



2025

FALL SPORTS GUIDE



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2025 FALL SPORTS GUIDE

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Main Street in downtown Waynesville and online
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Helene's wrath revealed the spirit of sports

By Aarik Long

Last fall, thousands of people packed into a stadium and drew together to root for their teams with all their might. But it wasn't just high school sports that were being celebrated the night of that County Clash football game. They were also celebrating the enduring spirit of a community that refused to buckle under the weight of a catastrophic storm.

The proceeding weeks were a tumultuous time for student-athletes in Haywood County. Everyone in the county was touched by Helene in some way, but student athletes also battled damage to their fields and halted seasons.

When Helene hit, everything came to a standstill, including sports. It took two weeks for sports to resume in Haywood County, with some neighboring counties, like Buncombe, taking even longer.

Once players returned to the field,



DAMAGES — Mud covered the field at Pisgah Memorial Stadium where fencing was destroyed and goalposts were twisted during flooding. Aarik Long

things were still different. In Canton, the football and soccer teams played a chunk of their season at Bethel Middle School while repairs were made to Pisgah Memorial Stadium.

But just being on the field or the court

with their teammates again was something the players treasured. In such a chaotic time, practices and games brought a sense of normalcy.

The repairs at Pisgah Memorial Stadium were made rapidly, and the Pisgah soccer and football teams returned

to the stadium on Nov. 6 and Nov. 8, respectively.

Both of those games were match-ups against their cross-county rivals, Tuscola, who also dealt with a tough hand following Helene. The games highlighted the spirit of two communities who refused to give up after the storm and continued to come out and support their Bears and Mounties.

Pisgah's cross country team also had their home course destroyed, but are hoping to be able to return this fall for a meet in October.

The fall sports weren't the only ones affected by storm damage. Spring sports were threatened by heavy damage at the baseball and softball fields of Tuscola, Pisgah and Canton Middle.

Those fields were also repaired in time for the season, though the Canton and Pisgah teams did have to start their seasons away from home for a couple of weeks.



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Ready to go

Tuscola football faces takes on tough home games in conference play

By Aarik Long

Tuscola football is ready to get back on the football field, and the Mountaineers are facing a challenging schedule in 2025.

The season starts with a pair of road trips to a couple of very strong opponents. The Mounties hit the road to take on Robbinsville to open the year up.

"It's going to be a slobberknocker right out of the gate. I love it," Tuscola Coach Jonathan Crompton said. "It's a challenge, but that's what you want."

The decision to play Robbinsville came after changes to how playoff teams are selected this season.

"Now, no conference champions are guaranteed to get in," Crompton said. "So myself and their coach were like, 'Hey man, let's play.' They're good. We're good. We should both help each other. It's going to be a hard-nosed game. It should be. That's football. That's what you want."

Scheduling tough opponents will be important for the Mountaineers as they hunt for a spot in the postseason.

"We try to make sure we scheduled good games for our kids' sake. They deserve to play really good teams," Crompton said. "At the end of the day, the chips will fall where they fall."

Week two, the Mounties hit the road once again to face Cherokee.

"First two road games, it's never easy, but it's part of it. We get two JV games at home. We can go watch our



Diana Gates

BIG T – Tuscola is facing a challenging schedule this season, but the team is bringing back some key players in crucial positions this year.

little guys run around. They're in the mindset of defending their conference title," Crompton said.

Both early-season road games are tough, but that will prepare Tuscola

for the tough road trips it faces in conference play.

"The places we're playing, they're not easy places to play. It's always good to see how we face and respond

to adversity early," Crompton said.

Non-conference play closes out with the home opener against South Caldwell.

Defending home turf

Pisgah football faces challenging schedule in 2025

By Aarik Long

Pisgah football is just around the corner. With a full 10-game slate ahead, there are a handful of can't-miss contests for Bears' fans.

The most important game for any coach during the offseason is the opener. This season, that will be just over an hour up the road for Pisgah as they head to Burnsville to face Mountain Heritage on Aug. 22.

Last year, the Cougars finished the season with a record of 12-1, including an undefeated regular season. Mountain Heritage eventually ended up being knocked out of the 1A playoffs in the final four.

"I feel really good about it," Pisgah Coach Ricky Brindley said. "Playing someone like Mountain Heritage who is a powerhouse in 1A football is going to give us a great challenge to begin with and hopefully help prepare us down the road in conference play."

The following week, Pisgah returns to Canton and Pisgah Memorial Stadium for the first time this season.

It was just two seasons ago that the Bears were returning to the stadium for the first time following Tropical Storm Fred's damage to the field.

After just a season-and-a-half on the field, Helene wiped through — causing extensive damage, sidelining the season and forcing the Bears to play at Bethel Middle when the season resumed.

Pisgah did, however, get back to Pisgah Memorial to close out the regular season against Tuscola and in the playoffs against Smoky Mountain.

"It's going to be a tremendous honor for our kids," Brindley said. "Being able to play at that stadium is unlike any other. I say that as a former player and coach. It's a special place. There's nothing like playing on the banks of the Pigeon River."



BEAR DEN — The Pisgah football team is ready to welcome teams to Pisgah Memorial Stadium once again this season, as the prepares to defend its conference title this season.

Pisgah finishes up its non-conference schedule with a trip across the county line to face Enka. The Bears have won 19 of the last 20 meetings with the Jets, including the last 12.

Conference play gets started in week four as Pisgah plays host to Smoky Mountain.

It's a rivalry that has heated up significantly in the last season. First, Brindley left the program to take the head coaching job at his alma mater in Canton. Then, the Mustangs eliminated Pisgah from the playoffs on the Bears' home field.

"For us, it's going to be about execution," Brindley said. "In the playoffs, we didn't execute quite as well as we did the first time. They made plays when it mattered. Hopefully, our kids are ready. That's a program that wants to compete for con-

ference championships every year."

Conference play continues with a road trip to North Henderson and a home game against Franklin the following week. Pisgah defeated both of those squads last season — extending their streak against North Henderson to 18-straight wins.

Week seven brings a massive game for the Bears, as Pisgah will hit the road to face West Henderson. The Falcons knocked off Pisgah at Bethel Middle last season — giving the Bears their only conference loss of the year.

"That's going to be huge for conference championship ramifications," Brindley said. "They're well-coached. They play extremely hard. Going over there will be a challenge but it's something our kids have had circled on the calendar for a while."

Just one week later, the Bears get their

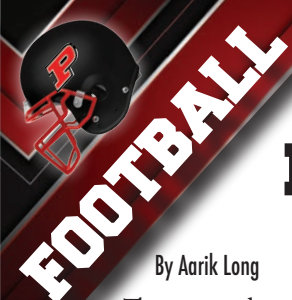
biggest game of the season — a trip down the road to Waynesville to face Tuscola.

Last season, Pisgah grabbed a 10-7 win at home.

"It's a special rivalry," Brindley said. "It's something that not everyone gets to experience. I was very happy for our kids to get to experience it at home and get to see that environment. It's a special game that's really unique. It's two great schools in an incredible county."

Pisgah wraps up the regular season home slate with senior night against East Henderson. The Bears have won seven straight against the Eagles and 11 of the last 12 meetings.

The regular season concludes with a road trip to Brevard. The Blue Devils beat Pisgah 35-0 last season, but the Bears earned a 24-10 win over Brevard the prior season.



Pisgah football looking to repeat as conference champs

By Aarik Long

There was plenty to celebrate for the Pisgah football team in 2024. The team had a new coach, but still managed to claim a share of the Mountain 7 and a County Clash win on their home field.

A big part of that was the 15 seniors on the squad who played crucial roles for Pisgah.

While those guys have graduated, there are a lot of players ready to step up for the Bears — prospects that are bringing a lot of excitement to Canton.

While the first snaps of football season are just around the corner, the work to get those up-and-coming players ready for the gauntlet schedule has long been underway.

“It started in January when we got our offseason program in full swing,” Pisgah Coach Ricky Brindley said. “It was about being able to develop leaders, to develop guys that were going to step up and hold their

teammates accountable. We really feel good about this senior class and what they were able to accomplish in the offseason.”

That group of seniors has stepped up in the offseason, Brindley said. The team has talent all over, but the group of 21 guys in their final season of high school football will be crucial to any success the Bears hope to achieve in 2025.

“They’ve done an incredible job this offseason, particularly as leaders. I couldn’t be more proud of what they’ve done. Not only are they great football players, but they’ll be great leaders,” Brindley said. “It’s important because they’ve been through the fire. They’ve been here for four years. They understand what it takes to be successful. They understand how I expect things to be done.”

Many of those seniors can be found on the defensive side of the ball. The defense is extremely experienced this season and has talented players at all three levels.



Mikell Clark-Webb

FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS — Pisgah football earned a conference title under first-year head coach Ricky Brindley last season. Now, the Bears look to build on that success in year two.

