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Alabama bill seeks ethics training for university trustees

By: Ed Enoch

A Vestavia Hills lawmaker has reintroduced a bill that would require mandatory ethics training for the boards of trustees for colleges and universities that receive state funding.

The bill would require trustees to complete mandatory state ethics law training and require institutions to develop an annual ethics compliance form to be completed by the board members.

“We wanted to give board members a road map how to avoid getting into difficult situations and creating a situation where you are always looking over your shoulder and hoping you did not screw up something,” sponsor Rep. Jack Williams said.

The latest version of the proposal was developed after discussions with officials at state universities and helps make clear state expectations for ethical conduct, said Williams, who is optimistic about the bill's chances for passage.

"Really, I am not aware of any opposition to the bill," he said.

The proposed bill would require ethics training for board members of each higher education institution that receives state appropriations, including Auburn University and the University of Alabama.

The training would have to be approved by the Alabama Ethics Commission. The trustees would be required to attend a training program approved by the commission or participate in an online educational review of the state's ethics law provided by the commission.

If approved, the current members of the boards would have to complete training within six months of the proposal's enactment, and new members would have to complete the training within 120 days of appointment.

The institutions would have until June 2017 to develop the annual ethics compliance form for the trustees.

The form would include but not be limited to:

- Business and non-privileged relationships with fellow board members of board-affiliated entities

- The nature of all substantial professional, personal and familial financial interests in the institution

- A statement of intent to comply with board standards and core principles

See next page
- Requirements of the accrediting agency.

A version of the bill introduced last year passed the House but died in the Senate. The bill came at a contentious time amid discontent over the short-lived decision by University of Alabama at Birmingham President Ray Watts to discontinue the football, bowling and rifle programs and the trustees handling of the concerns raised by supporters of the programs.

The earlier version also required mandatory training and disclosures of business and personal interests, but it included a provision for immediate dismissal of a trustee was implicated by name in reports of wrongdoing by the Southern Commission of Colleges, the accrediting agency for most of the colleges and universities in the state.

The proposal was tweaked following talks with universities and SACS, Williams said, who noted the accreditation body’s concerns not only with micromanagement by trustees but also by lawmakers.

“We had a really good discussion on how we could do this and please SACS and not get the boards twisted with SACS or get the Legislature twisted with SACS,” Williams said.
ALABAMA LEGISLATURE

Bill seeks ethics training for university trustees

Similar proposal introduced last year

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

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ETHICS

From Page B1

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Alabama education superintendent to step down next month

By: Kim Chandler

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) - Alabama Superintendent Tommy Bice says he’s stepping down after more than four years at the helm of the K-12 education in the state.

Bice, 61, made the surprise announcement Tuesday in a press conference. The outgoing superintendent said he felt it was the “right time” to change roles after 39 years in education and after the department of education met graduation rate goals and other milestones. He will leave the department March 31.

“While I may be retiring from formal public education, my work on behalf of students is far from over,” Bice said.

Bice said after some time off he will join the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation as its education director later this spring. He said the move will allow him to return to work that represents his greatest passion: helping inner-city students, their teachers and leaders to improve educational opportunities and communities.

The Board of Education tapped Bice to be superintendent in late 2011 and he took the post on Jan. 1, 2012. During his tenure, he oversaw the implementation of the Common Core academic standards and the Plan 2020 improvement strategy.

“I retire knowing that public education in our state is moving forward at an accelerated pace due to the dedicated teachers and leaders who have embraced the policy environment created by our State Board of Education,” Bice said.

He said the decision to retire was personal and professional and not driven by the political fights surrounding education over the last several years. Those included efforts to repeal Common Core and the Alabama Legislature’s approval of a law he opposed that provides tax credits for private school tuition.

“I knew when I took this job there would always be challenges politically. I don’t expect everyone to agree on every subject,” Bice said.

Bice said poverty is the biggest obstacle facing education in the state. Asked what political and policy trends worry him, he said a continued obsession with test scores by reform groups and “the use of one test score on one day as the determinant of all success of kids and schools and school systems.”

Bice said it’s important that Alabama, “not fall back on an environment where we misuse assessment to rank and divide and conquer but rather use assessment to improve instruction, improve student learning which was assessment was intended for.”
Alabama writers

Harper Lee and 6 more authors that make us ‘Bama Proud

Shelly Haskins  shaskins@al.com

After Harper Lee, of course, her childhood friend and confidante, Truman Capote, first comes to mind. Though born in New Orleans, Capote spent most of his childhood in Monroeville, playing "Dill" to Nelle’s "Scout." "In Cold Blood," was a ground-breaking piece of work, novelizing a true crime from the killer’s point of view. "Breakfast at Tiffany’s" is another Capote classic, among many for the troubled, but brilliant award-winning author.

I grew up in Tuscumbia, just blocks away from Ivy Green, famous home of Helen Keller. In addition to being a prodigy who overcame being deaf and mute, Keller became a prolific author in her time, from "The Story of My Life," published by Doubleday in 1903 to a tribute to her teacher, Anne Sullivan, published in 1955.

When I attended the University of Alabama in the mid-1980s, a friend at the school newspaper gave me a dog-eared copy of "Forrest Gump," by Winston Groom. This was several years before the book was made internationally famous by the 1994 Tom Hanks movie.

"Forrest Gump" was a cult classic at Alabama, mainly because Forrest played football for The Bear in Groom’s hilarious tale of a simple-minded but worldly wise boy from the fictional town of Greenbow, Ala. When I found out Groom hailed from Mobile, it made me like the book that much more and brag about him to my non-Alabama friends when the movie became a blockbuster.

While researching Alabama authors, I came upon a namesake from Demopolis named James Haskins. As far as I know, we’re not related, but I would be proud if we were. James Haskins, who died in 2005 as a professor of English at the University of Florida, attended segregated schools in Alabama. His mother moved him away to Boston, but he returned home to Alabama State University, only to be expelled for his participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

Haskins eventually became a stock trader in New York, but felt unfulfilled and became a teacher in Harlem. He kept a journal of his experiences, publishing it as a book "Diary of a Harlem School Teacher," in 1969. He’s written a number of other books, mainly biographies of famous black Americans and stories of black culture.

The list goes on. Though raised in West Virginia, "Rocket Boys" author Homer Hickam worked for NASA during its heyday and continues to publish books from his Huntsville home. "Rocket Boys" was made into a movie "October Sky," in 1999, launching (pardon the pun) Hickam’s literary career.

Fannie Flagg, whose birth name is Patricia Neal, was born in Irondale and lived for a time in Baldwin County. Though she lives in California now, she visits often and still calls Alabama home, according to her friend, Missy Ming Smith of Huntsville. Her 1987 book "Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe" became a the 1991 movie "Fried Green Tomatoes" starring Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy.

That’s just a sampling of Alabama’s contribution to literature of all kinds. Now pick up a book by one of our own and go brag to your friends.

Haskins takes a weekly look at points of pride statewide. Email your suggestions to shaskins@al.com, or tweet them to @Shelly_Haskins using #AlabamaProud

The worldwide recognition and celebration of Lee’s legacy made me think it appropriate to bring up just a few other Alabama authors to take pride in, though the full list would fill a book itself.
ALABAMA INCUMBENTS HOLD THEIR GROUND

Associated Press

Alabama voters turned out in droves to make their picks for president and a slew of other local and state races on Super Tuesday. As expected, longtime Sen. Richard Shelby defeated four GOP challengers.

His opponents included Marine veteran Jonathan McConnell; former state legislator Shadrack McGill; Baldwin County businessman Marcus Bowman; and former Army Ranger John Martin.

The primary victory is tantamount to election since both Democratic primary candidates are virtual unknowns in our heavily Republican state.

After going decades without a serious challenge, the 81-year-old Shelby spent more money on campaign advertising than usual this year as McConnell aired spots accusing him of being too old and out of touch for the job.

But Shelby had plenty to spend, having bankrolled a campaign account of about $19 million through the years.

Shelby was elected to the Senate in 1986 as a Democrat but switched to the GOP in 1994.

In another highly watched race, Rep. Martha Roby defeated two primary challengers for her 2nd District congressional seat.

Roby is a former Montgomery City Council member in her third two-year term in Congress. She has campaigned to improve health care for veterans in central Alabama and to preserve the area’s military bases.

Roby bills herself as a conservative but faced a challenge from the right by Becky Gerrist of Wetumpka.

Gerrist, a co-founder and president of the Wetumpka Tea Party, accused Roby of aligning herself with the Washington establishment since joining Congress.

Several Republican incumbents representing Alabama in the U.S. House of Representatives fended off challenges from GOP opponents in the state’s primary.

U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers defeated longtime Auburn educator Larry DiChiaro in his quest for a fourth term representing District 3, which covers east Alabama. Early, incomplete returns showed Rogers had won about 75 percent of the vote.

Rep. Robert Aderholt, who serves on the powerful House Appropriations Committee, was successful in his quest for an 11th term representing the 4th Congressional District, which covers a large section of north Alabama.

U.S. Rep. Bradley Byrne won the primary for his 1st District seat.

Byrne defeated Orange Beach developer Dean Young in a rematch from a 2013 special primary runoff to fill the seat left vacant when Rep. Jo Bonner retired.

Byrne was elected to his first full term in 2014. The 1st District covers a swath of southwest Alabama including Mobile.

A roller-coaster presidential primary has increased GOP turnout in primaries everywhere, and Alabama was no exception.

Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill said voter turnout in the state looked “extraordinarily high,” pointing to a projected turnout as high as 60 to 70 percent in one county.

Merrill said there were a few minor hiccups around the state as polls opened Tuesday morning, but nothing that directly affected voting or voter participation.

Baldwin County Probate Judge Tim Russell said his county is slightly unusual, as it is home to a large retiree population which doesn’t have to worry about leaving work to get to the polls, but he projects turnout well above 50 percent in several precincts and one as high as 74 percent.

In the heavily Republican Birmingham suburb of Helena, Jeannie Lindsey got up early, pulled on her Alabama sweat shirt and waited with dozens of others for 40 minutes in the morning chill before the polls opened.

But she said it was worth it. She cast her ballot for Donald Trump, who also won Georgia and Tennessee.

“I stood in line for six hours the other day at a Trump rally because to me he’s just the man,” said Lindsey. “He is the one that is going to make the country great again.”

But about 40 miles south in Clanton, Dale Crawford said he liked Trump but voted for Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, “because he’s more Christian.”

“I did what I figured God would bless me for. I woke up in the middle of the night and it was like, ‘Cruz-Cruz-Cruz,’” said Crawford, gesturing toward his head. “I didn’t think it was Satan. I think it was the Lord.”

Republicans including Trump, Cruz, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and Ben Carson campaigned through the deeply red state in the days leading up to Super Tuesday.

Hillary Clinton, coming off a win in South Carolina, added Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia to her list of victories.

In Birmingham, Lashaun Smith, a 38-year-old health care worker, said she’s supporting Clinton because she seems to be the most experienced and qualified candidate in the field.

“I think she can do the job,” Smith said. “She’s smart, she knows what she’s doing and she’s spent time with the president.”

Smith added that Clinton’s stances on equal pay for women and health care also resonate with her and she’s confident Clinton will be the party’s nominee.

Clinton enjoys heavy support among African-American voters. In Alabama, nearly seven in 10 voters in recent Democratic presidential primaries have been African-American, said Democratic Party Chairwoman Nancy Worley.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders drew an enthusiastic crowd of thousands when he spoke in Birmingham earlier this year, but some of his supporters seemed resigned to defeat even as they cast their ballots.

Montgomery bartender Shannon Thornton, 31, voted for Sanders in the hopes of keeping his issues alive in the general election, although she expects Hillary Clinton will ultimately win the Democratic nomination.
SCIENCE
Ala. to be hub of scientific study of Southern tornadoes

By Jeff Martin
The Associated Press

ATLANTA — About 40 scientists from around the nation are expected to participate in "VORTEX Southeast," an upcoming study of the unique characteristics of tornadoes that develop in the South, weather researchers say.

SEE TORNADOES, A6
TORNADOES

Like earlier studies in the Midwest, the research based in Huntsville, Alabama, will include mobile radars, drones and other equipment that can measure tornado intensity. It is set to run through March and April.

VORTEX, an acronym for Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes Experiment, began in the mid-1990s with a large tornado study that helped inspire the Hollywood film “Twister.”

Another large study, VORTEX 2, took place from 2009-2010.

This spring, researchers hope to learn more about the mysteries of Southern tornadoes, such as whether the landscape in the South gives them added power, and how to warn people at night, when many tornadoes strike in the South.

The research aims to find ways of better forecasting tornadoes, communicating warnings more effectively and finding out how the public responds to those warnings, according to documents from the National Severe Storms Laboratory, which is involved in the planning. The Norman, Oklahoma–based lab is part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Unlike the original experiment, the latest iteration of the study will include several social scientists, who seek to learn more about how people respond to tornado threats in Southern states. They say they plan to conduct interviews with residents to probe the psychology behind tornado warnings and figure out ways to persuade people to take action when tornadoes are forecast.

It’s human nature to seek “secondary confirmation” when tornado warnings are issued, but the nature of Southern tornadoes often prevents people from getting that, researchers say.

On the wide open plains in the Midwest, “people can just look out their window and see it coming from miles away and still have time to take action,” said one of the researchers, Laura Myers, executive director of the Center for Advanced Public Safety at the University of Alabama.

That confirms the threat for them, prompting them to take cover.

But in the South, “we can’t see them coming because of the terrain, the trees and they’re often rain-wrapped,” Myers said.

“We can’t rely on that secondary confirmation,” she said. “By the time we see it, it could be right on top of us.”

So the question of how to satisfy people’s psychological need for secondary confirmation is one focus of the research. Another is how to warn people at night, when many of the South’s tornadoes tend to strike.

Michael Egnoto, an assistant clinical professor and researcher at the University of Maryland, has held focus groups in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Lexington, Kentucky; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

“We’ve been working with meteorologists and they’ve been very, very open to the social science perspective,” Egnoto said.

“They’re really excited about trying to understand the human factors and how that can positively impact outcomes: saving lives, reducing injuries and lowering the human and capital costs of storms.”
NYC Skyscraper Launched RSA Empire

By: Casey Toner

Alabama's pension system bought a 3.8 million-square-foot skyscraper in New York City in 1993 for a fraction of its worth and needed an honest man to run it.

