardin, Gallatin, and Saline counties. It is composed of acres of hardwoods, food plots, and brush spread over all the counties.

Hardwood ridges provide good mast crops of oak and hickory nuts. Squirrels migrate to such areas like metal to a magnet. The obviously good squirrel hunting locations do have some pressure. The secret is to check those

areas that do not look good at first glance. A wise hunter scouts through the poor prospects to the good areas beyond them.

There are hardwood ridges in Shawnee Forest accessible only by passing through heavy brush and briars. Hunter usually do not disturb the squirrels in these islands of hardwoods. They tend to multiply quite readily.

There are maps of the Shawnee National Forest available. It pays to use the map to find areas of ridges that are not readily accessible from roads and trails. Mark the map and scout the area. Look for cuttings and good mast crops. Keep notes from year to year as to where the squirrels live. Keep the maps, and they will save valuable hunting time next year.

For further information about Shawnee National Forest, contact the U.S. Forest Service, Shawnee National Forest, Route 45 South, Harrisburg, IL62946. They have information regarding camping, fishing, and hunting opportunities.

Further north, squirrel hunters can hunt in the southern portion of Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge near Marion. The woods

are much the same as in the Shawnee and the squirrel hunting patterns are the same.

Operated as a refuge for waterfowl, the refuge does have some site-specific regulations. One of those is the requirement that anyone using the land for any purpose must pay a vehicle user fee. Hunters' check-in at the Visitor's Center before going into the hunting area.

The refuge itself is about 43,000 acres of land with 23,000 acres open to hunting. Most of the hunting is for deer, turkey, and waterfowl. Some areas are open for any species open to hunting by state law. The areas that are open to general hunting have public hunting signs. For more detailed information regarding squirrel hunting at the refuge.

Regardless of where in southern Illinois someone wants to hunt, there is public land squirrel hunting available. All one needs to do is find it. As mentioned earlier, the IDNR lists public hunting areas in the Hunting Digest published each year. It is available anywhere hunting licenses are available.

Once on the property, locate a promising location far from the roads and, if any, the crowd. With a little advance work and some common sense, one can enjoy squirrel hunting on public land.

— **Don Gasaway** is a veteran freelance outdoor writer from Marion. The author of over 1,000 magazine articles, he is on Facebook at www.facebook.com/#1/DonGasawayWriter and www.facebook.com/DonGasawayfishing/. Comments and reviews are welcome.



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Why Scott Nagy gets Southern Illinois better than you think

Scott Nagy isn't from here. And maybe that's exactly why he gets it.

While Saluki fans spent the better part of five years hoping SIU player-turned-coach Bryan Mullins would reignite the local recruiting pipeline, it's taken an outsider to actually make it happen.

Quietly, quickly, and intentionally, Nagy is reshaping the program's identity — one Southern Illinois recruit at a time.

Carterville. Benton. John A. Logan College. And now Pinckneyville, with last week's news that big man Ty Laur has committed to the Dawgs.

Think blueprint over nostalgia.

It didn't take Nagy much time to figure out what connects in Carbondale. He built his first couple of rosters like a coach who's seen the way mid-major programs thrive — through fit, familiarity, and fan base alignment. In a time when programs live and die by NIL support and local engagement, Nagy is making moves that actually make sense here.

Caden Hawkins, who starred at Carterville and John A. Logan, will suit up for the Dawgs. So will Isaiah Stafford, another Logan product with a versatile game and serious edge.

In two recruiting cycles (including one that was hyper abbreviated), Nagy has already brought in more scholarship-level Southern Illinois players than Mullins did in a half decade.

And it matters.

Programs like SIU aren't built on five-star talent. They're built on connection. Fans show up when they feel like they're part of it. Local recruits sell belief AND tickets, as local fans will travel to see their hometown guys don the Saluki gear.



They're also the players who end up with jerseys hanging on the walls of local restaurants. The ones who inspire student sections at their old high schools. The ones local business owners are actually willing to support through NIL collectives.

There's real ROI when someone from your own backyard puts on the jersey.

Not to trigger any Saluki trauma — Chris Lowery and Barry Hinson weren't exactly the most popular figures by the end of their runs — but they both understood something that still holds up today: You can win in Carbondale by keeping it local.

Lowery leaned into that when he built some of the toughest, most beloved teams of the early 2000s. Matt Shaw. Nick Evans. Kyle Smithpeters. All Southern Illinois kids. All part of that defensive, unshakable Saluki identity.