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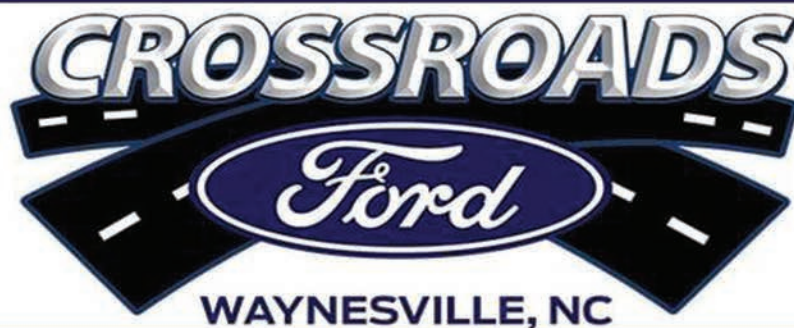
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

"I think defensively right now, we're a pretty good ways ahead because of the experience in the box. All of those guys played significant minutes for us last year," Brindley said.

The defensive front, in particular, is loaded, with just about the entire defensive line returning this season after a dominant 2024.

"It'll be huge for us, particularly as we get into those tight ball games," Brindley said.

Outside of the seniors, just having the additional continuity of Brindley going into his second year with the team will be huge for the Bears.

The coaching staff didn't have to spend a large chunk of the offseason trying to teach the kids a new system, like they did last year. Once practice began, the team was ready to hit the ground running.

"There's not nearly as much installation as far as base stuff and terminology," Brindley said. "Our kids understand our terminology. They understand what I'm thinking with concepts. It's been really nice. Through spring ball, through the summer, our kids are much further ahead than they were having to learn all of the new stuff last year."



Mikell Clark-Webb

STEPPING UP — Senior Matthew Mehaffey will step into the starting QB role this season. Last year, he helped lead the Bears to a win against Franklin after stepping in for the injured Aaron Clark at halftime.

Pisgah's home opener against Swain County comes in week 2. The game will carry a little extra importance to the Bears after the damage that Pisgah Memorial Stadium suffered during Helene last season.

The Bears did eventually return home for the season finale against Tuscola and a playoff game against

Smoky Mountain, but missed out on two games at the stadium. Those two games were played at Bethel Middle School instead.

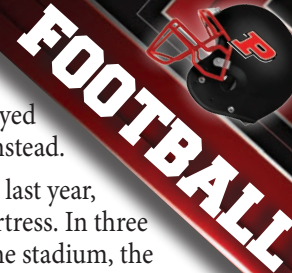
When they were at home last year, Pisgah Memorial was a fortress. In three regular-season games at the stadium, the Bears went undefeated.

"It's a tremendous boost for our kids to be able to walk down and see that home crowd. It's always a really good environment," Brindley said.

That will be important once again this year as Pisgah faces some of its toughest opponents on the road, such as West Henderson, Tuscola and Brevard.

All of those games come near the end of the season, as well as a game against Franklin right before that stretch. Getting the team ready for that end-of-season gauntlet will be crucial for Pisgah's success this season.

"You certainly have to be cognizant of wanting to play our best football towards the end when we get to the 4A part of the conference. That's when we want to be playing our best football," Brindley said.



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Tuscola football has big expectations heading into 2025

By Aarik Long

There's a lot of excitement building on The Hill as Tuscola football prepares for the 2025 campaign.

"I think our culture is where we want it," Tuscola Coach Jonathan Crompton said. "We've got a great group of kids in that locker room, not just athletically, but just for everything that we want to stand for here at Tuscola. I feel good about it. We've got to go play now."

There are a lot of expectations on Tuscola football this season. Last year, the Mounties finished 5-6 overall, including a first-round loss in the playoffs and a loss in

the County Clash. The Mountaineers are expecting things to be a lot different this year.

"I've got all the confidence in our guys. I'll die on that hill. I've seen how they bought in and how they respond to each other. That's another reason I wasn't scared to go on the road the first two weeks. We've got a great group of kids," Crompton said.

The Mountaineers graduated 13 players last year, but are bringing back a lot of very talented players at very important positions this season. Many of the players stepping into starting roles this season got meaningful reps last season.

"It's never easy replacing somebody who played, but the good thing is that the guys who are replacing them also played," Crompton said. "It's always good to be able to have depth. We're really starting to build depth by teaching to play football in our system and the game. It takes years to develop that. We're another year further along, just like next year will be another year further along."

On offense, there are key players coming back at some critical positions in the Tuscola offense — positions that need to be more comfortable with the system being run.

"Having a quarterback for the second year in a row, a full off-season of them getting work on their own," Crompton said. "It's big. That's big for any program. Having returning starters helps. We've got a good amount of guys that are returning and that know the system. That's what's been fun to see."

The offense also has numerous weapons at wide receiver. Juniors Bo West, Elijah Pruitt and Isaiah Hyatt all put up big numbers last season — torching defenses in the long game and collecting ankles in the short game.

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FOOTBALL

Diana Gates

SEE YA LATER SPEED — Tuscola junior Elijah Pruitt is set to light things up for the Mountaineers on both sides of the ball. As a sophomore, Pruitt was a key piece on both offense and defense.

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Tuscola football returns lots of experienced players

By Aarik Long

Tuscola football is coming off a solid 2024 season, but there's even more to be excited about this season.

The team is replacing 13 seniors, but has plenty of guys stepping up to fill those roles.

"You're always going to have to replace seniors," Coach Jonathan Crompton said. "It's never going to be easy. But we've got a group that has bought into what we stand for, has busted their butt, held each other accountable, worked their butt off all winter long, all spring long."

For the first time in Crompton's three years, the coach is welcoming back a returning quarterback.

Crompton, a former quarterback at Tuscola, Tennessee, and in the NFL, has demonstrated considerable success in developing quarterbacks into successful players. This year, senior Jett Bartley is returning for his second year leading the Mountie offense.

Bartley is one of a handful of players returning in key positions for Tuscola this season.

"It's massive," Crompton said. "On offense, every position is important, but there are a couple that, in my offense, have a lot more on their plate — quarterback, tight end, center. Those positions have a lot of thinking to do, a lot of adjusting."

As for the signal caller himself, Crompton said Bartley has made some real strides this offseason.

"Jett's really grown into his own as a leader, not just vocally, but in general. I'm excited to see where he can go. But he would be the first to admit, it doesn't live and die by that position," Crompton said. "He's got all the faith in the world in all the guys around him, just like they do in him. That's the beautiful thing about what we've got going on."

Protecting Bartley will be an offensive line with some experience and a lot of talent.

"We've got guys, that's for sure. Now it's about plugging and playing and competing," Crompton said.



Diana Gates

NO FLY ZONE — Tuscola senior Brandon Jordan will be a tough player for quarterbacks to beat in the passing game this season.

ton said. "It's coming along really well. We lost a couple of guys, but the guys that are in our system know what we want. They've stepped up."

Out wide, Tuscola is sporting an elite group of receivers. Juniors Elijah Pruitt, Isaiah Hyatt and Bo West all put in big performances last year as sophomores.

"You can't put words on it, especially at this level," Crompton said. "We've got some guys that can genuinely threaten people wherever they're at on the field. They have all the confidence in the world in everything we do. All of our coaches have all the confidence in the world in everything that we've got."

On defense, the Mountaineers look very strong. The linebacker group graduated a couple of elite-level players in Bridger Jones and Walker Bolden, but has plenty of guys stepping up behind them.

"We've got guys that know our system that have busted their butt. We're deep there. They've shown up and played and shown they can play high-level football in our system," Crompton said. "I'm looking forward to that position. That's something our coaches have talked about — just seeing where we go there. I'm excited for

them to have a chance to go show their ability."

The secondary also looks like it will be a big piece of the Mountaineers' success. Senior Brandon Jordan and juniors Elijah Pruitt, Ty Walker, Isaiah Hyatt and James Launer will all be critical pieces in shutting down opposing pass attacks.

"We've got some guys returning that I'm very excited about back there. With the system we're going to run, we're going to put them in a position to play some ball. They're all interchangeable. They all know what they have to do. They communicate well," Crompton said. "I'm looking forward to seeing those guys run around, fly around and have fun with each other. They've done a great job this summer."

As a senior, Jordan, in particular, will be a huge piece for Tuscola.

"People are eventually going to start throwing away from Brandon. That's the biggest compliment. Then we've got other guys that can step right up," Crompton said.

The Mountaineers will also be bringing in a new kicker. Last season, graduating senior Christopher Wells was incredibly important for Tuscola. He was consistent on field goals, extra points, kickoffs and punts — proving to be an invaluable asset.

"Kicker is a unique position. Replacing Christopher is never going to be easy. Statistically, he was off the charts last year," Crompton said. "But we've got some kids that have stepped up and worked their butts off this offseason. They're all going to have a chance to go do it."

When asked to pick which side of the ball he thought would be best this season, Crompton couldn't choose — citing the strength of both sides.

"I think we're strong everywhere. Maybe I'm being biased, but it's a credit to how the kids have worked," Crompton said. "Regardless, if the game is on the line and there's a minute to go, no matter which side is on the field for us, I feel confident because of our kids. Not because of what we've done coaching, but because of what they've done with each other."



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Pisgah football looking strong despite player turnover, position shuffles

By Aarik Long

Last year's Pisgah Bears football team was an experienced group. The team graduated 15 seniors — many of whom had played at least three years at the varsity level.

It's always tough to replace a group like that, especially when many of those players were in critical positions, such as quarterback Aaron Clark.

Pisgah Coach Ricky Brindley feels confident in his team's ability to fill those roles, however. Many of those spots will be filled by an equally talented senior class coming up this year — a group even bigger than last year, with 21 this season.

