Saban legacy includes more than football

Winning football games is nice. Winning championships is great. We appreciate that Nick Saban has won at a remarkable rate. All Alabama fans certainly appreciate that even in those years when the Crimson Tide doesn't win a championship, the team has been in the hunt for one every single year since Saban's second year at the Capstone. Success like he has enjoyed will always endear a coach to a fan base.

But as Nick Saban has preached since he arrived in Tuscaloosa about eight years ago, each team is different. Each year is different. One team can't rest on the laurels that another team has garnered. That lesson in and of itself is that gridiron glory is fleeting. Each new season brings with it new expectations and new challenges, and the cherished memories of years gone by eventually fade without new victories.

But a legacy lasts. While Saban is without question building a legacy on the field that will endure for generations to come, it is what he's doing in our community that is just as remarkable.

The legions of fans that make up the "Alabama Nation" across the globe may not recognize it, but many here in Tuscaloosa certainly see it. Let's face it: Saban isn't exactly warm and fuzzy. He's not the grandfatherly figure that Paul Bryant and Gene Stallings were. He's all business. But increasingly, and quietly, his business has been to give back to this community. After the horrible tornadoes of 2011, he and wife, Terry, gave both time and treasure in helping the community get back on its feet.

While opposing fan bases and many national media pundits were parroting the line that Saban was certainly growing increasingly tired of Tuscaloosa and the unrealistic expectations of the fan base, Saban and Terry were busy helping their neighbors. While the same distant voices were claiming the Sabans' next stop was Austin and Terry was already house shopping in Texas, the Sabans were organizing another Nick's Kids event, donating huge sums of their own money to provide for children in need in our area while celebrating those in our community who volunteer.

While the naysayers were claiming Saban would soon leave for this NFL franchise or that one, the Sabans were busy working as a driving force behind the effort to build a new YMCA in the center of town and donating large sums of money to help build a new larger St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church on campus to help serve a student body that was growing as rapidly as the team's trophy case.

Now, we hear that just before the team was to play in yet another championship game, the Sabans are the driving force behind a new $2 million Catholic student center at St. Francis. The legacy he's building on the field is impressive. Quietly, the Sabans are building just as impressive a legacy off the field. We shouldn't wait for years gone by to appreciate both.
Crimson Tide prevails in epic title showdown

What a game! Two evenly matched teams - not just in talent but in desire and, yes, guts - played their hearts out Monday night on the biggest stage in college sports.

In retrospect, the nonstop hype over the preceding week was justified. The college football national championship game was riveting. From the moment Alabama running back Derrick Henry broke free on a 50-yard touchdown run in the first quarter, one big play followed another - by both teams - building to a breath-taking crescendo in the final stanza. By the time it was over, the fans of both teams were exhausted, never mind the players.

Ultimately, the Crimson Tide refused to be beaten, prevailing over Clemson on the strength of several huge plays in that explosive fourth quarter, including a surprise - and gutsy - onside kick that will be mentioned whenever this game is talked about in the years to come. And it will be talked about. It was, quite simply, one of the best college football games of all time.

We shouldn't be surprised. This Alabama team showed the character that has endeared it to coach Nick Saban like no other, and as we all know, he's coached some doozies. And Clemson, led by head coach Dabo Swinney, was a more than worthy opponent. The Tigers never quit and quarterback Deshaun Watson was spectacular. If he plays every game next season like he played Monday night, the Heisman Trust will have no need for a presentation ceremony. It can just ship him the trophy this December.

For Alabama fans, it was especially gratifying to see the contributions of Kenyan Drake, with his 95-yard kickoff return for a touchdown late in the fourth quarter, O.J. Howard, with his five catches for 208 yards and two touchdowns, and Jake Coker, who completed 16 of 25 passes for 335 yards, two scores and no interceptions. All of them have overcome adversity of some sort in their careers and though they might have endeared themselves to Tide fans before, after Monday night there's no doubt.

Both teams had a slew of talent, but what took this game to another level were the intangibles they shared - heart, desire, character, guts - and that make athletic competition so compelling.

Meanwhile, by winning its fourth national championship in the last seven years, all under Saban, the Tide cemented its stature as the best program in college football. And with 16 national championships overall, 11 of them by consensus in the poll era, Alabama has a strong argument, perhaps the strongest, as the best college football program in history.

The debate over the best college football coach of all time also has begun. Of course, there is no way to objectively answer that question, but the prevailing view since Monday seemingly has narrowed the field to two men - Saban and the Bear. Isn't it great that Alabama can claim both?

Congratulations to Alabama, national champions yet again.
This game had it all, including a sweet victory

The dynasty is not dead.

If Clemson couldn't kill it, throwing every imaginable weapon at the Crimson Tide, one wonders what will.

The fourth national championship in seven years was scarier than any of the other three, which will only make it sweeter.

Sweeter, because it took coaching and guile.

Sweeter because it took a 24-24 fourth quarter, because it required fourth-quarter courage that transcended talent and defines champions at every level of athletic competition.

Sweeter because of that onside kick.

Sweeter because of that kickoff return.

Sweeter because of that tight end who cast off his cloak of invisibility once and for all.

Sweeter because it defied the standard Alabama image, the one that most of the national media — including the rapid revisionists of the

SEENHURT,C4

Sweeter, because it came against an opponent that proved itself worthy by any definition and a quarterback that may well have been the best Alabama has seen since 2010.

"Sweeter" doesn't automatically mean better. Comparing championships — the four recent ones, the upset of Miami in 1992, the many titles under Paul "Bear" Bryant — is futile. They all have their own quality. There is no bad championship. But it is fair to say that none of those championship teams had ever read their own obituary, then faced the chance of seeing all their hard work at erasing that obituary all blow away at the end. That could have happened. Clemson fought fiercely to make it happen.

Instead, that onside kick happened.

"We have worked on that every week for 10 weeks," Marlon Humphrey, the man who came up with the football, said. "Then we worked on it in practice Thursday and I dropped it."

That didn't daunt Nick Saban. He has expressed confidence in Adam Griffith's ability to execute that play all year long. But the reason the call came when it did was even simpler — Alabama needed it.

"It was 24-24 and we weren't stopping them," Saban said. "We needed to do something."

That play didn't seal the game. It simply opened the door for the other plays that did — O.J. Howard's ensuing touchdown, Kenyan Drake's kickoff return, Derrick Henry's third and (barely) clinching touchdown. But the onside kick not only snatched momentum away from Clemson, it also seemed to ignite an Alabama fan base that expects everything from its football team — except a surprise.

None of the other four championships that Saban has brought to Alabama had that particular element. No one was truly surprised at beating Texas, at shutting out LSU in the rematch. Those games, and the smashing of Notre Dame, had memorable moments, of course. But surprises, thrills, chills and a fourth quarter for the ages — only this game had it all that.

There have been other great games in the seven years of dominance. The SEC Championship win over Florida in 2009 — still, to my mind, the defining game of the Saban era — was more complete. The win over Georgia three years later in Atlanta was, amazingly, even more of a heart-stopper. But there was something different in Glendale.

"We probably didn't play our best game when it comes to flat-out execution," Saban said. "But when it comes to competing, to showing character — this was as good as it gets."

— Reach Cecil Hurt at cecilhurt@tidesports.com or 205-722-0235.
Championship means more meat

Rama Jama’s adds beef, bacon to match Tide’s titles

By Angel Coker
Staff Writer

Before dawn on Tuesday morning, just a few hours after the Crimson Tide took home its 16th national championship in football, the owner of Rama Jama’s restaurant, Gary Lewis, climbed up in a chair with a chalkboard eraser and swiped away the number 15 and wrote a 16 in its place on two different menu items - the National Champ Burger and the National Champ BLT.

“The menu has changed once again after Monday night. Monday night at kickoff, we had a BLT that had 15 strips of bacon. We had a burger that had 15 ounces of meat,” Lewis said. “When we opened up Tuesday morning, that BLT had grown to 16 strips of bacon. The burger had grown to 16 ounces of meat. We win a national championship, it grows one more time. Next year, it’ll be 17.”

The BLT is made up of 16 slices of thick-cut bacon, three slices of Texas toast, double lettuce, double tomato and mayonnaise.

The burger has two 8-ounce patties of 80 percent lean, 20 percent fat ground beef on a 5-inch bun, lettuce, tomato, onion, pickle, two strips of thick-cut bacon, one onion ring and topped off with a dill pickle.

Lewis said the tradition began with 13 strips of bacon and 13 ounces of meat in 2009 when Alabama beat Texas in the national championship football game, earning UA its 13th title. Rama Jama’s burgers and BLTs grew as the Tide won its 14th football title in 2011, its 15th in 2012 and its 16th Monday night with a 45-40 win over Clemson.

