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2026 FALL SPORTS GUIDE

PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER

Jonathan Key

GENERAL MANAGER

Karl Miller

SPORTS EDITOR

Aarik Long

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES

Jennifer Worley

jennifer@themountaineer.com

Alan Sharp

asharp@themountaineer.com

DESIGN/PRODUCTION

Heather Allen

Mac Heishman

Copies of the 2026 Fall Sports Guide can be found at The Mountaineer rack locations throughout Haywood County, at The Mountaineer office on Main Street in downtown Waynesville and online at www.themountaineer.com.

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Time for the next wave

Pisgah football looks to reload after a deep playoff run



Russ Parker — Starfire Media/Epic Photography

BEAR DOWN — Pisgah football is excited for a big 2026, but there are plenty of questions around the team after graduating a large and influential senior class last spring.

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Pisgah football is back in 2026 with more questions than answers after a successful 2025.

Last year, the Bears charged through two rounds of play-offs before being eliminated by Mountain 8 rivals Brevard in the fourth round. (They got a free pass on the first round of playoffs due to their high ranking.)

Pisgah finished the regular season with a record of 7-3, including a season-finale loss in double overtime to Brevard — a game that would've seen the Bears earn a second-straight split conference title with a win.

It was a big year for the Bears — thanks to a cohort of seniors who had racked up a wealth of experience at the varsity level. Pisgah had 22 seniors last season, many of whom played big roles on one side of the ball or the other.

That means the Bears are going to be

looking for new starters at several positions this year. But Coach Ricky Brindley feels good about the guys already starting to step up.

“We’ll be a lot better in October than we are right now. Development and growth are going to be key for us in terms of our ability to execute,” Brindley said. “It’s going to take some time for us to continue to grow and get better. We’re going to have to do a good job as coaches making sure we do that, and we prioritize that football IQ.”

A big chunk of the team will be coming up from the junior varsity squad, but Brindley has tried to keep schemes consistent between the two teams in order to make that transition simpler.

“The good news is that our JVs from last year used the same terminology, the same scheme, all that kind of stuff,” Brindley said. “They’ve got an idea of what we do and how we go about executing it. We’re just going to have to do it at a much faster pace. We are starting from

scratch, but it’s guys who have been in the system for several years now.”

The Bears look like they’ll have a lot of very athletic players at the skill positions, as well as a strong mix of experience and young talent in the trenches.

The team’s ceiling is extremely high, but it remains to be seen how well the team will gel early in the season.

Either way, it will be something new for Pisgah fans. The last few years have seen many of the same players making a big impact — from their sophomore years through their senior years.

Now it’s a chance for Pisgah Nation to adopt its next generation of fan favorites.

“I think everybody enjoyed watching Landon Pope run the ball, and Mason Putnam catch the ball, but seeing different guys out there this year might be enticing for some people to be able to come and watch and just see the new crop of players that hopefully have de-

veloped and have gotten better through the offseason,” Brindley said.

And luckily for Pisgah fans, most of the biggest games of the year will be held in the friendly confines of Pisgah Memorial Stadium.

Games against West Henderson, Brevard and Tuscola in conference, as well as a big non-conference battle with Mountain Heritage, highlight the home slate for the Bears this year.

The most important thing for the Bears this season is how they will answer whatever adversity they face, Brindley said.

“We’ve got a group of kids that just need to continue to develop, continue to work. That’s what that group did such a good job of last year. Whether it was after the Heritage game or after the Franklin game, to be able to respond and respond the right way. That’s what we’re looking for in this team,” Brindley said.

'Sky's the limit'

FOOTBALL

Veteran Mountaineer squad ready to lean on experience

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

When the Tuscola Mountaineers took the field for their first home game of the season, there was a lot to be excited about.

The team is returning an experienced squad in 2026 — a team without too many holes based on early preseason indicators.

Tuscola Coach Jonathan Crompton, a Tuscola alum who played quarterback for University of Tennessee and went to the NFL, is now in his fourth year back home leading the Mountaineers.

Over the last few seasons, the players have learned the system that the coaches want to run, making each year's transition a little bit easier.

"It's massive. They understand our lingo, our terminology of what we're wanting here and there, and what we're looking at schematically," Crompton said.

This year's senior class is strong 13 players deep, which is a tipping point for the team.

"The experience is the invaluable part. The moment's not going to be too big for anybody because they've done it for multiple years now," he said.

The Mountaineers finished last season with a 6-6 record and a 5th place finish in the Mountain 8. The season ended in the second round of playoffs, but the first-round was a sweet one, giving the Mountaineers a final victory on their home field.

Tuscola will look to keep that momentum rolling into this year. If the off-season is any indication, the Mountaineers are on pace to do just that.

"They've had a really good winter, spring, summer. We've got a lot of kids in the program, which is a good



Diana Gates

EXPERIENCED SQUAD — Tuscola football had a solid season last year, but now, the Mountaineers are back with a lot of the same pieces. The biggest difference this time around is having another season of experience under their belts.

thing. It's about 20 more than last year," Crompton said.

It's a big year for Mounties football fans, as well. This year marks the 90th anniversary of C.E. Weatherby Stadium, which opened as Waynesville Township High School Field on Sept. 18, 1936. While the high school has since moved to a new campus — it's now home to Waynesville Middle — the historic field still remains the home turf for Tuscola football.

The Mountaineers have a game on the anniversary date of Sept. 18, but it unfortunately falls as an away game on the road at West Henderson.

The season starts off with two games in the historic venue to open up the season.

"We're going to have some commem-

orative patches on our jersey for that, so that'll be fun to start the season off at home for the 90th year," Crompton said.

The strong senior class will be a big part of the Mountaineers' success this season. The experience of the 13 seniors translates into 13 coaches out on the field every Friday night, helping their younger teammates out on the fly.

"I'm excited for these kids. I really am. I'm gonna miss the hell out of this senior class," Crompton said.

As for the up-and-coming players, the coach is fired up about the new recruits coming into the program. The junior varsity squad is more than 50 players deep.

"I'm excited about our JV squad," Crompton said. "They are working their butts off. Our freshman class has come

up and meshed well with our sophomore class. They're the future, they're the next generation. I think we're in a good spot when it comes to those things because our kids have bought in from freshman to senior year."

That group is the future of the program, and Crompton feels confident about where things are going to be in the future.

But he's just as confident in this year. With the veteran players coming back, Crompton feels as though the sky is the limit for his team.

"I can't wait to see how they go perform on the field," Crompton said. "Because it ain't about us as coaches at all. It's about the kids on the field and on the sideline wearing the uniform, representing the 'Power T.'"

Who's taking the field?

A look at the new players shaping Pisgah football



Mikell Clark-Webb

IMPACT PLAYER — Senior Tahari McLean is stepping into a much bigger role this season, but looks primed to take full advantage of the opportunity.

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Pisgah's football roster had a lot of question marks — but a lot of potential — heading into the season this year. Many of last year's starters were graduating seniors, leaving a lot of holes to fill.

But Coach Ricky Brindley feels good about the guys stepping into those positions. Many of them have proven themselves at the junior varsity level. Here's a look at the interesting players all over the field for the Bears this season.

Quarterback

In the countdown to the first game, Pisgah fans were eagerly anticipating who would take the field

as quarterback. The Bears had really solid signal callers the last few seasons, first with Aaron Clark running the show for three years before Matthew Mehaffey took over last season.

This year, however, things were up in the air. Two players were competing for the job over the summer.

"I think we've got two guys right now that we feel really good about, and I think they have different skill sets," Brindley said during pre-season practice. "They're both high character, good leaders. Either way we go there, we feel really good about it."

One is senior Zane Wilson, who Brindley said, "has done a really good job for us this summer."

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The other is junior Jaxon Swanger, who has been the quarterback for the JV squad the last couple of years. "He's one of those guys that you can call anything, and you have complete confidence that he's going to understand exactly what you want him to do," Brindley said.

Having two guys that can play the position will be a big advantage for Pisgah this season.

"There's been many years where there was one quarterback in an entire program," Brindley said. "You didn't have a JV quarterback that you felt good about, and if he went down, you were scrambling. I think to be able to have two of them like that is a big deal."

Offensive line

No matter which guy wins the starting job, he'll have some solid protection in front of him. Leading the line will be seniors Nic Messer and Carson Riley, both of whom are returning starters from last year.



Mikell Clark-Webb

BACK FROM INJURY — After only playing in a few games before getting hurt last year, junior Easton Frady is back and ready to make an impact in the rushing attack.

"We've got some guys that we feel really confident in," Brindley said.