Senior Matthew Mehaffey will step in as quarterback. Mehaffey played primarily as a safety last season, but did take some snaps at quarterback — most notably on the road against Franklin when he played the entire second half after an injury to Clark.

Mehaffey's performance helped lift the Bears to a crucial conference win on the road — something that eventually led to the Bears' share of the conference title. Mehaffey also led the team with eight interceptions on the defensive side of the ball.

"It's the most difficult position in sports," Brindley said. "It's the most important position in sports. We feel good about Matthew. He's a competitor. We've got a guy that could have been a starter for a lot of teams in our conference for a couple of years."



Mikell Clark-Webb

TWO WAYS — Pisgah's Mason Putnam has been a key contributor on both sides of the ball for the Bears.

Joining Mehaffey in the backfield will be senior running back Landon Pope. Pope has established himself as one of the best running backs in Western North Carolina over the last few years.

Last season, Pope led the team in rushing yards and touchdowns with 748 yards and 11 touchdowns. The senior combines speed with a powerful running style for a bruising attack.

"Pope is going to be the workhorse," Brindley said. "We need him to carry it 15-20 times a night. He's a special kid. I think he's got the mental fortitude as well as the physical conditioning and stamina to do that. We'll have to rely on him in a big way."

The skill-player groups were particularly hard hit by the graduating class. This season, the Bears will be looking to replace the likes of Jake Lowery and Kenyon Moore, as well as Sawyer Belue, who missed last season due to injury.

One big player in the wide receiver/defensive back room is going to be senior Mason Putnam. Putnam was second on the team last season in receptions and receiving yards, trailing just Lowery.

While his 34 catches for 403 yards were big for the Bears, the receiver didn't find the end zone. He'll be hoping to change that this season. He also snagged four interceptions on defense.

"Mason Putnam has had a tremendous offseason," Brindley said. "He's done a fantastic job as a leader. He's not super vocal, but he's steady. He holds himself accountable first and foremost. We have to get the ball in his hands. He has to get lots of touches. On defense, he can anchor the secondary with Matthew."

Another key piece in the receiving corps could include junior receiver/defensive back Tahari McLean.

"Tahari has had a great offseason. He's very explosive with the ball in his hands," Brindley said.

Senior Maddox Wright is also rejoining the team after not playing last year. He has a big motor, lots of length and could be a strong piece as both a receiver and defensive back.

Senior Jaxon Bautista is going to shift around a bit as well, moving to play tight end. Senior Hunter Nelson will move to more of a wingback role after playing tight end last season. Both Bautista and Nelson will play linebacker.

"Hunter Nelson could have been a starting linebacker



Mikell Clark-Webb

RETURNING STARTER — Pisgah's Landon Pope will be a crucial piece for the Bears this season as the team's workhorse running back.

last year, but we had Carter Browning," Brindley said.

Up front, the offensive line will see a lot of new faces, but senior Jayse Creson will be an important returning piece.

"He's got a lot of experience on Friday nights, and we hope he can lead that group, especially with the players on the JV level that will have to step up and play," Brindley said.

On the opposite side of the trenches, Pisgah is loaded. Last season, the defensive front was a major strength for the Bears.

"We've returned pretty much our entire defensive line," Brindley said. "I really feel like that will be a strength of our team. It's a defensive line that is big and physical. We'll have to rely on them to be able to stop the run."

Pisgah will also have a new face in an often-overlooked spot — the kicker. Last season, Dominick Messer was a key player for the Bears — not missing a single PAT all year and only missing one field goal in the playoffs.

His backup, Miguel Gamez, is expected to step into that role this year.

"Dom was very consistent for us," Brindley said. "That's what we look for out of a kicker. Miguel Gamez was the backup kicker last year as a junior. He should step into that role as a senior. We're very proud of his work ethic. He's done a great job preparing himself for this season."

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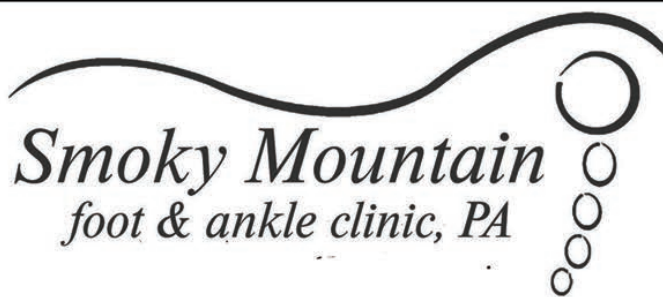
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10/3 AWAY @ FRANKLIN*

8/29 AWAY @ CHEROKEE

10/10 HOME vs. PISGAH*

9/5 HOME vs. SOUTH CALDWELL

10/17 BYE (NO GAME)

9/12 HOME @ NORTH HENDERSON*

11/24 HOME vs. BREVARD*

9/19 HOME vs. WEST HENDERSON*

11/31 AWAY @ EAST HENDERSON*

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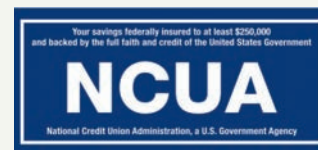
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Building on success

Pisgah volleyball looks to new faces, seasoned leaders



Mikell Clark-Webb

READY TO GO — The Pisgah volleyball team is ready to get into action this season under their new head coach, Carter Tolley. Pictured from left to right are: Back row — Head Coach Carter Tolley, Delaney Pifer, Sable Elvira, Jade Cody, Macey Devlin, Loni Ehling; Front row — Scout Belue, Kenlee Browning, Kylee Mesimer, Sloan Riddle, Chandler Lowery and Alexis Markos.

By Aarik Long

The Pisgah volleyball team is coming into the new season with lots of excitement and a lots of new faces.

One of those new faces is head coach Carter Tolley, who is taking over for departing coach Katie O'Conner.

Last season, Tolley served as the Bears' junior varsity coach.

"It's a lot of excitement. It's definitely going to be something new to me. I think with my experience as the JV head coach, it's going to help me a lot. I've got a lot of great people I've been talking to. It's going to be a learning

process, but we're ready to get started," Tolley said.

Already having been a part of the program is a huge advantage for Tolley, who comes in loaded up with useful knowledge on her players.

"Already knowing the girls and how the program works — it's been a very easy transition going from JV to varsity," Tolley said.

The team will also be featuring several new faces out on the court. Star players such as Mable James and Alldyn Queen were among the five graduates for the Bears last season.

"It's definitely going to be hard to replace them," Tolley said. "They were such big people in our lineups. We have some athleticism coming up. We have (senior) Chandler Lowery and (senior) Macey Devlin and (sophomore) Scout Belue who are really going to help lead the team this season."

The loss of James in particular will be a tough one for the Bears. James had spent the last few seasons as a dominant force at the net for Pisgah — crushing opponents with her spikes on offense and her blocks on defense.

"We'll be losing Mable's height, but we'll replace that with athleticism and

grit," Tolley said.

Last season, Pisgah finished third in the conference and made the playoffs. They'll be hoping to replicate that success while establishing the foundation for the program's future.

The trio of Lowery, Devlin and Belue will be crucial for Pisgah next season. Devlin and Lowery will bring much-needed senior experience, while Belue was making an impact for the Bears in her freshman season last year.

"Those three are going to be the three

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



Mikell Clark-Webb

SENIOR LEADER — Senior Macey Devlin will be a key piece for the Bears this season, bringing a wealth of experience and leadership to the team.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

big ones, especially with two of those being our setters. They're the most vocal and the quarterbacks of volleyball," Tolley said. "They'll be held to higher standards as leaders."

Lowery and Devlin also showed prowess on serves last season — finishing second and third on the team with 30 and 24 aces, respectively.

The Bears face a challenging schedule this season.

Outside of conference play, the slate includes a battle with T.C. Roberson. Facing tough teams like that will allow the Bears to prepare for a challenging conference lineup and any potential playoff match-ups.

"I've always liked having a stronger non-conference schedule," Tolley said. "It really prepares our girls for anything. If we can get used to playing at that higher level, then we're more prepared for it, rather than scheduling those easy games that we know we can win.

Those don't benefit us at all. With this tougher schedule, we'll be coming into conference and playoffs with a higher volleyball IQ."

Once conference play begins, things stay tough. The Mountain 8 this season includes the reigning state champions, West Henderson, a very strong Franklin team, and newcomer Brevard, who went 18-5 last season.

"We'll have to really scout and prepare for anything," Tolley said. "We have to pick on people's weaknesses. We have to learn our strengths. We can't just walk in thinking we're going to crush it. Really, anyone could beat you. If someone has a good game, anything can happen. We have to be ready for everything."

Pisgah has an uphill battle this season to return to the success they've seen the last few years, particularly in conference play. But the Bears are ready to answer the bell.

"These girls are hungry and they're ready to get going and playing," Tolley said.

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New faces on the hill

Tuscola volleyball looks to replace big graduating class



Diana Gates

NEW FACES — Tuscola volleyball has a ton of new faces this season, including a new head coach and lots of new starters. Pictured from left to right are: Back row — Larkin Conner, Miranda Anderson, Ivy Jones, Briley Jordan, Alyssa Trantham and Sadie Henry; Middle row — Emma Duncan, Julia Wells and Minhthu Meela Nguyen; Front row — Allie Rathbone, Haiden Creson, Kingsley Wyatt and Kaleigh Thach.

