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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS SPORTS CONNECTION

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

Former Mt. Vernon and SIU basketball standout **Kent Williams** leads DeSmet High School to a second state championship in three years. [page 6](#)

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We hit it completely out of the park with the April issue of Southern Illinois Sports Connection!

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

As always, it is great to have you alongside again this month as we continue to bring you unique stories that you simply wouldn't find anywhere else other than the monthly gem you hold in your hand.

We love to be unique and we love to bring you a different side of area sports that, without us, would go unnoticed. We find it amusing that others are in competition with us and we're in competition with nobody!

Looking ahead, April is the first full month of spring and with it comes all things new, such as green grass, budding trees, the constant roar of lawn mowers and a renewed joy in being outdoors after being cooped-up inside for a few months.

And thinking along those lines of "new" things, we have some new directions to travel this month as we strive to bring you a different side of sports.

That is evidenced in a unique story, a nice feature written by Davy Broy that highlights multi-talented senior, Jayci Spencer, from Carmi-White County High School. Spencer took up archery with her dad, during the bleak days of Covid, in 2020, and that decision has paid great dividends. Spencer is not only a state and national archery champion, but she's also an award-winning



FROM THE PUBLISHER

BY JIM MUIR

artist.

Please read that previous sentence again, and pay attention to the words, "state and national archery champion." What an amazing accomplishment...if the story stopped there, but on top of that Jayci is also a top-notch artist that has won many awards on a regional and statewide level.

As I was proof-reading the story, I thought about the success that Jayci has enjoyed, pretty much unnoticed and without fanfare. How many other student/athletes are there right here in our backyard, I wondered, that are also doing some amazing things in sports and competition that we are not hearing about. If you know of some athletes that you think we should consider for a feature, please email me at: jmuir@frontier.com.

Our cover story this month features the success of former Mt. Vernon and SIU basketball standout Kent Williams, who has taken

his success as a player to the coaching ranks and last month led DeSmet High School, in Missouri, to its second state championship in three years. Randy Olson, of Areasports.net, does a great job highlighting the success that the personable Williams has enjoyed as a coach.

With the continuing loss in the number of veteran high school sports officials, which has also caused the overall quality of officiating to deteriorate, I happened across a story in my vast archives that certainly caught my attention.

Ernie Reynolds, who passed away a few years ago, came from an era of basketball officials that left a positive mark on the game with coaches, players, fans and younger officials. Pay attention to Reynolds' wise words!

Younger officials who are still in the process of learning how to officiate and those thinking about entering the sport, should

pay close attention to the way the legendary Reynolds approached the game.

And along with all those wonderful story-lines, we have our usual cast of great writers visiting a variety of topics.

Finally, as always, I want to thank our advertisers for their support in helping us keep SISC churning along each month. The fact that these advertisers continue to believe in our monthly effort is the reason a new issue of SISC shows up in your familiar location to grab one each month.

And also, a big shout-out to all the businesses that allow us to stock SISC on their shelves so their customers can grab their monthly copy.

Since baseball season is in full-swing, let me use an old analogy when describing the 32-page gem you hold in your hand: We hit it completely out of the park with the April issue of SISC! No brag... just fact!

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

Jim Muir, Publisher
Southern Illinois
Sports Connection

At FCA, we must keep Jesus in all we do!

Southern Illinois Sports Connection provides me the space each month to talk about Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and I want to make sure that we make it VERY clear — Jesus must be the focus of everything that goes on with FCA, or we are failing the calling that God has given us!

For those of us that are followers of Jesus, He is our King, our Saviour, our Helper, our Healer, and so much more than the English language is able to communicate.

Those of us who are a part of FCA come alongside the “BIG “C” CHURCH”, as a parachurch organization (an organization that comes alongside the church). Although, I have had many students who say that their time in an FCA Huddle is their “church” time, for many reasons.

As a parachurch organization, we use our platform with coaches, student-athletes and a multitude of volunteers to first and foremost, share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone possible.

Within the FCA framework, we are also focused on creating as many environments as possible to develop discipleship-making opportunities.

These environments can look very different, depending on the school, the team, the coaches involved, and even depending on the area that FCA is doing ministry.

In bigger, more metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, etc., FCA is focusing more on travel ball opportunities and even starting clubs and leagues that FCA runs themselves.

In Southern Illinois, there are several great travel ball programs that work in many sport environments and encompass many dif-



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ferent team sports.

We want to communicate that we want to come alongside these travel ball groups, and at the same time, make sure that we are keeping from competing against them financially.

However, to make it very clear, WE would LOVE the chance

to come in and allow us to be involved with your travel programs, if you are interested. WE can find ways to be available for ministry with individual travel teams on a weekly basis, mostly working through specific coaches.

Another big push for us is to be

allowed to come into travel tournaments and be able to do a Sunday morning devotional for any and all families that are interested.

In the FCA world, we continually come up with so many ways we can come alongside sports that are happening outside of a school environment – we would just love the opportunity to see how we can partner, so contact me anytime to find out more!

It can be more difficult to find ways for athletes to play individual sports outside of a school environment in Southern Illinois, however, it is definitely happening in sports like golf, wrestling, swimming, track and field, and others. And Fellowship of Christian Athletes wants to be involved in all of it!

In Southern Illinois Fellowship of Christian Athletes, our main limiting factors are having enough people to cover our 18 counties and having enough financial resources to do all that we are called to do.

Our Southern Illinois Team has seen the phrase, “The Lord will provide” come to fruition over and over again in the last few years!

We have been provided with individuals who are willing to volunteer, and some who are even coming on staff on a full-time or part-time basis!

And somehow, somehow, always finding individuals, businesses, churches, etc. who are willing to come alongside our ministry with valuable financial resources!

Our ministry is 100 percent donor-funded and our full-time and part-time staff each develop “Home Teams” that have financial partners who consistently give either monthly, quarterly or yearly.

This allows us to create realistic budgets to have for each year that can be dependable and help us to know when we can continue to add more events, such as camps, Fields of Faith, worship nights, and so many other ministry events, along with our

ever-increasing giving of bibles, food and other resources to schools, teams, etc.

Outside of Home Team giving, our biggest fundraiser of the year is our Southern Illinois FCA Annual Fundraiser Banquet.

This event is April 23, 2026

(basically now!) at the Rend Lake College Event Center.

Details are in the graphic on page 4 of this column and we would love to have each of you attend, and invite people who may know very little about FCA, but who you believe would want

to partner with us!

May God Bless You!

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Mission Accomplished!

Former Mt. Vernon and SIU basketball standout Kent Williams leads DeSmet High School to a second state championship in three years

Cover story •
BY RANDY OLSON
AreaSports.net

Former Mt Vernon Ram and SIU Saluki Hall of Fame player, Kent Williams, has won another Missouri State Championship as the Boys Head Basketball Coach at DeSmet Jesuit High School in St Louis (Creve Coeur).