So they turned to an undercover detective who was working under a fake name in concert with a legendary New York City district attorney to take bribes from mobsters.

The ensuing investigation helped lead to the downfall of two of the nation's largest crime families, the end of a multi-million dollar garbage collection racket, and helped launched an unlikely second act for a New York cop. This time under his real name.

As for the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the building was a windfall investment.

Purchased for about $202 million, the 53-story floor is now worth an eye-popping $1.5 billion. It rents at $58 per square foot and leases to some of the biggest names in fashion and business. Millions of dollars of proceeds from the skyscraper flood into the RSA coffers annually.

Perhaps more importantly, the building's success gave them a seat at the table for bigger business deals to come.

It cleared the path for future RSA investments in resorts, office buildings, golf courses, a media conglomerate, and other businesses that now color the Alabama landscape. Today, the RSA has more than $38 billion in assets and its CEO David Bronner is one of the most powerful businessman involved with state government.

"It's definitely the best investment the Retirement Systems of Alabama in its history has ever made," said Marc Reynolds, a longtime RSA deputy director who was fired from the RSA in 2012.

"It was like someone going to the dog track and winning big money and you're hooked and you think it can do it every time."

Going undercover

Talk about fake it until you make it.

That's exactly what Harry Bridgwood did at 55 Water Street.

A New York City undercover detective, Bridgwood's corporate experience was limited. He co-owned a sporting goods store with two other police officers, shared a franchise for a Tropicana juice delivery route, and never graduated from college, according to a New York Times story.

But what he lacked in his business background, he made up with his courage and believability, according to former New York City District Attorney Robert Morgenthau.

Morgenthau, a celebrated World War 2 veteran, said that Bridgwood had the right character to do the job.
"Nobody suspected him," said Morgenthau, now 96. "He played the role of a corrupt owner's agent really well."

The idea was that Bridgwood, wearing a wire and using the fake name "Paul Vassil," would coordinate bribes and rig bids with V. Ponte & Sons. Morgenthau has deep Alabama ties and had previously collaborated in the past with Bronner, who signed off on the project.

In 1992, Bronner and the RSA led a bankruptcy takeover of the 53-story building after its former owners defaulted on $548 million worth of loans on the building.

The RSA was the largest single holder of the loans, with $100 million worth, and put together a deal to buy out the other loan holders for 29 cents on the dollar.

At the time, the building was in desperate need of repair and beholden to a number of criminal forces.

None was bigger than the garbage collection firm that had the contract at the building for more than two decades.

At their height, the Gambino and Genovese crime families that controlled the garbage cartel overcharged their clients up to $500 million a year, prosecutors alleged. This wasn't the only scam either.

In an interview with AL.com, Bronner recalled a tiny flower garden in the building that one man was paid $50,000 a year to water. There was also a ghost payroll scheme where 15 union members were charging the building for the work of two non-union immigrants.

He played the role of a corrupt owner's agent really well.

"Everything had a scam to it," Bronner said. "You name it, there was something going on."

**Cracking the case**

Wearing one of three suits Morgenthau purchased for him from a prominent New York City designer, Bridgwood made his debut in October 1993 at 55 Water Street under the name Paul Vassil, according to a New York Times story. As the CEO, Bridgwood's first job was to oversee a $150 million renovation that would turn the run-down building into a first class property.

Part of the process of renovating the building included rebidding the building's costly service contracts. That meant the mob-controlled garbage enterprise – which was overcharging the skyscraper by $1 million annually – might be out of work.

Bridgwood met with Vincent Ponte, the son of Angelo Ponte, the former head of what once was New York's largest garbage-hauling company. During their meetings, Ponte slipped Bridgwood two envelopes containing $5,000 worth of cash to keep the contract with the skyscraper, and later to see the bids at the last minute so that his firm could undercut them.

Then, the police swooped in. A total of 34 people, 34 companies, and four trade waste associations were indicted as part of the five-year investigation.

*See Next Page*
"We know the cartel functioned because we infiltrated it," Morgenthau said in a June 1995 press release announcing the indictments. "We attended their meetings. We dealt directly with their leadership. We saw and experienced first-hand how the cartel used its coercive powers and its organized crime connections to ensure that no one would challenge their control. In short, we became an accepted member of the established criminal enterprise."

Interestingly, Morgenthau noted that it "took the Retirement Systems of Alabama to stand up and do the right thing."

Ponte pleaded guilty to accepting $10,000 in bribes, got five years on probation, and now has a job with Ponte Equities. He did not respond to multiple messages. His father, Angelo Ponte, was sentenced to two to six years in state prison.

'It made us a player'

In the end, Harry Bridgwood became who he pretended to be.

When the investigation wrapped up, Bronner kept the former undercover police officer as the head of 55 Water Street.

In his permanent role, Bridgwood helped attract big name tenants such Standards and Poor's, the NYC Department of Transportation, and communications firm Bowne & Co.

In 2013, the building had a payroll of $2.8 million. Tax records show the building generated a profit of nearly $41 million that year after generating an $80 million profit a year earlier.

Bridgwood received a total compensation of $285,648 two years ago, making him one of 14 employees there that received a six-figure salary, according to the last available tax records.

He was an employee of New Water Street Corp, a non-profit that was created to funnel the building's proceeds to Alabama's pension fund.

But if he were paid as a state employee, Bridgwood would have been the fourth-highest paid Alabama state employee that year, right behind the late RSA senior counsel William Stephens ($314,672), RSA deputy secretary Donald Yancey ($325,000), and Bronner ($562,494), the state's highest-paid employee.

With his ties to Bronner and the RSA's vast business network, Bridgwood expanded his clout in Alabama. He is a board member for Raycom Media, the media conglomerate that the RSA now has a $2.7 billion stake in, and Hope for the Warriors – a veteran's charity whose board treasurer is the Raycom Media CEO.

Bridgwood, who was unavailable for immediate comment, retired from the job in July 2014.

Today, the skyscraper is the jewel of the RSA's eclectic real estate portfolio which includes a number of high-rise office buildings in Mobile and Montgomery.

It all started with a fake persona and the mobbed up skyscraper that the RSA bought on the cheap.
"We're in Alabama, the fifth poorest state in America," Bronner said. "Who cares about Alabama besides you and me and a handful of other people? The point is the world didn't care about us. It made us a player."
Google Fiber is bringing its ultra-fast Internet service to Huntsville

By: Lee Roop

Google Fiber is bringing its gigabit-speed, fiber optic Internet and television service to Huntsville, Mayor Tommy Battle announced today.

Starting in mid-2017, Google will begin connecting homes and small- to mid-sized businesses to the Internet at speeds up to 1 gigabit per second – up to 85 times faster than average current speeds in the United States. Citywide service is expected in four years.

"If you're going to have a high-tech community," Battle said, "if you're going to be able to address the new workforce that's out there, you're going to have a lot of people who want to work from home – mothers and fathers with children, biotech people – who are going to need high-speed Internet service."

Google Fiber now serves Kansas City; Provo, Utah; Austin, Texas; and Atlanta, Ga., and had announced plans to expand to five other cities, including Nashville. Huntsville would become the tenth city in the nation with Google Fiber.

"You know far better than us that Rocket City is a great place to show what's possible with super-fast Internet," Google Fiber Expansion Director Jill Szuchmacher said in an interview, "given the strong science and technology presence and history. We are excited to partner with the city to help bring Huntsville this very high-speed Internet service. We can't wait to get started."

"Speeds this high mean families spend less time waiting for websites to load or arguing about bandwidth and more time just using the Web," Szuchmacher said. "For businesses, it can mean uploading and downloading very large files in just seconds, as opposed to minutes or hours, increasing efficiency across the board."

Partnering with utilities

Google Fiber will partner with Huntsville Utilities, which is extending its fiber-optic cable network to build a "smart utility grid" that can reroute power faster to repair outages, among other things.

"We are building the network for our own purposes," utility President and CEO Jay Stowe said in an interview. "It's going to have excess fiber that's available for lease, and Google will be the first company to lease that fiber."

Under the plan, Huntsville Utilities will own the system's fiber backbone, and Google will own the power line-to-home connections, handle all hookups and provide the services.

"This is the first time we are partnering in this way," Szuchmacher said.

See next page
"It's a unique model," Battle said. "This may be the model for mid-tier cities to put in a (fiber) backbone and have private industry work off that backbone."

Fiber to the county

The utility, which serves all of Madison County, will run fiber into the county – at first to substations and other infrastructure – raising the possibility of providers bringing gigabit service to Madison and rural areas, too.

"But the work we're doing to lease the dark fiber to (Google) is just within the city limits of Huntsville," Stowe said. Dark fiber is fiber-optic cable before data is moving through it.

Huntsville Utilities expects to spend $55- to $60 million on the fiber expansion, but to recoup that from the lease to Google and other companies wishing to lease city fiber.

Price points

Szuchmacher said it is too soon to say what Google fiber service will cost in Huntsville, but existing monthly rates in other cities are around $70 for high-speed Internet and $130 for Internet plus 150-channel Google high-definition TV.

Battle's team has been pushing to bring high-speed Internet to Huntsville for at least seven years. It tried to land Google Fiber's first citywide service in 2013 but lost – along with more than 1,000 other cities – to a bid from Kansas City.

In 2015 as part of its Gig City push, Huntsville asked companies to bring their ideas for high-speed Internet to the city. It had 13 responses, but Stowe said no company was ready with every piece of the puzzle.

Huntsville considered the Chattanooga model, where the local utility is the Internet, television and telephone provider, Stowe said, and it considered limited service to businesses or government offices.

"Each either had a problem or was too expensive or we didn't feel comfortable with that decision," Stowe said.

It was in this process that Szuchmacher expressed Google's interest. "We got in touch to see if we could play a role," she said.

City economic development officer Harrison Diamond, Stowe, Battle, and others have been working the issue "aggressively" for the past 6-7 months. They say they consider high-speed Internet a basic utility of the future just like water, natural gas and electricity.
State Senate passes
General Fund budget

Mike Cason
mcason@al.com

The Alabama Senate on Thursday passed a General Fund budget that would essentially level-fund most agencies next year, including Medicaid, which had requested a $100 million increase.

The budget calls for spending $1.8 billion from the General Fund, about 4 percent more than this year.

Gov. Robert Bentley's proposed budget would have given Medicaid $785 million from the General Fund, $100 million more than this year.

But Bentley's plan depended on taking $181 million from education revenues.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh said there was no support for that, or for raising taxes.

"There's a consensus in this body, and I think it's in the House, too, that we cannot continue to put in these large increases for Medicaid at the detriment to the other governmental agencies in the state," Marsh said.

Level-funding for Medicaid could cost the state hundreds of millions in federal dollars, officials say.

Medicaid Commissioner Stephanie Azar told lawmakers Wednesday that level funding would stall the plan to shift Medicaid services to regional, managed care organizations, which has been in the works several years.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services recently granted a waiver for the transformation, which is intended to slow rising costs, partly by emphasizing prevention and management of chronic conditions.

Under the waiver, the state could receive up to $747 million in federal assistance over the next five years to change to managed care.

It's not possible to meet Medicaid's requests without deep cuts to other critical needs...

Sen. Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, Senate Budget chairman

Azar said the federal government won't provide any of that money if Medicaid has to scale back current programs. And she said the level-funded budget would mean cuts in services.

Senate budget chairman Trip Pittman, R-Montrose, said it's not possible to meet Medicaid's requests without deep cuts to other critical needs such as prisons, courts and programs for children, low-income families and the mentally ill.

He said the Legislature needs to figure out how to pay for those services and Medicaid, which uses more than one-third of the General Fund.

"This is a big debate that needs to happen," Pittman said.

"Most of the departments, I think, can manage their way through this year with these appropriations," Pittman added later.

"Obviously we need to try to work on coming up with some additional revenue for Medicaid."

"We're not just talking about the $100 million for Medicaid, which in itself, is a tremendous hole and has tremendous consequences."

The budget passed by a vote of 24-10. It goes to the House.
Five students avoid trial in hazing case

By Stephanie Taylor
Staff Writer

Five University of Alabama fraternity members accused of hazing have resolved their cases and avoided a trial.

Four of the men were granted youthful offender status, meaning that the outcome of their cases won't be made public and the criminal record will be sealed. Colter Anderson, now 22, was 21 when the misdemeanor charges were filed in September and wasn't eligible to apply for youthful offender status.

Punishments for youthful offenders are often less severe and more rehabilitative in nature.

Anderson's case was dismissed Tuesday at the request of the Tuscaloosa County District Attorney's Office.

Tuscaloosa County District Court Judge Joel Chandler ordered him to participate in a pre-trial treatment program. The type of treatment wasn't listed in the court case file.

Three Phi Gamma Delta pledges were hospitalized in September, first at DCH Regional Medical Center and later UAB Hospital's burn center, after they were told to stand in a cooler of ice mixed with salt.

The mixture caused serious injuries similar to frostbite.

Fraternity members Hunter Wagner and Richard Markwalter, both 20, were accused of making the pledges stand in the salted ice water in a second-floor bathroom of the fraternity house on Sept. 14.

The pledges told authorities that they were forced to stand in the coolers for 15 to 20 minutes each while they were questioned about knowing upperclassmen in the fraternity.

According to the court records, Anderson and John Patrick Buckley, 21, were present when the act occurred and did nothing to stop it.

One of the victims told officers that he later went to a small room referred to as the "new boy closet" because he was in pain from the frostbite. Anderson told him to "man up" and then fraternity member Mark Powers pushed his head into a toilet and flushed, according to court records.

Powers, a 20-year-old from Athens, was charged with one count of hazing. The other men were each charged with three counts. The charges are misdemeanors.

"During the interviews, Wagner, Markwalter, Buckley and Anderson admitted that the act was a form of hazing," a UAPD officer wrote in court documents filed after the arrest. "They all stated there was no intent to injure the victims, and they agreed it went too far. Anderson even admitted that he knows this same form of hazing has occurred inside the fraternity house before."

All of the men are still enrolled at UA.

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HAZING
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"During the interviews, Wagner, Markwalter, Buckley and Anderson admitted that the act was a form of hazing," a UAPD officer wrote in court documents filed after the arrest. "They all stated there was no intent to injure the victims, and they agreed it went too far. Anderson even admitted that he knows this same form of hazing has occurred inside the fraternity house before."

