

Towns County Sports

Towns County's Leader In Sports

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Family ties run deep between Towns Co basketball and Peach Belt Conference

By Jerry Kendall
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The following information is a bit tardy but will hopefully be of interest.

Most readers may not realize that there were significant connections to Towns County in the recently completed Peach Belt Basketball Conference Tournament beyond that brought about by the inspiring, miracle run of Pete Herrmann's Young Harris Mountain Lions Men's Basketball Team.

That was the case, however, as will be described in the following paragraphs along with a few items from down memory lane that at least some readers seem to enjoy.

First of all, let's take a look at the Mountain Lions' appearance in the Peach Belt Tournament in their first year of eligibility.

They recovered from a difficult stretch of nine straight conference losses to win seven straight and earn a trip to the tournament as the fourth place team in the western division of the conference.

This finish sent them on the road to face first place GRU Augusta from the eastern division of the conference in the first round. They came away with an 83-76 win, improving their record to 13-13 while dropping Augusta to a still gaudy 23-6 record.

This win sent the Mountain Lions to the semi-finals of



Columbus State Head Women's Basketball Coach Jonathan Norton has local ties through his parents. Photo/www.peachbelt.com

the tournament at UNC Pembroke in eastern North Carolina where there was not only the Towns County presence of the Mountain Lions in their game against Columbus State but in both semi-final women's games as well and then with both teams in the women's championship game.

The Mountain Lions could not pull off another upset as Columbus State improved to 22-6 with a 74-65 win while the Mountain Lions season came to an end with a 13-14 record. The

two semi final women's games proved to be more successful as related to Towns County, however, as Columbus State took an 84-48 win over USC Aiken and Georgia College a 65-51 win over North Georgia.

The connections to Towns County in the three women's games include players Eryn Cochran for Columbus State and McKenna Rushton for Georgia College along with Columbus State Women's Head Coach Jonathan Norton.

Not only is Cochran a



Columbus State freshman and Towns County grad Eryn Cochran during a game as a Lady Cougar. Photo/www.cscougars.com



Georgia College's McKenna Rushton during an early season game with the Bobcats. Photo/www.gsubobcats.com

former star player for the Towns County Lady Indians who enjoyed enormous success during her four years on the team but the fathers of both Cochran and Rushton, Shell Cochran and Eddie Rushton, were star players and teammates for the Indians themselves prior to graduation from TCHS in 1975.

That 1975 team was the most successful Indians team to this date, finishing with a 24-4 record, a region championship game win over Buford, and ranked as high as second in the state in Class B.

They fell in the final minute of play 58-54 in the first round of the state tournament to Montgomery County but Montgomery went on to finish as state runner up to Monticello. And further, McKenna is the granddaughter of legendary YHC men's head basketball coach Luke Rushton and legendary female athlete and youth coach June Bryson Rushton.

Eryn and McKenna both saw successful action in each of the three games played by their teams in the Peach Belt Tournament, including preliminary games at Columbus State and Lander University prior to the semi-finals and championship games at Pembroke. Eryn's most impressive statistical contributions came in the first half of the Lady Cougars' first round home court win against Georgia Regents University when she sank two free throws near the mid point of the first half and then back to back treys at the 3:20 and 2:57 marks in extending just a 24-17 lead to 30-17 which became 37-21 by intermission.

Cochran, by the way, finished the season with 35 for 41 free throw shooting for sparkling 85.4 % accuracy.

McKenna's most notable

worthy contribution during Georgia College's three tournament games was 15 points on four for five shooting from 3-point range and three for three at the foul line in a 72-67 upset win in first round tournament play at Lander University, dropping Lander to a 23-6 record and getting Georgia College, with a then 15-12 record, in the tournament semi-finals.

The victories by Columbus State and Georgia College in the semi-final round at UNC Pembroke brought the two teams face to face in the championship game of the Peach Belt Tournament with Georgia College holding the only win over Columbus State during the regular season in Milledgeville.

The Columbus State Ladies took their second straight tournament championship with a 63-51 victory. Eryn sank two free throws and a trey for five points in a 9-0 Columbus State run between the 11:34 and 9:34 marks of the first half as Columbus State extended just a 12-9 lead to 21-9 as a trigger for a 38-24 Columbus State lead at intermission.

Jonathan Norton has never lived in Towns County but both of his parents, Junior and Peggy Puett Norton, are Towns County natives and graduates of Towns County High School. And both were members of the 1960 Lady Indians and Indians basketball teams when Junior was a senior and Peggy a freshman. Further, Peggy's sister, Patsy Puett Efrid, a long time prominent resident of Union County, was a valued starting guard for the Lady Indians a few years prior.

And before that, a grainy photo exists of Cline Puett, the father of Patsy and Peggy and grandfather of Jonathan, being

shown as the first basketball coach, in 1922, at what became Towns County High School with Jonathan carrying on the tradition as a coach himself. And still further, Jonathan has had a significant number of Norton relatives involved with much success, usually in multiple sports, at TCHS.