By Aarik Long

Tuscola volleyball is ready to hit the court this fall, but they'll be doing so with a lot of question marks.

The team has just one returning varsity player from last season and is competing in a loaded Mountain 8 conference. One question has been answered, however, with Amy Brown being named the team's new head coach.

"We were an extremely tight-knit staff. I just want to give these girls stability. I think it's extremely important to support them through this transition," Brown said.

Brown is an alum of Tuscola and is now getting to lead her former program.

"I'm extremely excited and honored. Not many people

get to come back and coach at their alma mater. I bleed black and gold," Brown said.

She steps into the role having previously served as the team's JV coach. She replaces Coach Jody Ward, who passed away at the end of last season following a battle with cancer.

"There's no replacing him, but I think we're honoring his expectations and the legacy he's left," Brown said. "Not just his expectations on the volleyball court but life in general. All he asked for was max effort every day."

The team is already rallying around their former coach's memory. The team has "Compete Like Jody" plastered around its facilities and on its warm-up uniforms, something that has been seen around Tuscola

athletics for the past year and a half.

"That's our motto this year. That's our goal," Brown said. "If we do that, I think we're going to achieve great things."

Brown will be relying not only on her experience as a coach but also on that of her time as a player. She has fond memories of her playing days and hopes to make those same memories for the players on her team.

"My senior year was the last year we were conference champs," Brown said. "That's something that's meaningful to me. I want these girls to have the same experience I had. It's very important to me to bring back that culture."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

VOLLEYBALL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

The season kicks off with a tough out-of-conference battle with Robbinsville — an early-season test for the Mountaineers.

“I think it’s important that your non-conference games be just as challenging,” Brown said. “We’re so used to seeing the same powerhouses. It’s important to constantly challenge yourself so your players can get better.”

Once conference play starts, things don’t get any easier. Over the course of about a week, the Mountaineers play host to West Henderson, Pisgah and Brevard. All three games will be tough. Last year, the Falcons won state, Pisgah was strong and Brevard went 18-5.

“That stretch is going to show the resiliency of our team,” Brown said. “They are powerhouses, but we have the potential to compete with them. Whether we

win those games or not, if we can take a set, that’s a goal.”

The biggest goal for the team is getting better week to week.

“A win or loss doesn’t always show the strength of a team,” Brown said. “It’s important to go into each match and see what we can take from them. Every team has a weakness. Our strength is that we play very well together.”

The JV players from last season will play a significant role this season. Brown knows the players well after spending last season coaching the squad. A big focus this season for the Mounties will be developing those young players into the backbone of the Tuscola volleyball program.

“Any good varsity program starts with the JV program. The great thing is we’re going to be young,” Brown said.

The coach plans to rely heavily on those young players who have stuck around through coaching changes over the last couple of years.



Diana Gates

READY TO CELEBRATE – The Mounties are ready to hit the floor and celebrate some wins in 2025.

“These girls are tough,” Brown said. “We had to finish the season last year without our beloved head coach. We

can’t just look at the strength of the schedule. We have to show up every day and get better and better and compete.”



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Battle for Haywood

Who can claim supremacy on the volleyball court?

By Aarik Long

This year's volleyball battle between Haywood's high schools is sure to be intriguing.

Both teams were in the playoffs last fall, but both teams have a lot of new folks in key positions — namely, the folks leading the teams from the sidelines.

Pisgah and Tuscola are both under new leadership at the varsity level. Both programs' JV coaches stepped up to the head coaching role at the varsity level.

Outside of the coaches, both teams are bringing in a lot of young players. The Mountaineers graduated eight seniors last season, while the Bears graduated five.

Despite all of the new faces, every player on both sides knows how important the County Clash game is.

"In the County Clash games, neither team is going to be the best in the county or the worst in the county. Both teams always put forth 100% effort," Pisgah Coach Carter Tolley said.

Tolley said it's important to remind her players to focus on the two meetings with Tuscola and not let the rivalry overshadow the match itself.

"You always have to remind them that anything can happen. It doesn't matter that we're playing Tuscola and they're our rivals," he said. "We have to play them like any other team in our conference. We have to not pay attention to the crowd and play our game. Once it's over, we can celebrate."



Diana Gates

BATTLE AT THE NET — Who can come out on top when the Mounties and Bear meet on the volleyball court this season?

For the Mounties, the games will showcase what the season's themes — grit and determination.

"Looking at my team and the girls that have stayed through the program and the changing of coaches. These girls are tough," Tuscola Coach Amy Brown said. "We have to show up every day and get better and better and compete."

The first meeting between the two teams takes place on Sept. 4 at Tuscola. Pisgah will host the Mountaineers on Sept. 30.

The Bears won both meetings last season and are on an eight-game winning streak in the rivalry series.

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Leading the way

Tuscola again the hunted in Mountain 8 girls golf

By Paul Nielsen

All the tools are in place for the Tuscola girls golf team to again be a player on the state stage.

Former Tuscola star McKenna Williams has graduated and plying her trade at the college level. But the Mountaineers return four quality players as the team looks to strive to new heights.

The team also has a new coach in Erik Melville, a familiar Tuscola coaching veteran who doubles as the boys' golf coach. Melville, who has also coached the soccer programs at Tuscola, replaces Sean Williams.

Melville inherits a team that includes a roster that helped the Mountaineers to a fourth straight Mountain 8 Conference title, the 3A-West regional championship and a sixth-place finish at the 3A Championships last fall.

Melville knows Tuscola will be the hunted in the Mountain 8 Conference but said the girls are up to the challenge

"We have several good returners," Melville said. "McKenna was the



Becky Johnson

TITLE DEFENSE — Tuscola girls golf has won four-straight conference titles and are looking for a fifth this season. Pictured from left to right are: Madi Wright, Melody Kirkpatrick, Josie Ostendorff, Haiden Woods and Abbey Adams.

stalwart the last fours but it is not like the cupboard is empty."

Tops on that lists of returning players is junior Abbey Adams and senior Josie Ostendorff, two key players that helped the Mountaineers to a sixth-place finish at state.

Adams finished in fifth-place at last year's regional championship and 53rd at the state championships. Ostendorff posted her career best 18-hole score at the regionals and finished in 72nd place at state. Both players earned all-conference honors last fall.

Seniors Haiden Woods and Madi Wright both played important roles for the Mountaineers last year and round out a solid top

four. Teams can enter five players but only the top three scores count.

"Abbey Adams has qualified for state the last two years and Josie Ostendorff has been right there," Melville said. "I think the team is

poised to continue to compete and win like they have the past couple of years. Their overall games are really solid and I am looking forward to getting to see them play every day."



Mikell Clark-Webb
TEE OFF — Tuscola junior Abbey Adams is ready for the 2025 season. Adams looks to be one of the Mountaineers' top golfers this season.

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Taking a step forward

Pisgah girls golf looking for breakout season

By Paul Nielsen

Pisgah High girls golf coach Rebekah Gaddy is predicting big things for the Bears this fall.

"I expect us to be in the top three in conference," Gaddy said. "I feel our team is going to do really well this year."

That optimism is rooted in the fact that the Bears return four players with a vast amount of Mountain 8 Conference experience. Seniors Aloah Cox, Olivia Merrell and Valentina Miguez have played together for four years now and sophomore Avaleigh Bradley had a breakout freshman season a year ago.

Cox is pretty well-cemented in to play at No. 1 for the Bears, but Gaddy said the battle for No. 2 through No. 4 spots will be a competitive one. She said that competition will help the team achieve its goals.

"I really feel confident in our team," Gaddy said.

Cox played a competitive summer schedule, resulting in the senior upping her game heading into the season.

"She is already looking at some schools to play college golf at," Gaddy said. "I believe she can do some really amazing things this year as far as Mountain 8, regionals and competing at the state championships. I see all of that for her."

Gaddy said Cox had an average score of around 80 for 18 holes during summer competition.

"She has taken 10 strokes off her scores since last season," Gaddy said. "She has really, really improved. We should really see some amazing things from her."

Merrill has also improved her



Mikell Clark-Webb

FORE — The Pisgah girls golf team is prepared for the 2025 campaign. Pictured from left to right are Avaleigh Bradley, Valentina Miguez, Olivia Merrell, Aloah Cox and Coach Rebecca Gaddy.

game since last fall and Gaddy feels the senior is capable of qualifying for the state tournament. Bradley and Miguez have upped their games since last summer as well, the coach said.

"It's going to be exciting to see them grow and see what they can do this year," Gaddy said. "They have been putting in the work."

Gaddy is hoping that some new faces will provide needed depth for the team.

"We are looking forward to getting

other girls involved," he said.

Pisgah's players again attended a summer camp at Clemson University led by Tigers coach Kelley Hester and other women's golf coaches.

Each Pisgah player received one-on-one instruction from college coaches on full swing mechanics, chipping, pitching, bunker play and putting.

"They had a whole day where they went over their swings," Gaddy said. "This is the second year the team has gone to this camp."

The camp also featured fitness, nutrition and training tips along with instruction on sports psychology, college admissions and recruiting advice, and on basic rules and etiquette.