They defeated Blue Springs South of Kansas City 79-61 to win the 6A Title recently at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Two years ago, Kent, his staff and players also won the 5A State Championship.

So, that is now two Missouri State Championship titles in the past three years, a very impressive feat by any standard.

Kent had the luxury of having eight seniors on his team this season. Five of those players were a part of the rotation two years ago when they won the 5A Title. Two of them were starters in 2024 and three of them came off the bench and played significant minutes, so having that experience return to anchor the team, certainly helped.

The Spartans had high hopes of making a run last year, but unfortunately, they made an early exit in postseason, losing a heart-breaking double-overtime game to Chaminade in the District Championship. That loss made them all hungry to return this year and make a magical run.

“We were fortunate to have a rematch with Chaminade this season and we had them down 24-5 after the first quarter,” said Williams. “Our guys were focused on the mission and our goal this season.”

In the championship game this year, DeSmet led 39-23 at the Half, but Blue Springs South made a run in the second half to get as close as eight points before DeSmet pulled away again to win the state championship game by 18 points.

“In the first half, we played exactly how we wanted to play, we executed our game plan. We had a size advantage inside, and we attacked the rim and finished well while doing a great job of taking their three-pointers away from them. Half of their shots are treys, and we eliminated that,” said Williams.

“In the second half, I told the guys in the locker room they were going to start pressing us more and will try to make it a sloppy game, try to force some turnovers and they did. They used their quickness to their advantage; we made some careless passes which led to some transition baskets for them.

“But, once we settled down, took care of the ball and got into our offense, we were fine, got good looks and were able to put them away.



Former Mt. Vernon and SIU star Kent Williams (second from right in back row) is pictured with his DeSmet team after they won the Missouri Class 6A state title.

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"I think our guys relaxed for a bit and then picked it back up to finish them off. I also felt the referees might have changed the way they called the game, which we had to adjust to. They called it much tighter in the second half, and they started getting to the foul line.

"We made some matchup adjustments on the defensive end based on foul trouble."

In the Missouri state semi-finals, Williams and his DeSmet Spartans knocked off No. 1 Ranked Rockhurst to advance to the championship game. Williams believed that his rugged schedule prepared him for a battle with Rockhurst.

Along the way, his Spartans had already played 18 teams with 20 or more wins, including 23 teams with 18 wins or more wins out of his 32-game schedule. I asked Williams to tell us about the keys to their victory over Rockhurst.

"With this game specifically, we wanted to make sure we weren't playing from behind so we could control the tempo of the game. They like to play low scoring games and when they have the lead, they'll typically play methodically, with long possessions," said Williams.

"They are a good defensive team, but I felt like they couldn't score with us. So, by us grabbing the early lead, we forced them to play faster to catch up and we could bring their defense out, make them have to come get us, and we could spread the floor and use our dribble penetration since we were faster than them. Williams also said that the battle on the boards was a major factor in the semi-final win.

"We were really concerned with their offensive rebounding, but our guys got after it and we out-rebounded them 35-32 and held them to just six second-chance points off offensive rebounds. That was important," said Wil-

liams.

With two State Championships in the last three years at DeSmet, it is very apparent that Kent Williams has successfully brought that winning tradition back to the private school in Creve Coeur.

Success breeds success, and DeSmet is attracting more and more quality athletes for an opportunity to play basketball for Williams and his staff.

"I believe a combination of winning, style of play, and what we've been able to do for our student-athletes in getting our kids to the next level has played a role in attracting more families to want to attend DeSmet. We've definitely seen an increase in interest over the last several years," said Williams.

"In my nine years here, 17 players have gone on to play college basketball. So that's attracting interest. I also believe that we have been able to take players who might fly under the radar elsewhere and develop them into better players. We are a program and not a team.

"We develop players from one level to the next. Players on this year's team were a mix of guys who played varsity as a freshman, played JV as a freshman, and guys who played on the freshman team as a freshman.

"We allowed all of them to develop at their pace, run their own race to help prepare them. If you look at our team, we don't have a huge team, we have a somewhat normal size team, but we play a style that allows them to be successful, and families that know basketball, recognize that."

In the eight years prior to this season, Coach Williams helped 15 players go on to play college basketball and coached eight more players who went on to play collegiately in another sport of their choice.



To the victor goes the spoils! DeSmet players hoist the state championship trophy for the second time in three years!



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WILLIAMS

from page 7

Speaking to Williams about this year, several members of the DeSmet Spartans state championship team have college offers on the table. Senior, Ian Thomas has signed with Indiana State.

Senior, Jordan Boyd has signed with Northern Iowa. Senior Braden Butler has DII schools interested in him, but he also has a lot of interest in track as a high jumper. Junior, Will Foulk has two DI offers on the table.

In addition to coaching the boys' basketball team at DeSmet, Kent is also the Department Chair of PE, as he teaches PE and weight training while also serving as the assistant athletic director at the

school.

Two years ago, when DeSmet won the 5A Missouri state championship, Williams had his former Mt Vernon Ram teammate, Jon Knoche, on his staff as an assistant Coach.

Knoche was not part of the staff this year because Jon became the head basketball coach at St Louis Bishop DeBourg High School.

If you have followed William's career after his playing days at SIU, you also know that he spent several years in the college ranks, serving on the coaching and basketball staffs at Purdue, Missouri State, SIUE, and Tennessee.

While he would not ever rule out a return to college basketball as a coach, he was very clear in his answer to that question.

"I really like where I am with

DeSmet. As a college coach, we turned a lot of programs around, but I never got to see it all the way through as my head coach left for other jobs. I've been here nine years and have built the exact type of program I was hoping to build.

"We have another young group coming through that I want to see do the same things this last group just did. I'm motivated to keep this program rolling. For me to leave, it would have to be an offer that me and my family couldn't turn down, but I love where I'm at. I have a good balance in my life right now with family and basketball."

For those of you with youth who would like to learn from Kent Williams and his staff, he has some basketball camps coming up that

area kids can attend. He will have five camps this summer and you can find them online at www.desmet.org/spartanssummer.

He has four camps for kids entering the 4th-8th grade and one camp for kids entering 1-4 grade. Williams will also have training sessions in the evening this fall.

In winning his second Missouri State Championship in the past three years, Kent Williams didn't have a single 7-footer, or even a guy at 6-foot-9 — in fact his tallest player in the normal rotation is 6-foot-6, but they all play great fundamental basketball, work hard, play together as a team, and are very coachable.

Congratulations on another State Championship, Kent. Mission Accomplished!



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From 1965-66 through 1968-69, high school basketball in Southern Illinois was off-the-charts great!

In the mid to late 1960s, it was a thrill for me as a 10- to 13-year-old kid to watch great high school basketball teams and great individual talent here in Southern Illinois, especially in the South Seven Conference. Many of those area players went on to play DI basketball.

