

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS SPORTS CONNECTION

October 2025 • Single Copy Free

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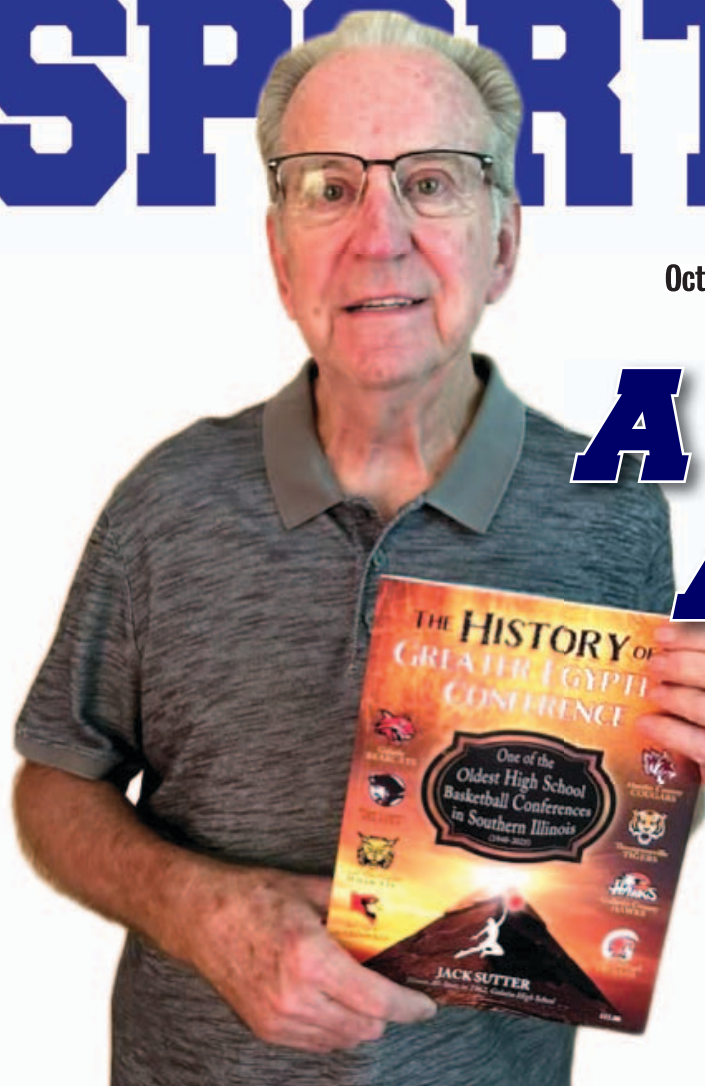


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A LIFELONG LOVE AFFAIR WITH BASKETBALL



From his playing days at tiny Galatia High School, to coaching at the Division I level, to penning a book about the Greater Egyptian Conference, **Jack Sutter's** life has always revolved around basketball. *page 6*

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We are heading into the final quarter of the 2025 calendar

Greetings and welcome to the October issue of Southern Illinois Sports Connection!

It seems like it was about 15 minutes ago that I was writing about the much-anticipated start of the high school football season and by the time you read this we will be heading into the final one-third of the nine-game regular season with our eyes firmly-fixed on those amazing Saturday afternoon playoff games — one of the most exciting times during the high school sports calendar.

And speaking of going fast... this October issue of SISC will propel us into the final quarter of the 2025 calendar! Wasn't I just wishing everybody a Happy New Year?

As my late mother Geraldine often reminded me when I was younger: "The days are long and the years are short." As with most things, she was spot-on in that assessment of how fast time flies by!

I am excited about this issue of SISC for a variety of reasons. Let me explain.

Our cover story this month is about a love affair of sorts — a lifelong love story that started decades ago in Saline County and is still flourishing today. As a youngster living in tiny Galatia, Illinois back in the 1950s Jack Sutter, picked up a basketball and a lifelong love affair ensued. Sutter went on to have a standout career at Galatia, from the Greater Egyptian Conference (GEC) and then play at Middle Tennessee State.

After an outstanding career



FROM THE PUBLISHER

BY JIM MUIR

coaching at the college ranks, Sutter has turned into quite a "scribe" in his retirement, penning three books.

His latest book highlights the history of the GEC, which includes Galatia, Pope County, Carrier Mills, Norris City-Omaha-Enfield (NCOE), Hardin County, Thompsonville, Gallatin County and Crab Orchard.

You will enjoy Sutter's journey from the sandlots of Galatia to the pinnacle of Division I basketball and his latest book is a must-read for high school basketball fans across the region.

Davy Broy also pens a wonderful feature story this month on a sometimes-forgotten aspect of high school sports — volunteers — those unsung heroes who work behind the scenes in a variety of ways to help promote sports at their respective school.

The Broy feature highlights the volunteer work of Tara Perjenski, who has volunteered for West Frankfort schools for more than three decades.

Look around at school throughout our region and there are a lot of people just like Tara Perjenski

who work tirelessly to help promote local sports.

This month is also one of transition as we bid farewell to longtime contributor Bob Pankey, who has served as the statewide director of Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Bob has contributed a monthly column for FCA during the past few years and it has become a staple of what we do and what we hope to accomplish here at SISC. Bob is leaving FCA to go into full-time ministry and we are certainly grateful to him for his wonderful and spot-on contributions. Bob will be sorely missed!

But, on the good news side of that story, FCA will continue to submit a monthly column in SISC. Brian Laur, of Sesser, who serves as an area director for FCA, will grab the keyboard in Pankey's absence and begin in November with his first column.

I am thrilled to see Bob pursue a direction that he feels God is leading him and I am equally thrilled to have an outstanding young man like Brian become a part of our team.

Also, this month we welcome guest columnist Gerry Macken-

zie, who put together a great read this month that will go hand-in-hand with the wonderful October tradition of Major League Baseball post season that will culminate with the Fall Classic.

Gerry, who lives in Hamilton County and has been a long-time friend, certainly raises some interesting points and questions in his first-time visit to SISC. We hope to see Gerry on our pages again!

And as always, we are proud and appreciative of all our monthly contributors who help in making this the most unique and one-of-a-kind publication ever here in Southern Illinois.

In case you were questioning that last sentence, it's "no brag... just fact."

Finally, and as always, a big thank you to all our monthly advertisers who continue to support our monthly endeavor of love and to all the local businesses who allow us to place our FREE publication in their business for our legions of readers to devour SISC each month.

Thanks for taking the time to read this and God's blessings to you!

Jim Muir,
Publisher of Southern Illinois
Sports Connection

Pause, Reflect, Assess, Advance

I've always been a big rhythm guy. I love finding rhythms in life, in work, in ministry...in everything!

One of the things I loved about coaching the great game of high school football several years ago is that there was a consistent rhythm every week. I held coaches' preparation meetings on the weekend.

On Monday we prepped our team for that week's opponent coming up by introducing that week's game plan and working on any installs we needed to implement for that team.

Tuesday and Wednesday were the bread-and-butter days of practice week, with heavy emphasis on offensive and defensive reps, working out the "kinks" and getting our kids confident in the game plan.

On Thursday we added any finishing touches to the offense and defense, locked in our special teams for the week and held our team meal and team building time.

Friday was game day...enough said. Saturday was an opportunity to evaluate the previous night's game on film and tend to any injuries or "dings" to the bodies of our players.

Then wash, rinse & repeat... every single week throughout the season. For a guy like me, that works out really well because... well...I love rhythms!

I realize most sports can't follow this kind of regularity of schedule but I did enjoy it during my football coaching years.

As much as I like rhythms, we also have to make sure our rhythms don't turn into ruts. So, taking time to PAUSE, REFLECT, ASSESS and then ADVANCE is a great "rhythm" within itself.

Certainly, any sports team that



FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIAN ATHLETES

BY BOB PANKEY



FCA was heavily involved in man of the "See You at the Pole" prayer events held throughout the region in September.

expects to have any effectiveness at all will find a way to incorporate these things.

And we follow these same "rhythms" of PAUSE, REFLECT, ASSESS and ADVANCE in FCA as well. FCA's fiscal year runs Sept. 1 through Aug. 31.

So, our ministry just wrapped Fiscal Year 2025 and has begun Fiscal Year 2026.

This is a great time for us to PAUSE, REFLECT, ASSESS and ADVANCE.

A few reflections and assessments from FCA's Fiscal Year 2025:

Our last ministry year saw incredible growth and impact in the lives of coaches and athletes in nearly 70 countries worldwide. FCA is continuing to advance

the Kingdom of God through the influence of sport in many key areas.

Grew to 3,175 teammates (staff).

Hosted over 23,000 Huddles (FCA Bible study & prayer groups).

Hosted 950 FCA Camps with just under 90,000 attendees.

Increased to 190 FCA Sports Leagues and 414 FCA Clubs (ran and administrated by the FCA Ministry)

Distributed close to 245,000 Bibles.

Celebrated 52,473 who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord of their life!

Praise God! What an amazing ministry year of Kingdom growth! Make no mistake, while lots of faithful FCA staff, volunteers, donors and coaches helped these accomplishments occur, THE LORD HIMSELF empowered His people and brought the increase! It's all Him!

And FCA is now gearing up for another year of Engaging, Equipping & Empowering coaches and athletes.

As previously mentioned, it's a very healthy practice for teams to implement a PAUSE, REFLECT, ASSESS & ADVANCE rhythm for sure.

