

2024



FALL SPORTS

GUIDE



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Table of contents

06	What to expect from Tuscola football	24	New season means new hope for Pisgah golf
07	How will Pisgah football's season shake out?	26	Conference champion heads Tuscola tennis squad
08	New coach on Pisgah sidelines	27	Pisgah tennis sets sights high
09	Tuscola football settles into new system	28	Bears get cross country season underway
11	Mountaineers have new faces in key roles	29	Mountie runners set for 2024 campaign
12	Pisgah football brings back impact players	31	Bears hope to repeat as conference champs on soccer field
14	Tuscola football schedule	32	Mounties soccer hopes for more scoring
15	Pisgah football schedule	33	Who can earn bragging rights on the soccer field?
17	Bears volleyball rides playoff momentum	35	Tuscola cheer rebuilds program
19	Tuscola volleyball finds continuity	36	Bears cheerleaders hope to add to trophy case
21	Who can claim supremacy on volleyball court?	37	What players will make an impact this fall?
23	Tuscola golf on hunt for fourth-straight conference title	38	Don't miss these games in Haywood County

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Building consistency

Tuscola football focused on 2024 campaign



Diana Gates

MOUNTIES ON THE GRIDIRON — Tuscola's football team is locked in for its 2024 campaign.

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

Last season was a year of streaks for the Tuscola Mountaineers — both good and bad.

The Mounties lost their opener, before winning the next two games. Tuscola then lost the next three games before winning three in a row after that.

The season kicks off with a road game for Tuscola as the Mounties head across the county line to take on the Asheville Cougars. Last season, the Cougars visited C.E. Weatherby Stadium and emerged with a close 25-22 win.

"You always feel good going into a game," Tuscola head coach Jonathan Crompton said. "We've had a good offseason. I feel good about where we're at. Now, it's just a matter of getting out there and playing someone other than ourselves."

The season opener against Asheville has had the Mounties full attention as the season rapidly approaches.

"Our biggest thing is getting focused on Asheville," Crompton said. "That's how our coaches are. That's how our players mindset is. It's the week at hand and the task at hand. We're not looking ahead."

In week two, Tuscola returns home to take on Polk County — a team the Mountaineers took down 29-23 on the road last season.

Week three, the Mounties stay at home with a game against McDowell — the only team on Tuscola's non-conference slate that did not make the playoffs last season. The Mountaineers won last season's meeting 44-22.

Tuscola will be hoping to have at least a pair of wins by the time they hit the road in week four against a strong Swain County squad.

"It's always important to try to start out fast," Crompton said.

That Swain County match-up in week four will be a measuring stick game for the Mounties before they hit the conference schedule. Last season, Swain County beat Tuscola 30-26 on their way to an

11-2 record.

Tuscola does have a couple of advantages before even getting into the conference slate. The team gets a bye week between the non-conference games and Mountain 7 games — allowing the team to rest up and get healthy before the biggest games of the year.

The Mountaineers also get all of their non-conference games done at the beginning of the year, allowing them to focus on the Mountain 7 entirely later on.

"It's good to get the non-conference out of the way and get the kinks out before conference play," Crompton said.

After the bye week, Tuscola hosts Franklin and goes on the road to face North Henderson. Tuscola lost both of those games last year, but will hope to get their revenge this season.

The following week, the Mounties take on East Henderson at home. The Eagles have struggled in recent years — grabbing just one conference win over the last eight seasons. Tuscola has won its last seven games against East Henderson

dating back to 2013 in blowout fashion, but the Mounties will still be fully focused on the game that week.

"You never overlook an opponent," Crompton said. "You never look down on an opponent."

The following week, Tuscola will head to Canton for the first County Clash hosted at Pisgah Memorial Stadium since the spring of 2021, meaning no current Tuscola player has played a County Clash game there.

"We play on the road week one," Crompton said. "From a football standpoint, once the kickoff happens it's a normal game. Once all the festivities are started, we're still playing football. It will be an electric crowd. I expect it to be one of the wildest ones festivity-wise, crowd atmosphere-wise in a long time, but we just have to go take care of our business."

Tuscola will close out its regular season with a home game against Smoky Mountain (which Tuscola beat 34-21 last season) and a road game at West Henderson (which beat Tuscola 42-14 last season).

Hitting the ground running

Pisgah football hopes to match last season's hot start

By Aarik Long
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The Pisgah Bears are back and ready to build on the successes of their 2023 campaign.

Last season, Pisgah went 9-3 in its first season back at Pisgah Memorial Stadium following flooding from Tropical Storm Fred.

After a strong eight-win regular season, the Bears added a 35-17 home playoff win over North Henderson to their impressive resume.

This season, Pisgah plays the same 10 opponents it did in 2023. Last year, the Bears won their first six games of the year — something Head Coach Ricky Brindley will want to repeat in his first year at the helm of the program.

“The thing we are going to be focused on as a team is making sure we are continuing to get better — whether that’s from week one to week four to week one to week eight,” Brindley said. “We’ve got to continue to get better on a consistent basis. If we do that, we’re going to be where we want to be come playoff time.”

That hot start would have to begin in the non-conference slate. Pisgah starts the season on the road against a strong Brevard team. The Bears beat Brevard 24-10 last season, but the Blue Devils finished the season with a 10-3 record.

Week two sees Pisgah host Enka for the Bears’ home opener. Last season, Pisgah won the match-up 56-3 and the Jets finished the season 3-7.

For the third week of the season, the Bears hit the road for an 82-mile trip to Hampton, Tennessee, to face the Hampton Bulldogs. Pisgah knocked off the Bulldogs 42-14 in Canton last year, and the Bulldogs finished the season 10-3.

The non-conference slate wraps up with a home game against Hayesville. Pisgah knocked off the Yellowjackets 32-7 on the



READY TO GO — The Pisgah Bears are all set to get its 2024 season underway.

road last season. Hayesville finished the year 7-5.

The conference schedule begins in week five when Pisgah hits the road to face the Smoky Mountain Mustangs.

Last season, the game was a hard-fought, defensive battle that Pisgah eventually won 16-7. Adding on to the intensity of a close-game will be the emotions from the home sideline. Brindley served as the school’s head coach for the past six seasons.

“It’ll be neat,” Brindley said. “I’ve got a lot of love and a lot of emotions when it comes to those players that are there and the sacrifices they’ve made. It’ll be a pretty neat experience. I’ll be more concerned with my team at that point. Are we prepared? Are we ready? Are we focused? Are we going to be able to weather the storm?”

The Bears will take the following week

off before returning in week seven for a road trip to Franklin. Pisgah beat the Panthers 35-0 at home last season.

Week eight will be a major challenge for the Bears. The West Henderson Falcons have won the Mountain 7 the last two seasons with a perfect 12-0 record in the conference.

“They’re the champs and until someone knocks them off, they’re going to continue to be the champs,” Brindley said. “West Henderson coming over here — that’s a huge game for us. We’ve got to make sure we’re prepared, that we’re really solid on defense and prepared on offense because of how good they’ve been.”

Pisgah will welcome the Falcons to Canton one year after West Henderson beat the Bears 30-10 on its home field.

There won’t be much time for the Bears to catch their breath, as one week later they’ll host Tuscola for the first time since

the spring of 2021. It will be the first full-capacity County Clash in Canton since 2018.

“It’ll be extremely exciting,” Brindley said. “It will be one of those situations that I’ll probably cherish and remember forever — the fact that in my first year back we were able to play them here at home. Any time you’re a part of that game, it’s special — whether it’s here or on the road. This will be extra special being in front of our home fans after four years away. It will certainly be a violent, physical football game.”

Tuscola won last season’s County Clash 27-10.

Pisgah wraps up its regular season with games on the road against East Henderson and at home against North Henderson. Pisgah won those games 41-6 and 55-41 last season.

Back home

Pisgah coach returns to his alma mater

By Aarik Long
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Pisgah Head Coach Ricky Brindley is back home.

The coach played as a defensive back and wing back for the Bears from 1997 through 2001.

"I've always loved coaching secondary," Brindley said. "That was always something I've felt is a strong suit of mine. Having played a similar position makes a difference."

He also spent seven years coaching at Pisgah as an assistant. Now, after spending six years as Smoky Mountain's head coach, Brindley is back at his alma mater.

"It's exciting, but I don't know that I ever truly slow down enough to think about the moment because I feel like there is constantly work that has to be

done," Brindley said.

During his last coaching tenure at Pisgah, Brindley coached the secondary before moving up to the defensive coordinator position and then later into the offensive coordinator position.