Joining Messer and Riley is junior Hank Case. Case, who Brindley described as "probably our best

JV lineman last year," came up and played tight end on the varsity level in the playoffs last season. Except to see him on left tackle.

"He knew the scheme, whether he

was a tight end or left guard, left tackle, didn't make a difference," Brindley said. "He's a technician, not the biggest guy in the world, but he's got great pad level, and he gets off the ball the right way. I think he's got an opportunity to be really successful."

Senior Roan Looman will also provide a big body at the right guard position.

"Roan is a guy that's developed over the course of his time here," Brindley said. "He didn't see a whole lot of playing time last year, but he got better and better and better. He's a big kid that's got pretty good feet."

Skill positions

The skill positions have some of the most experience on the team.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

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Mikell Clark-Webb

QB BATTLE — Senior Zane Wilson is in the race for the starting quarterback job this fall.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

Seniors Ayden Rana and Tahari McLean both have varsity experience and are poised to play big roles for the Bears as receivers, running backs and defensive backs.

“I think it’s huge anytime you can go to a Friday night and you’ve got guys that have done it, particularly in big-time games. It can give them some poise and some composure when they’re out there. To be able

to have those guys and lean on them is going to make a big difference for us,” Brindley said.

The team is also excited about junior Josh Lowe’s athleticism. Lowe won two state titles in indoor track and field jumping events, but has had some injury concerns — with a pair of injuries costing him the end of last spring’s track season and last JV football season.

He’s a guy the Bears are looking to use both in the backfield and out wide in a utility role, similar to what a player like graduating-senior Mason Putnam played in recent years.

“We know he can go the distance any time he touches it,” Brindley said. “I think he had four or five touchdowns in the two JV games he played last year before he broke his collarbone, so we’ve got to be able to get him the ball out of the backfield and make sure we utilize his explosiveness.”

At running back, Easton Frady is



Mikell Clark-Webb

POTENTIAL QB — It’s a two-man race for the quarterback position. Junior Jaxon Swanger served as the man under center for the JV squad last season.

returning from injury as well, only being able to play in a couple of JV games last season.

“He’s back. He’s healthy. We think

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Easton's going to be able to carry a good load for us in the backfield," Brindley said.

But he'll be splitting carries with some of the guys lining up at receiver, as well as Enka transfer junior Zaiden Monteith.

"Excited to see what Zaiden Monteith can do. He came right in and works extremely hard; he has a chance to be a starter on both sides of the ball for us. I'm excited to see what he can do offensively and defensively," Brindley said.

The Bears also have sophomore Angel Mendoza, who put together a solid year on the JV squad last season.

Running back is going to be a deep spot for the Bears this season, a change from graduating-senior Landon Pope — who is now playing for Western Carolina University — getting the majority of touches last season.

"It'll probably be a lot of tailback

by committee where nobody gets 40 carries a game, but all of them get 10 to 12," Brindley said.

Defense and special teams



Mikell Clark-Webb

NEW ROLE — Senior wide receiver/defensive back Ayden Rana served as a rotational player last season, but is set to have a much larger impact on both sides of the ball this season.

Pisgah's defense has a lot of returning talent, like junior Gavin Cantrell, who got a significant amount of playing time at linebacker last season, while Rana and McLean got reps in the secondary last

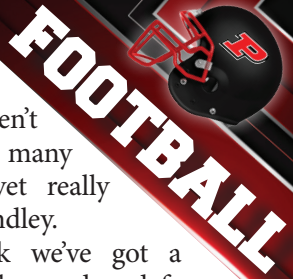
year.

But the guys who haven't gotten as many chances yet really excite Brindley.

"I think we've got a chance to be good on defense when you look at the pieces that we're going to plug in. We've got some really good players that just have very little experience on Friday nights," Brindley said.

At kicker, the Bears will have sophomore Luis Mendoza, who is also on the soccer team.

"Luis has been very consistent with his extra points through the summer. He's been here every day. He's worked extremely hard. He's a kid that right now in the summer you feel good about, and we'll see how it goes as the bullets start flying," Brindley said.



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Experience runs deep

Tuscola football brings back veteran core with plenty of firepower



Diana Gates

GROUND ATTACK — Tuscola junior Sam Trantham rushed for about 1,500 yards and 12 touchdowns last season. This year, he looks to keep the foot on the pedal.

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

The Tuscola Mountaineers are poised to hit their stride this year, with a deep bench of experience and talent returning for the 2026 campaign.

While the squad had a handful of graduating seniors from last season to replace in key positions, the team as a whole has locked in to the coaching strategy of head coach Jonathan Crompton, now in his fourth year.

“We communicate really well on both sides of the ball with all of our players because they trust the system, and we trust them implicitly,” Crompton said.

This year’s seniors are the first cohort of players that have been with Crompton all four years.

“This year’s fun for me because these seniors are my first freshman class, so

it’s fun to see how they’ve grown over the time,” Crompton said.

The biggest thing, the coach said, is that the players are on the same page.

“We have guys that understand what we’re wanting, and they know that they’re 1 of 11. We’re 11 pieces to a puzzle on offense, defense, and special teams,” Crompton said.

Quarterback

The biggest question mark for fans, however, is who would be playing under center this season.

Prior to the first game of the season, Crompton was keeping his cards close to his vest, not yet ready to reveal who the Mountaineers would field in this position.

“I don’t think it really matters who takes the snap because we’ve got a cou-

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Diana Gates

BIG-TIME PLAYER — Tuscola senior Isaiah Hyatt is expected to make a big impact for the Mountaineers this season after a couple of great years at wide receiver.

ple gamers that can go and just run the system and play ball and understand what we want,” Crompton said.

One option was junior John Hansen, who played quarterback at the JV level

as a freshman.

“His football IQ is through the roof. We can have intellectual conversations about schematics. He’s a kid that I know if somebody lines up wrong, he’ll correct it. And as a coach, there’s not many better feelings than that because things happen in the game. It’s never going to be perfect,” Crompton said.

During a preseason scrimmage, senior Isaiah Hyatt, who has spent most of his time in high school at the wide receiver and defensive back position, was taking snaps at the quarterback position while Hansen was running routes. Hyatt brings a lot of speed to the position, which could be an exciting wrinkle in the Tuscola offense.

But the team has talented athletes up and down the roster, creating a mystery among fans who would trot out to take the snaps week one.

Defense

Arguably the most talented part of Tuscola’s team this year is the guys outside of the trenches for the Mountaineers.



Diana Gates

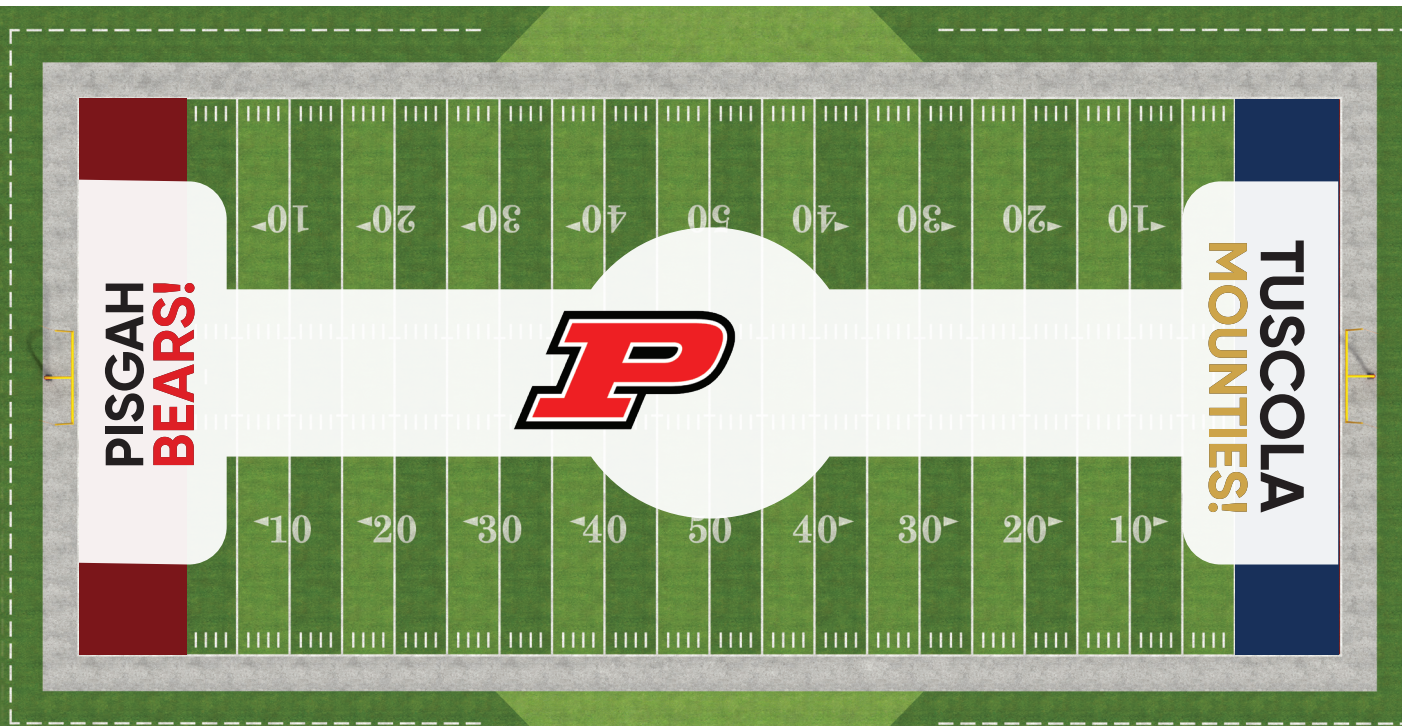
BALL HAWK — Tuscola senior Elijah Pruitt has been phenomenal at racking up interceptions over the last couple of seasons.

