

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS SPORTS CONNECTION



July 2025 • Single Copy Free

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Football season will be here before we know it!

Greetings and welcome to the July issue of Southern Illinois Sports Connection.

I mentioned it last month and I'm going to bring up the subject again (old folks do that a lot), but it sure seems like time is flying by faster and faster to me. One thing that started me thinking about how quickly the calendar is moving is some comments I heard last week about the upcoming start of the school year in some communities. One local school is starting on Aug. 7, and a couple other schools are starting on Aug. 11. And the start of the school year means that football and the start of the fall sports schedule is right around the corner. Wasn't it just a couple days ago that I was writing about the end of the spring sports schedule?

Heck, I remember back in my day when school didn't start until after Labor Day — which of course tied-in with the end of the annual and beloved Du Quoin State Fair. Maybe it's just me, but it sure seems like the pages on the calendar flip over a lot quicker these days. And it's just another great example that another one of my mom's old-fashioned sayings is spot-on accurate. Geraldine always said: "The days are long and the years are short." And then she always followed that up by saying: "And the older you get the faster time goes and the shorter those years become."

As I have found out through the years, sometimes the hard way, what my mom and dad said (that I oftentimes ignored) was always right! With that trek down mem-



FROM THE PUBLISHER

BY JIM MUIR

ory lane and tidbit of old-fashioned philosophy and out of the way, let's look ahead to the monthly gem you hold in your hands!

The thing that stands out to me about this month's issue is the fact that I see a wonderful story behind every story we highlight this month. Let me explain that last sentence.

Our cover story, entitled "A Rude Awakening" details the amazing coaching career of Mike Rude, a coach who has already gained legendary status and is now embarking, at the tender age of 76, on a new challenge guiding the Christopher-Zeigler-Royalton Bearcats, which, by the way, is his alma mater. I thoroughly enjoyed chatting with Rude to get his thoughts on his 55th year coaching high school football. He has certainly breathed some life into the Bearcats program, which has been on life support in recent years. The Rude/CZR storyline will be one of the best stories for gridiron fans to follow in the fast-approaching 2025 high school football season that will kick off on Aug. 29 — only six weeks away.

Another feature, written by Davy Broy, highlights the amazing career of Cat Osterman, regarded by many as the greatest softball pitcher of all-time. In typical fashion, Broy digs deep into the story and writes about Osterman's deep ties to southern Illinois and Mt. Vernon, a fact that I was not aware of before I read the story. As always, it's a great feature and I am confident that you will enjoy the little journey back in time.

We also feature three shorter features that I am going to lump all together. Randy Olson writes this month about the career of Jackson Creel, of Mt. Vernon, who played basketball at Rend Lake College and Indiana University and has now moved into the coaching ranks at IU as a graduate assistant with the men's basketball program. Additionally, we feature stories about Harrisburg native Kyle Smithpeters, who was promoted to an assistant basketball coach at Missouri and Connor Wheeler, of Carbondale, who was hired as an assistant basketball coach at Iowa. That's three big-time college programs and

three southern Illinois natives that many people like me watched grow up here in our backyard. I couldn't help but feel a real sense of pride reading about the accomplishments of Creel, Smithpeters and Wheeler. It's an easy prediction to look ahead and see that these three fine young men will have successful careers in their respective new roles. What a great testament to these three families, to our region and to southern Illinois basketball!

And as always, we have our usual list of outstanding columnists who will entertain, enlighten and amuse you with a wide assortment of thoughts. In short, your July SISC is chocked full of reading enjoyment for you. And always, it's FREE! Who else does that for you? The answer, of course, is nobody!

In closing, a big thank you to our wonderful advertisers who continue to support our monthly effort here at SISC and also all the locations that allow us to put our product at their locations for you to grab each month!

Thanks for taking the time to read this, thanks for your continued support of SISC and God's blessings to you!

Jim Muir,
Publisher of Southern Illinois
Sports Connection

Getting to do the stuff!

Every coach and athlete know you have to practice in order to have success in the game (except maybe Allen Iverson 20 years ago!) But no mistake about it... we want to play the game! We practice in order to play the game! We work hard in order to play the game! We sweat in order to play the game! Athletes and coaches do all that they do in order to "Do The Stuff"...in the game!

When it comes to God's Kingdom (and the ministry of FCA), we certainly aren't playing a game, but we still love it when coaches and athletes "Get To Do the Stuff"!

This is actually THE WHY behind all we do. We ENGAGE with coaches and athletes relationally and with the Gospel, we EQUIP them to grow in their relationship with God, and we EMPOWER them to do the same with others. That last part...the EMPOWERMENT part...is how we launch others to "Do the Stuff." We want to raise up disciples who make disciples. And we LOVE it when this happens, as it has over the past month with two Southern Illinois athletes.

Reece Johnson and Hunter Danberry each spent the entire month of June in Europe serving in various capacities as part of the FCA Global Impact International internship program..."Doing the Stuff!"

Hunter was a 2024 graduate of Webber Township High School and is now a student athlete at Millikin University in Decatur, throwing shot and discus on the track team.

Hunter also has been very involved in the FCA ministry at Millikin as well and served as an FCA intern during the month of June in his first year as a part of FCA's Global Impact internship program.



Top: Hunter Danberry (left) and Reece Johnson (right) serving at FCA Camp in Europe. Bottom: The FCA interns praying over campers.

Reece (a Benton native) is about to start his final year at College of the Ozarks where he plays basketball. Reece has served the previous two summers as an FCA intern through Global Impact and served as a "shepherd" this year, leading other interns in Europe.

Reece spent the majority of his time in Wales and Sweden leading teams to learn about God's heart for all peoples of the world and also led teams through All-Ability training (sport ministry to special needs athletes).

Reece said, "We learned the theology behind suffering and how to play sports for para-athletes, like para volleyball, blind baseball, and goalball (look them up)! In Sweden we worked soccer and golf camps, where we engaged with kids and shared the Gospel! I grew in a much deeper understanding of God's grace over the month."

He explained that the most challenging part (but also his favorite part) about Global Impact was a golf camp he had the opportunity to help lead.

"The golf club didn't want us to be super outspoken about our faith, but with a lot of prayer and praise, by the end of the week seven out of 21 kids had given their lives to Christ", Reece explained.

Hunter spent his time in Wales, Hungary, and Sweden. Throughout the month, his team engaged in sports ministry using golf, soccer (football), and baseball as platforms to connect with local communities.

Through these camps, they were able to share the Gospel and the love of Jesus by leading with servant hearts and intentional relationships. "Being with Global Impact this summer truly opened my eyes to God's heart for the nations."

I was able to see firsthand just how deep His love runs for all His children across the globe. It left a lasting impact on me to see every nation as belonging to the Father, and to strive to love people the way He does,” Hunter said.

He added, “One of the most challenging parts of the trip was going strong for all 30 days – even when we were exhausted or worn down. But what we continually strived for was not to let our tiredness or our worldly selves get in the way of what the Lord wanted to do through us.

We knew that His strength is made perfect in our weakness, and we leaned on that truth as we showed up each day, trusting that He would move in powerful ways through the camps we were a part of.”

“Doing The Stuff” is addicting, and there’s no doubt that both of these guys are hooked. I’m extremely excited for Reece and Hunter as they continue to allow themselves to be used by God in all kinds of ways.

I’m thankful for their willingness to be used by the Lord and I’m thankful to the Lord that he chooses to use us for His Kingdom! He wants us to be able to “Do the Stuff”!

Don’t hesitate to reach out with questions or to find out how you can get involved at spankey@fca.org!



Left: Webber product Hunter Danberry poses with an FCA camper on his shoulders.

Above: Benton’s Reece Johnson poses with an FCA camper.



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A 'Rude' awakening at Christopher High School

At 77 years old, Mike Rude takes on the challenge of rebuilding Christopher Bearcats' football

Cover story •
BY JIM MUIR

As always during the dog-days of summer, it's a sweltering July afternoon in Southern Illinois but Mike Rude seems oblivious to the oppressive heat.

Surrounded by a group of new and attentive football players Rude was in his element as the quintessential high school football coach.

In non-stop order Rude was handing out a compliment one minute, pointing out a mistake the next, giving one-on-one instruction without missing a breath and tying it all together with more than a few pats on the back and words of encouragement.

Rude announced prior to the start of the 2024 football season that it would be his last year at Sesser-Valier, where he served co-coach with veteran coach John Shadowens.

He emphasized that the Christopher football job was not on his radar when he made that announcement.

"The kids at SV knew I was not coming back," said Rude. I have a granddaughter who lives in St. Louis and I had contacted four schools over there and they all had positions I could take.

That was my plan, but when the Christopher job opened up, I talked with the administration



Mike Rude is pictured in his element, giving in-game instructions to high school football players. — BOBBI SHADOWENS PHOTO

and we discussed putting in a fundamentally solid program and then trying to find somebody to mentor to become the head coach. And through that, it just happened."

And it happened in a big way as Rude, in typical fashion, hit the ground running, familiarizing himself with players, looking over past rosters, encouraging kids to tryout for football and in general putting together a plan to try and

turn around a program that has not had a win in more than two seasons.

He said he went into his new role with eyes wide-open about the project he is undertaking at Christopher, who have lost 20 games in a row.

"When you stop and look at it, when I went to Anna-Jonesboro they had 12 losing seasons in a row and we turned it around and when I went to Marion their best

season had been 5-4 during the last 12 years and we had success," Rude said.

"And at Johnston City, they had so much talent my wife could have won nine games a year there. We started a program at Vienna from scratch, practicing on the front yard of the high school with one football and we made the playoffs after starting with nothing. But I believe this project might be even more difficult than that."

A 1966 graduate of Christopher High School and a 1970 graduate of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Rude began his coaching career at tiny Wyanet High School in central Illinois where he stayed two years.

"They (Wyanet) had lost 26 in a row when I got there and I helped them get it to 34 losses in a row. We did go 3-5 my second year there. I stayed there long enough to find out that I didn't know as much as I thought I did."

From there Rude spent five years at Kankakee Bishop McNamara as an assistant coach before moving back to Southern Illinois to coach at Anna-Jonesboro where he stayed from 1977-1981. Rude then coached at Marion from 1982 to 1991 and at Johnston City from 1992 to 2006. While Rude was at Johnston City his Indians won six Black Diamond Conference titles and qualified for the playoffs 12 of 16 years.

After leaving JC, Rude took on the monumental task of starting a football program at Vienna and stayed there for four years and then coached for six years at S-V-W. During that stretch, that included the Covid year, the Red Devils went 43-18, making the playoffs five of six years. At S-V-W Rude coached only defense, while Shadowens coached the offense. In all, Rude has coached for 55 years that includes all or parts of six decades.

Rude said his sole purpose in taking the Christopher job is to rebuild a once-thriving football program.

"I think many of the people in Christopher have forgotten or they don't know that we used to be a football-town," he said. "We always had good football in Christopher. And I want to see that happen again."

Being around high school athletes from the 1970s to present, Rude is convinced that while football and times have changed, kids have not.



Mike Rude, right, is pictured with John Shadowens, displaying some of the hardware they garnered as co-coaches during a successful run at Sesser-Valier-Waltonville.

"I really don't think kids have changed that much," Rude said. "These kids here at Christopher have lost 20 games in a row. If you would have told me that we would average 17-20 kids coming in at 6 a.m. to lift weights this summer I wouldn't have believed it. I am not going to be critical of anything that has happened in the past, but I believe we have some good football players here at Christopher."

He said he is pleased with the number of football players that will wear the Orange & Blue this year.

"Our numbers are up, and I am not going to delve into any reasons, but the numbers were low and they are up now," he said. "We are having our camp right now and we are averaging 50-plus kids every day. I am really pleased with that."

Rude said he has stressed daily

to his players that the past is the past.

"We had kids that didn't come out or played one year and quit and there are reasons why that happened," Rude said. "I explained to them on day one that the slate is clean as far as I am concerned. I don't care what happened in the past, your slate is clean with me."

Rude said he also wants to set the record straight concerning his return, after all these years, to coach at his alma mater.

"I think a lot of people have a misconception that I wanted to come here and coach my entire career and that's simply not true," Rude said. "I interviewed at Christopher in 1972 after my first year at Wyanet and I was no more prepared at that time to be the head coach here than the man in the moon. And after I started coaching, I didn't have any desire to leave Marion or AJ of JC to come home to Christopher. But, my goal now is to bring this program back to the way it was when I was in high school where we competed every year, and that's it."

Rude played for Ralph Davidson in the early 1960s at Christopher and he has been instrumental in his life ever since.

"Coach Davidson treated me very well and I still use things he taught me from way back then," Rude said. "He put the love of football in me and he is a legend in coaching in Illinois."

While there's no question that Rude knows, understands and is a master at teaching the X's and O's of high school football, he recognizes that his biggest job at Christopher is changing a culture that has got accustomed to losing.

In trying to change that part of the Christopher program, Rude brought in Rod Sherrill, another seasoned veteran of the coaching ranks with success as head coach at Herrin and SIU as an assistant.

RUDE from page 7

“That’s the first thing we had to do was change the culture,” Rude said. “Coach Sherrill changed the entire culture in the weight room and that’s the first place it had to change. These kids want to win and they don’t need any negativity; they don’t need to be criticized for the past or yelled at and we are doing everything we can to make everything positive because they are learning a new offense and a new defense and the terminology is all different.”

While Rude has learned to adapt to coaching in the 21st Century, he still readily admits that he is a throwback to a different time and era.

