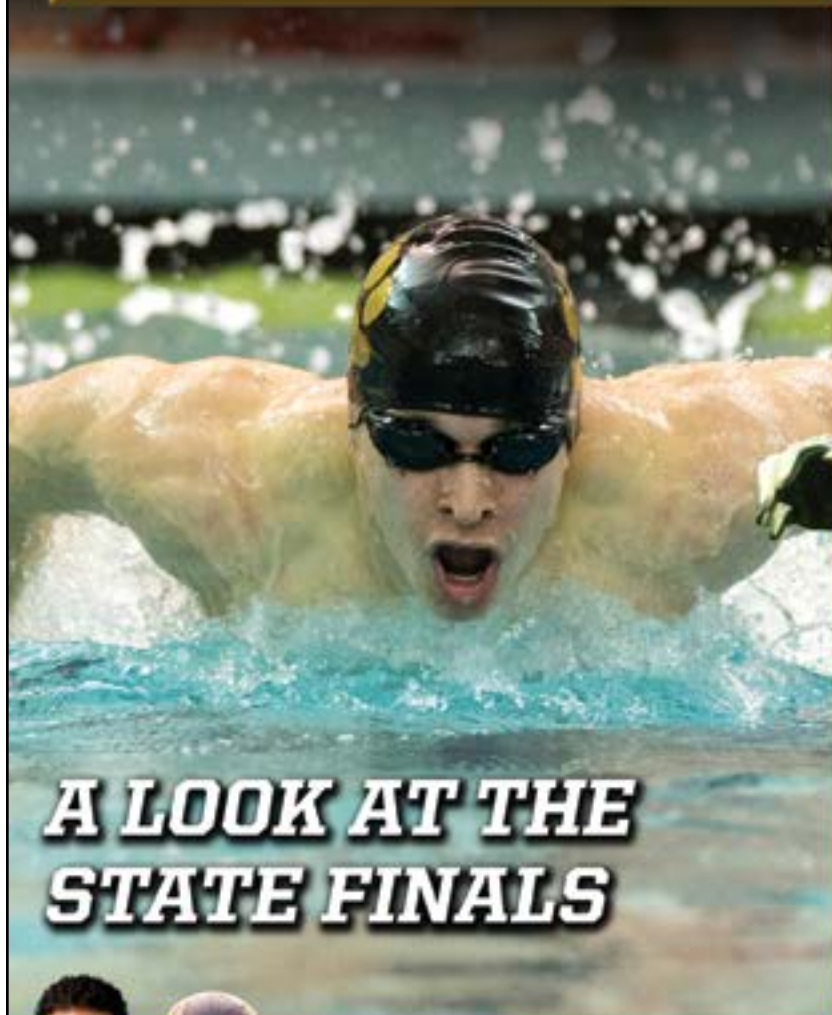


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CAN'T MISS THIS WEEK

- 4** Columnists IJ Rosenberg and Craig Sager II give their thoughts and reflect on their experiences on National Signing Day.
- 5** Our Fletcher Proctor was out and about Wednesday covering live signings in the metro area. In our cover story, he breaks down what he witnessed and more.
- 7/8** We preview this weekend's swimming and diving state championships at Georgia Tech.
- 8/10** Our rankings: where you can see our polls for all the winter sports.



SHOT OF THE WEEK...



ATHENS BOUND: Kell defensive back Brendan Langley signed with Georgia Wednesday on National Signing Day, the first day Class of 2013 graduates could sign college athletic scholarships. Dozens of other scenes like this across the metro area played out with similar pomp. Photo courtesy of Craig Sager II.

TEAM SCOOP AND VOICES

*COVER DESIGN BY DJ GALBIATI BLALOCK
 COVER PHOTOS COURTESY OF BRIAN MORGAN,
 ROB SAYE AND SONNY KENNEDY*

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INSIDE AT SCORE

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CHEAP SEATS



Lack of honesty taints recruiting game

By I.J. Rosenberg

Score Atlanta president I.J. Rosenberg has been working in Atlanta sports media since 1986 and continues to go through the recruiting process with his son, who was the quarterback at Centennial High School this season. He can't comment on his son's recruiting because the school he wants to attend does not confirm a player's commitment until they have been officially admitted into the school but ...

Recruiting sucks. Period. I went through it with both of my daughters who are now at UGA, but though I have covered it for many years, I have to say it is indeed a filthy business and the NCAA needs to put in some serious reforms. It won't.

It won't because college football continues to bring in the big bucks so I'm not going to even get into what they should do. They never listen.

I do, however, have some words for many of the coaches that both my son and I dealt with. How about learning how to tell the truth and treat these kids with respect?

My son, who threw for 2,300 yards and 18 touchdowns in his first year as a starter at Centennial in the top classification in Georgia, was labeled as a "tweener." A lot of FBS (Division I) and FCS (I-AA) coaches felt he had the ability to play at their level and had him on their board, but either wanted him as a preferred walk-on or weren't a fit academically.

So all along we focused on the schools up north: the Ivy League, the Patriot League and some of the top academic Division III schools.

If you think they are any different than the schools down here when it comes to telling the truth and treating the student-athletes with respect, then you are wrong. So after spending an entire year right in the middle of this process, here are my recommendations for coaches:

— First and foremost, don't lie. Look, my son is 17 and he spent an entire game keeping Milton star defensive end and now Auburn-signee Carl Lawson from killing him. He can handle, "Son, we have decided to go another way." Hey, thanks for being upfront coach.

— Second, and almost as important as No. 1, return phone calls. We had one Ivy League quarterback coach that specifically flew down to meet with my son. He told him, "Yeah, we have you right at the top of our board and we are going to invite you up for a visit." This is from a coach at one of the top academic schools in the country and, you know what, despite repeated calls, emails and texts, we haven't heard a word from him. How long does it take to pick up the phone, write out a text or email and say, "We're not interested,

we have decided to go elsewhere." No problem, coach, I will focus on my other options. — Third, and almost important as No. 1 and No. 2: Check under the hood. What I mean is just because my son is white and Jewish, doesn't mean he can't run. Coaches spend so much time looking at tape, they don't get to know the kid well enough. Sure, Reuben Foster looks like a man and his tape is awesome, but he also has a three-year-old daughter and, with all the trips he has taken, doesn't seem like he has been to school at all this year. The eye test is important, but there is much more to a kid than the tattoo he has on his arm and his 40-yard speed. I swear it seems like college coaches would rather have a kid with a rap sheet than one that makes the honor roll.

Look, I might sound like a frustrated father but if everything works out for my son the way it is supposed to, he will find himself in the perfect place; most importantly, a chance to get a great education, but also play football for four more years.

But I will say, this recruiting stuff is for the birds.

Rosenberg can be reached at ijrosenberg@scoreatl.com.

SAGER SAYS



A former player's look at signing day

By Craig Sager, II

The first time I ever heard of National Signing Day was when I was a freshman at Walton High School and I went to see my senior teammates Aaron Kelly, Hamilton Holiday and Jeff Hallen sign their letters of commitment. Kelly was heading to Clemson, Holiday to Vanderbilt and Hallen to Presbyterian College. As a trembling adolescent, the thought of a college coach coming to watch me even practice seemed more distant than the thought of graduation. I knew I wanted to play in college, but the possibility of me getting my own signing day was never going to be an option. I knew my path would have to be different.

These guys on National Signing Day were a different class in my eyes. Not only were they skilled and mature beyond their

years on the field, but they were outstanding teammates. All three guys would start and finish at their schools. The Kelly's, Holiday's and Hallen's that have run their course through the college football world are the reason college programs today continue to trust the type of talent and leadership mounting in Georgia high schools today.