On the defensive side of the ball, seniors Elijah Pruitt and Isaiah Hyatt will both play big roles in the secondary.

“I trust their eyes because they’ve done it for multiple years now. That’s the fun part for me is to see their evo-

lution in the game. It’s clicking for them because they’re intelligent young men, especially on the football side with their IQ,” Crompton said. “It’s always stress-

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FOOTBALL



Mikell Clark-Webb

STEPPING UP — Junior Chace Smalley (pictured locked up with a Pisgah offensive lineman) had a big sophomore campaign, totaling two sacks and nine TFLs. Smalley could have an even bigger year as a junior.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

ful, but it's a lot less stressful having those guys back there."

Pruitt in particular has been a force

to reckon with for opposing quarterbacks given his talent in the secondary, racking up multiple interceptions in each of the last two seasons.

"He's a ballhawk," Crompton said.

Junior Jake Durbin could also be a strong candidate to make the jump up to the varsity secondary this fall. He had a strong season for the JV squad last year, including an interception and kick return touchdown in the JV County Clash game last season.

In front of the secondary, guys like senior Ty Walker will make a big impact at the linebacker spot. He's been an influential player the last couple of years for the Mountaineers and is ready to finish out his high school career with a bang.

"The only system he's ever run is our system from the day he was 14 years old to now as a senior, because he's been on varsity every year," Crompton said.

Junior Chace Smalley could also have an impact at the linebacker position this year after exploding onto the scene for the Mountaineers last year with two sacks and nine tackles for loss.

Offense

Hyatt and Pruitt will be big pieces for the offense once again after racking up



Mikell Clark-Webb

NEW FACE — Tuscola junior Jake Durbin made a big splash during last year's JV County Clash with a couple of big plays. Could he be a missing piece for the varsity squad this season?

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the lion's share of the receiving yards for Tuscola last season. Both players offer a deep ball threat while also being able to get open in the midrange game. Hyatt could take over the quarterback position this season, however. If that is the case, Hansen's ability as a large wide receiver or a tight end could be heavily utilized, as well.

Tuscola's running game could be the best that it's been in a while, however.

Junior Sam Trantham returns after a 1,400-yard, 12-touchdown season last year as Tuscola's lead running back. Expect Trantham to shoulder a heavy load in the Mountaineer offense this season.

Walker, meanwhile, proved to be an effective change of pace in the backfield on his way to 10 total touchdowns last season — seven on the ground and three through the air.

Junior Everett Messer is expected to have a leadership role on the offensive line for the Mountaineers, as well.

The offense has all the weapons to be explosive, if the ball bounces their way

in some big moments.

Mix of experience and youth

The key to any good team is a mix of experienced players who have been-there-done-that, combined with players who are younger but still extremely talented.

During one pre-season practice, coaches took a break to discuss this year's underclassmen and the future of the program with The Mountaineer. They rattled off players that the youngsters reminded them of. By the 10th player, they realized they had a special group of underclassmen.

"That's a good thing if we're getting to where double-digit freshmen and sophomores remind us of our juniors and seniors, to where we can really build for the future — and that's what we're trying to do," Crompton said.

On the flip side of the spectrum, this year's senior class of 13 is ready to make their impact on the program.

"Every senior class has their own unique way. Once winter starts, you



Diana Gates

LOCK DOWN DEFENSE — While senior Ty Walker has taken plenty of snaps at running back, he really excels on the defensive side of things.

start seeing what the evolution of next year's team will look like," Crompton said.

But at the end of the day, the coaches feel excited about the team they have ready for this year.

"We're playing a big kids game, and our job as coaches, in my mind, is to put them in the best position, support the crap out of them, coach them hard and love on them hard," Crompton said.



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Most of Pisgah football's toughest tests come at home

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

This season's schedule should excite folks in Pisgah Nation. The Bears face a lot of challenging opponents — and more often than not, the Bears get those opponents at home.

One of the biggest challenges for Pisgah this season was its opening game of non-conference play against Mountain Heritage from Burnsville — the same team that beat the Bears 48-19 on the road to open up last season. That team went on to finish the regular season as the No. 1 seed in the 3A West bracket, eventually losing in the third round of playoffs by just one point.

Pisgah Coach Ricky Brindley hoped to turn the tables this year, however, despite the Cougars bringing back a lot of talent, from quarterback to running

back to the offensive line.

"We know how talented they are," Brindley said. "They've got a good football team on paper. To be able to play them at home and hopefully start the season on the right note is important for us."

The Bears follow that up with a road trip to Swain County — a squad that Pisgah beat 28-27 last season. That game will present another major challenge for the Bears, but another chance to test the team and see where things are.

Non-conference play wraps up with a home game against Enka. The Bears have won 13 straight games against Enka, and 20 of the last 21. That game should give Pisgah a chance to get settled back in and gain confidence ahead of a tough Mountain 8 schedule.

Once conference play begins, the



Mikell Clark-Webb

HOME-FIELD ADVANTAGE — The advantage of playing in front of Pisgah Nation on the banks of the Pigeon River will be very evident this season with the majority of the Bears' biggest games this year coming at Pisgah Memorial Stadium.

Bears hit the road to face Smoky Mountain before returning home to face North Henderson. Although Pisgah won each of those games last year, both teams are scrappy and will give the Bears a fight.

The Bears' toughest road game of the season comes the following week with a trip to Franklin. That is always a tough environment to play in, and Franklin is likely to have a strong squad once again this season — making that road game one of the biggest contests of the season.

Over the final five weeks of the season, Pisgah has three home games, one road game and a bye. This stretch of games includes three of the biggest of the year — and all three will be played at Pisgah Memorial Stadium.

The trio of home games begins with West Henderson — a perennial contender in the Mountain 8.

The following week, the Bears host Tuscola in the annual County Clash game.

"Being able to play the big one back down here on the river again — hopefully that's a great environment. Hopefully it's an opportunity for our people

to be able to come out and see us play well," Brindley said.

Hosting that game on their home turf means a lot to both the fans and players.

"That's such an important game in this community and to our kids and to this county," Brindley said. "I probably look forward to that one the most just because of the environment that it always provides."

Pisgah then takes its week off before a trip to East Henderson — a game the Bears should be able to handle, having not lost to the Eagles since 2017 and winning every game over that stretch by multiple scores.

The season finale is another huge matchup, as Pisgah hosts Brevard. The Blue Devils gave Pisgah two of its losses last season, including eliminating the Bears from the playoffs. Brevard went undefeated in conference play last season and will be looking to repeat as Mountain 8 champions.

"I think it makes a difference. Having to go on the road to Brevard the last three times we've played has been difficult because that's a tough place to play, and they were obviously an exceptional football team," Brindley said.

2026 PISGAH FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

8/21 HOME VS. MOUNTAIN HERITAGE

8/28 AWAY @ SWAIN COUNTY

9/4 HOME VS. ENKA

9/11 AWAY @ SMOKY MOUNTAIN*

9/18 HOME VS. AT NORTH HENDERSON*

9/25 AWAY @ FRANKLIN*

10/2 HOME VS. WEST HENDERSON*

10/9 HOME VS. TUSCOLA*

10/16 BYE (NO GAME)

10/23 AWAY @ EAST HENDERSON*

10/30 HOME VS. BREVARD*

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Ready for the heat?