"It helps when you put all of those things together and you try to become a head coach," Brindley said. "It makes a huge difference in how you approach each and every day and practice schedules and things like that."

In his return to Canton, Brindley says his goal is more than just winning football games.

"We've got to be able to put a product on the field that is successful and that everybody is proud of," Brindley said.

To reach those goals, Brindley says the team must



Mikell Clark-Webb

NEW LEADER — Pisgah head coach Ricky Brindley talks to players following practice.

reflect the town's soul on the football field.

"In order to do that, I don't think I've got time to slow down and enjoy this moment as much as you'd like to," Brindley said. "You've got to continue to work and continue to prepare to be successful. That's who we are as a town. It's a town that has a great work ethic."



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Tuscola coach anticipates improvement in second year

By Aarik Long
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In any sport, familiarity with a coach is important. In football, with different terminology and systems, it's crucial.

That's why Tuscola coach Jonathan Crompton hopes to see an improvement in results during his second year leading the Mounties.

"It's always easier the longer you're around," Crompton said. "It's been fun for me to be around for a full offseason, not get here in April."

That full offseason means making sure players are studying the system the coaching staff has in place and doing offseason workouts that better prepare the players for the current play style of the team.

"It's good to have a system and a routine, which we're in, finally," Crompton said.

For the coach, nothing could be better than his current gig leading the Mountaineers on the football field.

"Coming to work every day is fun — even in the offseason," Crompton said. "It's fun being able to go watch basketball games or whatever sporting event is going on and supporting our athletes at the school. They support us and we support them. I couldn't ask for a better position. I don't think I've had more fun than I've had this past year."

Being a part of the tradition of the Mounties only adds to the allure of the job.

"It's surreal," Crompton said. "It's fun being back at my alma mater, being able to sit in the chair my coach sat in — the fun part is it's the same desk. Stuff like that is really cool for me."



COUNTY CLASH WINNER — Tuscola coach Jonathan Crompton (center) lifts the trophy after knocking off Pisgah at home last season.

Diana Gates



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GO MOUNTIES!



Mountaineers to feature new faces in key positions



Diana Gates

LAST RIDE — Tuscola's senior group is ready to take the field this season for the final times as Mountaineers.

By Aarik Long
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Tuscola football is ready for 2024 with a lot of new faces on both sides of the ball.

The Mountaineers had plenty of senior talent last season — leaving spots for this year's crop of players to find starting spots around the roster.

A major focus for the Mounties will be on ensuring they can win the battle in the trenches.

"They're the biggest part of any team and any player or coach that says they're not is lying to you," Tuscola Head Coach Jonathan Crompton said. "They're the heart and soul. You win games in the trenches on both sides of the ball. Our guys understand that. They know that we as a team are going to praise them anytime we can. Without the fight up front, we can't run the ball or throw the ball."

Tuscola fans will have their eyes glued

to the backfield when the Mounties take their first offensive snaps of the season against Asheville.

Last season, senior Jed West led the Mountaineers from the quarterback position — lighting up the scoreboard on the ground and through the air.

With West's graduation, there is now an open position at signal caller. West's younger brother, Bo West, is a sophomore this season and played quarterback for the junior varsity Mountaineers last season.

The Mounties also picked up junior Jett Bartley, who transferred in from A.C. Reynolds. The former Rocket saw minimal playing time with the varsity A.C. Reynolds squad last year as a sophomore, but could step into a starting role this fall with the Mountaineers as a junior.

Flanking whoever the starting quarterback is will be a largely new cast of

receivers. Receivers Bryant Oancea and K.J. Vang graduated last spring and receiver Jonas Howard transferred away from Tuscola.

Senior Gavin Langley could be a key contributor running the ball for the Mountaineers this season.

"We fit into our system and fit our system around our kids," Crompton said. "The biggest thing is looking for playing fast, playing competitive, not giving up on a play and not giving up on your teammates. They've done a really good job of answering the challenge that I've thrown on them. I'm looking forward to those guys being a key group for us."

On defense, the Mounties saw a handful of players graduate in the spring, including Vang, Oancea, Hudson Blackburn and Sy-eed Jackson.

However, players such as senior defensive lineman Jesse Bledsoe, sophomore linebacker Ty Walker, junior linebacker

Carter Purvis and senior linebacker Walker Bolden remain as cornerstones of the Mountie defense.

"We've got a good amount returning defensively," Crompton said. "We've been able to replace some guys we've lost with some other key players. I'm looking for them to play a little faster because it's been another year in the system. Every year you're in it, you get more comfortable. They're going to be fun to watch."

While there are a handful of positions to fill from last year's roster on both sides of the ball, Crompton and the Tuscola staff feel confident in the players that have stepped into the roles heading into this season — particularly due to the hard work the players have put in during the offseason.

"All the kids in the locker room have busted their butt this whole winter, spring and summer," Crompton said. "We're almost there. They can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Back In Action

Pisgah's deep roster of returning players

By Aarik Long
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The Pisgah Bears football team are ready to hit the field this season and are returning a strong cast of players as they head into the 2024 campaign.

Leading the charge on offense is senior quarterback Aaron Clark. Last season as a junior, Clark threw for more than 1,800 yards and 16 touchdowns. He also added more than 500 yards on the ground with eight more touchdowns.

The season was Clark's second year as the starter under center.

"It's the most important position in sports and you're talking about a young man who's done it at the varsity level since his sophomore year," Pisgah Head Coach Ricky Brindley said. "He will be able to essentially be the leader on the field and lead that team while the coaches are on the sideline."

Clark is one of a group of players returning for their third season as starters with the Bears.

"When you look at the other kids that are returning that

have been multi-year starters, I think their experience can become valuable, particularly in adverse situations," Brindley said. "They've been there and seen quite a bit."

In front of Clark will be a strong group of players on the offensive line looking to defend their quarterback.

"I think we all knew that in order for us to be as successful as we could be, we had to get better up front on the offensive line," Brindley said. "We had to become more physical. We had to become a group that played with great tempo and a certain edge, a certain nastiness to us. We feel really good about the progress our group has made. They have bought in to what we are teaching in terms of footwork and steps and pad level."

He'll be throwing to a strong group of receivers and running backs including seniors Kenyon Moore and Jake Lowery and junior Landon Pope.

"We love our skill position kids," Brindley said. "We knew that when we got here. We knew how talented they had been at those positions. They can put you on their back at times and win you football games with big plays. We're going to rely on those guys and get those guys the football in space as much as we can."

On defense, the battle will start in the front seven. Senior John Frazier is returning on the defensive line and senior Carter Browning will be a leader among the linebackers.

"John (Frazier) has been our 'Wardaddy,'" Brindley said. "He's been a fantastic leader for this team. I really look for him to be able to lead that front seven along with Carter Browning at the linebacker position to really solidify our defense and to play with that tone and edge that we need to."

Moore and Lowery will help solidify the secondary this season — using two different play styles to mesh together in pass coverage.

"Based on what we ask them to do, it's extremely important that they have different skillsets," Brindley said. "Based on the coverages we look to play, I think their skill sets compliment each other and it really helps our secondary as a whole."

Lowery excels with the ball in the air — grabbing two interceptions last year with his ball hawking abilities. The senior took both of those picks all the way back for touchdowns.



Mikell Clark-Webb

PLAYMAKER — Kenyon Moore celebrates after making a play for the Bears.

"Jake does a really good job of anticipating throws and playing the ball in the air," Brindley said.

Moore led the team in interceptions last year with five, but anyone who watched Pisgah football last year can tell you one major thing that stood out with Moore's game — his big hits.

"Kenyon does a really good job of running the alley, really strong tackler, understands how to play in space and take proper angles," Brindley said.

While most people don't think too much about special teams, the Bears certainly are this season. The team lost its kicker Walker Fox, who graduated last spring. Fox had been a force for Pisgah as a place kicker — hitting three kicks longer than 40 yards last season and being named All-State third team.

Senior Dominick Messer and junior Miguel Gamez have stepped into a battle for the open kicker position leading up to the season.

"The thing that stands out so much about them is how consistent they are in their commitment," Brindley said of the pair. "They don't miss practice. They're down there working every single day for two hours."



Betty Sims

SCRAMBLE — Pisgah junior quarterback Aaron Clark runs with the ball in the playoff loss to Oak Grove.