Fast forward 10 years later, and my view of signing day is still just as green-eyed as the first. Each 2013 signee, just as inspiring and impressive even as I am finally able to look eye-to-eye and measure up with most of them now. The heavy pressure they traversed throughout their careers earned them their scholarships. Mine would never come, but I would walk on to play receiver at UGA for

three years and got an opportunity while I was there to once again be impressed.

Each kid's path to a college locker room is different, and so was mine. I had a year and a half of college at Kennesaw State University before I was accepted at UGA. All I did for that year and a half was eat, live and breathe for training and football. When I arrived, I was finally physically mature enough to compete, two years after my graduating class's signing day. Landing on campus for the first time with me were the early enrollees that were just a month out of high school and had not even gotten to their class's National Signing Day yet.

This year alone out of east Cobb, Quincy Mauger, Anthony Jennings, Eddie Printz and Parker McLeod have taken this route and are all already at their SEC schools in winter workouts. It is becoming more and more common. Tavarres King, Ben Jones and Richard Samuels were the guys I got to see go through this challenge. Not only did they make it through the Dante's Inferno known as Mat Drills but they gained the respect of the players and coaches with how well they did. The King's, Jones' and Samuels' of the college football world are the reason early enrollment is beneficial and becoming more common.

The factor that always motivated me was

not how I viewed myself, but how I viewed myself next to scholarship athletes. I measured myself to them to find out what I was capable of. Everything I did, whether it was in the weight room or the practice field was for the sole purpose to outwork, outperform and beat them at it. It was not a chip on my shoulder as much as it was my tremendous amount respect for them as athletes and individuals.

As I got my first year under my belt, I finally got to see how recruiting played out. I remember when Aaron Murray and Orson Charles came up to Athens together on a visit. It was amazing to see how supportive and active the current players are in the recruitment process. Despite having a full plate of responsibilities, they focus on bringing in talented recruiting classes. They would offer genuine advice and support to make sure the recruits felt welcome.

After 10 years of seeing signing day evolve before me, I have learned a lot. I still see these guys in a different class than myself. However, as this year's talent disperses throughout the country I am starting to realize it is what Georgia's recruits are doing after their signing days that will continue to impress me the most.

Sager can be reached at csager@scoreatl.com.



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SIGNING DAY REVIEW



Event offers chance to celebrate future, past

By Fletcher Proctor



The annual rite of passage known as National Signing Day took place this past Wednesday with football prospects from across the state putting pen to paper to officially sign with various college and university football programs. The eyes of the nation rubbed any remaining sleep away when the No. 1 recruit in the country, Grayson's Robert Nkemdiche, declared on national television that he was headed to the "University of Ole Miss."

Nkemdiche's announcement got the ball rolling for everyone as fax machines started chugging along, solidifying the futures of current high school players as they look to compete at the next level.

EAGLES SOARING ...

Milton High School also got an early start to National Signing Day 2013 as nine Eagles signed letters of intent to play football at the next level beginning at 7:30. Eason Fromayan was not in attendance as he is already in Fort Worth with the TCU Horned Frogs program, but two of his fellow linemen got the Milton signing ceremony started as Josh Harris and Cory Helms inked their letters of intent to Wake Forest. Noah Allen, a defensive tackle, then signed with Army before Malik Mitchell signed

with Northern Illinois. Three Eagles would go on to become Auburn Tigers, including running back Peyton Barber and the Score Final 50 No. 1 player Carl Lawson (pictured right).

ESPNU was on hand to capture Lawson officially signing with Auburn, but before the cameras began rolling, Milton principal Cliff Jones addressed the recruits, family members and football teammates that had all made their way to the auditorium to celebrate the 12 student-athletes who would be accepting scholarships to pursue an education at the next level.

"It's an amazing smile when a student signs that piece of paper, but how many of you would be here if not for the parents in this room?" said Jones. He was quick to praise the athletes but also each's support network that helped out along the way.

GEORGIA HIGHS ...

While Milton and Grayson's ceremonies were sending countless players out of the state to pursue the dream of college football, Kell's Brendan Langley was signing a letter of intent to join teammate Quincy Mauger in Athens. The two defensive backs that helped Kell to a 10-2 season last year will now try to help the Georgia Bulldogs win the SEC

Championship Game, a feat that has eluded them the past two seasons.

Elsewhere in Atlanta, many members of the Bulldog Nation waited with great anticipation as Davin Bellamy sat down at Chamblee High School just after 11:40 a.m. Wednesday to decide between Georgia and Tennessee. The former Florida State pledge had thrown the recruiting world a curveball by re-opening his recruiting process after coaching changes at Florida State and Georgia caused him to rethink his commitment to the Seminoles.

Rumors circulated that Georgia had the inside track to land the Chamblee defensive end, but in the days leading up to National Signing Day, Bellamy noted that he liked Tennessee and even Oregon, where he visited the final weekend of the recruiting cycle.

Bellamy told those in the school's media center that he had been dealing with one of the toughest decisions in his life.

"For the last couple of days, I was getting a lot of phone calls from coaches," admitted Bellamy to reporters and others in attendance. "I just wanted to go with a gut feeling and my gut feeling told me to stay in town."

Bellamy announced his pick by pretending to reach for a Tennessee hat before smiling and grabbing the Georgia hat. The room broke into applause following his announcement.

THE OTHER GUYS ...

While the Kell cornerback and the Chamblee defensive end will be fine signing day-additions for the Bulldogs, each player sat beside teammates also making a college choice, though not everyone was headed to a major program.

Chamblee's other six student-athletes were headed to schools such as Presbyterian College, the University of Charleston and the Air Force Academy. Milton's other players not going to Auburn or Wake Forest were deciding to go to Northern Illinois and West Point.

Mercer will take the field for the first time this year and 15 players from across the state submitted paperwork declaring their intentions to help the program get off the ground. North Gwinnett's Michael Hayes, Johns Creek's Sam Arrington, Peachtree Ridge's Andrew Stanley and Devin Davidson and Cherokee's Tunde Ayinla were just a few of the Peach State natives to sign with Bobby Lamb Wednesday.

Georgia State and Georgia Tech also receiving more than their fair share of Georgia players. Westminster kicker Harrison Butler and Lovejoy's Travis Custis joined McEachern's Ty Griffin, Tri-Cities' Shamire Devine and Fayette County's Antonio Messick to sign with the Yellow Jackets Wednesday. Paul

Johnson got a treat when Sandy Creek's Corey Griffin and Cairo's Paul Davis were late additions to the class.

Georgia State received a stud in Kight Dallas, who committed to the Panthers out of Stephenson along with North Gwinnett's Alex Stoehr and Columbia's Mackendry Cheridor.

While college football fans so often get caught up in stars, depth charts and a recruit's ranking, it is refreshing to see a parent beam with pride, proud that his or her son was able to take his athletic talent and parlay it into a chance at a top quality education.

At Chamblee, Bellamy's uncle got up after the defensive end announced his decision and proceeded not just to congratulate Bellamy for his decision but also Bellamy's mother, who reared him as a single parent.

"I am so proud of her and how she was able to do it alone," he said. "It was so hard, but she did such a good job and look how great he turned out."

Khari Rosier's mother entertained the Chamblee crowd with a story of his first practice and how he wanted to quit, but she wouldn't let him. The inspirational story brought goosebumps to the room and Rosier embraced his mother afterwards with a hug that earned a round of applause.