Tuscola football faces a challenging slate with big tests at every turn

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

The Mountaineers have an exciting schedule this season. From early home games to tough road tests and everything in between, there's plenty of games on the calendar for Tuscola fans to salivate over.

Home games in particular will be big for Tuscola this year. Over the last two seasons, Tuscola's home record is 6-5, while the road record is 5-7.

It's not a huge difference, but it's an edge the Mountaineers will hope to capitalize on.

"I always tell people, and maybe I'm a little biased, but I think we've got one of the best home atmospheres — not just home field advantage, but the atmosphere in general," Tuscola Coach Jonathan Crompton said. "It's always nice to play home week one and try to get the

season started off on the right foot in front of our fans."

The season opened with a tough home-game challenge against Robbinsville — serving as an early-season test for the Mountaineers. The Black Knights made it to the 1A state title game last year, losing 9-8. Robbinsville beat Tuscola in the opener last season in Robbinsville, 28-14.

Tuscola stays at home in week two for a game against Cherokee. The Mountaineers won a close game in Cherokee last year, 36-35.

"They're a historic program. They're always tough," Crompton said. But playing Cherokee is a no-brainer for a non-conference season warm up — both in terms of a competitive match-up and close travel distance.

"Whether you're home and away, neither team has to feel like they're not



Diana Gates

FRIENDLY CONFINES — Tuscola's home stadium, C.E. Weatherby Stadium, is celebrating 90 years of high school football games calling the field home this year.

going to have a fan base because it's only 40 minutes," Crompton said.

The Mountaineers then wrap up non-conference play with a road trip to face South Caldwell in week three. Tuscola won that game 42-6 last season at home, but is facing a nearly two-hour drive to the game this year.

The game against South Caldwell is the first in three straight road games for the Mountaineers — with a pair of away games kicking off Mountain 8 conference play.

"You can't always get what you want, but going on a three-game road trip is not ideal," Crompton said. "You'd rather break it up."

Those two opening road games include trips to North Henderson and West Henderson. And both will be tough. The Knights are always a scrappy team that doesn't give away wins, while West Henderson is consistently one of the stronger teams in the Mountain 8.

The Mountaineers beat North Henderson and lost to West Henderson last year.

Then, Tuscola returns home for a two-game homestand against Smoky Mountain and Franklin.

The Mountaineers beat the Mustangs

20-0 last year as Smoky Mountain had an uncharacteristically bad season, but fell 28-7 on the road against Franklin.

The following week, on Oct. 9, the Mountaineers go back on the road, but just across the county for the annual County Clash rivalry game against Pisgah. That game is always a massive one on the schedule and this year will be no different. The Bears have won the last two meetings after a two-game winning streak from Tuscola in the series.

After the Pisgah game is the Mountaineers' bye week — one that will be greatly needed after the grind of the Mountain 8 schedule.

"Having a bye in week nine can give us a nice breather before the last two and then hopefully heading into making a playoff run. Obviously, we've got to stay healthy, got to do all the things right in the meantime. But that's why I was okay with having the bye week where it was, is to try to get rejuvenated for the final stretch," Crompton said.

After the bye, the regular season wraps up with a tough road trip against defending conference champions Brevard, then back home to wrap up the regular season with senior night against East Henderson.

2026 TUSCOLA FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

8/21 HOME VS. ROBBINSVILLE

8/28 HOME VS. CHEROKEE

9/4 AWAY @ SOUTH CALDWELL

9/11 AWAY @ NORTH HENDERSON*

9/18 AWAY @ WEST HENDERSON*

9/25 HOME VS. SMOKY MOUNTAIN*

10/2 HOME vs. FRANKLIN*

10/19 AWAY @ PISGAH*

10/16 BYE (NO GAME)

10/23 AWAY @ BREVARD*

10/30 HOME VS. EAST HENDERSON*

ASTERISK = CONFERENCE GAME



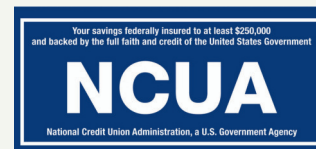
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Who will take home this year's **County Clash**?

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Every year, the County Clash football game is a sight to behold. The game regularly draws more than 10,000 fans to one end of the county or the other to root for their favorite high school football team.

This year's game presents a handful of fascinating storylines to keep an eye on. The biggest, obviously, is who will win the big game on Friday, Oct. 9. It's Pisgah's turn to host on their home field, and the last time the Mountaineer won on the Bear's turf was 2012.

Pisgah won the last two meetings in the series — a 35-14 win last year in Waynesville and a 10-7 win in Canton the year prior.

The teams come into the game with two entirely different rosters. The Mountaineers have a ton of experience in a lot of positions. The defense is loaded with players that have equal parts



Mikell Clark-Webb

BIG IMPACT — Get ready for a hard-hitting County Clash battle this season.

experience and talent, while the offense returns a pair of great receivers and a 1,500-yard rusher from last year.

On the other side of the field, the Bears don't have many experienced starters. Pisgah had 22 seniors last season — enough for a full starting 11 on both sides of the ball. A majority of those seniors played key roles in Pis-

gah's success last year, both offensively and defensively.

The biggest question mark for both teams before the season, however, was who was going to be taking the snaps on offense. Both teams graduated their starting quarterbacks last season, and both teams went into the year with a quarterback battle going on.

Both teams have capable options, but you can bet neither coach will want to stray too far away from the rushing attack. Tuscola returns a fantastic running back in Sam Trantham, while the Bears have a running-back-by-committee approach with several talented halfbacks in the backfield.

The defense should be where both teams shine. Once again, Tuscola has the experience advantage at defensive back and linebacker, but Pisgah has some talented players ready to step up to the challenge. The Bears and Mountaineers will likely both lean on the defense to get them to some wins this season.

But as for the game itself? You can throw out both teams' records and stats going into the game. It doesn't matter how good or bad either team is; you can expect plenty of fireworks when the Bears and Mountaineers meet in Canton on Oct. 9.



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Aiming higher

Pisgah volleyball sets even bigger goals this year

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Pisgah volleyball made it to the third round of the state playoffs last year. It's an impressive record, but the Bears aren't settling.

Last year's squad only featured two seniors, so a lot of the team is returning this fall.

"The girls coming in have really stepped into those positions and are handling it very well," Pisgah Coach Carter Tolley said. "The level of competition that they're at now has definitely improved from where

we were last year. They're constantly growing."

This year's team brings a wealth of experience to the court with a lot of upperclassmen — specifically a big junior class.

"They're all comfortable with each other already, so we haven't really had to develop in that way. But just having the leadership that they have all gotten through these past couple years and how comfortable they are makes it easier on the court," Tolley said.

Stepping up

Macey Devlin and Chandler Lowery were big leaders for the squad as seniors last year, and although they've graduated, they left an impression on the program.

"The two we lost were big leaders on and off the court," Tolley said. "Our younger girls have learned you can't give up no matter what the circumstances are. The girls really learned those leadership roles from them, which has definitely carried over to the beginning of this season, so far."

This year, seniors Alexis Markos and Jade Cody will play crucial roles for the Bears. Junior Scout Belue will also be expected to step into a big role.

"I've always seen Scout as a leader," Tolley said. "She just has those tendencies to take over whenever she needs to, and she's just very mature for her age. It's nice to see her constantly supporting her teammates and everything."

Tolley said all three have grown in their volleyball skills this year and



Mikell Clark-Webb

BUILDING ON SUCCESS — Pisgah volleyball made a run into the state playoffs last season. Now, the Bears are back and looking for more.

will be moving around the court more.

The coach is also excited about a couple of younger players. Freshman Janee Lancaster is expected to make a big impact in her first season with the Bears.

"She has been very, very fun to watch, and I see very bright things in her future," Tolley said.

Tolley is also expecting junior Sloan Riddle to take a big step forward this year.

"She is going to be stepping into that libero position and taking after Chandler and following in her footsteps. I have 100% confidence in her," Tolley said.

Building momentum

The team is coming off a huge playoff run last season. The Bears won a pair of games on their way to the third round, including an upset of the No. 3 team in the west in the second round.

This year, the team is looking to build on that.

"I think the playoff run really boosted their confidence, knowing that they could succeed and they could win these games if they play to their fullest potential," Tolley said. "I think it's going to be really nice to be coming off of those wins and seeing how we take those and run with it."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24



Mikell Clark-Webb

SENIOR PRESENCE — Senior Jade Cody will serve a major role for the Bears as one of the team's tallest and most experienced players.