Everyone has their own opinion on what the greatest era of high school basketball was in our area. It's hard to argue against the four-year span from 1965-66 through 1968-69. Let me explain.

I'm sure I'll leave some deserving teams and players out of this story so I apologize in advance.

With that being said, here's what I remember from 60 years ago. Benton and head coach Rich Herrin's 1965-66 and 1966-67 teams may have had the most dominant back-to-back seasons for a team from Southern Illinois as they had an overall record of 61-2. For most of both seasons the Rangers were ranked No. 1 in the entire state and keep in mind that during this time IHSA basketball was still a one-class system.

The Rangers 1965-66 team was probably the best Southern Illinois team that I have ever seen as they finished the season with a record of 31-1.

The team included 6-foot-5 All-State senior Jim Adkins, who went on to play at the University of Alabama, and 6-foot-9 junior Rich Yunkus, who was one of the most highly recruited players in the nation.

After graduating from Benton in 1967, Yunkus went on to be a two-time All-American at Georgia Tech University. He is still the Yellow Jackets' all-time leading scorer (2,232 points) despite playing only



three seasons as freshmen were ineligible to play varsity college basketball at that time. Yunkus was drafted to play professionally in both the ABA and NBA, but he chose to go into the business world instead. The other three starters on the 1965-66 Benton team included Terry Heard, Dave Woodland and Kenny Payne and they were all very good players.

In December of 1965, the Rangers gained their No. 1 state ranking after they defeated eventual state champions (Harvey) Thornton in the championship game

of the Centralia Holiday Tournament. Benton kept that No. 1 ranking until they were upset by Galesburg 73-71 in the quarterfinals at the state tournament in Champaign.

The 1966-67 season included two of the best teams from throughout the entire state, Benton and Carbondale. Benton again went undefeated during the regular season and they finished with an overall record of 30-1.

The Rangers were again ranked No. 1 in the state for most of the season. Yunkus, who was an All-Amer-

ican and All-State selection, led the 1966-67 team as a senior and he was surrounded by four other very good starters. Senior guard Jerry Hoover went on to play at the University of Florida while junior guard Danny Johnson went on to play at Western Kentucky University.

Johnson and his WKU teammates reached the NCAA Tournament Final Four in 1971. The Rangers had a lot of depth in 1966-67 as other key players included 6-foot-8 Greg Fustin, John Burlison, Bill Lowery, Bruce Taylor and Dick Corn.

The 1966-67 Carbondale Terriers coached by John Cherry who were equally as good as Benton, finished the season with a record of 29-3 and a second-place finish at the IHSA State Tournament. Despite losing to Benton twice during the regular season, Carbondale got very hot at the end of the season and defeated the Rangers 59-53 at the 1967 Super-Sectional in the SIU Arena.

Carbondale's starters included 6-foot-9 All-State selection Billy Perkins who went on to play two years at the University of Louisville before coming back to play his senior year for his hometown SIU Salukis.

Another very good starter for the Terriers was 6-foot-5 Early (Peaches) Laster who went on to play at the University of Utah. The other three starters for Carbondale were also very good and they included 6-foot-4 L.C. Brasfield who went on to play at SIU-C, point guard Kenny Lewis and Phil Gilbert. Terry Wallace, who was the first player off the bench, was also a valuable contributor to the team.

The Southern Illinoian newspaper sports editor Merle Jones once wrote, "Wallace is the best sixth man in the state."

Besides the great Benton and Carbondale teams, other very good Southern Illinois players from the 1965-66 and 1966-67 seasons included Marion's outstanding shooter Greg Starrick, who like Rich Yunkus, after graduating in 1967, was one of the most highly recruited players in the nation.

Starrick broke the single game scoring record at Marion with 70 points in a loss against West Frankfort.

The 6-foot-2 guard, who was an All-American and All-State selection for the Wildcats, first played at the University of Kentucky before coming home to have a good career with SIU-C.

While with the Salukis, Starrick led the nation in free throw

percentage in two different seasons and his career free throw percentage of .908 stood as an NCAA record for several decades.

Mt. Vernon's 6-foot-8 Danny Hester, who graduated in 1966, went on to play in junior college for two years.

After that he played two seasons at Louisiana State University with All-American Pete Maravich. While at LSU, Hester averaged 13 points and 10 rebounds per game including a then school record 25 boards against Ole Miss in 1970. Hester played one year professionally in the ABA with the Denver Rockets and the Kentucky Colonels.

During the 1967-68 season, Benton finished 23-6 with another regional championship.

see **BROY** page 12



After graduating from Benton in 1967, Rich Yunkus (left) went on to be a two-time All-American at Georgia Tech University. He is still the Yellow Jackets' all-time leading scorer (2,232 points) despite playing only three seasons as freshmen were ineligible to play varsity at that time. Yunkus was drafted to play professionally in both the ABA and NBA, but he chose to go into the business world instead.



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BROY

from page 11

Their 6-foot-1 senior guard Danny Johnson, who was an All-State selection, was in my opinion, the best player in Southern Illinois that school year.

During this season, Johnson broke the Rangers' single season scoring record with 744 points (25.7 points per game).

A few months after graduating, Johnson started his playing career at Western Kentucky University.

At 6-foot-4 Ron "Moose" Stallings was a great player at Ridge-way High School, where he graduated from in 1968.

Stallings, who was an All-State selection, went on to play at the University of Louisville including his senior year (1971-72) when

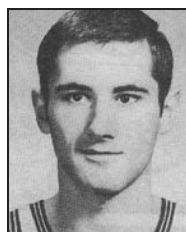
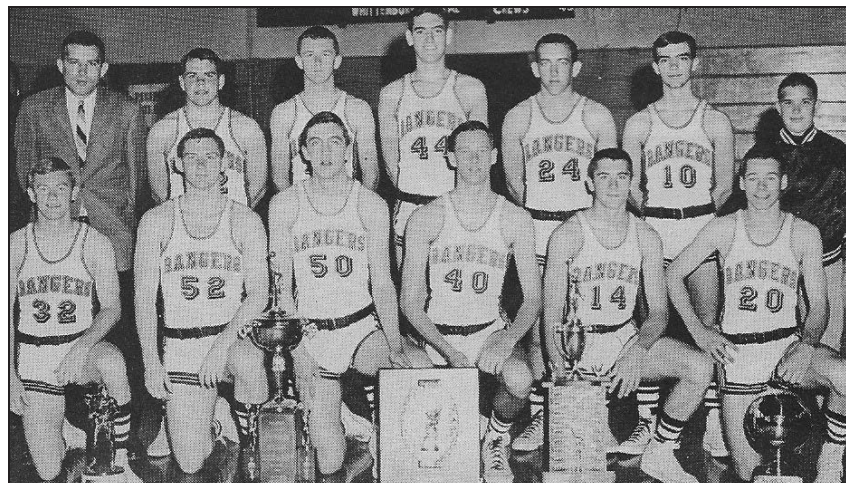
the Cardinals reached the NCAA Tournament Final Four.