"They learned a lot about leadership skills," Gaddy said. "There was a lot of great camaraderie with the college coaches and they learned what is expected if they want to go into college golf."

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New coach means new expectations for Tuscola tennis

By Jared Feinberg

Jim Gross joins the Mountaineers tennis program as a first-time coach following the departure of Scott Schuett. Gross has yet to meet his entire group of players but will do so as fall practices get underway.

To help with player and team management in his first year, Gross has tapped into some existing wisdom.

“Well, we’ve made (senior) Chanie Brown the assistant to me. She and another player are relatively responsible for communicating with the rest of the team for when we have practices, meetings, and schedule changes whenever they happen,” Gross said.

Tuscola has a few young and newer players that have caught Gross’ eye, such as junior Chloe Bowman, sophomore Alyssa Blackburn, and senior Piper Baumgarner.

“They’ve got aggressive tendencies, which is good in tennis, but it’s got to be controlled aggression,” Gross said. “You can’t be hit just hitting there, hit low, hit the stars, hit the fences, hitting players; they’ve got to have controlled aggression.”

Gross’ expectations are different than what you may expect from a typical coach. He doesn’t care about win-



Aarik Long

ACES — Tuscola tennis looks prepared for the new season under new leadership in 2025. Pictured from left to right are: Back row - Chloe Bowman, Madisyn Brooks, Bianka Deitz, Alyssa Blackburn, Koko Departs and Keronia Jackson; Front row - Aaliyah Tapie-Flores, Piper Bumgarner, Ivanka Lainey, Emma Haney and Embry Schmersahl.

ning or losing, instead focusing on how his girls learn how to compete, whether it be on the court or in life.

“Winning will come naturally, but you really have to learn to lose before you can win,” Gross explained. “You have to learn what you did right or wrong, or what the opponent did right or wrong, before you can make an adjustment, a correction, or an improvement.”

A Vietnam War veteran, Gross’ military background instilled some lessons he’s planning on implementing as a coach.

“I go back to Vietnam, and one thing we learned is that the individual is not important; the team is important. When we’re younger, we always think we’re special because our parents told us we’re special, and we believe we’re special, and that’s perfect, okay?” Gross said. “But as we get older, we realize we’re not that much different than our next person or individual on the planet.

“And so what I’m striving to do is to get them with a team mentality that you try for every point, you don’t wait on the next player to win their match, you do the best you can to win your match, and don’t rely on others,” Gross explained they will win and lose as a team, and will help each other during that time.

He won’t be the only one giving input, encouraging his girls to do the same for one another. The first-year coach also said there is anxiety amongst his players, but it’s fueling a desire to stay on target.

“In the practices we’ve had, there’s been an awful lot of anxiousness to come to practice and play, not just hanging around, talking to each other, and finding out what’s going on. They want to play tennis,” Gross said.



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Pisgah girls tennis looks to make history in 2025

By Jared Feinburg

Pisgah girls tennis team comes into the 2025 fall season with high expectations after reaching the second round of last year's playoffs.

"From a tennis perspective, playoffs are always a goal," said head coach Harold Shepard. "If (the girls) come out and play like I feel ... they are capable of and are willing to, we could win the conference for the second time in school history this year."

If that happens, it would be a first for the team in nearly a decade.

Pisgah is looking to have a normal fall season after Hurricane Helene disrupted the schedule last year. Shepard called them "resilient," and while they weren't able to accomplish their goal of winning another conference title, the girls tennis team reached the second round of the playoffs.

"The girls made up their minds last year that they were going to make a run at things," Shepard said. "We ended up finishing third, which they were a bit disappointed about."

"We made the playoffs again, which they were excited about, and made it through the



Mikell Clark-Webb

LOVE ALL — The Pisgah tennis team is ready to get their season underway. Pictured from left to right are Gabby Renegar, Haley Henderson, Aspen Herron, Emma Henson, Kenzie Gibson, Rosie Burgess, Sonja Soldier, Ella Tiller, Holly Henderson, Hannah Francis and Mikayla Heatherly.

second round of the playoffs. They're a good group of kids."

Senior Ella Tiller returns as Shepard's top-of-the-order player, having done so for the past two seasons. Tiller was a regional qualifier in doubles last season and singles in 2023.

"She will come in and be a strong player for me. I feel like she is going to be really good," Shepard said.

The Bears have a hefty amount of standout underclassmen, according to Shepard.

"They've all been working. Emily Henson, Aspen Herron, Hannah Francis have all been doing extra stuff," Shepard said. "They're going to come in and have a good sophomore year, I feel like. They've bought into the tennis program and they like the idea of what it is."

After several setbacks with injuries to the same knee, senior Hailey Henderson is making her return to the court. Shepard said Henderson has been taking more lessons and played in a couple tournaments recently. He

also said Hailey's sister, Holly, is worth keeping an eye on.

"She bounced back and forth and is going to come in and be a factor," Shepherd said. "She got better last year, and I expect her to be in the three or four spot this year."

Pisgah recently received a facelift with resurfaced tennis courts along with new netting and poles. Shepard feels the latest facility improvements will be a boon for his team.

"They play better when they look good, and when they have nice facilities and stuff like that, and they've got a nice facility," Shepard said.

Shepard feels confident in the Bears' chances of winning the conference championship. Much of the competition has experienced changes in some regard, and Shepard believes his girls can take advantage of that.

"I don't know why we wouldn't," Shepard said.

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Pisgah Cross Country hopes to ride momentum from strong 2024 season

By Aarik Long

Pisgah cross country is ready to hit the course again this fall after an up-and-down 2024 season.

“We’re really excited as far as the boys are concerned. We lost a couple of really good runners,” Pisgah Coach Joe Sayblack said. “We have a good group of boys coming up.”

Last season, the team overcame adversity when their home course at the Pisgah baseball complex was destroyed during Helene.

“That’s our biggest struggle — getting our cross country course rebuilt,” Sayblack said. “I’ve had a lot of support from our athletic director and our administrators. They’ve gotten me the supplies I’ve needed and helped me when I needed. Hopefully, Mother Nature will cut us a break this fall.”

Sayblack has been hard at work during the offseason to prepare the course with the hopes of hosting a race on Oct. 1.



Mikell Clark-Webb

BIG EXPECTATIONS — The Pisgah Cross Country team is ready to hit the ground running this fall. Pictured are (from left to right): Front row — Bella Rich, Devin Lopez, Max Rich, Leo Bolejack, Lachlan Ledford; Back row — Iris Bolejack, Eli Soi, Roland Millsaps, Silas Hardin.

While there were plenty of struggles last season, the Bears boys cross country team did grab a second-place finish at the conference championships. This season, they hope to build on that momentum.

“I keep bringing it up to those boys. It was the first piece

of hardware the Pisgah boys cross country team has brought home. We want to continue that tradition. They know they’ll have to work hard,” Sayblack said. “We’ve got a firm foundation planted and we want to continue to grow on that.”

Junior Silas Hardin will be a big part of the Bears success this season. Last year, he was one of two runners to make it to state for Pisgah.

“He ended up being our number one runner for most of the season last fall,” Sayblack said.

Senior Leo Bolejack will likely step into a larger role after Daniel Sayblack graduated last year.

“He’s always a really interesting runner to watch to see how he’s going to do week-to-week,” Sayblack said.

Another big piece will be senior Roland Millsaps. The senior ran his first two years, but didn’t compete last season. Sayblack is also looking at sophomore Devin Lopez to step up this season.

“I think these guys are probably going to end up being our top four,” he said.

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Experienced trio, high-potential newcomers highlight Tuscola cross country's 2025 season



By Aarik Long

Tuscola cross country is ready to hit the course this fall with new leadership and high hopes for the new season.

“We’re really solid up front. Our top three are really good. We’re still developing behind that,” Coach Mark Altamari said.

Senior Olivia Arnold, junior Julia Wells and sophomore Natalie Jimenez are expected to be the leaders on the team this season. The trio ran in the spring under Altamari on the track team — grabbing historic results in the process.

“They all ran on our 4x800 relay team in track that won a national championship,” Altamari said. “They’re dialed in. Their fitness is high. I don’t see why those three can’t compete at the highest level at the state track meet — top 15 finishes.”

While the trio saw success on the track, it’ll take more work in order to convert those skills over to a different sport. Altamari said they’ve already shown they can put the work in and have looked good over the summer.

“Track and cross country in my mind are two different things. They both involve running, but it’s two different disciplines,” Altamari said. You have to get them to think differently and put in a lot of mileage in the summer.”

For Wells and Jimenez, part of their running ability comes from their soccer background.

“I think the longer stuff suits them, just mentality-wise. They’re tough as nails,” Altamari said.

“I’ve seen kids transition from soccer to running full-time. It benefits them.”

That can also be a challenge as players have to adjust to the differences in each sport and each coach they play for. Wells, for example, plays sports in all three seasons — and typically plays multiple sports at once.

“It’s a double-edged sword playing multiple sports. Every coach has a different philosophy and every sport has a different need to compete,” Altamari said.

For Arnold, she excels in track. While cross country is a different beast, Altamari is expecting her to make the transition seamlessly.