'Nothing but volleyball'

Mountaineers lean in to court chemistry



Diana Gates

BUILDING ON EXPERIENCE — Tuscola volleyball feels ready to put its best foot forward in 2026 after gaining a lot of experience last season.

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

After a tough 2025 season, the Tuscola volleyball team is back and ready to rebound in 2026.

"Last year was my first year. It was a rebuilding year," said Tuscola Coach Amy Brown. "We have really put the work in this summer to try to build for this season, and I'm very excited for where we're at right now."

The Mountaineers only mounted two wins last season, but they gained a lot of valuable experience, with a pair of freshmen getting a lot of playing time. The team was close to several wins and improved their chemistry along the way.

Over the summer, the team attended an Appalachian State team camp, went through a two-day clinic with an Olympic coach, and hit plenty of scrimmages. They've done

everything they can to prepare for this year's campaign.

"We have done nothing but volleyball this summer because I think that's what it takes to build a program, and they're the ones that have set that standard," Brown said.

Experienced squad

The Mountaineers only had two seniors last season, allowing them to play more of the team's younger players. But those two seniors were also critical in establishing the culture of never giving up.

"The seniors paved the way for what's expected," Brown said. "They won two games last year, but that didn't really show how they played. We fought, and we battled."

This year, Tuscola has a larger senior class and a lot of returning players with experience playing along-

side each other. Last season's team only had two players with varsity experience, but this year's squad is loaded with varsity experience.

"The chemistry on the court is what is going to benefit us the most. They know each other, they know what to expect. We're not the young team with freshmen coming together," Brown said. "I felt like last year we were planting the seeds for the fruit of this year."

This year's senior group has gone through coaching changes, rebuilding seasons and the death of their coach, Jody Ward, over the last few years.

"What I love most about my senior group is the team culture that we have. I think the word that describes it the most is resiliency. Last year, they were the underdogs, and this year, they're coming to win," Brown said.

The senior group was on Brown's

squad when she coached the JV team, creating some continuity, as well.

Setting the tone

When asked who among that group was stepping up to be a leader this year, Brown couldn't narrow the list down.

"It's hard to pick just one," Brown said. "They each have their role, and they know that role. When that comes together, that just builds positive team culture."

She pointed to senior Emma Duncan as the team captain.

"She is the kid that you want on the court at all times. She's not so much your power hitter. She is your encourager, your leader, your constant steady. She's the one that you can rely on in tough situations because she knows what it takes,"

CONTINUED ON PAGE 25



Diana Gates

STANDING TALL — Players who earned a lot of reps last year, like senior Julia Wells (left) and sophomore Samantha Horton (right), will be critical for Tuscola's success this season.



VOLLEYBALL



Mikell Clark-Webb

TEAM LEADER — Junior Scout Belue comes into this season with a couple of years of varsity experience under her belt. She's set to be one of the team's most important players this season after a big year as a sophomore.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

Pisgah will start the year off with some challenging opponents, including TC Roberson, Hendersonville, Cherokee and Enka.

While those games will be important for playoff seeding at the end of the year, the bigger benefit is the preparation they will bring for an incredibly tough Mountain 8 conference.

"I'm just worried about now getting the girls prepared, and you're not going to do that if you don't play competition and teams that are (up) to your standards. It'll definitely be helping us prepare for whenever we start to play teams like Franklin and Smoky and West Henderson," Tolley said.

The Mountain 8 is loaded with talent this season. Pisgah, West Henderson, Franklin and Brevard all made it to at least the third round of state last season, while teams like Smoky Mountain, North Henderson

and Tuscola will all be looking to compete for a conference title.

When everything shakes out, Pisgah has as good a chance as anyone else to win the Mountain 8 conference title this season.

"It's going to be a fun year," Tolley said.



Mikell Clark-Webb

SENIOR LEADER — Senior Alexis Markos is ready to make an impact for the Bears this season.



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Brown said.

The coach was also excited about what senior Julia Wells brings to the team. Wells is a multi-sport athlete and brings a level of competitiveness and athleticism that any team would love to have.

“This is only her third year playing volleyball, but what she brings to the team, I can’t coach, and that’s character. That’s expectations,” Brown said.

She also praised seniors Alyssa Trantham and Miranda Anderson for what they bring to the team away from the court.

“They are our cheerleaders. They’re the ones that are inclusive to the underclassmen that make them feel like they need to be here. They hold everybody accountable,” Brown said.

But that’s not to say the younger players won’t be important. Sophomores Stella Yarrington and Samantha Horton played major roles

as freshmen last year, with the same being expected this year.

It will all be critical this year as the Mountain 8 conference is loaded with talent once again. Half of the conference — Pisgah, West Henderson, Franklin and Brevard — made it to the third round of the state playoffs last season.

“We have a tough conference. We are in probably one of the toughest conferences in the state of North Carolina, and I’m just really excited to see how they compete this year,” Brown said.

But the Mountaineers have prepared all offseason with tough competition.

“We challenged ourselves with playing teams from Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia this summer because we had to elevate our game, and I also had to elevate my game as a coach because this is only my second year coaching varsity,” Brown said. “I also had to learn.”



SENIOR LEADER — Senior Julia Wells will likely play a big role for the Mountaineers this season, bringing a level of athleticism and competitiveness that will be crucial for the team.



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Who will claim this year's volleyball County Clashes?

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Both Pisgah and Tuscola will come into the new year with experienced squads loaded with upperclassmen talent with lots of games under their belts.

Each team only had a pair of seniors on each squad last season, meaning there aren't many holes to fill on either end of the county.

That should lead to some thrilling County Clash battles. Last year, Pisgah won both contests against its cross-county rivals, extending the Bears' winning streak in the series to 10 games.

Pisgah won both of those meetings in a clean 3-0 sweep, too.

But the games weren't as lopsided as the numbers appear. Tuscola gave Pisgah a fight both times they met up. With

each team just having more experience and more chemistry this season, those games could be even tighter.

The Bears may appear to be the season favorites, but the Mountaineers shouldn't be counted out. County Clash meetings always bring out the best of both squads, and Tuscola has a ton of upsides this season.

For Tuscola, players like seniors Emma Duncan and Julia Wells could have a big impact, but sophomores Stella Yarrington and Samantha Horton might be the difference-makers in their second season on the varsity squad.

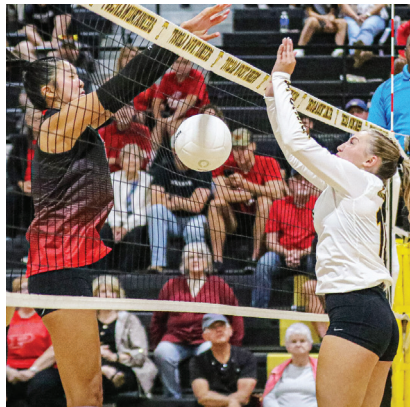
Pisgah will rely on seniors Alexis Markos and Jade Cody and junior Scout Belue. But they've also got a couple of wild cards who can step up on the big stage of the County Clash. Freshman

Janeé Lancaster is looking to make a splash in her first games against Tuscola and junior Sloan Riddle will step into a new role this season.

No matter who wins the games, expect a high-intensity contest with a loud crowd. With both fanbases turning up in full force for these two games, the gyms are always deafening when big moments happen — and you can count on plenty of big moments between these two squads.

Can the Bears extend their winning streak to 12 games against Tuscola, or will the Mountaineers get their first win over the Bears since 2019?

Pisgah will host the first meeting on Sept. 3. Tuscola hosts the second contest on Sept. 29.



Mikell Clark-Webb

BATTLE AT THE NET — A battle of then-junior Jade Cody (left) and then-freshman Stella Yarrington (right) is likely to play out again this season with both players expected to make an impact for their side.



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A new way forward

New coach, new system builds on Pisgah soccer success

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Pisgah soccer is ready to build on a successful 2025 this season. But they'll be doing it with a new coach in charge.

Last year, the Bears won a first-round playoff game against cross-county rivals Tuscola before exiting the playoffs in the second round.

But things will be different for the Bears this season. For one, the team lost eight seniors — nearly an entire starting lineup.

The team will also have a new coach with Luis Garcia taking the reins of the Bears soccer team.

"I'm gonna bring a different system, and I am very excited that at least we have a few players who understand the game system that we want to present," Garcia said.

Garcia was previously the head coach for Pisgah's girls' team for a season and has been around Pisgah soccer quite a bit, coaching as an assistant and a JV coach with



the boys program for several years.