Stallings saw action off the bench as Louisville lost to UCLA in the semifinals before the Bruins, led by Bill Walton, won their sixth straight NCAA championship.

Alan Crews, who graduated from Du Quoin High School in 1968, was a 6-foot-7 All-State selection his senior year. He played at the University of Illinois for one season and then one season at SIU-C.

Herrin's Pat Doughty was a very good basketball player for Herrin High School where he graduated from in 1968.

Doughty, who was also outstanding academically, attended Duke University on a basketball scholarship.

see **BROY** page 12

The Benton Rangers, coached by Rich Herrin, were one of the best teams of the mid-1960s (above, the 30-1 1966-67 team that included Georgia Tech-bound Rich Yunkus). Among their other stars was 6-foot-1 guard Danny Johnson (left), who was an All-State selection as a senior the next season in 1967-68 when he broke the Rangers' single season scoring record with 744 points (25.7 points per game). After graduation, he went on to play at Western Kentucky University.

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The 1967-68 Carbondale team, coached by Walt Moore, defeated Mt. Vernon 68-66 in the IHSA super-sectional which gave the Terriers a trip to the state tournament for the second straight season.

Carbondale lost in the quarterfinals at Champaign to Chicago Crane 64-63 in double overtime. Carbondale, which finished with an overall record of 20-10, were led by Les Taylor, Bob Pankey, Chuck Taylor, Doug Woolard, Bob Westberg and James Wilson.

The 1968-69 Mt. Vernon Rams team, coached by Bob Arnold, defeated a good 25-4 Carbondale team in the IHSA super-sectional 71-63. The Terriers were again led by Les Taylor and Bob Pankey.

The super-sectional victory gave the Rams a trip to the state tournament where they lost in

the quarterfinals to Aurora (East) 52-46. Mt. Vernon finished with an overall record of 23-5.

The Rams had a strong team whose starters included 6-foot-7 Steve Strickland, 6-foot-6 Terry Sledge, 6-foot-4 Nate Hawthorne, 6-foot-3 Eddie James and 6-foot-2 Frank Sanders.

Strickland went on to play at the University of Mississippi, Sledge played at Rend Lake College and then Arkansas College while Hawthorne and James both played at SIU-C. Ron Henderson and Darrel Gray saw playing time off the bench for the Rams.

Personally, my favorite hometown West Frankfort Redbird player Tim Ricci played during this era and he is still the FCHS boys' basketball all-time leading scorer with 1,708 points.



West Frankfort Redbirds player Tim Ricci played during this era and he is still the FCHS boys' basketball all-time leading scorer with 1,708 points.

see **BROY** page 14

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BROY

from page 13

The 6-foot-3 Ricci, who I believe is the greatest all-around basketball player in West Frankfort history, started as a freshman and sophomore on the 1967-68 and 1968-69 West Frankfort teams.

He was highly recruited by several colleges for both football and basketball, but after graduating in 1971, Ricci chose to stay close to home and play basketball at SIU-C where he started for good teams from 1972 through 1975.

To back up my point that the mid-to-late 1960s was the greatest era of Southern Illinois basketball, please consider this.

During the 1968-69 season, the South Seven Conference had three senior players, Benton's Doug Collins, Mt. Vernon's Nate Hawthorne, and Carbondale's Les Taylor, who after playing in college, were all drafted to play professionally in the NBA or the ABA.

That had never happened before with three players from the same graduating class in the history of Southern Illinois bas-

ketball, let alone the same conference, and there's a very strong chance that it will never happen again.

After graduating from Mt. Vernon High School, the 6-foot-4 Hawthorne, who was very strong defensively, had a good career at SIU-C where he averaged 13 points and 7 rebounds per game over three seasons. He was then selected in the 1973 NBA draft by the Los Angeles Lakers.

Hawthorne played three years in the NBA including one year with the Lakers and two years with the Phoenix Suns.

The 6-foot-3 Les Taylor, who played more like he was 6-foot-8, was the most dominant high school basketball player that I have ever seen. He led the South Seven Conference in scoring in his junior year with 30.4 points per game and also his senior year with 31.6 points per game.

Taylor broke the Carbondale single game scoring record during his senior year with 49 points against Greenville and he also broke the single game rebounding record when he pulled down an incredible 38 boards against Harrisburg.



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He was an All-State selection for Carbondale in 1969 and he went on to be an All-American at Murray State University where he averaged 21 points and 8 rebounds per game over his three-year career. Taylor was drafted in 1973 by the NBA Cleveland Cavaliers and the ABA Kentucky Colonels, but he chose not to play pro-

fessionally.

Most older sports fans from our area know that Doug Collins, who was a 6-foot-2 All-State selection in his 1968-69 senior year for Benton, grew in college and went on to be a 6-foot-6 All-American at Illinois State University.

He then played on the 1972 U.S. Olympic basketball team before

being the No. 1 overall selection in the 1973 NBA draft by the Philadelphia 76ers.

Collins was very successful in the NBA where he averaged 18 points per game over 8 years before injuries ended his career. Collins also coached in the NBA for 11 years with a winning record of 442-407.

— **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.westfrankfortsports.com.



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'Miracles appear in the strangest of places...'

One of my favorite Willie Nelson's songs is a ballad entitled, "Yesterday's Wine" that has the notable line: "Miracles appear in the strangest of places, fancy meeting you here."

While I certainly agree with that particular line from the "Red Headed Stranger" I have learned throughout life that many things appear in the strangest of places, even ideas for a monthly sports column. Let me explain!

While I had an idea about the direction I wanted to go this month, I had not fired off a single word yet. However, when I was proof-reading this month's edition and came across Davy Broy's column about a spectacular four-year stretch of basketball talent in the South Seven Conference in the late 1960s I decided to go a totally different direction.

You see, Broy and I share a kinship in many ways. We both love local sports history, we both have a great memory for details of players, games and seasons from 40 and 50 years ago (although we might not remember what we had for dinner last night), we both have trouble understanding some of the things we see in sports these days...and lastly...we both are getting long in the tooth!

So, reading his column was like taking a walk down memory lane for me, remembering those golden days of high school basketball and some of the all-time greatest from our region to ever lace up a pair of tennis shoes. The amazing thing about remembering those memories and looking over the list of names, is that years later I met and interviewed and wrote about almost everybody on the list – Rich Yunkus, Danny Johnson, Jim Adkins, Greg Starrick, Phil Gilbert, Billy Perkins, Rich Herrin, John Cherry, Tim Ricci and others. While all those former players and



A FEW RANDOM THOUGHTS

BY JIM MUIR

coaches are great guys and I count many as friends, the name that got stuck in my mind was former Carbondale basketball coach John Cherry. I met John and interviewed and talked to him many times. Every conversation was honest, sincere and always provided more insight into John Cherry the coach, but more importantly, John Cherry the man.