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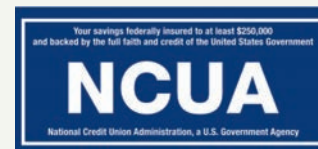
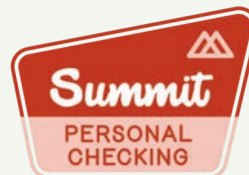
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8/23 AWAY @ ASHEVILLE

10/4 AWAY @ NORTH HENDERSON*

8/30 HOME vs. POLK COUNTY

10/11 AWAY @ EAST HENDERSON*

9/6 HOME vs. MCDOWELL

10/18 AWAY @ PISGAH*

9/13 AWAY @ SWAIN

10/25 HOME vs. SMOKY MOUNTAIN*

9/20 BYE WEEK (NO GAME)

11/1 AWAY @ WEST HENDERSON*

9/27 HOME vs. FRANKLIN*

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8/23 AWAY @ BREVARD

10/11 HOME vs. WEST HENDERSON*

8/30 HOME vs. ENKA

8/23 AWAY @ ASHEVILLE

9/6 AWAY @ HAMPTON (TN)

10/18 HOME vs. TUSCOLA*

9/13 HOME vs. HAYESVILLE

10/25 AWAY @ EAST HENDERSON*

9/20 AWAY @ SMOKY MOUNTAIN*

9/27 BYE WEEK (NO GAME)

11/1 HOME vs. NORTH HENDERSON*

10/4 AWAY @ FRANKLIN*

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Building on success

Pisgah volleyball hopes to ride momentum of playoff wins



Aarik Long

PLAYOFF WINNERS — Pisgah volleyball hopes to make a run in the playoffs once again this season — after grabbing a pair of wins last season in the tournament.

By Aarik Long
 along@themountaineer.com

Last season was a big year for volleyball in Canton.

The Pisgah Bears found their way into the playoffs as the No. 24 seed and made a splash in a big way — grabbing a pair of playoff wins with a victory over the No. 9 seed followed by second-round win at home.

The Bears will look to build off of that success in 2024.

“It gave them some confidence that they can compete with not just teams in the west, but girls closer to Charlotte

and around the state. Volleyball is a lot bigger over there,” Pisgah head coach Katie O’Connor said. “That gave them confidence. We got knocked out by North Iredell. They had never really seen that speed before.”

O’Connor said one of the team’s goals this season is to bring that same level of speed into their offense to better prepare themselves for any playoff matchups this year.

The team will be lead by a strong group of returning players. Senior hitter Mable James has been a force at the net for Pisgah during her time with the Bears. Last season, James led the Bears

in kills by a wide margin — beating out the second-most on the team by more than 150. For Pisgah to have success this year, James will need to continue to dominate on blocks and kills.

The Bears are also bringing back senior setter Alldyn Queen. Last season, Queen led the team in assists with a massive gap back to the second most. The rising senior recorded 548 assists last year. Graduate Aven Thompson was second on last year’s squad with 35.

Queen also had the most digs last season of any returning player with 186.

Seniors Rylee Campbell and Kenna

Lawing will also play big roles for the Bears this season. The two can do a little bit of everything — putting up solid numbers in digs for the Bears with the second and third-most of any returning players. Lawing recorded 114 digs, while Campbell recorded 73.

“I feel really confident. These girls, they’re really good athletes. They have a really strong work ethic. They want to be better,” O’Connor said. “I think we should be better than we were last year. I’m really excited.”

While the end of the 2023 season was

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VOLLEYBALL

COTINUED FROM PAGE 17



Mikell Clark-Webb

BIG TIME — Pisgah senior Mable James helped the Lady Bears win their round two playoff match against Hibriten.

exciting for the Bears, the season didn't start off quite as hot. Pisgah lost its first three games of the season. By the time the first County Clash of the year rolled around, Pisgah was 3-6.

The Bears finished out the regular season on a two-game losing streak before grabbing the two playoff wins.

While it wasn't always the best of seasons for Pisgah, things ended on a high note and the Bears were able to learn a lot over the course of the year. "Last year, we definitely had some challenges, but I think the incoming seniors this year learned a lot from those challenges," O'Connor said. "I have a lot of faith that they can lead to this team to success this year."

The challenges will definitely keep rolling in for Pisgah this season, however. The Mountain 7 is as strong as ever. Last season, the conference sent five teams to the state playoffs.

Pisgah finished fourth in the conference behind Franklin, West Henderson and North Henderson. They will look

to improve that this season.

The Bears opened the year up with a tough slate of non-conference opponents, facing the likes of Mountain Heritage, Swain County and Enka. They still have a few tough non-conference games left on their schedule, including a pair of games on the road against A.C. Reynolds and T.C. Roberson.

But O'Connor is confident the team can continue to improve as the season rolls along and the Bears hunt for another playoff berth.

"This is a competitive group," she said. "They're determined to get better every time they step in the gym. I'm excited to see what they can do this season."

Pisgah volleyball returns to action with a road trip to Smoky Mountain on Aug. 22. That will be followed by its game at A.C. Reynolds on Aug. 27. The Bears' next home games will come in September when they host West Henderson and Tuscola in a pair of crucial matchups on Sept. 3 and 5.

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GO BEARS!

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Senior leaders and second-year coach guide Tuscola volleyball



Diana Gates

HARDWOOD HEROES — Tuscola volleyball is set for improvements under second-year head coach Jody Ward.

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

Tuscola volleyball is coming off a strong 2023 season. The team increased its win total in its first season under head coach Jody Ward. This year, the Mounties look to continue to grow their program.

In season one under Ward, the Mountaineers earned a 7-15 overall record, while going 2-11 in Mountain 7 play. That came one year after a 4-19 season in 2022. This season, Tuscola seems primed to jump to an even better record.

“Building off of last year and the continuity of kids coming back, I think we’re going to be better this year than we were last year,” Ward said. “We’re very excited.”

Any time a new coach steps into a program, there can be a bit of a learning curve. Add on the fact that the Mounties had three coaches serve just one year leading up to Ward’s arrival and it’s clear that the coach had his work cut out for him in year one.

Ward feels confident that the stability of having a

second-year coach will help push the Mounties to the next level this season, particularly after a half-decade of instability in the program.

“Last year, I was just trying to feel things out — getting to know the girls,” Ward said. “I’m the only second-year coach in the last five years that’s been up here. It’s hard to build a program off of that. We’re turning the curve. The kids are learning our system. Things are going really well.”

Ward has an added advantage this season — experienced players. With approximately half the team playing in their final high school season, the team is packed full of players who have played at the high school level and can provide leadership to the younger players.

“The good thing is we’re going to be senior heavy this year,” Ward said. “It’s going to be huge because the girls have been there and done that. They know what’s going on. They play well together.”

The team has been hard at work this offseason, working together at team camps to build that continuity within the squad.



Mikell Clark-Webb

SENIOR LEADER — Tuscola senior Addi Sampson is set to be one of many senior leaders on the squad this season, serving as the team’s libero this year.

“We’re trying to build for the future,” Ward said. “Kids are buying in.”

Senior Chloe Crisp is returning to the team after not

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

playing during her junior year. Ward said he's expecting Crisp to make an impact for the team from day one.

In her sophomore year, Crisp led the team in blocks (27) and was third in hitting percentage and aces (15).

She'll be joining a plethora of strong players in the gold and black this fall. Ward also pointed to sophomore setter Ennis Marcus, senior setter Savannah Jones, senior libero Addi Sampson and junior middle hitter Kendall Williamson as his big impact players this season.

Last season, Sampson was a force for the Mounties. She led Tuscola in digs (241), aces (33) and receptions (364).

The early season schedule for the Mounties is a tough one. Ward said those early games "will let us see where we're at and what we need to work on."

The team still has non-conference games against Mountain Heritage, Erwin and Madison in addition to a full slate of Mountain 7 games.

Both Madison and Mountain Heritage finished their



Mikell Clark-Webb

YOUTH — Junior Kendall Williamson will be one of the few non-senior players expected to make an impact for the Mounties this season.

2023 campaigns right around .500, giving the Mounties a good opportunity to see their growth over last season.

In Mountain 7 play, Tuscola will be looking to improve on their results from last year. In 2023, the Mounties swept East Henderson across the two contests, winning by a combined score of 6-1.

Outside of those two games against East Henderson, Tuscola picked up just two sets total in conference play

— losing 3-1 at home against Pisgah and on the road at Smoky Mountain.

That conference slate will be particularly tough this season in a loaded Mountain 7. Last season, five of the seven teams made the state championship playoffs. Four of those teams earned a first-round win.