The most recent are two successful third generation athletes in senior Emily Ledford and freshman Cole Ledford who have followed the footprints of their grandfather, Rex Norton, a first cousin of Jonathan, and mother Penny Norton Ledford. Rex especially gained notoriety as a vital member, as a starting guard, of a 24-6 Indians basketball team his senior year of 1964.

Jonathan Norton has accumulated a quite impressive record as a women's head basketball coach, compiling a 116-55 record in six seasons at Columbus State and an overall head coaching record of 246-140 in thirteen seasons when including two very successful stints at Lander University in Greenwood, South Carolina, and Berry College in Rome, Georgia.

Columbus State went on to win a first round game in the NCAA Women's Division II National Tournament over Carson-Newman of Jefferson City, Tennessee, but fell victim to ice cold shooting in an upset loss to Anderson University of Anderson, South Carolina, in the second round.

The Lady Cougars perhaps fell victim to what your reporter views as the burden of high expectations. Of course, high expectations are a most desired status by sports teams but they can also be hard to overcome, especially when under a difficulty such as cold shooting against increasingly competent opponents as post season play progresses.

With a 31-2 record for the recently completed season, Columbus State tied the all time women's basketball single season school record set by the 2001 squad which went undefeated until falling in a close game in the 2001 national semi-finals to soon to be crowned national champion Cal Poly Pomona.

As a result of the record setting performance by his team, Jonathan has received the prestigious honor, usually won by Division I coaches, of being named as the Whack Hyder Women's Georgia College Basketball Coach of the Year with the award to be presented at the Naismith banquet to be held in Atlanta in April.

The mention of the 2001 Columbus State season brings about a final sports connection from the past to Towns County. That Columbus State team featured vital contributions from former Lady Indians star Keisha Taylor (O'Hearn), who was recruited by then assistant Columbus State women's coach Jonathan Norton prior to his entering the head coaching ranks.

Hopefully this look at the quite noteworthy number of connections to our small county in the Peach Belt Tournament semi-finals and finals along with the accompanying trip down memory lane will be of as much interest to readers as it is to your reporter.

NASCAR 2015

By Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter

Keselowski wins G-W-C Thriller

FONTANA, Calif.—Brad Keselowski's four-tire pit stop allowed him to outrace Kevin Harvick and Kurt Busch in Sunday's Sprint Cup race.

"I had no idea if we could win it," said Keselowski. "I knew we had a car that could run with them, but it was the team's decision to put on all four. And it turned out to be the right call."

A caution came out on lap 199 of the 200-lap race forcing it into overtime with Busch leading and Harvick running second.

All the leaders pitted. Harvick's team intended to put four fresh tires on his No. 4 Chevrolet, but once the two right side tires were on, he sped out of his pit. Busch only took two right side tires, while Keselowski waited around for all four tires to be changed.

Back on the track, Busch and Harvick were the leaders, while Keselowski was back in 14th.

Busch and Harvick raced each other for one lap, and then another caution came out.

On the restart, it was again Busch and Harvick, but Keselowski had moved up to sixth. When the green flag was given, Keselowski was on the move.

Before the white flag was given, signifying one more lap, Keselowski had gotten by Harvick and had his sights set squarely on the one remaining car in front of him, the No. 41 driven by Kurt Busch.

He was even with Busch as they entered turn-3. Busch was running up against the outside wall, so Keselowski dove down, and as they exited turn-4, and headed for the checkered flag, the new leader was Keselowski. Busch scraped the outside wall, allowing Harvick to edge him out for the second spot.

Had it not been for Harvick's miscue, he might have been him standing in victory lane for his third consecutive win. "What a race," said Harvick. "It all happened so fast. I'm not sure two tires were the way to go, but that was our call, and we'll live with it."

Busch led 65 laps, the most of any driver, but had to settle for third.

"We had an awesome car all day long," said Busch. "We just got hung out. Brad's four tires were better than our two. I drove it as hard as I could, and there at the end I got up a little too high."

Paul Menard finished fourth, followed by Ryan Newman, Dale Earnhardt Jr., Joey Logano, Martin Truex, Jimmie Johnson, and Jeff Gordon.

Denny Hamlin led 56 laps, mostly during the middle portion of the race. He was assessed a stop-and-go penalty by NASCAR because his team allowed a tire to roll outside their pit box on the race's last caution. He wound up finishing 28th.

Top-16 Chase contenders after 5 of 26: 1. Harvick-225, 2. Logano-197, 3. Truex-192, 4. Earnhardt-164, 5. Keselowski-163, 6. Newman-162, 7. Johnson-159, 8. Kahne-159, 9. Menard-152, 10. Almirola-138, 11. Allmendinger-137, 12. Mears-132, 13. Kenseth-127, 14. Hamlin-126, 15. Ragan-124, 16. McMurray-120.

HARVICK ROLLS TO XFINITY WIN



Brad Keselowski and his girlfriend Paige White after he won the California Sprint Cup race. Furnished by NASCAR.

Kevin Harvick put a whipping on the rest of the field in Saturday's Xfinity race at Fontana. He led four times for 100 laps of the 150-lap race, and was ahead by 3.317-seconds when he crossed the finish line.