During the very first interview I learned that John, who was always a gentleman and soft-spoken, was also a man who did not mince words and was not afraid to speak his mind or give his opinion. At some point in the interview, I asked John about the first two losses to Benton during the 1967-68 season. He explained that the first loss, in Carbondale, was totally his fault. "I tried to run with Benton and they ran us out of the gym. We were not a run-and-gun team, so that loss was on me."

The second loss, a 72-71 loss in Benton when the Terriers missed a last second shot that rimmed out, was not a down moment for Cherry. "I told my team after the game that we are as good as Benton, we proved it that night, and that if we see them during the post-season, we will beat them."

It was during that interview that I learned that John didn't mince words.

"Talk about the Super-Sectional

win when the Terriers upset the Rangers," I said. John looked me squarely in the eye and in is always polite, low-key manner, said: "Let's get one thing straight, Mr. Muir, that win over Benton was NOT an upset."

I quickly rephrased the sentence and John explained his strategy about the game, when he felt the game turned and then talked about the joy of taking that team to the state championship game.

While you may disagree, ever since that interview I have never thought of that game as an upset. I think it was a high-leverage matchup between two of perhaps the greatest teams to ever play in Southern Illinois. And in this heavyweight battle, Carbondale was the better team, overcoming a five-point deficit heading into the fourth quarter to win 59-53 and hand the Rangers their only loss on the 1966-67 season. Underdog, or not an underdog, Carbondale won the game that mattered most.

Years later, when John was 92 years old, I arranged an interview to write a story that needed to be told. Back in the early 1960s, Carbondale had three high schools – Carbondale Community, Carbondale Attucks and Carbondale University High. Carbondale Community was a mix of white and black students; Carbondale Attucks was primarily all black students and Univer-

sity High was primarily all white. John explained that he was coaching at Community High School when all three Carbondale schools ended up in regional championship games with Community High School facing Attucks High School in one of the games. Keep in mind that this was in the early 1960s when racial tensions ran high, and John set about the task of being the driving force behind the integration of all three schools into one high school. He was clearly the man for the job and the moment, and not only pulled off the fete, he did it so impressively that everybody involved, including students, gave him high marks. I remember the headline of the story was: "The Right Man at the Right Time." And clearly, John Cherry was just that!

Any person that has ever labored promoting high school sports by the written word, radio and now social media, will tell you that it is not a job where you will get rich. Well, at least you will not get rich monetarily, but if you hang around long enough, you'll get very rich in building great and lasting friendships and relationships and you'll be wealthy beyond your imagination in great memories!

Thanks to Davy Broy for rekindling some great memories and thanks to Ol' Willie for reminding me again that, just like those "miracles" ...column ideas also appear in the strangest of places!

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

— **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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Fishing Illinois strip pits

The sky is turning blue over stars peering through and reflecting on the darker water. The light turns the surface of the lake to liquid glass.

Time was when strip mined land was a story of environmental devastation. Now they have become successful habitat restoration. The woodlands, healthy grasslands and abundant water provide outdoor recreation for the public.

Across Illinois, water-filled pits dot the landscape. State biologists manage many waters for fishing. Strip mined pits produce fishing action for such species as bass, walleye, channel catfish, crappie, bluegill, sunfish, stripers, bullheads, and warmouth. Some lakes contain a particular species requiring limits on access as a program of management is necessary for the future.

Landowners often restrict vehicle access to many strip-mined lakes to maintained roadways and parking lots. Some roads close to all traffic all, or part of the time. Use caution when launching boats because the ramp may drop-off sharply.

The clear water makes fishing challenging. Anglers in many areas must rely upon light line, stealth, and low light to fish successfully. Boats aid in fishing some lakes but others do not



accommodate such craft.

Many lakes require protection from the effects of wave action. They may require kayaks, canoes, other small boats, and float tubes for access.

Wildlife agencies support small ponds and lakes as part of programs to introduce kids and novice anglers to the sport of fishing. These programs are very popular and most public waters contain stocked catfish. The hatchery raised fish are added by various private and public organizations.

Medium sized lakes are also accessible to shore anglers. In the evenings and early morning, the cats in these waters will move about in the shallows to feed. The rest of the day they hole up in deep holes or near stumps. The key to success is to fish all the water both horizontally and ver-

tically.

Anglers cast to the holes with bait suspended beneath an adjustable float. If no fish bites within 20 minutes, the angler retrieves his bait and moves to another location. Then they repeat the process.

The hook size for catching these fish many must be smaller due to the size of the fish. Think about the mouth size of the fish. Because these lakes receive heavy fishing pressure, the fish tend to not gain great size before becoming someone's evening meal. But there are exceptions.

Shore angler fan cast from either the right or left and graduating moving to the other direction. A systematic angler fishes the bottom of the water column first. If no bites from a fish he adjusts the slip float accordingly and moves to the middle of the column depth

and finally the top portion. Most fish are in either the bottom or the top one foot of depth.

Bank fishing anglers and those wading in the shoreline water should use caution. Most strip pit lakes have a shoreline that drops off quickly into deeper water. It is advisable to wear a PFD while near the water.

The basic license required for fishing strip pits is in the regs of the state. Usually is a basic fishing license for most people with some exceptions for kids or elderly. If trout are present then an Inland trout stamp is also a requirement.

Special length and creel limits provide for the future of such fisheries. Check local signage and The Illinois Fishing Digest for site specific regulations. By checking the Illinois Department of Natural Resources website, you can find the address and phone number for the IDNR Fisheries Biologist in a specific county.

They are happy to give you site specific information about the fishing in their area and may guide you to a good strip pit.

— **Don Gasaway** is a veteran freelance outdoor writer from Marion. He is on Facebook at www.facebook.com/#1/DonGasaway-Writer and www.facebook.com/DonGasawayfishing. Comments and reviews are welcome.

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Old School

Ernie Reynolds worked for more than 25 years as a high school basketball official in Southern Illinois and helped chart a path for today's referees

(Editor's Note: *This story appeared in Southern Illinois Sports Connection Magazine in 2009 and highlighted a retired and veteran Southern Illinois basketball official, Ernie Reynolds, who officiated games in a different era as opposed to new officials today. Reynolds and a long list of officials from that era left an indelible mark on high school sports in our region. Ernie Reynolds died July 27, 2014 at the age of 87.*

From the archives •
BY JIM MUIR

It takes only a brief conversation with 82-year-old Ernie Reynolds to figure out that, even though he officiated his last sporting event more than 35 years ago, he still holds a deep love, and maybe more importantly, great respect for Southern Illinois high school basketball.

"I can truly say that I got back a lot more than I gave," said Reynolds. "Basketball has been very good to me and provided me with some great memories."