Hinson followed that same playbook, even if his results were more mixed. The Verhines brothers from Woodlawn. Tyler Smithpeters from Harrisburg. Ryan Bonifield from Carterville. He may not have delivered the wins fans craved, but he did understand the importance of rooting your roster in the region. Pride plays differently when it's personal.

Mullins never tapped into that, which always felt odd for a hometown hero of sorts. The lone local name on his roster was Will Keller, a walk-on from Marion who transferred in from Logan.

Nagy walked in with no personal ties to southern Illinois — although he has deep ties to basketball in the state — and started building them immediately.

He understands that you don't have to be from here to respect what this region offers. You just have to care enough to look. Logan remains one of the most consistent JUCOs in the country. Local high schools are still producing tough, disciplined kids who know how to play in front of crowds. There's talent. Always has been.

The difference now is that there's a coach willing to put a roster spot behind that belief.

And local kids are more likely to stick. More likely to grind. More likely to care when things get tough.

And when they do leave? They usually come back around. That kind of loyalty is currency in today's portal world.

You can feel the momentum shifting.

This team is finally starting to reflect the region again. For the first time in a long time, the Dawgs aren't just another mid-major try-

ing to cobble together a squad from random transfers and big-market leftovers. They've got players who actually know what it means to wear the maroon.

Scott Nagy might not be from here.

But the team he's building very much is.

— **The UnderDawg** is an independent publication launched in October 2024 by Joe Szykowski and The UpWrite Group. As an SIU graduate from the Class of 2005 and a former reporter for *The Southern Illinoian*, I've spent years immersed in the stories that define our Saluki athletes and programs. My work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Fox & Friends*, *Entrepreneur Magazine*, *AARP*, and multiple other global publications, but nothing excites me more than connecting with my fellow Salukis. I've had the privilege of covering the grit, determination, and pride that are the backbone of SIU athletics. I know firsthand how our athletes push their limits, and I understand how important it is to keep the community informed and engaged. That's why I'm launching *The UnderDawg*, an independent platform dedicated to providing in-depth coverage of all things SIU sports. We'll go beyond the headlines, offering game analysis, athlete features, and insider stories that capture the heart of Saluki Nation. Whether it's the big plays or the behind-the-scenes moments that shape our teams, *The UnderDawg* is here to tell the stories that matter most to diehard fans like you. Let's celebrate our Saluki pride together, with coverage that digs deeper and brings you closer to the action than ever before. To read more or subscribe, visit www.underdawgsports.com.



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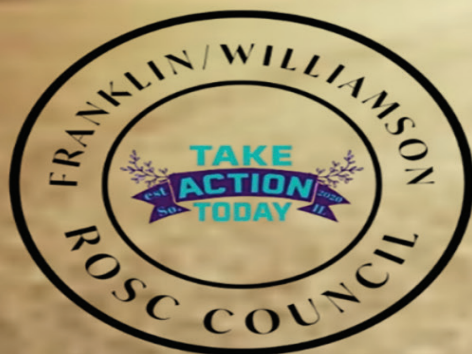
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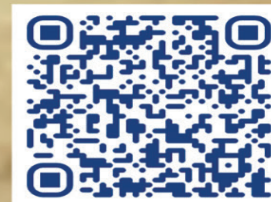
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Leave baseball alone!

I'm a high-tech guy!

OK, I need to clarify that opening sentence, because you can look at my picture accompanying this month's offering and see that I am not a part of the Millenium Generation and that I was clearly born long before all our lives revolved around a small, rectangular-shaped object that we have with us everywhere we go – even to bed and the bathroom.

Let me digress from my topic (old people do that a lot) to share a funny tidbit I read recently about our super-sophisticated cell phones.

The little meme read: "We all have in our possession, a device that gives us access to all the knowledge known to man. We use it to take pictures of what we're eating and our cats and to argue with strangers on Facebook." Funny! Huh? OK, back to the task at hand.

Perhaps instead of saying "I'm a high-tech guy" I should say "I'm an old guy who loves technology." And considering that I grew up in an era of black-and-white television that had three channels on it, rotary dial, party-line telephones and long before we knew about cell phones, algorithms, e-mail, fax machines and Zoom-this and Zoom-that I have made great strides, in my



A FEW RANDOM THOUGHTS

BY JIM MUIR



mind anyway, adapting to this ever-changing world.