Reigning-conference champion Franklin, West Henderson and Elite Eight-participant North Henderson will likely present challenges for the Mounties, but a strong performance against any of the three will give Tuscola momentum heading through the rest of the season and into next year as the program continues to develop.

For now, the Mounties are focusing on a tough out-of-conference schedule to open the season, as well as practicing hard to continue to improve — allowing the senior leaders on the team to mentor the younger players.

"We've got that mix and match between seniors and a couple younger kids," Ward said. "Once we get to practicing and get some continuity together, I feel like our season is going to take off."

Tuscola kicked off their season on Aug. 12 against Enka on the road. The Mounties will next be in action on Aug. 26 when they host the Mountain Heritage Cougars, a playoff team just one year ago.

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Battle for Haywood

Who takes control on the volleyball court?



Diana Gates

BATTLE AT THE NET — Pisgah senior Mable James jumps to block a ball from Tuscola senior Taylor Rogers during last year's meeting.

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

While every volleyball match is important, there are two that are circled every year — the annual County Clash match-ups.

Last season, Pisgah won both match-ups — earning a 3-0 win at home and a 3-1 win at Tuscola.

In the match on the hill, Tuscola grabbed the first set 25-17 before narrowly dropping sets two and three, 25-22 each time.

Pisgah has won the last six meetings in the rivalry, but before that Tuscola had won eight straight matches in the series.

Both teams will be returning a strong group of players this season. Pisgah will be highlighted by seniors Mable James

and Alldyn Queen, while the Mounties will be lead by seniors Addi Sampson and Chloe Crisp.

After winning just two games in the Mountain 7 last season, the Mounties will face an uphill battle against the Bears this season. But with added stability at the head coach position, Tuscola will try to return to the heights that team saw the Mounties play for a state title in eight straight seasons from 1985 to 1992, including a state championship in 1987.

Pisgah, on the other hand, are coming off of a playoff run that saw the Bears win two games in the postseason — including a second-round win on their home floor.

The two Haywood County squads will first meet on on Sept. 5 in Canton. The return leg of the series will take place on Oct. 1 in Waynesville.

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Aiming high

Tuscola girls' golf seeks fourth-straight conference crown

By Paul Nielsen
paul@themountaineer.com

The Tuscola girls golf team will be shooting for a fourth-straight Mountain 7 Conference championship this fall.

And the Mountaineers' roster is filled with experienced faces as most of last year's squad that missed the state tournament by just a few strokes returns this fall.

McKenna Williams is the Mountaineers' unquestioned leader as the senior has qualified for the state tournament three times as an individual. Sophomore Abbey Adams also brings state tournament experience to the team after qualifying last fall.

Haiden Woods, Josie Ostendorff, Madie Wright and Emma Arrington round out the top six for Tuscola.

Tuscola coach Sean Williams said the Mountaineers have embraced being the conference favorite and that the team

will rely on its skill and confidence in their quest for a conference championship.

"We have our strategy," Williams said. "We are going to stay true to working hard on what we need to work hard on to win. We know that we can do it. I feel very confident that they will be just fine."

McKenna Williams is drawing considerable college interest after finishing in the top 15 in the state the last two seasons. Williams played in a number of tournaments this summer to prepare for her final prep campaign and she shot a 79-81 at a tournament at the University of Georgia.

"She is active all year round and she has played in seven tournaments since late May," Coach Williams said.

This summer also brought a major change to Williams' game as she switched to a new set of clubs, now swinging new irons and woods. Coach Williams said the change has allowed his daughter to add distance to her game.

"She brought some new equipment into her game and that takes a little while to get used to," Coach Williams said. "But that is needed for what is to come in college. She is getting used to them more and more."

Williams has her sights set on playing Division II golf in college, her dad said.

"It will allow her to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond," Coach Williams said of playing D-2 golf. "There has been a lot of interest in her and it is an exciting time right now. Of course, she could wake up tomorrow and have a whole new lineup of interest as well. She is very excited to get going."

Williams was already on the radar of several schools following her strong junior season but that map expanded last winter when she won the presti-



Diana Gates

ON THE GREEN — The Mounties girls golf team is prepared to hit the course this fall.

gious Southeastern Junior Golf Tour's Sea Island Junior Classic on St. Simon's Island in Feb.

The tournament featured junior girls' golfers from all around the southeastern United States and Williams shot a seven over par 73-78-151 to win by a single stroke.

"That was a big moment for her," Coach Williams said. "A lot of coaches became interested in her and came forward."

Adams finished 66th at the state tournament last fall and Williams said the sophomore is poised to jump further up the leaderboard this fall.

"She has high goals and high expectations," Coach Williams said. "I'm sure she is going to be right there for us. She

has been working hard on her game and she is definitely going to be a threat."

Coach Williams is also expecting big things from juniors Ostendorff and Woods.

"They have the potential to make it to state this year," Coach Williams said.

Williams and Adams qualified for the state tournament as individuals last year as the team was four shots shy of advancing out of the regional tournament. Taking the next step is a realistic possibility for the Mountaineers.

"As a team they can make it this year," Coach Williams said. "The potential is there because they have all been working hard on their game."



Diana Gates

TEE OFF — Tuscola senior McKenna Williams tees off at Springdale. She hopes to lift Tuscola to the state championship tournament this season.

Hitting their stride:

Pisgah golfers on the hunt for breakout season

By Paul Nielsen
paul@themountaineer.com

There is an air of excitement surrounding the Pisgah High girls' golf team. And rightfully so.

The Bears return all three players from a year ago and add one freshman. Second-year coach Rebekah Gaddy is hoping to add more players to the roster.

That would be a huge step for the program as it takes five golfers to compete for a Mountain 7 Conference team championship.

Gaddy will also have some coaching help this season as former Western Carolina University women's golfer Ashley Kress will be an assistant coach for the Bears.

"It's an exciting time for Pisgah golf," Gaddy said. "Things are really coming together."

Pisgah returns its three players from a year ago in juniors Aloah Cox, Valentina Miguez and Olivia Merrill. This will be the third season for the trio to be together. All three qualified for the regional

tournament last fall.

"They are all getting better and better," Gaddy said.

The team has also added freshman Avaleigh Bradley ahead of the fall season.

The three juniors went to a summer camp at Clemson University run by the Tigers' women's golf staff this summer and Gaddy said the experience should pay dividends this fall.

"The experience was a big deal," Gaddy said. "It was a good bonding experience. The Clemson coaches really stressed the mental part of the game and how to approach different situations when they are out on the course."

Cox, who is Gaddy's daughter, went to the camp following her freshman season and encouraged her two teammates to join her this summer.

"(Cox) told them that if they are serious about this we should go this summer," Gaddy said.

The past two seasons the three girls have embraced a motto for the season and last year it was "grit and grace." But their experience at Clemson led them to embrace the Tigers' motto.

"This year after attending the Clemson camp they came back with 'All In,'" Gaddy said. "All In is more than just a slogan to the Clemson Tigers. It's a way of life that means being committed to doing your best with what you have, both on and off the course. It also means being committed to your fellow student-athletes and standing up for them when they face challenges. The girls want this motto to fuel their motivation this year to achieve individual and team goals."

Gaddy hopes to add to the roster following an open tryout that was held last week at the Springdale Resort golf course. If the Bears can pick up at least two more girls that will allow the team to compete for



NEW YEAR — The Pisgah girls golf team is prepared to take on all challenges in the new season.

team accolades at the conference level.

"We think we will get some more girls to come out," Gaddy said before the tryout. "I don't know how many are coming out and what that looks like right now. But I am hoping for the best."

Gaddy is in her second year as the Bears' coach after taking over the helm just before the start of the season last fall. Taking over the helm of the girls' golf team wasn't something that was on Gaddy's radar — but she stepped up so her daughter and the other girls wouldn't have to lay down their clubs for the season.

"I volunteered myself because they didn't have a coach and I really wanted the girls to have an opportunity to play," Gaddy said. "I said if they don't have a coach that I would do it."

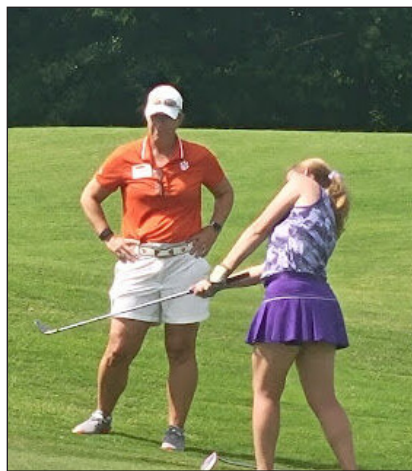
Gaddy has grown into the position

saying that coaching the girls has been an awesome experience. Gaddy stresses to the team that competing on the golf course is more than just posting a good score.