A Carterville native, Reynolds began his basketball officiating career in 1948 and worked a full slate of games through the 1972-73 season. During his career he worked five state tournaments (1960, 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1968) and also officiated two state championship games (1961 Collinsville vs. Thornton-Harvey and 1968 Evanston vs. Galesburg).

A lifelong member of the Egyptian Officials' Association, Reynolds holds the distinction of call-

ing the final high school state tournament game at Huff Gymnasium in 1962 and the first high school state tournament game at Assembly Hall in 1963. Reynolds recalled that he was asked by the executive director of the IHSA what he thought the first time he walked on the floor at the mammoth and brand-spanking new Assembly Hall at Champaign.

"I told him I didn't have any idea what it was going to be like for high school basketball," Reynolds said. "But, I said it would sure hold a lot of shelled corn."

Reynolds was asked, both as a spectator and an official, what basketball has meant to him.

"Well, let me put it like this, the best thing that ever happened to me is that I married a good woman and I've got a great family," said Reynolds. "But, after that, officiating basketball is one of the greatest things that has happened to me in my lifetime and it's meant more to me than I can explain. I wouldn't trade anything for the experience. I had the opportunity to work for some of the greatest coaches ever in Southern Illinois and also referee the games of some of the greatest players. And on top of that I've met some great people and made some wonderful friends."

Reynolds worked during the era of two-man officiating crews and teamed almost exclusively with the late Wayne Bollinger, but also mentioned other officials of that era that he worked with on a regular basis including Ernie Driggers, Ford Peebles, Robert Blondi, Sr. and Claude Rhodes.



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“Wayne and I worked so much together that we pretty much knew what the other one was going to do before he did it,” said Reynolds.

When asked to name some of the coaches that stand out to him Reynolds reeled off a list of names that reads like a who’s who in the coaching ranks, a list that included Lee Cabutti, Stan Changnon, Rich Herrin, Ron Herrin, John Cherry, Bob Dallas, Virgil Fletcher, Doc Bencini, Arthur Trout and Noble Thomas. Players that stand out in Reynolds mind includes Rich Yunkus and Danny Johnson (Benton), Jim Gauldoni and John Tidwell (Herrin), Greg Starrick (Marion), Billy Perkins and Peaches Laster (Carbondale) and the entire 1957 Herrin Tigers team that captured a state championship.

“I covered a bunch of their games that year,” said Reynolds. “They were just a sound team that did not make mistakes.”

Reynolds also worked the first state tournament where officials were allowed to wear short sleeve shirts – quite an innovative step at the time he said.

“It was in 1961 and it was quite a big deal when the IHSA finally let us start wearing short sleeve shirts,” said Reynolds. “I remember that it had to be consistent across the board, everybody had to wear short sleeves or nobody. I think it made it much better for officials.”

Reynolds was asked how he dealt with irate coaches or players who felt he had missed a call.

“I could count the technical fouls I gave on one hand,” said Reynolds. “I figure if you know the rules, work hard and know how to talk to coaches and players you won’t have to hand out technical fouls.”

However, one ‘T’ does stand out in Reynolds mind and he assessed it against then-Carbondale coach John Cherry, a person that he called “a close personal friend.”

“He’s still my close friend,” Reynolds said.

But during a game at the Carbondale Holiday Tournament in the late 1960s the fact that the two men were friends might not have been on display.

“John had a good team that year and he kept telling me the entire game that the other team was playing rough and fouling his big man,” recalled Reynolds. “I told him I didn’t think his big man was being fouled and he told me again that he wanted me to call something and I told him that I’d call something if I saw it. John looked at me and said, ‘if you’re not going to call anything why don’t you just call a technical on me. I said, ‘John, you don’t want that,’ and he said, ‘call at ‘T’ on me.’ I think he just wanted to see if I had the guts to do it, so I popped him and didn’t leave any doubt about it.”

Reynolds said the game concluded without incident but when he was changing clothes he heard a knock on the dressing room door.

“It was John, who is a real gentleman, and he stuck out his hand and told me he was sorry,” said Reynolds. “We shook hands and I accepted his apology, but I told him to make sure the next time he asks for a technical that he really wants one.”

Reynolds offered some spot-on advice for younger officials climbing the ranks and even for those that have been around a while.

“First of all, a real interest in basketball is crucial, it has to mean something to you because if you go into it to make a few bucks extra, you’re in it for the wrong reason,” said Reynolds.

“Officiating is the toughest thing in the world for a young man to go into, but I think the most important things are that you have to respect the game and also that young officials need to talk to the older officials, ask questions and don’t be afraid to ask for advice. You’ve never been officiating too long or get too good to ask for advice.”



A Carterville native, Reynolds began his basketball officiating career in 1948 and worked a full slate of games through the 1972-73 season. During his career he worked five state tournaments (1960, 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1968) and also officiated two state championship games. — PHOTOS FROM THE ARCHIVES

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Carmi-White County senior Jayci Spencer is not only a state and national archery champion, she's also an award-winning artist

April feature •
BY DAVY BROY

Many high school student-athletes excel in different ways. However, very few have excelled at the level of Carmi-White County High School senior Jayci Spencer who is one of the most talented young ladies in Southern Illinois.

Jayci, who lives in Crossville, was born October 15, 2007 in Newburgh, Indiana to Jordan and Jenny Hindman Spencer. Jayce's maternal grandparents are Dick and Jerry Hindman of Norris City while her paternal grandparents are George Kent and Susan Spencer of Crossville.

Competing for the Edwards County Archery Club out of Albion, Illinois for the past two years, Spencer has been outstanding. Her ability as a talented and award-winning artist is equally impressive. Spencer is also a very good student at Carmi-White County High School, where she is



Jayci Spencer signs her scholarship to compete for the Southeastern Illinois College archery team. Next to Jayci are her parents Jenny and Jordan Spencer. Standing are Edwards Co. Archery team coach Eli Landingham (left) and SIC archery coach Rick Sauls (right).

a member of the National Honor Society with a current GPA of 3.86 on a 4.0 scale. Spencer is also a member of the Historians Club and active in the CWC art programs.

Spencer competes in the S3DA (Scholastic 3D Archery) organization which is a national youth program up to grade 12 which focuses on 3D, indoor, and outdoor target archery. S3DA is now active in over 30 states and one of the fastest growing youth sports organizations in the nation.

In a recent interview, Jayci's

mother Jenny explained how her daughter got her start in archery.

"She actually started archery in the fall of 2020 as a 7th grader," Jenny said. "There was a presentation day at school in 2019 where they let the kids try a bow and she liked it. My husband was a past bow hunter that hadn't done it in years since we had gotten busy with kids. Being at home more during Covid, we decided to get Jayci a bow. It was something her and her dad could do at home in the backyard. Then we found out S3DA was going to start hav-

ing competitions again in early 2021 and she decided she wanted to try competition archery."