Even during my 10 years as Franklin County Circuit Clerk I have witnessed and been instrumental in helping usher in a new technology age that has moved the court system from the Dark

Ages, technology-wise to a paperless court system. Under my watch, we now take no hard copy files to court, everything is on imaging. If it sounds like I'm patting myself on the back, it's because I am.

That's no small feat for an old

boomer like me! So, in short...I am far from being opposed to modern technology!

Except in baseball! Leave baseball alone! Please, please no more sabermetrics, new lingo and...I might as well go ahead and say it...stupid statistical analysis that is now used to explain a player's value.

I have to believe that behind all these numbers that we're bombarded with is an agent with dollar signs in his eyes who uses these exaggerated statistics to help a lifetime .240 hitter sign a \$60 million contract for four years that nobody can figure out. Of course, the salary is justified, he says, based on sabermetrics.

I am of the opinion that baseball is not a complicated game. See the ball. Hit the ball. See the ball. Throw the ball. See the ball. Catch the ball. See the ball. Field the ball. That's it!

Beyond that, add a few nuances and some seasoned strategy and, let me say it again, baseball is not a complicated game.

But I watch games now and I'm bombarded with phrases like Adjusted OPS (OPS+), Isolated Power (ISO), Launch Angle, Weighted Runs Created (wRC), Weighted Runs Created Plus (wRC+) and On-base Plus Slugging (OPS).

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There are many, many more terms and phrases I could bore you with, but if you're like me, your eyes are probably still crossed from reading that previous paragraph. I am also not going to try and explain all those because it would be akin to me trying to teach an Algebra class. And I'm sure we both know how that would turn out!

Regarding baseball, in the end, all I really need to know is batting average, hits, RBIs and what have you done for me lately to earn your gazillion dollars a year that my \$150 ticket, \$8 soda and \$10 hot dog is helping to pay.

Long before baseball got so complicated, Ted Williams batted .406 in 1941, the last player to ever hit .400. An interesting sidebar to this accomplishment

is that Williams entered the final day of the season with a batting average of .3995, which would have been rounded up to .400. His manager asked him if wanted to set out the double-header on the road at Philadelphia to make sure he reached the coveted .400 mark. Williams insisted on playing to ensure there was no doubt about his mark.

And with no Launch Angle or Adjusted OPS to consult, Williams went 4-for-5 in the first game and 2-3 in the second game, making it a 6-for-8 showing for the double-header, actually raising his average to the .406 mark that has never been reached again.

And during that same year, Joe Dimaggio hit safely in 56 straight games, also a feat that has never

been matched. Joltin' Joe hit safely in every game from May 15 to July 17. During that incredible stretch, and without the aid of sabermetrics, Dimaggio hit .408 and had 15 homers and 55 RBIs. See the ball. Hit the ball.

And I could go on and on – Pete Rose with 4,256 hits, Babe Ruth hitting 714 homers only to be eclipsed by “Hammerin’ Hank Aaron, who clubbed 755.

Showing my age, let me pose a question that I would ask the sabermetric fanatics to answer. How did all those marvelous events happen – events that have never been matched?

Let me end this column with a paragraph I used earlier. It does a great job summing up my thoughts on sabermetrics.

It reads:

I am of the opinion that baseball is not a complicated game. See the ball. Hit the ball. See the ball. Throw the ball. See the ball. Catch the ball. See the ball. Field the ball. That's it! Beyond that, add a few nuances and some seasoned strategy and, let me say it again, baseball is not a complicated game.

— **Jim Muir** is a veteran Southern Illinois journalist, working more than 25 years as a writer/columnist for the Benton Evening News and the Southern Illinoisan and as a broadcaster at WQRL in Benton as the Voice of the Benton Rangers. Along with his role as publisher of SISC he also serves as Franklin County Circuit Clerk, a position he has held since 2016.