National Signing Day proved once again to not just be a glorious hope of what could happen in the future but also a celebration of the efforts put in by the student athletes and their families in the past.

Photos courtesy of Fletcher Proctor. Proctor can be reached at fproctor@scoreatl.com.



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WHO'S HOT

THUMBS UP
TO SCORERS



Kentavious Caldwell-Pope

Georgia's current three-game winning streak as of Wednesday has come against opponents lower in the standings, but a three-game streak in the SEC is a three-game streak in the SEC. Period. Caldwell-Pope scored at least 19 points in all three against Texas A&M, Auburn and South Carolina while making a ridiculous 22 of 34 field-goal attempts. The sophomore is the real deal.

Michael Snaer

Snaer's buzzer-beating barrage continued on Tuesday night and the most recent victim was none other than Georgia Tech. Florida State's sharpshooter ventured into the lane this time and sank a runner as time expired to beat the Jackets, 56-54, at McCamish Pavilion. Snaer's dagger was his third game-winner in 13 days, having previously sniped Maryland and Clemson.

Golf

The Masters is exactly two months away and the latest installment of golf's first major may generate even more buzz than usual. World No. 1 Rory McIlroy just joined Tiger at Nike, Tiger just blitzed the field in La Jolla and Phil Mickelson just found his game from out of nowhere by flirting with a 59 before crushing everyone in his path out in Phoenix.

Going out of state

Georgia reeled in another strong recruiting class, but it could have been even better. The Bulldogs failed to keep Dooly County defensive tackle Montravius Adams in state, as he opted for Auburn on Wednesday morning. Adams is rated the No. 2 prospect in the nation at his position. They also missed out on Walton RB Tyren Jones, although that was hardly a surprise.

Retirement

You can't count on one hand the number of people in Atlanta who want Falcons' tight end Tony Gonzalez to retire before next season; you can count that number on zero hands. Among the hopefuls for a return are GM Thomas Dimitroff, who told ESPN.com in an interview late last month that he has already been lobbying hard, to Gonzalez's face, for a comeback.

Atlanta Hawks

The new year brought with it both bad luck and bad basketball for the Hawks, who are 7-11 since the beginning of January. Once in third place in the Eastern Conference and just a game back of Miami, Atlanta (26-21 as of Wednesday) is now sixth in the East and six games behind the first-place Heat. Is the end result a trade-deadline deal?



WHO'S NOT

THUMBS DOWN TO
BAD STRETCHES

SCORE LIST

BY BRIAN JONES

1 THE NEXT MOVE: The NFL season has come to an end and the Falcons have some decisions to make. They have little to no room in the salary cap, so there will be some contracts that need to be reworked as well as players being cut. Do the Falcons cut Michael Turner? Will they resign William Moore? Will Tony G. be back? And how much money will Matt Ryan make off his new contract? It should be a very interesting offseason.

2 AGAINST THE ODDS: Speaking of what's next, Vegas has already predicted how the 2013 season will end, and once again the Falcons aren't in the discussion when it comes to the Super Bowl. The oddsmakers give the Falcons an 18-1 chance to win the Super Bowl meaning they have the eighth-best chance behind teams such as New England, Denver and Green Bay. Maybe the odds will increase if Tony G. decides to come back for one more year.

3 BEST OF THE BEST: The finalists for the Atlanta Sports Awards were announced on Monday and it should be no surprise which teams and players headline the list. The Georgia Bulldogs and the Atlanta Falcons are competing for Team of the Year while Mark Richt and Mike Smith are in the running for Coach of the Year. It has also been announced that Chipper Jones will receive the Lifetime Achievement Award. It should be a fun night at the Fox Theatre on March 5.

4 THE END IS NEAR?: The NBA trade deadline is getting closer and there is no telling what the Hawks are going to do with Josh Smith. The ninth-year forward is looking to get a max deal but he has not played like he has when he was playing with Joe Johnson. Smith is averaged two few points and one fewer rebound than last season and has free-throw percentage (49.7) is the lowest of his career. As much as I'd love Smith to stay, it would not surprise me (or anyone) to see Smith and the Hawks part ways.

5 THE HUNTER: Georgia State freshman R.J. Hunter has been on fire as of late as he scored 38 points against Old Dominion on Sunday. For his efforts in that game as well as the 27-point performance against Northeastern, Hunter has been named Lou Henson National Player of the Week. Hunter leads all CAA freshmen in scoring (17.3) and rebounding (5.5). Henson is only of four freshmen in the country averaging 17-point and five rebounds per game. Now the question is could he win CAA Player of the Year?

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

BY RICKY DIMON

23 Home runs per year averaged by both B.J. Upton (22.6 in six seasons) and Justin Upton (22.75 in four seasons) as full-time players (minimum of 109 games played).

5 Consecutive seasons in which B.J. has stolen more than 30 bases, including three with more than 40. Justin has swiped at least 18 bases in four straight years.

25 Postseason games played by B.J. since 2008, the most of any current Brave in that span. Justin has played 11 since 2007, the second most of any Brave behind B.J.

773 Combined number of RBIs and runs scored for Justin since the start of the 2008 season. In the same span, B.J. has 757 combined RBIs and runs scored.

11 Years since B.J. and Justin last played on the same team, when B.J. was a senior and Justin was a freshman at Greenbrier Christian Academy in Chesapeake, Virginia.

23.6 Assists per game being averaged by the Atlanta Hawks, third most in the NBA. Jeff Teague is averaging 6.6 dimes, including 7.7 per game in his last 10 outings.

18.3 Points per game being averaged by Teague in his last 10 overall (compared to a 13.9 average for the season). He has scored more than 20 in five of his last 10.

61 Combined largest deficit the Hawks faced in their last two games against the Chicago Bulls, 44 points in a Jan. 14 loss and 17 points in another loss last Saturday.

3 Wins for the Hawks in their last 11 games against opponents with winning records, including two in their last eight. They are 3-0 in their last three against losing teams.

0 Atlanta Hawks players on the Eastern Conference all-star roster. This is the second straight year the Hawks will not have a representative in the All-Star Game.

TRIVIA QUESTION

What Georgia basketball player is second in the SEC in scoring as of press time?

Answer on Page 14

SANITY AT LAST

"Nothing against Rivals or Scout, but I'd prefer to go with my own rankings."

- Georgia Tech coach Paul Johnson on the Jackets' recruiting class.

SCORE'S FINAL TEN

The top 10 of the Score Final 50 have made their decisions. For the full list, check out GAPREPNEWS.com

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Carl Lawson, Auburn | 6. Tray Matthews, UGA |
| 2. Montravius Adams, Auburn | 7. Trey Johnson, Ohio State |
| 3. Robert Nkemdiche, Ole Miss | 8. J.J. Green, UGA |
| 4. Alvin Kamara, Alabama | 9. Tyren Jones, Alabama |
| 5. Josh Dobbs, Tennessee | 10. Brice Ramsey, UGA |



Trojans, War Eagles want titles back

By Fletcher Proctor

For years, some of the nation's best female swimmers have called Georgia home, including Olympians Amanda Weir, Kathleen Hersey and Kara Lynn Joyce. Once again, swimming enthusiasts will turn their gazes towards the Georgia Tech Aquatic Center to see another class of young ladies set fire to the pool and blaze their way to state titles.

CHANGING WINDS ...