All of the men are still enrolled at UA.
UA elects new SGA president

University of Alabama junior Lillian Roth was elected Student Government Association president for 2016-17.

On Tuesday, 13,751 votes were cast via online, according to the unofficial results.

Roth, a political science major from Montgomery, received 53.87 percent of the votes, defeating challengers Patrick Fitzgerald, a junior from Harvest and Caroline Morrison, a junior from Vestavia Hills.

The winners of the other executive offices were Ben Leake of Normal, Illinois, executive vice president; Emily Cerrina of Ridgewood, New Jersey, vice president for academic affairs; Alli Selman of Red Level, vice president for external affairs; Jordan Forrest of Columbia, Missouri, vice president for financial affairs; Dalton Beasley of Montgomery, vice president for student affairs; and Claire Parker of Fitchburg, Wisconsin, executive secretary.
President honors UA's national championship team

By Darlene Superville
The Associated Press

President Barack Obama on Wednesday welcomed the University of Alabama football team to the White House for the fourth time since he became president and said he must have brought it some good luck.

Obama, sounding confident in his apparent positive influence as well as in the Crimson Tide’s athletic prowess, said he’d like to welcome the team back in

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2017 — “but we’ve got this thing called term limits.” He’ll be out of office at this time next year after serving two terms.

Winning four national titles in seven years is historic, said Obama, who compared the feat to “winning a best-of-seven series, except you’re playing 127 teams around the country. The last time a team went on this kind of run was in the 1940s. Back then, folks were still wearing leather helmets.”

“I don’t feel like anybody in a leather helmet would do too well trying to tackle Derrick Henry,” he added, referring to the running back and Heisman Trophy winner who is entering the NFL draft. “Of course, even with modern helmets they didn’t do too well tackling Derrick Henry.”

Alabama came from behind to defeat Clemson in college football’s national championship game in January.

Obama noted Henry’s SEC record of more than 22,000 rushing yards and 28 touchdowns, but also gave credit for Alabama’s “smothering defense” to center Ryan Kelly, defensive lineman A’Shawn Robinson and linebacker Reggie Ragland.

Obama said the team isn’t defined solely by its on-field performance. Alabama is first in the Southeastern Conference and third among top 25 teams in graduation rates, he said. The players have also volunteered hundreds of hours at retirement homes, hospitals and schools around Tuscaloosa.

Obama also commended coach Nick Saban for continuing to help Habitat for Humanity build homes to replace those that were destroyed after a powerful tornado struck the Tuscaloosa area in 2011.

“Everybody recognizes excellence when they see it and nobody’s had more sustained excellence as a football program at the collegiate level than the Alabama Crimson Tide,” the president said. “Congratulations.”
UA strives to create more inclusive campus

By Caroline Vincent Assistant News Editor

On Feb. 1, The University of Alabama opened the doors to its first Intercultural Diversity Center, though the work of representing minorities on campus is far from done.

"I think that we are at a very pivotal time in our university's history, and I'm hoping that the only way we go is up," SGA president Elliot Spillers said.

The first step in going up was to create the center that is now on campus.

"I think that getting a physical space was a really critical step to show that it's not just an intangible idea, but a concrete set of policies that we can enact," said Amanda Bennett, who works at the center and is a co-organizer for the student coalition We Are Done. "To have this here at all, a place that celebrates diversity of all origins on this campus, to me is particularly important for the longevity of institutional change. It's no guarantee but at least it's a start," she said.

Bennett said she hopes it's a start to larger and longer-lasting changes that will allow for marginalized students to be able to have their concerns addressed, something that is not easily executed right now.

"The people who we really want to be speaking are marginalized students, and so seeing them trying to communicate with white administrators, who are typically older white males who are from the South, is fascinating to watch," Bennett said. "It's almost like two different languages or two different conversations are happening, and they're never intersecting."

This miscommunication is believed by both Bennett and Spillers to be a result of a lack of representation and understanding within administration. This is in the process of improving, as Spillers said he and Vel Lewis, his director of multicultural affairs, are working with President Stuart Bell in efforts to create a Chief Diversity Officer. They are members of a subcommittee for the president's planning process of building a division that will constantly assess the institutionalization of "diversity, equity and inclusion." To do so, they have looked at examples set up by other schools, primarily around the South.

"All other SEC schools - Auburn, Mississippi State, Vanderbilt, The University of Florida - they all have a chief diversity officer," Spillers said. "Or they have somebody in the upper administrative level that focuses on diversity, equity and inclusion. We don't have that here."

The Southeastern Conference is not the only set of schools the University is looking at for examples, but also colleges within its own system.

"UA and UAH included, who are in our system, already have that set up," Spillers said. "And so, step one, for me, was ensuring that we at least reach the fact that we need to, one, acknowledge we don't have this and it is a demand, and that we will be getting it."

The University of Alabama in Huntsville does have an Office of Diversity that falls under its Office of Multicultural Affairs, and The University of Alabama at Birmingham has an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Both were developed fairly recently, but have been established before The University of Alabama even began to develop one, though those efforts are in full swing now.

Spillers wants to make sure that this new position will be one of power that can help to make a true difference on campus.

"What you don't want to create is just a chief diversity officer who doesn't have any power or influence to truly oversee the aspects and elements of campus that need to be focused on and brought up to the president," he said. "And so, it's important that this person has significant influence by having it at that level."

While there is much progress being made, Spillers can't help but feel discouraged that it's taken this long for the University to address these issues.

"I'm still at a place where, yes, we were able to have many firsts this year and throughout my administration and my term as president, but it still disheartens me to see that it hasn't happened until now," he said.

He also expressed concerns about the movement losing momentum in the near future.

"I fear that after I leave, after this amazing group of student leaders graduates, it'll just stop," he said.

But Spillers is not left without hope.

"We've been training up the next generation, the next group to keep it and pay it forward," he said.

Part of that training is by providing

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students with the Intercultural Diversity Center, which Bennett said she believes will lead to big changes on campus.

"Ultimately, we hope that the Intercultural Diversity Center will be housed in a larger permanent building that is dedicated to the Office of Diversity, as well as a museum commemorating the experiences of various marginalized groups at the University," she said. "We hope that the space will grow to be a place to educate students about inequity and diversity, as well as a place for marginalized groups to gather and speak frankly about their experiences on campus."

Students believe this center will not only provide services to campus, but serve as an example as well.

Mazinica Malladi, a junior majoring in political science and communication studies, said, "It's a great way for us to prove to the rest of the country that we've made mistakes in the past and are moving forward as best we can."
How much money does athletics make?

The answer depends on who you ask

Michael Casagrande mcasagrande@al.com

The business of athletics remains profitable at the University of Alabama. Just how much money is being made depends on who you ask and which factors are considered.

Limited information through public documents does not provide a full picture of Alabama's athletic department finances. Alabama contests some conclusions, and failed to provide a full picture of what it says represents the program's 2015 finances when asked by AL.com.

Athletic department profit margins dipped in 2015 by two calculations though Alabama continued to make money, according to two independent standardized financial reports from the U.S. Department of Education and the NCAA.

Revenues exceeded expenses by $30.1 million, according to the Department of Education report required by the Equity in Athletics Disclosure Act (EADA). Alabama's paperwork, filed with the NCAA, differs in terms of which items are counted. There was a surplus of $16.6 million according to that calculation.

When contacted by AL.com, an Alabama spokesman said both measures left out key revenues and expenses. According to Alabama, athletic department profit was $2.7 million in 2015. Despite multiple requests from AL.com, Alabama did not provide detailed financial information to demonstrate calculations to arrive at a $2.7 million profit.

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What is clear, however, is the cash flow reported to the EADA and NCAA is not as large as it was a year ago.

Alabama's profit according to the EADA slipped $7.1 million in 2015 — a 19.1 percent drop. Revenue was off $1.9 million as expenses increased by $5.1 million.

The $33 million profit in the 2014 NCAA filing was down to $16.6 million in 2015 — off by 49.9 percent. Revenues dropped $4.3 million in 2015 while expenses went up $12.2 million. The $153.2 million in 2014 revenue ranked fourth nationally, according to USA Today's database.

Alabama said it had a $5.3 million profit in 2014. Factors including cost of attendance scholarships, debt service and capital projects contributed to the drop but did not provide financial details to AL.com.

A spokesperson from the NCAA told AL.com the goal of their report is "to illustrate trends overall so schools can judge where they land compared to their peers."

Though bowl revenue is counted differently in the NCAA reporting forms in 2015, it remains part of the total reported, the NCAA said. It is still included in the conference distribution portion along with the school's share of the College Football

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Playoff distribution.

According to reports filed with the NCAA, the 2015 Sugar Bowl had $2.6 million in expenses. Bowl revenues were included in the $31.2 million distributed to each SEC school as part of the annual payouts from sources including TV contracts.

How much of Alabama's revenue drop is attributed to the exclusion from the NCAA report cannot be determined since the $31.2 million was not broken down by source.

The financial success in Tuscaloosa isn't going unnoticed. The New York Times in November published a front page story that ran online under the headline "Alabama Is Rolling in Cash, With Tide Lifting All Boats." The extensive piece detailed how the department has flourished financially, citing the NCAA financial report as the basis for the $33 million profit.

A full account of how the EADA report arrives at bottom line numbers is not included in the public document. The NCAA version breaks it down with more specifics. It illustrates where the profit slipped.

The biggest bump in expenses came from salaries of coaches (up $1.7 million, or 9.9 percent) and support staff (up $923,745, or 9.1 percent). Largest revenue losses came in the categories of contributions (down $2.8 million, or 8.3 percent) and endowment investment income (down $6.4 million, or 60.1 percent).

Football continues to drive department income.

It accounted for $95.1 million, or 63.9 percent of the NCAA report revenue. That piece of the pie hasn't been lower than 61.7 in the last five years. The EADA report has football revenue at $97 million (up from $94.9 million in 2014), or 64.6 percent of the total.

Auburn, for the sake of comparison, had $9.2 million in 2015 surplus revenue, according to its NCAA filing. That's up from a $13.6 million deficit in 2014.
Maligned Pepsi sign soon to be replaced by promo for UAB

Critics are unsure of improvement

Kelly Poe  kpo@al.com

The controversial Pepsi sign in downtown Birmingham is being replaced by a sign for UAB.

Crews started construction Wednesday on the billboard atop the 17-story Two North Twentieth building.

The sign, 179 feet by 25 feet, is expected to be finished in two weeks, according to UAB.

The Pepsi sign was installed in early 2014 without approval from the Birmingham Design Review Committee. Buffalo Rock, a Pepsi distributor, and PepsiCo leased the sign from Harbert Realty for an undisclosed sum and term.

It’s unclear if Harbert still owns the sign, as Harbert and Buffalo Rock have each declined to answer questions about the sign from AL.com.

Additional calls went unreturned Wednesday.

Harbert had submitted multiple proposals for similar signs to the committee in 2013 that were all rejected. The huge two-sided vinyl sign called Pepsi “A Southern Original” and bore a bottle cap with the company’s logo.

“The new sign is a visual blend of old and new, paying homage to Birmingham’s rich history while underscoring the unique partnership between the City of Birmingham and UAB,” UAB President Ray Watts said.

“The future of this region will be driven by collaboration between Birmingham, Jefferson County, UAB, the Birmingham Business Alliance and business and civic leaders and their respective organizations. The new signage is an affirmation of that mutually beneficial relationship.”

The sign will feature “iconic images from Birmingham’s past and present,” according to a press release. Images will be rolled out in the next few weeks on UAB’s social media accounts.

Before the Pepsi sign, the billboard had been a lighted electronic scrolling sign. Harbert Realty said the company was spending $500 per month on replacing light bulbs alone, and it was too expensive to maintain.

Steve DeMedicis, who owns Iron City and who founded Scenic Alabama, an anti-billboard group, said a billboard on the skyline that advertises UAB still brings blight to the skyline — no better than an ad for Pepsi or anything else.

“Certainly, UAB knows the negative impact of that billboard better than anybody else because they have to look at it all day long,” DeMedicis said. “Why would UAB want to put up that billboard after they heard the firestorm after the original Pepsi sign went up?”
Researchers link pot, impaired memory

Amy Yurkanin  ayurkanin@al.com

Heavy marijuana users performed worse than average on a test of memory, according to a study that included work by a UAB researcher.

Dr. Stefan Kertesz, a professor at the UAB School of Medicine, worked on the study, which was led by Dr. Reto Auer of the University of Lausanne in Switzerland.

The study used data from a 25-year-long health study coordinated by UAB. Participants joined the study as young adults, between the ages of 18 and 30. More than two decades later, researchers tested their cognitive function.

The study showed that one out of every two participants who used marijuana daily for more than five years could remember one less word than average from a list memorized 25 minutes earlier.

The loss in memory function isn't huge, but it is significant, Kertesz said.

"It's smaller than the effect of a significant stroke, but it's a hint of something that could be important," Kertesz said.

Kertesz said the impact on memory could potentially be even greater for people who start to use marijuana in their early to mid-teens. He also noted marijuana sold today tends to be much stronger than strains sold in the 1980s, when the study began.

"The brains of adolescents and teens really are different and more susceptible to harm from marijuana," he said.

Researchers also tested other cognitive functions and found no evidence of impairment caused by marijuana, Kertesz said. They also found few differences between non-users and those who used marijuana for less than five years on average.

"Our study shows a mild effect," Kertesz said. "I don't think a person in middle age who used marijuana in teens and 20s and gave it up should worry at all."

But he added that the study looked only at average cognitive function, and that the effects could be different for individuals.

"Studies like ours look at average effects, but no single human being is average," Kertesz said. "So your mileage may vary."
UAB plans freestanding ER, primary care facilities in Gardendale

By: Alan Alexander

The University of Alabama at Birmingham Health Services Foundation plans to purchase five acres in Gardendale for the development of two medical facilities, including a new freestanding emergency department.

UAB will construct one facility to house primary care and family care services and another as a freestanding emergency room off Mt. Olive Road between Caulfield Drive. and Flippo Parkway. The goal is to improve access to care within a 50 mile stretch along I-65 from Birmingham to Cullman, an area that has traditionally been underserved by health care providers.

The plans have to be approved by the University of Alabama System Board of Trustees and the State Health Planning and Development Agency. The emergency hospital facility will be modeled after the UAB Medical West freestanding ER in Hoover.