Spencer started competing in 2021 in the Youth Division of S3DA when she was still a 7th grader. By her second year in the Youth Division (2022) she started improving so much she finished 2nd at the Illinois S3DA Indoor Championship and then 3rd in the Illinois S3DA 3D State Championship. During her freshman year of high school (2023), Spencer began competing in the Young Adult Division, but she received no awards. That would all change the following year.

What happened next is amazing as Spencer's archery career took off to new heights during her sophomore year (2024) in the Young Adult Division competition. Her list of accomplishments in archery is long as she has become among the best in the nation over the past two years. On Feb. 10, Spencer won the 2024 Illinois Indoor State Championship. She then went on to finish 7th at the Eastern Indoor Nationals on March 1, 2024.

Three months later, on June 8, 2024, Spencer won the Illinois 3D State championship. One week later, she finished 5th at the Eastern 3D Nationals. To cap off the year, Spencer was selected as the 2024 "Illinois 3D Shooter of the Year."

Spencer's success continued in 2025 when she won her second straight Illinois Indoor State Championship. What came next was the pinnacle of success as Spencer won the 2025 Eastern Indoor National Championship on March 1.

On June 21, Spencer won the Illinois OT (Outdoor Target) State Championship before finishing 5th at the Eastern OT Nationals on July 12th. To cap off the year, Spencer was selected as the “Illinois Indoor Shooter of the Year.”

Eli Landingham, who is the Edwards County Archery team head coach, had this to say about Jayci Spencer. “I had been a regional coordinator with the S3DA when Jayci started her archery career and the coach for the Edwards County Archery team while she was shooting for the White County Archery team. She has been with Edwards County Archery for a few years now. Jayci has brought with her an extreme amount of talent. Her dedication to the team and to the sport of Archery is amazing. She has helped the team win several team

awards at the state and national level as well as many podium-finishes for herself. I can’t wait to see where this sport takes her as she joins SIC while shooting collegiate archery and hopefully see her more at the Pro/Am events as well.”

So far 2026 has been equally impressive for Spencer. On Feb. 14 she won her third straight Illinois Indoor State Championship before finishing 2nd at the Eastern Indoor Nationals. As competition continues this spring and summer, it’s a good bet that Spencer’s list of great accomplishments will get even longer.

Daniel Weber, who is the owner/bow tech at Weber’s Archery Shed in West Salem, holds Spencer in high regard.

see **SPENCER** page 24



Jayci Spencer displays some of her outstanding award winning artwork at Carmi-White County High School. The “Nuts and Bolts” portrait is a painting while the “Marbles” and “Target” artwork were done with colored pencils.



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SPENCER

from page 23

“Jayci has fully committed herself to archery, showing determination, discipline, and a strong work ethic that continues to fuel her growth in the sport. She puts in the time, pushes herself to improve, and holds high expectations for her performance. While her competitive fire can sometimes show when things don’t go as planned, it ultimately reflects how much she cares and how deeply invested she is in becoming the best archer she can be.”

Josh White, who is the Illinois S3DA Coordinator said Spencer has worked hard for her accomplishments.

“Jayci has really invested a lot of time and effort into archery over the years, and her commitment to

the sport has definitely paid off,” White said. “Her podium appearances are a true testament of her love and ability in the world of archery!”

Spencer has also won several honors for her outstanding artwork. The Cedarhurst Center for the Arts (Mitchell Museum) in Mt. Vernon hosts the annual Scholastic Art Awards Exhibition showcasing creative work of high school students from multiple counties throughout Southern Illinois. Earlier this year, Spencer won first place in 2D Art for her artwork “Self-portrait with Bow” in colored pencils drawing. She also received honorable mention for her drawing “Boots and Roots.” The art exhibit was on view in the new semantics gallery at Cedarhurst through March 8, 2026.

see **SPENCER** page 26



Jayci Spencer and her award winning artwork which was on display at the Cedarhurst Center for the Arts in Mt. Vernon.

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Top picture: Jayci Spencer (center) after she won the 2025 Eastern S3DA Indoor Archery National championship in 2025.

Bottom picture: Jayci Spencer (center) after she won her third straight Illinois Indoor Archery State championship in 2026.

SPENCER

from page 24

According to her family, Spencer has always liked to color and do art projects since she was very young.

She has been fortunate to have two of the best art teachers in our area which has included Kate Simmons in junior high and Hillary Gee in high school. In 7th grade Spencer took her first art class where she received more instruction on techniques. That's when everyone started to see her talent.

After her 7th grade year, Spencer has been enrolled in an art class every year, including two art elective classes this year as

a senior. Colored pencils artwork has become her favorite and many of her awards have come from that form.

During her junior year, Spencer won multiple awards at the Carmi Sights and Sounds yearly art and band/choir performance at CWC. The art teachers pick judges for the art show and they place ribbons on their favorites. Spencer won three first place awards which included her painting titled "Nuts /Bolts" as well as her two pieces of colored pencils artwork titled "Target" and "Marbles." She also won the first-place blue ribbon for being the "Outstanding Advanced Artist."

Gee, who is the CWC art instructor, has enjoyed teaching one of her favorite students.

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“Jayci is such a joy to have in class and a truly special student. Her talent shines through in everything she creates, and her careful attention to detail and ability to stay focused are so impressive.

“I especially admire how she takes on new challenges with confidence, always willing to try something new or push herself further.

“Even while balancing her commitment to archery, she manages to devote extra time to her art. It has been a pleasure to teach her over the past four years, and I am so proud of all she has accom-

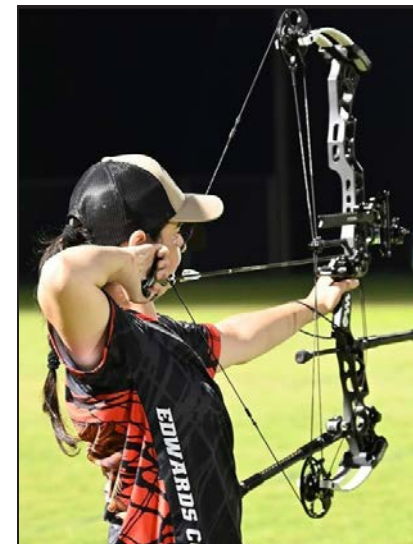
plished and all that lies ahead for her.”

Jayci Spencer will continue her academic and archery career at Southeastern Illinois College in Harrisburg, where she will be on scholarship for the SIC Archery Team starting this August.

She will study business/cosmetology.

Near right: Carmi-White County High School senior Jayci Spencer.

Far right: Jayci Spencer competing at a recent archery competition.



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Who am I?

The process of perfection, or in other words the process of success is something I have found myself thrown headfirst into. When relating the idea to the process in which one becomes a successful college athlete, I feel as though there is so much complexity to it, it is so important to discuss. Not because college athletics are the most important aspect of my life, or because I hold them to a higher importance, do I discuss this topic.