"I am a big advocate for girls getting involved in golf," Gaddy said. "It is an amazing sport for them because it teaches them a lot of life lessons as well. These girls go out there and learn how to deal with pressure, patience and overcoming adversity."

Kress was a three-time all-conference selection at WCU and Gaddy said having an assistant coach with that level of skill will help the Bears improve their game.

"(Kress) will be able to help the girls with the technical part of their game," Gaddy said. "She will probably be running practices. That is something I am really excited about and feel good about."



LEARNING SESSION — Clemson women's golf coach Kelley Hester gives Pisgah junior Aloah Cox some pointers at the Tigers' summer camp earlier this summer.



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Tuscola tennis hopes to turn the corner in 2024

By Jared Feinberg

With any new season, there's a renewed sense of hope for what the future can hold. That's the case with the Mounties girls' tennis team, which is hoping that 2024 goes better than 2023.

Tuscola struggled throughout the fall season while having a group of young, inexperienced players on the court.

The Mountaineers are led by Mountain 7 Conference Player of the Year, Sierra Sellar. The rising senior won the conference's singles championship while qualifying for regionals in doubles competition alongside Kylie Whitaker, who graduated last spring.

"I pretty much expect her to dominate in singles this year," Tuscola coach Rumi Kakareka said, expressing his excitement for his star player and leader of girl's tennis this season.

Entering his third year as the girl's tennis coach, Kakareka hopes to see improvement from his players this upcoming season, including a couple of seniors he is eager to see on the court. One of those seniors is Hannah Downs, who Kakareka hopes to see healthy this year after dealing with injuries this past season.



Diana Gates

GAME, SET, MATCH – Tuscola tennis will hope to lean on the talents of their star players this season.

Kakareka believes that outside of Sellars, his group of girls will be more competitive with another year of experience under their belt.

"Hannah is also going to be a good competitor this year. We've got returning players such as (rising senior) Cecilia Morgan and Madisyn Brooks," Kakareka said. "We've got some returning players from last year and I think we'll be competitive."

The Mountaineers will have to learn how to be adaptive to new environments this fall as renovations are being made on their court. Kakareka's goals for his team are simple: to get better, enjoy playing tennis and take the sport with them in life.

"This year since we may have a lot of players and some court work being done, we will have to be more adaptable. I want them to show up, participate and enjoy tennis," said Kakareka.



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Pisgah tennis continues to build following playoff appearance

TENNIS

By Jared Feinburg

August marks the beginning of a new school year and that means a new season for Pisgah girls' tennis.

Following a 2023 season with a third-place finish in the Mountain 7 conference and a playoff appearance, the Bears look to improve that mark with the help of all-conference rising senior Anna Shepard and rising junior Ella Tiller.

The Bears will rely heavily on a trio of rising seniors in Lilly Martinez, Kennedy Conrad and Sarah Robertson, who are expected to have larger roles this season.

Pisgah coach Harold Shepard lauded Robertson's leadership toward the newcomers while also praising Anna Shepard as an individual and leader.

"She has worked hard and spent time trying to get better and that's a great

thing," Shepard said.

Shepard has emphasized prioritizing grade point averages with his players as he begins his 11th year as the girls' tennis coach, saying an athlete's grades can keep

them off the team, not their play.

"We had six freshmen that came out for camp, which is great. I looked at them and was like, 'Look, I'll teach you how to play tennis and we'll figure it out. How-

ever, your GPA is the most important thing," Shepard.

As Pisgah's head baseball coach, Shepard has utilized some aspects of the sport to help his tennis players such as hitting tennis balls off batting tees to practice hand-eye coordination or using the on-deck circle to help establish a point of reference when serving.

Shepard will be relying on his senior leaders to help lay the ground work for the team this season. He said he conveyed to his players that the foundation is there for constructing a good team culture but it's up to the seniors to teach the younger athletes what the culture is.

"Iron sharpens iron. The older kids will help the younger ones be better and it also teaches them the way," Shepard said. "It takes the coaching out of your hands."



Aarik Long

NET BATTLE — Pisgah tennis is prepared for the 2024 season with a group of talented players.

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Pisgah runners face high expectations

By Jared Feinberg

While a lot of eyes are always on the ball-sports, fall is also home to cross country season.

Pisgah is coming into the season with high expectations and hopes for a great campaign following a year where several runners competed in the regional finals, including coach Joe Sayblack's son, Daniel.

Daniel Sayblack competed in the state championship and is considered one of the team leaders.

"Daniel is committed to the idea of the 'team' state championship as opposed to the individual," Sayblack said.

Sophomore Silas Hardin and senior Caroline Henson are also among the leaders for Pisgah cross country. Sayblack said Henson's ultimate goal is to reach the state championship, something no female runner in the school's history has done.

"We talked about how close she was to qualifying for the state championship in cross country last season and we've been working with her," Sayblack said.

Competition within the program is expected as the coach said both Sayblack and Hardin will be competing for the



Aarik Long

NEW SEASON — Pisgah cross country is on the hunt for a successful 2024 season.

No. 1 and No. 2 spots on the roster.

Sayblack believes in his group of female runners including Henson and rising senior Raquel Munoz. As for the male runners, rising senior Daniel Velasquez and sophomore Leo Bolejack are some of the runners from last season that Sayblack sees taking the next step as cross country runners.

As the season moves along, Sayblack will work with his runners to improve their pacing with good starts and getting out front in a good position — though not to the

point of burning out.

"We'll work that into training where we'll have some workouts that will start fast, but will then settle into a more familiar pace," he said.

With seven runners having competed in track and field in the spring, Sayblack sees that running in other seasons such as outdoor track and field can help them improve in cross country, both from a running and technical standpoint.

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“Overall, it’s [assistant coach] William



"I don't think the sky is the limit for Julia.

"Sharing them with another sport means that they're really going to have to be diligent with their running and training when we're sharing them," Lopresti said.



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Finding the net

SOCCER

Pisgah soccer vies for second-straight conference crown

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

As the full season approaches, the Pisgah Bears soccer team are hoping for a repeat of last year's regular season.

In 2023, the Bears went 17-3-2 with a perfect 12-0 record in Mountain 7 play. The strong results in the regular season gave Pisgah a conference championship and the No. 2 seed in the playoffs.

"They're humble and they are definitely hungry," Pisgah coach Roddy Alt said. "What's in the past is in the past. I don't want to look ahead too much because we have to earn our way back. You have to win a lot of games in the conference to even make the playoffs."

The Bears will want to improve their playoff results this season, however. Pisgah's season ended with a 3-2 first round lost to Robinson.

"We didn't get a playoff win," Alt said. "That's one of the goals on our radar. We want to be one of the top teams in the conference again. We feel like we have that potential, but you have to work hard and play the games out."

To get back to the playoffs, the Bears are going to have to fill some significant holes. Three of the Bears four leading scorers from last season graduated, including Carlos Hinojosa who scored a team-leading 18 goals.

In total, the Bears had eight seniors last season.

"I don't think those guys are replaceable," Alt said. "We lost some big personalities and have some big holes to fill. They have to go figure that out and create their own new team."

The Bears will have a key player on each end of the field. Senior Andrew Hardin led the team in goal contributions last year — finishing the season with 15 goals and 15 assists.



REIGNING CHAMPS — Pisgah soccer looks to defend its Mountain 7 title this season.

In net, senior Dominick Messer held opponents scoreless on nine different occasions.

"Both of those guys are two of the top players in the conference and I expect them to do well again," Alt said.

In the midfield, three seniors will help anchor the Bears in both the attack and defense. Hollis Blanton, Chris Perez and Diego Gamez will all play key roles with the Bears this season.

"We've got some good solid seniors coming back," Alt said. "They'll be the core of our team there."

The Bears will look to the group of seniors to be leaders this season.

"I told the guys that every team is a new team," Alt said. "The dynamics we've had in the past — a lot of those are going to be the same, but every team has new chemistry. We've been blessed to have really solid player leadership the last couple of years. This group of guys is no different. We have some really good leaders"

The Bears will face a tough schedule this season on their fight back to the playoffs. The season starts with a non-conference slate featuring numerous playoff teams.

Teams like Rabun Gap-Nacoochee, T.C. Roberson, Enka, Carolina Day and Owen all present tough battles for the Bears early on in the campaign.