“I am old school and this team will be old school,” Rude said. “It’s not a secret, we’re going to run the football and when you run



With more than 50 years coaching high school football under his belt, Mike Rude (right) has coached in all or parts of six different decades.

the ball you got to be able to block and they haven’t been doing that in the past, but that’s going to change.

“The bottom line with me is

that this is just so exciting and the kids have responded so well to everything we’ve thrown at them. These are good kids at Christopher and they have just been a

pleasure to work with so far.

Approaching his 78th birthday shortly, Rude said his energy level remains high in handling the grueling task as a head coach.

“At SV I ran the defense and John (Shadowens) ran the offense, but now I am back to doing it all,” Rude said. “I get tired, but I think I will be fine. I coach differently than when I was 30 years old. I don’t burn as much energy because I think I am smarter now than I was in my 30s. Do I wear out a little quicker than I used to? The answer to that is ‘yes.’ But I sure am enjoying this and having a lot of fun! I believe God has blessed me to allow me to keep doing this. I’ve got 55 years of coaching knowledge to share, and I want to keep sharing it.”

Rude’s Bearcats will open the season at home against Eldorado on Aug. 29.



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THE PAVILION

A dream come true

From Big Ten Player to graduate assistant, Mt. Vernon's Jackson Creel takes on a new role and challenge at Indiana University

BY RANDY OLSON
AreaSports.net

A well-known former southern Illinois high school basketball athlete who suited up for a Big Ten Conference college basketball team for the past two years as a player, now has an opportunity to experience the other side of that major college basketball program from the perspective of serving as a Graduate Assistant.

Jackson Creel has been selected by new head coach Darian DeVries of the Indiana Hoosiers Men's Basketball program to work behind the scenes with his players and coaching staff for the next two years as a Graduate Assistant, in a position technically referred to as a Graduate Manager. Creel wore No. 22 for the Indiana Hoosiers as a player under previous coach Mike Woodson, who left Indiana after this past season.

Creel is a native of Mt Vernon, and was an All-South Player and Co-MVP of the South-Seven Conference in his playing days for the Mt Vernon Rams.

He went on to play for Rend Lake College, where he was an All-GRAC and All-Region player, before transferring to Indiana University to pursue his degree in Exercise Science.

Creel graduated from IU this



Jackson Creel is wearing many new hats this summer in preparation for the fast-approaching 2025-26 Hoosiers men's basketball season.

past school year with a Bachelor's Degree in Exercise Science and Kinesiology, plus he now holds Certification in Strength & Conditioning. He is also actively pursuing a Master's Degree in Sport and Coaching Science.

Following graduation in May, Creel began to put out feelers to various coaching contacts he had made at a variety of universities seeking a Graduate Assistant (GA) opportunity so he could pursue his Master's Degree, while getting exposure to the coaching side of things.

Jackson was able to sit down with Coach DeVries upon his arrival as the new incoming head coach at Indiana University, and he interviewed with him. The two seemed to connect, as DeVries was also once a GA several years ago at Creighton University.

"God has really blessed me to

have this opportunity with Coach DeVries. I really like him and the energy and knowledge that he brings. My whole experience at Indiana University has been a dream come true," said Creel. "I have already been on the ground working daily here in the summer with Coach DeVries, his staff, and all of the players, just trying to learn, while also doing anything I can to help make the program better."

DeVries comes to Indiana after a year at West Virginia, and prior to that, he was the head coach at Drake University from 2018 to 2024.

As the new head coach, he brought a stable of coaches with him, including his own strength & conditioning coach, which are all different than the coaches that Creel played under for two years, but Jackson has taken all of that in stride.

"I've embraced the opportunity to learn new things from new people, and it has been great so far," said Creel. "Coach DeVries has obviously been a winner everywhere he has gone, so soaking up that knowledge and experience has been something I have been thrilled to have the opportunity to do. I didn't fully understand or appreciate everything that goes into that side of a basketball program, but I am committed to learn everything I can."

The team will soon make a trip to Puerto Rico in August to scrimmage other basketball programs, so Creel has found himself putting in some long days, but he loves it.

"My responsibility has been doing individual workouts with the players, whether that be assisting them with weightlifting, stretching, nutrition, recovery, as well as practice," said Creel. "When it comes to strength and conditioning, everything today is very science-based."

"Everything from the supplements that the guys are taking to recovery methods, to weightlifting methods for different attributes whether that be speed, explosiveness, overall strength and power, there is just so much that goes into it and that is what I really love about that side of the athletic performance. I feel like I have learned a ton already."

When it comes to athletic facilities, Indiana University is at the top of their game with the facilities that the athletes have at their disposal, Creel said.

"Indiana is blessed to have a lot of resources when it comes to recovery, and injury prevention. Thankfully over the past two years, I was able to stay really healthy because of those resources," said Creel.

“Being able to take care of my body with good nutrition, good sleep, and when I did have an injury or a tweak, you have the cold tank and the hot tub, and so many other different machines that I have no idea what they do, but they hook you up to them and before you know it you are back to optimal performance level. There is no doubt that the facilities are a game changer for the athletes, and I am excited to learn more about it from the other side.”

As a graduate assistant, Creel has learned to jump in and do whatever Coach DeVries needs done. For Creel, that means he often still gets to actively put on a practice jersey and scrimmage or work on schemes or reads with the players on the team.

“I love it. That’s been one of my favorite parts so far. The coach might say, hey, we need an extra body on the court today, so I jump right in and play,” said Creel. “So, in addition to what we talked about with strength and conditioning, nutrition, and recovery, I get to do things on the court, in the film room, help guys in the weight room, get them organized and consistent on nutrition, and anything else the coaching staff needs me to do.”

Having a new coaching staff come in means there are also a lot of new players on the roster. The transfer portal is here to stay. It’s just part of collegiate athletics now at every campus. “I like the talent pool that Coach DeVries and his



After two years at Rend Lake College, Jackson Creel finished his career as a Hoosier.

staff have brought in. We spend a lot of time together as a cohesive unit and I really think that everyone is well connected and on the same page,” said Creel. “I really like all the guys from a personality standpoint, and I think that they all like each other and really care for each other. Many of them have come from mid-major programs or lower level Division-1 programs and I believe that they are all very hungry, happy to be here, and as a result they are working hard to succeed and prove that they belong here, and strive to flourish here to do something special at IU.”

With his degree in hand and pursuing his Master’s Degree while working as a GA under DeVries at Indiana, Creel has the opportunity to see which path he wants to pursue in life, whether it’s the coaching side of basketball, or whether

it’s the strength training and nutrition side of basketball.

“I am very excited to take a deep dive into the coaching side of college basketball at this level,” said Creel. “I’ve talked to Coach DeVries and many people about my pursuit of a GA position in a program like this, and everyone has told me that after I put in these two years as a GA at Indiana, I will be exposed to so many things and learn so much from the staff that I will know for sure whether I want to be a college basketball coach or not. Being at one of the top programs in the nation, I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity to get a real-world education to accompany my classroom knowledge.”

The strength and conditioning coach that came to Indiana with Coach DeVries is Coach Ryan Horn, who is well known for his approach to preparing athletes and keeping them healthy.

“I have already learned so much from Coach Horn. Thankfully he has let me help him out in the weight room,” said Creel. “I am soaking in his programs and what his day-to-day goals are with our athletes and how he is preparing them for the season as well as the practice that day, and the coming week, and how he is balancing their workloads and recoveries. It’s so nice and educational to see how he handles it. I really like him a lot as a person and as a coach.”

Creel says that his day begins as early as 6:30 a.m. as guys come into the practice facility to get some

shots up, and he helps with that and also helps set up the weight room for some lifting groups, and individual workouts. The players then get a late breakfast and recover before practice rolls around in the early afternoon. After practice the guys eat and then take care of recovery methods, which Jackson often helps with.

“It’s a long day, and if I didn’t love it, perhaps it would be miserable, but I genuinely love every day and love what I am doing and what I am learning,” said Creel. “It’s fun, I am staying in shape, I am staying busy. I love the camaraderie with the new players, and I like the other GA’s that I am with. I am very thankful to be here at Indiana.”

Since many of the new roster players are young and seeing college basketball at this level for the first time in their life, Creel is able to also be a sounding board and mentor to some of them. “Since I played here for two years, I get a lot of questions from the new players, especially the young ones. There are a lot of things that go along with being an IU basketball player, your character, how you carry yourself in public, and what to expect on game day in a Big Ten environment,” said Creel. “I am happy to help the new guys any way I can and pass along knowledge from the experience that I had as a player and help them stay grounded and focused. Again, I am just so thankful for this opportunity that I have, and I am more than happy to pass it forward.”

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During the NCAA tournament's first round back in March, Connor Wheeler (left) went head-to-head with his former coach at John A. Logan Kyle Smithpeters (right) when Drake upset Missouri. Wheeler was an assistant for the Drake Bulldogs, while Smithpeters is on staff at for the Mizzou Tigers.

Representing Southern Illinois basketball on the biggest stage

A pair of coaches with strong southern Illinois basketball pedigree in their blood are leaving their mark on Division I college basketball

Connor Wheeler named assistant coach at University of Iowa

Staff Report

Connor Wheeler has been named an assistant coach with the University of Iowa men's basketball program, it was announced Tuesday by head coach Ben McCollum.

Wheeler has eight years of coaching experience at Drake (2016-25), Southeast Missouri State (2022-24), Southern Illinois (2019-22), Southern Miss (2018-19) and Missouri (2016-18).

"Connor is a great up-and-coming coach," said McCollum. "His

career path has been fast and rightfully so. He's very talented and will continue to hone his skills at the University of Iowa. He will help us get to a championship level."

Wheeler joins the Hawkeyes from Drake, where he served as an assistant during the 2024-25 season. He helped the Bulldogs enjoy unprecedented success as the team racked up a school-record 31 victories and won both the Missouri Valley Conference regular season and tournament titles.

Drake advanced to the second round of the NCAA Tournament after upsetting sixth-seeded Missouri, 67-57, in the Round of 64.

see **WHEELER** page 13

Kyle Smithpeters promoted to associate head coach at Mizzou

Staff Report

Having helped University of Missouri men's basketball reestablish itself on the national stage during his first three years with the program, Harrisburg native and former John A. Logan College head men's basketball coach Kyle Smithpeters has been elevated to associate head coach, announced by Whitten Family Head Coach Dennis Gates.

"Kyle has played a pivotal role as we've restored Missouri bas-

ketball nationally and placed it among the top of the SEC," Gates said.

"During the last three seasons, his efforts in recruiting and development of student-athletes is one of the key reasons for our success at Mizzou.

"He has been tremendous at building relationships and locking down top targets before helping them reach their full potential on the court, in the classroom and in the community.

"He has exceeded all of my expectations and this promotion is well earned as we continue to chase championships."

see **SMITHPETERS** page 13

WHEELER

from page 12

Wheeler assisted in Drake's complete roster rebuild, as the Bulldogs brought in a combined 10 transfers and first-year players. One of the signees – Bennett Stirtz – was named the MVC Larry Bird Player and Newcomer of the Year, while being a finalist for the Riley Wallace Award and Lou Henson Awards.

“My wife and I couldn't be more excited to join the University of Iowa family,” said Wheeler. “This program has a rich history, an incredible fan base and a culture of hard work and dedication. I'm excited to recruit and develop exceptional young men that will make Hawkeye nation proud. I'm honored to be a part of this program and can't wait to get to work.”

Prior to making the move to Des Moines, Wheeler spent two seasons as an assistant at Southeast Missouri State, where he helped guide the program to its first Ohio Valley Conference Tournament title and NCAA Tournament berth. It was the first NCAA appearance in more than 20 years.

Wheeler ventured to SEMO after a three-year stint at Southern Illinois. He joined the staff as the director of player development before moving into the role of director of basketball operations. During the 2018-19 season, Wheeler was video coordinator at Southern Miss and he also coordinated video as a graduate assistant at Missouri from 2016-18.

As a player, Wheeler was a member of the Final Four team in 2011-12 at Illinois Wesleyan, he was an all-conference and all-region selection at John A. Logan College, he won a Division II National Championship in 2014 at Central Missouri, and he finished his career at Division I Southern Illinois Edwardsville in 2015-16.

The Carbondale, Illinois, native earned his associate's degree from John A. Logan College in 2015, his bachelor's degree from SIU Edwardsville in human and family development in 2016 and his master's in educational, school and counseling psychology with an emphasis on positive coaching in 2018.

He is married to his wife, Sammie.

— *This story was written and contributed by the University of Iowa Athletics.*

SMITHPETERS

from page 12

In his first three years with the Tigers as the program's assistant coach, Smithpeters played a key role in orchestrating a turnaround at Mizzou that saw the team record its best SEC finish in school history, while twice eclipsing 20 wins and advancing to the NCAA Tournament.

“I've enjoyed every aspect of my first three seasons with Missouri basketball and I couldn't be more thrilled in my new role as associate head coach,” Smithpeters said. “I'm truly excited about the future as there is so much more that we can accomplish. I'm honored to work with so many great basketball minds on a daily basis. To learn from Coach Gates – from x's and o's to game management – has been very fulfilling and I'm looking forward to continuing to build off that as we elevate the Mizzou program even further.”

Joining the Tigers after a highly-successful 10-year stint in charge at John A. Logan Community College, Smithpeters helped make an immediate impact with the Tigers. During his first season with the program in 2022-23, Mizzou posted its most wins in 11 years with 25 victories, while advancing to the SEC Tournament Semifinals for the first time and earning its first NCAA Tour-

namment win in 13 years.