Ever since the GHSA split the swimming and diving championships into two separate classification brackets, the highest classification title has been handed back and forth between Fulton County (Chattahoochee, Centennial, Northview), Lassiter and Brookwood. The Broncos won last year, ending Lassiter's run of four straight titles, to give Brookwood its fifth title since 2001. Lassiter has won five titles since the split and Centennial, Northview and Chattahoochee all have claimed one since 2000.

Brookwood recently finished second in the Gwinnett County championships, as Mill Creek ran away with the title. Brookwood lost several key contributors from last year including Kelsey

Gouge, but coach Greg Puckett has senior Rachael Muller back.

"Muller should be one of the favorites in the 200 free and 500 free," Puckett predicted.

Muller beat fellow Bronco Anna Jahns in the 200 freestyle and 500 freestyle at the Gwinnett County championships. Muller finished second in the 200 free last year and third in the 500 free.

Mill Creek lacks the individual standouts of years past such as Rachael Dudley (2012 100 butterfly, 100 backstroke champion) and Frederique Lefebvre, but look for the Hawks to once again lean on their depth and their incredible diver Lexi Sachse, who won the Gwinnett diving title.

Meanwhile, Lassiter will look to rebound after falling in the Cobb County championships.

"I know that all of our girls are excited about (the championships)," Lassiter head coach Lauren Barnes said. "The second-place finish to Walton at the Cobb County Championships has helped pump them up."

Lassiter will be led by Jordan Drake, Lauren O'Malley and Lexi Glunn.

"Jordan Drake is a fierce competitor,"

Barnes said. "When she gets in the right mindset, nothing can shake her confidence in a race. Lauren O'Malley possesses a lot of maturity for a sophomore. She is a leader of the team and she motivates others with her grace and positive attitude."

Walton will enter with a lot of momentum after claiming the program's first Cobb County title since 2008 as Kira de Bruyn and Jane Watts were among the top swimmers at the event.

A third Cobb County team could swim away with the title as Kennesaw Mountain should have Rebecca Postoll back from U.S. National Team duties. Postoll missed the Cobb County championships, but the Lady Mustangs still managed to finish third. Postoll's sister, Melissa, was a force in the pool, taking the 100 backstroke and 200 freestyle events. The Mustangs will also be a threat on the diving board as Alex Hart recently set a new school record at the Cobb County championships. She finished second last year to Colquitt County's Elizabeth Kirkland in the one-meter dive.

SMALL, BUT MIGHTY ...

While the A-AAAAA competition includes schools with some of the state's smallest enrollment numbers, plenty of standouts will be ready to compete. Wesleyan recently finished fifth at the Metro Atlanta Swimming and Diving Championships. Rachel Koch was one of the standouts for the Wolves, taking the 100

butterfly. In last year's championships, Koch finished fifth in the event.

The defending champion Westminster Wildcats ended Marist's run of five straight last season, but Westminster owns 20 crowns since 1963, including a run of six straight from 2001-2006. The Wildcats enter with some momentum after beating out Marist and Woodward Academy in the Metro Championships.

Puckett came away impressed by Westminster's Nicole Stafford at the Maddie Brown Invitational.

"(She) should be the favorite in the 200 free and 100 butterfly," Puckett said.

Woodward Academy will look to exact a measure of revenge after recent losses to Westminster. Expect Rebecca Justus and Caitlin Cooper to make some waves after each recently set a school record in the 100 butterfly and 100 backstroke, respectively. Cooper is also a threat in the 50 free, an event she won last year as a sophomore.

"I'd keep an eye out for Kathleen Cook," Woodward Academy coach Kelsey Emerson said. Cook is a freestyle specialist who placed in a number of events last year.

Two names to watch out for in the diving competition are Marist seniors Andrea Demick, who finished second last year, and Taylor Gould, who finished third.

See the boys preview on page 8. Proctor can be reached at fproctor@scoreatl.com.

PREVIEWING THE BOYS



Coaches discuss Tech's pool, titles

By Stephen Black

There is something special about this pool at Georgia Tech. While there are many tremendous pools around the state that host high school events, the trip to the westside of Atlanta for the state finals is always different no matter how often teams come here.

"Having the state championship at Georgia Tech is awesome," Parkview coach Jack Gayle said. "Tech is one of the best pools in the country. The guys walking into Tech and seeing the stands and the all the people up there gets them pumped up mentally."

After a season full of important meets, teams that made it to this weekend know how important the state finals meet is.

"That's the meet that matters," Marist coach Terry Blish said. "All the other meets are designed to prepare for that and to get people qualified to swim in that."

Blish and Gayle would know about state championship meets. While Blish has won four boys state titles at Marist in his career, which began at the Dunwoody school in 1973, Gayle has won three boys titles at Parkview since he

became head coach in 2004 and was a member of two state championship teams at the Gwinnett program in 1995 and 1998 as a swimmer.

KEY PLAYERS ...

According to the Score Atlanta/GPB swimming and diving polls, the Parkview (Class AAAAAA) and Marist (Class A-AAAAA) boys teams are each ranked at the top of their respective classes. However, that does not always mean success in the state meet.

"We've had many upsets in the years that I've been involved," Blish said. "Some would say we've pulled a few of those upsets. It's very often billed as an upset. We've had years when we weren't the heavy favorites and others where some have said the only way we'd lose is if we got lost on the way to the pool."

While Parkview is defending its 2012 boys title, the Panthers know what it is like to be the underdog chasing the team with the proverbial championship belt.

"Last year, we had been second two years ago, and I know that weighed heavily

on (the team)," Gayle said. "Our theme was 'V for vendetta,' and they had kind of a mission. That was a big motivation, whereas this year, being the defending state champions is a lot more difficult because everyone is looking to you to perform."

Parkview and Marist certainly have the talent to live up to the expectations No. 1 teams have in this meet. The War Eagles will rely on a mix of veterans and underclassmen this weekend, as seniors Will Herbert and Takunda Mafundikwa lead the team in the relays while junior Braxton Young will be counted on in the 50 and 100 freestyle races. Freshman Christian Lorys has recovered from an illness that sidelined him in the Metro Meet finals two weeks ago, a meet Marist lost by one point to the Westminster boys.

Speaking of the Wildcats, Westminster freshmen twin brothers Derek and Ere Cox will swim in a variety of events, mostly relays and sprints. No. 2 Wesleyan, meanwhile, is anchored by sprinters Luke Hedrick and Drew Middleton.

Parkview, the defending boys state champion and current Gwinnett County champ, is led by seniors Nathan Jones, Dillon Kasson and Rory Martin. Alpharetta, the No. 2 team in the state, will provide strong competition as will Cobb County powers Walton and Lassiter, which are ranked third and fourth, respectively.

Walton, the Cobb County champ, and the Lassiter will attempt to bring the first-place trophy back to Cobb, where it hasn't been since 1999 when Pope won it. A Gwinnett program has won each title since in the state's largest class. Nathan Hufnagle led the Raiders

to victory two weeks ago at the county meet, where he won the 100 breaststroke and 200 IM, while the Trojans boasted strong performances by Zach Bunner (100 backstroke, 100 butterfly), Jimmy Yoder (200 freestyle, 500 freestyle) and Daniel Bridgers (50 freestyle, 100 freestyle).

AS IT WERE ...

Parkview has been on fire lately, beating rival Brookwood in a head-to-head meet, then winning the county meet. The Panthers, it seems, are swimming their best at the right time of year.

"Yeah, I think so," said Gayle when asked if his team was peaking. "I think a lot of it is that we're really fortunate to be able to swim (against) our great rival Brookwood at the end of the season and go right into the county championships. I think that really helps our swimmers and the Brookwood swimmers because it's a great 'pump-up' meet that gets everyone really excited."