"We want to replicate those big game situations early on — test ourselves and see where we stand and how we need to develop for the whole season," Alt said.

Once the Mountain 7 slate rolls around, things don't get much easier. Last season, the conference sent five of its seven teams to the state championship playoffs.

"Our guys know that and know that we have to go out and earn it every single night. In the Mountain 7 conference, there are no easy games. Everybody has a good team, so that makes it tough," Alt said. "You have to respect every opponent that we play because there are so many good teams and so many good players."



Mikell Clark-Webb

DOWNFIELD — Pisgah senior Andrew Hardin races downfield against Blue Ridge. Hardin scored two goals and had two assists in the 5-1 win last season.

While the team had a lot of success last year, Alt wants to make sure the team isn't complacent.

"The success we had last year, it's good. But it's a 0-0 score and we have to go out and earn it again. Everyone starts at ground zero," Alt said. "They have a good chemistry built and a good level of what the expectations are. They're ready to step into it, but it doesn't happen automatically. They know it takes a lot of work to make it happen."

More offense

Tuscola soccer switches approach ahead of tough schedule

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

Tuscola soccer is back under second-year coach Stan Georgiev, and the team is hoping to make a splash in 2024.

The team finished the 2023 season with a 2-14-1 record, scoring one Mountain 7 win over Smoky Mountain in the penultimate game of the season.

Despite the lopsided record, the Mounties played in a lot of close games that were decided by just a goal or two. In fact, the final six games of the season were decided by two goals or less, including that win over the Mustangs and a 3-2 loss at West Henderson to close out the season.

Georgiev hopes that the second season under his coaching will show major improvements for the Mounties.

"I feel way more confident," the coach said. "Now, I know the players. I'm pretty sure the boys are feeling better too because they know some of my systems."

And the Mounties have some lofty goals to go along with that confidence.

"Hopefully, we make the playoffs," Georgiev said. "To become a playoff team again is our goal."

Tuscola was last a playoff team in 2021, finishing with an 8-10-1 record and losing to North Henderson 2-0 in the first round of the state playoffs.

While Georgiev spent much of the 2023 season focusing on solidifying the defense for the Mounties, he said this year there will be more focus on the other end of the field.

"I'm going to focus way more now on attacking training than I did last year," he said. "Last year, I didn't know the players, but this year, we're going to be practicing a lot more attacking set pieces."

Over the course of the 2023 season, Tuscola was outscored by their oppo-



Diana Gates

TIME TO ATTACK — The Mounties are set to turn their attention to finding the back of the net more often this season.

nents 52-26.

In net, the Mounties played three different goalkeepers last season. With Tanner Carver having graduated last season, it will likely be senior Ty Hendricks taking most of the playing time between the sticks — something he did last season while saving 70% of shots he faced.

The Mounties also lost their leading scorer with Sean Fitzgerald's graduation. Last year, Fitzgerald scored eight goals while adding five assists — both of which led the team.

Stepping up in his place will be multiple players. Senior Matthew Ritter was second in goals last season with four shots finding the back of the net, while senior Sebastian Guajardo sat one spot further back with three goals.

Senior Chris Wells also netted a couple of goals last season as the team's only other multi-goal scorer.

Tuscola will also look to shake things up from last season tactically.

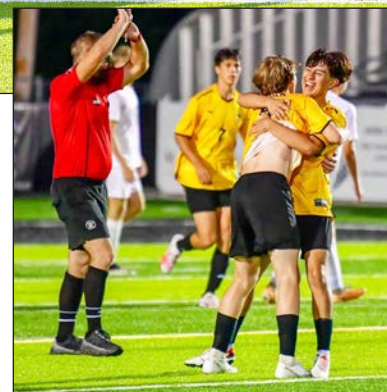
"We're working on different set-ups, different training programs," Georgiev said. "I've got new players, so I may change philosophy."

The Mounties face an uphill battle this season. As always, the Mountain 7 is going to be a strong conference this season. The reigning conference champions, Pisgah, play across the county while West Henderson, Franklin, North Henderson and East Henderson all also made their way into the playoffs.

Of those five, just Franklin earned a playoff win by beating conference foes East Henderson in the first round.

Outside of the conference slate, Tuscola has several opponents who put together fantastic 2023 seasons. Enka made it to the final four of the 3A state playoffs. A.C. Reynolds won a pair of playoff games. Asheville won a playoff game. Brevard and Murphy also made the playoffs.

The Mounties will know early on just where they stand as a team as they run



Diana Gates

SENIOR LEADERS — Tuscola's Matthew Ritter and Sebastian Guajardo celebrate Guajardo's goal against the Asheville Cougars during the 2023 season.

through their tough non-conference schedule.

"I hope what we started last year is a new beginning for the program, which means the players are more confident and happier," Georgiev said. "Hopefully, with everything we do in practice, we can get on the field and get some wins this season."

Tuscola opened the season against Enka on Aug. 12. They return to action on Aug. 21 with a home game against Swain County.

Who can claim the advantage during the soccer **County Clashes?**

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

Both Haywood County soccer teams will be hoping to make the playoffs this fall, making every game crucial. No matter how each team is performing throughout the season, though, there are two games that are massively



Mikell Clark-Webb

RIVALS — The County Clash rivalry is just as lively on the soccer field.

important — the County Clash contests.

Last season was totally different on the two sides of the county. For Pisgah, the Bears went 17-3-2, including a 10-0 record in the Mountain 7 and a No. 2 seed in the playoffs. The Mounties, on the other side of things, went 2-14-1 — earning just a single win and draw in the Mountain 7.

In the first game between the two sides last season, Pisgah went to Waynesville and won 4-1. Later in the year, the Bears grabbed a 3-0 win in Canton.

The Bears come into this season on a four-match winning streak in the County Clash series. Before that, Tuscola had won three straight and 12 of the previous 14 match-ups.

Pisgah will hope to keep their streak alive on the feet of players such as senior Andrew Hardin, who led the team in goal contributions last season. Senior goal keeper Dominick Messer will also play a crucial role for the team.

The Mounties will rely on players like seniors Matthew Ritter and Sebastian Guajardo to get the offensive attack



Diana Gates

RISING UP — Every player gives their best in the County Clash, illustrated by players flying toward the ball during one of last season's meetings.

going — a major focus for coach Stan Georgiev this season.

The first meeting between the two sides will come on Sept. 30 in Canton. The second meeting will come Oct. 23 in Waynesville.

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Eyes on state

Tuscola cheerleaders set goals high



Diana Gates

CHEER — This year's Tuscola cheer squad has its hopes set high for this season.

By Jared Feinberg

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Coach Kari Setser and the Tuscola High School cheerleading team have been rebuilding the program from the ground up and heading into the 2024-2025 school year, their eyes are set on one goal: winning a state championship.

Tuscola, along with cross-town rivals Pisgah, competed against numerous teams in last December's NCHSAA Cheerleading Invitational. The Mountaineers showed progress with a fifth-place finish in sideline competition and third in the performance routine, beating their previous score from the year before by over 20 points.

Despite the improvement, Setser said they've had a lot of work to do since the pandemic shut things down four years ago.

"This year will only be the third year back from competing from COVID-19. We've only competed two years since COVID-19 shut us down and we've worked really hard to rebuild endurance and strength in our stunts; stuff we weren't allowed to do during COVID-19," Smith said.

However, it's not just about winning a state championship for Setser. She said it is about community and being great leaders within, having young ladies with good character and it starts with youth camp and cheer nights.

"If we can be involved with the youth through middle school and into high school with us, we're building a better and stronger program every year," Setser said.

As with any high school sport, academics come first and foremost for Setser and her cheerleaders, saying that she wants them to be scholar-athletes but their grades are the most important. Furthermore, it comes with good representation within the Tuscola community.

"Mostly, our description of what high school cheer does, per the state, is that we're the spirit leaders of the school and we support all athletics and increase school spirit overall within the community, the school,

students, fans and athletes," Setser said. "Competition is just something on the side for fun but most important is the spirit of our school and community. We just want to be great representatives of that."

Tuscola will feature 37 girls in cheerleading with 16 on junior varsity and 21 on varsity. While varsity includes just four seniors, three of them are considered the leaders of the team including Ava Quigley, Baylee Cabe and India Warren.

"Our captains have cheered with us all four years of high school, working their way up from junior varsity to varsity to become leaders of the team," Setser said.

Some cheerleaders compete in other high school sports with several of them playing a mixture of basketball, softball and track and field. Setser said she has eight girls that participate in competitive dance events.