But it's also healthy for individuals as well. Hopefully each of us is putting this practice into action in our own lives. I know I am. And it's this practice in my life that has led me to a transition time in my life.

Over the past several months, the Lord has been steering my path in a bit of a different direction and I couldn't be more excited about it!

My time as a staff person with FCA will come to an end on Oct. 31 of this year and I will be stepping into the Lead Pastor role at my home church.

I love FCA, I love what FCA is about, I love what FCA does, I love our teams of staff/volunteers/donors/coaches within FCA...I love it all!

Which is why I know for certain this is a direction God is taking me rather than my own desire or ambition. My time on staff with FCA has been one of the greatest experiences of my life and I will always be grateful for my time with this awesome organization.

But my own PAUSE, REFLECT, ASSESS and ADVANCE strategy has led me in a different direction. The executive leadership with FCA has been extremely

gracious and understanding of this decision and are choosing to send me out with their blessing, of which I am very grateful. That means you, the readers of this great publication, will have the opportunity to hear from someone else on a monthly basis concerning the ministry of FCA!

Brian Laur is the Southern Illinois Area Director for FCA and will be taking over this monthly article beginning in the November issue. Brian is a phenomenal leader and will do a great job sharing about FCA with you all on a regular basis. I can't wait to read what he shares each month!

I want to offer a very special thanks to Jim Muir for allowing me the privilege of regularly sharing my thoughts over the past several years in Southern Illinois Sports Connection magazine.

I pray that it has been helpful for at least a few. I also want to thank so many of you, the readers, who have reached out to me regularly to thank me for the column. I appreciate your encouragement! If I could leave the reader with one last thought it would be this: God has allowed us the amazing blessing of many enjoyments in life, including sports.

But nothing in life will ever be

as important as the simple Gospel...that God sent His Son Jesus to die on a cross for every single one of us so that our sins could be forgiven and so that we could have an intimate relationship with God for eternity if we will submit our lives to Him. That's the ultimate ADVANCE!

Our mission is to lead every coach and athlete into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church. If you'd like to support the work of FCA or if you have questions, don't hesitate to reach out at bpankey@fca.org or blaur@fca.org!

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A lifelong love affair with basketball

From his playing days at tiny Galatia High School, to coaching at the Division I level, to penning a book about the Greater Egyptian Conference, **Jack Sutter's** life has always revolved around basketball.

Cover story •
BY JIM MUIR

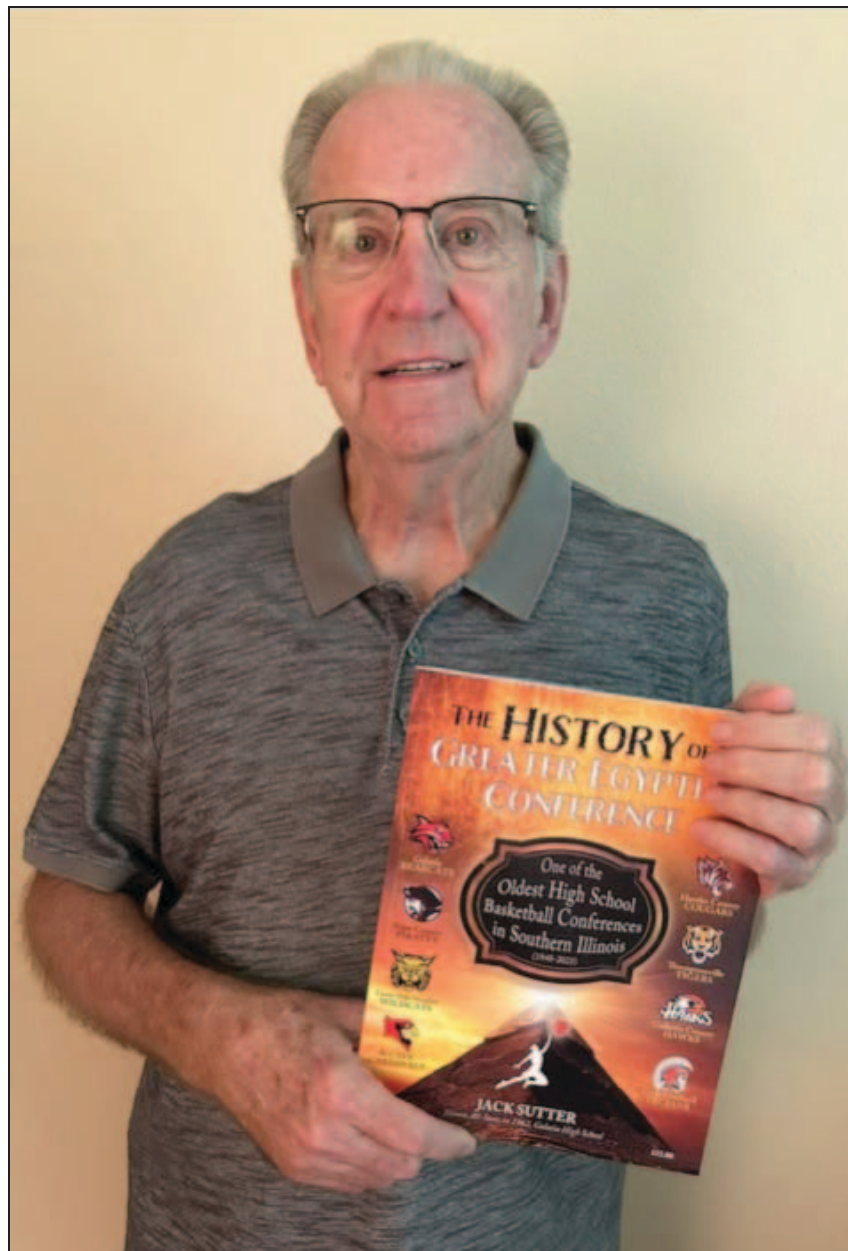
Back in the early 1950s young Jack Sutter picked up a basketball, bounced it on a sandlot court and then launched it toward a rickety outside goal. And with that single shot, a love affair with basketball began that has spanned all or parts of eight decades.

With that humble beginning as a backdrop, Sutter (who is now 81 years old) is still involved in basketball, recently authoring a book about the glory days of the Greater Egyptian Conference, one of the oldest high school basketball conferences in Southern Illinois.

The GEC began in 1948 and is still thriving in 2025 — a 77-year span. The GEC is comprised of the Galatia Bearcats, Pope County Pirates, Carrier Mills Wildcats, Norris City-Omaha-Enfield Cardinals, Hardin County Cougars, Thompsonville Tigers, Gallatin County Hawks and Crab Orchard Trojans.

Sutter graduated from Galatia in 1962 and during his playing days he was a three-year varsity starter and earned All-State honors his senior season, back in an era when Illinois still had a one-class system in basketball. Sutter readily admits that once he started playing basketball as a youngster it really was a true case of love at first sight.

“From the time I first started playing, I’ve been a basketball junkie. I loved basketball and



Jack Sutter is pictured with a copy of his latest book, “The History of the Greater Egyptian Conference.”

studied basketball, so I understood the game when I was young. I was pretty good with the ball and a pretty good shooter and passer. I’ve had more than one coach tell me that they looked at me as having a coach on the floor. I always took that as a great compliment.”

Sutter gives his high school coach, J.W. Pulliam, much credit for his opportunity to handle the ball.

“I was 6-feet-1 and I was the third tallest player on the team,” recalled Sutter. “To Coach Pulliam’s credit and to my benefit, he played me at the point guard position, and I was a pretty good-sized point guard back in that day.”

Sutter scored 1,320 points during his career at Galatia, without the benefit of the three-point shot.

“I shot the majority of my shots from beyond the arc, and I was looking for a shot when I crossed the half line,” Sutter recalled with a laugh. “I remember the makeup of the GEC during those days was really good basketball.”

Being a self-proclaimed basketball junkie, Sutter used his nights off from basketball at Galatia to watch other teams play.

“We (Galatia) played on Tuesday and Friday and the South Seven played on Friday and Saturday – which I always thought was silly – but I loved it because I loved basketball so much that I would go to Harrisburg or Benton or Marion to watch games,” said Sutter.

"I admired those players, but I didn't think that brand of basketball was any better than the GEC. I was envious of the gyms and crowds, but I sat there and watched and thought, I am better than some of these guys that I hear a lot about and I thought some of the top teams in the GEC could play against some of the South Seven teams. It was a numbers game; they had more numbers and that meant they had, over-all, more talent."

Sutter said Galatia, with 150 students, played a tough schedule against McLeansboro, Eldorado, Sesser-Valier and Christopher to name a few.

"We were playing up against schools that had twice as many students as we did," Sutter said. "I loved playing against good teams in nice gyms. It made us better."

Sutter signed out of high school

to play basketball at University of Missouri but transferred after one year to Middle Tennessee State where he played for three years.

The move to MTSU was also instrumental in Sutter's life because it's where he met two players from Benton – Tom Whittington and the late Terry Thomas – who became lifetime friends, and also where he played for legendary Coach Ken Trickey. While he couldn't have known it when he transferred to MTSU, Sutter's player-coach relationship with Trickey opened the door to many coaching opportunities later in his life.

"Missouri was a mistake for me from the get-go," Sutter said. "I was sort of lost at Missouri. It was a football college and the basketball facilities at that time were terrible. After one semester,

I knew I had made a mistake, and I had the opportunity to transfer. I had to sit out a year. At MTSU I played for Ken Trickey – a Cairo native. MTSU was in the Ohio Valley Conference and it was just good solid basketball and I could play there. It was a great decision on my part to go there."