While the Panthers are trying to defend their state title from 2012, Marist will try to win its first boys state championship since 2009 and seventh in school history. Wesleyan is two-time defending Class A-AAAAA champion. Westminster, meanwhile, will attempt to bring home state hardware in the boys meet for the first time since the Wildcats won six straight from 2003-2008. Walton won the championship in 1983, while Alpharetta and Lassiter are each looking to win state gold for the first time.

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SCORE
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BASKETBALL RANKINGS

BOYS

CLASS AAAAAA

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Tift County | 6. Westlake |
| 2. Shiloh | 7. North Cobb |
| 3. Norcross | 8. Wheeler |
| 4. Hillgrove | 9. Chattahoochee |
| 5. North Gwinnett | 10. Peachtree Ridge |

CLASS AAAAA

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Miller Grove | 6. Mays |
| 2. Allatoona | 7. Sequoyah |
| 3. Effingham County | 8. Northside-Columbus |
| 4. Lithia Springs | 9. Mt. Zion-Jonesboro |
| 5. Evans | 10. Tucker |

CLASS AAAA

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| 1. Columbia | 6. Monroe |
| 2. Eagle's Landing | 7. South Atlanta |
| 3. Glenn Hills | 8. Statesboro |
| 4. Marist | 9. Grady |
| 5. Jonesboro | 10. Westover |

CLASS AAA

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Cartersville | 6. Morgan County |
| 2. Buford | 7. North Murray |
| 3. Johnson-Savannah | 8. Washington Co. |
| 4. Savannah | 9. Dawson County |
| 5. North Hall | 10. Woodward Acad. |

CLASS AA

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| 1. GAC | 6. Laney |
| 2. Vidalia | 7. Calhoun |
| 3. Manchester | 8. Dade County |
| 4. Bleckley County | 9. Dublin |
| 5. Westside-Augusta | 10. Pelham |

CLASS A-PRIVATE

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. North Cobb Chr. | 6. Landmark Chr. |
| 2. W.D. Mohammed | 7. Aquinas |
| 3. Athens Christian | 8. Excel Christian |
| 4. Greenforest Chr. | 9. Holy Innocents' |
| 5. Mt. Paran | 10. Calvary Day |

CLASS A-PUBLIC

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Wilkinson County | 6. Portal |
| 2. Mitchell County | 7. Treutlen |
| 3. Wilcox County | 8. Stewart County |
| 4. Seminole County | 9. Dooly County |
| 5. Turner County | 10. Hancock Central |

CLASS AAAAAA

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Parkview | 6. North Forsyth |
| 2. Norcross | 7. Alcovy |
| 3. Alpharetta | 8. Tift County |
| 4. Cherokee | 9. North Cobb |
| 5. North Gwinnett | 10. Langston Hughes |

CLASS AAAAA

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. Tucker | 6. Flowery Branch |
| 2. Stephenson | 7. McIntosh |
| 3. Miller Grove | 8. SW DeKalb |
| 4. Creekview | 9. Osborne |
| 5. Kell | 10. Cedar Shoals |

CLASS AAAA

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Columbia | 6. Statesboro |
| 2. Cross Creek | 7. LaGrange |
| 3. Redan | 8. Mary Persons |
| 4. South Effingham | 9. Fayette County |
| 5. Woodland-Henry | 10. Jonesboro |

CLASS AAA

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Washington Co. | 6. Beach |
| 2. St. Pius X | 7. North Oconee |
| 3. Buford | 8. Chapel Hill |
| 4. Sonarville | 9. Decatur |
| 5. Central-Carroll | 10. SW Macon |

GIRLS

CLASS AA

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Wesleyan | 6. Dublin |
| 2. Laney | 7. Westside-Augusta |
| 3. Kendrick | 8. McIntosh Co. Acad. |
| 4. Thomasville | 9. Northeast Macon |
| 5. Calhoun | 10. GAC |

CLASS A-PRIVATE

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. SW Atlanta Chr. | 6. St. Francis |
| 2. Holy Innocents' | 7. Strong Rock Chr. |
| 3. Darlington | 8. Mt. Paran |
| 4. Calvary Day | 9. George Walton Acad. |
| 5. Paideia | 10. Atlanta International |

CLASS A-PUBLIC

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Randolph Clay | 6. Wilkinson County |
| 2. Turner County | 7. Claxton |
| 3. Treutlen | 8. Towns County |
| 4. Gordon Lee | 9. Mitchell County |
| 5. Irwin County | 10. Clinch County |

PREP NOTEBOOK



Grapplers prepare for sectionals, finals

By Stephen Black

The sectionals will take place this weekend around the state as individual wrestlers will come together at 12 locations in order to qualify for the state meets. There are two sectional meets per classification and the top eight individuals from each sectional qualify for the state traditional wrestling meet, which is held in Macon Feb. 15-16.

For metro Atlanta teams, the No. 1 team in Class AAAAAA, Archer, is the heavy favorite to win the traditional title after its duals title last month. In Class AAAAA, top-ranked Pope, thought to be the best team in the state outside of Archer, is favored to repeat as traditional champ after sweeping last year's titles. Woodward Academy should be a threat in Class AAA while Holy Innocents' has an outside shot in Class A.

AREA RESULTS ...

Class AAAAAA No. 1 Archer had 12 of 14 wrestlers win their respective weight classes at the Area 8-AAAAAA meet Saturday at Parkview. ... Chattahoochee nipped host North Forsyth 201-200 at the Area 6-AAAAAA meet. ... Host Rockdale County won Area 2-AAAAAA. ... In Area 3-AAAAAA, Douglas County won and host East Coweta came in second. Douglas County had seven individual winners, includ-

ing five straight from 170 pounds, 182, 195, 220 and 285. ... In Area 7-AAAAAA, traditional power Collins Hill won yet another area championship, this time holding off North Gwinnett 225.5 to 221.5 at Norcross. Collins Hill had five individual winners and North Gwinnett had four. ... Area 4-AAAAAA was decided late as Kennesaw Mountain sneaked by Hillgrove 201-200 at North Cobb. The Mustangs won a hotly contested meet despite only three individual winners while Hillgrove had just two. Marietta checked in with 190.5 points while McEachern had 188.5. ... Roswell won the Area 5-AAAAAA meet at Wheeler by outdistancing second-place Cherokee. ... In Class AAAAA, No. 1 Pope won the Area 7 meet with nine individual champions at Creekview. ... In Area 6-AAAAA, Southwest DeKalb won five weight classes to take the area crown at Dunwoody. Lakeside-DeKalb came in second and Stephenson third. ... Area 6-AAAA was won by Marist, which had 225.5 points and eight individual champions. Lithonia came in second place. ... Woodward Academy took the Area 3-AAA title in a meet that the War Eagles hosted. Dawson County was second and McNair came in third.

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SPORTS AND INJURIES



Children's
Healthcare of Atlanta

Children's teaches kids how to prevent ACL injuries

The knee is arguably the most important joint in young athletes. From basketball players to cross country runners, just about every athlete needs a healthy knee to be able to compete.

More kids are competing in sports than ever before and the number of knee injuries in young athletes has steadily been on the rise. This is especially true for injuries involving the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), which is located in the middle of the knee and stabilizes the joint. Most ACL tears, either full or partial, occur without contact.

Because more and more athletes are participating in sports at all levels, the focus for many physical therapists has shifted from the treatment to the prevention of ACL injuries.