Smithpeters and the Tigers didn't slow down after the early success. He played a vital role in Mizzou securing the nation's fifth-ranked recruiting class in 2023, leading to even more accomplishments in his third season on campus. During the 2024-25 campaign, the Tigers earned three wins over schools ranked in the top five nationally for the first time since 1988-89 as Mizzou placed sixth in a SEC that sent a record 14 teams to the NCAA Tournament.

Advancing to the next level has also become common with Smithpeters on the Mizzou sideline as five Tigers have signed with NBA franchises following their time on campus. Kobe Brown was selected in the first round of the 2023 NBA Draft by the Clip-

pers, while D'Moi Hodge, Sean East II, Tamar Bates and Caleb Grill have also inked contracts at the next level.

The early accomplishments exhibited by Smithpeters and Mizzou was nothing new for the long-time head coach. In 10 years with Logan, Smithpeters compiled a 241-73 record and was an eight-time Great Rivers Athletic Conference Coach of the Year, while mentoring two NJCAA National Players of the Year and 10 All-Americans during his tenure.

A graduate of Southern Illinois, Smithpeters has also spent time at Southeastern Illinois and Missouri State during his coaching career.

— *This story was contributed by the University of Missouri Athletic Department.*

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Hiking angler

Probably the oldest symbol of fishing is the barefoot little boy walking along with a cane pole and a can of worms. Many modern anglers are beginning to find that enjoyment again. No, they are not barefoot, but they are hiking and fishing.

The large tracts of land in public areas contain small ponds and streams with fish populations available to hiking anglers. State parks and national forests are another area where opportunities exist. Fall is a good time to hike in the woods. The days are warm and the nights cool. The insects can be a problem. Fishing can be good all year around.

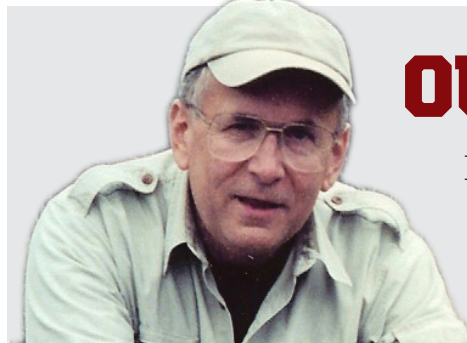
Often there are several marked trails in the woods as well as miles of gravel and blacktop roads. Some of the marked trails lead to or near fishing areas. More detailed description of trails and fishing areas are usually available locally from highway departments as well as local fish and game officials. Local county highway departments often have maps available for a few dollars.

Most trails in national forests are easy to moderate in difficulty. Hiking is not a strenuous activity if one takes a few precautions and is in moderately good physical shape. Most trails will pass through valleys and level terrain with hills and ridge tops. This is not to say that there is not rough terrain, or that the trails are not rough.

Due in part to fiscal considerations, some trails could use better markings. That would be a good project for a conservation or church group to consider.

Still with a map and common sense, the hiker/angler can find some excellent wilderness fishing.

Assuming you select a place to hike and fish it is time to consider the gear for your use. One of the



OUTDOORS

BY DON GASAWAY

first considerations is the feet. Hiking boots are a good idea, and there are a few very fine ones on the market at moderate prices. They should be well broken in before hiking. Wear them for everyday wear. Several short hikes around the neighborhood will help break them in as well as increase your own stamina.

Other clothing should include cotton or acrylic stockings and loose clothing. Long pants and sleeves are best to prevent insect bites and scratches from the vegetation. A wide-brimmed hat is best.

Insect repellent is good during those times when the mosquitos and ticks are a problem. A pocket sized first aid kit or at least a couple of BandAids are a good idea.

As for the fishing tackle the lighter the better. A small backpacking rod and reel is a very good idea. There are several them on the market. Most are ultra-light spinning rod and reel setups. They do not take up much room in a day pack and are just for such a purpose.

Usually, a line of two to six-pound test is best. Heavier line does not work well casting from these rods. Small plastic tackle boxes (4X6 inches) are ideal for holding the terminal tackle. They have small compartment to hold jigs and small crankbaits as well as floats, hooks and sinkers. Live bait

jig in a slow presentation. Retrieve it so slowly that the curly-tail barely has motion to it for good results.

Some water or soda, and snacks round out the equipment needed to enjoy fishing and hiking in the woods. Hiking and fishing have both traveled a long way since the days of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. One can still enjoy this pastime wherever you live.

— 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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Lots of winning!

Congratulations to the Carterville High School softball team for their outstanding 2nd place finish in last month's IHSA Class 2A Softball State Finals. It was the second year in a row that the Lady Lions made it to the championship game and they won it in 2024.

Over the past two years the Lady Lions have had an incredible overall record of 67-6 and two of the best back-to-back seasons in Southern Illinois softball history. I believe strongly that a Class 2A trip to the 2026 state finals will go through Carterville once again as they had only one senior on this year's team. Most importantly, Carterville returns Caidence Phillips and Taryn Ford who have been two of the best pitchers in the state over the past two seasons.

In my feature story last month titled, "Another Great Season For Southern Illinois High School Softball" I made sure to include the stats of probably the best overall player in the area, Carterville's Caidence Phillips.

Somewhere between turning in the story and it being printed in the June edition of the SISC, Phillips' stats were inadvertently left out. I am correcting that in this column.

Not only did Caidence Phillips lead the Lady Lions to their second straight IHSA Class 2A state championship game appearance, she also led the 2025 Carterville team in both pitching and hitting. According to Max Preps stats, Phillips finished the 2025 season with a pitching record of 24-1.

Her overall pitching stats, which were incredible, included an ERA of 0.55 which was second in the entire state. In 152 innings pitched, Phillips allowed only

SPORTS REFLECTIONS

BY DAVY BROY



12 earned runs, 47 hits, and 19 walks while striking out 297. She held opposing hitters to a minuscule .092 batting average. Phillips wasn't just outstanding in the circle, she also led the Lady Lions in several offensive categories which included batting avg. (.452), home runs (7), RBI (40), on base percentage (.532), slugging percentage (.796), and OPS (1.328). Phillips recently committed to play softball at the University of Illinois.

The significance of what Texas Tech's Gerry Glasco did as a Southern Illinois (Crab Orchard & Johnston City) native and a head coach in the championship game of the NCAA Women's College Softball World Series has only been done a few other times by area natives in the past 100 years.

Bennie Tate, who was born in Whitwell, Tennessee in 1901, played major league baseball for 10 years including with the 1924 World Series champion Washington Senators. Although he was not born and raised in Southern Illinois, Tate lived here for most of his life.

His family moved to Herrin in 1918 so that a young 17-year-old Bennie and his father could work at a local coal mine. The following year, while playing for an area

semi-pro baseball team, Tate was spotted by a baseball scout who signed him to a professional contract.

Tate's first year in the major leagues was in 1924 with Washington. That same year he married Pauline Russell from West Frankfort. From that point on, Tate lived in West Frankfort until his death in 1973.

Ray Blades, who was a McLeansboro native, played 10 years of major league baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals and he was also the manager of the Cardinals for two seasons. Blades played in three world series for St. Louis which included one championship season in 1931.

Hal Smith, who was born in West Frankfort and lived in Orient until he was 11 years old, had a 10-year career in major league baseball. He played for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1960 World Series.

Smith hit a huge three-run homer in game seven which helped lead the Pirates to a world championship victory over the New York Yankees.

Herrin native Richard "Itchy" Jones was the head coach of SIU-C when they reached the 1971 College Baseball World Series championship game which they lost to USC.

Five area natives Larry Calufetti (Harrisburg), Mike Broeking (Marion) Scott Waltemate (Steeleville) Danny Thomas (Dupo) and Dick Langdon (Carbondale) were on that 1971 SIU-C baseball team.

Benton's Danny Johnson played for Western Kentucky when they reached the 1971 NCAA Basketball Tournament Final Four while Centralia's Dick Garrett played five years in pro basketball, including the NBA Finals for both the Los Angeles Lakers in 1970 and the Milwaukee Bucks in 1974.

Marion native Ray Fosse played major league baseball for 12 years which included the 1973 and 1974 World Series for the Oakland A's.

They won the championship both years.

Benton's Doug Collins played in the NBA for eight years including the 1977 NBA Finals for the Philadelphia 76ers while Centralia native Gary Gaetti played major league baseball for 20 years including the 1987 World Series for the Minnesota Twins, which they won.

McLeansboro's Carl Mauck played in the NFL for 13 years. He was also an assistant coach in the league for several years which included the San Diego Chargers when they reached the Super Bowl in 1995.

Another McLeansboro native Jerry Sloan played in the NBA for 11 seasons. He was also a long time assistant and head coach in the league including the head coach for the Utah Jazz in both the 1997 and 1998 NBA Finals.

From my recollection (sorry if I'm forgetting anyone) those athletes and coaches are the only other area natives that have lifted Southern Illinois into the national sports spotlight in the way that Gerry Glasco did this year.

His Texas Tech Red Raiders softball team knocked off four-time defending champion Oklahoma in the semifinals of the College Softball World Series before losing to Texas in the championship game.

But it gets even better for the Glasco family as you can add three women to that group of Southern Illinois natives who have reached the pinnacle of national team sports success. Gerry Glasco's three daughters have now all been involved in the NCAA College Softball World Series as a player or coach. I have to wonder

if that has ever happened with any other four immediate family members in the United States let alone a family from Southern Illinois.

Erin Glasco played for Texas A&M in the 2008 College Softball World Series and they made it to the championship game. Gerri Ann Glasco played for Oregon in the 2015 Women's College World Series and Tara Glasco Archibald was a coach for Texas Tech at this year's WCWS. Gerry Glasco has now been involved in four WCWS, three as an assistant coach (Georgia in 2009 & 2010 along with

Texas A&M in 2017) and then this year as the head coach of the Red Raiders.

The 2025 season was Gerry Glasco's first as the head coach at Texas Tech and it was the first time that the Red Raiders had ever advanced to the Women's College World Series.

To make their outstanding 2025 season even sweeter, Glasco's daughter Tara played a big part in Texas Tech's success as their associate head coach and pitching coach.

She also played on the Johnston City High School softball

teams that finished 2nd in 1998 and 3rd in 1999 at the IHSA State Finals. Tara Glasco Archibald played collegiately at SIU-C.

— **Davy Broy** is a lifelong resident of West Frankfort and a longtime 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.westfrankfort-sports.com.

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Flexin' those mental muscles

Every parent, coach, and athlete know the importance of weight training and being physically fit. What you put into workouts, diets, training—it all hopefully shows when gametime arrives. Paying attention to what your nutritional intake looks like—appropriate hydration, good proteins, all the fruits and veggies is important.

But, what about your mental intake? Meaning what is coming and going in and out of your athlete's mental space? It is important. Especially as we find our lives constantly revolving around instant gratification. Immediate responses via text messaging. Looking at Life 360 to see when mom will arrive home. With so much at our fingertips, it sometimes becomes frustrating for us to have to wait for any length of time to see the results we hope to see.

I, myself, love the mail. Old school as in, placing a stamp on a letter, putting it in the mailbox, lifting the flag, and waiting for the postal worker to magically whisk it away and possibly leave a letter for me in return. I am also guilty of stalking the mailbox like a kid at Christmas waiting on Santa to arrive. I find myself becoming impatient for no good reason. Am I expecting a large Publisher's Clearinghouse check? No. Am I waiting to hear from a land far away that a royal baby has been born into the family? Of course not. So, I get how ridiculous I seem when I get all excited and impatient about getting the mail.

You can't rush mental growth. It simply doesn't work that way. But in the same way we learn to build muscles and grow physically with diet and nutrition, we can find ways to grow mentally. Mental growth is something that comes in handy for everyone with a brain. So, yes, this applies to everyone,



not just athletes. I have compiled a short list of things that can help boost your brain in everyday life (and apply it to sports, work, home, and beyond).

Communication: I am sorry to all of the self-proclaimed introverts out there, but communication is here to stay – in some form or another. Talking, texting, messenger birds, smoke signals...whatever you see fit to use, communication has been a key to lots of things for a long time. When athletes are allowed to express their frustrations, their achievements, their goals, their feelings of defeat or victory...everything just seems to work out a little easier. Learning to apologize when wrong or having gratitude when someone helps them or compliments them, these all carry over into adulthood. Communicating those things to another person may seem like a small feat but can lead to big wins mentally.

Perfectionism: Nothing is ever

perfect, not in the world of youth sports and not in the real world of adulthood. Practice does not make perfect regardless of what your grandmother instilled in you. Practice does make progress, though. Focusing in on the ongoing journey of learning and development through repeated engagement with a task or skill. This is something that rings true in all aspects of life whether it be at work, or in the classroom, even learning a new skill or craft or a foreign language...no matter what stage of life you find yourself currently residing in. We can't expect perfection, but progress suggests moving at a pace all your own which makes it much less intimidating. Progressing toward a goal gives your mental health a positive boost which I think we can all use from time to time.

Coping Skills: I don't recall everything from high school but what I do remember focused mainly on reading and writing, math, history, and science. I would be lying if I said I do not use most of that on a daily basis to some extent. But you know what I most definitely need access to on a daily basis and don't recall having it in school...Coping Skills for Dummies (or something similar in name). And boy, could I use it sometimes. If you have ever existed amongst other humans to any degree, I bet you

could use some of those skills as well. Our children and not just those engaged in sports (think playground, sleepovers, school, daycare, etc.) need those skills, too. If my son bonks your son over the head on the playground because he got beat to the swing set, what is a parent to do? This is where kids learn to share. Give and take. Compromise. Sometimes being the "bigger person" so to speak. Young athletes need good adult role models and peers to help them learn these valuable coping skills. How to take a walk and breathe, how to give themselves a little pep talk when needed, how to help one another cope with losses, unfair calls, injuries, and all those other pesky situations that arise.