Unlike the portal system now in place, in that era if a player transferred, they had to sit out a year.

"I think sitting out a year hurt me some," he said. "I had an OK career at Middle Tennessee, I averaged 9 points a game and I was named MVP one year and named as an all-defensive player two years, but I never got my confidence back as a scorer after I sat out that year."

see **COVER STORY** page 8

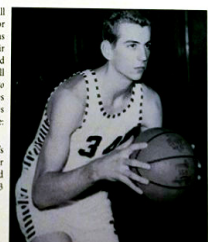
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jack Sutter grew up in Galatia and graduated from high school there in 1962. Like many of the other basketball players in the GEC, he honed his basketball skills on the dirt court in his backyard. Also, like many other players in the conference, his high school coach, JW Pulliam, played a major role in his development, on and off the court. Jack finished his career at Galatia with the record for most points in a game (44) against Ridgway, most points in a season (560) a 25.5 per game average, and most points in a career (1,320). He was voted to the All-Southern Illinois First Team, he was two-time All-GEC, one year the captain and his senior year MVP. All-Area by the Evansville Courier, and picked on the 1962 Champaign News Gazette All-State Team. He received over 20 scholarship offers. Jack signed a scholarship to play at the University of Missouri. He transferred to Middle Tennessee State University where he played for three years and graduated in 1967. He has coached for 22 years at every level: Assistant at Otwell Community College (KS), Head Basketball Coach at Salem, IL High School, and Head Coach at Bloomington High School in Brandon, FL.

Jack fell in love with the game of basketball as an 8-year-old in 1952. His passion for the game is obvious in his writings. He has written two books, the first is a memoir entitled *Welcome to My World*. The second book is about the 75 greatest basketball players of all time, *The GOAT: The Quest to Find the Best*. He has written several articles for basketball publications. His articles about basketball can be found on his website: www.thebasketballgout.com

Jack has been married to Diane (yes, that's right, Jack and Diane) a retired schoolteacher for 53 years. They have three children and eight grandchildren, ranging in age from 23 to 10 years old.



A page from Jack Sutter's latest book, "The History of the Greater Egyptian Conference" shows the author now and during his playing days at Galatia in the early 1960s.





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COVER STORY

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Interestingly, Sutter said losing his starting spot and becoming a sixth man off the bench his senior season actually changed the trajectory of his life.

“Coach Trickey recruited a 6-foot-3 point guard and I lost my starting spot to him and I came off the bench for the first time in my career,” said Sutter. “I knew I was going to get my degree and teach and coach, so instead of being upset that I was not starting, I embraced that role of sixth man and coming off the bench. If I played five minutes or 10 minutes, I tried to make something happen to help my team. I never got down, I never complained and I never bad-mouthed anybody. I tried to be a team player.”

After completing his degree at MTSU, Sutter took a teaching job in the Detroit area. Three years later he received a phone call with a very familiar voice on the other end.

“I got a call from Coach Trickey and he offered me a job coaching at Oral Roberts University as his assistant,” said Sutter. “I went there for a weekend visit and I knew by Sunday afternoon that I definitely wanted to coach at Oral Roberts. Coach Trickey told me that how I handled not being a starter my senior year at Middle Tennessee is what got me that job.”

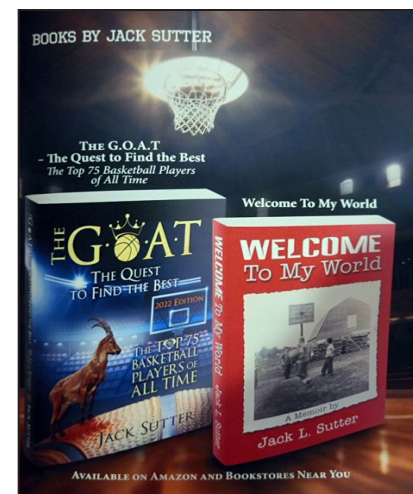
Sutter was at ORU for four years, with their best team losing to Kansas in the 1974 Midwest Regional final, a loss that kept Oral Roberts from going to the Final Four.

After leaving ORU, Sutter went back to Detroit as an athletic

director and then coached with Trickey again at Iowa State for one year. He then came back to Illinois and was hired at Salem as athletic director and basketball coach, where he stayed for three years. He then spent five years at Butler Community College coaching.

Even though he felt a year sitting out after he transferred from Missouri to MTSU hurt his career, Sutter is not a fan of the portal system.

“It hurts the mid-majors, it hurts high school athletes and it takes away any chance of recruiting a player and then developing his talent,” said Sutter. “There is no chance now in college basketball to build a player/coach relationship. Players come in now and it’s often one-and-done. Some players play for four or five schools during their college career.”



Jack Sutter's latest book is his third. His first two, also basketball related are titled, “Welcome to My World: A memoir by Jack Sutter” and “The GOAT: A Quest to Find the Best,” which lists the top 75 NBA players according to criterion based on statistics he developed during 22 years of coaching.

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Sutter got the idea of writing about the GEC when he heard that the annual mid-winter tournament was the longest-running in the state at 77 years. That prompted him to begin doing research on the conference and the rest is history. Writing was not something foreign to Sutter, who has authored two other basketball related books. His first, "Welcome to My World: A Memoir by Jack Sutter" chronicles his life and the constant presence of basketball. His second book is "The GOAT: The Quest to Find the Best," which names the top 75 professional basketball players of all time. Sutter emphasizes that the book is not necessarily his favorite players or even who he thinks is the greatest, but is based on pure statistics.

"I have a friend who is an NBA savant, he can tell you off the

top of his head who the leading rebounder was in the league in 1983, and he provided all the statistics," said Sutter. "Our top 75 was based on a criterion of statistics established during my 22 years of coaching experience."

As a little bit of a tease, Michael Jordan is not the GOAT according to Sutter's book, and neither is his boyhood idol.

Sutter said compiling the information to create the history of the GEC has been a pure labor of love – love for the conference, the coaches who spent decades there and all the players who have pulled on a uniform from one of the eight schools.

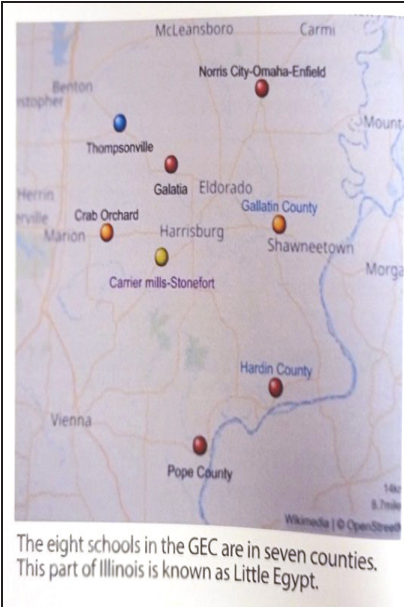
"One of the greatest compliments that I have been given is when I had people tell me that this book will be used in the future for reference," said Sutter. "To show the amount of work, when we

started, we could only find 25 of the 77 MVPs of the league. After a lot of work and research, we have now named 70 of the 77. The best part is connecting with people I played against and all the new people I met. No matter at what level you play you never forget your high school days. Reflecting back on my high school days brought back some wonderful memories."

At age 81, Sutter said the idea of leaving part of the great basketball legacy of the GEC behind also played into his decision to write the book.

"Yes, leaving something behind was a factor in writing this book. I have to be honest about that," he said. "But I made so many friendships. I hope I have done my part in recording history."

see **COVER STORY** page 8



The eight schools in the GEC are in seven counties. This part of Illinois is known as Little Egypt.

A map in Jack Sutter's latest book shows the eight schools in the Greater Egyptian Conference that are spread out over seven counties.



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COVER STORY

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Anybody interested in any or all of Jack Sutter's books can purchase them on his website at: thebasketballgoat.com or you can reach out to him via Facebook Messenger.

He can also be reached by email at: jackomaxol@gmail.com. The book can also be purchased through Venmo at: <https://venmo.com/u/Jack-Sutter-10>

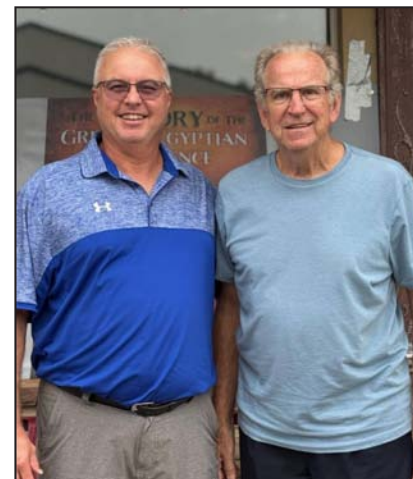
Sutter recently made swing through southern Illinois promoting his latest book, making numerous stops at GEC communities. Sutter and his wife Diane live in Brandon, Florida.

They are the parents of three grown children, Amy, Andrew and Ashlee.

Despite coaching at the DI level and being in some of the greatest basketball facilities in the nation, Sutter still has great memories of the "good old GEC days."

"I was blessed to have played and coached all over the country in front of big crowds, in some of the biggest cities in the United States, but there has never been any situation that was any more exciting than playing for the championship of the GEC in Ridgway, Illinois in front of a packed house," said Sutter.