Brendan Gaughan finished second, followed by Erik Jones, Chase Elliott, Chris Buescher, Brian Scott, Kyle Larson, Brad Keselowski, Regan Smith, and Elliott Sadler.

Top-10 leaders after 5 of 32: 1. T. Dillon-187, 2. C. Buescher-182, 3. Elliott-172, 4. Reed-168, 5. D. Wallace-165, 6. Gaughan-164, 7. Smith-157, 8. Sadler-148, 9. Starr-136, 10. Scott-134.

THE HIGH COST OF RACING

Most racing fans are aware that NASCAR is like a traveling side show; a two-three day expensive carnival, that's costly not only for the fans that attend, but especially for the team owners.

A conservative estimate of building a Sprint Cup car and getting it on the track is in the neighborhood of \$300,000-\$350,000.

Sounds overpriced doesn't it? Let's look at where the dollars go.

Last week Michael Waltrip Racing answered a lawsuit by an employee, who was fired from his \$160,000 a year job.

Brandon Hopkins was a tire changer on weekends, and a shop worker during the week.

He was allegedly fired for stealing one of the team's air guns, which could cost up to \$1-million to develop and manufacture.

Sound far fetched? It's all in the court records of North Carolina Superior Court in Charlotte.

Engines top out at around \$100,000 each. Other parts, pieces and equipment that go into the car run another \$125,000. Tires are also about \$500 each, and a team uses up to 16 sets per race for a total of \$32,000. Travel to and from the track for each team: \$75,000-\$90,000.

Oh yes, NASCAR charges \$5,000 to inspect each car. If a team wrecks a car during practice and has to go to a backup, that's another \$5,000.

Don't forget that all NASCAR teams have airplanes, pilots, truck drivers, and engineers in addition to their regular shop staff.

So now, let's look at the official NASCAR Phoenix payout for Jamie McMurray and Kyle Larson, the two Ganassi Racing teams. McMurray finished second and earned \$194,931. Teammate Kyle Larson came in 10th and took in \$116,438.

The two teams had \$311,369 in total NASCAR earnings. Each driver gets at least 40 per cent of his winnings, so based on that figure, Ganassi Racing took home \$186,821. Their estimated total racing costs for the Phoenix race for both teams was at least \$600,000. That means sponsor money had to make up the \$413,179 deficit.

So where's the good news for race teams? It might be hard to find.

Cup teams are getting less money in 2015 as NASCAR has quietly increased the purses for the Xfinity and Truck series', ESPN reported.

Chairman Brian France said last year that NASCAR would consider giving the two series' a bigger portion of the new television deal that went into effect this year. That is what NASCAR has done, although it won't say by how much. It never announced the change, but it did confirm to ESPN that that was the case.

The bottom line is you need deep pockets to own a NASCAR team.

Weekend Racing: It will be the Sprint Cup cars and Camping World Trucks this weekend at the .52-mile Martinsville Speedway. The Xfinity teams have an off weekend.

Sat., Mar. 28; Truck Series race 3 of 23; Starting time: 2:30 pm ET; TV: FoxSports1.

Sun., Mar. 29; Sprint Cup Series race 6 of 36; Starting time: 1 pm ET; TV: FOX.

Racing Trivia Question: The first NASCAR race held at Martinsville Speedway was in 1949. Who was the winner?

Last Week's Question: Which team did Kevin Harvick score his first Cup win with? He took over the Richard Childress car after Dale Earnhardt was killed at Daytona in 2001. He won in only his third career Cup start, edging out Jeff Gordon at Atlanta.

You may contact the Racing Reporter at: www.hodges@race500.com. NT(Mar25,C1)ac

Raceway construction update at Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery

The Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery has been closed to visitation since August 4, 2014 due to an ongoing construction project. The project was to completely reconstruct 18 raceways from the ground up, install new drain line and supply line, and concrete around all the new raceways. As of February 7, 2015 the project has been shut down due to cold weather. It is expected to resume the last week in April or first week in May, depending on conditions. At this point in the construction phase the only thing left to do is get a final grade on the grounds and pour around the raceways.

The construction has in no way affected the upcoming trout season. Hatchery crew members are already gearing up for stocking trout in all the streams the week of opening day. The hatchery is still being kept closed to visitation due to the construction. We are hoping to reopen the hatchery to visitation around the end of May.



Deputy Hatchery Manager Kelly Taylor beside one of the newly constructed raceways.

Even though the trout stocking will go unaffected, the fishing events in May did not fare so well. After talking it over with the contractors and the hatchery staff, Deputy Project Leader Kelly Taylor has decided to cancel the Veterans' Appreciation Fishing Rodeo on May 8th and the Special Kids Rodeo on May 13th. Mr. Taylor thought the presence of

participants for the events on hatchery grounds while still in construction phase would pose too much of a safety issue. The staff of the Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery is deeply saddened by this turn of events.

For further updates follow us on www.facebook.com/ChattahoocheeForestNationalFishHatchery. NT(Mar25,Z3)CA