I have said it before, and I am sure I will say it many more times, but our youth are destined for adulthood (sometimes sooner than we'd like to admit). The lessons they learn on the field or in the gym, in the classroom, in theater and band, pretty much anywhere...these lessons mold and shape how they will handle situations in life as adults. Some lessons are harder to learn and adopt than others. But if you look at it as in progress, not perfection...they seem much easier to tackle.

— **Lindsey Cox** is married to Eli, a Benton native. Along with their two children, Julianne 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," came out in June 2025 and discusses her past struggles in hopes of helping others still struggling with a message of hope and humor.

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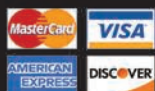
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Exploring different cultures

As my whirlwind month of June has come to a close, I want to share my incredible travel experiences! From three incredible weeks of travel to the holiday weekend, I am so thankful for the countless memories I have from exploring the most incredible places, all the while my sleep schedule is still facing the repercussions! From beautiful National Parks in California, to an ocean away in fascinating Japan, I found myself amazed by the different ways of life and even cultures I observed.

To start my travel bonanza, I explored the beautiful Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks. From the biggest trees I've ever



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BY MAYA ROUNDS

seen, to some extremely brave rock climbers, I was in awe of the beauty that lies just a short plane ride away. From the magnificent views, to the lack of humidity, I enjoyed every aspect the area provided.


While admiring things that are unbelievable in size and beauty, I found myself understanding just how small we really are, and that maybe sometimes our “problems” might be just as small too.

These beautiful parks provided

me with a much-needed feeling of peace and served as a reminder as to just how much of the world is out there for us to discover!

After a short intermission back in Southern Illinois, I was once again on a plane, and this time the flight ahead of me was most definitely not short! Soon, California seemed to be a next-door neighbor as the journey to Japan was underway.

A “short” 12-hour plane ride from Dallas, and a 10-hour time difference later, I fearfully watched the intriguing yet slightly terrifying plane camera as we descended over Tokyo Bay and safely landed at our destination!



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After navigating passport checks, baggage claims and easily the most hectic of them all, the train stations, I was greeted by a beautiful street alive with the brightest of colors and the tiniest of trash cans.

From the incredible convenience stores such as the iconic 7/11 which surpassed all expectations, to the city never quite sleeping, Tokyo is an incredibly unique place. Inside the largest city in the world nestled between homes and businesses were historic shrines and temples many of which are still currently used.

This seemed to be a common theme throughout each city we visited, not only where the structures beautifully scattered throughout the cities, but the local people upheld an atmosphere of respect and politeness that was displayed from shrines all the way to retail work!

From shopping to incredible

street food and even Tokyo Disneyland, the city left me wishing to see more!

The next stop, Hiroshima, really began my fascination with the cultural differences I was experiencing. As we visited the "Hiroshima National Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bombing Victims," I was overcome with emotion as I witnessed a woman slowly walk throughout the museum and simply weep. Despite thousands of miles, languages and cultures, this moment of humanity I witnessed made me wonder, are there parts of us, as human beings, no matter where you're from or who you are, that are all the same?

To put it quite simply, yes, if anything must be remembered now more than ever it's that if you take time to understand one another, we all may just be a little more alike than different!

Opposite to grief, I found great

joy in witnessing the joy of children as they made their way to school in the mornings, one day passing by a group of kids who may have ended being late to class, but were fascinated by a silly looking bug! From the beautiful city, to a nearby island full of small shops, beautiful mountains, temples and even deer you could pet, the memories of Hiroshima will forever stay near to my heart!

Kyoto, a city that brought me the experience of a hike up a very steep path on a very warm day to see some very adorable monkeys, was incredible! Although the food was simply amazing throughout each city, I must say Kyoto easily had some of my favorite meals!

The small husband and wife owned cafe that was a stone's throw away from our Airbnb had ice cream that I will never forget, simply incredible! Easily one of the most unique experiences of my

life was having the opportunity to fully dive into the culture and be dressed in kimonos! The women in the kimono shop worked in perfect unison to make the entire experience so special!

Throughout all three cities, I can simply not say enough great things about my experience in Japan. Sure, there are things that I greatly missed from home and nothing is ever perfect, but Japan is a fascinating and beautiful place that could bring great memories and experiences to anyone! From the food, endless roads of stores, vending machines on each and every corner, and the hospitality, Japan is a place I wish everyone could experience!

— **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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SIC men's basketball coach Sam Swinford leads U.S. team to Gold in Portugal

SIC Media Services

Southeastern Illinois College Head Men's Basketball Coach Sam Swinford recently led the Student Athlete World Tours (SAWUSA) U23 USA Men's Basketball Team to a gold medal at the Portugal Basketball Festival in Lisbon.

The U.S. team went 5-1 during the international tour, competing against squads from around the world in the two-day festival held June 28–29. More than 40 teams from nine countries participated in this year's event, which promotes competition, cultural exchange and inclusion through basketball.

Swinford, a Marion native and SIC alumnus, has been involved with SAWUSA for several years, coaching international tours in Costa Rica in 2022 and Argentina in 2023. He was named SAWUSA's Coach of the Year in 2023 for his leadership and commitment to student-athlete development.

He said of the experience: "I'm incredibly grateful for the chance to represent the U.S. and share this experience with a talented group of young men. International tours like this give players a unique opportunity to learn, compete, and see the world. I'm also proud of the progress we're making at SIC—developing local talent and building something special here at home."

A former two-year starter and team captain for the Falcons, Swinford brings deep local roots and experience to his coaching.



After his SIC playing career, he continued at Fontbonne University in St. Louis, where he studied Sports Business Management and gained experience with the St. Louis Blues and St. Louis Sports Commission.

He also helped coach SI Select to Amateur Athletic Union (AAU)

World Championship titles in 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022 and 2024.

Under Coach Swinford's leadership, the SIC men's basketball team finished the 2024-2025 regular season with a 24-6 record, averaging nearly 83 points per game and earning its second consecutive bid to the Small College



Above left: SIC head men's basketball coach Sam Swinford talks strategy with the Student Athlete World Tours U23 USA Men's Basketball Team during the Portugal Basketball Festival in Lisbon.

Above right: SIC head men's basketball coach Sam Swinford celebrates with the championship trophy after leading the Student Athlete World Tours U23 Men's Basketball Team to gold at the Portugal Basketball Festival in Lisbon.

Sam Swinford reacts from the sideline during the Portugal Basketball Festival in Lisbon.

National Tournament.

SIC President Dr. Karen Weiss praised Swinford's leadership both locally and internationally.

"Coach Swinford continues to represent Southeastern with professionalism and a dedication to student success that extends well beyond our campus," Weiss said. "We're extremely proud of his leadership on the international stage."

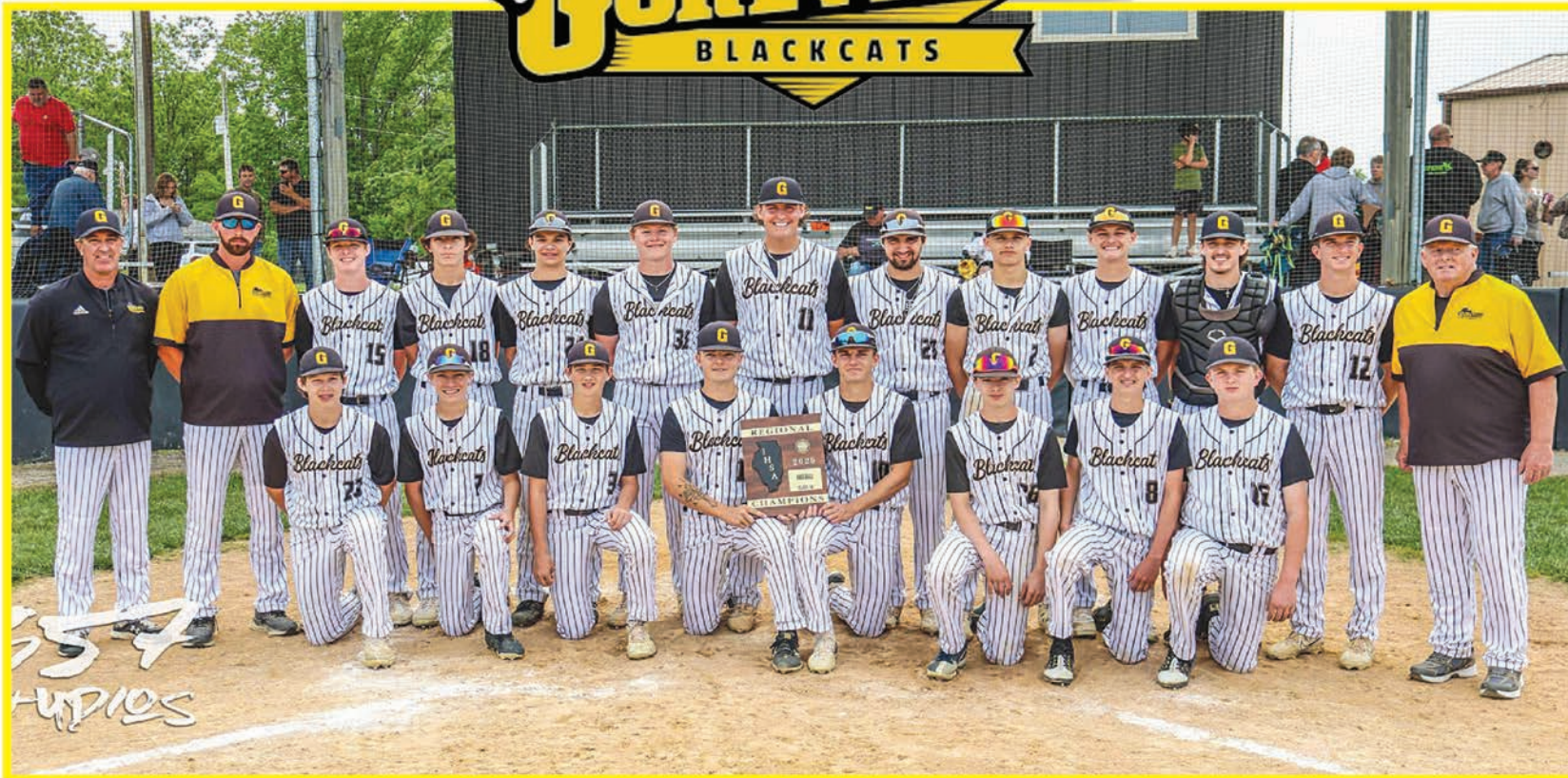
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Strong roots!

For decades fast-pitch softball has had strong roots in Southern Illinois — including the great Cat Osterman

BY DAVY BROY

Men's fast pitch softball was very popular in Southern Illinois from the 1950s through the 1980s. There were numerous teams throughout the area and some of those teams went on to win ASA Illinois state champion-

ships. With most of their players being from West Frankfort and Johnston City, the Broadway Motors men's fast pitch softball team out of Johnston City won the 18 team ASA state championship at Alton in 1956.

Led by their outstanding pitcher Gary Endres, who was originally from Vergennes, the Martin Oilers fast pitch softball team out of Carbondale won three consecutive ASA state championships in 1970, 1971 and 1972. Endres was the tournament MVP all three years. By then, the state tournament included over 40 qualifying teams and it continued that way for several years.



Cat Osterman pitching for Team USA.



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Led by their outstanding pitcher Terry Linton, who was originally from Johnston City, the Zeigler Raiders won the ASA state championship in 1977 and 1979. Most longtime fast pitch softball players and fans consider Linton and Endres to be the best two pitchers to ever come out of this region.

The Pinckneyville Celtics won the ASA state championship in 1981. Men's fast pitch started dying out in the mid to late 1980s. The decline started with fewer pitchers because of retirements; plus, slow pitch softball took over.

The Pinckneyville Celtics did win their second state championship in 1993, but there weren't as many teams from throughout the state as there were in the previous five decades.

I love the growth of women's fast-pitch softball in the past few

decades at the high school, college and professional levels. I recently read that the final three games of the 2025 College Softball World Series featuring Texas and Texas Tech were the most watched NCAA softball games in history.

For most of us in Southern Illinois it was even more special this year as our entire area took great pride in watching Crab Orchard and Johnston City native Gerry Glasco lead his Texas Tech team to the championship game.

Glasco's journey as a nationally respected softball coach is as interesting as any story that I have ever witnessed. In 2008, which was just 17 years ago, he was the junior high softball coach at Johnston City after being an assistant coach at JC High School for a few years. Glasco also coached a very

successful summer travel softball team during that time period which led to him making good connections with college softball coaches and an eventual job as an assistant coach at the University of Georgia.

Glasco's college coaching success has made Southern Illinois sports fans proud on a level that we have only seen a few times in the past with national sports figures from our area. Check out my column in this month's publication for the names of those coaches and athletes.

Most people in our area do not realize that Catherine "Cat" Osterman, who many consider to be the greatest women's softball pitcher in the sports' history, has roots in Southern Illinois.



Cat Osterman as a member of Team USA at the 2004 Olympics.

see **OSTERMAN** page 28

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OSTERMAN

from page 27

Osterman, who played for the University of Texas, is the only player to ever be selected as a three-time USA Softball National Collegiate Player of the Year. She also won three Olympic medals.