"It was just really good basketball and it was special and I never forgot that feeling."



Above left: On a recent book tour through Southern Illinois promoting his latest book, Jack Sutter stopped in Ridgway and is pictured with local legend Martin Duffy. Above right: Jack Sutter is pictured with Thompsonville High School head basketball coach Kevin Smith, while promoting his book about the Greater Egyptian Conference.



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'Friday Night Lights' in full swing throughout the region

As high school football season is now in full swing, I enjoy watching the games and also seeing how much other people support their local teams.

Football has been one of my greatest passions over the past 60 plus years. I doubt that any young kid in Southern Illinois liked football more than I did in the 1960s and during that time I was fortunate to watch some great high school teams and players compete not too far from my home.

My family lived just a few blocks from Johnson Field, the home of the West Frankfort Redbirds high school football team, and I started riding my bike to watch the Redbirds varsity team practices in 1961 when I was six years old.

My two brothers Dink and Danny were quite a bit older than me (8 and 11 years) and we grew up in a tough neighborhood called "The Patch." The football field was right in the middle of "The Patch" and during the fall months there were always a lot of football games being played by kids in empty lots throughout our neighborhood.

You had to be tough to survive those games, sometimes with other kids that were a few years older.

My older brothers did their best to prepare me for what I would see growing up in a not so easy world. They never cut me any slack and at times that wasn't much fun.

As I grew older though, I learned to greatly appreciate what they did to try and prepare me for not only life, but also sports because they knew how much that I loved to compete.

While I was in late grade school and junior high, both of my brothers served in the military as



"As I grew older though, I learned to greatly appreciate what they did to try and prepare me for not only life, but also sports because they knew how much that I loved to compete."

decorated war heroes in Vietnam which set an even greater example for me.

While I was in grade school, many of our neighborhood football games included friends and family members who all lived within a few blocks of each other. They included my older cousins by two years Kenny Sloan, Mike "Bones" Sloan, Gary Sloan and Jarrett Broy as well as neighborhood friends Benjie Brown, Harry Riddle and George Culley who were also two years older than me.

Kids from "The Patch" took pride in the fact two NFL players, Lou Levanti and Joe Wendryhoski, grew up in our neighborhood.

Levanti was an All-State football player for FCHS in 1942 and he went on to play at the University of Illinois. In the early 1950's, he played two years in the NFL as an offensive lineman which included one year with the Pittsburgh Steelers and one year with the Detroit Lions.

Wendryhoski was an All-State football player for FCHS in 1956 and he went on to be an All-Big Ten offensive lineman for the

University of Illinois. During the 1960s, he played for five years in the NFL which included three years with the Los Angeles Rams and two years with the New Orleans Saints. He was the Saints offensive captain.

While we were in grade school my football-loving friends and I had the privilege of watching some great high school football players compete at Johnson Field in West Frankfort.

They included Carbondale's Ron Acks who went on to play nine years in the NFL as a linebacker, Marion's Mike Burgener who went on to play defensive back for Notre Dame and their 1966 national championship team and Mt. Vernon's Marvin Kendricks who went on to star as a running back at UCLA and also professionally in the Canadian Football League and the World Football League.

Some of my favorite West Frankfort football players in the 1960s included Bobby Brown, Terry Moake, Billy Barr, Larry Wolfe, Pat Sipes, Jay Kaiser, Charlie Skuta, Leonard Murphy, Jeff Overturf, Tom Pollack, Mike Gunter, Jim Paulk and my cousins

Rocky Morris, John Wilson and Bobby Sloan. Barr, Wolfe, Kaiser, Morris, Gunter, Paulk and Sloan all grew up in our neighborhood, "The Patch."

By the time I started junior high school, my love for football grew even more.

That's when my closest friends and I started playing football on the empty lot behind St. Johns' School. Our group of friends played summer baseball together for several years so it was easy to transition from that to playing football together in the fall.

Those friends included Leonard Hopkins, Mark Roe, Brad McClain, Bruce Swinkunas, Bill Troutt, Jeff Roberts and Gary Samples. We played countless games on the lot behind St. Johns prior to playing high school football together on some very good teams.

Our close-knit group was very proud and excited to later watch our friend Leonard Hopkins go on to be the starting quarterback for the SIU Salukis in 1975.

My love for football has continued to be strong over the past several decades. Now that we're older, my wife Cindy and I love sitting in the bleachers on Friday nights in the fall watching high school football games throughout the area. Football has always been Cindy's favorite sport going back to when we were in high school. It's fun to share our love of the game with each other.

High school football season is such a great time to see how much so many communities can pull together as they support their student/athletes. Johnston City is a perfect example.

In my opinion, no other community in Southern Illinois supports their football program any more than the Johnston City Indian fans.

Friday night lights in the community of just 3,300 residents is one of the most amazing things that I have ever seen in local sports.

You have to witness it first hand to understand the extent of the fan support in Johnston City and the community pride that goes with it.

Good luck to all of the high school football teams in Southern Illinois as they continue this 2025 season and their quest to

advance to the IHSA postseason playoffs.

In closing I want to promote a great cause. I would like to encourage all of our readers to please attend a special event next month at the Orient American Legion in Orient.

"Benefit for a Hero" will be Saturday, Nov. 1, 2025 from 4:00-7:00 p.m. United States Marine Corps

hero Ronald Dean Rogers from West Frankfort gave the ultimate sacrifice for his country in Vietnam on Aug. 31, 1969.

There will be a BBQ dinner (\$10) and a gun raffle (tickets are \$10 or 3 for \$20) to raise funds to purchase a headstone for Ronnie.

If you have questions or want to purchase tickets, please contact my friends Danny Ramsey at 618-927-5057 or Cindy Ramsey at 618-357-1797.

Tickets can also be purchased

at the door. Any support is greatly appreciated!

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

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The oddities of the game of baseball

As the Major League Baseball season approaches its climactic ending, I can't help feeling nostalgic, knowing it will be months before the cry of "Play Ball" will be heard again.

I have been a baseball fan nearly all my life (79 out of 85 years) and I can still recall vividly, reclining on a blanket on Sunday afternoons along the left field line while watching our hometown team, the Ladd (Illinois) Merchants, while listening to the Chicago White Sox on my dad's transistor radio.

I eventually became a "ball boy" and got to retrieve foul balls due to limited funds. This experience was heightened when my dad took me on trips to Chicago to iconic "old" Comiskey Park to watch our beloved White Sox. Highlights included seeing Joe DiMaggio hit two homeruns in a double-header, watching the great Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, Nelson Fox, Minny Minoso, Billy Pierce and the legendary Satchel Paige, when he was with the old St. Louis Browns – anybody remember them?

One lazy summer day when I was about 17 years old, my neighbor and I, knowing the Boston Red Sox were in town, hitchhiked the 100 miles to Chicago to see the immortal Ted Williams in action.

I was able to meet him during their warmups and shake his hand. What a thrill! He went 3-for-4 but our Sox won the game. On a later occasion I watched Jack Harshman, a screw-balling lefty, fan him four times in a row. But boy, did he ever have a beautiful swing.

Our hitchhiking trip did not feature any logical planning, because we didn't consider how we'd get home. Old Comiskey



GUEST COLUMN

BY GERRY MACKENZIE



Guest columnist Gerry Mackenzie points out that baseball managers are the only coaches in professional sports that wear the team's full uniform, sometimes (like St. Louis Cardinals manager Oliver Marmol above), complete with an expensive wrist watch.

was not in one of Chicago's better neighborhoods. Fortunately, a friend of ours was in pharmacy college and he allowed us to crash with him for the night.

My love for baseball has not diminished during the decades. Fact is, I wept when the White Sox recorded the last out in winning the 2005 World Series. As special a moment as that was, whoever was involved, win or lose, the game itself provided a myriad of special moments during the years.

Yet, as wonderful as the game of baseball is, it is not perfect and in fact, leaves the thinking fan searching for answers to perplexing questions.

Consider the following:

Why does the manager wear a baseball uniform? Basketball coaches don't, football coaches don't. I can understand the first and third base coaches doing so, because they are on the field every half inning — but the manager? And why do we see the manager sitting in the dugout

wearing a wrist watch, and nowadays a very expensive one.

Why do the fans, and sometimes the announcers, sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" when they're already there? And the lyrics, "buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks? Why not peanuts and popcorn? Cracker Jacks has peanuts in it"

Why does the home team wait until the seventh inning to "stretch?" The fifth inning is the midway point of the game, it seems more logical to stretch then.

Why do they call it a "knuckle-ball" when it is released from the fingertips? Why is the visiting team pitcher booed for simply throwing a perfunctory lob to first base to hold a baserunner on, when the home team pitcher does the same and receives not criticism.

Why is a weakly hit ball that travels only a few feet called a "swinging bunt" when it was the result of a hefty swing? How is it that a player that grew up playing baseball in the Caribbean, where the sun shines brightly 365 days a year, can lose a ball in the sun? Why are the poles at the end of the lines extended from home plate to the outfield walls, and which are actually in fair territory, called the foul poles? Shouldn't they be called the "fair poles?"

Why award a batter an RBI when the run actually scores on a walk or a hit-by-pitch? Explain the logic that awards a pitcher with a win, when all he does is record a couple of outs in the inning prior to his team taking the lead for good, when the starter he relieved may have recorded seven or eight scoreless innings and is saddled with a "no decision?"