For me, time and time again, when I feel uncertainty in everything else, sports have been there to ground me as I find my way back to certainty.

So, this year, finding out each day what it means to balance the concept of loving your sport, giving your all to your sport, but in return putting an emphasis on controlling my happiness and self-appreciation.

As I have continued to figure out this balance, I have found that success means so much more when it is sustainable. In order to really succeed, I believe our lifestyle, happiness, and self-love all have to support the process. As athletes, it can be so easy to believe that the more of ourselves we give, the more successful we will become.

And while yes, as collegiate athletes we are asked to give so very much of ourselves, there should be balance in knowing that what we are giving is going to last. While my life really is track and school, I make sure to have fun, love loudly and enjoy my time away from it as well because being grounded and at peace provides much sustainability.

For me, that has meant learning that loving your sport and loving yourself should really go hand in hand.

The process becomes so much more rewarding when you let yourself enjoy it instead of only focus-



OPEN & HONEST

BY MAYA ROUNDS

ing on the outcome. Some days that means appreciating the little wins, and other days it means giving yourself grace when things do not go exactly how you planned. This is such an important aspect to consider, because there is so much to life and if absolutely all of my happiness was tied to athletic outcomes, I'd never be happy, because in truth, as athletes we are always striving for more.

So, when you are able to take care of yourself, enjoy the people and things around you, and still feel confident in who you are outside of your sport, the process starts to feel a lot more fulfilling.

I also have found out that one of the biggest parts of finding sustainability is setting goals outside of athletics. It is oh so easy to completely lose sight of plans and goals I have set when all I can think about is how far I can throw this shotput.

So, while performance is important and should be treated as so, it cannot be the absolute center of my life. Setting goals in academics, relationships, confidence, or even just in becoming more comfortable with yourself creates such an important sense of balance. It is a reminder that while sports can shape us and challenge us in so many ways, they are still only one part of who we are.

Track has already given me price-

less memories, connections and moments and to say I am excited for the next three years would be an understatement. But God has blessed me with a life that is worth

appreciating and taking the time to actively live so that's exactly what I'm learning to do!

— **Maya Rounds** is a freshman at Southern Illinois University where she is studying Elementary Education and is on the track and field team. A 2025 Sesser-Valier graduate, Maya has a deep love for athletics and all of the opportunities they have blessed her with. Maya enjoys spending her time with family and friends, making memories at SIU, and listening to all things Taylor Swift. In her column, "Open and Honest," Maya hopes to share an inside on what it means to be a college athlete and a bit about life too!

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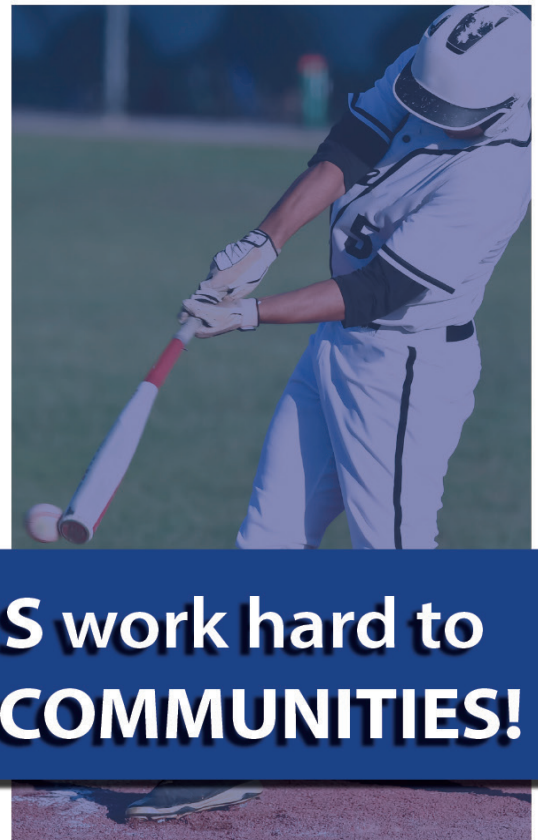
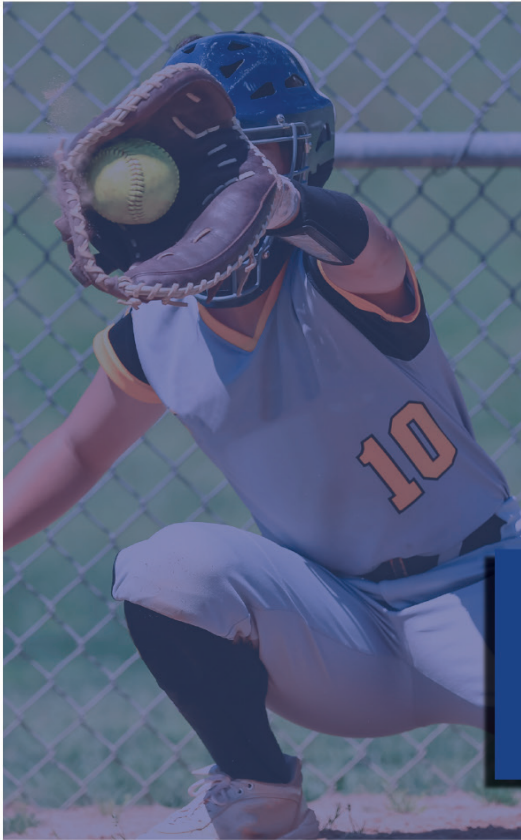
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2026 Carnival - Egyptian Exposition



Wednesday - Friday
6pm - 10 pm
Saturday 1 pm - 5 pm
Saturday 6 pm - 10 pm

Carnival is located in the NE corner of the Benton Public Square on the City Parking Lot behind Joe's Pizza. Visit the facebook page to view video and more pictures of this fantastic new Carnival!

2026 REND LAKE WATER FESTIVAL

“Sparkle & Splash”

APRIL 29TH-MAY 2ND 53rd Annual Rend Lake Festival

Parade - Saturday May 2nd, 2026 - 10:02 AM

The Parade will begin at 10:02 am at Kirkpatrick Motors on East Main Street and will end at Joplin St. on North Main .

Any businesses, groups, churches, or organizations that would like to participate in the parade are welcome to join in the fun. This is a perfect opportunity to get your business or organization in front of a large audience. You are welcome to hand out flyers or toss out candy and other promotional items. There is not cost to register an entry into the parade, but registration is required. We ask that you please keep everything family friendly and nothing controversial or obscene



Saturday May 2nd
10:02 am - 12:00 pm



Friday

- Chili Cookoff

211 E. Main St, Benton 6-9

Voting will be 8:30 by public judged

Saturday On The Square 12-4

- Motorcycle Show

- Veterans Fair

- Craft Show & Vendors 10-4



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