Osterman was born (1983) and raised in Houston, Texas, but she has strong ties to Mt. Vernon Illinois where she visited her paternal grandparents Joe and Jackie Osterman during the summers of her youth. Her grandfather Joe was a teacher at Mt. Vernon Township High School for several years while her grandmother Jackie was an accountant. Catherine's father, Gary Osterman, was born and raised in Mt. Vernon and he graduated from high school there (1974) as did his sister and two brothers.

Gary's brother Mike Osterman graduated from Mt. Vernon in 1972. Mike and I have been friends since we competed against each other in high school sports in the early 1970s. Mike now lives in Texas where he had an extremely successful career as a teacher and high school basketball coach at Taft High School in San Antonio for 23 years (1985-2008). Prior to that Mike taught and coached at Murphysboro High School (1978-1984) which included five years as an assistant coach and two years as head varsity basketball coach.

In a recent interview for this story with Mike Osterman, he and I discussed his family's Southern Illinois roots. "My Dad (Joe) grew up on a farm just east of Geff and north of Fairfield. He enlisted in the Air Force during WW II in 1944 when he turned 18. After that he went to SIU-C on the GI Bill.

"My mom (Jackie) grew up on a farm in Odin, north of Centralia. She went to SIU-C and got a degree in accounting. My parents met in Carbondale while attending SIU. Dad graduated from



Cat Osterman and her dad, Mt. Vernon native Gary Osterman, in 2004 displaying the gold medal that she won as a member of Team USA at the Athens Olympics.

SIU-C first and started teaching at Hurst-Bush High School. When Mom graduated, she received a big break in being hired by General Radiator in Mt. Vernon to be in charge of the entire accounting department. That was rare for a woman back in the early 1950s.

"My parents moved to Mt. Vernon for mom's accounting job, and dad got a job as a math teacher at Mt. Vernon High School.

"Dad then added a second job working at General Radiator when he got off work at the high school. He would work until midnight, and worked his way up to foreman, and then moved into the offices as vice-president of production. During those early years of moving up the ladder, he gave up the teaching job and worked full time at General Radiator.

"Then, in about 1970, he left General Radiator and returned to Mt. Vernon High School as a counselor. My parents eventu-

ally moved to Florida after their retirement in the 1990s.

"I was born in Carbondale in 1954. My three younger siblings were born in Mt. Vernon. Gary, (Catherine's dad) was born in 1956. He graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in engineering. He had job offers from California and Houston before he even graduated. He decided on Houston and started at a firm that designed and built oil rigs that were placed out in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Our sister Rhonda was born in 1961 and she lives in St. Louis. Our brother Bret was born in 1967 and he lives in Tampa, Florida."

Gary Osterman moved to Houston, Texas in the early 1980s. Gary and his wife Laura, who is from Arlington Heights, Illinois, met while attending the University of Illinois which is where Laura also graduated from with a degree in education.

Catherine "Cat" Osterman was born to Gary and Laura on April 16, 1983 in Houston. She has two younger brothers Craig and Chris. Catherine attended Cypress Springs High School in Cypress, Texas (Houston suburb) from 1997 to 2001 where she set several records for the school's softball team as one of the best pitchers in the nation.

Cat Osterman's route to being possibly the greatest women's softball pitcher in the sport's history was somewhat by accident. Her first love was basketball and she was very good at it from a young age. At 6-feet-2 she was an outstanding player on the Cypress Springs High School basketball team. She was recruited to play that sport in college including the University of Texas where the basketball coach hoped that Osterman would play both basketball and softball. That didn't work out as she decided to just focus on softball in college.

Osterman started playing softball in the first grade before quitting the sport to play just soccer and basketball. She found her way back to diamond in the fifth grade. When she was 10 years old, Osterman was playing in a youth softball league. The starting pitcher for her team had accumulated all of the innings that she could pitch for the week so the coach asked the other players on the team if anyone wanted to volunteer to pitch. Osterman, who had never pitched before, volunteered and fell in love with it.

After her first pitching experience, Osterman came home and told her mother that she wanted pitching lessons for her upcoming 11th birthday. Her parents agreed and Osterman's father Gary got her the best pitching coach in Houston. Most importantly, Gary worked with Cat in her daily pitching development. The support that she received from both of her parents in her pitching journey was outstanding.

Cat's mother Laura, who was a long-time middle school teacher, was also an extremely strong influence on her daughter's success.

Osterman's softball career was outstanding at every level. In high school (1997-2001) she dominated in the circle. She set numerous records (too many to mention), including 33 strikeouts in a 14-inning game which is a national record for strikeouts in a game less than 20 innings.

Osterman was selected first team All-State three times and in her senior year (2001) she was selected as the Gatorade National Softball Player of the Year.

Osterman's college career at the University of Texas was also stellar as she broke virtually every school pitching record. She was a three-time USA Softball National Collegiate Player of the Year (2003, 2005 and 2006) and a four time

All-American. Osterman was also a two-time ESPY Award winner for Best Female Athlete. She compiled an amazing career record at Texas of 136-25 with a 0.51 ERA and 2,265 strikeouts while helping lead the Longhorns to three Women's College World Series appearances.

At the end of her collegiate career, Osterman was the NCAA career record holder for strikeouts per seven innings (14.3), number two all-time in career strikeouts (2,265) and number two all-time in career shutouts (85).

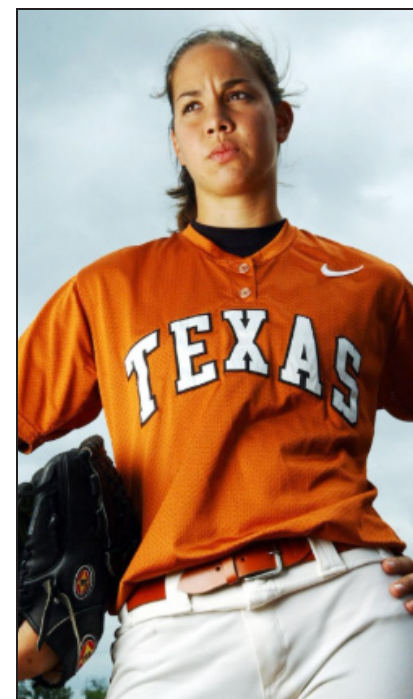
Her number 8 jersey was retired by Texas in 2022. Osterman was also a standout student as she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in educational and counseling psychology. She was an Academic All-American.

Osterman was also a three-time Olympic medalist winning a gold

in 2004 as the youngest player (21) on the USA team. She also won silver medals in 2008 and 2020. Softball was not a part of the Olympics in 2012 and 2016, but it was brought back for the 2020 Olympics that were actually played in 2021 because of the Covid pandemic.

Amazingly, Osterman came out of retirement at the age of 38 and made the 2020 USA Olympic team in 2021. She was a huge part of Team USA for several years.

Osterman was the first overall pick in the 2006 NPF (National Pro Fast Pitch League) draft. She went on to play in that professional league for eight years first with the Rockford Thunder (2007-2009) and then the USSSA Pride (2010-2015) before retiring in 2015 at the age of 33.



Cat Osterman when she was pitching for Texas.

see **OSTERMAN** page 30

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OSTERMAN from page 29

While playing in the NPF, Osterman earned several awards including being named All-League six times and also Pitcher of the Year three times. Osterman's teams won four league titles including with the Thunder in 2009 and with the Pride in 2010, 2013 and 2014. During their 2014 league championship season, Osterman and the Pride were coached by Gerry Glasco.

As part of her comeback to participate in the 2020 Olympics, Osterman played in the inaugural 2020 season of the new professional Athletes Unlimited Softball League. She played in the league for two years and won the championship in 2020.

Osterman is frequently mentioned as the best college softball pitcher ever, surpassing even other legends such as Monica Abbott, Jennie Finch and Lisa Fernandez. Osterman's spin and movement on her pitches, especially her rise ball, are considered to be the best in softball history. She was named to ESPN's "Greatest All-Time Softball Team" as the left-handed pitcher. She was also the first softball player to ever appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated. Osterman's accomplishments at the University of Texas, in international competitions with Team USA, and in professional softball prove that she is a softball legend.

Despite her extremely busy schedule, Cat Osterman was kind enough to do an interview with me for this story. Here's what she had to say when asked about her amazing softball journey as well as her family roots in Southern Illinois. "I tell everyone that I am my dad's (Gary) daughter through and through. My passion for sports was because of his. He has stories from growing up of being outside and playing all sorts of sports with his friends in Mt. Vernon many



11 year old Cat Osterman practicing pitching in her driveway with her dad Gary and Uncle Mike Osterman.

of which I've been able to meet as softball took us around the country.

"My dad was my catcher until I left for college. He would go to every pitching lesson with me, sit on the bucket during every practice session in the driveway, and drive me to meet up with my catchers from various teams and get work in.

"I witnessed his work ethic as an engineer, and he instilled those same traits in me. I was to practice at home a certain number of times if I was to get a lesson. When we practiced, it was intentful as we would be very precise in working on spins, locations and eventually my mindset. He taught me what work looked like, and I know that comes from his upbringing.

"Mt. Vernon and the house on Turner Drive is engrained in my memory. There were a good number of summers spent there at my grandparents' home. Swimming in their pool, running around their acreage, gathering vegetables and fruits, playing wiffle ball and chasing fireflies under the big tree are fond memories. It was one of my favorite places.

"I actually detoured and drove by (didn't stop because it's obviously now owned by someone else) their house in Mt. Vernon on my way to my last Athletes Unlimited

season in Chicago. While my vivid memories didn't match its current state, I smiled because it's always been a piece of me.

"With my passion for sports, I played everything. My first love was basketball. I believe it's my

dad's love. He and my Uncle Mike both had my cousin Joe and I at Don Eddy basketball camps every year and also in the driveway playing often. We'd work on our shot, our dribbling, you name it. If softball hadn't been in the picture, there's no doubt that I would have been a basketball player."

Catherine "Cat" Osterman and her husband Joey Ashley have been married since 2016 and they live in New Braunfels, Texas which is near San Antonio. They have a two-year-old daughter. Catherine also has a stepdaughter. Osterman is currently the General Manager for the Volts team in the professional Athletes Unlimited Softball League and she also works as a softball analyst for ESPN.

For six seasons (2015-2020) Osterman was the assistant softball coach and pitching coach at Texas State University.

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AARON PRICE
Swinford Publications

CARTERVILLE — For the second year in a row, the Carterville High School Lady Lions softball team made it all the way to the IHSA Class 2A state championship game — an accomplishment very few high school programs can claim.

While last year's campaign ended with a state title, this season concluded with a hard-fought second-place finish. Still, the journey, the growth, and the pride felt by the team, coaches and community make this year just as unforgettable.

"This is the first time in program history we've been to back-to-back state championships," said head coach Will Capie, who just completed his 10th season leading the Lady Lions. "It's an incredible accomplishment. That kind of consistency is rare in high school softball."

Capie, who has been part of the program since 2008, has now helped lead the Lady Lions to three state titles (2008, 2016 and 2023) and six overall state tournament appearances. He became the head coach in 2016. But what stands out to him most about this year's team isn't just the record — it's the character and leadership they displayed every step of the way.

This year's roster featured a mix of returning stars and young talent. The Lady Lions went 29-5 overall and finished a perfect 8-0 in conference play, earning them the No. 8 overall rank in the state. Despite having 10 freshmen on the team and only one senior, the team still defied the odds and went all the way for the second year in a row.

Capie credited last year's championship squad for laying the foun-

dation of this year's success.

"That group had such an impact on this year's team," he said. "We had just one senior, but she was brought up the right way, taught how to lead, and that carried through to the younger girls."

That senior was Kendall McCalla, a standout shortstop and vocal leader. She finished the season with a team-high 7 home runs and 5 stolen bases.

"It's an amazing privilege," McCalla said. "We worked so hard and knew what our goal was, so to be able to accomplish that twice was awesome."

McCalla's leadership was felt in every aspect of the game; not just in stats, but in her example.

"She was the first person to practice every day," Capie said. "She showed the younger players how we do things here, and she wasn't afraid to speak up when something didn't meet our standard."

But she wasn't alone. The junior class was stacked with experience and talent, including Caidence Phillips, Colbie Bennett and Taryn Ford, all of whom were returning from last year's state title run.

Phillips led the team with a .452 batting average, a .532 on-base percentage, and 7 home runs, tying McCalla for the most on the team. She also posted an impressive 0.55 ERA in the circle, dominating opponents on both sides of the game.

"I'm so blessed to get to experience these opportunities and wonderful memories with my teammates, which are some of my closest friends," Phillips said. "I just wish the outcome would have been different."

Bennett, the team's junior catcher and outfielder, batted .406 and hit 5 home runs, while also

Lady Lions softball is a force to be reckoned with on the field

transitioning into a new position behind the plate this season, which is a role that Capie said was crucial to their success.

"We had girls step into key roles this year who didn't see much playing time last season," Capie said. "Players like Audrina Sloan and Emilyn Ford had breakout years and played vital roles."

Freshman Emilyn Ford led the team in stolen bases with 9, while Sloan posted a .411 OBP and contributed consistent defense at second base. For Carterville this season, a major turning point came in early May during a road trip to face Glenwood, a top-tier 3A program that went on to win the state championship in its class.

"We played two really competitive games with them, and we didn't feel like we played Carterville softball," Capie said. "That experience showed us what we needed to do better."

Capie says that loss helped sharpen their approach as the postseason neared.

"We pride ourselves on playing the toughest schedule possible," he said. "If you don't challenge yourself, you won't be ready for the big stage."

"I would say what contributed to my team's success this season was we came together when we needed to," Phillips added. "We all did our jobs and contributed."

Capie emphasizes preparation; and not just for the playoffs. He says the softball team is expected to approach every practice with intent and structure.