As the start of football and, subsequently, cheerleading begins, Setser said she and assistant coach, Carlee Sutton, are proud of the progress and improvement their girls have made over the summer and are excited for the prospects of the coming school year along with December's competition, as Setser call her girls a 'smart and humble' group who like to be involved and give back in the community.

"I and our assistant coach are going on our fifth year coaching together so every year we see progress in their sideline performances, their cheers and dances as well as their strength and endurance with stunts, and willingness to try harder things," Setser said.

With all the goals in mind and the improvements made this season and the ones prior, one goal will persist for Setser: bringing a state championship back to the Tuscola community.

"We're happy to be back competing and we hope to continue to keep increasing those scores and hopefully become state champs," Setser said.

Adding to the trophy case

Pisgah cheer eyes another state title

By Jared Feinberg

For over a decade, state championships have been the standard for Coach Morgan Smith and the Pisgah High School cheerleading team. It has only been a couple of years since the Bears won back-to-back state competition titles and their fifth in the last decade.

However, despite a down year in competition last season, Smith still has high goals for her girls.

“My goals are to just build this team and their confidence,” Smith said. “If I can do that and bring the love of the sport out, then I’ll get more out of the kids themselves.”

The Bears dealt with plenty of trials and errors last season, including injuries that hampered their chances in competition. Smith said her group had a lot of skill but couldn’t put it together in a tough 2023-2024 school year.

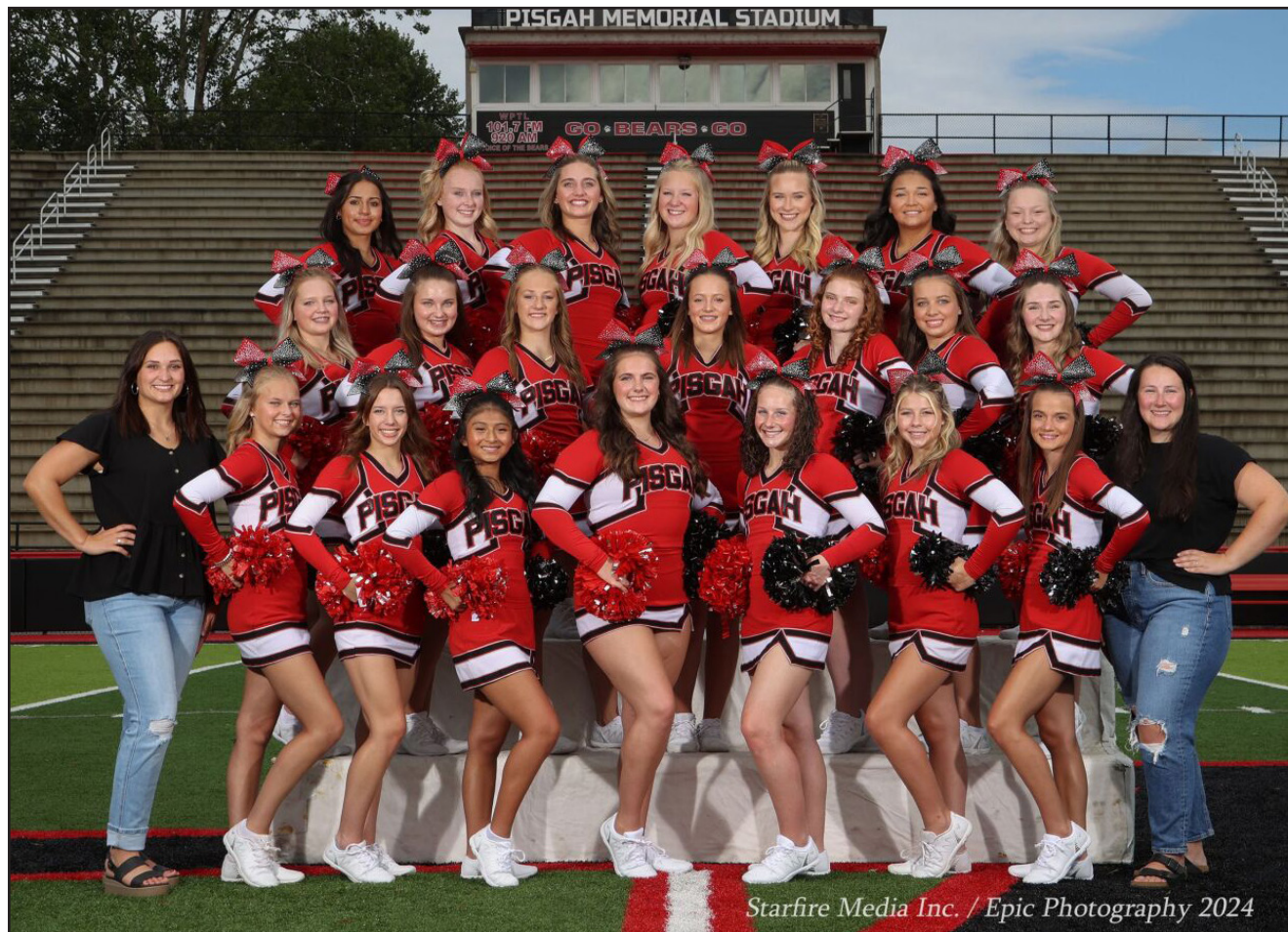
“We had all kinds of factors into not competing well this past year,” Smith said.

The 2024-25 season looks to be a much better year for the Bears’ cheerleaders. Smith said her girls spent some time at a cheerleading camp at Appalachian State, where they have been working hard and have shown improvement. Yet, there is still a big jump for the new members of varsity cheer.

“Over half of the kids that are on varsity this year were all on junior varsity last year. Although they are very talented, that is still a very large jump for kids to come in, especially with the skill level that my varsity team is expected to have,” Smith said.

Pisgah cheer will be led by seniors Savannah Dickerson and Alyssa Cagle. Smith expressed high praise toward her captains, their academics and the type of people they are, calling them ‘excellent.’

Cagle is returning from an injury that kept her out of competitions and performing on Friday nights but was able to



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Epic Photography/Starfire Media Inc.

MORE FOR THE TROPHY CASE — Pisgah cheer has won numerous state titles in the past decade. Now, the Bears are hungry for more.

gain a different perspective as a cheerleader while on the sidelines. Cagle is one of seven seniors on Pisgah cheer this season.

“I’m excited to see how they can help me reach that goal of making sure these girls enjoy their time and remember what they love about this sport,” Smith said.

Among the many goals Smith has for her cheerleaders this year, one is to make sure fans aren’t just coming out to watch a football or basketball game but also see her girls perform.

“They see us and recognize how good my girls are. I always get great compliments on them and how talented they are,” Smith said. “I want them to stop in their

tracks when they see my girls performing and I feel like if I can bring that performance to light, it will amplify their high school experience.”

Despite not competing to the best of their ability, Pisgah cheer showed effort and competitiveness in state competition. Smith said she was proud of the work her team did because of the difficulty level on some of their stunts. Her girls have shown a willingness to try new things during practice to better themselves going forward.

“They would send me videos that they would see on Instagram or TikTok and I would go, ‘I don’t know if we can do that.

That’s really hard,’ and they’re like, ‘Let us try, let us try.’ We would all sit down and watch the video and figure out the best way to be able to build it and they would do it,” Smith said.

Two years removed from back-to-back state championships, Smith said there is no better feeling than being a championship winning coach but at the end of the day, it’s about helping her girls reach their ultimate goals.

“We like to say we’ve won these state championships but at the end of the day, it’s just the best feeling knowing that you helped kids reach the goal they’ve grown up always wanting to have,” Smith said.

Players to keep an eye on this fall

PLAYERS
TO WATCH



Mikell Clark-Webb

CATALYST — Senior Kenyon Moore will likely have a big impact on both sides of the ball for the Bears this season.

By Aarik Long
along@themountaineer.com

It's an exciting time of year for high school sports fans. The summer months are wrapping up and we're heading into fall, which means students are getting back in the classroom and athletes are getting back on the field.

Fourteen teams between Tuscola and Pisgah will take the field, court, course or track this season.

Who are the names that you should be keeping an eye out before the year starts? The Mountaineer has you covered with a preseason watch list in Haywood County.

FOOTBALL

Starting out on the gridiron, there are a plethora of players to pick from, but we will keep it to one a team. For the Bears, that is senior Kenyon Moore.

While it would be easy to pick senior quarterback Aaron Clark, who is coming

into his third season as the starter under center, Moore offers an explosiveness that is exciting to watch.