The projected cost of the development has yet to be disclosed.

“There is a tremendous need in Gardendale and along the entire I-65 corridor in North Jefferson County to bring emergency medical services to the growing population of these communities,” said Will Ferniany, CEO of the UAB Health System. “The medical office building and the freestanding emergency room will be important components in helping to alleviate some of the barriers to care that exist throughout the region.”
Dynamic Cyber Warning Software Incorporates Novel Eye Tracker

By: Jim Steele

University of Alabama in Huntsville researchers are seeing potential in a software application that could effectively warn users when they are about to give away sensitive personal information online.

Dr. Frank Zhu, a computer science associate professor, and Dr. Sandra Carpenter, a psychology professor, say the software, originally developed to adapt eye recognition equipment for use in their behavioral research involving online information disclosure, has been promising in displaying warnings in a dynamic manner that is more readily perceived and less easily dismissed by the user.

Computer Science doctoral student Mini Zeng has been working on the software and the behavioral research for more than two years.

"I need to know how long the user's eyes stay on the area, and I need to use that input in my research," Ming says.

The eye tracker detects where a user's eyes are at the computer screen and records how long they gazed at that spot. Zeng uses these two functions to find when a user's eyes remain on a request for sensitive personal information. At that moment, a warning box displays. The app tracks the amount of time the user's eyes are on the warning, and the box stays on the screen until sufficient time has passed to ensure it has been read, then when the user looks away it disappears.

"That's the novelty here, is using the eye tracker as an input to warn people what not to do," says Dr. Zhu.

If the user looks away from the warning, it remains active until the app detects that enough time has been spent on it to read it.

The relative unpredictability of a warning that can pop up anywhere on a screen when a user is looking at a request to divulge personal information helps overcome behavioral obstacles to paying attention to standard warnings that the researchers have identified in their work.

"If you get a warning every single time and it becomes annoying or habitual, you are going to ignore it," says Dr. Carpenter.

For their behavioral research, Zeng created an app that mimics a restaurant reservation app asking for personal information. That app is used along with the warning software to determine the effectiveness of warnings in test subjects.
After El Nino, Will The Global Warming Pause Continue?

By: Dr. Benny Peiser

Is the global warming pause over for good — or will it continue once the current El Nino dies down? That is the key question raised by Dr David Whitehouse, the GWPF’s science editor, in a new video produced by the Global Warming Policy Foundation.

The current El Nino is one of the strongest on record. It has elevated global temperatures to a record level. El Ninos are frequently followed by cooler than average periods called La Ninas, so we can probably expect 2016 to be warm with the following two years somewhat cooler. What does this mean for the global warming “hiatus”? It means we have to wait for the current exceptional El Nino to end, and the subsequent La Nina, and a few years into ‘normal’ conditions.—Global Warming Policy Foundation, 3 March 2016

By a statistically significant amount, February 2016 was the warmest month in the satellite temperature record, according to Dr. John Christy, director of the Earth System Science Center at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. Interestingly, however, that record might have as much to do with an extraordinarily warm month in the Arctic as it does with warming caused by the El Niño Pacific Ocean warming event. Globally, the average temperature anomaly in February (+0.83 C) was warmer than the previous record set in April 1998 (+0.74 C) during the so-called “El Niño of the century.”—University of Alabama Huntsville, 1 March 2016

The Yale Climate & Energy Institute (YCEI), a climate change research engine formerly run by a “climate expert” and alleged sexual harasser, will close down in June following the University’s decision to cut its funding. Rajendra Pachauri, YCEI’s founding director and Nobel Prize Winner, was formally charged with sexual harassment and stalking on Wednesday, which has prompted some people to wonder whether the charges and the institute’s closing are inextricably linked. David Bercovici and Jay Ague, the current directors at YCEI, wrote in an announcement Monday that the institute was created to research of global warming. The razing of the institute, they noted, was a result of lack of university funding. Yet YCEI staff members and students, as well as members of the media, are not buying Bercovici and Ague’s justification for closing, claiming the directors shut it down for reasons other than lack of funding.—Chris White, The Daily Caller, 3 March 2016

One of Europe’s most promising markets for renewable energy is being threatened by legislation that would impose new fees and potential jail terms for operators of wind farms, an industry lobby group said. Poland’s governing Law and Justice Party is proposing laws that would require new turbines to be situated away from homes, schools and natural reserves at a distance of more than 10-times their height. That would be about 1.5 kilometers (0.9 miles), according to data compiled by Bloomberg New Energy Finance.—Jessica Shankleman, Bloomberg, 3 March 2016

With the new financial reality of a world awash in cheap oil and natural gas, wind and solar can only survive, if they survive at all, by the government forcing people to buy them and jacking up electricity and home heating prices to families and businesses. Green enthusiasts who still think that financially viable green energy looms ahead, should consider one major finding of the University of Chicago study: “If the past 35 years is any guide, not only should we not expect to

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run out of fossil fuels anytime soon, we should not expect to have less fossil fuels in the future than we do now. In short, the world is likely to be awash in fossil fuels for decades and perhaps even centuries to come.”—Editorial, Investors’ Business Daily, 1 March 2016

Remember the university professor who wanted the government to use the RICO law created to prosecute mobsters as a tool against global-warming dissenters? Well, taxpayers may be the ones calling for an investigation after examining the nonprofit venture that George Mason University Professor Jagadish Shukla has been running with generous government funding. According to Chairman Smith’s letter, the audit “appears to reveal that Dr. Shukla engaged in what is referred to as ‘double dipping.’ In other words, he received his full salary at GMU, while working full time at IGES and receiving a full salary there.”—The Wall Street Journal, 2 March 2016
February satellite data reveals warmest month on record

By: Paul Gattis

Satellite temperature data collected by the University of Alabama in Huntsville revealed that February was the warmest since records have been kept.

The satellite data began in 1978.

According to the monthly report from Earth System Science Center at UAH, February was the warmest month by a statistical significance. The average temperature was 0.83 degrees Celsius above normal. That topped the previous record set in April 1988, which was 0.74 degrees Celsius above normal.

In the northern hemisphere, the February anomaly (+1.17 C) was a full 0.32 C (0.58 F) warmer than the previous northern hemisphere record (+0.85 C) set in April 1998. Temperatures in the tropics and the Southern Hemisphere were not at record levels in February.

January was also among the warmest, ranking fifth on the list of warmest months in the satellite data era.

"The record hot February is driven by two major factors," John Christy, director of the ESSC at UAH, said in an email to AL.com. "First is the huge El Nino in the central tropical Pacific ocean waters. As the warm ocean temperature drops (which is has the last 2 months), some of that heat is expelled to the air which warms up the deep atmospheric layer. Interestingly, the tropical atmospheric temperatures (from satellites) are still cooler than they were in 1998.

"The second factor is more random - a very warm mid and high latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere. These winter-time departures-from-average fluctuate up and down in these latitudes all the time, mostly independent from the El Nino. In February, it happened to be very warm up there. So the combination of the second-warmest El Nino in the tropics plus very warm high northern latitudes add together to give the record. It is possible that the warm high latitudes will cool off (those anomalies change quickly sometimes whereas El Nino is very slow to change) and next month will decline. But, I'm not forecasting anything at this point."
Our View: Busy tornado season shaping up?

By: Staff

Alabama hasn’t reached triple digits in tornadoes since the hellish year of 2011. (April 27 of that year gained permanent bold print status in the state’s history books; are we really approaching the fifth anniversary?)

The trend so far in 2016, however, is ominous. Preliminary National Weather Service statistics show 20 tornadoes in Alabama in January and February (there were only 32 in 2015), and that’s not counting the EF2 twister that caused damage and injuries Tuesday night in western Jefferson County.

That certainly isn’t welcome news, especially heading into March and April, which statistically have been Alabama’s busiest tornado months (although the season really never ends here).

It spotlights this week’s gathering of scientists from various academic, governmental and research groups in the Southeast to launch VORTEX-SE (Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes Experiment, Southeast.)

The project is based at the University of Alabama in Huntsville and has a $5 million budget.

It’s an effort similar to those made in the Great Plains’ “Tornado Alley,” which were the grist for the 1996 film “Twister.”

The goal is to gain better understanding of tornadoes and improve warning systems for them. Our question is “what took so long?”

According to the Storm Prediction Center, an average of 40 Southeastern residents were killed by tornadoes each year between 1985 and 2014, four times the rate of the “Tornado Alley” states (Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas). Alabama averaged the most deaths, 14.

Researchers say tornadoes are harder to chase and behave differently in the woodsy, hilly South compared to the Plains flatlands. Emergency management personnel say the terrain also makes twisters difficult to spot and issue timely warnings for.

That’s why the VORTEX-SE researchers aren’t going to be chasing wall clouds and storm systems like Bill Paxton and Helen Hunt in the movie. They’re going to set up at various sites in the region and wait for storms. History says they won’t get bored.

We think the money allocated for the project is well spent. Any new insight gained about these monstrous forces of nature will be positive and potentially life-saving.

However, what should Alabamians do now to protect themselves, given the present knowledge base? You’ve heard this advice from meteorologists and emergency management personnel before, but there’s no such thing as reminding people too many times about something so important.

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Pay attention to forecasts and don’t get snarky and dismissive if things on a given day don’t turn out as predicted. Meteorology is an imperfect science, but we’ll remind you that forecasters predicted what happened April 27, 2011, well in advance and no one should’ve been caught by surprise.

Get a weather radio and download weather and alert notification apps to your smartphones or tablets, so you’ll get the most immediate warnings of bad weather. Don’t depend on the old-fashioned siren system that rarely gives people enough time to take cover.

Have a severe weather plan for your homes and families, or be cognizant of where the nearest shelters are if you live in a mobile home or don’t have a basement.

Those steps aren’t obsessive or panicky. They’re simply the embodiment of “being prepared” — which is a good thing.
Be Prepared: Huge tornado study conducted in the TN Valley

By: Lauren Jones

HUNTSVILLE, AL (WAFF) -

UAH is the home base for the Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes Experiment, or VORTEX-SE - a 2 month long study on tornadoes that runs through the end of April.

40 researchers from 20 research entities or universities will travel to Huntsville, in some cases, thousands of miles, several times this spring to conduct this study. They will deploy approximately 13 vehicles, 3 mobiles radar, and one fixed radar from UAH’s SWIRLL.

The number of killer tornadoes in the southeast is disproportionately large when compared to the overall number of tornadoes throughout the rest of the country. Researchers believe this could largely be caused by sociological factors, like how the public responds to warnings.

Todd Barron, the Warning Coordination Meteorologist with the Huntsville National Weather Service, is looking forward to applying this research to how warnings are issued “because it doesn’t really matter how many warnings we put out or how accurate they are, if the public isn’t responding correctly, then it doesn’t really matter,” he says.

The two previous VORTEX field campaigns took place in the Great Plains.

“In many ways, VORTEX-SE represents a new approach to tornado research in general,” said project manager Erik Rasmussen.

Conducting this year’s project in the southeast, and more specifically, the Tennessee Valley, could be greatly beneficial to better understanding and forecasting for our specific threats.

Their focus will be on learning more about the terrain and topography’s influence on tornado formation and strength, nighttime tornadoes, and spin up tornadoes embedded in a line.

“Compared to chasing in the Plains, that environment is very open country,” said Dr. Eric Bruning, a professor at Texas Tech University. "We can operate much closer to storms because we can see the hazards. So here, we’re interested to be observing in this environment with a lot more trees and hills and have an opportunity to figure out how to get as close as possible while still remaining safe.”

This project will also greatly benefit the students involved.
Kate-Lynn Walsh, a senior at the University of Oklahoma, is excited to work with UAH and overcome the challenges that chasing in the Tennessee Valley presents that vastly differs from the Great Plains.

"I think the biggest challenge will be... in the Plains, it is really flat, and we don't have trees, and we have a wonderful road network," she said. "The thing I'm slightly worried about is the idea that we could be blocked. There might be something we should be retrieving and be seeing on the radar that maybe we're not seeing. And we could use that information. So beam blockage is a bit worrying but I think that in working with UAH, they have so much experience, that won't be as much of an issue."

Alex Staarmann, a senior at UAH, is planning to continue his studies in graduate school at UAH and is looking forward to taking this research with him and that it "will greatly benefit in the long run for getting a job in the future."
Meteorologist Chris Higgins looks at the next generation of tornado research

By: Chris Higgins

HUNTSVILLE, AL (KTVI) - This is the starting point of a four day trip across two different Tornado Alleys.

My first stop is here in Huntsville, at the University of Alabama Huntsville and the Severe Weather Institute Radar and Lightning Laboratories (SWIRLL). Monday, this facility will play host to media day for the next generation of tornado research, Vortex Southeast.

Everyone has heard the term tornado Alley, it refers to the region of the country from the Midwest into the Central and Southern Plains states where the most violent of tornadoes are the most common.

However, few are familiar with its neighbor to the east, Dixie Alley.

It stretches from Louisiana into Mississippi and Alabama, and this spring it will be the focus of this massive new field research project, the next generation following Vortex 1 and Vortex 2.

Monday night on FOX 2 News at 9pm, I will take you behind the scenes as researchers prepared to head into the storms. I’ll show what they are looking for and what they hope to learn. And take you into the high tech storm chasing vehicles that make up the fleet.

Then, Tuesday and Wednesday, I’m off to Oklahoma City for the National Tornado Summit. Both nights I will report back on the hot topics in tornado research and preparedness as well as disaster response.

It will be a busy couple of days and you can follow along on my Facebook page Chris Higgins on FOX2. My stories where air on FOX 2 News Monday night, Tuesday night and Wednesday day. I will also be broadcasting my weather forecast live from the field on FOX 2 News at 11pm all three days.

It is weather coverage you will only see on Fox 2 News!
Tornado Researchers Head to Alabama for VORTEX Southeast

By: Bob Henson

The venerable series of studies known as VORTEX is about to enter its third chapter in 22 years, this time with a change in venue. VORTEX Southeast gets an official kick-off with a media day on February 29 in Huntsville, Alabama, the experiment’s home base. As its name implies, VORTEX-SE is focused on the southeastern U.S., where tornadoes can ravage the heavily forested, densely populated landscape at just about any time of year—including February, as highlighted in this week’s deadly outbreak on Tuesday and Wednesday.