The Children's Healthcare of Atlanta ACL Injury Prevention Program is designed

to reduce knee injuries in young athletes while also improving their sports performance.

Statistically speaking, male athletes experience more sports-related injuries than females, but ACL injuries occur five to six times more often in females. One out of every 100 high school females suffers an ACL injury each year.

This is often attributed to their different skeletal anatomy, including a wider pelvis and bones that are not perfectly aligned. Differences in how males and females train also contribute to the high rate of ACL injuries in young female athletes.

Each of these differences can be addressed and improved upon with an organized training program designed by knowledgeable physicians, therapists and certified

athletic trainers.

The Sports Medicine team at Children's features an experienced, multidisciplinary team that includes orthopaedic surgeons, sports medicine physicians, certified athletic trainers and physical therapists. In 2011, they managed more than 30,000 sports physical therapy patient visits.

Created by the Sports Medicine team, the ACL Injury Prevention Program provides a collection of tips, exercises and stretches to both male and female athletes. It aims to improve young athletes' speed, strength and agility while teaching proper mechanics for sports-related activities.

The team's goal is not just to get young athletes back on the field, but to get them back on the field and playing better than ever.

Visit choa.org/ACL for more information about the Children's ACL Injury Prevention Program.

This is general information and not specific medical advice. Always consult with a doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns about the health of a child.

Some physicians and affiliated health-care professionals on the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta team are independent providers and are not our employees.



SWIMMING RANKINGS

BOYS

Class AAAAAA

1. Parkview
2. Alpharetta
3. Walton
4. Lassiter
5. North Gwinnett
6. Chattahoochee
7. North Cobb
8. Collins Hill
9. Brookwood
10. Mill Creek

Class A-AAAAA

1. Marist
2. Wesleyan
3. St. Pius X
4. Dalton
5. Pope
6. Chamblee
7. Woodward Academy
8. Westminster
9. Rome
10. Lakeside-DeKalb

GIRLS

Class AAAAAA

1. Walton
2. Brookwood
3. Lassiter
4. Kennesaw Mountain
5. Mill Creek
6. North Gwinnett
7. Johns Creek
8. Peachtree Ridge
9. Parkview
10. Etowah

Class A-AAAAA

1. Westminster
2. Woodward Academy
3. Marist
4. St. Pius X
5. Pope
6. Lakeside-DeKalb
7. Wesleyan
8. Calvary Day
9. Rome
10. Dunwoody

WRESTLING RANKINGS

Class AAAAAA

1. Archer
2. Collins Hill
3. Camden County
4. North Gwinnett
5. Kennesaw Mtn.
6. Roswell
7. Brookwood
8. North Forsyth
9. Rockdale
10. Parkview

Class AAAAA

1. Pope
2. Woodland-Cartersville
3. Whitewater
4. Ware County
5. Flowery Branch
6. Ola
7. Creekview
8. Loganville
9. Effingham County
10. South Paulding

Class AAAAA

1. Gilmer
2. Alexander
3. West Laurens
4. Chestatee
5. Carrollton
6. Marist
7. Locust Grove
8. Perry
9. Glenn Hills
10. Lumpkin County

Class AAAA

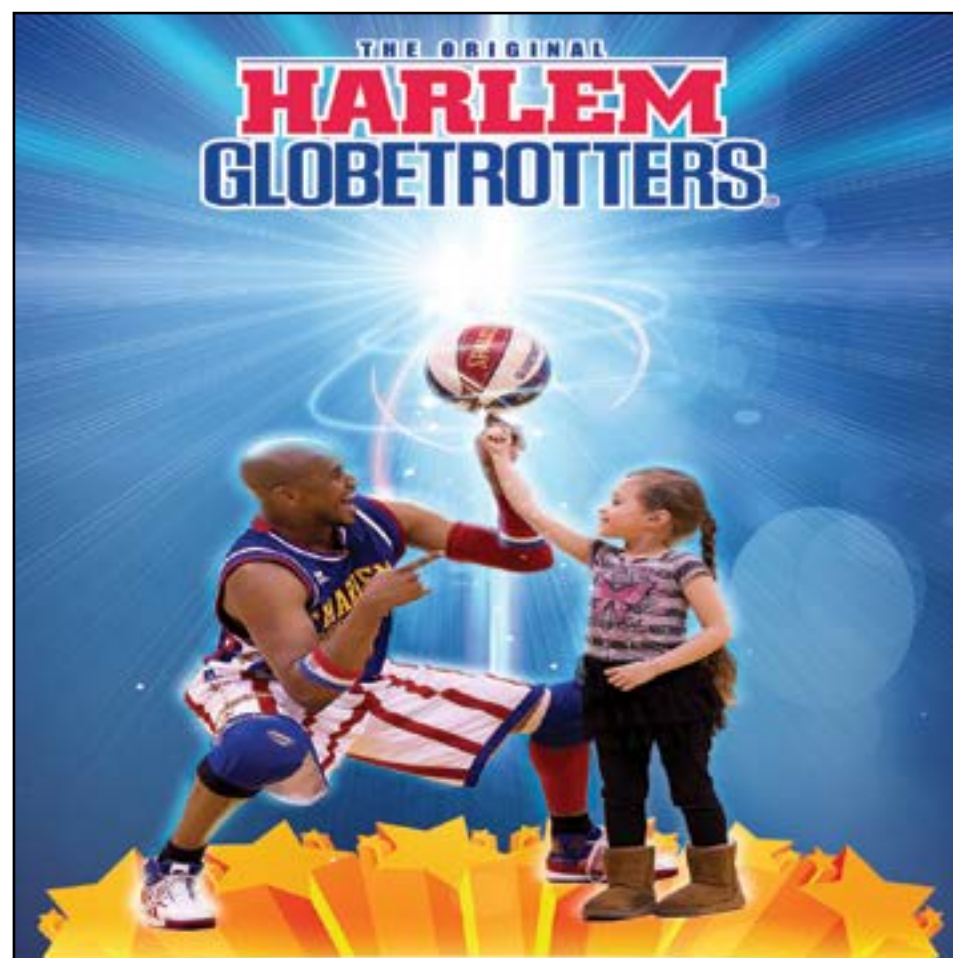
1. Banks County
2. Woodward Acad.
3. Oconee County
4. Morgan County
5. Sonorville
6. Pierce County
7. McNair
8. Buford
9. Rockmart
10. Blessed Trinity

Class AAA

1. Jefferson
2. Bremen
3. Lovett
4. Calhoun
5. Social Circle
6. GAC
7. Monticello
8. East Laurens
9. Fitzgerald
10. Bowdon

Class AA

1. Gordon Lee
2. Holy Innocents'
3. Commerce
4. Mount Zion-Carroll
5. Turner County
6. ELCA
7. Darlington
8. Strong Rock Chr.
9. Irwin County
10. Athens Christian



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BULLDOG BEAT



Dawgs sign 32, miss on others

By Chris Lionetti

As the calendar turns to February, many become excited about the upcoming spring months, but for college football enthusiasts, it means much more: the start of spring workouts and National Signing Day.

BIG WEDNESDAY ...

Known as the end of that year's recruiting season, National Signing Day has become a holiday of sorts for football fans to compare teams as well as discuss the upcoming season. Many will discuss the shortcomings of the Georgia Bulldogs late in the 2013 recruiting season, but no matter what happens, the class will have fulfilled its purpose of refilling the cupboard.