On defense, he's a spark plug for the Bears. Moore led the team last season with five interceptions. But any Pisgah fan can tell you that he's best known for his big hits to opposing players. On offense, Moore will be a weapon out wide — particularly after a couple of senior graduations in the offseason.

On the other side of the county, senior Gavin Langley could be a real difference maker for the Mounties. The running back rushed for about 50 yards a game last season, while adding on five touchdowns.

That may not seem like a lot, but Langley was Tuscola's leading rusher outside of quarterback Jed West. With West's graduation, there could be an opportunity for Langley to step into a bigger rushing role this season. Last season, Langley

averaged more than five yards each time he carried the ball.

VOLLEYBALL

Senior Chloe Crisp is returning to Tuscola volleyball after taking a year away from the team. In her sophomore season, Crisp led the team in blocks (27) and was third in hitting percentage and aces (15).

In addition to strong play, Crisp also brings senior leadership to the Mounties squad. Her impact will likely be felt both on the floor and in the locker room this season.

For Pisgah, senior Mable James will bring a lot of excitement to fans. The middle hitter has been a force at the net for the Bears. Last season, she led the team in blocks (51) and kills (293). The gap over second-place in kills was more than 150.

If you're a fan of high-flying play at the net, you'll want to make sure you're watching James and the Bears.

SOCCER

Pisgah brings back senior Andrew Hardin, who was a star for the Bears last season. Hardin led the team in goal contributions last season — highlighted by 15 goals, the second-best on the team, and a team-leading 15 assists.

With the team-leader in goals, Carlos Hinojosa, having graduated in the spring, Hardin will have to be what makes the offense tick from his forward position for the Bears to have success this year.

Tuscola will be losing last season's leading goalscorer Sean Fitzgerald, who tallied eight goals over the course of the campaign. They will, however, be bringing back senior Matthew Ritter, who finished second on the team in goals with four.

Ritter also tallied a couple of assists last season. With the Mounties focused on generating more offense, Ritter will surely be a large part of that plan.

TENNIS AND GOLF

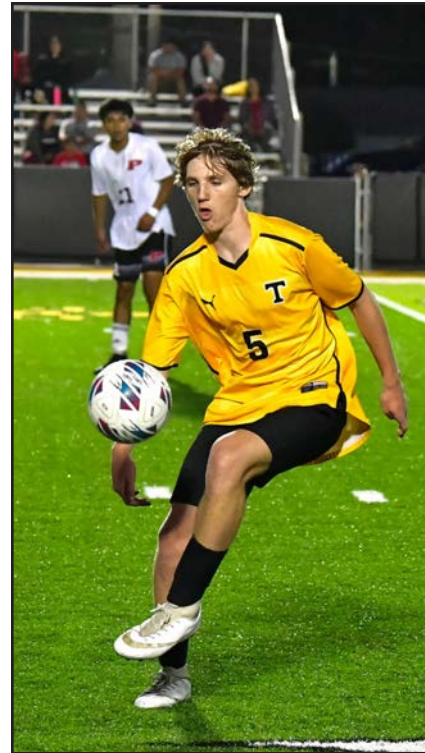
Two conference champions are returning for Tuscola this fall — the girls golf team as a whole and an individual on the tennis court.

Tuscola girls golf claimed the conference title for the third-straight season last year. On their hunt for four-straight, senior McKenna Williams will be a crucial piece of the puzzle.

Williams has qualified for the state tournament as an individual each of her first three-years. This year, she will hope to make it a perfect four-for-four.

On the tennis courts, Sierra Sellars was named conference player of the year in 2023 after grabbing an individual Mountain 7 title.

The senior will be a key player for the Mounties this fall as she looks to defend her title in her final high school season.



Diana Gates

TOP THREAT — Senior Matthew Ritter will likely be a top scoring threat for the Mounties this season.

GAMES
TO WATCH

This fall's top games in Haywood County



Mikell Clark-Webb

BATTLING THROUGH — Senior quarterback Aaron Clark powers through Tuscola defenders in last year's County Clash meeting.



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By Aarik Long
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This fall will be jam-packed with exciting games on the fields and courts on both ends of Haywood County.

The Mountaineer has you covered with all of the biggest games of the season mapped out.

AUGUST

On Aug. 26, the Pisgah Bears soccer team plays host to Brevard. Last season, the Blue Devils went 15-7-1.

The two soccer teams haven't met since 2021, but Brevard has won the last four meetings dating back to 2019. If Pisgah wants to repeat the successes of last season, an early season win against Brevard can help the Bears grab some crucial momentum.

Four days later, on Aug. 30, both Pisgah and Tuscola football play their home openers. The Bears will host the Enka Jets, who Pisgah beat 56-3 last season.

Tuscola will welcome Polk County to town. The Mounties beat the Wolverines 29-23 last season. Getting off to a hot start is important to any season and both the Bears and the Mounties will be hoping to do just that.

SEPTEMBER

Sept. 5 marks the first County Clash of the fall as Tuscola volleyball will visit Pisgah. Last year, the Bears swept the Mounties — winning 3-0 at home and 3-1 at Tuscola. Pisgah currently holds a six-match winning streak in the series.

Just over a week later, Tuscola volleyball has another massive volleyball match — this time playing hosts to West Henderson, who have been the team to beat in the Mountain 7.

Last season, West Henderson won both meetings with the Mounties 3-0.

On Sept. 25, Pisgah soccer welcomes West Henderson to Pisgah Memorial Stadium in a crucial Mountain 7 matchup.

Before last season, the Falcons had won 15 of the previous 16 meetings, but a sweep by the Bears helped lift Pisgah to a conference title.

Five days later, one Sept. 30, Pisgah has to turn their focus to the County Clash. The game will be hosted by the Bears.

Last season, Pisgah won both games — 3-0 at home and 4-1 on the road. The Bears have won the last four meetings, but before that Tuscola had won 12 of the previous 14 matchups.

OCTOBER

The rivalry will carry over to the following day, as well. On Oct. 1, the second-leg of the volleyball County Clash will take place. This time, the Mounties will play host.

The match is the last time the two volleyball teams will meet this season — making a win and the bragging rights that come along with it even more of a prize.

On Oct. 11, West Henderson football visits Pisgah Memorial Stadium for what should be a meeting between two of the Mountain 7's top teams.

Last year, the Falcons beat the Bears 30-10 in Mills River on their way to another conference title. However, this season could be different as West Henderson has lost numerous key contributors heading into this season including quarterback Jude Lyda, running back Carson Dimsdale and receiver Truitt Manuel.

The Falcons also lost a few pieces on its offensive line — further opening the door for the Bears to take down the reigning champions of the Mountain 7.

One week later, Pisgah football hosts another home game, but this one is much more important to the fans — the annual County Clash game.

It will be the first time a full capacity crowd has watched a County Clash game at Pisgah Memorial Stadium since 2018. The Bears last home game in the series came in the spring of 2021, but was in front of a limited crowd due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Any time these two teams get together, it's an exciting and important match-up. This season looks to be no different.



Diana Gates

RIISING TO THE OCCASION — Pisgah senior Andrew Hardin rises up for a header against Tuscola last season.

Just five days later, on Oct. 23, another County Clash takes place as Tuscola soccer plays host to the Bears. The game comes closer to the end of the season, making the momentum for whoever wins the rivalry match-up that much more important as the season progresses.

On Oct. 25, Tuscola football plays host to Smoky Mountain. This season, Tuscola has a particularly tough conference schedule — hitting the road for games against last year's top three finishers in the conference: West Henderson, Pisgah and North Henderson.

The game against Smoky Mountain is the Mountaineers only chance to play a playoff team from last year at C.E. Weatherby stadium during conference play — and also the team's home fina-

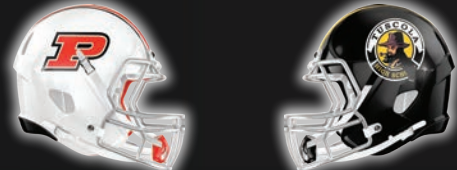
le for the regular season. The following week, Tuscola goes on the road to face West Henderson — making a win crucial for the Mounties to keep any momentum rolling through the end of the year and into the playoffs.

On Oct. 30, Tuscola soccer hosts West Henderson to wrap up the regular season. The Falcons are coming off of a third-straight season with a winning record. The Mounties are on the upswing right now as a program and capping off the regular season with a win against West Henderson would be huge for the confidence of the players.

The Mounties last beat West Henderson in 2021 and will be hoping to get back on the right side of the win column in the series.



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