Lewis opened the restaurant, which is at 1000 Paul W. Bryant Drive across the street from Bryant-Denny Stadium, on Sept. 14, 1996.

Now, Lewis has put the restaurant on the market, but he said the restaurant will not close. He said he will be selective in choosing who will purchase the restaurant, if anyone, with stipulations that it remain Rama Jama’s with all 400 pieces of memorabilia left on the walls.

So why does he continue the restaurant’s tradition of adding beef and bacon?

“I’m doing all these things because I am the business, and these things are what I’ve done for the last 20 years. It’s so important to me to continue on doing those things up until the time if or when it does sell. If it doesn’t sell, I’m going to continue to do these special little things in Rama Jama’s that’s made it special all these years,” Lewis said.

MEAT

From Page B1

but he said the restaurant will not close. He said he will be selective in choosing who will purchase the restaurant, if anyone, with stipulations that it remain Rama Jama’s with all 400 pieces of memorabilia left on the walls.

So why does he continue the restaurant’s tradition of adding beef and bacon?
Adversity and obscurity are no match for Alabama's unsung heroes

Kevin Scarbinsky kscarbinsky@AL.com

The stars came out as they usually do on a night when Alabama needed them, but you don’t win a national championship with your Heisman Trophy running back alone.

You don’t beat a team the caliber of Clemson with nothing but your usual handful of All-Americans.

It takes a village to defeat a team that hasn’t been defeated, and Alabama’s 16th national championship should be remembered for the men who emerged from adversity and obscurity to put their fingerprints all over that gold trophy.

It took O.J. Howard, the greatest rumor of a tight end in Alabama history, making good on all that promise all at once after all these years. He played the role of Ozzie Newsome Jr. with five catches, three of them covering more than half the field, two of them reaching the end zone.

It was Alabama fan nirvana. They finally threw the ball to the tight end.

A lesser player with Howard’s skills might not have waited two years in between touchdown catches. He stayed and stayed ready, and when it was time to step up, he stood out.

It took Jake Coker, the non-Heisman finalist among the quarterbacks on the field, following his career day against Michigan State with an even more defining evening. Despite suffering five sacks and getting called out by his head coach at halftime for not getting rid of the ball, Coker was at his best in the fourth quarter when anything less wouldn’t do.

With the trophy leaning in Clemson’s direction, with Alabama needing a second-half comeback in a national championship game for the first time under Saban, Coker faced a third-and-11 and a pass rush in his teeth.

Somehow, defying logic, physics and any remaining critics, he rifled a pass through traffic to ArDarius Stewart for a 38-yard breath of CPR. Alabama kicked a field goal to tie. Two snaps later, after the most outrageous onside kick in college football history, Coker hit Howard for the go-ahead score.

Coker has started two College Football Playoff games and set a new career high for passing yards in each. That’s a Ph.D. in game management.

In maybe the most inspiring contribution of all, it took Kenyan Drake outrunning the nightmares of a broken leg and a broken arm to give Alabama its largest lead. It was sweet karma to see Drake run away from Clemson tacklers and complete his 95-yard kick return for a touchdown by launching himself to the pylon.

He never fully became Lane Kiffin’s crimson version of Reggie Bush, but Drake ended his Alabama career in style.

Howard, Coker and Drake are far from the biggest names on the roster, but that’s OK. You can call them champions. Alabama wouldn’t be celebrating without them.
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ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOLS

Graduation rate improves

Record set with 89 percent of students earning diploma

By Kim Chandler
The Associated Press

MONTGOMERY — Alabama last year reached a record graduation rate, with nearly nine out of 10 students leaving high school with a diploma, the Alabama Department of Education said Thursday.

Superintendent Tommy Bice said that last school year, 89 percent of students graduated on time with a regular diploma. That year, Iowa, had the highest graduation rate of nearly 91 percent. The District of Columbia had the lowest rate, at 61 percent.

Alabama no longer requires high school students to take a graduation exam. However, Bice said that had little effect on boosting graduation rates because almost all students passed the test.

Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley praised the achievement, saying it was a testament to hard-working teachers and school staff.

"Education is the future. It's the key to making Alabama better," Bentley said.

Graduation

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graduated from high school on time. The rate is just shy of the department's goal of a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020.

"We attribute that to the innovation and flexibility that is happening in our school systems. They are doing everything and anything to make sure that kids stay in school and graduate," Bice said.

The state’s graduation rate was as low as 72 percent in 2012, sparking the department to set improvement goals.

While it's important that students leave school with a diploma, Bice said it's more important to make sure that the diploma means they have gotten the knowledge and skills to prepare them.

Bice said preliminary data indicates 68 percent of students left school with a credential — measured through standardized test scores or vocational certificates — that indicates they are prepared for either college or a career.

He said the department is trying to raise that number.

Graduation rates are on the rise nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Education. In the 2013-14 school year, 82 percent of students nationwide graduated on time with a regular diploma. That year, Iowa, had the highest graduation rate of nearly 91 percent. The District of Columbia had the lowest rate, at 61 percent.

Alabama no longer requires high school students to take a graduation exam. However, Bice said that had little effect on boosting graduation rates because almost all students passed the test.

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"Education is the future. It's the key to making Alabama better," Bentley said.
Tide of support rolls in for Phyllis from Mulga

By: Carol Robinson

Phyllis – of Paul Finebaum fame – has found her faith restored.

Not in football (though Bama's 16th National Championship didn't hurt) or fans, or even Finebaum himself. But in people.

Because when Phyllis Perkins needed it most -- her husband is battling terminal cancer -- the Finebaum family of callers and listeners has responded in ways she could not imagine.

Johnny from Cullman, Rich from Atlanta and many others teamed up to launched a GoFundMe site to help raise money for medical costs, which inevitably has raised Phyllis' spirits. "It has renewed my faith in humanity. I can't believe that many people care about me," Phyllis told AL.com. "It has touched me more than anything in this world."

The tough-talking, longtime Alabama superfan is known across the country for her passion, which usually comes across as loud and angry. But the woman behind the bluster is really a softie who has weathered her fair share of tragedies. She lost her father when she was just 17. She herself kicked lung cancer in 1996 after doctors removed half of her left lung, she told AL.com's Ben Flanagan in 2013. Her daughter Tina lost her own battle with breast cancer in 2010. The following month, Phyllis found she also had breast cancer, the same type that took her mother's life.

Calling Finebaum's show gives her an outlet, a place to relieve any stress she might have from real life, she told Flanagan.

Less than two years ago, doctors diagnosed her husband, Don, with Stage 4 lung cancer. The cancer had also spread to his liver, his stomach, his bones, his bloodstream and his brain. "You name a place, it's there," Phyllis said. "The doctors said he had six months."

The news, she said, was initially devastating. "It was the most horrible feeling in the world," she said. "We were down for so long."

Then one night the couple – now married for 38 years – sat down and had a heart-to-heart talk. This is what she told him: "It's you and me and we're going to live one day at a time. We're going to love one day at a time. We're going to just trust in the good Lord. He made you, and no one's taking you out but Him."

Don undergoes chemotherapy treatments every three weeks, a plan designed not to save his life but to ease his pain. "The doctor told him three or four months ago that he was living on borrowed time and that's just the way it is," Phyllis said.

In November, her Finebaum family started the online fundraising efforts to help the family of modest means deal with the astronomical costs. This is what they wrote on the GoFundMe site:

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"She is perhaps the most famous fan in college football. Alabama's biggest fan and famous caller to the leading radio show in college football 'Phyllis from Mulga' needs our help."

Even if you're not a college football fan, there's a good chance you've heard her rants on the mothership... She was even profiled in the New York Times.

Phyllis has been a loyal and devoted fan for over 50 years, and for her it's personal. While casual listeners may think she's just an overly passionate fan, Alabama football made a real difference in her life. Many of us don't know the backstory of Phyllis' passion for 'Bama, but another caller into the show composed a blog that shed a lot of insight into her devotion. Phyllis' story, as told by a fellow caller.

When her son was born with oxygen deprivation, the trauma caused neurological damage, causing him to be teased at school. When he came home and told his mom he didn't want to live, Phyllis knew that her son needed a hero, and looked to Alabama Coach Gene Stallings for help. Coach Stallings not only sent her son a signed poster but requested to meet her and her son. They remained close and Coach wrote her son many letters over the years. He gave her son the hero he so desperately needed, and she has been grateful ever since. So when you hear her passion thundering through on the radio, now you can understand why Alabama means so much to her.

One of the great things about sports is how it can connect people from all walks of life, and this is now easier than ever with Twitter and the internet. Many callers into the radio show have their own Twitter accounts, and while I've yet to call in to the show, I listen almost every day. I've always enjoyed Rich from Atlanta's calls as he poses thoughtful and insightful calls. I had tweeted the show asking if he was on Twitter, and they put my tweet on TV. Within a day or two, Rich and I had connected on Twitter and we met in person when he was in Boston for business. When I walked up, he was just hanging up a phone call with Phyllis and I had told him how much I liked her especially after reading Celina's blog about her backstory. We tried to call her back but got her machine.