VORTEX-SE is targeting a relatively small area in its first field phase this March and April, relying more on fixed instruments and radiosondes (weather balloons) than on the mobile radars that crisscrossed the southern Great Plains during the earlier experiments. The new project also has a beefed-up social science component: investigators will be looking closely at how meteorologists present information about tornadic threats, and how people use and interpret that information.

Rolling through a different alley

The original VORTEX project (Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes, 1994-95) was a landmark in many ways. It was the first major use of the NSF-supported Doppler on Wheels mobile radars, which have become mainstays of weather research. Data from the first VORTEX and its successor, VORTEX2 (2009-10), helped lead to a much more detailed and nuanced picture of how supercell thunderstorms gather and organize rotational energy (vorticity) and why only a small number of supercells manage to parlay their energy into making tornadoes.

The southern-Plains focus of the first two VORTEX projects emerged naturally, given that supercell tornadoes are more frequent and often more violent across this region than anywhere else on Earth. But deadly tornadoes also plague other parts of the nation. Geographer Michael Frates outlined four distinct tornado “alleys” during his graduate studies at the University of Akron. As shown in Figure 2, these include the traditional Tornado Alley as well as Hoosier Alley (centered on Indiana), Carolina Alley (spanning parts of the North Carolina Piedmont and Coastal Plain), and Dixie Alley (extending from far east Texas to north Georgia).

It’s easy to quibble over exactly what constitutes a tornadic alley, or where its boundaries should be drawn, but it’s also clear that the southeast U.S. is especially tornado-vulnerable. That point was hammered home by the 2011 Super Outbreak. Concentrating its fury in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and southern Tennessee, the outbreak took more than 300 lives on April 27. It was the nation’s largest single-day tornado toll since the Super Outbreak of April 3, 1974, which also hit the same area hard (as well as points further north).

With their constituents suffering, regional lawmakers decided to work toward bringing tornado research from the Plains into the hard-hit Southeast. Congress provided guidance in 2014 to NOAA and NSF to collaborate in organizing and conducting a VORTEX-SE research study, and more than $5 million was allocated by Congress in fiscal year 2016. VORTEX-SE organizers have put in place a planning process for a succession of research projects that, if funding support

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continues, are designed to lead to improvements in tornado forecasts and responses in the Southeast.

**A grab bag of threats**
Tornadoes obey the same laws of physics no matter where they develop, but some types of tornadoes are especially problematic in the Southeast. Violent “wedge” tornadoes can be more difficult to see than on the Plains because of lower cloud bases produced by richer low-level moisture and because of the widespread hills and trees. The region’s high frequency of severe weather year-round leads to a perennial threat from weaker, short-lived (but still dangerous) tornadoes produced by quasi-linear convective systems (QLCSs), or what are traditionally known as squall lines. Thunderstorms are often moving quickly, sometimes at more than 50 mph. Nighttime tornadoes are also more common here than in many areas, which adds to public safety concerns.

Rebecca Morss (National Center for Atmospheric Research) is shepherding the VORTEX-SE social science component as a member of the project’s scientific steering committee. “The Southeast has unique issues related to tornadoes—meteorologically, operationally, and societally,” Morss told me in an interview. One key example: about half of the nation’s mobile/manufactured homes are located across the Southeast, where they constitute more than 20% of housing units in many counties. Thousands of manufactured homes are located on small acreages, which complicates the task of getting to shelter.

Along with challenges unique to the Southeast, Morss and colleagues are teaming up with NWS forecasters to advance a longer-term, national-scale effort to improve forecast and warning communication. Those warnings aren’t received in a vacuum, she stressed. “What do people do when they get a warning? Do they look at social media? Do they look outside? We often think of individual decision making, but it’s really a social process. People are usually making decisions about how to act in conjunction with other family members and what friends are doing.”

**Spinning up an experiment at tornadic speed (or close to it)**
Most major atmospheric research campaigns—including the first two VORTEX projects—emerge after several years of proposals (typically to NSF and/or NOAA), which means the scientific goals tend to be fully developed by the time the campaign gets under way. In the case of VORTEX-SE, researchers have funding in hand while they continue to work out the priorities and strategies that are most relevant to the study area. A workshop held in Huntsville last November drew more than 100 on-site participants, with virtual collaborations boosting the total number of researchers involved to around 150.

“It’s turning into a really good science program,” said coordinator Erik Rasmussen. A veteran tornado researcher involved with the two prior VORTEX projects, Rasmussen is steering VORTEX-SE from NOAA’s National Severe Storms Laboratory, the official organizing agency.

Much of the funding thus far has gone into an initial set of NOAA-allocated grants to scientists scattered across the Southeast and beyond. Some of these research threads will extend beyond the spring, such as one aimed at improving prediction of tornadoes in landfalling hurricanes and

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tropical storms. Others are being woven into a set of intensive observing periods this March and April. These IOPs will be conducted from an operations center at the University of Alabama in Huntsville’s new SWIRLL facility (Severe Weather Institute & Radar Lightning Laboratory). Local researchers will figure heavily into VORTEX-SE. Along with a number of scientists and facilities from UAH’s Atmospheric Science Department, the project will draw on the capabilities of the Huntsville-based NASA Marshall Space Flight Center and its expertise in lightning and storm electricity.

This year’s field campaign will focus on the boundary layer, the lowest mile or so of the atmosphere. Many of the Southeast’s severe weather episodes are intense but localized, with high wind shear and relatively low instability (or CAPE). “Some people have hypothesized there are little pockets of CAPE in these situations,” says Rasmussen. “Are models keeping up with such developments? I think that’ll end up being the main focus this year.”

Out in the field, there’ll be radiosonde-launching mobile units from the University of Louisiana at Monroe as well as Mississippi State, North Carolina State, Purdue, and Texas Tech. Fixed-site launches will be conducted by UAH and NOAA’s Air Resources Laboratory. A dozen compact StickNet instrument packages from Texas Tech will also be deployed. To see how much the StickNet data improves model performance, NOAA’s Earth System Research Laboratory will carry out post-storm runs using the high-resolution HRRR and RAP models. The extra data may help better characterize pools of cool surface air left behind by thunderstorms. This, in turn, could improve short-term forecasts of storm rotation and longevity.

Rather than moving along with major supercells for dozens or even hundreds of miles, as was the case during prior VORTEX campaigns, the observing platforms this spring will be concentrated in northern Alabama and southern Tennessee, largely in the warning area served by the National Weather Service office in Huntsville.

“We have greatly limited mobility, and to complicate that, we have fast-moving storms,” said Rasmussen. “We’re going to throw a network up in a good dual-Doppler coverage area and take most of the observations in that network.”

Another VORTEX veteran, Yvette Richardson (Pennsylvania State University), is leading the physical science wing of the VORTEX-SE steering committee. “We’re putting a great deal of thought into which problems can be addressed in the Southeast, given the topography and tree cover. It’s a challenging part of the country to do an observing campaign.” Rounding out the steering committee is Kevin Laws, science and operations officer at the NWS/Birmingham office, who will shepherd the operational science elements.

**Tornadoes and terrain**
The role of landscape will get increasing emphasis in 2017 and beyond. One of the current grant-funded projects, led by NOAA/ARL, will use high-resolution, 3-D observations to assess the variations in the low-level atmosphere as well as the roughness of the land surface. “This knowledge will lead to a better understanding of how local conditions can lead to more favorable environments for tornadoes when conventional understanding would indicate tornadoes are unlikely,” states the grant abstract.
The extent to which tornadic storms can be shaped by landscape and topography has long been controversial and difficult to assess. Generations of Tornado Alley dwellers grew up hearing about towns that were “protected” from tornadoes by hills or ridges. (Some residents of Topeka, KS, thought that a local feature called Burnett’s Mound would steer tornadoes away, until a devastating twister plowed through town on June 8, 1966, killing 17 people.) It’s now clear that tornadoes can maintain their strength while climbing and descending hills, a message forecasters have been stressing for years. Yet this doesn’t rule out the possibility that some tornadic storms get a boost from landscape features that help to channel low-level winds.

At Penn State, graduate student Branden Katona is looking into such possibilities. He’s built a climatology of where environmental characteristics that could influence storm rotation are maximized, based on three years of HRRR forecasts across the Southeast. Katona focused on two variables: significant tornado parameter (STP, which incorporates both instability and wind shear) and storm-relative helicity (SRH, a measure of potential storm rotation). “Quite a few local maxima in both SRH and STP follow terrain contours,” Katona pointed out in an email. “In particular, the SRH maxima are aligned with local ridge axes in both northeastern Alabama and in the Great Smoky Mountains in southeastern Tennessee. Additionally, a local STP maximum stretching from northeast Mississippi down into western Alabama is aligned with a local valley axis.” Katona will soon be comparing the HRRR data to actual tornado paths: “I expect at least some of the model perturbations to coincide with clusters of tornadoes.”

Bob Henson
Deadly 'Dixie Alley' focus of new tornado-chasing campaign

By: Doyle Rice

Two decades after helping inspire the movie Twister, a vast operation to chase, observe and study tornadoes in the USA is getting a reboot.

Starting Tuesday, 40 scientists from up to 20 different government, research and academic organizations will fan out across the Southeast, focusing for the first time on the so-called Dixie Alley, a region frequently hit by deadly, destructive tornadoes.

Known as VORTEX-SE — a clever acronym for "Verification of the Origins of Rotation in Tornadoes Experiment, Southeast" — the project follows in the footsteps of large research campaigns that began 22 years ago in the "Tornado Alley" of the Great Plains and sparked the 1996 Hollywood blockbuster.

The impetus for the venture — allocated a $5 million budget from Congress — stems from a violent tornado outbreak in April 2011 that left hundreds dead, mainly in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee.

The new research — to help scientists better understand tornadoes and the complex storms that fuel them as well as improve early warning systems that save lives — is well overdue in the region.

"Tornado density is greater in the Southeast than anywhere else," said Grady Dixon, a geosciences professor at Fort Hays State University in Kansas.

On average, about 40 people die in the nine states that make up the southeastern U.S. each year. Alabama tallies the highest death toll annually with an average of 14, according to data from the Storm Prediction Center.

By comparison, an average of 10 people die from twisters each year combined in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, the three states that make up Tornado Alley. Overall, about 73 Americans are killed each year by tornadoes, based on data from 1985-2014.

"I know it is sometimes portrayed as surprising that more deaths occur in the Southeast, but it makes total sense," Dixon said.

Dixon's 2011 study found twisters were far more likely in the region because the storm-fueled forces of nature last longer on the ground there than in the Plains. His research discovered the most tornado-prone area in the country is Smith County, in southeastern Mississippi.

The deadly tornadoes that ripped through the southern and eastern U.S. last week, killing seven, highlight why the twisters researchers will begin studying in depth this week.

Southern tornadoes can sometimes occur in the winter, when people may not be as prepared for their destructive powers that are most often associated with spring. Many also happen at night,

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making it harder to seek shelter or watch the latest forecasts. Tennessee, Arkansas and Kentucky log the most nighttime twisters, Weather.com reports.

Half the nation's mobile homes, far more susceptible to tornadoes' winds, are located in the Southeast, where they add up to as much as one-fifth of the residences in many counties. Most tornado deaths occur in mobile homes, according to the Storm Prediction Center. The twisters are different beasts in the wooded, humid and hilly Southeast than they are in the dry, flat and windswept Plains, said Kevin Knupp, a professor of atmospheric science at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, the home base for the project.

That makes chasing the twisters harder in the region, where low clouds add to the list of conditions that can obscure tornadoes until it's too late for residents and researchers alike.

Driving is limited by the terrain and roads there whereas the Plains' orderly grid pattern of highways makes getting around easier and its limited trees allow everyone to see the twisters sooner and more clearly, said Erik Rasmussen, longtime severe weather researcher at the National Severe Storms Laboratory and VORTEX-SE coordinator.

The "rough" forested and urban landscapes of the Southeast make tornadoes spin up in different ways than the "smooth" landscapes of the flat, agricultural Plains, said Knupp. "We don't fully understand their behavior," Knapp said.

Part of the VORTEX-SE project will be to figure that out, he added.

Twister promoted the idea of storm chasers dashing madly to catch the next storm system that might produce a tornado. While mobile teams will be part of the southeastern project, there will be plenty of researchers in fixed locations throughout the region.

"The storms will be coming to us, rather than us going to them," Rasmussen said.
Super PACs supersizing primary spending

By: Trent Butler

Republican front-runner Donald Trump talks often about how he's funding much of his presidential campaign.

Democrat Bernie Sanders reminds voters that most of his donations are small and from ordinary Americans.

They're telling anyone who will listen that they can't be bought by powerful outside interests.

Yet, not every candidate operates the same way. Many campaigns are hoping to catch the eye of third party groups called Super PACs (Political Action Committees) that can spend unlimited amounts of money on political advertising.

There are set limits on how much a person can contribute to a single candidate. Not only that, corporations and unions aren't allowed to give directly to a campaign. However, six years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a ruling that opened the fundraising floodgates for unlimited donations!

In fact, Super PACs are raising and spending supersized amounts of money during this year's campaign season. Voters watched Jeb Bush's presidential campaign rise and fall despite being supported by the Right to Rise Super PAC and its 118 million dollars. Super PACs that support Hillary Clinton raised 57 million. Groups that favor Ted Cruz raked in $47 million and it's $34 million for Marco Rubio's backers.

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group reveals, funding for Super PACs has skyrocketed 749 percent since the last presidential election.

"2012 was the first presidential race we've had since the Supreme Court decision," said Chris MacKenzie, Communications Director of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. "And now, in 2016, candidates have really honed their fundraising strategy to take advantage of the loopholes created by that Supreme Court case."

That Supreme Court case, "Citizens United," overturned the ban on independent expenditures. Now, corporations, unions, and even individuals can send unlimited donations to Super PACs. Yet, people who run the Super PACs must follow certain rules if they want to spend the millions in their checking accounts.

"They're not supposed to give money directly to a candidate," said UAH political professor Andree Reeves. "They're supposed to be spending money, advocating issues or maybe working against other candidates but it's not supposed to be coordinated at all with the candidate's campaign."

Critics say many Super PACs are spending their unlimited donations like drunken sailors on a barrage of TV, digital and billboard ads that are often crafted by former campaign workers.

"If they are staffed by former campaign people they know where that campaign money needs to go. They know who the constituents are. What needs to be spent and how it needs to be spent," said Reeves.