Courtesy of Mark Altamari

READY TO RUN – The Tuscola cross country team is ready to hit the ground running this season, with plenty of high expectations. Pictured from left to right are: First row – Stormie Edgerton, Ayden Cox, Rylie Pressley; Middle row – Olivia Arnold, Natalie Jimenez, Julia Wells, Harper Ramsey, Alexa Sanchez; Back row – Luck Hughes and Sam Clontz.

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Defending the crown

Pisgah soccer chasing third-straight conference title with key players to replace

By Aarik Long

Coming off back-to-back conference titles, the Pisgah boys soccer team is shooting for the hat trick in 2025

Earning a three-peat as champions is never an easy task, but it will be especially difficult for the Bears this season. Not only did they lose some crucial players at important positions, but there's also a new team in the conference that will be gunning for the crown in Canton.

Last year's team graduated eight seniors — including the team's leading goalscorer, Andrew Hardin, and all-conference goalkeeper Dominick Messer. Replacing the two will be tricky, but new Pisgah Coach Rocky Heath is hoping that some younger players can fill the gaps.

"We lost some key pieces, but we've got some kids that have grown and matured since last year, and they're ready to step up," Heath said. "They're a good group. There's been great participation. I've had zero poor attitudes and a lot of excitement."

In goal, Heath is looking at a middle school prospect coming up through the ranks. The coach worked with the player all summer and even sent him to the Premier Goal Academy in South Carolina. The program only takes 100 goalkeepers a year.

"It's absolutely first class. To go to a camp for goalkeepers and run by goalkeepers, that will help him so much," Heath said. "No one can replace Dominick, but he can have a really solid year because of his innate athleticism and that training he is getting."

Stepping up on the front end will likely be seniors Osvaldo Munoz-Velazquez and Johan Hernandez. The two were second and third on the team last season, with Munoz-Velazquez scoring 12 and Hernandez scoring five.

One of Pisgah's biggest strengths will be its backline. Seniors Alex Wenzel and Luis Gamez and junior Maximiliano Andrade all return on the defense and will be strong pieces for the Bears.

"Those three are back in the back, and we only have one fullback to replace," Heath said. "We're going to be solid in the back."

Heath is also planning on making depth a key strength for the Bears. He wants to give everyone that makes the team a decent amount of playing time.



Mikell Clark-Webb

CHAMPIONSHIP TO DEFEND — The Pisgah soccer team is looking to defend their conference title from last season. Pictured from left to right are: Front row — Omar Gonzales, Alan Pina-Gamez, Victor Piña, Eliseo Lara Arredondo, Miguel Angel Gonzalez Perez, Gabriel Mendoza Resendiz, Fernando Gamez, Luis Correa; Back row — Asst. Coach Ralph Michael, Jose Gamez, Fabian Gamez, Osvaldo Muñoz-Valesquez, Max Andrade, Kendrick Gibbs, Maverick Garcia, Johan Hernandez, Luis Gamez, Alex Wenzel, Breeze Lutz, Head Coach Rocky Heath.

"I've told the boys, 'You're expected to be productive if you make the team. If you make the team, I can't be scared to put you in the game,'" Heath said.

Throughout the season, the Bears will be tested. In non-conference play, Pisgah has a brutal three-game stretch against Highlands, Enka and Murphy — three teams that combined for a record of 42-18-3 last season.

While they are tough opponents, they are games that are winnable for the Bears — and games that will prepare Pisgah for the playoffs.

"Enka will be a huge challenge. They're the equivalent of what we'll see in a second or third-round playoff," Heath said.

Things don't get any easier once Mountain 8 play starts.

"At the end of the day, it's the 14 conference games that matter," Heath said.

In addition to all the tough opponents the Bears faced in the Mountain 7 last year, such as West Henderson, Tuscola and Smoky Mountain, Pisgah also has to contend with the newest member of the re-named Mountain 8.

Brevard joins the conference this year after going 18-4-2 last season and will present a major hurdle for the Bears' goal of repeating as conference champions.

An important thing for the Bears this season will be

defending their home turf. Last season, Pisgah went 6-2-1 at home.

"It's huge," Heath said. "You feel a sense of confidence. You don't worry about the little things like going into the locker room or the pregame meal. It's the little hinges that swing the big doors. You have to defend your home field. You have to get results."

But the players have the confidence to do so. Last year, Pisgah earned its second-straight conference crown, while also grabbing the first two playoff wins in program history.

"They believe now. They already believe," Heath said. "They're like 'Coach, we're going to win some playoff games this year.' They're already there. They believe that they can be good and they can win the close games. You can't say enough about the former coach (Roddy Alt). He did a great job on and off the field."

Heath is also intent on making sure the players are winners away from the field.

"We're not going to use any profanity," Heath said. "If you see a kid in the cafeteria sitting by themselves, you're going to sit with them. You're going to bust your butt to make A/B honor roll."

Aiming high

Tuscola soccer looks to fill gaps, continue momentum

By Aarik Long

Last season was a big year for the Mountaineers soccer team. Coming into the season, the goal was to finish in the top 3 of the conference and secure a play-off berth. At the end of the year, Tuscola sat behind just Pisgah in the Mountain 7 and played in the playoffs.

The team checked off plenty of goals last season, but this year will look a lot different. Last year's team graduated a whopping 12 seniors.

"That's an entire team," Tuscola Coach Stan Georgiev said. "I think we're going to be in rebuilding mode, but the good thing is the freshman group coming in, I have a good number of people who want to try out, so hopefully we'll have a JV team, and that will help the program itself to rebuild and be steady."

The Mounties are looking to re-establish some foundation after losing so many key players at once.

"Having a JV helps a lot. You can teach the freshman what we're working on (with) varsity, and they can step into the roles in the next year or so," Georgiev said.

Many of those players who played on the JV squad last season will have to step into much bigger roles on the varsity squad this year. That will be crucial in keeping some sense of continuity in the program moving forward.

"They'll be very important in the transition from last year to this year," Georgiev said. "Those guys know what I coached last year. They can help me to translate to the new ones coming up to make it a nice, smooth transition. They know what my expectations are and how we practice."

Among those graduates who need to be replaced is goalkeeper Ty Hendricks. The position is among the most important



Diana Gates

EXPERIENCE AND POTENTIAL — Tuscola soccer brings back a handful of experienced players and a ton of new faces after graduating 12 seniors last season.

on the field, with every mistake being amplified.

Last season, the goalkeeper was a brick wall in front of goal, often coming up with crucial saves to keep the Mountaineers in close games.

"It's very tough. I have a few options. We'll see who shows up," Georgiev said. "Having someone like Ty who is all the time in goal is going to be hard to replace."

On the other end of the field, the Mounties will be bringing back a couple of key players. While Tuscola is losing the likes of Christopher Wells, Matthew Ritter and Gavin Baer, they do have a pair of key returners.

Senior Bryce Ferguson led the team in goals last season with 15, while junior Stonewall Strickland was right behind him with eight. Both players missed a handful of games last season, so those numbers should improve this season.

Strickland was also a great set-up man, tallying a team-best nine assists last

season, while Ferguson notched five of his own.

"I'm hoping they stay healthy the full season and help make this transition," Georgiev said.

The challenge for Georgiev will be filling out the roster around these two key players. The seven players who played the most minutes for Tuscola last season were all seniors, meaning that there are seven holes on the field to fill this season.

"We have to see the technical skills of the new players and their conditioning," Georgiev said.

As for the schedule, the Mountaineers face a gauntlet from the season's onset. That includes an opening stretch of Enka, Murphy, Madison and Asheville — four teams that combined for a record of 56-24-4 last season.

"I did it on purpose that way to test the team as early as possible," Georgiev said. "It'll help me make changes in formations and get the players ready for conference."



Diana Gates

SCORING THREAT — Senior Bryce Ferguson led the Mounties in goal last year. This season, he returns and looks to add to his tally.

The Mounties also have to contend with a new conference foe — the Brevard Blue Devils.

Last season, Brevard finished the year 18-4-2. This season, they join the Mountain 8 looking to shake up the conference.

"Brevard is a really good team. They have a very good feeder system. They have a soccer club that feeds the program. Brevard will be a tough team to play with," Georgiev said.

The coach said the team is shooting to finish in the top three or four of the conference this season.

"That'll be a very good goal to achieve," Georgiev said.

New faces, same rivals

Who can come out on top on the soccer field?

By Aarik Long

No matter the sport, County Clashes are always the most anticipated contests of the season.

Add in that last year, soccer teams for both of the county's high schools finished first and second in the conference, and you've got the recipe for a thrilling contest.

Last season, the two County Clash soccer games went to overtime, with the Bears winning by a single goal each time. Both games had fans on the edges of their seats throughout the contests.

"They were excellent last year," Pisgah Coach Rocky Heath said.

This year, both teams are facing what look to be rebuilding seasons. Pisgah lost eight seniors, including their leading goalscorer and goalkeeper. The Mountaineers lost a whopping 12 seniors, including their starting goalkeeper and numerous starters.

The two soccer contests will be among the biggest question marks heading into the fall for Haywood County sports fans. With so many graduates, it's difficult to predict where each team will be come late September.

"Haywood County soccer is going to be different this year, for sure," Tuscola Coach Stan Georgiev said.

The two games are circled on both teams' calendars from the time the schedules are made.

"The players are always excited when they play Pisgah," Georgiev said. "It's a rivalry game. That's probably the most important game for the players this season. We're going to try to get ready for those. We haven't won against Pisgah for three years. It's time to change that."