Now, Phyllis needs the help of the college football family. Her husband has been diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer and sadly is on borrowed time. We don't have any additional details as to how long that could be, but Rich, world famous Johnny from Cullman (heard throughout Northern Alabama on Cole Cubelic and Tide 99.1 in Tuscaloosa) and I have put ourselves into a call for action to raise funds for Phyllis to ensure she can properly care for her husband as he enters the final stage of his life.

Alabama football was there for Phyllis and her family many years ago, and I know that now is a time that the entire college football family can come together for her once more. Johnny from Cullman said "she's one of the sweetest, kindest and loving people you'll ever meet. Ever." Let's help her in her time of need. All funds will go directly to Phyllis, she is aware that we are creating this page for her and I know she will be grateful for everyone's help. No donation is too small, her family is of modest means and every little bit will help."

See next page
Finebaum caller Rich from Atlanta, also known as Rich Johnson, said they started the site for the woman they've come to love. Johnson had Phyllis at his Georgia home for the SEC Championship game, where they took her to the College Football Hall of Fame. She was also a guest on Finebaum's set that weekend, and got to meet her nemesis, ESPN analyst Danny Kanell.

"We all know each other through the show and we're all just friends that way," Johnson said. "She's like our crazy aunt and we just love her to death."

Johnson recently also gave Phyllis and her husband a mattress and box springs, which she said has vastly improved her husband's comfort level.

"The best thing in life is when you help others," he said. "Her passion for Alabama is unsurpassed. She's just the best. She is just the nicest person I've ever met."

Phyllis said she's thankful for the money being donated, but she's even more thankful for the people behind the donations, the thoughts, the tweets, the messages of support. "I love them unseen," she said. "Some people will say you can't love them if you've never met them, and I say, 'Oh yes you can.' You can pass love all over the world."

And she said she's beyond thankful for Finebaum, the man and the show that has spawned her newfound friendships. "I love Paul, and I think he loves me," she said.

That he does. "I have been very touched by what everyone is doing. It is such a wonderful display of devotion and love toward her," Finebaum said. "I first met Phyllis many years ago and I have never met a finer and better person. No person has meant more to our show and she is beloved by people who know her well — and by thousands with whom she has never met. We may spar from time to time on the air, but I love her dearly .... And so does everyone else."
Irondale offers deal to land Saban dealership

Kent Faulk kfaulk@al.com

Mercedes-Benz of Birmingham, a car dealership co-owned by Alabama football coach Nick Saban, would get $13 million in incentives — mainly tax breaks — to relocate to Irondale under a plan recently approved by that city's council. The dealership is currently located in Hoover.

Irondale council members unanimously approved the proposal. Then attorneys for the city filed documents in Jefferson County Circuit Court seeking a judge's validation of the tax incentives plan.

Joe Agresti, partner with Saban in Mercedes-Benz of Birmingham, as well as Saban's attorney, couldn't be reached for comment.

Under a proposed project, funding and cooperation agreement between the city and the dealership, Mercedes of Birmingham would build a 40,000-square-foot "upscale Mercedes Benz automobile dealership" at a site off Grants Mill Road at Interstate 459 in Irondale. The business would create 60 full-time jobs.

Under the $13 million incentives plan:

- The city would spend up to $3 million to build an access road off Grants Mill Road leading to the dealership. The money also would cover running utilities — water, sewer, gas and cable — to the site.
- Irondale would provide breaks up to $10 million on the city's two sales taxes — the 1.5 percent sales tax on new and used cars, and the 4 percent retail sales taxes on parts.

"I think we have the potential to receive a lot of sales tax revenue," said Irondale City Councilman Craig Sanderson, chairman of the council's finance and economic development committees.

The cost of the road and utilities is being covered by money from a bond issue approved by the city council earlier in 2014, city officials have said.

The dealership also will have the ability to sell some of the outparcels, allowing more business to move in and eventually increase the tax money coming into Irondale, Sanderson said.

"We have the potential to have a great deal. The worst case scenario is we've got a deal we can't lose money on," he said. Sanderson said the incentives aren't being offered just because Saban is a partner in the dealership. Almost everyone who comes to locate a business in Irondale can get incentives if they generate sufficient revenue, he said.

"The city is willing to invest to get people here," he said.

Saban and Agresti have been considering Irondale as the location for a new Mercedes dealership since 2013. Hoover Crown Automobile Co., however, filed a lawsuit against Mercedes-Benz USA seeking to stop the car maker from allowing a new dealership to open in what it considered its territory.

Crown argued plans for the new dealership derailed a plan to sell Crown Automobile. Attorneys for Mercedes-Benz USA, LLC, however, argued they were well within their rights to open a second Birmingham area dealership.

A confidential settlement of the lawsuit was announced in August 2014 and by Oct. 1, 2014, Agresti and Saban had taken over ownership of the Crown Mercedes dealership.

At the time of the settlement, Saban's lawyer issued a statement saying the original plan to locate the dealership in Irondale had not changed and that they were continuing to work with city leaders "to facilitate that development."
For black Americans, childhood is about survival

Kyle Campbell

I was 12 years old once. I don't remember everything about it, and I suppose there wasn't much to remember. The life of a 12-year-old is routine — go to school, do your chores, play, do your homework, and repeat. Twelve-year-olds don't generally form lasting friendships and very rarely achieve their dreams, if they even have dreams yet. It is frightening to me, then, to think that my life could have ended at 12.

I've accomplished much of what I set out to accomplish as a college student. I've lived nearly 20 happy years now, and I hope to live several scores more. And now that I am what most people would consider an adult, I have a pretty decent chance at that. Aside from early disease, an unfortunate accident or a random act of violence, there is little likely to prevent me from living a few more decades. But it wasn't always that way.

I was around 12 years old on one of the first Halloweens that I went trick-or-treating unaccompanied by adults. My parents were worried, of course, as all parents are, after hearing incessant news reports about child abductions just before sending their children off to accept candy from strangers.

I heeded all of their warnings to stay in a group and call for help if I felt unsafe, but I also grabbed a knife. That made sense to me at the time; I wanted to be able to defend myself. The evening went by without incident, and it wasn't until I came home and emptied my candy bag that my parents saw what I was carrying. The physical discipline I was used to from my mom was replaced by hysteria: "Don't you realize you could have been killed?" she yelled.

I didn't realize that. And neither did Tamir Rice. I shudder involuntarily reading the commentary on Tamir's death.

"He looked older than 12," they say. So did I.

I was always respectful on the several occasions I was stopped by the police for walking in my own neighborhood during the day. I told the officers where I lived, what I was doing, and they let me go. It never occurred to me that it was wrong that my neighbors called the police to report a child taking a walk. My white friends would always remark on how unlucky I was, and I believed them. We all wore the same baggy jeans, tennis shoes, and hoodies. I didn't know that my skin was the missing piece of a criminal's uniform.

I remained respectful even as I grew, as I learned about police brutality and race and the realities of black America. Yet I still carry a metaphorical knife with me on occasion. I take walks late at night on campus to clear my head, knowing very well that if there is a robbery in the area, I will fit the description.

Among the many black faces 6 feet below the earth, their expressions still holding for the benefit of the doubt, the fact mine is not represented is a coincidence. When I have nightmares about Tamir Rice lying in the street for 4 minutes with no medical attention, no one to talk to, no understanding of why he is dying, sometimes I am Tamir. But in even worse dreams, I'm one of the police officers, standing over my dying body.

It reminds me of a day I stood over a baby snake in my driveway, one I knew was not venomous, but petrified me just the same. "Don't worry," my dad said, "he's even more afraid of you than you are of him."

Then he killed him anyway.

Kyle Campbell is a student at the University of Alabama and state president of the Alabama College Democrats.
A private foundation is suing UA in Texas state court, alleging the university breached a contract between the two after taking more than $1.3 million for a scholarship program for first-generation college students.

The lawsuit filed by the Suder Foundation, based in Plano, Texas, in July 2015 claims breach of contract, anticipatory breach of contract, promissory estoppel, and unjust enrichment. It is seeking return of the funds, attorneys and court fees, and pre- and post-judgment interest on the funds.

"A donor should not have to worry that a grantee, especially a nationally known university, would not fulfill the contractual promises it made when accepting a gift or grant. Sadly, we have no choice but to take this undesirable course," said a released statement from Eric Suder, founder of The Suder Foundation.

In a complaint filed in Dallas County District Court in Texas, the foundation reports it gave UA more than $1.3 million for scholarships and startup funds as part of UA's agreement to participate in the First Scholars program, a program with a mission to improve graduation rates of first-generation college students.