"We're very process-oriented," he said. "We don't look ahead. We stay in the moment. And when it comes time for the state tournament, we've got everything planned

down to the minute."

Phillips said the Carterville coaches do a great job at preparing them for the big moments.

"The coaches help to prepare us by meaningful practices," she said. "Our practices are very organized. We simulate the pitchers in practice off the pitching machine. They also encourage us and build us up."

That structure helped Carterville navigate a long and challenging postseason road that once again ended in Peoria at the state championship game.

"The coaches always say that pressure is a privilege," McCalla said. "So when we get to those big games, we remember that. The little things always win big games."

By looking over the team's record this year, it is easy to see they weren't the only ones that showed up this season — it was the entire Carterville community. At the super-sectional game held at SIU, Capie said it was the biggest crowd he'd ever seen at a high school softball game.

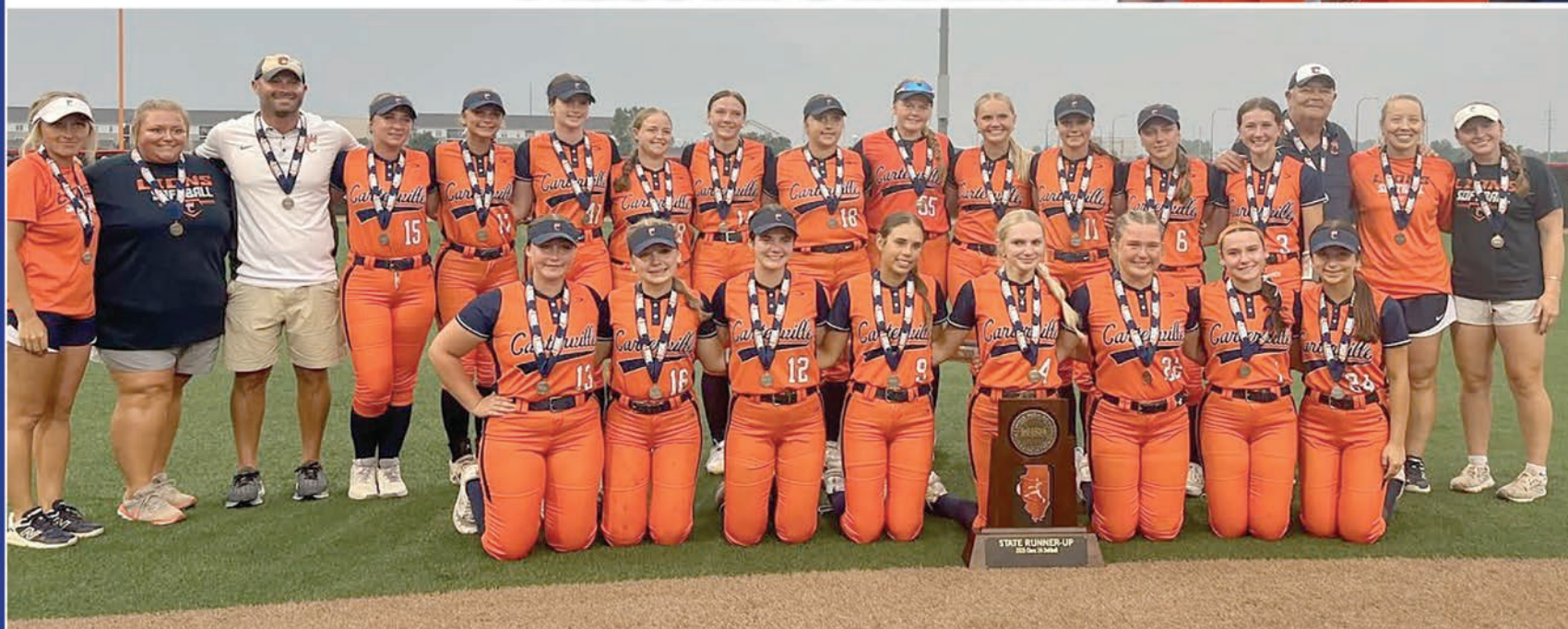
"There wasn't a seat left. It was just a sea of orange and blue. Our girls played their best under the lights, and our community helped create that moment," he said. "The fans, the families, the people around town. We feel their support every time we take the field. They've been with us the whole way."

As Carterville reflects on another historic season, the message from their senior captain to the next generation of Lions is clear.

"I would tell them to enjoy it and always keep working," McCalla said. "Everyone faces adversity, but it's how you react to it that truly matters. Never give up."



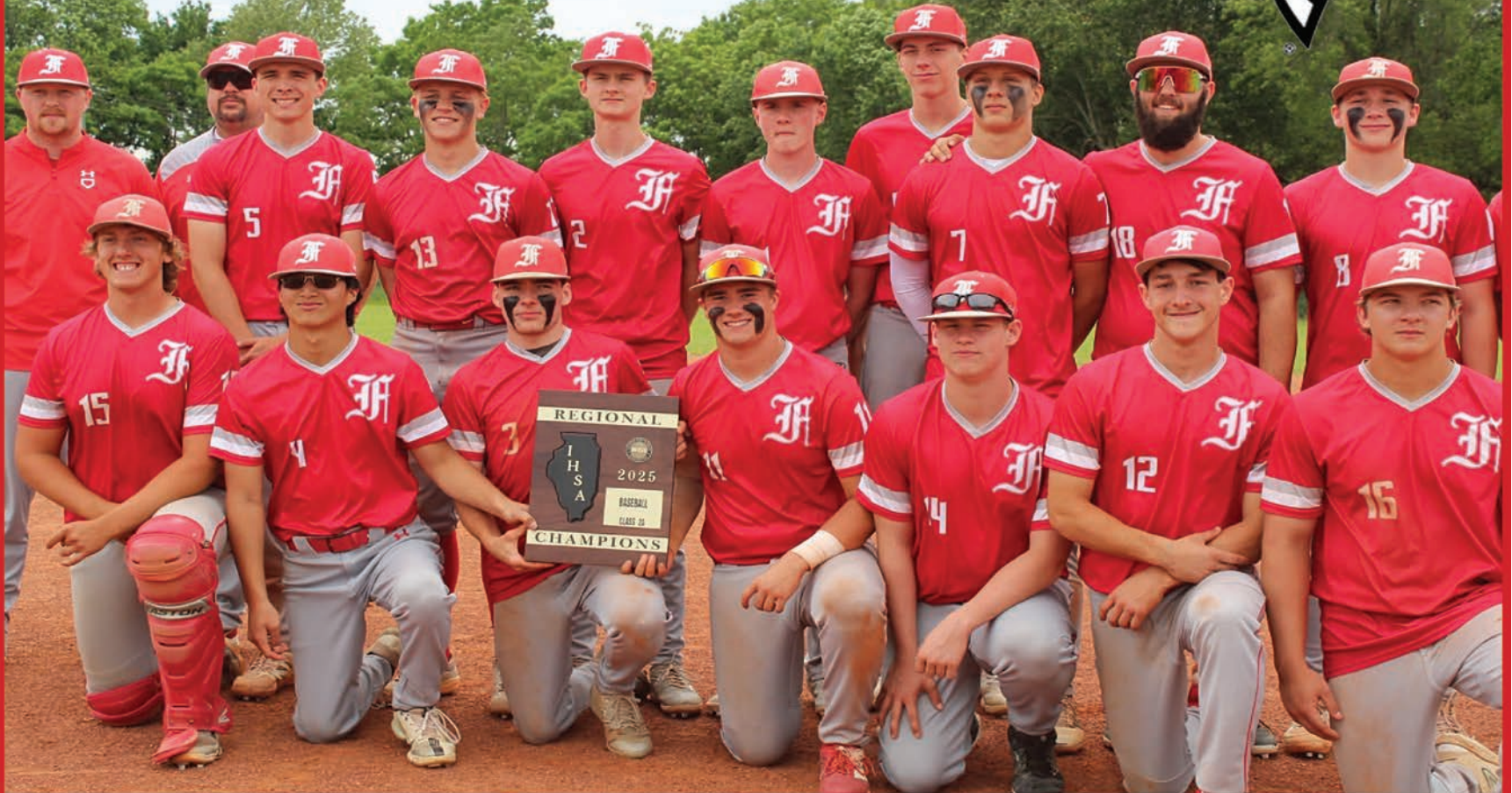
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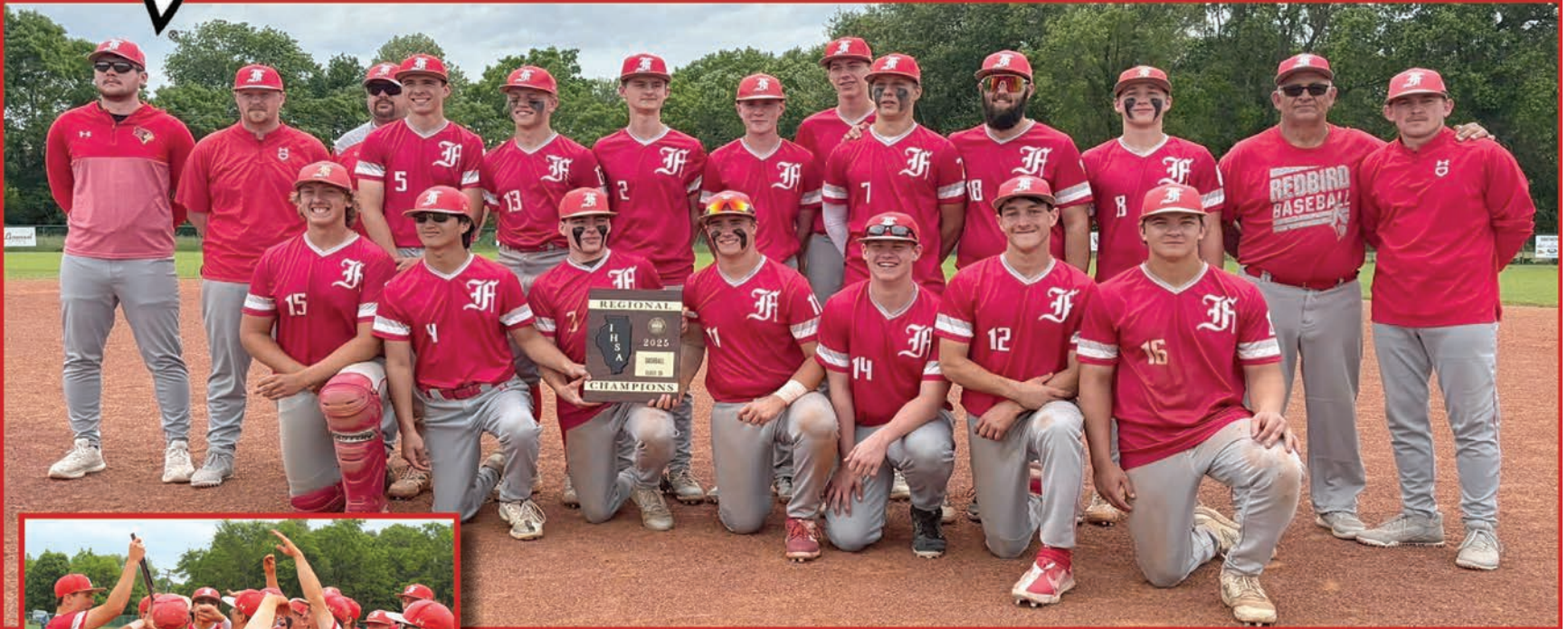
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CHAMPIONS

League formed in Herrin for children and adults with special needs is now international

BILL SWINFORD
Swinford Publications

HERRIN — Those stopping by Herrin's Diamond 7 any summer Thursday evening will be witness to champions in action.

The Champions League, a PONY Baseball and Softball tradition launched by Herrin's Steve Miller and his friends and family, meets to play Thursdays at 6 p.m. at the ball diamond near the Harrison-Bruce Football and Track Complex.

PONY officially adopted this opportunity for children and adults with special needs in 2009, when a team organized by Miller and from Herrin participated in Major League Baseball's Fanfest

connected to the 2009 MLB All Star Game. Since 2010, the Champions League has been an official division of PONY and is part of the annual festivities at the Colt World Series at Marion's minor league stadium.

Miller had started Herrin's Champions program a few years earlier with just two players. Now it has grown to include as many as 35.

"It's been in existence for 19 years and it's been a pleasure to work with these kids and young adults and their families," Miller said.

He said his own children and grandchildren have all assisted with the local program, along with many other volunteers from the Herrin area.

"And now it has gone international," Miller said in May, when he was honored for his volunteer work by the HerrinFesta Italiana Committee at the Mayor's Banquet. Miller as a longtime director, coach and mentor for Herrin Jr. High and Herrin High School

baseball and softball programs and he is Chairman of the Board of PONY Baseball and Softball International.

The PONY Champions Leagues have expanded across the United States and world, as leagues run concurrently with traditional baseball and softball seasons. Additionally, Champions Leagues have run friendly "tournaments," which provide players the opportunity to participate in games just like many of their classmates who are participating in All-Star play at the time. In Moreno Valley, California, for example, the Champions program has grown so large that a West Zone Champions World Series has been played for the past two years.

Champions League games have also crossed over into PONY's Softball World Series events in the South and West Zones.

The 2009 MLB Fanfest activities included playing at the America's Center as well as playing a one-inning game against the Challengers of the Little League

program in Busch Stadium. Players were able to see their names in print and to see themselves on the video screen that showcases MLB's top players. A Hall of Famer, the late Tony Gwynn, was part of the cheering committee that greeted each player as they reached home plate.