Why does a pitcher who lasts only five innings and gives up two earned runs (which adds up to a mediocre 3.60 ERA) get credit for a quality start? How about semantics, Tommy John never had Tommy John Surgery. Think about that one! Why is it called the on-deck circle when the guy on-deck (next hitter up) rarely ever stands in it?

Fans and management can also contribute to a degree of consternation. When something exciting is about to happen on the field, everybody stands up and nobody can see better! Appearance on the field can also become an issue. Facial hair? Or,

no facial hair? I have no problem with neatly-groomed facial hair, but I do with some of the manes that would be more fitting on a Shetland Pony!

How about uniforms? High socks? Or, ankle-length pants? But what we are talking about here is a baseball “uniform” which, loosely defined, means “the same.” So, teams should make a choice, but make it apply to their entire roster.

How about salaries? They have become obscene! Here’s a bit of perspective: In the 1950s Mickey Mantle won the Triple Crown. Even though his numbers were higher across the board the fol-

lowing year, penny-pinching Yankee general manager, George Weiss, wanted to cut his pay because Ted Williams won the batting title with a .385 mark.

A current pet-peeve — having players “miked-up” when they are actually in the playing field playing (and hopefully) concentrating. Television runs the show!

And finally, how about the million-dollar question: Why aren’t Pete Rose, Barry Bonds and Roger Clements in the Hall of Fame yet?

I’ve covered a lot of territory in this space, but, as Casey Stengel would say: “You kin lookit up.”

—**Gerry Mackenzie** grew up in the tiny North Central Illinois village of Ladd (population 1,300). He is a graduate of Illinois State University. He began his professional career as a teacher and coach. The confinement of the classroom was not to his liking; therefore, his avocation of training bird dogs became his vocation. He became well-known not only as a competitor in bird dog field trials, but also as a journalist, writing reports of field trials and human-interest stories about individuals of note in his profession. He has been a resident of rural Hamilton County for the past 38 years).



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Tara Perjenski...The Ultimate Volunteer

October feature •
BY DAVY BROY

Most coaches, athletic directors and administrators understand that workers for junior high and high school sports programs are invaluable.

Over the past several years I have admired many people from throughout Southern Illinois who gave, or are still giving up their free time to help sports programs in several needed capacities.

Most of these people spend hours away from their families just so that they can be supportive of their local schools and student/athletes.

Whether it's a public address

announcer, an official scorer, scoreboard operator, team manager or any other working capacity, many of these people do it without pay as a volunteer while some do it with a very small stipend that doesn't come close to being equivalent to the time and effort involved.

Just to name a few, I remember the dedication for several decades of great people who have passed away like Tom McKie and Bill Simmons of West Frankfort along with Louie Eovaldi, of Benton, Tim Miller, of Herrin, and David Eaton, of Du Quoin.

Johnston City's Roy Rogers worked for his hometown sports programs for several decades and just recently retired from doing it.



Tara Perjenski helping out at a West Frankfort Lady Redbird basketball game.

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Benton's John D. Aiken also worked for his hometown sport's programs for several decades.

Some who are still active include Ronnie Rowe and Roger Kee, both of Johnston City, Zeigler-Royalton's Randy Risley, West Frankfort's Jim Johnson, Benton's Ron Head, Danny Stewart and Kirby Williams along with Marion's Ralph Walker and Nick Spencer who have all been dedicated workers for several years.

There are others who I have failed to mention. With that being said, they have all done a great service to their communities and they are greatly appreciated.

One of the most dedicated volunteers that I currently admire the most is West Frankfort's Tara Perjenski who has helped out her hometown school's sports pro-

grams in many capacities for over three decades.

Once you meet Tara, you quickly realize that she has a very loving heart. In today's sometimes cruel world, Tara is the kind of person that we all wish more people would be like.

She is always smiling and likes nothing better than to greet everyone with a hug. Her hug will melt your heart and bless you with the thought that there truly is kindness and goodness in this dysfunctional world.

Tara was born Nov. 30, 1974 in Herrin to Marsha Cherry Perjenski and Tom Perjenski. Tara lived in Waltonville until 1980 when at the age of 5 she moved to West Frankfort after her mother Marsha married the late Johnny Pappas.

see **TARA** page 18



Tara Perjenski running the scoreboard at a recent West Frankfort Junior High softball game.

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TARA

from page 17

No one at that time realized how important Tara's move to the community would actually be, especially when it came to her influence on Lady Redbird sports as an outstanding volunteer. After attending grade school and junior high in West Frankfort, Tara entered FCHS in 1990 and that would change her life and the lives of coaches and student/athletes in West Frankfort for years to come.

Tara's mother Marsha Pappas made it clear how much Tara has always loved being a Redbird.

"We moved to West Frankfort after Johnny and I got married in 1980, so being a Redbird is all she has ever known. She has always had a love of sports. She would

often sit with Johnny on weekends and watch football and also basketball. March Madness is something we all looked forward to."

Tara's life has not been without tragedy. An accident in 1985 had a huge effect on her life at the age of 10. On a rainy night at 7:15 p.m. on Wednesday, November 6, 1985, Tara's 17-year-old sister Marla Salingue, and her 16-year-old friend Lisa Day were killed in a car accident in Marion.

Marsha Pappas had this to say about the accident.

"Tara went to the hospital in Marion with us that night. We had no idea how bad everything was. You can imagine how awful everything was for all of us and Tara did not understand what was going on. She was devastated losing her 'sissy' as she called her. She withdrew into herself and we had to seek medical help for her."

Five years later, when Tara entered high school, her teachers had a huge and positive influence on her life. That's also when she got involved as a volunteer for Lady Redbird sports. Marsha Pappas explained how much all of that changed Tara's life.

"I will forever be grateful to FCHS Special Education teachers Carmen McPhail and Annie Petreikis who I think helped Tara in school more than any teachers that she ever had. Annie is the one who got Tara involved with helping out with FCHS sports. Tara loves it and loves all the kids, coaches and parents."

McPhail, who has taught special education in the Frankfort school district for 31 years, had this to say about Tara.

"I first met Tara whenever I went to observe a classroom at FCHS. She was one of the first students

I worked with. She was kind to everyone and a very hard worker; always willing to work extra to learn something new. She was always aiming to please. Tara is one reason I am a teacher. She was so fun and easy to work with. She made teaching fun. If everyone had 10 percent of her personality and work ethic this world would be kicking butt!"

Tara Perjenski has now been a devoted volunteer for Lady Redbird sports for 35 years and she has worked with different sports and in different capacities at both the high school and junior high.

It all started during her freshman year at FCHS in 1990-91 and it continues today. In interviews for this story with past and present West Frankfort school coaches, it was obvious how much each coach loves and appreciates Tara's dedication to their programs.



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West Frankfort High School head softball coach Jim Piersol had this to say about his experience working with Perjenski.

"Tara has been a part of the Lady Redbird Softball program for as long as I can remember. She offers her unwavering support for all the girls. She has been called the 'World's Best Scoreboard Operator.' Many times, she has the ball/strike on the board before the umpire can even make the call. You won't find a more dedicated person to Lady Redbird Athletics and we really appreciate all of her help!"

Matt Hampleman is a former, longtime West Frankfort girls' head basketball coach. He's in his 32nd year as a teacher at FCHS and currently the FCHS cross country coach, a position that he has held for 28 years.

Hampleman holds Perjenski in

high regard.

"Teams experience ups and downs, but there has been one constant for FCHS girls' basketball and that's manager Tara Perjenski. Tara is more than a basketball manager; she is a team and family member of all the girls and coaches she has been around. Tara's work ethic and constant smile show how much she cares about the girls and the teams she's been part of. If she knows you well, you will get an occasional hug regardless if you are a visiting coach or a player that just needed a lift on that day. Tara is always willing to do what it takes to help the program. She has definitely been a great addition to our athletic program."

Former FCHS Athletic Director Richard Glodich, who served in that capacity for 22 years, had this to say about Perjenski.

"Tara is very special to Redbird Athletics. She puts her heart and soul into all of the Redbird programs. She always has a smile on her face, and supports the teams whether they are winning or losing. Redbird athletics would be lost without her."

Current FCHS girls head basketball coach Nathan Dodd knows how much Perjenski means to Lady Redbird sports.

"Tara has been a staple of Lady Redbird athletics for as long as I can remember. She is always willing to help out and is by far the most dedicated fan that I know. The girls are always excited to see Tara there and give her a hug or fist bump before a game. Our athletic programs are extremely fortunate and grateful for Tara's help and support."

Marsha Pappas has often been surprised at how many people

know her daughter Tara through her work as a volunteer for FCHS and CJHS sports.

"It always amazes me how many people know her and seem to really care for her. One time we were on vacation down in Gulf Shores, Alabama and we were getting ready to get on the elevator at the condo. A man yelled from across the way 'hey Tara.' She waved and then went over and talked to the man and his family. When Tara came back to us, I asked her who that was. She responded, 'oh, he is a coach over in Harrisburg.' Johnnie and I both laughed. It made me so proud of her. I love being known as 'Tara's mom,'" said Pappas.

That is the ultimate honor for kind-hearted Tara Perjenski. She is a blessing to every person that she has touched in her life.



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All in the family

The story of the Turner family of coaches at Mt Vernon Township High School

BY RANDY OLSON
AreaSports.net

Join me for a moment in a hypothetical dream. Let's assume that you are a successful high school student-athlete.

Upon graduation, you go away to college and you get a teaching degree.