The university filed a response in September 2015, denying the claims. In court filings, UA argues it properly made a decision to discontinue participation in the program and notified the foundation.

UA declined to comment on the pending litigation.

The private foundation's First Scholar's program provides first-generation college students financial, social, emotional and personal development support as part of the program. The foundation also evaluates outcomes by collecting data on the students in the program.

Following a request for proposal process, the foundation chose UA in 2010 to participate in the program, according to court documents.

The foundation provides funding to its public university partners for startup and scholarships during the first four years. In the fifth year, the universities assume responsibility for the program funding going forward as part of the agreement.

The suit alleges weeks after receiving the final check, the university, in breach of its agreement, failed to keep its contractual promise when it notified the foundation in September 2014 it intended to make changes to the program and would not continue as part of the First Scholars network.

The suit alleges the breach includes failing to provide data on the cohort of students in the program at UA in 2014 and 2015 and failure by staff to attend conferences and meetings.
Hazing Trial Delayed for 5 at University of Alabama

By: Jay Reeves

A judge delayed the trial Wednesday for five one-time University of Alabama fraternity members charged with hazing new members who allegedly were forced to stand in ice water until they had frostbite.

District Judge Joel R. Chandler's office announced the postponement hours before the trial was set to begin. He previously said the case would go ahead as planned, but some defendants sought a delay.

The case was tentatively rescheduled for March 1, the judge's office said.

The five are fighting the charges, court documents indicate, but they were expelled from Phi Gamma Delta, which has a policy prohibiting hazing.

The defendants include Richard Eugene Markwalter II, Hunter Lee Wagner and Mark Allen Powers II, all 20 and from Huntsville; John Patrick Buckley, 21, of Houston; and Colter K. Anderson, 22, of Dallas.

Markwalter, Wagner, Buckley and Anderson were each charged with three counts of hazing, a misdemeanor under Alabama law. Powers was charged with one count of hazing, and Wagner also was charged with marijuana possession.

Each hazing count carries a maximum penalty of $500.

Wagner's attorney filed a document stating "each defendant will engage in finger-pointing at the other defendants." Anderson's lawyer filed a document showing he was in drug and alcohol rehabilitation and could not be in court.

Alabama has what is described as the nation's largest Greek community with more than 10,000 members in 61 fraternities and sororities. Multimillion-dollar mansions occupied by Greek-letter organizations dot the campus, and Phi Gamma Delta has what's arguably the best location — directly across the street from Bryant-Denny Stadium and a short walk from a row of bars and restaurants popular with students.

Police depositions allege Phi Gamma Delta pledges Cameron Ewing, Hall Bryant and Benton Jones were told to stand in a cooler full of ice water and salt in a bathroom of the white-columned fraternity house on Sept. 14. Upperclassmen asked the pledges questions to test their knowledge of fraternity brothers during the ordeal, which lasted 15 to 20 minutes, one of the depositions said.

Anderson stomped on a bare, frostbitten foot of Bryant and told him to "man up," police alleged, and Powers made Bryant stick his head in a toilet, which a fraternity brother flushed in what was called a "swirly."
All three new members were treated for frostbite in Tuscaloosa and then transferred to the burn unit at UAB Hospital in Birmingham with second- and three-degree burns, records show.

All five except Powers told officers they knew the treatment was hazing, a police deposition said.

"They all stated there was no intent to injure the victims and they agreed it went too far," the document said. "Anderson even admitted that he knows this same form of hazing has occurred inside the fraternity house before."

The university notified police after learning of the hazing allegations, a police statement said, and the five fraternity brothers were arrested after the new members gave statements to investigators.
Student center will bear Saban's name

Building expected to open in August

By Angel Coker
Staff Writer

A soon-to-be-built student center at St. Francis of Assisi University Parish will bear the family name of the University of Alabama’s head football coach.

“With the growing student population at the University of Alabama, there is a tremendous need at St. Francis University Church for a student center — a place where students can continue their spiritual development as well as socialize in a friendly, safe environment,” Saban, who is a parishioner at St. Francis, said in an email.

The artstudent center at St. Francis of Assisi University Parish will bear the family name of the University of Alabama’s head football coach.

This artist rendering shows the planned Saban Catholic Student Center that will be built at St. Francis of Assisi University Parish in Tuscaloosa. RENDERING PROVIDED BY ELLIS ARCHITECTS

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to The Tuscaloosa News.
“Terry (Saban’s wife) and I are proud to be a part of the support for the new student center as well as the recently built St. Francis church on our campus where our family worships. Of all the legacies we may leave behind, this Catholic student center will be one that will touch many lives in a positive way over the years.”

The 1974 church that once stood on the site was demolished in December. At 1 p.m. Feb. 1, St. Francis will break ground on the new Saban Catholic Student Center, which will be built where the former sanctuary once stood on Fifth Avenue.

A new St. Francis of Assisi Church, more than double the size of the 1974 church, was built three years ago to accommodate the growth of the congregation. Now the students need a larger facility.

“What we had just wasn’t big enough,” said the Rev. Tom Ackerman, pastor of St. Francis. He said there are about 3,000 Catholic students on the UA campus.

Saban and his family have donated money and were part of the effort to raise $2 million for the student center. So far, $1.3 million has been raised.

The 4,600-square-foot student center is expected to be complete by the start of the fall semester in August.

Mike Ellis of Ellis Architects designed the facility to contain three main rooms.

He said the gathering room will have a family room atmosphere with soft chairs surrounding a fireplace and some desks and tables that can be used for studying. The recreation room will have pool tables, TVs and activity tables, and the educational room will be used for lectures and small groups, he said.

“The main function is to provide a gathering space for college students and parishioners to come together,” said Ellis, who has been a parishioner at St. Francis for 24 years.

Allie Loomis, the coordinator for campus ministry at St. Francis whose office will be housed in the student center, said she expects the student center to be a social and spiritual hub and it will be open to all students, not only Catholic students.

“Us being a university parish, it is of utmost importance evangelizing the campus. It will be very beneficial just giving the students their own space,” Loomis said. “It will give us a hub to reach out and meet and gather.”
New director of museum research, collections named

John Abbott began new role Jan. 4

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

The University of Alabama's new director of museum research and collections was drawn by the chance to return to research and collections as well as the staff at Alabama.

"I spent most of my career in collections," John Abbott said. "I saw this as an opportunity really get back into collections."

Abbott started his new role as director of Museum Research and Collections at the University of Alabama on Jan. 4.

Most recently, he was the director of the Wild Basin Creative Research Center at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, and, before that, a faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin for 14 years.

Abbott, an entomologist studying systematics and biogeography (why species are where they are), said the staff in place at UA made an impression on him during the interview process.

"I just really felt a good connection with the team of folks over there," Abbott said.

Abbott, tasked with supervising the collections owned by the Natural History Museum, described the job as split between overseeing the collections and research. Previously, the post was just a collection position, he said.

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DIRECTOR
From Page B1

The changes in the job reflect a renewed emphasis on museum-based research at UA, said William Bomar, executive director of University Museums, in the announcement of Abbott's hiring. Bomar praised Abbott's experience as a curator and his scholarship.

"One of the key things there is trying to build synergies with faculty across the campus and really ... across Alabama and the nation," Abbott said.

Abbott also hopes to get students and the community involved with the university's collections as well.

Abbott will also continue his own research, which includes work with dragonflies and damselflies.
Phoenix
a perfect metaphor for Kiffin

CECIL HURT

Arizona has not been especially kind to Lane Kiffin lately. "The last time I was here, I got fired," Kiffin said on Saturday morning. "The time before that was for the (USC) NCAA hearing. So, yeah, good memories."

Kiffin wasn't complaining, though. For most of a busy hour in which he was surrounded by an army of media, at least one platoon of which consisted of Los Angeles-based reporters who haven't gotten any face time with the former USC coach in over two years, he was jocular and positive. Phoenix, after all, represents rebirth, a city named after a mythical bird that destroys itself in flames, then rises again from its own ashes.

And who, in all of college football, has flamed out as spectacularly as Kiffin did two years ago, only to be re-invented, not out of ashes but under the protective wing of Nick Saban?

Kiffin seems progressively more relaxed and at ease with the idea of returning to Alabama for a third season as offensive coordinator in 2016. He joked about his firing at USC, addressing the famous "fired on the tarmac" story with a correction ("I was a good 20 yards off the tarmac," he said to a roar of laughter) and revealing that he still has a "good relationship" with USC AD Pat Haden.

"I still pull for those guys," Kiffin said, going onto say that his successor, Steve Sarkisian, who was fired in the middle of this season, actually texted plays to him at halftime of Alabama's semifinal win against Michigan State. Kiffin didn't reveal whether any of those plays were actually implemented in the game plan.