Garcia said his team is going to play in a 3-4-3 formation with the focus being on playing down the wings. It's a strategy that will stretch opponents horizontally and use speed to expose weaknesses on the flanks.

"We're gonna put a lot of speed on the lines, and with the finishing in the center, that's the plan that we have. The speed is gonna be the secret," Garcia said.

The team's leading scorer last season, Osvaldo Munoz-Velazquez, was a graduating senior, leaving an opening for someone to step into.

And there are certainly players to fill that gap. Senior Miguel Gonzalez Perez scored 11 goals while adding five assists. Sophomore Luis Mendoza Resendiz also added six goals, while senior Maximiliano Andrade scored five goals with a team-leading six assists.

"We feel confident that we can have a good season with this team. We just have to work hard," Garcia said.

While the 3-4-3 is the primary

plan for the Bears, if that doesn't work, Garcia has a backup plan.

"Once conference play starts, if the system isn't working, we have a plan B, but I have faith that this system is gonna help us," Garcia said.

That backup plan would be to switch to a more guarded 4-4-2 formation. In that, one of the forwards would be replaced by a defender, but the plan would still be to attack down the wings — just with more defensive backing.

A big focus early in the season has been on making sure everyone is on the same page.

"We're still working on this DNA, this connection to everybody. Everything needs to be connected 100% so the system can work correctly," Garcia said.

Freshman Lee Eastland has earned early-season experience in goal this year for the Bears.

Ultimately, Garcia said, the season comes down to the mentality the team takes. Soccer is a very mental game. While having the athleticism and talent is important,



Mikell Clark-Webb

ASSIST LEADER — Senior Maximiliano Andrade led the team in assists last year. This year, in his final season as a Bear, he looks to pick up where he left off.

having the right mindset is critical to success.

"It's a competition, and we've got this mentality that we need to compete. It's just a competition to see who can get the ball first, and that's the mentality, the philosophy that I just want to put to them," Garcia said.



Mikell Clark-Webb

DO-IT-ALL — Pisgah senior Miguel Gonzalez Perez was all over the field last season, making plays for the Bears wherever he was needed.

Back to the basics

Tuscola soccer looks to turn things around with defense-first approach



Diana Gates

NEW FACES — From coach down through most of the starters, there's a lot of new, but familiar faces around Tuscola soccer this season, as the Mountaineers look to turn the corner.

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

There's a lot of cautious optimism around the Tuscola soccer program this fall.

The team struggled last season, finishing with a 3-17-1 overall record and winning just one game in Mountain 8 play. But the team has a new coach back in the saddle — one who has over three decades experience on the soccer field — and is primed to take a step forward this year.

"They're coming off a 1-13 conference season, so we've got nowhere to go but up," said Tuscola Coach Ray Sugg. "So far, attitudes have been really good. I am enjoying myself. It's been fun so far."

It'll be a pretty clean slate for the Mountaineers this year, as well.

Seven seniors graduated from the program last season.

"Last year's team was very senior heavy. Some very good soccer players walked across the stage and left us," Sugg said.

But many of the returning players are ones Sugg is familiar with, having coached them before at either the middle school or club soccer level.

In fact, that was a big factor in Sugg taking the job on short notice — less than a week before tryouts began.

Sugg's pedigree as a soccer coach includes two previous stints as the Tuscola boys soccer coach in the 2010s and again in 2021. He's also been the Tuscola girls soccer coach twice, in the 2000s and again in 2024-2025. Along

the way, he's coached Waynesville Middle, club soccer and Asheville Christian Academy.

While most of Tuscola's returning players weren't starters last year, they got plenty of varsity playtime experience last season.

And Sugg said those players are better than he remembered from middle school, crediting outgoing soccer coach Stan Georgie.

"They had a great coach the last three years," Sugg said. "Stan's fantastic at player development, and I can tell you right now that every one of these kids that I coached back in middle school, they are much better players at this point because of playing for Stan. Skills have gotten better, understanding



Diana Gates

LEADING RETURNER — Junior Erick Raya is Tuscola's leading returning scorer, having netted four goals last season.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31

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Who takes home this year's soccer County Clashes?

BY AARIK LONG
ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Every year, fans from both sides of the county circle the match-ups between Pisgah and Tuscola on their calendars.

And soccer shouldn't be overlooked. The last several years, both the boys' and girls' teams have put together thrilling battles to decide which side of the county would win bragging rights.

This fall should be no different. Both boys' teams entered the season with a lot of questions — along with optimism and excitement for the new year.

There are two rivalry games each season — with each team hosting a County Clash on their own field. Pisgah has won nine straight County Clash boy's soccer games, last losing to their rivals in 2021.

Before that streak, however, Tuscola had won 12 of the previous 14.

Last season, the Bears and Mountaineers actually met three times — thanks to a bonus County Clash during playoffs. Pisgah took home all three wins, including the playoff showdown in Canton, which was the biggest win of Pisgah's nine-game streak at 6-1.

But the two main season County Clashes were much closer. The Mountaineers lost 4-3 at home and 5-3 in Canton earlier in the regular season, showing that the team is right there with their rivals.

Both sides will face off with new forwards commanding attention, as last year's leading scorers for both teams were seniors.

The Mountaineers lost the ma-



Diana Gates

BATTLE FOR THE BALL — Tuscola sophomore Brady Epps and Pisgah junior Fabian Gamez chase down a loose ball during last year's County Clash match-up.

jority of their scoring players from last season. While Pisgah has more returning experience this year, the Mountaineers still have plenty of talent and potential on their end of the county.

Tuscola is planning to play more defensively this season. The Bears are planning to be a bit more aggressive, but already know that could change once conference games roll around.

There's a real chance this year's County Clash contest is a cagier, low-scoring affair than the average 7.3 goals scored in last year's three match ups.

But then again, when Pisgah and Tuscola meet, the only thing you can really count on is exciting action on the field.

of the game has gotten better. If we have any success this year, I've got to give equal credit to Coach Stan on that."

The biggest question for the Mountaineers is figuring out where the goals will come from. Last season, Tuscola scored 39 goals. Only six of those goals were scored by players who returned this season.

Because of that, Sugg is planning on switching the game plan around. The team isn't going to be focused on playing soccer that is easy on the eyes and exciting to watch.

"It's not going to be pretty soccer. If you watch any of the World Cup, it won't look anything like that. But we're going to try to surprise them with a quick counter-attack," Sugg said. "I would rather us not possess the ball very much



Diana Gates

BACK FOR MORE — Senior Kohl Rudd is back this season and ready to step into a bigger role for the Mountaineers.

and come out with a 1-0 win than to play really good soccer and lose 5-3."

Last season, teams scored about 3.5 goals per game against the

Mountaineers. With a significant reduction in the team's firepower, it's going to be critical to reduce the number of goals they allow.

"I'd love to cut that in half. For us to be able to compete, knowing we're not going to score a lot of goals, we've got to start by fixing the goals allowed," Sugg said. "We may not score as many goals as last year, but we definitely have to concede fewer."

The team is going to shift to a 5-3-2 formation. All five of the players at the back are ones who had varsity experience last season.

"If we can keep games close, then we have a chance of coming up with a tie or a one-goal victory by having a good quick counter-attack," Sugg said. "If we give up three goals in the first half, odds are against us being able to get back in that game. We do not have that kind of offensive firepower."

Be-
hind
those five
will be se-
nior Conner
Murphine. Last
year, Murphine
played close to two-
thirds of the minutes
in goal — giving Tuscola
some consistency from year-
to-year in at least one position.

"He's got a lot of experience. At times, he looked really good last year. He has potential to be a very, very good goalkeeper," Sugg said.

Tuscola might not be world beaters this year, but the goal is simple for Sugg and the Mountaineers — improve from last year despite losing seven seniors.

"We do not want to finish in seventh or eighth place. Sixth place would be an improvement," Sugg said.



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Small roster, big opportunity

Tuscola's top golfers see chance to make a run at conference title

BY PAUL NIELSEN

PAUL@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

There will be little room for error for the Tuscola High School girls' golf team this season.

The Mountaineers currently only have three players on the roster — the bare minimum to compete as a team. If a team has more than three players, only the best three scores are kept. But for Tuscola, the score of each player will count every match — and that's a challenge because an "off day" is just par for the course in golf.

However, Tuscola Coach Erik Melville is optimistic that the Mountaineers can still finish at the top when the Mountain 8 Conference Tournament rolls around in October.

And that optimism is warranted as Tuscola arguably has two of the top players in the conference in senior Abbey Adams and sophomore Melody Kirkpatrick. Add in Shinning Rock transfer Kaylee Ramsey and the Mountaineers have the ingredients to make a run at the conference tournament.