For Heath, the rivalry is particularly special due to the respect shown by both sides, despite the passion the teams bring to the field.

"There's no rock throwing in the parking lot, there's no slashing tires. It's a fierce rivalry and if you win, you talk about it all year, but it's not a negative thing. It's a source of pride," Heath said.

The Mountaineers will host the first of the two County



Diana Gates

BRAGGING RIGHTS — Both Pisgah and Tuscola soccer are facing an uphill battle in replacing several key players, but who can do enough to grab the win in this year's County Clash matchups?

Clash games on Sept. 24. Pisgah gets their chance for home-field advantage on Oct. 20

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Tuscola cheer led by experienced group of seniors



Diana Gates

EXPERIENCED LEADERS — The Tuscola cheer team is ready for a big season, led by 11 seniors this year.

By Aarik Long

The return of the school year — and return to sports — is a welcome time of year for Tuscola cheer.

“We’ve worked all summer. We’ve hit the ground running here in August,” Tuscola Coach Kari Setser said. “I am feeling very confident about it, very prepared, ready to go.”

But it’s a bittersweet excitement. This year is the final season for 11 senior cheerleaders on The Hill.

“We have a great group of 11 seniors. They’re very strong in their skills and leadership,” Setser said. “They’re terrific, but I know they’re ready to be seniors.”

That group of 11 seniors makes up more than half of the varsity roster of 21 this year. It’s one of the biggest groups of seniors that Setser has had during her time coaching.

“The amount of talent and leadership there is phenomenal,” Setser said. “All of our groups are strong, but this group has had an unprecedented amount of natural leadership and talent. They’re friends. They have monthly dinners. They give input.”

And that leadership is important when you’re aiming to build and maintain a winning program.

“The right leadership from coaches or captains or seniors makes such a difference because it sets the dynamic and tone for the whole season,” Setser said. “It can help grow your program or hinder your program. We have leadership that helps us continue to grow.”

Some of those 11 cheerleaders are already thinking about their next step.

“We’ve got several that have the idea of cheering in college. We’re excited for

them to pursue that if that’s the direction they want to go in,” Setser said.

During her first year coaching, Setser had a cheerleader sign with East Tennessee State University’s dance team.

“Since then, we’ve not really had anyone sign to cheer. To have the possibility that even a few of them could cheer in college, that’s really exciting,” Setser said. “We’ve had several already visit college cheer clinics to get a feel for what they would need.”

Right now, the team is focusing on preparing for football season and all that comes with it, but they’re still thinking about upcoming competitions.

“For competition, it’s set timed routines,” Setser said. “There are certain elements that have to be in them, but we’re able to take those elements and incorporate them on the sidelines. That gives us that

extra practice that we would need for competition during practice and in front of a crowd.”

Some of those crossover elements include stunts, cheers and dances.

In December, the team will travel to Raleigh to compete in the state championships. They’re also hoping to pick up another competition along the way.

The team is focusing on more than just their performances, however. They’re also getting involved with their communities. Recently, they held a youth cheer camp — helping foster that next generation of Mountaineer cheerleaders.

“Community outreach, competitions, we volunteer at schools. Any way we can be involved, that helps grow our program as well. That gets the future of our program interested and excited,” Setser said.

The team is also growing their relationships with one another — building lifelong bonds with their teammates.

“We like to do a lot of team bonding. The stronger we are together, the more it will help us in all the other aspects. We try to promote that we are a cheer family,” Setser said.

While many of the cheerleaders are thinking about their futures, Setser is also thinking about the future of the Tuscola cheer program.

“We’re trying to build a strong relationship with our middle school program,” Setser said. “To have those relationships is important.”

But most importantly, she’s focusing on making sure her seniors go out with a great season.

“We want to make it the best year for all of them, but especially this group of seniors that we watched grow and develop over the years,” Setser said.

New coach hopes to lead Pisgah cheer back to a state title



Courtesy of Taylor Henson

READY TO GO – The Pisgah cheer team is ready for 2025 under new coach Taylor Henson.

By Aarik Long

Pisgah cheer has a historic pedigree, having won five state titles in the last 13 years. The Bears have done it all on the mat, and this year, they look to add to that resume — this time under the direction of a new head coach.

Taylor Henson stepped into the position this offseason. It's her first season as a head coach at the high school level.

"I am really enjoying it," Henson said. "I'm excited. I want the girls to enjoy themselves and have fun."

Henson was once a Black Bear cheerleader at Pisgah herself. In fact, she was a part of the first state title team at Pisgah in 2012.

"I'm excited," Henson said. "I cheered at Pisgah about 10 years ago. I'm excited because cheering was some of the

best memories of my life."

Henson is hoping to lead her team back towards another state title this season.

"It's a lot of pressure, but it's worth it because the kids have a unique bond that sets Pisgah apart," Henson said.

Last season, Henson helped coach the Pisgah cheer team during basketball season as an assistant, serving under the same coach who had guided her a decade prior.

"It definitely made me appreciate (Coach Tammy Ensley)," Henson said. "I always have, but being under her made me realize how much goes on behind the scenes. She's a really good role model."

Henson recalled Ensley running with the team when Henson was in high

school. That leading by example is something that Henson has learned and wants to implement as a coach herself. It's just one of the many things Henson learned from her previous coach and wants to use with the Pisgah cheer program.

For Henson, a big part of coaching is developing the character of the cheerleaders. It's just as important, if not more so, than winning competitions, according to Henson.

"I want them to be a good team, but more importantly, I want them to learn to be good kids, not just good cheerleaders," Henson said.

Earlier in the summer, the team took a trip out to Johnson City, Tenn., for a four-day trip to the campus of East Tennessee State University. The team took part in a cheer camp at the college,

helping prepare for the upcoming season.

"That's something that Pisgah's cheer has done for a long time. We go to a camp in the summer, and that helps build relationships," Henson said.

Henson added that the camp allowed some of the team's new members to form relationships with the veteran cheerleaders, while the athletes with a couple of seasons under their belt were able to strengthen their bonds with one another.

With the season just around the corner, Henson is prepared to get the girls on the mats competing and on the sidelines supporting their classmates.

"They're good kids," Henson said. "They're great athletes. But I think what makes Pisgah special is how well they work together as a team."



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Late Tuscola coach leaves lasting legacy

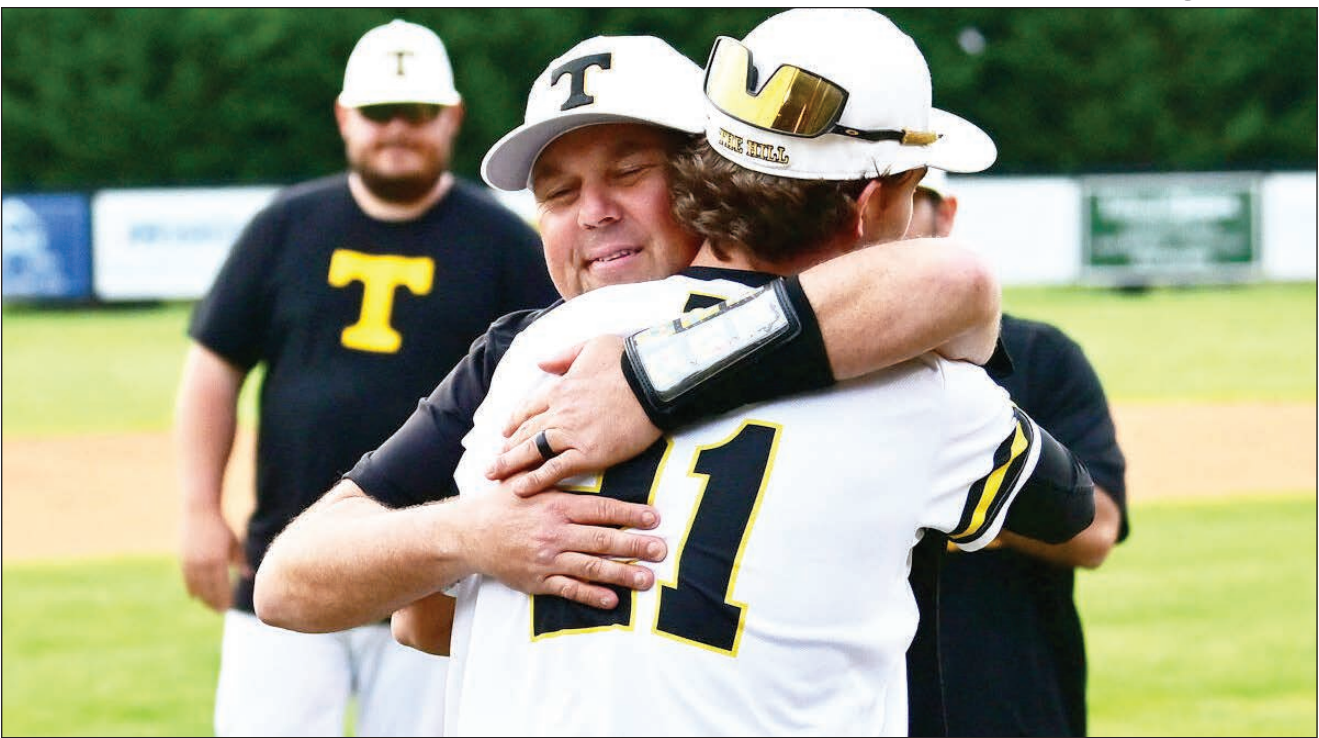
By Aarik Long

Waynesville lost one of its most beloved coaches last week after an eight-month battle with cancer.