He also noted that Saban had originally offered him the Alabama offensive coordinator job in 2007, the year before he became head coach at Tennessee for a tumultuous one-year term. Even that experience, he says, was part of an education - but not as much as his

SEE HURT, C4
two years under Saban.

"I don’t have any regrets, but of course there are things I would do differently," he said. "I was young when I became a head coach and in a lot of situations, the only experience I had was to do things the way Pete (Carroll, his USC mentor) had done them. Now I can look at a situation and say ‘What would Pete do? What would Nick do? And where do I fit in with those alternatives?’

“Nick has been really great to work with, he really has," Kiffin said. "The nightmare stories you hear ... It’s a great example of not believing all the stuff that you read. He’s so hands-on. He’s helping players develop, he’s coaching coaches. One of the best things he said to me, really early on, ‘When I see something, I’m going to tell you immediately – good, bad, indifferent – and then it’s over.’ He’s just telling you what he thinks and how he wants things done.”

Kiffin and his phoenix-like rise from the ashes is a great story but Alabama fans have a more immediate concern: beating Clemson on Monday night.

“I don’t think fun is a word used around our program much," Kiffin replied when asked if he was having ‘fun’ in Arizona. "We’re not here to have fun, we’re here to win. “And if we win, we’ll probably have a 7:30 a.m. staff meeting.”

Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
Building a better helmet and more: UAB researchers tackle concussions

By: Amy Yurkanin

Concussion care has improved in Alabama since the passage of a 2011 law that requires school-age athletes to see a doctor before they return to the playing field, according to a study conducted by a pediatric neurosurgeon at UAB.

The movie "Concussion," based on the true story of a pathologist who became concerned about brain damage suffered by NFL athletes, has brought the issue of concussions back into the headlines.

But despite everything doctors have learned about the long-term risks for pro football players, there's still a lot to learn, said Dr. James Johnston, a UAB neurosurgeon and co-director of the Alabama Concussion Task Force. Several researchers at UAB are conducting research that could help diagnose, treat and even prevent concussions in some contact sports.

One of the biggest questions is also one of the most basic: What is the best way to diagnose a concussion?

"The diagnosis of concussion is kind of a gray area," Johnston said. "I could see a concussion where someone else might not."

Not every athlete who suffers a concussion loses consciousness, Johnston said. Athletes who receive violent blows to the head receive evaluations for concussions that may not catch all injuries.

Researchers in the Vestibular and Oculomotor Research Clinic (VORClinic) in the UAB School of Optometry are trying to develop tests to measure physical changes in eye-tracking after concussion. If the lab can find quantifiable physical changes for concussions, it could help with diagnosis and in determining when patients have recovered.

Studies have recently shown that a large number of hits may cause more brain damage than a handful of concussions, Johnston said.

"People are really moving toward impact exposure," Johnston said. "That's sort of where we're going too."

But how many hits are too many? Johnston and the VORClinic are trying to find out.

Investigators are measuring how athletes' pupils react to light over the course of a season, according to UAB. Athletes who show signs of minor brain damage may be asked to rest to prevent further injury.

Athletes who suffer concussions may have to refrain from play and study for weeks, until their symptoms have subsided. As Al.com reported in 2013, UAB researcher Candace Floyd has been
testing a compound that could potentially stop the process that causes brain cells to die during a concussion.

A substance that was developed to reduce rejection after organ transplant may hold the key to preventing more damage, according to UAB. If the compound proves to be effective in preventing brain cell death, then Floyd and her team may try to develop a treatment that can be administered on the sidelines, possibly as an inhaler or spray.

Outside the medical school, an engineering team is also working on ways to prevent concussions through improved equipment.

Dean Sicking, a mechanical engineering professor, developed safer barriers for use in car racing. How he has turned his attention to football helmets.

At his laboratory at Barber Motorsports Park, Sicking and his assistants have been testing different helmets currently on the market to determine how well they protect the brain. His team is also working on a new contraption, a helmet specifically designed to for concussion prevention.

But even without new equipment, tests or treatment, researchers can have an impact on the safety of young players. Increased awareness of concussions is already changing the way the game is practiced and played, Johnston said.

Many college and professional coaches have reduced the amount of tackling in practice, he said. Those changes haven't always filtered down to high school teams and younger, Johnston said.

"Junior high and high school teams that are led by well-meaning but uneducated coaches are still running a lot of outdated drills," Johnston said. "We know now that most of the concussions happen in practice."
$50,000 breast cancer grant awarded to ASU, UAB researchers

By: Kym Klass

A research proposal from Alabama State University and UAB scientists to conduct breast cancer research has been funded with a $50,000 Faculty Development grant from the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

It will enable both schools to conduct research on "aggressive" breast cancer, and falls in line with President Barrack Obama's Tuesday State of the Union request that American scientists come together and find a cure for cancer, according to a release from Alabama State University.

Sabita Saldanha, assistant professor with ASU's department of Biological Sciences, serves as the grants co-principal investigator and will work collaboratively with UAB scientists on the joint-venture. The research will be conducted at both sites. The grant period is through 2017. It is Saldanha's first collaborative grant as a co-principal investigator.

The findings of the study, she said, will provide an opportunity for a much larger collaborative grant between the two universities.

Saldanha said African-American and African women are more likely to die from breast cancer due to the aggressive subtypes of the disease prevalent in the population.

"Metabolic syndrome is a collective term given to a group of risk factors that increase the risk of a disease," Saldanha said. "The risk factors include obesity, hypertension, high triglycerides, low HDL cholesterol and high fasting blood sugar."
VA patient receives hospital's first kidney transplant in almost 50 years

By: Amy Yurkanin

The first kidney transplant in Alabama happened in 1968 at the VA Hospital in Birmingham.

The VA Hospital's second kidney transplant had to wait almost 50 years, until Jan. 5, 2016.

Recipient, William Andrew Terrell of Keysville, Ga. was at a dialysis appointment on Monday when he found out that a donor kidney was on its way to Birmingham. He packed his bags and left for Alabama.

Terrell had been on dialysis since 2008, and on the kidney transplant list for six or seven months, said his wife Maggie Terrell.

"We really prayed for this," Maggie Terrell said. "God delivers in his own time. We really thought it would be two or three years down the road."

The Birmingham VA Hospital began building its transplant program in 2012. It joins just six other VA Hospitals around the country that perform kidney transplants. The two closest are in Nashville and Houston.

"Traveling to one of the other sites can be costly and difficult for patients," said Kimberly Rowley, transplant administrator for the Birmingham VA Hospital.

The transplant program includes doctors who practice at UAB Hospital and the VA, said Dr. William Harper, chief of staff at the VA Hospital.

"This is a collaboration between UAB and the VA," Harper said.

Rowley joined the VA in 2012 to launch the program, but it was put on hold in 2014 after hospital officials discovered low levels of Legionella bacteria in the water supply. An outbreak of Legionnaire's disease at UAB infected nine and killed two in 2014, but no patients at the VA were affected, AL.com reported. The VA Hospital added a system to prevent the growth of bacteria in the water.

Members of the Military Order of the Purple Heart presented a gift to William Terrell to celebrate his groundbreaking procedure.

Rowley said she hopes to expand the kidney transplant program to include living donors. Demand for the procedure is high, and the hospital receives one or two referrals a week, Harper said.

So far, William Terrell has recovered well from his surgery, and Harper said physicians plan to discharge him on Saturday. He will remain in Birmingham for a couple of weeks after that before he can be cleared to return to Georgia.
UAH Celebrates Martin Luther King Jr.

By: Chris Davis

Students and faculty gathered at University of Alabama Huntsville's Conference Training Center today to celebrate the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

The Commemoration Program featured keynote speaker, Dr. Latasha McCrory of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Dr. McCrory received her undergraduate degree from UAH, and now works as a staff attorney for the SPLC. The event honors the legacy of Dr. King and recognizes community leaders and faculty who embody his message.

Dr. Emmanuel Waddell was this year's recipient of the "Dr. Adriel D. Johnson Power of One Award." The "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Award" went to Robert Leonard and Joyce Maples.

In addition to today's program, UAH has two Black History Month events planned in February:

Black History Month Buffet Luncheon “Hallowed Grounds: Sites of African-American Memory”

February 18, 2016 - 11 am
Shelby Center, Room 301
Tickets: $12

Black History Month Artistic Show & African Dance Performance

February 18, 2016 - 7 pm
Conference Training Center, Exhibit Hall
Free
New Alabama gene research targets 'superbugs' and biological weapons

By: Lee Roop

Could extreme environments hold a key to new antibiotics capable of fighting "superbugs" and biological weapons? A scientific study starting in Huntsville this year will try to find out.

Huntsville company iXpress Genes has won a $100,000 Defense Department grant to analyze the DNA of samples taken from extremely cold, acidic or alkaline environments.