"I do," Melville said when asked if Tuscola can finish first at conference. "Especially if we can get that one other girl who had played in middle school. That would give us a fourth. In case someone doesn't play well we have another number to fall back on. If we can get that fourth girl that would be big. But even if we just have the three they are good enough to keep us at the top of conference."

Part of that confidence also stems from the fact that as many as five of the eight conference schools may not field the needed three players required to compete as a team.

Melville has heard that only Brevard High School and Smoky Mountain High School are the only other conference teams that can field a team.

"It's going to be very different this



Diana Gates

THIN MARGINS — With only three golfers this season, Tuscola has just enough players to compete as a team this season. Despite the small size, the team is ready to shoot for another conference title.

year," Melville said. "As we stand right now five of the eight schools do not have teams."

The players

Adams has been a steady scorer for Tuscola since her freshman year, qualifying for the state tournament three times. The senior finished in eighth place at the regional last year and 15th at the rain-shortened Class 4A State Golf Tournament.

"I think she has a chance to be the best player in the conference," Melville said. "Abbey has been playing since she was in middle school and she just continues to get better and better. If one part of her game is not working, she is very quick to pivot to focus on the part

of her game that is working that day."

Adams also competes in regional tournaments in the offseason and even traveled to Florida for one event. Melville said that experience is invaluable.

"Abbey is battle tested in those higher-level tournaments," Melville said. "There is no substitute for boots on the ground and doing it."

Adams has received interest from several NCAA Division 2 schools to play college golf but Melville said the senior is more focused pursuing an engineering degree that is only offered at major universities.

"She is very academically motivated," Melville said. "But just because

you are not playing golf in college doesn't mean you have to stop playing the game, unlike baseball and football."

Kirkpatrick had a solid freshman season last year, qualifying for the regional tournament. Melville said Kirkpatrick has the skill set to make the next step this fall to qualify individually for the state tournament.

"Melody is just a natural athlete," Melville said. "Melody has fallen in love with the game and that is something you always like to see. Her length is her greatest weapon and she hits it as far as some boys you see playing at that age. She can definitely play in college because she has that natural athletic ability. She was our second or third best scorer last year."

Kirkpatrick fired a 50-45 95 at the regional last fall while missing the state tournament.

"If it wasn't for a couple of bad holes and a couple of bad swings, she would have qualified for state," Melville said. "I think she will be back in regionals if we don't qualify as a team. I think her goal should be to qualify for state this year."

Ramsey played on Shinning Rock's school team last year.

"It seems like she works hard to get better," Melville said. "The girls (Adams and Kirkpatrick) were very complimentary of her when they played together a couple of weeks ago."

Adams and Kirkpatrick both work with former club golf professional Trey Smith. Smith was a golf pro around 15 years ago but is now an engineer with Civil Design Concepts in Waynesville. Melville and Smith have been friends and golfing buddies for years.

"(Smith) works with them once or twice a week after work," Melville said. "Smith is excited to work with Kaylee as well as we get into the season."

Building on a breakthrough

Pisgah cross country aims to build on milestones

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

The Bears are ready to hit the course running this fall with hopes to build on the program's successes from one year ago. "We're optimistic about the year. We had a very successful season last year, and we're looking forward to carrying on that tradition again this coming fall," Pisgah Cross Country Coach Joe Sayblack said.

The boys' team is coming off of a top 10 finish in the state. It was the first time the program had qualified for state as a team after finishing fifth at regionals.

"It sets a precedent for them, lets them know that they are able to accomplish that kind of thing," Sayblack said.

This year, the team will be led by senior Silas Harden. He finished third in the state individually, the best finish for any Haywood County runner last fall.

Sayblack is expecting the runner to be a big piece not only on the course but also away from it.

"He is going to be the program leader," Sayblack said. "He's going to be the one that the other kids look



Mikell Clark-Webb

BUILDING A PROGRAM — Pisgah cross country made some major strides last year as the team builds its foundations. This year, they're looking to take another major step forward.

up to. He's going to be the one to set the example. He is going to be the one that the rest of them follow this year. Whatever he does, I think the rest of them are going to follow very closely."

The Bears also had a pair of sophomores who are now juniors who finished in the top 100 at state indi-

vidually last season — Devin Lopez at No. 75 and Max Rich at No. 92.

On the girls' side of things, the program is set to take a big step forward this year after a major milestone last year.

The team sent two girls to last season's state championship meet — the first time any Pisgah girl had qualified for state in cross country.

"We're challenging the girls to do even more this year," Sayblack said. "We've got new kids coming in on the girls' side this year, so we're definitely feeling optimistic."

Last year's girls' team didn't have a single senior, meaning this year's squad is bringing back a lot of talent.

Junior Brooklyn Riddle and sophomore Annie Jennings return after finishing 54th and 58th, respectively.

"The girls saw that they could do

what I said that they could do, and I think that now they realize that that's something to follow up and to build on," Sayblack said.

This year's team will feature an infusion of even more talent coming up from the middle school level.

"That's really exciting to be able to see both sides of the program grow — to be able to see that we're not just growing and building on one side of that tradition, but starting to create a tradition on both sides of our program," Sayblack said. "We've seen a lot of growth, a lot of expansion in our track and field program, and I think that's really kind of filtering over into our cross country program as well, especially for the girls' side."

Pisgah will host two meets this season. The first will come on Saturday, Oct. 3 and is planned to be a larger event outside of just the high school races.

"We're hoping it's going to be a big event," Sayblack said. "We wanted to be like a real invitational-style cross country event on a Saturday morning. We're actually going to precede it that morning with a community 5K fundraiser, which we have just about got up and running on a registration website."

The second meet the Bears will host will come on Oct. 21 — the Mountain 8 Conference Championships.

"That's at least a mental advantage," Sayblack said. "The kids can go out on that course, and they will know it just because they've been on it. There's also an aspect of pride there. That is their place, and everybody is coming to their place. They'll want to really perform in a positive way there."



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Building something bigger

New coach looks to bring out the best in Tuscola runners



NEW COACH, SAME GOALS — Tuscola cross country has a new coach in Jared Lily, but the team is still focused on being one of the top teams in Western North Carolina.

BY JARED FEINBERG

Tuscola cross country enters the fall with high expectations once again, this time with a new head coach.

The Mountaineers hired Jared Lily as the new cross country coach to lead the program in 2026.

“I’ve worked with students for years,” Lily said. “While the coaching aspect is new, I’m really committed to helping students find the best version of themselves and push them towards that.”

Tuscola’s girls are coming off an eighth-place finish in the 4A state championship. They have been the face of the program for the past couple of seasons as the Mountaineers have made their run to Kernersville in back-to-back seasons.

This year, the girls take a hit with the loss of senior Julia Wells, who is focusing on other sports with the Mountaineers.

In his first look at the group, Lily notes sophomore Luke Hughes as a key contributor on the boys’ side, though the girls’ side of things could be trickier ahead of the start of competition.

“Hughes has stood out on the boys’ side as a really strong runner and someone I expect to be a key contributor,” Lily said. “On the girls’ side, it’s honestly been much tighter than I expected. There isn’t a

clear separation yet, which I actually think is exciting because there are several girls who have the opportunity to emerge as the leader as the season progresses.”

For a first-year coach, there is always a learning curve, and at a program like Tuscola with high expectations, there is more pressure to succeed right away. Lily sees state as a desire rather than an expectation.

“While those expectations of being competitive at state and stuff are things that I share, those are certainly desires. I don’t think anybody joins a team not wanting to do those things. But the most important thing, particularly at a high school level, is we are for the students, right? And so the expectation is whatever serves them the best,” Lily said.

With that comes Lily’s philosophy of building his student-athletes up and pursuing their best interests.

“My philosophy is that we focus on building them up and pursuing everybody’s best interests; we’re gonna see the roots of that by going to state,” Lily explained. “That’s going to be an indication. That’s going to be a symptom of having a great team versus making that a goal.”

Lily is coaching cross country for the first time, but he is stoked for the opportunity, to say the least.

“If you are somebody who is ultra competitive and wants to beat everybody, there’s certainly a spot for you there,” Lily

said. “But if you’re a person who’s just looking to find a way to stay healthy and build community, there’s a space for that, too. I’m excited to see those different issues of people’s different offshoots and how they mold together. Ultimately, all those perspectives will serve the team better.”