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Retired Marine Jonathan McConnell is taking on the herculean challenge of trying to unseat Alabama Senator Richard Shelby, who's been a fixture in Washington, D.C. for nearly three decades.

Federal disclosures show that during the final two months before Alabama's Super Tuesday primary, Shelby's campaign spent more than $5-million on ads that accuse McConnell of bribery, campaign violations and being soft on immigration.

"He's already outspent 14 presidential candidates. So, what does it say to people? The mantra we keep hearing all throughout the state is He's too old, he's been there too long, it's time for him to come home," McConnell said.

Senator Shelby's campaign started the year with a political war chest of $18 million, but outside groups, including the NRA and the National Association of Realtors have poured more than $900,000 into his re-election campaign.

Some critics, including McConnell, claim Shelby can't relate to the average Alabamian since many of his largest donors live outside the state.

MacKenzie told us about some of his research into Shelby's funding by a Super PAC.

"The head of an Ohio energy conglomerate that donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Senator Shelby's Super PAC," said MacKenzie. "The average Alabamian doesn't own an energy corporation and probably doesn't share the same values as this donor."

MacKenzie is talking about Murray Energy, an Ohio company that donated $100,000 to the New Generation PAC. New Generation shuttered not long after passing the money to the Citizen Super PAC which supports Shelby.

Sen. Shelby is part of the Republican leadership that opposed President Obama's plan to increase EPA regulations on coal emissions. Yet, Senator Shelby isn't apologizing for his well-funded campaign. He says, if anything, McConnell is trying to duplicate his success.

"He would do the same thing if he could. That's what he wants to do," said Shelby. "He's wanting some of the Super PACs. We have no control of them. We have no connection to them. We don't even know them."

Shelby may say he doesn't know the people associated with the Super PACs, but he may want to tell someone else to send a "thank you" note to hedge fund investor George Fox, who lives in Connecticut.

Last summer, Fox gave $1-million to the Citizen Super PAC that just spent more than $358,000 on ads to help get Shelby re-elected.

Many have asked what happens if there's money left over in a Super PAC at the end of a campaign?

A spokesperson for Priorities USA Action, the Super PAC that supports Hillary Clinton, says they "anticipate all of our funds will be spent this cycle on her."
Yet, the Federal Elections Commission said that while Super PACs must report all of their spending, there are no real restrictions on how the money is spent.

So that means anyone who sets up and runs a Super PAC can pay themselves a salary, or even cash out the entire account. Donors can request that they are given their money back. Yet, Super PAC organizers aren't legally obligated to follow through.
Career Day at LLCA: Astronaut urges students to follow their passion

By: Adam Smith

During the height of NASA's manned space exploration, it wasn't uncommon to hear a child say he or she wanted to be an astronaut when asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Students at Lindsay Lane Christian Academy in Athens were able to hear from a real astronaut, Dr. Jan Davis, on Tuesday as part of the school's annual career day. She told students NASA is always looking for the next generation of astronauts, but added there are plenty of other careers available at NASA for those with an aptitude for science, mathematics, technology or engineering.

"You don't have to be an astronaut to work for NASA," she said. "There are a lot of people we need to help get us into space."

Blasting off

Davis said her path to becoming an astronaut began when she was a young girl. She loved math and science, but there were no women astronauts. When she decided to attend Georgia Tech after graduating from Huntsville High School, Davis said she was told it was "a guy's school."

"I was usually the only woman in my class, which was kind of odd," she said. "The guys wouldn't talk to me because it was like I was an alien to them."

After earning her bachelor's degree in applied biology, she earned her first master's degree from Auburn University. She then moved to Texas and worked for Texaco as a petroleum engineer in tertiary oil recovery. Two years later, in 1979, she began working at Marshall Space Flight Center as an aerospace engineer just as NASA's shuttle program was heating up.

On her 30th birthday, Davis applied to the astronaut program because women and civilians were then able to apply. Out of 5,000 applicants, NASA interviewed 128, and Davis was one of those interviewed at Johnson Space Center. She's didn't get picked, however.

Though she held a bachelor's and master's degree, the rejection motivated her to complete her doctorate degree. She enrolled at the University of Alabama in Huntsville and later earned masters and doctoral degrees in mechanical engineering.

She was also named as team leader in the Structural Analysis Division of the Hubble Space Telescope, HST maintenance mission and the Advanced X-Ray Astrophysics Facility. In 1987, Davis was assigned to be the lead engineer for the redesign of the solid rocket booster external tank attach ring.

Still, Davis had dreams of becoming an astronaut. She applied again following the Challenger explosion, but worried her affiliation with MSFC would rule her out.

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“Some of the hardware that caused the accident was managed out of Marshall Space Flight Center, so I thought there was no way they would pick someone affiliated (with MSFC),” she said.

Davis was selected in 1987 and subsequently flew on three missions. On her first mission, in 1992, she operated Spacelab and its subsystems. In 1994, she maneuvered the Wake Shield Facility and conducted thin-film-crystal experiments. On her final mission in 1997, she was payload commander, deploying and retrieving the CRISTA-SPAS payload and operating a robotic arm developed by the Japanese.

Davis showed clips to the students of a space shuttle launch and said she’s often asked about the physical sensation of liftoff. She equated it to driving “really fast on a bumpy road with someone shaking you really hard.”

After her time as an astronaut, Davis was assigned to NASA’s headquarters in Washington, D.C., as director of the Office of Safety and Mission Assurance, Independent Assurance Office. She later served as director of the Flight Projects Directorate at MSFC before leaving in 2005.

“It was a great job for me and flying in space was great and the things I had to learn were wonderful,” she said. “It was an incredible opportunity.”

The road ahead

Davis, who now serves as vice president and deputy general manager of Jacobs Engineering and the Science Services and Skills Augmentation Group at NASA, also told the students about the future of manned space travel — the Space Launch System.

With nine million pounds of thrust, the SLS rocket will ferry the manned Orion space capsule past the moon and hopefully to Mars. The first unmanned launch is set for 2018, with the first manned launch set for 2021.

“You folks are hitting the prime time for this amazing new program at NASA,” she said.

Davis also offered a piece of motivational advice to the students: Follow your passion.

“I think it’s important to find something you really enjoy,” she said. “Be open to the opportunities God has for you and your own desires and passions for what you want to be. … Nothing worthwhile in this life comes easily; you have to work hard for it.”

About career day

Lindsay Lane’s career day was organized with assistance from United Way of Athens-Limestone County. The school was paired with the agency through the Greater Limestone County Chamber of Commerce’s Partner in Education program.

Other speakers at the school’s career day included: Dr. Bill Berry, local veterinarian; James America, human resources manager for Carpenter Technology Corporation; Dr. Quanda Stephenson, criminal justice professor at Athens State University; Bill Giguere, development
officer with the Mental Health Center of North Central Alabama Inc.; Kristi Valls, Athens attorney and former Limestone County district attorney; Howard "Mac" McFarlen, Huntsville Fire & Rescue chief; Steve Britton, chief of special operations for Huntsville Fire & Rescue; John Cranston, sunshield process engineer at NeXolve; Morgan B. Abney, a space systems engineer at MSFC; Darius Yaghoubi, engineer at MSFC; and Adam Smith, editor of The News Courier.
UAH incubator wins millions in federal grants

Construction of $9 million technology business center building to begin in a year

Lucy Berry lberry@al.com

Plans for a technology business incubator at the University of Alabama in Huntsville got a boost this week with a $500,000 federal grant in addition to $3 million in federal money already invested.

Jay Williams, assistant secretary for economic development for the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration, visited UAH Monday to talk about the $9 million Innovation to Invention Center, called 1IC for short, which will provide office and lab space to startups from the university and surrounding 15-county region.

The $500,000 grant is the second award from EDA, which last year invested $3 million in the 45,000-square-foot 1IC building.

"This is unique," Williams said. "We make these investments across the country. These are very competitive investments, so I think it speaks volumes to the level of collaboration here."

The $500,000 grant will allow the 1IC to hire personnel and implement policies and procedures for its operation before construction starts in about a year. UAH Architect Larrell Hughes said the facility should be finished about two years after buildout begins between Wilson Hall and the Business Administration Building facing Sparkman Drive.

UAH President Robert Altenkirch said the incubator is about 75 percent covered through funding from the city, county, state and EDA.

"We thought about this for a while and put it together to sort of mine the intellectual capital that's in Huntsville, mostly at the Arsenal and in the Research Park and then also the spinout companies from the university," he said. "These companies will link up with business faculty, engineering faculty, science faculty, specialized equipment that we have on campus, meeting spaces and also student projects."

UAH will use the EDA funding toward the Virtual Proof of Concept Center: The Growth & Acceleration of Products (GAP) Project to begin creating the functions that will be housed in the 1IC.

Once the project is complete, startups at the incubator will reside there for three to five years before they are mature enough to launch on their own.

"The President believes that this is the proper role to invest early, to help mitigate some of the risk, to help clear some of the barriers because ultimately this is about attracting that private investment," Williams said. "We know that there are going to be hundreds of jobs created from the immediate investment and it's going to be leveraged multiple times over."
UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA

Senate confirms 3 new trustees for UWA

Trustee Sheila Cloud reconfirmed

By Ed Enoch
Staff Writer

The Alabama Senate has confirmed the appointment of three new trustees for the University of West Alabama and the re-appointment of board member Sheila Cloud. The Senate confirmed Gov. Robert Bentley’s appointments of John H. Killian of Maytown and Joseph Brown of Tuscaloosa as at-large members of the board, replacing trustees Thomas Ballow Jr. and Willie O’Neal, whose terms expired in December. Justin Smith of Tuscaloosa, the past president of the UWA Alumni Association, was confirmed as the new trustee for the 7th Congressional District seat, succeeding trustee John Northcutt whose term also ended in December. The terms for the new trustees will end in Dec. 27, 2021. Trustees can serve two terms.

Cloud’s new term also runs until December 2021. The Senate confirmed the appointments on Friday. The UWA Board of Trustees is set to meet March 7 in Livingston for its next quarterly meeting. The new trustees are expected to attend the meeting, according to UWA President Ken Tucker."
Petty finds desire to play football again

Drew Champlin
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Jordan Petty has a healthy knee and a renewed desire to play football again.

Petty, a former Florence High standout, is back at UAB after spending two weeks at Old Dominion in Norfolk, Va., last January. The cornerback played his first two seasons with the Blazers, but found a place to play after the program was originally shut down.

He transferred to ODU, but left after two weeks. According to the Virginian-Pilot, Petty had lost his desire to play football at the time.

Petty said after a recent UAB practice that he left ODU just before the add-drop date in the 2015 spring semester so he could keep his transcript in order. He had to have microfracture surgery on his knee before he could think about playing football again, but he was set on returning to UAB to finish his degree.

“I guess I was a little homesick,” Petty said. “Twelve hours away in a month’s time, it was too much for me. I guess I wasn’t too happy and I just made the decision to go home. God led me here, so I can’t complain.”

Petty’s first day back at UAB was June 1 — the day the football program was reinstated.

He’s now healthy and participating as a cornerback for the Blazers. Petty was a key member of the secondary as a true freshman and sophomore, recording 84 tackles and two interceptions in his two seasons. He felt as though he was playing with the knee injury in 2014.

“He had a long way to come from that injury but he’s really doing well,” UAB coach Bill Clark said. “Super-intelligent player, and it’s important to him.”

Petty thought he might be done with football when he returned home from ODU, but he’s glad that he’s not.

“It feels like home,” Petty said. “It’s a different team but they’re all family. It’s always going to be family. The environment that Coach Clark creates, they’re all my brothers already. I’m ready to play.”

Petty is one of several players from the 2014 team who are returning, including defensive end Shaq Jones, receiver Wally Adams, center Lee Dufour, linebacker Tevin Crews and others. That core group helped form chemistry with the newcomers.

“That’s a guy that gets that because he was with us,” Clark said. “It’s good to have him back there. He’s probably excited for a chance to become maybe who he could be.”

For Petty, who will eventually earn a health care management degree at UAB, there’s no place he’d rather be.

“It’s definitely a legacy,” Petty said. “It’s not something everybody’s willing to do. I pride myself in doing things against the norm. Coach Clark and the family it creates, it builds a man more than a football player. I’m glad to write a part of football history.”
Brown's gamble paid off

Drew Champlin  dchamplin@al.com

The best compliment UAB head coach Jerod Haase received from star senior guard Robert Brown's father had nothing to do with his statistical accomplishments.

The 6-foot-5 guard came from an ACC bottom feeder in Virginia Tech and took a chance after Haase's first season with the Blazers, transferring in the summer of 2013. His gamble paid off.

After sitting out the 2013 season, Brown last year led a young team through ups and downs and, capping it off with MVP honors in the Conference USA Tournament and a huge three-pointer late in UAB's upset over third-seed Iowa State in the NCAA Tournament.

"He and his family put the confidence in me and the staff to do what's best for him," Haase said. "Maybe the best compliment I can take is when his dad said, 'You did everything you said you'd do.'"

Haase didn't promise anything statistically for Brown, just that the coaches would push him academically — he'll graduate in May — and on the basketball court, and help him grow as a person.

"He came up and told me I was a man of my word," Haase said.

"I think Robert's leaving here when the season's over and when the school year's over in a good position for the rest of his life."

The Clermont, Fla., native admitted he was originally skeptical about coming to Birmingham.

"Being here has really felt like home. The fans have embraced me and my family and it's just been a fantastic deal," Brown said.

"Coach Haase means everything. Him trusting in me and being able to put this team in my hands and let me play, I don't want to say you can't describe it, but when he has that trust in me, it's just unbelievable."

UAB travels to Florida International on Thursday for a 6 p.m. tip-off.
Starr's Alabama beating as wrong then as it would be today

Kevin Scarbinsky kscarbinsky@al.com

When I read Monday that Bart Starr was the victim of a "brutal secret hazing" to become a member of Alabama’s A-Club for varsity lettermen in 1954, I couldn’t believe it. The details were that sickening.

The opening lines from Joe Goodman’s riveting story gave me chills.

"They beat Bart Starr with a wooden paddle until his back resembled a piece of raw meat. The quarterback was never the same again."

One of the most dignified athletes in this state’s history subjected himself to a barbaric tradition and then suffered in silence his entire adult life.

He and his wife, who’s been with him from then until now, kept the details and the consequences to themselves.