The search is for new metabolic pathways leading to antibiotics that can fight biological weapons such as anthrax and drug-resistant pathogens known as superbugs.

"New antibiotics are desperately needed against multi-drug resistant pathogens, which are killing approximately 20,000 Americans per year," iXpressGenes President Dr. Joseph Ng said. "Also, these drugs are in high demand to protect warfighters who face threats from (biological warfare agents) and patients who suffer from increased bacterial resistance to existing antibiotics."

iXpressGenes is collaborating with Dr. Mark Liles from Auburn University and HudsonAlpha Genomic Services Lab director Dr. Shawn Levy. Ng is on the faculty of the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH).

"By combining Dr. Liles' experience in bacterial pathway cloning/expression, Dr. Levy's high-quality sequencing technology, and iXpressGenes'... protein and synthetic biology expertise, this project could lead to novel therapeutics," iXpress research associate AJ Singhal said, "as well as valuable enzymes for the food industry, fuel cells and biosensors."

"When HudsonAlpha labs and associate companies come together, we are able to accelerate laboratory research into real-world applications," said Carter Wells, vice president for economic development at HudsonAlpha.

(Updated Jan. 13 at 9 a.m. to reflect that Ng is on the faculty of UAH)
New UAH College of Nursing building expansion open house

By: Bob Gathany

The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) celebrated the opening of its new College of Nursing building expansion with an open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony Tuesday Jan. 12, 2016.

"It is an exciting time to be at The University of Alabama in Huntsville and at the College of Nursing. With the university's focus on increasing student enrollment and retention, our new building will be able to support our growth. In addition, the state of the art technology will serve to enhance and promote student learning and success. This will be the place where students will be educated to become professional nurses, advance practice nurses and nurse leaders who will ultimately transform the health care delivery system," said Nursing Dean Marsha H. Adams.

The renovation began in summer 2014. The expansion includes additional classrooms, student gathering spaces, faculty offices, and a 250-seat auditorium. It also houses the College of Nursing's Learning and Technology Resource Center (LTRC), a state of the art facility which includes Charger Hospital, a 16-bed hospital laboratory and five high-fidelity simulation laboratories; 16 table health assessment room, four advanced practice provider clinical examination rooms, an obstetric/pediatric four bed laboratory, an IV practice room, a home health simulation room and two debriefing rooms.

The building also features a new larger elevator to accommodate medical equipment, enhanced entry and security features, new handicapped accessible restrooms, and additional breakout spaces and other amenities.
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Comcast to build high-speed fiber optic network in Huntsville

By: Lucy Berry

Comcast Business announced this morning it will build a fiber optic network with up to 10 gigabit speeds and cloud-based voice solutions for businesses and government organizations in the Huntsville area.

The telecommunications company's multi-million dollar plan for fiber-based Ethernet service complements the City of Huntsville's attempt to become a "GIG City" with high-speed, fiber optic Internet for businesses and homes.

"As Huntsville continues to grow and develop a vibrant, high-tech community, Comcast recognized the need to make this important technology investment," said Doug Guthrie, regional SVP for Comcast. "This effort will enable businesses to expand their operations, and reinforces Huntsville as a destination of choice for organizations requiring the most advanced technology available."

Comcast revealed last month it would make a major technology-related announcement for the area. Alex Horwitz, vice president of public relations for Comcast, said the investment would involve some new jobs, but it is not yet clear how many positions will be created.

Comcast said it provides the following services to schools, businesses, hospitals and other organizations:

- Ethernet Private Line: point-to-point connectivity between two customer sites for bandwidth-intensive applications.

- Ethernet Virtual Private Line: point-to-multipoint connection to enable customers to tailor bandwidth, performance characteristics, and cost.

- Ethernet Network Service: multipoint-to-multipoint connectivity to connect organizations with high-bandwidth requirements and multiple locations across Comcast's network.

- Ethernet Dedicated Internet: continuous, high-bandwidth connectivity between customers' LANs and the public Internet.

Bringing high-speed Internet to Huntsville was voted the most exciting idea for Huntsville's future in a 2014 poll for AL.com's "What works: Regionalism" project. Officials hope faster download speeds will satisfy the area's existing data heavy companies, as well as new businesses looking to open or move here.
In a news release announcing the network, Comcast praised Huntsville's aerospace, telecommunications and military background. The company also mentioned the University of Alabama in Huntsville and NASA Marshall Space Flight Center as points of pride.

"Comcast's announcement is the latest in a series of wins for Huntsville's residents and businesses to receive high speed internet," said Mayor Tommy Battle. "We thank Comcast for making this significant investment in the city of Huntsville and for their belief in our high-growth market."

Rep. Howard Sanderford, R-Huntsville, said, "Huntsville will enjoy all of the advantages of having the fastest internet speeds and most cutting-edge technologies in the state – all designed to support our robust economy."
Comcast promises 10 Gig service in Huntsville

By: Dave Flessner

Last fall, EPB officials boasted that Chattanooga surpassed other communities on the information super highway when it boosted EPB Fiber speeds to 10 gigabits per second. The Chattanooga utility billed its Internet speed across the city as the fastest in the world.

But not for long.

The cable TV giant Comcast announced this week it will spend millions of dollars to build a 10 Gig network in Huntsville, Ala., among other cities. The fiber-based Ethernet network will provide businesses and government organizations with highly scalable and ultra-fast Internet connectivity and cloud-based voice solutions.

"As Huntsville continues to grow and develop a vibrant, high-tech community, Comcast recognized the need to make this important technology investment," said Doug Guthrie, regional senior vice president for Comcast. "This effort will enable businesses to expand their operations, and reinforces Huntsville as a destination of choice for organizations requiring the most advanced technology available."

Last year, Huntsville solicited super fast Internet providers to the self-described Rocket city and received 13 proposals.

"Comcast's announcement is the latest in a series of wins for Huntsville's residents and businesses to receive high speed internet," Huntsville Mayor Tommy Battle said this week.
NOAA says December temperatures warmest on record in Alabama

By: Leigh Morgan

It was a warm December — the warmest on record in Alabama.

That's according to NOAA, which released a nationwide analysis of average December temperatures this week.

A climate report released by NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information said that December 2015 was also record warm in the continental U.S. The average temperature was 38.6 degrees Fahrenheit, which was 6 degrees above the 20th century average.

The previous record was 37.7 degrees in 1939.

The weather pattern in December made for record warmth across most of the eastern half of the nation while keeping the West at average or below-average temperatures, the NCEI said.

Alabama was one of 29 states that experienced its warmest December on record. All of those states were in the eastern half of the nation.

Alabama's statewide average temperature in December was 56.4 degrees, 10 degrees above average, according to the NCEI. The data period is 1895-2015.

Alabama's previous warmest December was in 1984, when the average statewide temperature was 55.1 degrees.

However, that is not the only opinion on the matter.

Alabama State Climatologist Dr. John Christy said that data collected from the University of Alabama in Huntsville may beg to differ about a 2015 being the hottest December.

"The UAH satellite data measures the temperature of the deep atmosphere," he said. "Over Alabama, December 2015 was very warm, but it was actually hotter in December 1984."

Why was last month so warm?

"Weather patterns shift all the time, and this time it was our turn to be in the warmest (relatively speaking) region of the planet," Christy said this week via email. "January won't be that way as you can tell."

Christy said the ongoing El Nino, thought to be one of the strongest on record, also had an influence on December's temperatures.

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December was also particularly soggy in Alabama, according to the NCEI.

2015 ranked as No. 2 for precipitation when looking at data from 1895 through 2015, the agency said.

The statewide average for precipitation last month was 10.64 inches, which was 5.45 inches above average.

The wettest December on record in Alabama was in 1961, when the statewide average precipitation was 12.21 inches, more than 7 inches above average.
UAH study finds that our lifestyles could cause indoor air pollution

By: Will Harkins

Some associate air pollution with outside, however, UAH study shows the air in your home can also be toxic.

In a study of 10 people, Dr. Azita Amiri and a student Lilia Bullock monitored the lifestyles and air quality in their homes. Seven of the ten people studied lived in air quality that was considered "acceptable", ~500 micrograms per cubic meter of air. However, 3 people were living in levels much high that that, up to 8 times higher in fact.

According to the study, those who used more aerosols, perfumes, and scented sprays had air quality that was much worse than those that don't use them. Additionally, those who open doors, windows, and use fans to circulate the air had much better air quality.

According to the student, who has now graduated, Lilia Bullock "What did surprise me is that the ones with higher concentrations also had health issues on top of that and they didn't connect the two. They just thought they were born with weak immune systems, but in reality they could be living in such high concentrations that its affecting their overall health."

Both Dr. Amiri and Bullock hope to continue the research and determine what lifestyle changes could have the most affect. They also want to expand the number of people they study as well.
Open house set for new active learning center

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

The University of West Alabama plans an open house on Jan. 21 to showcase a classroom outfitted as an adaptive learning environment through a $50,000 grant.