On the eve of National Signing Day, the Bulldogs had 30 verbal commitments and were in contention for six more commitments. Even if they were not to seal the commitment of those six players, Mark Richt and company will have added nine defensive backs, one quarterback, one running back, one fullback, five wide receivers, one tight end, three defensive linemen, three offensive linemen and six linebackers.

Of all the recruits the team will sign, those that play on the defensive side of the

ball will provide a much bigger impact on the 2013 season than their high school peers. The Bulldogs lost 12 key players on defense from last year's team, and to maintain last season's success, Richt needed to restock the proverbial cupboard and that he did.

The biggest areas of need for Richt were the defensive line, linebacker corps, and secondary. The head coach kept his team in the race for some big-time talents but the 2013 season will rely on the performance of last year's freshman class. The secondary is a different story. Of the nine defensive backs committed to Georgia, three are viewed as capable of earning a starting spot right away.

While the other two positions are big needs for Georgia, inside linebacker was Georgia's largest need heading into the 2013 recruiting season. The Bulldogs did not take a linebacker at that position last year and lost three out of the four that played significant snaps at the position, causing a significant need to retool the position. Defensive coordinator Todd Grantham brought in four prospects in this year's class and all four are expected to compete for a starting spot.

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TECH BUZZ



Jackets post inspired win over Cavaliers

By Ryan Caiafa

The Yellow Jackets have certainly shown improvement in conference play as of late, culminating in a 66-60 victory over the Virginia Cavaliers, when they rallied from a nine-point halftime deficit. Mfon Udofia's 15 points led the way for the Jackets and his jumper with 1:19 remaining gave the Jackets the lead for good.

Tech continues to get strong play from freshmen Chris Bolden and Robert Carter Jr., who each had 14 points, with Carter adding eight rebounds as well. While both continue to make their impacts in the rotation, Carter has proven that he can become a centerpiece for the program over the next few seasons. Despite a 2-6 record in conference play, the Jackets' signs of improvement have come at the perfect time as they still have 10 games remaining in order to improve their place in the standings in time for the ACC Tournament, where, of course, a shot at the NCAA Tournament is on the line. The team has a rather favorable remaining schedule, with a home date against North Carolina and a road game against Miami highlighting the most difficult games.

BALANCED LIST ...

While not landing some of the nation's

biggest prizes, the Jackets quietly found themselves with a solid list of 2013 commitments. The already potent triple-option offense added more depth with the commitments from wide receiver Ricky Jeune, whose reliable hands and ability to catch in traffic were key characteristics that impressed the coaching staff, and Lovejoy running back Travis Custis, who is known for being a true power back and possessing strong field vision.

The Jackets had received a commitment from Aquinas fullback Brendan Douglas, but, in a turn of events, he decided to switch his commitment to play for the Georgia Bulldogs. They also lost another potential signee, Lovejoy receiver Jumichael Ramos, who changed his commitment to N.C. State. Tri Cities' offensive tackle Shamire Devine and his 6-foot-6, 355-pound frame is expected to immediately slide in and contribute with his strength and physicality, to go along with his exceptional run-blocking skills. They also added several other local products including Jackson defensive end Justin Atkins, Fayette County receiver Antonio Messick and McEachern dual-threat quarterback Ty Griffin.

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PANTHER PROWL



Men's hoops streaking through CAA

By Brian Jones

The men's basketball team has been up and down all season long and that can give headaches to Panther fans.

Currently, Panther fans don't have headaches because the team has been trending upward. As of early Wednesday, the Panthers have won six of their last seven games, including an 83-63 thumping against Old Dominion.

Freshman R.J. Hunter had a career game for the Panthers as he scored 38 points and made 12 of his 18 attempts. Hunter also recorded a school and Colonial Athletic Conference record with 10 three-pointers. Hunter's 38 points are the most by a Panther since 1998, when Antonio Reese scored 38 against Kansas State.

"My teammates did a great job of getting me the ball tonight," Hunter told georgiastate-sports.com. "The basket looked as wide as it ever has for me and I just took advantage of it. I didn't even realize until after the game that I had made 10 three-pointers."

Because of the game Hunter had against Old Dominion as well as his play during this stretch, he was named Lou Henson Player of the Week. Not only did Hunter score 38 points against Old Dominion, he dropped 27 points against Northeastern and helped the Panthers give the Huskies their first conference loss of the year. Hunter was also named CAA Rookie of the Week and CAA Player of the Week.

STILL STRUGGLING ...

The women's basketball team is not having the same success as the Lady Panthers have lost five of their last six games as of Wednesday. On Sunday, the Lady Panthers took on Drexel and thanks to an 11-0 run at the start of the second half, Drexel came away with a 79-55 win.

Shooting 52 percent from the floor, Drexel could not be stopped on offense and the Panthers could not hang with their opponents, shooting only 40 percent.

"Well, Drexel is one of the better teams in the CAA and they shot well in the second half, but I am not pleased with the way we did things, offensively or defensively, in the second half," coach Sharon Baldwin-Tener told gsusports.com. "We hurt ourselves with mental mistakes on both ends of the court."

SOFTBALL PREVIEW ...

Softball season is not too far away and the coaches of the CAA think the Panthers have a good shot of winning the conference title. In the preseason CAA coaches poll, the Panthers are ranked second only behind Hofstra. Last year, Hofstra won the conference tournament while the Panthers came in second place.

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OWL OUTLOOK



Baseball season arrives; 22 players return

By Brian Jones

Baseball season is right around the corner and the Owls are looking to build on what they did in 2012.

With 22 lettermen returning, the Owls have the depth to compete for the Atlantic Sun title. Andy Almonte was named to the preseason all-conference team after hitting .295 with 11 doubles, 49 runs scored and a .411 slugging percentage. Other players to watch for are pitchers Steve Janas and Kevin Kyle and senior captain Peyton Hart, who scored 32 runs and stole 14 bases last year.

MAULED BY MERCER ...

It has not been a fun season for the men's basketball team, but the Owls were looking to do something they haven't done all season: sweep a season series against a conference rival.

The Owls took on Mercer for the second time this season last Friday and they were looking to sweep the season series against the Bears. That did not happen as Mercer recorded a 66-42 victory over the Owls.

For the first time this season, the Owls did not have a player score in double-digits. Nigel Pruitt led the Owls with nine points while Aaron Anderson recorded 11 boards and four points.

The Owls took on North Florida at the Convocation Center on Thursday. They will have another home game on Saturday when they face Jacksonville at 2:30 p.m.

SLOW FINISH ...

The women's basketball team also did not fare well against Mercer, losing 57-36 down in Macon. The Lady Owls led by six early in the first half, but the Lady Bears woke up and led by four at halftime.

At the start of the second half, the Lady Bears went on a 10-0 run and the Lady Owls could never muster any offense to make a comeback.

"We just couldn't get the game plan working in the second half like we did in the first," head coach Nitra Perry told ksuowls.com. "As with any game plan, they started getting comfortable and finding the holes in our defense and we needed to adjust and we didn't do as good a job as they did at tweaking the plan."

The Lady Owls will look to bounce back on Saturday as they face Jacksonville at noon at the Convocation Center.

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HAWKS HAVEN



Hawks' season going from bad to worse

By Ricky Dimon

These are tough times for the Atlanta Hawks right now. Their January campaign featured a season-ending loss of Lou Williams and a 7-9 record. To say February has not made things any better would be an understatement. Overall, the Hawks have lost 12 of their last 19 games dating back to Dec. 31 and they have dropped to sixth in the Eastern Conference standings, six games back of first-place Miami but five games inside the playoff cut line (ahead of ninth-place Philadelphia).