Cherry Starr shared them with Goodman.

The world knew back problems interrupted Starr’s college career as the Alabama quarterback, kept him out of the military and plagued him during his long Hall of Fame run with the Green Bay Packers.

Now we know the source of those back problems. It was a beating, pure and simple.

It wasn’t boys being boys.

It was boys being savages.

It was hazing, and it was just as wrong then as it would be today.

You might ask yourself why it matters six decades later. Starr is 82 and in declining health after suffering two strokes. He is truly a lion in the winter of an amazing life.

But instead of questioning why his wife would unburden herself now, we should applaud her. Is it ever too late to set the record straight? Is there a statute of limitations on opening your heart to release a painful secret?

See Scarbinsky, B6

SCARBINSKY

FROM B1

Cherry Starr said her husband perpetuated the myth that he’d hurt his back while practicing punting because, in his mind, telling the truth "would make him look bad."

Imagine the repercussions had he blown the whistle. This was college football at the time of Paul Bryant and the Junction Boys at Texas A&M. Only coaches blew the whistle, and then strictly for the purpose of making you run one more gasser or hit one more sled.

But who knows how long that violent A-Club ritual was allowed to continue? How many other players willingly allowed themselves to be bullied that way and kept their mouths shut about it because that’s what you were expected to do?

The trouble with suffering in silence is you subject others to the same kind of suffering. Keeping quiet and keeping up appearances keeps alive the kind of "tradition" that has no place in the world of sports or the world at large.

What’s the quote attributed to Irish statesman Edmund Burke? "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

Can’t imagine anyone disputing Starr’s credentials as a good man, but you have to wonder if he has any regrets about keeping that painful memory to himself. You also have to wonder how the people who delivered or witnessed the beating lived with their secret.

There’s more than enough sadness in this old story to go around.
NFL legend Bart Starr was victim of 'brutal' secret Alabama hazing

By: Joseph Goodman

They beat Bart Starr with a wooden paddle until his back resembled a piece of raw meat. The quarterback was never the same again.

For more than 60 years, Bart Starr and his wife, Cherry, have kept a dark secret hidden away from the narrative of the Hall of Fame quarterback's career. No more. One of the most respected football players in the history of the game, and arguably one of the toughest, was hazed so badly while at the University of Alabama that it derailed his college career, disqualified him from military service and affected him throughout his 16 years with the Green Bay Packers.

In an exclusive interview with AL.com, Cherry Starr debunked the cover story used about why Starr's career at Alabama fizzled before his junior season, and why he struggled with back pain throughout his storied NFL career.

It has long been accepted that Starr hurt his back during a punting exercise at Alabama. That is false, says Cherry Starr, who was with him at the time and throughout his life. Cherry told AL.com the truth is that Bart's injury happened during a gruesome ritualistic paddling for initiation into the university's A-Club for varsity lettermen.

"He was hospitalized at one point in traction," Cherry said. "That was in the days when they were initiated into the A-Club, and they had severe beatings and paddling. From all the members of the A-Club, they lined up with a big paddle with holes drilled in it, and it actually injured his back."

Bart never disclosed the incident involving the lettermen's club, says Cherry, because he thought "it would make him look bad." In declining health following two strokes in 2014, Bart, 82, is no longer able to discuss the events of his career, but the trauma he experienced at Alabama and its aftereffects are things the couple lived through together and have shared throughout their lives.

News articles from 1954 give few details about how Bart injured his back, and five biographies about his life and career, including an autobiography published in 1987, craft a narrative about his back injury around a punting exercise. Bart Starr buried the real reason for his injury in 1954, and his beating at the hands of the A-Club was either never reported or lost history.

"But his back was never right after that," Cherry Starr said. "It was horrible. It was not a football injury. It was an injury sustained from hazing. His whole back all the way up to his rib cage looked like a piece of raw meat. The bruising went all the way up his back. It was red and black and awful looking. It was so brutal."

Alabama tight end Nick Germanos, who was teammates with Starr and also Alabama's senior captain in 1955, described the beatings in sobering terms.

Germanos served in the Marine Corps for 3 ½ years following his graduation from Alabama. He said hazing for the A-Club was worse than anything he experienced in the military.

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"It was hell," Germanos said. "Lord have mercy it was a rough initiation."

And perhaps even worse for Starr, who not only broke the A-Club’s fraternal code of the era by secretly eloping in May of 1954 — teams used to revoke or reduce scholarships for marriages — but he also had the temerity to wed an Auburn girl and move her to Tuscaloosa.

Starr suffered the worst of it before his junior season, and only a few months after his elopement, says Cherry. Newspaper accounts of the day detail a fascinating cover up when viewed through the focused lens of a revelation almost 62 years in the making.

COVER-UP STORY

There’s a chance that Alabama coach Harold "Red" Drew never really knew how his star quarterback from Montgomery came to be injured before the beginning of preseason practice in the fall of 1954. Starr would miss most of the season due to his back injury, and Drew was fired that December.

History has painted a picture of Starr struggling throughout his career at Alabama and never materializing into a good quarterback until Vince Lombardi arrived in Green Bay in 1959. It’s not that simple. Starr started his sophomore season, helped Alabama to an SEC championship and, entering his junior season, was lauded by Drew as possibly the best passer in Alabama history.

Drew’s Split-T offense leaned heavily on Starr’s ability as a passer to keep defenses honest. Unfortunately for Drew and Starr, the quarterback’s back injury caused shooting pains throughout his upper extremities. It hurt just to lift his arms, according to later accounts of the injury.

Alabama finished 1954 with an overall record of 4-5-2 (3-3-2 in the SEC). With Starr either sidelined or playing through pain, the Crimson Tide went its final six games of the season without a victory.

The wormhole of what-ifs and fateful coincidences is a fool’s game, but if Starr's back had never been injured, then Drew might have had a successful season in 1954 and stayed on as Alabama's coach. Instead, a timeline of events was put into motion that led Paul "Bear" Bryant to Alabama in 1957.

Of course, in the preseason of 1954, Bryant wasn't thinking about Alabama. He was just trying to figure out how to turn his new team, Texas A&M, into a winner. While Bryant's Aggies were being transformed into "Junction Boys" during a hellish two-a-day camp that first week of September 1954, Starr was watching Alabama's preseason two-a-days in shorts.

The full extent of Starr's back injury was never reported while he was at Alabama, and it wasn't until the fourth week of the season — Oct. 6, 1954 — that an explanation for his injury was given by the press. Starr was checked into Tuscaloosa's Druid City Hospital on Oct. 4.

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With his week in traction to come later in the season, Starr's absence from preseason practice and his bothersome back were noted by local reporters at the start of camp. By all known accounts, though, the injury wasn't serious.

The Birmingham Post-Herald first reported the news on Sept. 4, 1954:

"Quarterback Bart Starr was the only Tider who worked in shorts as Coach Harold (Red) Drew sent the squad through a light afternoon dummy scrimmage. They all worked in shorts in the morning session.

Starr is nursing a minor injury he suffered in Spring training."

Just a few days earlier, however, the Birmingham News offered a report on Alabama's players who were injured the previous spring. There was no mention of Starr. From legendary Birmingham News reporter Alf Van Hoose on Sept. 2, 1954:

"How did the Spring-injured boys appear?"

That would be particularly, End Curtis Lynch and Fullback Noojin Walker. The answer's the same for both: Great. Lynch quickly regained his title as the hardest worker on the squad. Walker is running with no limp evident from a bum knee of last Fall and Spring."

Consistent with Van Hoose's report, Starr wasn't mentioned in an injury report leading into the previous spring's A-Day Game. Reporter Naylor Stone did, however, detail a list of six injuries prior to the spring scrimmage in the March 13, 1954, edition of the Post-Herald.

Starr competed in the A-Day scrimmage, completing 4 of 9 passes for 24 yards. Coincidentally, he reportedly was upstaged by backup quarterback Albert Elmore.

It's unclear who first manufactured the story that Starr was injured in the spring, but Starr would later propagate the misinformation while further confusing the timeline. It was extremely rare for Alabama's players to be quoted in the Birmingham papers in the early 1950s, but on the week he was admitted to Druid City Hospital, Starr apparently told the Birmingham News he suffered the injury in August, or less than a month before preseason camp.

From Van Hoose of the Birmingham News, reporting on Oct. 6, 1954:

"The whole trouble started, Starr thinks, from pre-season exercise. He remembers the pain beginning one day after a kicking session with a few of the boys in August. He thought it would go away in a few days, but it didn't — hasn't yet."

That a punter could injure himself in a non-contact kicking session to the point of possibly rupturing a disc is plausible, but that's not the reason for Bart Starr's injury at Alabama, according to Cherry Starr.

To be sure, it was a "kicking session" that altered Starr's career and possibly football history at the University of Alabama. It just wasn't the type of session that happened on the field.

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MISINFORMATION

The brutality of Starr's hazing by members of the A-Club left him with a lifelong back injury, according to his wife, but in that first week of preseason camp Alabama's former high school All-American was still hoping for the best.

That he most likely withheld valuable information from his team physician about his savage beating probably didn't help.

A week into camp, and doctors already were at a loss, apparently. It would become a common theme throughout Starr's career, and one that would drive him to seek alternative forms of therapy while with the Green Bay Packers.

In September of 1954, Alabama's team physician, Albert Tatum, sent Starr to Birmingham for an evaluation.

On Sept. 6, 1954, the Birmingham News reported Starr "is believed to be suffering from a possible pinched back nerve." The Post-Herald countered with its own story the following day, based on information from Alabama trainer Fred Posey. From the Sept. 7, 1954, edition of Birmingham's morning paper:

"Posey said Quarterback Bart Starr was examined and x-rayed by Birmingham specialists who discovered his back was only strained."

Nothing appeared to be broken, but Alabama's hopes for a successful season were already coming undone. Another player, tackle Fred Sington, was already in traction at Jefferson-Hillman Hospital with a possible ruptured disc when Starr first tried to run on his bad back. It didn't respond well. On Sept. 9, 1954, Starr reportedly "lugged the chain marker up and down the sideline" during Alabama's first full scrimmage of the fall.

With Sington lost for the year with his ruptured disc, Starr was ruled out for the season opener against Southern Mississippi (called Mississippi Southern College at the time). It was a bitter day for Starr. Not only was his back in constant pain, but Alabama's season opener was in the quarterback's hometown of Montgomery.

After being hyped as a contender for the SEC crown, Alabama lost to plucky Mississippi Southern 7-2. Starr couldn't bear to watch from the sidelines of the Cramton Bowl. After sitting out the entire preseason, he entered the game in the final minutes in a last-ditch effort to manufacture some offense. From the Birmingham News:

"There was one bright moment of hope for Alabama when Bart Starr, who didn't get to work out for a week because of a strain muscle, came in with the time fading out. He got off a 14-yard pass to Lynch and the ball was on the 41. He was trying to make his second cast when Williams swooped in on him, knocking the ball out of his hands for keeps. Three line plays and the game was over."

The following week against LSU in Baton Rouge, La., Starr once again entered the game "when all else failed earlier." This time, Starr "put the Tide on the way to victory," in the words of
Zipp Newman, the Birmingham News' sports editor in 1954, Alabama defeated LSU 12-0, and Starr was the player of the game. He also had an interception on defense. From Newman's account in The News:

"Bart Starr showed what he meant to Alabama. After floundering around with scoring chances, Alabama went for a touchdown when Bart came onto throw three of the finest passes here in many a moon."

In hindsight, it was extremely reckless for Starr to play that day at Tiger Stadium. He missed the next three games, and was eventually admitted to the hospital on Oct. 4, 1954. On the same day Marilyn Monroe's divorce with Joe DiMaggio made front page news in the Post-Herald, the newspaper buried a brief story by the Associated Press about Starr's hospitalization:

"UNIVERSITY, Oct. 4. (AP) — Bart Starr, Alabama's passing sensation, was placed in traction at Druid City Hospital today because of a nagging back injury."

Cherry Starr accompanied her husband to the hospital. The traction prescribed to Starr called for counterweights to keep his legs elevated. He was immobilized for a week. In a story in the Birmingham News two days later, Alabama's team physician "very frankly admitted that Starr's injury could be one of two things: (1) a strained back muscle or (2) disc trouble."

The story's lede echoed Alabama's frustration. "What's the score on Bart Starr?" wrote Hoose. Starr kept it a secret for nearly 62 years.

'LOST CAUSE'

With Starr in the hospital, the Crimson Tide reeled off three straight victories, including a 27-0 shutout of Tennessee in Knoxville. Alabama was 3-0 in the SEC and churning toward its second straight conference championship. Then Starr returned to action. Playing injured, his presence seemed to disrupt the team's rhythm.

Beginning with its homecoming loss to Mississippi State, Alabama scored just 14 points over its final six games.

Between losses to Mississippi State and Miami, Alabama went scoreless for 16 consecutive quarters, tying a school record. The Crimson Tide was outscored a combined 71-7 over its final three games, losses to Georgia Tech (20-0), Miami (23-7) and, finally, Auburn at Legion Field (28-0).

It was the enigmatic Bobby Freeman who led the rout for Auburn in the 1954 Iron Bowl, giving the Tigers its first victory against Alabama since 1949. Another Auburn standout from that 1954 Iron Bowl, Fob James, would later become governor of Alabama.

Attending the game as a personal friend of Drew, baseball great Dizzy Dean, living in Texas at the time, told the Birmingham News to "watch that Bear Bryant out our way next year. He'll have a team at Texas A&M. You know, he never did take a bad beating."

See next page
Bryant went 1-9 in his first season with Texas A&M. In an interesting twist, Starr nearly played for Bryant at Kentucky, but instead signed with Alabama in 1952. It was a fateful decision. Starr's offense didn't score a single point against Auburn in his junior and senior seasons, and a few days after Dean visited Birmingham on an invitation from Drew, Alabama's coach was fired. Starr's injury-plagued junior year marked Alabama's second losing season in half a century.

Things got worse for Alabama and Starr before they got better.

Politics and football have always been wrapped tightly around the Capstone like vines of collegiate ivy — beautiful, but with a tendency to suffocate. As it is sometimes prone to do, Alabama football was choking itself to death in 1954.

Drew, an innovative coach, had a quarterback in Starr, who, before his hazing, had the potential to be the best passer in the nation. Drew's line coach, Hank Crisp, was from the old school, and wanted to run the football. Crisp, who doubled as Alabama's athletic director, was also Drew's boss.