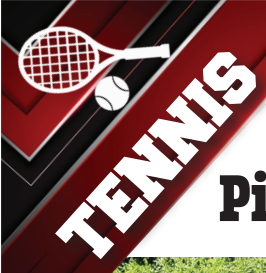
Despite losing Wells and a sense of unknown with yet another new coach, Tuscola remains one of the best cross country programs in the region. Lily hopes that as a new coach, his players will come in with good attitudes while being the best version of themselves.

“My expectation, really, is for people to come in with a good attitude and work to be the best versions of themselves they can be,” Lily said. “And then by extension, become the best team that we can be.”

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Next step awaits

Pisgah's experienced lineup looks to make a deeper playoff run



Mikell Clark-Webb

LOOKING FOR MORE — After consecutive trips to the second round of state, the Bears are looking to make a deeper run this season.

state as far as records and wins and losses and all the pieces last year," Shepard said.

Amongst the returning starters are junior Emma Henson and senior Rosie Burgess, both of whom are expected to be key starters for Shepard's Bears coming off an 11-6 season. Burgess was one of the top players in the sixth spot in the lineup in the entire state, while Henson has emerged as a big name for the program.

"She's stepping up as a leader," Shepard said. "She's played a lot this summer, and she's gotten better."

Leaders and returning starters are important as the Mountain Eight strengthens this season, spelling a tougher outing for Shepard's crew in conference play.

"Are we gonna be world beaters? No, but we're going to go out there, and we're going to play good, solid tennis and win the ones we're supposed to win, and we'll see," Shepard said.

What has made Shepard's program consistent in the past couple of years and throughout his 13 years as the girls' tennis coach is doing things the right way, such as behaving appropriately, making good grades, and playing with good tennis etiquette.

"We're going to try to beat you up," Shepard said. "We're going to shake your hand, but we're gonna look like somebody doing it. We're gonna act like somebody doing it. And we're gonna be role models for other people."

BY JARED FEINBERG

Pisgah girls tennis team enters the 2026 fall season coming off back-to-back appearances in the second round of the playoffs.

The Bears are looking to make the jump and advance in the post-season with seven players returning from last year's group, including most of the starting lineup.

One of those returning players is senior Holly Henderson, who Coach Harold Shepard expects to be the No. 1 starter this fall after playing as the No. 3 last year.

"She had a heck of a year last year," Shepard told The Mountaineer.

But Henderson is far from the only big name on the squad.

"Everyone that I've got coming back who was a starter last year, ranked in the top 10 of the entire

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Strength in numbers

Tuscola tennis enters 2026 with experience, depth and confidence

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Tuscola tennis is back with one of its strongest teams in recent memory — a big squad, with a lot of experience and eagerness.

“We have a bunch of good returning players from last year. We should have a pretty formidable team this year,” said Tuscola Coach Jim Gross.

Senior Mya Downs is the squad’s captain, while senior Chloe Bowman will serve as co-captain. The duo was paired together as doubles in several matches last season.

This year’s team features more than 20 players on the roster. While the Mountaineers lost seven seniors last year, they’ve made up the numbers with several new players this fall.

“We’re thrilled because we have a pol-



Diana Gates

FULL SQUAD — Tuscola tennis is boasting a squad of more than 20 players this fall, amping up numbers with a lot of new players.

icy where everybody plays,” Gross said. “Nobody gets cut from the team, and everybody will play regardless of their ability, their skill, their age level. We have a pretty good camaraderie within the team, a good team spirit. We’re glad

to have the numbers. We’ve got a couple more assistant coaches this year, so we have a good makeup.”

This year’s team features a handful of returning seniors who have spent the last couple of seasons in the program,

not able to step into more of a coaching role while still being on the court.

“It’s pretty helpful because now they actually are helping with some of the others who are newer to playing tennis and, of course, newer to the team,” Gross said.

The team is focusing on expanding beyond just learning how to hit a tennis ball and learning the ins and outs of tennis. Gross thinks that could be what helps push his team to the next level this season.

“We teach the girls not only the fundamental shots, but the tactical part of the game, the mental and the strategic and emotional planning that goes into play, and hopefully through the repetition, they’ll get the confidence and the belief in themselves,” Gross said.

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All in, all year

Pisgah cheer brings the energy and hype to fans



Russ Parker — Starfire Media/Epic Photography

READY TO GO — After a state title win last season, the Bears are ready to bring the energy this season.

BY CAROLE TERRELL

CAROLET@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

Training and practicing isn't just for the athletes competing on the field. Cheerleaders must be ready to pump up fans with polished, high-energy routines the opening week of Friday night lights — and to wit, the Pisgah High School cheer team began summer practice on June 1, the week after school got out.

The team works on stunting, conditioning, band dances, sideline cheers, jumps and their competition routine all year long.

"They are committed to giving 110% at every practice, pep rally, football game, basketball game, community event and competition," said coach Taylor Henson. This is Henson's second year coaching the varsity team at Pisgah.

The routine for this year will feature stunts, creative transitions, strong motions, jumps and high-energy choreography that will keep the crowd engaged.

"Every season brings new athletes, new challenges, and new opportunities. It's exciting to see the girls develop their skills, build confidence, grow in their faith, and create lasting friendships along the way," said Henson. "I enjoy watching them push one another to be better every day, both as cheerleaders and as young women."

During the summer the team attended an intense four-day UCA Cheer Camp at Clemson University where they learned a variety of dances, cheers, stunts and pyramids. One of the biggest benefits of attending camp is the opportu-

nity for the team to bond early in the season.

"Spending four days together helps the girls build trust, encourage one another, and create friendships that carry throughout the year," said Henson. "It also gives them a chance to establish team expectations, strengthen communication and work together toward common goals."

The varsity and JV teams also won state titles.

"Winning the state championship was an incredible accomplishment, and I am extremely proud of what last year's team achieved," said Henson. "They couldn't have done it without the Lord and, of course, each other. What I look forward to the most this year is watching this group continue to grow together."

The work of the team extends beyond the school to the community through service projects and volunteer opportunities. The team believes that community service teaches responsibility, gratitude and humility — qualities that are just as important as any skill they learn on the mat.

The team also spends time together off the mat through team bonding activities, meals and celebrations that strengthen their relationships.

"We believe that being a part of this program means more than performing at games and competitions," said Henson. "It means serving others and representing our school with pride. We are looking forward to another successful season representing our school and community with pride."

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Keeping the spirit alive

Tuscola cheer looks to build on a championship season

BY AARIK LONG

ALONG@THEMOUNTAINEER.COM

A year after bringing home state titles, Tuscola cheer is back and ready to keep the momentum rolling into 2026.

"We are feeling pretty good. We have worked hard through the summer, and we've started back strong with two full teams, so we're ready to go," said Tuscola Cheer Coach Kari Setser. "They are definitely riding that wave and ready for the new season."

She's also excited about getting folks fired up for Mountaineer sports.

"We're just ready to get in there and really bring the spirit to our school and really keep increasing that Tuscola pride and spirit here at school as well — get all the students to have the buy-in," Setser said.

The Mountaineers have some adversity to overcome this season, however.

The team had 11 seniors graduate last season, taking a deep well of experience with them.

"We did lose 11 seniors, but we also have the bulk of our girls back and a new group of 12 freshmen coming in. We've got a good-sized JV and varsity team, and they're all ready to come in and keep going," Setser said.

One of Tuscola's junior cheerleaders is battling a rare autoimmune disease and won't be cheering with the team this year. Another cheerleader is mourning the recent death of her mother.

The Tuscola cheer team has learned how to lean on one another, however. It's only been a couple of years since the squad reeled from the tragic death of fellow cheerleader Kara Bryson, who was killed in a storm.

Setser said it can be tough to face these things individually, but as a team — and a family — they can overcome it.

"We're there for each other," Setser said. "Cheer can be our saving grace when life gets tough. Life is beautiful,



Diana Gates

FAMILY — Tuscola's cheer squad has battled a lot of adversity heading into the season, but the team is still fired up to chase another state title this season.

but it's also tough, and so we have to rely on each other and support each other and keep moving forward for each other."

The Mountaineers brought home a state title from the NCHSAA state invitational meet and multiple trophies from the North Carolina Cheer Coaches Association's state championship meet.

This summer, the Mountaineers have been focusing on bringing in new dances and cheers, while maintaining some of the cheers that "are kind of the history and legacy" of the cheer program, Setser said.

The team hosted a camp at Tuscola and attended a clinic at West Henderson over the summer to sharpen their skills.

"I am most excited just to hit the ground running on a high note from last year, and getting our girls where they want to be, where they can be, pushing them to strive for their own success, and lead them in that way," Setser said.



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