After college, you return to your hometown and begin teaching and coaching at your Alma Mater.

During that time, you get settled in and enjoy a lot of success, you get married and raise a family. Within that family are two sons who you coach along the way.

And as the dream continues, the sons graduate and go away to college and they get teaching degrees, return back to your hometown, and begin teaching and coaching alongside you at your Alma Mater.

Sounds like a storybook dream, doesn't it? But, in fact, it is not a dream, it's a true story. The story of the Turner family of coaches at Mt Vernon Township High School.

Coach Clint Turner, his sons, Trace Turner and Crayton Turner, and his wife, Lisa Turner are all active coaches at Mt Vernon Township High School.

They are truly living out the popular Mt Vernon catch phrase: "Once a Ram, Always a Ram!" Each of them is Alumni of MVTHS.

Clint is retiring from teaching at the end of this academic year after 34 years at the high school, where he has taught physical



Pictured left to right: Clint Turner, Lisa Turner, Trace Turner, and Crayton Turner.

education and driver's education.

Turner has been a part of the track & field Coaching staff since 1992 and took on the reins of head track coach in 2004, trying to fill the shoes of legendary Hall of Fame coaches, Sonny Ellis and John Griffin.

His two sons, Trace and Crayton are assistant coaches on the track & field staff with Clint. His wife, Lisa, is stepping down after 32 years of leading the cheerleading program at MVTHS with lots of success, including multi-

ple state competition Top-3 trophies through the ICCA (Illinois Competitive Cheerleading Association). She was also a cheerleader at Mt Vernon herself, back in the day.

During the 1996-1997 school year, Clint Turner succeeded Sonny Ellis as the head cross country coach of the Rams.

He guided that program to much success for 26 years, and had the privilege of coaching several athletes who went on to run cross country and/or track in college.

Clint recently turned over the X-C program to his son, Trace, during the 2022-2023 school year.

Times change and other meets and courses open up over the years which pre-empts the places where teams decide to go and compete in cross country.

While it is no longer in existence, the former Mt Vernon Invitational cross country meet at the City Park was one of the most unusual meets in the state for nearly three decades, both for the location as well as the way it was conducted and scored.

"It was very unique, because we ran flighted races. You traditionally have seven runners on a cross-country team, five are scored, and your sixth is a tie-breaker. But in our meet, we would run all of the number 7 runners against each other at the same time, and then all of the number 6 runners together and so on all the way to number 1," said Turner.

"So, it was actually seven different unique races, both for boys and girls in competition, and of course Connie Harre-Blair was the girls coach and really helped organize everything. But every race was just as important, and we put a lot of emphasis on that number 7 race just like we did the others.

"The Mt Vernon Invitational

was also unique because spectators could literally watch over 90 percent of the race from one location, which is rare in Cross Country."

Reflecting on his 34-year career has been a eye-popping thought process for Turner.

"It's been a blessing and it's been fun teaching and coaching at my alma mater. I don't take it lightly and I don't take it for granted that I was given this opportunity," said Clint.

"I've been fortunate to have had an amazing run with so many terrific student athletes that have come through Mt Vernon, and now coaching alongside my two sons has been awesome, and watching them grow and come to the realization as to why and how we do certain things.

"It's fun to see that light bulb go off in their head and hear them say, OK Dad, now I know why you did this back when I was in high school and you were coaching me."

Having three Coach Turners (or Mr. Turners) on the faculty staff has made it sort of unique for the kids and other faculty members too.

"We've had a lot of fun at school with Turner 1, Turner 2, and Turner 3, while others instead refer to us as the old one, the middle one and the young one," said Clint.

"Sometimes I will get an email intended for one of them, or they will get an email that was meant for me.

see **TURNER** page 24



The pinnacle of the track & field program at Mt Vernon under Coach Turner's leadership occurred a few years ago in 2022 when the Rams brought home the IHSA runner-up trophy at the state meet.



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TURNER

from page 23

“We are on opposite ends of the building, so we really don’t see each other much, unless we go searching for each other.”

Clint went to college at Illinois State University in Bloomington after competing in football, wrestling, and track & field while in high school at Mt Vernon. Following college, he actually spent two years as a graduate assistant at ISU.

“I got to spend 363 days a year, for two years, doing cross country and track at Illinois State as a GA, so that is really where my education and knowledge of coaching those sports really kicked in,” said Turner.

“It was a grind, but the good Lord took care of me, and I was able to land where I landed here at Mt Vernon High School, and I couldn’t have asked for a better situation.”

Turner got his foot in the door at MVTHS by working on the staff for a year in the special education department and later in the attendance office.

In 1992, the Rams football coach at that time, Butch Kuras, hired Clint Turner to be a part of the football coaching staff. John Griffin was also on that football staff, and Coach Griff was the head coach of the track & field program, while still having Coach Ellis and Coach DeForest on the staff too.

Coach Griffin brought Clint into the track program and assigned him the task of handling the jumps, including long jump, high jump, triple jump, pole vault.

“Coach Griff was also coaching girls’ basketball at the time, and he let me just delve right into the jump programs and do whatever I needed to do, because he and the other coaches were handling all of the running events and



The pinnacle of the track & field program at Mt Vernon under Coach Turner’s leadership occurred a few years ago in 2022 when the Rams brought home the IHSA runner-up trophy at the state meet.

other field events,” said Clint. “Looking back on it, I am thankful that he trusted me enough to let me have free reign with the jump programs. He was always there to support me and provide anything that I needed.”

In 2004, Clint moved away from football so that he could concentrate more on the track program, and he took over as head track & field coach that year, as Coach Griffin had retired.

Just like cross country, Clint had the pleasure of coaching many student athletes who excelled at a high level on the big stage at the state meet, or laid the foundation and accolades in high school that enabled them to participate in track & field at the college level.

The deep history and respect for the Mt Vernon Track Program spans a large area of geography across the state.

That became very apparent to Coach Turner in 2021.

“For whatever reason, the IHSA sent us all the way up north to Tolono-Unity that year for the sectional,” said Turner.

“I didn’t know a whole lot of coaches up that direction, but we were in the coaches meet-

ing before the meet and another coach who I didn’t know came up to me asking about Coach Ellis and Coach Griffin and saying glowing things about them and our athletes.

“It just shows you the impact that those two guys and our program has made on people all over the state.”

The pinnacle of the track & field program at Mt Vernon under Coach Turner’s leadership occurred a few years ago in 2022 when the Rams brought home the IHSA runner-up trophy at the state meet.

“People don’t understand how difficult that is to achieve because for your team to place first or second in the state, you have to be very good at a lot of things,” said Turner.

“It is not good enough to just have fast sprinters like Cahokia and East St Louis have every year. You gotta have more. Our Rams team in 2022 had a little bit of everything, and we did it all pretty well.

“Our approach was a little different that year as we made a concerted effort not to overrun the kids during the regular season, and keep them healthy and

strong, even if it meant coming up short in some regular season meets, it all paid off for us in the post season.”

Changes in technology have affected both cross country as well as track & field through the years. “

Yeah, both of my sons will point out that I haven’t adapted well enough, especially when it comes to all the new watches and the meet entry stuff online, but each of them is on top of it and embrace all that new technology as most young people do,” said Clint.

“They look at me with a blank stare when I tell them how we all used snail mail to send in our meet entries, and even timing the races now is all different than it used to be.

“I’m still one of those old guys who uses an old stop watch in his pocket, and I still write it all down, instead of putting times into an app at the meet, but the boys are all about that, which is just fine.”

The technology changes in shoes and in clothing has also changed a bunch during the tenure of Coach Turner.

“I don’t even wear anything cotton anymore, everything is dry-fit, and the different types of shoes available for every need, and the technology behind them is astronomically different now than it was thirty years ago in 1995,” said Turner.

“Even though the technology has changed the uniforms and the shoes over the years, our school has always been good about giving me and our programs whatever we need.

Other coaches at Mt Vernon will tell you the same thing, whether it’s in the weight room, conditioning, equipment or whatever we need, our administration and athletic department has provided it for us.”

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TURNER

from page 24

Another important activity that Clint Turner is involved with at MVTHS is serving on the board of the Mt Vernon High School Sports Hall of Fame which was established in 2005.

Turner began serving on the board about 10 years ago and takes his role very seriously. "It is important, it takes time to research people who are nominated and it is paramount to recognize deserving individuals and teams," said Turner.

"Each year we see something unique occur at the Hall of Fame banquet which makes the effort all worthwhile. I really enjoy it."

There is a plethora of athletes that Turner has had the opportunity to coach either in track, cross country, or football, who are now members of the Mt Vernon High School Sports Hall of Fame.

Space doesn't permit us to talk about all of them here, but it is worth your time and effort to stroll by the Hall of Fame Hallway and read the names, accomplishments and photos of many great former Mt Vernon High

School athletes who have earned their place to be honored in that manner. It is located in the lobby at the front of Changnon Gymnasium.

Behind every successful coach is a significant other, and Lisa Turner has been super supportive of her husband, Clint, during his 34 years of coaching at MVTHS. Through all of the early morning practices, late night work outs, weekend meets, and lengthy bus rides, she has been there to cheer on his efforts.

Speaking of cheering, Lisa has led the Mt Vernon Rams Cheerleading program for 32 years, and most recently also took over the Rockin' Rams Dance Team seven years ago too. Lisa credits a long list of assistant coaches who have been by her side to help manage the efforts of the girls through literally thousands of practices, road trips to basketball games, and the lengthy preparation and execution on competition days through the ICCA and the IHSA. Sometimes that involves last minute changes in a routine due to sickness or injury that nobody expected.