At the event, The Champions' Pledge was written and read by Miller's son, Corey Miller, and it remains part of the program at the Colt World Series (see inset).

The Champions League Game at the 2025 Colt World Series will take place at 6 p.m. Saturday, August 2, at Mtn. Dew Park in Marion.

PONY's Champions League provides every child, regardless of special needs, the opportunity to participate in America's favorite pastime of baseball and softball. It is PONY's stated goal to provide an environment that enhances the participants' self-esteem, physical mobility and embodies the spirit of teamwork and community.

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Saluki Athletics announces 2025 Hall of Fame class

Six individuals, plus the school's 10 national championship gymnastics teams will enter the hall of fame

TOM WEBER
Saluki Media Services

CARBONDALE — The Southern Illinois University Department of Athletics announced its 2025 Saluki Hall of Fame class today. The distinguished class will be formally inducted in a ceremony on Friday, Oct. 24, and then make public appearances during Homecoming festivities on Saturday, Oct. 25.

The 2025 six-person class features Jeremy Chinn (Football), Fabray Collins (Football), Shaye Harre (Softball), Brianna Jones (Softball), Rodney Watson (Men's Basketball Coach) and Peyton Wilhoit (Men's Golf). The Saluki Hall of Fame will also induct the school's 10 national championship men's and women's gymnastics teams from 1964-74.

Jeremy Chinn Football (2016-19)

A first-ballot Hall of Famer, Chinn ranks among the most accomplished players in school history as a Consensus All-American (2019) and three-time All-MVFC performer. An ADA Academic All-Star and finalist for the Buck Buchanan Award his senior year, Chinn recorded 243 tackles, 13 interceptions, 31 passes defended and 6 forced fumbles in his career. The elite safety was a second-round 2020 NFL Draft pick by the Carolina Panthers. Chinn has enjoyed a six-year pro career and is currently a member of the Las Vegas Raiders.

Fabray Collins Football (1981-83)

Collins set the school record for



career tackles with 443 — a mark that has stood the test of time, as he remains atop the school's all-time tackles list. A three-year starter and All-MVC selection his senior year, Collins helped lead SIU to the 1983 I-AA National Championship. He played one season in the NFL with the Minnesota Vikings, and in 2013, Collins was named to SIU's All-Century team.

Shaye Harre Softball, 2014-17

Harre was a three-time All-MVC selection and two-time Academic All-American for the Salukis. Primarily playing first base, the left-handed slugger finished her career eighth in batting average (.330), first in doubles (49) and fifth in home runs (30). As a senior, Harre earned All-Region honors and helped lead SIU to a conference title and NCAA Regional appearance.

Brianna Jones Softball (2016-19)

A dominant pitcher, Jones re-wrote SIU's record book, setting career marks for wins (91), innings

pitched (851.0), appearances (168) and complete games (90). She was a four-time First-Team All-MVC selection and two-time All-Region pick. Jones pitched three no-hitters in her career and set the school record for strikeouts in a game (20). She led the team to two NCAA Regional appearances (2017, 2019).

Rodney Watson Men's Basketball Coach (1989-2009)

Watson coached 21 seasons as a member of the staffs of Rich Herring, Bruce Weber, Matt Painter and Chris Lowery, and his teams advanced to either the NCAA or NIT in 15 seasons. He was a member of more NCAA Tournament (9) and NIT Tournament (6) teams than any coach in program history, as SIU compiled a 431-237 record and won seven regular season and four conference tournament championships during his tenure.

Peyton Wilhoit Men's Golf (2015-19)

Wilhoit became the first four-time All-Conference selection in

program history and led the team to the first two MVC Championships and NCAA Regional appearances in school history (2016, 2019). He also qualified for the 2018 NCAA Regionals as the MVC Golfer of the Year. Wilhoit set school records for season stroke average (71.64 in 2019) and career rounds in the 60s (14), while winning MVC Golfer of the Week honors 11 times.

Men's Gymnastics National Championship Teams (1964, 1966, 1967, 1972)

Women's Gymnastics National Championship Teams (1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1974)

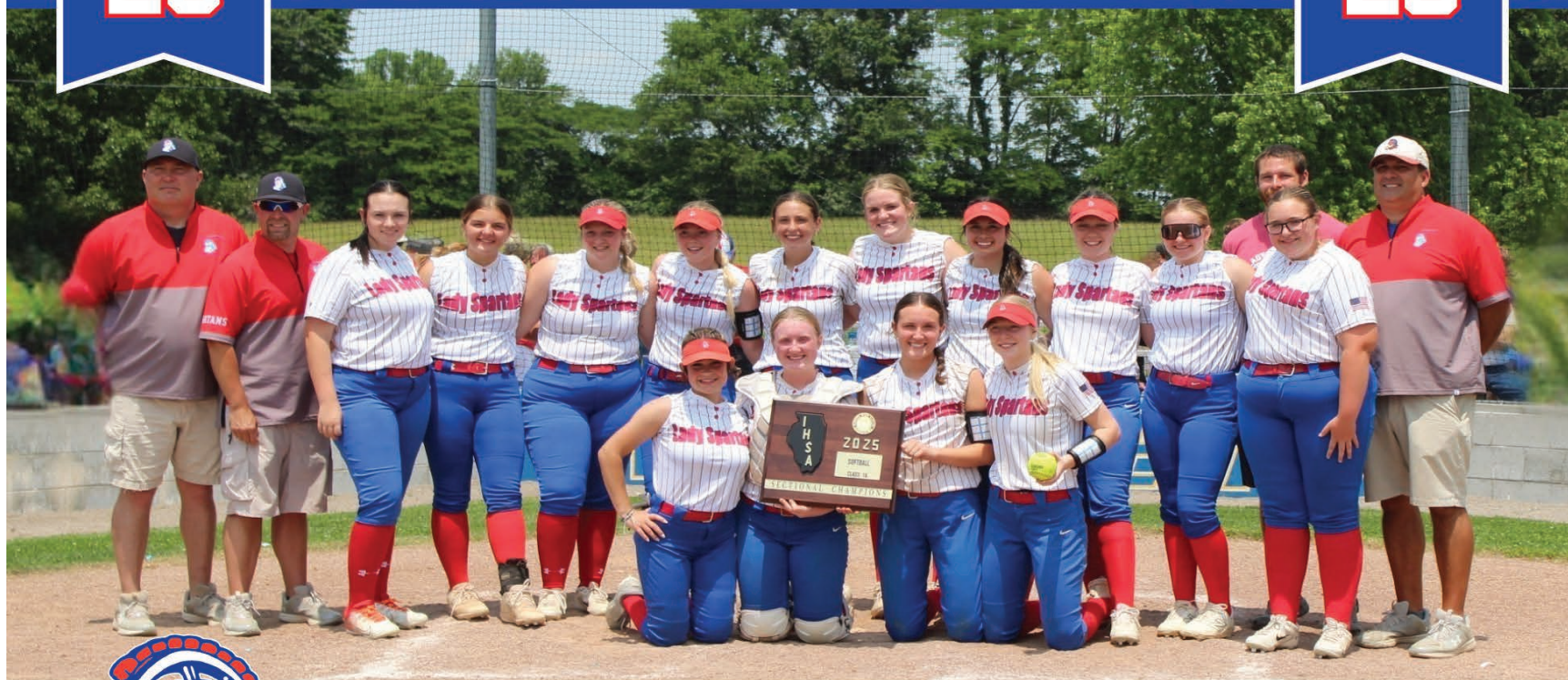
SIU's men's and women's gymnastics programs won a combined 10 national championships during a span of 11 seasons from 1964-74. Coached by Hall of Famers Bill Meade and Herb Vogel, SIU won numerous individual national titles, as the program brought great distinction to the University.

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Local teen reunites with Cardinals stars 11 years after fighting rare brain disease

AARON PRICE
Swinford Publications

ST. LOUIS — Former St. Louis Cardinals stars Jon Jay and Daniel Descalso first visited Charlie Patrick in 2014 as he was fighting for his life against an extremely rare and dangerous brain disease. Charlie was just four years old at the time.

Fast-forward 11 years later, Charlie got the opportunity recently to reunite with them prior to a game against the Chicago Cubs.

“He is a huge Cardinals fan. He has really grown to love baseball. To get to meet them again was really special. I don’t know if he understands completely how rare that experience is,” said Ryan Patrick, Charlie’s father.

Patrick also got to meet his favorite current St. Louis Cardinals player, Alec Burleson along with catcher Yohel Pozo and Manager Oli Marmol.

“Back in 2014, Jon Jay visited with us in his hospital room. Around 30 minutes later, he came



Former St. Louis Cardinals stars Jon Jay (left) and Daniel Descalso (right) first visited Charlie Patrick (middle) in 2014 as he was fighting for his life against an extremely rare and dangerous brain disease. Charlie was just four years old at the time. Fast-forward 11 years later, Charlie got the opportunity recently to reunite with them prior to a game against the Chicago Cubs.

back and had Daniel Descalso with him. They both visited with us. At the time Charlie had just

turned four. He doesn’t remember much about it. The pictures and the stories are what makes

him remember,” Ryan said.

Charlie was diagnosed with an extremely rare brain disease that required a surgery.

The only way to treat it is to disconnect the two hemispheres of the brain, and has left him with lifelong complications.

“It took a long time to finally get him to catch up to where he should be developmentally. At that time, the surgery was done to save his life. We were in the hospital for five weeks because he had to learn how to walk. He was a trooper and he was four years old,” Patrick continued.

Charlie and his family remained in the hospital for five weeks while he re-learned how to walk and move correctly.

He still suffers from the lasting effects of the disease, but has been seizure free since June 2014.

“He actually said, ‘This is the best day of my life!’ He was beaming, it was so cool for all of us to have that experience. We have powerful memories of that time,” Patrick continued.



LOCAL AAU TEAM PLACES THIRD AT AAU WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS

The Southern Illinois Select, a local youth basketball program based out of Marion, placed third in the 17U Division of the AAU World Championships, which were held at the ESPN Wide World of Sports at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida from July 3-7. The tournament featured hundreds of teams from all around the country and world. Left to right: Assistant coach Sam Swinford, media director Ross Swinford, Owen Grogran (Paducah, Ky.), Zack Persing (Carlyle), Logan Wring (Livingston Central, Ky.), Nathaniel Marlow (Webber), Adren Smith (Martin, Tn.), Quentin Osburn (West Frankfort), Jackson Klope (Paducah, Ky.), Jude Harmon (Massac County), Gage Peterson (Waltonville), Nick King (Goreville), assistant coach Mike Blakemore and head coach Riley Swinford.

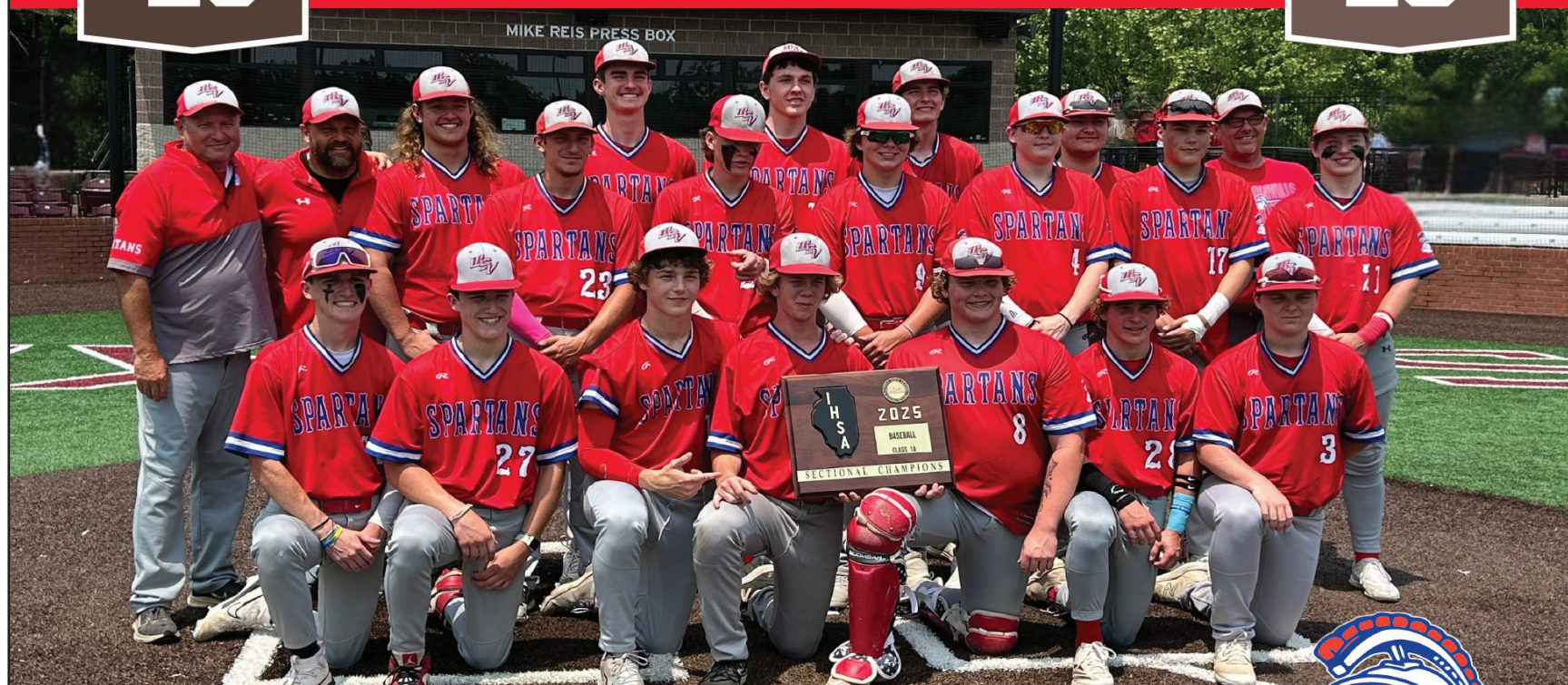
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Memories of a life-changing phone call

Like many folks, I get a large assortment of emails daily. Some I read, some I attempt to read and many I quickly send to the trash. On a recent day I received a short press release from Rend Lake College that triggered something in my memory and started me on a pleasant little trek down memory lane.