"The Active Learning Center is basically an environment that is conducive to hands-on, inquiry-based learning," professor Martha Hocutt said.

The room utilizes a combination of furniture, technology and other equipment to allow the space to adapt to different learning needs.

"It is an exemplary model of the 21st-century classroom," Hocutt said.

The Julia S. Tutwiler College of Education began using the classroom during the fall semester after being awarded the grant a $50,000 grant from Steelcase Education, Hocutt said. UWA was one of 12 recipients of the annual grant nationwide. The room is equipped with a Steelcase Education Blended Learning Classroom, which was installed by Dekalb Office of Birmingham.

The open house for the Active Learning Center in Lyon Hall room 128A begins at 3:30 p.m. on Jan. 21.

The classroom can be reconfigured for lectures, individual and group work, presentations and discussions. The room is currently outfitted for 28 students.

SEE CENTER, B3

"We have found it to increase student participation, comfort and enhance student learning outcomes," Hocutt said. "That is just after one semester. We are extremely excited about the new active learning center."

UWA has added additional furnishings and additional hardware including computers and a white board since the fall as well as ongoing preparation of faculty from other colleges to be able to use the room, Hocutt said.

The grant proposal and the use of the room are based on an educational theory to encourage student learning and exploration called the 5Es, according to Hocutt. The principles include engagement, exploration, explanation, elaboration, and evaluation.

"It is much more effective if (students) figure out a problem on their own rather than you to give them an answer," Hocutt said. "We as educators are too often doing the work that our students should be doing."

The active learning approach also includes tablets and handheld mobile devices, such as smartphones into the process.

"We are teaching teachers how to take advantage of the technologies that there K-12 students are already using," Hocutt said.

Hocutt sees practical applications for the approach beyond the task of preparing K-12 teachers to work in 21st century classrooms. She argued the active learning classroom was equally applicable at the collegiate level.

"This is a model that is applicable to all disciplines," Hocutt said.

As part of a two-year research plan, the college will study how teaching and learning in an active learning environment differs from the traditional classroom setting.
College Football

UAB's 2017 slate set

UAB will make its return to the grid-iron against Alabama A&M, the school formally announced Thursday.

UAB will host Alabama A&M and Coastal Carolina in 2017 and will travel to Florida and Ball State. That's the non-conference portion of the first year back for UAB football since it originally dropped football after the 2014 season and reinstated it six months later.

UAB will host Alabama A&M on Sept. 2, 2017 and travel to Ball State on Sept. 9, 2017. This contract calls for just one game at Ball State.

The Blazers host Coastal Carolina on Sept. 16 as part of a home-and-home series, and will travel to Myrtle Beach, S.C., on Sept. 15, 2018.

UAB's game at Florida will be on Nov. 18, 2017.

UAB's eight Conference USA games — four home and four away — will be announced at a later date, but UAB will be in the West with Southern Miss, UTSA, North Texas, Rice, Louisiana Tech and UTEP.
UA GYMNASTICS

Fresh start

Freshmen hope to make impact with Tide

By Sean Landry
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

The University of Alabama gymnastics team’s freshman class got an early start this year.

“We made a change this summer and we brought all six in this summer to get transitioned through Summer II (classes),” Alabama coach Dana Duckworth said. “We felt that was really good to get them acclimated to being away from home for the first time, being in a new environment, being coached by new coaches. Even though it was a lot of volunteer time, it was getting adjusted to our conditioning our training, and I think it’s helped them have a smooth transition.”

The move paid immediate dividends for the six freshmen, who make up a full third of the team, adjusting to life on a team with the highest of academic standards. The Crimson Tide as a whole finished the fall semester with a 3.8 GPA, with seven athletes with perfect 4.0 standards, including senior Elite 89 award winner Lauren Beers. Two of those gymnasts are in the freshman class: Ariana Guerra and Amanda Huang. Freshman Abby Ambrecht also has a career 4.0 GPA, joining Guerra, Huang, Beers and sophomore Mackenzie Braman, while the class combined for a 3.5 in the fall.

“I’ve definitely felt the emphasis,” freshman Angelina Giancroce said. “I don’t think it’s emphasized in a bad way by any means. You’re just held to a higher standard. That to me is important because you’re obviously coming here to get educated. It’s not all about athletics, and after your four years here, gymnastics is over so that was attractive to me because I didn’t want to be in a place that didn’t want me to succeed academically.”

SEE GYMNASTICS, C4

No. 14 Missouri at No. 6 Alabama

Where: Coleman Coliseum
When: 6 p.m. tonight
Records: Alabama 0-1
Missouri 2-0
TV: SEC Network
Radio: 98.7 FM

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Giancroce was one of two freshmen, with Jenna Bresette who made their competitive debut in last Sunday's 196.5-196.33 loss to UCLA.

“I thought the freshman really handled it well,” Duckworth said. “For six of them, we didn’t have a ton of routines from them, but almost everybody warmed up during the warmup time because we wanted to go ahead and get some competitive experience in that away arena, so it really was a good away trip for that.”

The early enrollment, with help from the upperclassmen, has helped the freshman class in more than just academics. Giancroce said the six have become close friends, while Brannan said the team chemistry with the class is “great.” But Duckworth has said her gymnasts are students first, athletes second, and to her, those are one and the same.

“The ladies, what they did in the classroom, by being champions this fall, is how they’ve prepared this season,” Duckworth said. “There’s a direct correlation, I believe, in how well they did in the classroom and how well we’ll do in competition.”
Alabama hopes to keep lengthy win streak against Auburn alive

Forget easing into the 2016 season. Alabama's gymnastics team stepped right into the express lane with three meets in eight days. It started with a road trip to UCLA last Sunday and continues with a few local stops. The home season begins at 6 p.m. Friday with No. 14 Missouri in Coleman Coliseum. Two days later, the No. 6 Crimson Tide faces rival No. 7 Auburn at 3 p.m. Sunday at the BJCC in Birmingham.

After a few recent scares, Alabama's streak of 116 wins over Auburn faces perhaps its greatest test Sunday. The Tigers fell to Alabama 197.200 to 197.025 on the same BJCC arena last March. And in the opening meet, Auburn scored a 196.175 in a win over Oregon State. Alabama posted a 196.300 in the loss at No. 5 UCLA.

So this is big.

But it'll be Part II of a long weekend for both teams. Auburn gets Kentucky on Friday night in Auburn Arena at the same time Alabama faces Missouri.

A quirk in the schedule forced this early-season rivalry meet in Birmingham. Last year's version was held March 8, but that wasn't possible this year.

Sunday was the only time they could secure an open date in the arena and the raised podium they prefer in such meets. It's better to have a meet on the stage-like podium later in the year since they're used in SEC and NCAA meets, but there wasn't an option this year.

"You're going to take podium whenever you can get it because it's such a great experience for everybody," Alabama coach Dana Duckworth said.

And while the rivalry and streak are important, Duckworth said the wins and losses aren't as important as the overall team and individual scores.

"We don't have a defensive/offensive strategy," she said.

"We just came off that amazing football game, probably the best football game I've seen in my life and as I was watching, the only defense is how you select to change your routine at the last second and maybe be more conservative.

"So we don't want fans to be discouraged because they saw a loss to a great team. The win-loss record isn't as important to the overall rankings for regionals and nationals."

Alabama saw two freshmen make debuts at UCLA in Jenna Bresette and Angelina Giancroce. The environment was a lot to handle at UCLA and it showed at times, Duckworth said.

A few veterans return as the core of the team that finished fifth last year at nationals. Mackenzie Brennan is now doing the all-around with returning standouts Lauren Beers, Katie Bailey, Carley Sims and Keely McNeer among those back for 2016.

Sims will again bring her crowd-favorite floor routine to both meets this weekend. It's changed from last year but still features a mix of hip-hop music. It debuted Sunday at UCLA.

They got a little pumped up when Trap Queen came on," Sims said.

"I guess it got their attention. When they heard the elephant sound they weren't too pleased, but once that song came on and they saw me do the Whip and Nae Nae, they kinda got into it."
Big numbers end Gamecocks’ undefeated run

By Cecil Hurt
Sports Editor

TUSCALOOSA — Powerball wasn’t just a lottery on Wednesday night.

The University of Alabama basketball team played their own brand at Coleman Coliseum, overpowering undefeated No. 19 South Carolina 73-50 for its first SEC win in three tries.

There were some unlikely numbers in this game as well, particularly from Riley Norris. Starting for the first time this season, Norris poured in a career-high 27 points and tied the school record for 3-point baskets, making eight of his 11 tries.

Justin Coleman came off the bench to score 14 points and had six assists as the Crimson Tide raised its record to 10-5, 1-2 in Southeastern Conference play.