Of Atlanta's seven losses since the start of January, four have come by five points or fewer. Five, however, have come by double-digits—including the two most recent setbacks as well as a 39-point blowout at Chicago on Jan. 14. The Hawks succumbed at home to the Bulls last Saturday, 93-76, and they fell at Indiana on Tuesday, 114-103. The latter contest saw the Pacers take a mere one-point lead at the half, but the home team had an 11-point advantage after three and led by as many as 16 in the fourth.

"We came out a little lethargic at the start of the third quarter, which is a point of emphasis with us every game we play; not coming out flat," head coach Larry Drew told the Atlanta Journal Constitution after losing to Indiana. "We just didn't come out with the energy that we should. I made an early substitution

with Jeff (Teague). He knows I rely on him to be the guy who gets us going, gets us energized. I brought him out for a few minutes and put him back in and he responded very well."

BRIGHT SPOT ...

Teague poured in a team-high 24 points against the Pacers while adding six assists. He also scored 16 against the Bulls despite sustaining a minor right-hip contusion. Teague has reached double-figures in five of his last six outings and eight of his last 10. In a two-point loss to the Knicks on Jan. 27, Teague led Atlanta with 27 points. Two days earlier he contributed 23 points and three steals in a win over Boston. Just as he did in the last two contests, Teague also shined as the Hawks' only real bright spot during a two-game stretch in mid-January. The former Wake Forest star recorded back-to-back double-doubles against the Nets and Spurs, including a season-high 28 points at the expense of Brooklyn.

The Hawks hosted Memphis on Wednesday but results were not available at press time. After entertaining New Orleans at the Highlight Factory on Friday, they will face road tests at Dallas and Orlando next week before the All-Star break.

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FALCONS BEAT



Falcons approach offseason with optimism

By Craig Sager II

The Super Bowl has passed and the Baltimore Ravens are the new world champs. Now the reality of the offseason has perched itself atop the Falcons' franchise. The following months make up the most important timetable involving the salary cap and contract negotiations that are tackled before a championship roster gets fine-tuned on the field. Before the Falcons regroup for OTA's this spring it is the top of the organization that is on the playing field.

OLD-MAN STRENGTH ...

The Atlanta Falcons were the oldest team in the NFC in 2012. Veteran leadership is a valuable asset in the NFL, but while general manager Thomas Dimitroff will be solidifying a roster for a possible Super Bowl run in 2013, he will be taking into consideration the age at certain positions and finding guys to plug in as long term replacements in the future. Young candidates for tight end, running back and defensive end among other positions will all be under careful evaluation.

The burning question will remain for what looks to be a while, over whether Tony Gonzalez comes back for another season. Gonzalez was 95 percent sure all year that he would hang up the cleats. However, with

such a prolific and productive Atlanta offense calling him back for on more year, and the realism that comes from being just five yards away from your first-ever Super Bowl game, it is fair to believe the competitive Gonzalez will weigh his options.

"It just doesn't seem like it's time for him to move on," Dimitroff told ESPN at the Super Bowl media center.

"Tony's a man and he's got to make his own decision. Suffice it to say that it's not going to be an easy decision for him one way or another because he knows that he still has fuel in the tank and it's very legitimate fuel in the tank."

The Falcons will have the 30th pick of the draft which will begin April 25. The 2013 NFL Scouting Combine begins Feb. 20 and goes through Feb. 26. Finishing the season with the NFC's best record and a home NFC Championship Game appearance is something that a team can build from. The ultimate goal is something Mike Smith told us following the NFC Championship, was one of, if not the only thing that the Falcons fell short of this past year. The pursuit for filling the missing pieces is underway in Atlanta.

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CHOP SHOP



Braves acquire Upton, complete outfield

By Fletcher Proctor

The Atlanta Braves made a major move to solidify the outfield, landing Justin Upton in a trade with the Arizona Diamondbacks while surrendering unsigned Martin Prado and four minor league players. The Braves also acquired third baseman Chris Johnson in the trade.

"We're always trying to add as many five-tool players as possible," said Braves general manager Frank Wren on a conference call following the trade. "We've been looking for a piece like this for a long time. We've been looking for a right-handed hitter that can hit in the middle of the lineup and make that other team think."

Last season, Upton managed to pound 17 home runs and steal 18 bases while batting .280 over 150 games. He is a two-time All-Star who will not turn 26 until August. The Braves control him through the 2015 season.

Upton will play left field and wear No. 8 after wearing No. 10 during his five-plus seasons in Arizona.

"I'll play anywhere," said Upton on a conference call. "He's (Jason Heyward) got the hardware. But as an outfield corps, we can push ourselves to be better, but if we push ourselves, we can get to that next level and we can be the best outfield in baseball. We have to get out there and take care of our

business. We have the young legs."

Upton is expected to hit third and the team is hoping he finds the power that saw him hit 31 home runs in 2011.

"Fred (Gonzalez) will have to look through (the lineup), but he has several more options than he did yesterday," said Wren on the call about how the lineup will look. "This puts us in a great position to compete in the National League."

THE OTHER GUY ...

Johnson is expected to compete with Juan Francisco for the suddenly-available third-base job with Prado signing with the Diamondbacks. Johnson hit 15 home runs and drove in 76 runs with a .281 average in 136 games. Prado managed just 10 home runs and 70 RBIs in 156 games, though he did boast a higher on-base percentage and batting average. Johnson finished with a higher slugging percentage and will likely bat near the bottom of the lineup. Francisco hit just .234 but did manage nine home runs in 203 plate appearances. A platoon is also possible with Johnson facing lefties and Francisco batting against right-handers.

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GWINNETT GLADIATORS



Glads keeping pace in South Division

By Joe Deighton

The Gwinnett Gladiators remained in second place in the ECHL's South Division last week, just three points behind Greenville. The Glads recorded a shutout victory against South Carolina on Saturday night to keep pace with the division leaders. An important top-3 seed in the playoffs will be determined by the division winner and will probably come down to the last game of the season. Greenville travels to Gwinnett on March 30.

BLANKING CAROLINA ...

Gwinnett goalie Louis Dominique was flawless against the Stingrays, recording 24 saves and his second shutout of the season. Forward Justin Bowers got things started for the Gladiators with his 11th goal of the year, 8:09 into the first period. All-Star forward Casey Pierro-Zabotel added a power-play goal, two minutes into the third period to put Gwinnett up 2-0. Joey Haddad tallied the last goal a couple minutes later to put the game away and give the Glads a 3-0 win over South Carolina. Haddad contributed two points on the night, while Bowers had three points to lead the team. It was a good win for Gwinnett

after being shutout the previous night by the same Stingray team.

JONES AND LEE DEPART ...

As is the case with a team that has a lot of talent, Gwinnett lost two more players to the AHL this week. Marietta native Doug Jones was called up to San Antonio after contributing 38 points for the Gladiators this year. Jones scored 17 goals in 47 games with Gwinnett and was named ECHL's Rookie of the Month in October. Jones leaves Gwinnett after recording 11 multi-point games.

Goaltender Mike Lee was also called up to the AHL this week. Lee returns to the Portland Pirates for the third time this year. The rookie goalie made an impact at the All-Star game in Colorado, stopping 18 of 19 shots in the third period to lead the ECHL to a 7-3 win over the Colorado Eagles. Lee had two shutouts and put together a .918 save percentage as a member of the Gladiators this year. He also ranks second in the ECHL with a 2.13 GAA. It is quite possible that Mike Lee will be back with Gwinnett this season, since this is his third call-up.

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