It's even more interesting that the press release didn't contain any gripping news and I had only heard of one person listed in the information. I love it when that happens.

Here's the memory behind that story:

I am an unabashed fan and cheerleader of community colleges and I have been for decades. In fact, I've often said that a phone call to Rend Lake College more than 35 years ago literally changed my life. And that phrase "changed my life" is not a figure of speech or an exaggeration.

Let me explain.

I went to work as an under-



A FEW RANDOM THOUGHTS

BY JIM MUIR

ground coal miner on December 6, 1971, which was one month after my 18th birthday. Now, more than 50 years later, that single sentence I just wrote makes me shudder and wince, because I was just a kid, an immature, naive kid when I entered into a new world as an underground coal miner. Yeah, "shudder" and "wince" are good words to use when remembering those days.

And for 20 years that was my life, my education, riding a "cage" 675 feet underground daily, swing shifts, dirty, dusty, fatal accidents,

wildcat strikes, a life with a lot of uncertainties. I've often said that the old Johnny Cash song, "Dark as a Dungeon" that was written about working in the mines, contained a chorus that summed up the life of a coal miner perfectly. It said:

"Where it's dark as a dungeon and damp as the dew,
Where the dangers are many and the pleasures are few,
Where the rain never falls and the sun never shines,
It's dark as a dungeon way down in the mines."

Looking back, it's interesting that all through those 20 years as a coal miner I had a feeling and a hunch that one day, some day, I would do something different. I always felt that I could and I always dreamed that I would know a life beyond the coal industry. I can't explain why I felt that way, but I always had a gut-feeling that there was something else I would do.

But, looking back I was like that little mouse on the spinning wheel that just keeps going. Good wages, good benefits, a family to support – getting off that wheel seemed very unlikely most days. Still, I continued to dream.

Even though I was unaware at the time, that "feeling" of a different life started to take shape on a cold January afternoon in 1990 when I walked into the "wash house" and saw a group of men standing around a bulletin board. The single piece of paper on Old Ben Coal Company letterhead said: "This mine will cease operation in 60 days..."



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That was as far as I read in the first sentence. I stepped away from the crowd of worried miners and my very first thought involved that “feeling” I said I had about a life outside the coal mines. I can distinctly remember to this day that my first thought was: “OK, Muir...here’s your chance...it’s time to put up or shut up.”

The very next day I made that phone call - the one I still refer to as a life-changing phone call — to Rend Lake College. That started the ball rolling that led to me entering college for the first time at age 39.

I’ve often said that if somebody at RLC would have said “boo” to me I would have ran off and hid. In other words, I was scared to death.

Instead, I was met with help, hope, encouragement and support. I also met an instruc-

tor named Christine Kuberski, who knew I was a laid-off coal miner, and pulled me aside one day during my second year and encouraged me to pursue a career as a writer and a speaker. I had her in a speech class and a rhetoric & comp class and she told me I had a “raw” talent in both areas. Wow! That was all I needed — a purpose and a direction.

The “feeling” I had all those years became my goal and then it became my reality. Looking back, Christine Kuberski looks like a prophetess!

In order to finish this story, I have to go back to the press release that triggered all these memories and is the basis behind what I write in this space. And it even has a sports angle, which helps me tie it in to this publication.

The press release detailed that 12 players from this year’s RLC

baseball team had signed to play at the next level. And with a 23-man roster, that’s impressive, I thought. It listed the players by name and told the different colleges they would be attending as a student/athlete next year.

I thought of those 12 “boys” (and at my age they are still boys) and what they must have been feeling two years ago. Almost all of them were from outside Illinois, so there was a big transition to make, and I’m sure there were many questions in their mind, uncertainties, obstacles and maybe some doubts — similar to a 39-year-old, laid-off coal miner taking a college course for the first time.

I wondered if they thought “here’s my chance.” And now, according to the press release, they had made the made the best of that “chance” and were moving on to another level. Reading about

these accomplishments made my day better!

In the end, I didn’t know any of those 12 young men in that press release, but I know the sometimes-bumpy road they traveled very well.

And this simple column is a good way for me to tell 12 strangers: “best of luck in the future and thanks for stirring up some wonderful memories about a life-changing phone call.”

— **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.

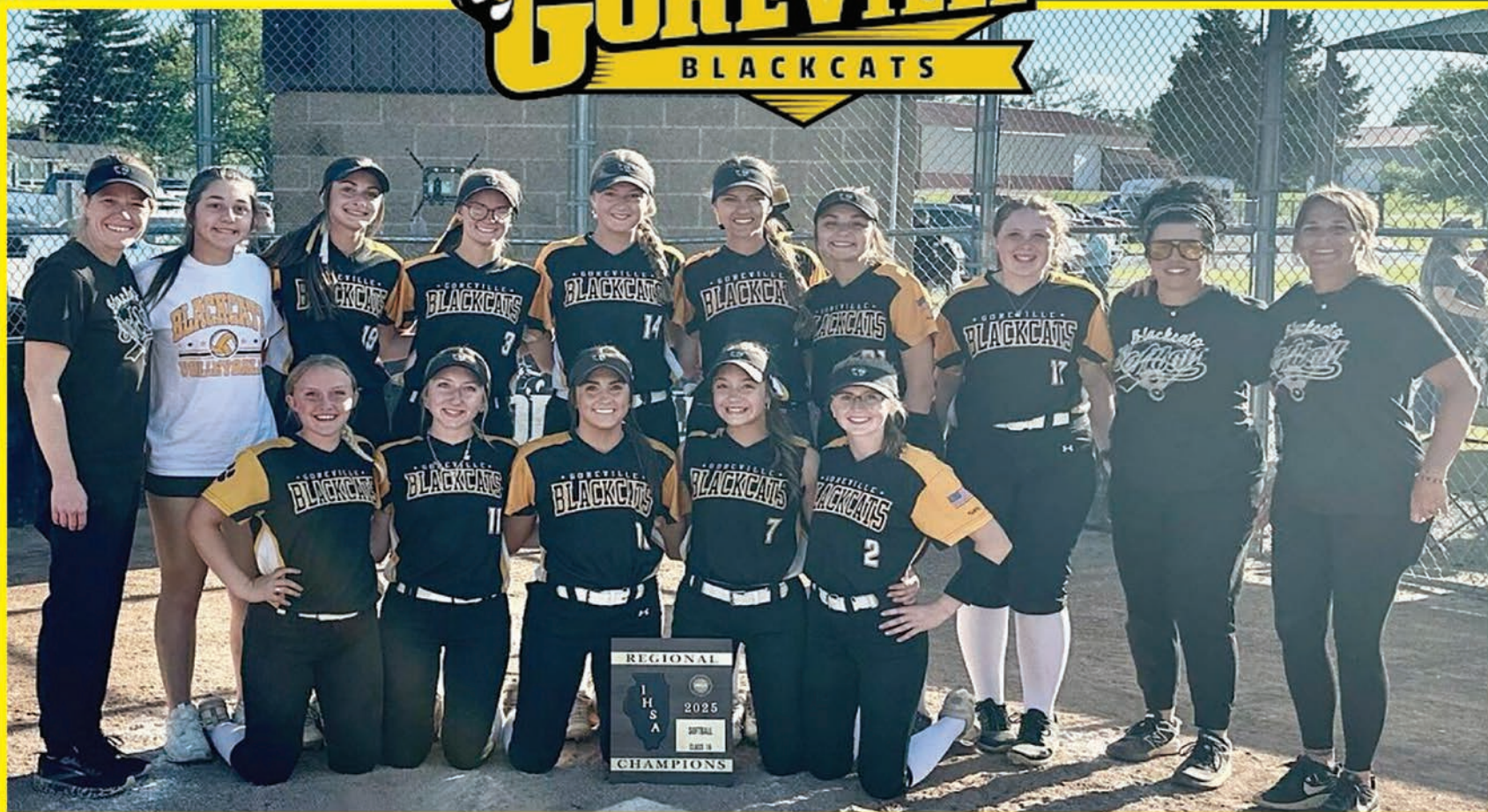


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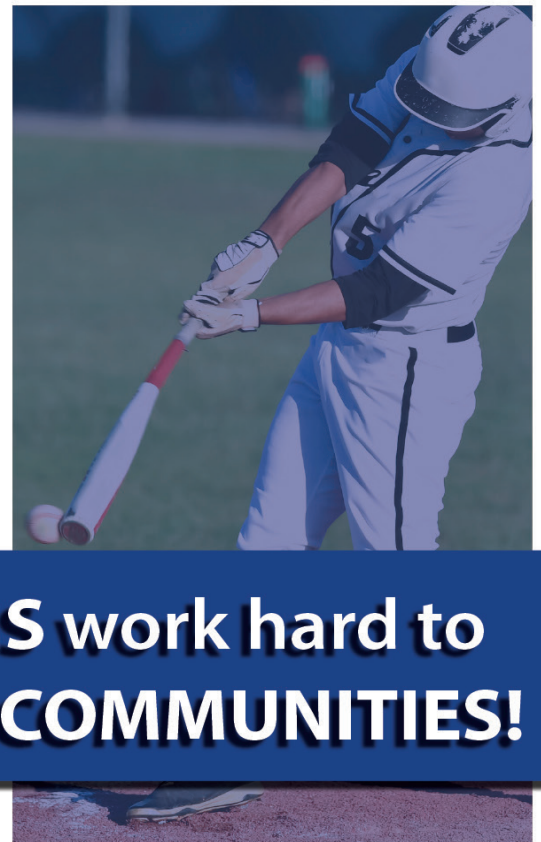
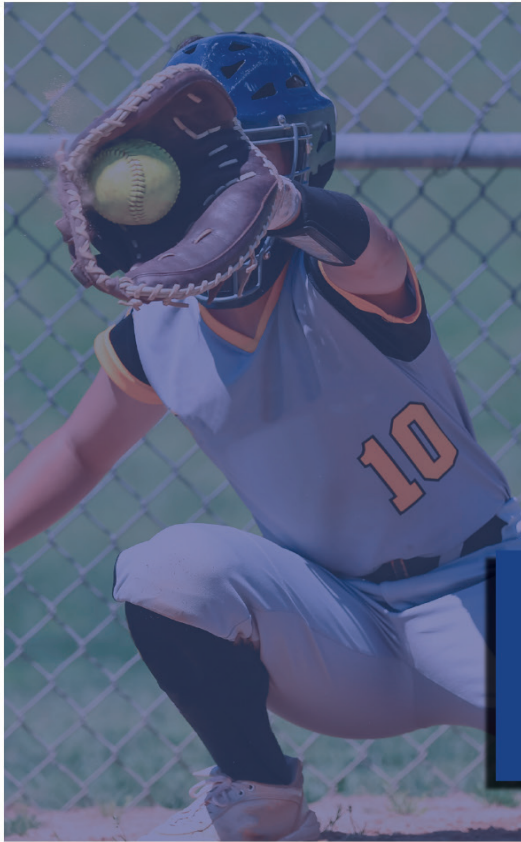
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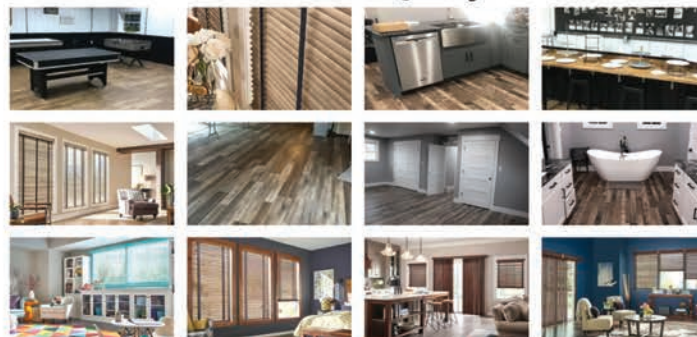
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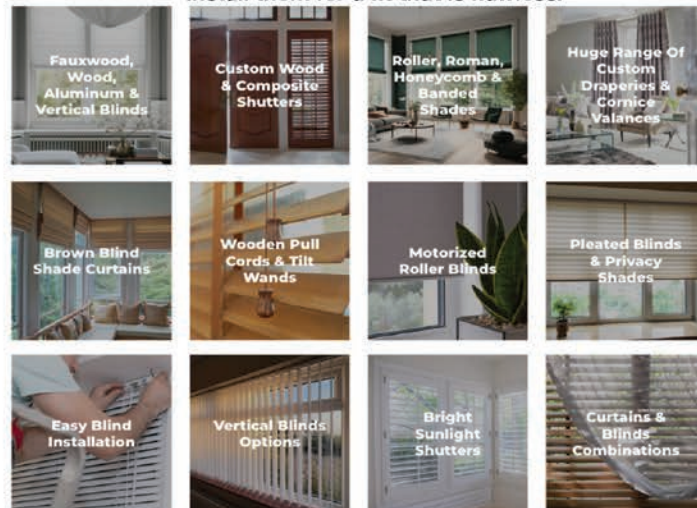
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