“Give a lot of credit to Alabama,” said South Carolina coach Frank Martin. “I told our team on Monday that we were going to play the team that plays the hardest on our schedule. They played that way and we didn’t and we got what we deserved.”

The first half could hardly have gone better for Alabama — except for its 2 of 8 foul shooting — as the Crimson Tide built a 13-point lead in the first 11 minutes of play and held that margin until halftime, taking a 35-22 lead at the break.

Norris was instrumental in the quick UA start. The
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sophomore forward from Albertville made all five of his first-half 3-point attempts and finished with 18 points, tying his career scoring high before halftime. In the meantime, South Carolina struggled, making just eight of 26 shots (30 percent) in the half.

The second half only extended the Gamecock misery. South Carolina missed its first 13 shots of the half and did not score for over eight minutes before Duane Notice hit a layup at the 11:51 mark. By that time, Alabama had a 26-point lead, 48-22, and was uncatchable for the rest of the contest.

The win was Alabama's third victory over ranked opponents this season, along with non-conference victories over Wichita State and Notre Dame.

Michael Carrera had 14 points and 10 rebounds to lead South Carolina, which saw its season-opening 15-game winning streak snapped.

—Reach Cecil Hurt at cecil@tidesports.com or 205-722-0225.
That will decide the championship

No. 1 Clemson (14-0) and No. 2 Alabama (13-1) only have one loss between them this season. So asking opposing coaches how to beat the Tigers and Crimson Tide is a difficult question. There are two things everyone can agree upon about the College Football Playoff national championship on Monday night in Glendale, Ariz: Beating Alabama's defense will take a special performance. Clemson's Deshaun Watson is capable of such a performance. Here's a look at some of the key matchups that will help determine which team wins the national championship.

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MATCHUP I

The Heisman Trophy finalist is the type of dual threat that can flummox even the best defenses, and his mobility will be crucial to breaking down the seemingly impenetrable wall that is Alabama's front seven. Trying to move Alabama's big and sturdy linemen such as All-America A'Shawn Robinson, Jarran Reed and Jonathan Allen off the line of scrimmage consistently is just not happening.

"The more you can spread them out the better opportunity you have of creating a seam in the defense to run the ball," Mississippi State coach Dan Mullen said.

Don't expect a ton of north-south power running by Clemson. The Tigers are more likely to attack at the edges of Alabama's defense.

"You've got to have some imagination and some smoke-and-mirror mentality for sure," said Ole Miss coach Hugh Freeze, whose team handed Alabama its only loss this season.

As the games have become more important for Clemson, Watson has been used as a ball carrier more. He has surpassed 20 carries in each of the last three games, including a season-high 24 for a season-best 145 yards in the Orange Bowl victory against Oklahoma.

Clemson will also need Watson's wheels to escape an Alabama pass rush that has registered 50 sacks.

MATCHUP II
Alabama WR Calvin Ridley vs. Clemson CB Mackensie Alexander.

The freshmen Ridley is Alabama's next great receiver, following Julio Jones and Amari Cooper. Against Michigan State, the Tide took advantage of a secondary that had no match for Ridley (eight catches for 138 yards and two touchdowns).

Alexander doesn't get quite as much publicity as some of the nation's other shutdown corners, but make no mistake: He is as talented as any of them.

"He's good enough to say let's not mess with it on that side," said former Syracuse coach Scott Shafer, who is now the defensive coordinator at Maryland.

That explains why Alexander had no interceptions this season. The other corner, Cordrea Tankersley, led the team with five picks and is no slouch, either. Tigers defensive coordinator Brent Venables leans on his cover guys.

Alabama offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin is excellent at creating advantageous matchups for play-makers. It will be interesting to see if Kiffin attempts to get Ridley away from Alexander.

MATCHUP III
Alabama RB Derrick Henry vs. Clemson LBs Ben Boulware and B.J. Goodson and S Jayron Kearse.

After going away from its Heisman Trophy winner to beat Michigan State, expect Kiffin to lean on Henry in the national championship game. Ball-control is absolutely key. Against Clemson's "fastball" offense, as coach Nick Saban describes fast and furious attacks, Clemson would be better off in a high-scoring game, with lots of possessions for its up-tempo offense.

Alabama wants to avoid that.

The Tigers also have a talented and tough defensive line, led by defensive end Shaq Lawson. Plus, their top-notch corners allow Venables to get safeties, like the 220-pound Kearse, involved in stopping the run.

"The traditional running game against them is very hard," Clawson said. "They give you very few run-friendly boxes."

Clemson has been susceptible to long runs. The Tigers have allowed 22 runs of 20-plus yards, tied for 83rd in FBS. Those are often the result of over pursuing, sloppy tackling and taking bad angles. The Tigers can't let a 5-yard run by Henry turn into a 35-yarder.

MATCHUP IV
Clemson TE Jordan Leggett vs. Alabama DBs Eddie Jackson and Geno Mattiass-Smith.

Defensive coordinator Kirby Smart moved Jackson and Smith, smaller defensive backs with comeback skills, to safety so the Tide could better match up with spread offenses. Basically, Alabama will be in a nickel defense with five defensive backs most of the game against Clemson.

Leggett, at 6-foot-5, 255-pounds, is a matchup problem and Clemson likes to send him down the middle on run-pass option plays. He caught 95 passes and led the team with seven touchdown receptions.

AL.com and wire reports
Spanish Fort quarterback, UAB commit Tyler Johnston named Mr. Football

By: Ben Thomas

Tyler Johnston is Alabama’s 2015 Mr. Football.

The senior, who was 35-0 in his career as Spanish Fort’s starting quarterback and led the Toros to the Class 6A state title this season, was crowned at the Alabama Sports Writers Association’s annual Player of the Year Banquet in Montgomery on Wednesday afternoon. The banquet was presented by the Alabama High School Athletic Director and Coaches Association.

He also was named Class 6A Back of the Year.

"It feels great," said Johnston, the first player from Spanish Fort to win Mr. Football. "I couldn't have done it without my teammates, my community and my school. That's for sure."

The 6-foot-2, 210-pound Johnston edged Clay-Chalkville quarterback Ty Pigrome for the Mr. Football honor. The two faced off for the state title last month in Tuscaloosa with Johnston’s Spanish Fort team winning, 31-28.

Johnston finished with 148 votes to Pigrome’s 139. Five-star linebacker Ben Davis of Gordo was a distant third with 80 votes. Pigrome also tied for second behind Kerryon Johnson a year ago.

Johnston, a UAB commit, is the first quarterback to win the honor since Carver-Montgomery’s Jeremy Johnson in 2012 and the first Coastal Alabama player to win since Daphne running back T.J. Yeldon in 2011.

Johnston missed nine games in 2014 due to a torn ACL but responded with his best year as a senior. He completed 67 percent of his passes for 3,619 yards and 39 touchdowns. He also ran for 750 yards and 13 scores. His performance garnered him the AL.com Coastal Alabama Player of the Year Award as well as the overall AL.com Player of the Year Award for the state.

"I knew he was a great competitor," said Spanish Fort coach Ben Blackmon, who took over for Mark Freeman last winter. "I knew that if there was anyone who could overcome something like that, Tyler Johnston was the guy in our program. From the time I walked in the door, he was already working to get back.

"Our athletic trainer, Rob Milam, really pushed him. I think his challenge was to have the best year he’s ever had in high school his senior year to prove to everyone that he wasn’t done with the injury, and I think he showed that on the field."

Another person who wasn't surprised with Johnston’s successful return to the field was his younger brother, Thomas.

"Knowing Tyler I the way I do, I'm not surprised by anything he does," said Thomas Johnston, himself a finalist for Class 6A Lineman of the Year. "People outside of our family might not
have thought that. But the mindset he had that God had a plan for him, that there was a great purpose -- I knew he would be back. He had in his mind he was going to outwork everyone to get back to where he was. He came back even better."

Spanish Fort finished 15-0 – the only unbeaten team in any classification in the Alabama High School Athletic Association. Tyler Johnston played the final game and a half with a torn ligament in his throwing elbow.

"It feels OK," he said. "It's not great, but I wasn't going to miss that title game."

Dr. James Andrews is treating Johnston's elbow and is hopeful he can avoid surgery. That decision will likely be made at the end of the month.

For his high school career, he completed 426 of 626 pass attempts for 8,338 yards and 83 touchdowns. He also ran for 2,706 yards and 44 touchdowns on 359 carries. He finished with a career yardage total of 11,044.

Before his first start at quarterback in 2013, Johnston also started at five other positions for the Toros.

He is the first UAB commitment to win Mr. Football since Cory Whisenant in 1999.

"It feels awesome, and I'm so humbled and honored," Johnston said. "It's a great cap to my high school career. Now, I'm just ready to get to UAB and play for coach (Bill) Clark."