While Lisa has had several different assistant coaches during a 32-year span, the current staff of

coaches putting in many hours with her include Emilee Mygatt, Linda Kueker, Ashton Boyer, and Olivia Sledge.

During her tenure, Mt Vernon High School Competitive Cheerleading brought home a Top-3 Trophy in the State, 15 times out of 30 State Appearances. That is impressive.

They were named the state cheerleading champions four times at the varsity level and once in junior varsity.

Among 30 state appearances at the junior varsity level, Mt Vernon placed in the Top-3 twelve times. Lisa was named the ICCA Coach of the Year in 2018. The IHSA has not offered competitive cheerleading as a sport for as long as the ICCA, but Mt Vernon has made 10 State Appearances in the IHSA and placed in the top 10 statewide on three occasions.

Just like Clint had the opportunity to coach their two sons, Lisa had the privilege of coaching their daughter, Maggie Turner, who went on to cheer and dance at Arkansas State University. And just like mom and dad, Maggie is now coaching the ASU Red Wolves Dance Team and works within the athletic department at the university where she handles

logistics for 22 suites at the football stadium.

She also serves as the associate director of Letter Winner Engagement and Events.

Again, it's all in the family. The Turner family story is a good one.

"It was always a dream for me and Clint to coach in our hometown and it has truly been a blessing to do so.

"The kids and many of the parents have been so special to me," said Lisa. "God gave me the ability and the knowledge to coach cheerleading all these years and I am so thankful, it has been a true joy. I asked God to give me peace about this decision and I have reached that decision to step aside. But I am always willing to help out in a volunteer capacity, if I am needed, but I don't want to get in the way either.

"While we won a lot of trophies at the state level, every year and every squad was important to me whether we won a big trophy or not. I will cherish many wonderful memories, because these girls become part of your family, and we have enjoyed watching them grow up, get married and start families of their own."

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'Reunion at the Rim'



The "Reunion at the Rim" brought Saluki basketball legends, coaches and community members together on Saturday, Sept. 6, 2025, at Giant City Lodge. Left to right: SIU Hall of Fame radio voice Mike Reis (emcee), Randal Falker (2007 team), Darren Brooks (2002 team), Jordan Armstrong (2007), Tony Young (2007), Christian Cornelius (2007), Jamaal Tatum (2007, event organizer), Jermaine Dearman (2002), Coach Rodney Watson (assistant on both teams), Bryan Turner (2002-04), Sylvester Willis (2002), Chris Lowery (assistant in 2002, head coach in 2007), Chris Carr (guest speaker, Saluki from 1992-995), Stetson Hairston (2002), CJ Smith (2007), Matt Shaw (2007), Wesley Clemmons (2007) and Tony Boyle (2007).

Saluki legends from 2002 and 2007 Sweet 16 teams gather together to raise money for a good cause

Swinford Publications

The first-ever "Reunion at the Rim" brought Saluki basketball legends, coaches and community members together on Saturday, Sept. 6, 2025, at Giant City Lodge for an evening of reflection, fellowship and purpose.

The event, hosted by Athletics Against Substance Abuse (AASA) — a nonprofit founded by SIU Hall of Famer Jamaal Tatum — celebrated the 2002 and 2007 Southern Illinois University Sweet 16 basketball teams. The night blended nostalgia and storytelling with a call to action: to use the power of sports to impact lives beyond the court.

Highlights included a keynote address from former NBA player and Saluki star Chris Carr, a panel discussion with longtime

assistant coach Rodney Watson moderated by veteran broadcaster Mike Reis, and an art auction featuring original works by Tatum. Dinner, networking and signed memorabilia rounded out the evening.

Tatum, who played on the 2007 Sweet 16 team, said his vision for the night went beyond reminiscing.

"The main focus was to bring everybody back together," Tatum said. "But then I also wanted to tie my nonprofit to it because it's something that has touched me over the years. I've lost a lot of friends from substance abuse. A lot of people's families have been torn apart by it. I felt it was necessary to give back and be of service — and I want to do that through athletics."



Three Saluki Hall-of-Famers: Mike Reis, Chris Lowery and Rodney Watson (being inducted this month at SIU's Homecoming weekend).

Reis, the longtime “Voice of the Salukis,” reflected on the impact those teams had on the fan base.

“You guys were two of my favorite teams. Obviously, the two more successful teams I broadcast, but also great people, great interviews, people that connected with fans,” Reis said.

“As I got older, that became more and more important because I always felt like we truly were a conduit to the fans. But it only works if the people on the other end of the conduit want to be part of it. You guys did.”

For former forward Sylvester Willis of the 2002 team, the night

underscored the bonds that made those runs possible. “We had a bond — we weren’t like brothers, we were brothers,” Willis said. “We talk all the time, we come back for events like this, and we developed lifelong bonds. I’ve played against and with really talented guys, but never with a better team.”

Former assistant and head coach Chris Lowery emphasized the determination it took to transform potential into history. “The hardest thing to do as a young player was to convince these guys that working as hard as we needed to work was going

to result in them being legends like they are right now,” Lowery said. “They had no idea at the time just how far they could go.”

For Tatum, the turnout itself was proof of the program’s enduring legacy. “I wasn’t sure what the turnout was going to be like,” he admitted. “But people in the community want to come out, they want to see this. It’s been a great turnout. And I think that just shows family and brotherhood — it shows tonight. This is legacy right here.”

Special guests included: Reis, Randal Falker, Darren Brooks, Jordan Armstrong, Tony Young,

Christian Cornelius, Jamaal Tatum, Jermaine Dearman, Rodney Watson, Bryan Turner, Sylvester Willis, Chris Lowery, Chris Carr, Stetson Hairston, CJ Smith, Matt Shaw, Wesley Clemmons and Tony Boyle. Bryan Turner from the 2003 team was also in attendance.

Through AASA, Tatum hopes the gathering will spark a larger movement. His mission: to empower people to grow through adversity, discover their purpose, and rise into the best version of themselves — mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

The image is a promotional graphic for Swinford Media Group. It features a central red square with a white stylized star logo. Below the logo, the text "SWINFORD MEDIA GROUP" is written in large, bold, red letters with a white outline. The background is a collage of various media outlets, including newspapers like "The Marion Star", "The Herring Independent", "The Courier", "WFCN News", and "Southern Illinois Sports Connection", as well as a laptop displaying a website and a tablet displaying a social media page. The overall theme is digital and print media.

Winging waterfowl over Southern Illinois

Streaks of orange appear over the horizon in the east. Gradually they disappear as the cloud cover blocks out the sun. The day is gray and damp but not our spirits as hunters. It is waterfowl season in southern Illinois on public waters.

Late in the season the bulk of the ducks tend to be mallards and the Canada geese begin to arrive. The abundance of public water in southern Illinois attracts waterfowlers from across the nation for the late season action.

Rend Lake Wildlife Management Area contains some 7,690 acres near Bonnie, Illinois in Franklin County. For site specific information call the IDNR office at 618-279-3110 or write to them at RR1, Box 168G, Bonnie, Illinois 62816. Carlyle Lake Wildlife Management Areas is about 8,764 acres in Fayette County near Vandalia. The address for the Site Superintendent is RR2, Box 233, Vandalia, Illinois 62471, and their phone number is 618-425-3533.

Private water also holds birds, but they can be difficult and/or expensive to gain access for hunting. That does not mean that the average hunter must have second rate hunting. Not at all!

Good hunting areas for duck and goose hunting is available on many state management areas such as Oakwood Bottoms, Rend Lake, and Carlyle Lake. The past few years, both last two have held birds right on through the season. Some birds even wintered with us in Illinois.



OUTDOORS

BY DON GASAWAY

Oakwood Bottoms is about 3400 acres of flooded timber in Jackson County near Murphysboro, Illinois. For information about it, contact IDNR at 618-687-1731.

Far southern Illinois has always been known for the goose hunting. Up to now the secret has been the excellent duck hunting.

Hunters take ducks in areas near both the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Fewer public hunting areas are along the eastern part of the state. Both areas have good harvests. More recently the focus has been around the Union County Conservation Area, Crab Orchard Refuge and Horseshoe Lake. Commercial goose hunting clubs have taken to managing crops in a way that is not baiting and does not run afoul of the laws on baiting. Yet, they do attract ducks to their areas.

Union County Conservation Area is about 2800 acres near Jonesboro, Illinois in Union County. The refuge office is at 2755 Refuge Road, Jonesboro, Illinois 62952. Their phone number is 618-833-5175.

Crab Orchard National Wild-

life Refuge in Williamson County belongs to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The 23,000 acres near Marion, Illinois are a Mecca for waterfowl with parts of the refuge closed to humans. There is ample waterfowl hunting from refuge blinds or independently from boats in the west end of the lake. For more information about waterfowl hunting at the refuge contact USF&WS, Marion, Illinois 62918 or call the refuge office at 618-997-3344. For additional information contact the Williamson County Tourism Bureau, the phone number is 800-GEESE-99.

Contact Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area at the IDNR office at Box 85, Miller City, Illinois 62962. Their phone number is 618-776-5689. The Alexander County hunting area contains some 4,190 acres and is open to waterfowl hunting with special hunts for physically challenged persons in addition to regular hunting programs.