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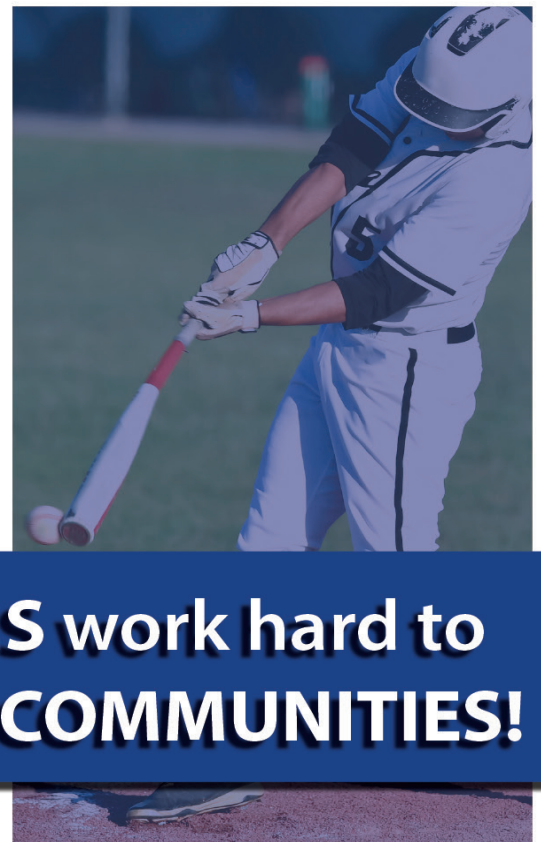
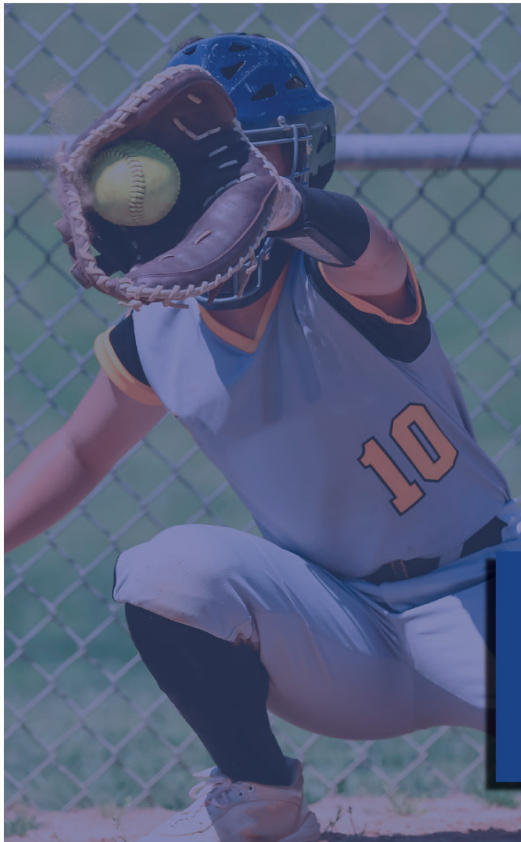
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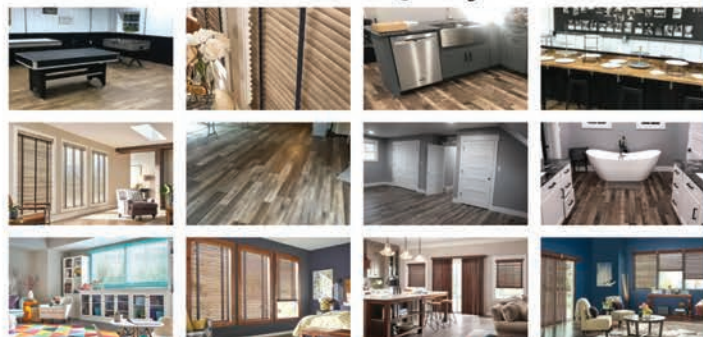
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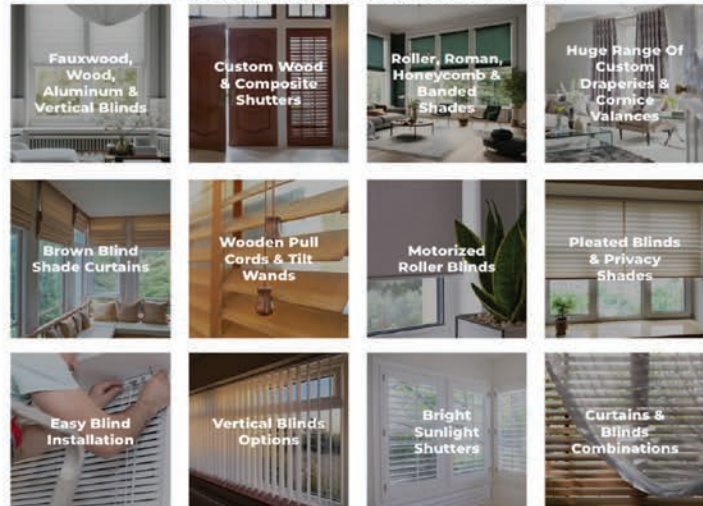
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