Jody Ward spent his life pouring his love into the athletes he coached — and there were a lot of them. Ward coached everything from little league baseball to high school volleyball and everything in between. This year, he served as Tuscola's head volleyball coach and an assistant coach on the school's baseball team.

"He coached for at least 20 years," said Katie Trantham, Ward's cousin and assistant volleyball coach last season. "You know that he had an impact on so many. I've had random people texting me and saying how much they loved Coach Ward."

The Haywood County Board of Education made sure that Ward's legacy would continue at Tuscola by voting to name the school's baseball and softball



Diana Gates

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

FAMILY AFFAIR — Tuscola assistant coach Jody Ward hugs his son Owen Ward before a County Clash game.

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LEADER — Tuscola head volleyball coach Jody Ward speaks to his team during a match against Enka in 2023.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41

complex after the late coach in June.

“Jody touched a lot of kids’ lives before he ever got to Tuscola. Jody was coaching at the middle school level. What he instilled in the middle schoolers, it carried on into the Tuscola years before he even got to Tuscola,” said school board member Steven Kirkpatrick. “Jody had so many hats and he touched so many kids’ lives.”

Kirkpatrick chairs the special issues committee for the school board, so he was the one to bring the motion to the board to rename the complex the Jody Ward Memorial Athletic Complex.

“I was honored to do that — to vote ‘yes’ to do something like that,” he said. “He made my kid feel like he could do anything on a baseball field. He could chew a kid out, but you knew he still loved you.”

Coaching came naturally to Ward — someone that everyone described as a competitor.

“Coach Ward understood me,” said Tuscola graduate volleyball player Addi Sampson. “He knew I have a very competitive passion for sports and that I’ll give my all no matter what the score was. He was probably my favorite coach ever. He was definitely a role model of mine.”

Tuscola senior ace Amos Rich had Ward in his life for as long as he can remember.

“He meant a lot to me. He’s been really

good friends with my family since I was little. He was a role model I’ve looked up to my whole life,” Rich said. “My family would go out to eat with him and his family multiple times a month. I’ve known him almost my whole life. It’s been great to grow up with him and have him as a role model in my life.”

For his players, Ward was much more than a coach.

“Coach Ward was a role model for me,” Tuscola graduate catcher Evan Conner said. “He meant a lot. He would help out with not only baseball but life. He taught us life lessons. He was a great guy. He meant a lot to me and my family.”

Ward’s passion for his athletes never wavered. The day before he passed, Trantham visited Ward in the hospital. Even then, he was asking about the volleyball team.

“After every game, whether he was able to be there or not, we would discuss how the game went,” Trantham said. “Even though he wasn’t there and was in a hospital bed and in pain, he cared about Tuscola volleyball and his girls.”

Even beyond what happened on the field or the court, Ward cared for and loved his athletes.

“He would always say ‘I love you.’ He wanted the girls to know how much he loved them. He would always tell me ‘I love you.’ Sometimes with men, it’s a little bit different and they don’t want to show



Diana Gates

FIGHTER — Despite being diagnosed with cancer, Jody Ward remained in the dugout for Tuscola baseball.

their emotions. He wanted to express that,” Trantham said. “You knew you meant something to him. He made everyone feel loved and he made everyone feel heard. Those types of people are going to stick with you. When they’re not here anymore it’s hard.”

He pushed athletes to be the best they could be both on and off the court.

“Jody was a good man. He pushed all of us to our limits and he wanted the best for us,” Sampson said. “I’ll always miss him and I love him.”

Parents of athletes admired the man Ward was, as well.

“I could hear the things he was saying and he was lifting them up and giving positive feedback. It was always encouraging. He was passionate about the sports he coached. He would fuss with them, but for the most part, he was always giving them positive reinforcement and feedback,” said Regan Wyatt, mother of two girls who played volleyball for Ward.

Wyatt’s oldest daughter decided she wanted to play volleyball when she was in

middle school and Ward welcomed her in — eventually leading to the entire family falling in love with the sport.

While her youngest daughter missed Ward at the middle school, her ninth-grade year was Ward’s first season at the helm of Tuscola’s volleyball team.

“We as a family are fortunate enough that he was in our lives,” Wyatt said. “We’re better because he was part of our lives. We were fortunate enough that our girls, each one of them, had their own interaction with him. They have their own special memories.”

While Ward won’t physically be on the sidelines or in the dugouts anymore, he’ll always be a part of the Waynesville sports community as a whole.

“He means so much to me. Tuscola volleyball will never be the same now that he’s gone. A part of him will always live within Tuscola volleyball. He will always be with us,” Trantham said. “I hope that athletes choose to compete like him and fight. He was an example. He truly did fight to the very end.”



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Players to keep an eye on this fall

PLAYERS
TO WATCH



Mikell Clark-Webb

IMPACT SOPHOMORE — Pisgah sophomore Scout Belue will be a big piece for the Bears this season, making an impact in all facets of the game.

By Aarik Long

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 for before the year starts? The Mountaineer has you covered with a preseason watch list in Haywood County.

FOOTBALL

All eyes will be on the gridiron this fall as both Pisgah and Tuscola will have new faces at some key positions, but there will also be some experienced players making big returns.

In Waynesville, senior Jett Bartley will be returning to play quarterback this season for the Mountaineers. It will be the first time Tuscola Coach Jonathan Crompton has had a quarterback return under his tenure — with his previous two being seniors who graduated after one season starting.

Bartley was good last season, completing 56% of his passes for 1,600 yards, 16 touchdowns and 11 picks. This year, Tuscola will be hoping the man under center can cut back on those picks a little bit while taking another big leap forward.

Bartley will also be throwing to a really good group of receivers this season — a group that all made impacts as sophomores last year and will be even better this season. That could help Bartley take that next big step forward.

For the Bears, there's one name that

jumps off the page — senior running back Landon Pope. As a junior, Pope rushed for 748 yards and 11 touchdowns.

The senior doesn't shy away from contact, often seemingly enjoying running through a defender instead of around them. Pisgah Coach Ricky Brindley said he expects Pope to be a workhorse back this season. After averaging just over 12 carries per game, Brindley said they are expecting 15-20 per game from the senior this season.

As those extra touches roll in, defenses are going to get a lot more tired of tackling the powerful running back. Expect Pope to just continue to get better late in games this season.

VOLLEYBALL

The Pisgah volleyball team has a couple of really good seniors com-

ing back this fall, but a lot of focus should go towards sophomore Scout Belue.

Last season, Belue burst onto the scene as a freshman — quickly making an impact for the Bears. Belue averaged just under a kill and a dig per set in more limited playing time than what she will receive this year.

While seniors Macey Devlin and Chandler Lowery will get a lot of praise this season, and rightfully so, it'll be interesting to see just how far Belue can progress after a great freshman season.

For Tuscola, junior Julia Wells will likely have a big role for the Mountaineers this fall.

Wells is a do-it-all player, competing in volleyball, basketball, soccer, cross country and track. The jack-of-all-

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trades has turned herself into a key player in all of her sports through her first two seasons.

On the volleyball court, Wells will have to step up in a big way after Tuscola graduated eight seniors last season. Wells has a lot of athleticism and is incredibly scrappy. She'll find a way to contribute big time for the Mounties.

SOCCER

Tuscola senior Stonewall Strickland is set for a big season for the Mounties this year. Strickland finished second on the team last year in goals with eight. Fellow senior Bryce Ferguson led the team with 15.

While Ferguson will likely grab a lot of goals once again, Strickland's game is just so fun to watch. The senior is a speed demon, burning past defense and tapping shots into the back of the net.

The senior can score in the blink of an eye. If he can further develop his finishing to another level, Strickland could be one of Western North Carolina's best strikers in 2025.

For the Bears, senior forward Osvaldo Munoz-Velasquez will need to step up in a big way. Last season, Andrew Hardin led the team with 20 goals. Hardin has since graduated, leaving Munoz-Velas-



Diana Gates

SENIOR SIGNAL CALLER — Tuscola senior Jett Bartley is back for his second season at the helm of the Mountaineers' offense. The quarterback will be a key piece in Tuscola's success this season.

quez as the leading scorer among the returners.

Last year, he scored 12 goals. Without Hardin in front of him, it will be up to the senior to help

cover some of those missing goals. He's got the potential to hit the 20-goal mark as the Bears' target man up top.

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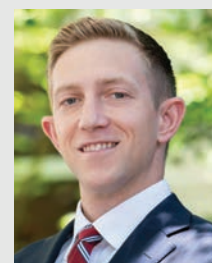
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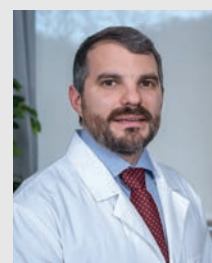
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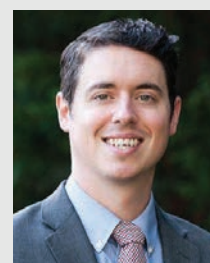
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