Traditionally there are a lot of ducks in the Cache River area and there is public hunting avail-

able. Cache River State Natural Area, in Johnson County, is an unusual cypress swamp hunting area. The 9,507 acres is different from the more traditional hardwood hunting areas to be around Illinois. For information about the hunting program contact the Site Superintendent at 930 Sunflower Lane, Belknap, Illinois or call the office at 618-634-9678.

Moving to big waters areas, ducks you hunt from boats with blinds. Rend and Carlyle reservoirs are excellent examples. Both also have excellent walk-in opportunities.

Other walk-in areas include LaRue Swampland Oakwood Bottoms. Both areas enjoy excellent hunting. LaRue Swamp Federal Land is 1000 acres in Union County near Wolf Lake. For information call 618-833-8576.

The above areas combine to provide over 60,000 acres of waterfowl hunting in the southern tier of counties. They do not include several hundred thousand acres in the Shawnee National Forest that also contains waterfowl that visit it each winter. Public land waterfowl hunting is alive and well in southern Illinois.

— **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/.

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November football is quickly approaching

“The games you remember... are the games in November.”

The first time that I heard that phrase it came from former Benton Rangers coach Jeff Roper, who took over a program in the mid-1990s that had not had a win in two years and he quickly turned the Rangers into a playoff team. Roper, who played for legendary coach Al Way, at Harrisburg, no doubt heard that same phrase during his high school days during some of those deep November post-season runs the Bulldogs made.

Under the very able direction of current coach Justin Groves, the Rangers for the past several years are a threat annually to make a deep playoff run. And that holds true again this year! Groves played for Roper, at Benton, during those early days and was a key player on that first-ever playoff team. He will also tell you, “The games you remember are the games in November.”

I still vividly recall broadcasting November playoff games from Hillsboro, Newton, West Frankfort, Robinson and Mt. Carmel and exciting playoff games at Tabor Field against Macomb, Addison Driscoll, Freeburg, Newton, Herrin, Harrisburg, Du Quoin and Red Hill. Those are wonderful memories etched in my mind!

While it is great excitement, here at the midway point of the regular season, to see teams like Benton, Johnston City, Du Quoin, West Frankfort, Nashville and many, many others fight and claw to get win number five and six to try and secure a playoff spot, it's those Saturday afternoon games that will be remembered most.

It's worth repeating: The games you remember...are the games in November.

I want to clarify, that I love “Fri-



A FEW RANDOM THOUGHTS

BY JIM MUIR



day Night Lights” particularly this time of year when the temperature starts cooperating and it feels more like “football weather” than those sometimes sweltering 95-degree games in September. Clearly, Friday Night Lights has a feel all its own that you will not find in any other sport – indoors or outdoors.

But, Saturday afternoon playoff football – when it's win and move on or lose and go home – has an atmosphere that is hard to explain – even for a guy that is pretty good at stringing words together. While I expect I will be at a loss, let me try to put it into words. There is an “electric” feel to Saturday afternoon football! It's an amazing thing to watch a community get behind a team, paint the store windows, paint the roads, feed the opposing team and basically lose their collective mind over a

high school football team. It's the sun going down on a victory that provides the guarantee that you can gear-up and do it again seven days later. It's the feel of autumn in the air, leaves turning, the sun setting earlier and watching statewide scores to see if you will get to stay home or embrace a road trip the next Saturday.

I have broadcast every conceivable sporting event known to man, from season-opening basketball tournaments to state championship games and about the only thing I can compare to Saturday afternoon football is a sectional championship basketball game between two really good teams. The venue is smaller and the crowd is closer to the action. Yeah, in the world of high school sports, Saturday afternoon playoff football and a sectional championship in basketball are very close to being as good as it gets.

The phrase “electric atmosphere” comes to mind when thinking of both.

For the past several years when Benton makes the playoffs Coach Groves has asked me to come out and talk to his team on the Thursday before the first Saturday afternoon playoff game. Before I proceed, let me say that I am both grateful and blessed to have that opportunity. All those playoff games I mentioned earlier pro-

vides me with great memories and a great history to talk to the current team about. I do not take that 10–15-minute talk lightly or for granted.

One of the things that I always tell the Benton team every year, is something I want to share with everybody – players, fans, enthusiastic parents...everybody.

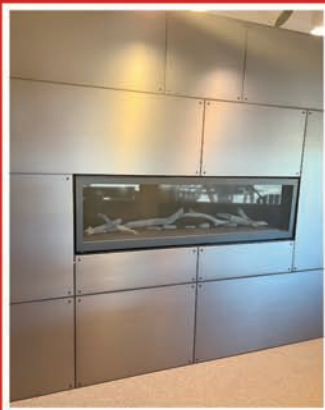
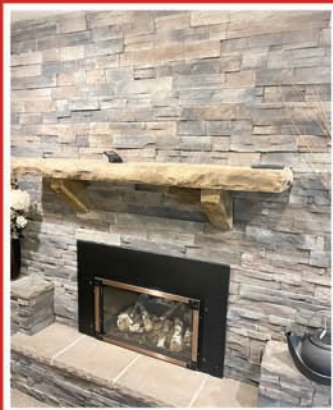
Take in every single moment of the playoff experience! Remember what the sky looks like when the game begins and what it looks like when it ends, what the leaves look like, remember the colors, the smell, the sounds, the tailgaters, the sight of smoke from grills drifting through the air, the band and the unparalleled and sometimes over-the-top excitement that is everywhere you look. For fans, get there early and don't go immediately to your seat, walk around and take it all in, absorb the atmosphere and excitement. Talk to other fans. Don't miss one exciting second of the pre-game and then embrace the game from start to finish! Let me go back to the sentence I used to start this paragraph. Take in every single moment of the playoff experience!

All those years ago, Jeff Roper was right! Justin Groves is also right! And anybody who has ever uttered that remarkable little nine-word sentence is right: “The games you remember...are the games in November.”

— **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 Illinoian 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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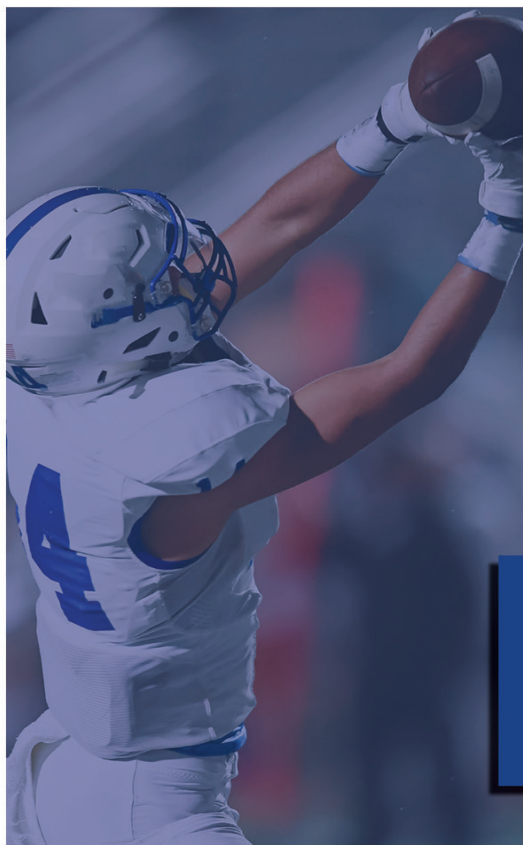


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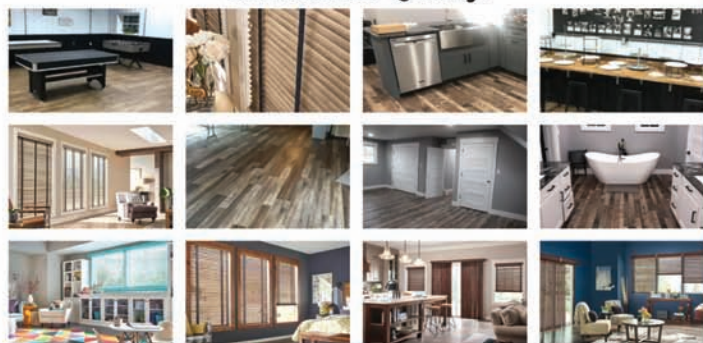
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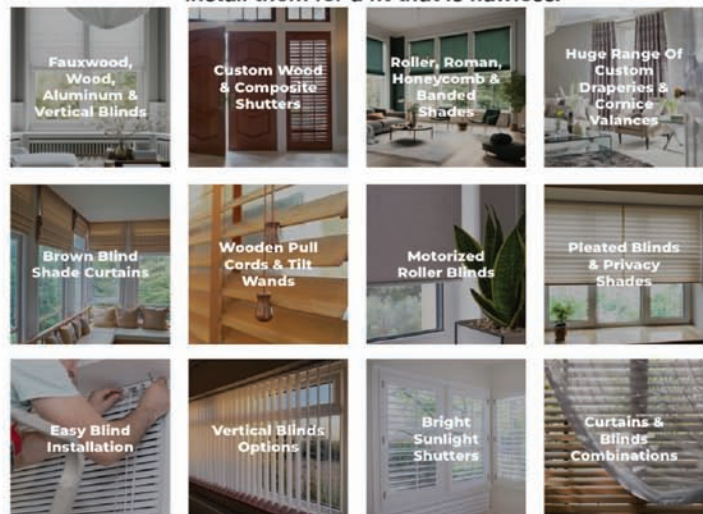
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