Crisp fired Drew and hired in his place the worst coach in Alabama football history, Jennings Bryan "Ears" Whitworth. In perhaps one of the most inane decisions in college football history, Whitworth benched Starr for most of his senior season and instead ran a ground-heavy offense.

Alabama went 0-10 in 1955, Starr's senior season. In his final game — a 26-0 loss to Auburn — Starr played admirably in defeat. Noted Newman: "Bart Starr was a heroic figure in Alabama's lost cause. He gave it all he had."

Truer words were never written.

MEDICAL DISQUALIFICATION

There are so many unlikely plot twists in the story of Bart Starr's rise to greatness with the Green Bay Packers. For starters, he was drafted in the 17th round on a recommendation by Alabama's basketball coach, Johnny Dee. Starr then had three coaches in four years with the third being an offensive assistant from New York named Lombardi.

The most amazing aspect of Starr's career might be this, though. His back was so badly injured during his time at Alabama that he failed his medical examination with the Air Force after his rookie season in Green Bay.

The military said Starr was unfit for service. He then played 15 more years in the NFL and won five championships, including the first two Super Bowls. He was named Most Valuable Player of both games.

"Thank goodness he failed that physical," Cherry Starr said.

The son of a master sergeant in the Air Force, Starr was a member of Air Force ROTC at Alabama. He was called to active duty after his first season with the Packers, and there was a great hope at Eglin Air Force Base that Starr could lead the base's football team to service glory.

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A story on page 6 of the Feb. 14, 1957, edition of The Command Courier, Eglin's base newspaper, trumpeted Starr's arrival to the northwest Florida installation. Landing Starr's service was "quite a feather in the caps of Athletic Director Bill Bailey and football mentor John Sparks, because they've been hoping for some time that this lad would be assigned to Eglin."

Starr was looking forward to replacing former Eglin quarterback Zeke Bratkowski, who, coincidentally, would later be Starr's longtime backup in Green Bay. It wasn't to be. The commander at Eglin Air Force Base, Col. Frank H. Mears, wouldn't sign off on Starr's service, according to Cherry Starr, "because of the liability." Bart Starr was medically disqualified by the Air Force and discharged in the spring of 1957.

From the May 4, 1957, edition of The Milwaukee Journal:

"GREEN BAY, Wis. — AP — The Green Bay Packers announced Friday that quarterback Bart Starr had received his discharge from the air force and will report here around May 15. Starr, a former Alabama standout, entered service last fall after his first season with the National Football League club."

Starr wrote in his 1987 autobiography that the base commander "refused to sign the medical waiver that would have been necessary for me to remain on active duty. I stayed at Eglin for six more weeks prior to receiving a medical discharge."

Think about this: if Starr had a healthy back, he would have remained in the Air Force for at least two more years. In other words, his pro career might never have materialized if not for that beating by the A-Club.

It's a grotesque irony, and Starr's back trouble hounded him throughout one of the most physically demanding eras of professional football. Starr's dogged persistence got him to Green Bay. From there, uncommon toughness pulled him up the mountain. The NFL didn't keep statistics on sacks throughout most of Starr's career, but in 1969 (the first year Starr's sacks were officially recorded) he was sacked 24 times for a sack percentage of 14.0.

Brett Favre, a longtime admirer of Starr, was sacked more than anybody in the NFL history (525), but Favre's highest sack percentage in a full season was 6.9.

And Starr did it all with a nagging back injury that precluded him from military duty.

"He took a pounding, and I think that was his greatest attribute, his mental toughness," said Cliff Christl, the Green Bay Packers' official historian. "No one could ever question Bart Starr's toughness, and in particular his mental toughness."

DISCOVERY

Starr played and coached through chronic pain his entire career, and the winter temperatures of Green Bay, Wis., presumably didn't help. The Packers regularly flew Starr to Madison, Wis., for back adjustments by a chiropractor.

"He was in so much pain constantly," Cherry Starr said. "They nearly tried anything."

See next page
Of course, the locker room culture of Lombardi's Packers probably wouldn't have tolerated a constantly aching player. It's not that Lombardi wanted his players to play through injuries. He didn't even acknowledge that players could be injured.

"Vince Lombardi didn't recognize injuries," said Christl, the Packers historian and longtime sportswriting legend. "He treated injuries as something all in your head."

Regular back spasms, spine adjustments and epidurals were Bart Starr's life throughout his time in Green Bay and into retirement. It wasn't until he moved to Birmingham in the late 1980s and met with doctors at the group fronted by Dr. James Andrews that Starr finally received some permanent relief.

A small fissure, a nearly undetectable crack, was discovered in one of Starr's vertebrae, according to Cherry Starr. The fracture was "basically invisible," she said, and located on the anterior side of her husband's spine. Starr had back surgery "to remove a chip."

Did Bart Starr play his entire career needing back surgery? It's impossible to know for sure, but his injury at Alabama changed not only the course of his life, but also shaped the histories of two of the most storied teams in football history, the Alabama Crimson Tide and the Green Bay Packers.
Hegstetter lays foundation for Tide

By: Terrin Waack

Nikki Hegstetter doesn’t need a flashy, winning record to be remembered. She leaves her mark by doing the dirty work and laying a solid foundation for the following teams to build on. She is the reason basketball programs grow.

As a starting forward for the University of Alabama women’s basketball team, Hegstetter is the only member who dates back four years. The senior’s journey is coming to an end as Alabama closed out its regular season on Sunday.

“I came into this program not knowing what to expect,” she said. “It’s been a roller coaster, and when I say roller coaster, it’s probably an understatement.”

Hegstetter came into a program that needed a change, and she, along with Alabama coach Kristy Curry, who joined the team after Hegstetter’s first season, were going to make that happen.

From the moment Curry took over, she knew Hegstetter was going to be a key component to the program’s evolution. The then-sophomore Hegstetter was ready to do whatever she could to help. Curry said her belief was contagious. So the rebuilding process began.

“I always say you can’t have one foot in and one foot out,” Curry said. “It’s got to be both feet in, and she’s just been both feet in from day one, in all areas.”

Alabama wasn’t the first program Hegstetter jumped into with both feet. She faced a similar situation when she entered Harrison High School in Kennesaw, Ga., where the girls’ basketball program, in its previous two seasons, totaled five wins.

Much like with Curry, when Hegstetter joined the team, a new coach was hired, but he wasn’t an unfamiliar face.

Before high school, Steve Lenahan coached Hegstetter on a summer team camp. He still remembers the shock he felt when Hegstetter spoke up in a huddle during a game the team was losing – badly. Hegstetter lit into the team.

“It was along the lines of, ‘Why don’t you guys start doing what the coach tells you to do because whatever you’re doing isn’t working, and I don’t want to lose for the next four years like you guys are right now,’” Lenahan said. “I literally about had a heart attack, but at the same time, I knew I had somebody special I was about to coach.”

The two paired up her freshman year and made a deal. Hegstetter was going to help Lenahan turn the program around and he was going to help her get a scholarship playing NCAA Division I basketball.

See next page
After countless one-on-one hours in the gym before and after school, both fulfilled their end of the deal.

“We kept each other going,” Lenahan said. “She probably made me stick it out longer than I would have, and in doing so, the program eventually changed. I would have missed out if I had left.”

When Hegstetter arrived at Alabama, it was like a repeat of high school.

“I remember talking to Nikki her freshman year at Alabama and some of the frustrations she went through,” Lenahan said. “I was like, ‘The good thing is you’ve been through this already so you know how it can turn out.’”

Hegstetter was ready to face the challenge head on – again. She went from being a high school point guard to a collegiate post player. She became Alabama’s voice defensively, directing traffic under the basket.

She’s the same scrappy player she was in high school, diving every which way to get the ball. Both of her coaches said if you look at her, she’s black and blue, but Hegstetter sees it as part of her job. She’ll do whatever it takes for the team, on and off the court.

“That’s why she’s going to be successful professionally, going to be a great mom, great wife. She just makes hustle plays, in her life, all day long,” Curry said. “The harder it gets, the harder she goes.”

Hegstetter leads Alabama in rebounds this season, averaging 6.4 per game. For her career, she’s ranked sixth in program history for blocks with 88, of which 31 are from this season. She’s also ranked seventh in Alabama history for career starts with 97, with two more games she’ll be tied for sixth.

She had one goal throughout her four years: make it to the post season, and for the first time since its 2010-2011 season, Alabama is eligible, proving that the dirty work pays off.

“Everyone’s a piece to a puzzle,” Hegstetter said. “My legacy – hopefully – will be that girl fought every day for what was on the front of her jersey, and she never gave up until she achieved the goal that everyone set out to achieve.”
Blazers clinch regular-season title

Drew Champlin dchamplin@al.com

UAB continued its history-making season run of success through Conference USA with a 71-67 win over Western Kentucky on Saturday. It wasn't easy, and as head coach Jerod Haase said to an announced crowd of 7,510 after the game, it certainly isn't the end. UAB clinched a share of the Conference USA title and the top seed in the conference tournament, which will be played in two weeks at Legacy Arena in Birmingham. UAB's first quarterfinal game will be at noon on March 10.

Later Saturday, UAB clinched the outright Conference USA championship when Marshall lost 84-75 at Middle Tennessee. There was cutting down of nets at Barrow Arena. That's saved for a more special occasion.

UAB senior Robert Brown, perhaps Haase's first big recruit when he signed with the Blazers in the summer of 2013 after transferring from Virginia Tech, was honored in an emotional ceremony after the game. Brown led the Blazers with 12 points despite playing with foul trouble.

UAB, which closes the regular season with two games in south Florida next week including Thursday at FIU, improved to 24-5, 14-2 in league play. WKU is 14-15, 6-10. UAB extended its school record of 25 straight wins at Barrow Arena and its 14 Conference USA wins added to its school record.

"The combination of securing at least a share of the conference championship and sending Robert Brown out the right way and ending the conference season at home with a win, all those things combined make today truly special," Haase said.

Western Kentucky handed UAB one of its two conference losses with a 69-62 victory over the Blazers on Jan. 28 in Bowling Green and started off paced to win again. Nigel Snipes three gave WKU a 21-10 lead midway through the first half.

But UAB started plugging away and eventually took a 27-25 lead on a three from Nick Norton with 3:51 left.

"Once we started to finally play a little defense and string a couple of stops together, the game really started to turn in our favor," Brown said.

UAB led 30-29 at half and trailed briefly in the second half. The Blazers led by 10 with 6:46 left when Brown beat the shot clock with a long jumper, but the Hilltoppers didn't go away.

WKU cut the lead to 67-64 with 24 seconds left. UAB's Tosin Mehlostripped WKU's Justin Johnson as he was going up for a shot down low. After a scramble, UAB was awarded a timeout and possession by referee John St. Clair.

After a few moments, a technical foul was called on the Hilltoppers bench and UAB eventually went up seven, icing the game.

"We were right there," WKU head coach Ray Harper said. "We're not done. I think we let them know today that the game at our place was not a fluke, we're for real, and we just gotta keep getting better — and that's what we're doing." UAB got 12 points from Brown and double-digit scoring games from two bigs that most probably wouldn't have expected. Tosin Mehlonged 10 with two big second-half buckets — a rebounded dunk with 4:26 left putting UAB up six and a 3-point play with 2:30 left putting UAB up eight.

"When Tosin's inside getting offensive rebounds and putbacks, it adds another element to our team," Haase said.

Lewis Sullivan added 10 points off the bench. He scored six early when UAB was struggling, as his drives to the bucket and left-handed shots were tough to stop.

"Lew was awfully important to us," Haase said. "His energy has been consistent all year. When he adds that element on the offensive end, it's really good. He was a big spark for us, especially in the first half."

It was another example of UAB finding victory while getting contributions throughout the roster.

"Nobody blows you out of the water with all their points or assists, but at the end of the day, it's a happy locker room because it's all about the team success and they have sure bought into that," Haase said.
Offensive coordinator Koenning a ‘huge get’ for UAB

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As UAB rebuilds its program with players from different backgrounds and with different skill sets, new offensive coordinator Les Koenning’s energy at practice has been unwavering.

And that’s just how head coach Bill Clark wants it.

“I tell our coaches all the time that we project the energy,” Clark said. “We can’t expect a bunch of players to be the energy guys, even though they’re going to get to that point where they’re carrying the torch because they play on the field.

“Practice is run by the coaches. Having the head of your offense that way, that’s going to trickle down. That’s what I expect.”

Clark and Koenning’s relationship began in 2008 when they were at South Alabama, at the time a start-up program without offices. Eight years later, they’ve reunited at UAB, which is in the midst of its football rebirth.

Their reunion has been a long time coming. Clark stayed at South Alabama until 2013, when he left to become Jacksonville State’s head coach. After 2008, Koenning spent time at Mississippi State and Texas.

“We talked every week from South till now,” Clark said. “We’ve wanted to coach together. It was a good fit and the timing was right.”

Clark said that Koenning is a perfect fit to run UAB’s fast tempo offense. The Blazers aren’t deep at receiver this spring, but quarterback A.J. Erdely and running back Greg Bryant — both mid-year signees — are early candidates to become focal points of the offense.

“We’re going to take the chains off,” Clark said. “He was one of the first one-back guys in the country and obviously has a great history.

“We’re always going to play good defense but we’re going to turn him loose offensively. This was a huge get for us, with all of his recruiting background in Alabama, Mississippi and Texas. He’s recruited all over the country.”

Koenning was at Texas in 2014 but wasn’t retained. Rumors of him coming to UAB surfaced last summer, but the move wasn’t official until the start of this year. Koenning was still being paid by Texas, and did some consulting for UAB.

He traveled the country — from California through Texas and up around the East Coast — studying various offenses.

“It was like a sabbatical,” Koenning said. “I went out and took notes at every place, talking with Coach Clark the whole time telling him that I think there was some really good stuff out here.”

When he was able to officially recruit for UAB, he played a big role in landing players like receiver Raylon Richardson out of Lithonia, Ga.

Koenning said he’s been proud to represent Clark and UAB while he’s been on the road recruiting.

“I’ve had opportunities (to go elsewhere),” the 57-year-old Koenning said. “But having the opportunity to get back with Coach Clark is really exciting. He’s a good person, good coach and good family man. He’s somebody you’d want your son to play for.”