

2025-26 NORTHERN NASH HS ATHLETICS BEST OF TIMES



JAH'MARZEA WILLIAMS -- NNHS BOYS ATHLETE OF THE YEAR
(Photo Submitted by Carl Copeland)

NNHS enjoyed magical sports year

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

RED OAK -- A successful athletic year on the campus of Northern Nash High School officially came to a close in May, highlighted by the school hosting its annual end-of-year athletics award banquet.

Of course, the event was highlighted by the recognition of the Knights boys basketball team, who headlined the school year by claiming the 6-A State Championship in March.

A title 56 years in the making, it was the school's first boys basketball state championship since 1968, immediately making the 2025-26 athletic campaign one of the most memorable in school history.

As the year continued

See KNIGHTS, Page 2B



LAYLA HASAN -- NN GIRLS ATHLETE OF THE YEAR
(Photo Submitted by Meryn Johnson)



SOUTHERN NASH FRESHMAN SOCCER STANDOUT BROOKLYN RICE

Special Soccer Season Southern, Northern excelled during Big East action

From Staff Reports

NASH COUNTY -- The newfangled Big East Conference was expected to provide an overall uptick in the girls soccer competitiveness level -- and Southern Nash and Northern Nash readily accepted that lofty challenge.

Taking part in a difficult league, the upstart Ladybirds, with eight freshmen on their varsity roster, went 18-7 overall and 9-3 in the Big East, which was good enough for second place.

Most important, Southern Nash saved its

See SOCCER, Page 2B



SOUTHERN NASH'S TERRI RICHARDSON
GIRLS ATHLETE OF THE YEAR
(Photos Submitted by Carl Copeland)

JOB WELL DONE 'Birds excelled in 2025-26

From Staff Reports

STANHOPE -- Southern Nash is known for its all-sports excellence, but it's the girls side of things that really captured the attention of SNHS Athletic Director Robbie Kennedy during the 2025-26 calendar year.

"We've got a really good group of girls' athletes right now," Kennedy said. "As good as we have had in awhile. And a lot of these girls will be coming back next year."

The numbers spell that out as SNHS claimed three Big East Conference girls crowns in 2025-26 -- and would have earned a fourth if flag football had been a sanctioned sport.

SN also reached the Elite Eight of the state playoffs in softball and girls soccer



SN'S LUKE FAULKNER
MALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

See BIRDS, Page 2B



KENO JONES ENJOYED AN EXCEPTIONAL
TENURE FOR THE BARTON COLLEGE BULLDOGS
(Photo Courtesy of Lynda Nielsen)

Keno Jones transferring to play at Troy University

By CHANCE PUCKETT
Correspondent

TROY, ALA. -- Keno Jones, who quarterbacked the Northern Nash High School to an appearance in the 2022 Class 3-A Football State Championship game, made quite the name for himself while at Barton College in

Wilson. Jones entered his collegiate career as a quarterback, but was mainly recruited as a safety before being walked up to linebacker.

While he was known for his

offensive prowess at Northern Nash, he's proven to be quite the athlete on the defensive side of the ball as well.

After making his way onto the field and sharpening his skills during his underclassmen campaigns, Jones started turning heads around the country during the fall of 2025.

The third-year Barton Bulldog earned All-America honorable mention honors at the NCAA Division II level, posting a school-record

See KENO, Page 2B



NORTHERN NASH ROGER SHEARIN AWARD WINNER LANDON KEEFE WITH THE LEGEND HIMSELF

KNIGHTS

continued from page 1B

to unfold, it wouldn't be the only state title brought back to Northern this year, however.

Fighting Knight junior Khaleek Evans registered not one but two individual state championships in his penultimate year at Northern, claiming the solo crown in the 500-meter dash at the 6A Indoor Track & Field State Championships with a time of 1:04.59, later following that up with a title-worthy 47.63 in the Outdoor Track & Field 400-meter dash during the spring season.

Evans was the Conference Athlete of the Year on the Boys Indoor Track circuit during the winter, ending the year as one of five Northern Nash student-athletes to claim that title in their respective sport.

Layla Hasan received the same honor as Evans on the Girls Indoor Track side of things, with Northern Nash High School also sweeping Swimmer of the Year honors in both boys and girls swimming.

Erin Wilson took home the girls title while Conner Exzell was the boys selection, the lone spring selection coming on the golf course as Britt Crumley was the boys golf Player of the Year.

School-specific individual award winners were honored at this year's banquet as well, with Hasan also tabbed as the school's Female Athlete of the Year while football and boys basketball star Jah'Marzea Williams immortalized as the Male Athlete of the Year.

Cara Brake and Necolus Rhodes were each honored as the Female and Male Triple Crown Award winners, recognizing their achievements as a student-athlete as well as in the classroom and in the local community.

Lastly, Landon Keefe, the son of the school's athletic director and head baseball coach, Joey Keefe, was named the Roger Shearin Award recipient in appreciation for us commitment and dedication to the Northern Nash athletic department as a whole.

Outside of individual recognitions, four Northern squads brought home Big East Conference championships to the school this year, most notably coming from the football team; which then made a run to the fourth round of the Class 6-A state playoffs.

The football team was joined as a league champion in the fall by the school's boys cross country team, a traditional power both in the local and statewide ranks.

Aside from that, the green and gold hung banners for both boys swimming and boys wrestling, building on a strong run of recent seasons in both sports.

While the previous athletic year will be hard to top, the Knights will look to continue their department-wide momentum in the fall, with football, boys soccer, volleyball, girls tennis and girls golf set to kick off the athletic campaign.

BIRDS

continued from page 1B

and was the Nash County Champion in girls outdoor track.

Four-sport star Terri Richardson was one of SN's top athletes as she starred in basketball, volleyball, flag football and track and field for the Ladybirds.

During SN's Athletic Awards Ceremony last month, Richardson was saluted as the school's Girls Athlete of the Year.

The Boys Athlete of the Year recipient was Luke Faulkner, who was splendid in football, baseball and indoor track and field.

The Nash County Schools Triple Crown Award for excellence in the classroom, playing field and community when to Ana Alonso for the girls and Wesley Immediato for the boys.

Alonso excelled in soccer, cross country and indoor track and field, while Immediato was strong in football and track and field.

The Team of the Year Award went to girls flag football, which claimed the unofficial Big East title in the first year of the sport.

Flag football is now sanctioned by the North Carolina High School



SN COACH OF THE YEAR TEVIN BOYKIN

Athletic Association, and look for SN to be one of the favorites in the sport this fall in the Big East Conference.

Tevin Boykin was the selection as Southern Nash Coach of the Year. His rebuilding project with the SN girls basketball program continued to make significant progress this past winter, and Boykin also served as the school's track and

field coach in the spring, helping the Ladybirds earn the top position at the Nash County Championships with a roster loaded with talented underclassmen.

The underclass-dominated lineup was a theme throughout many of SN's girls sports, so look for the Ladybirds to continue to pile up the conference crowns in the coming seasons.



2026 NORTHERN NASH GIRLS SOCCER SQUAD

SOCCER

continued from page 1B

best for last, reaching the quarterfinals of the state playoffs for the first time in school history.

On the other side of the county, Northern Nash was also sharp as the Lady Knights posted an 11-7-3 ledger and qualified for the second round of the postseason.

Wilson Fike was the regular season champ in the Big East and was paced by Coach of the Year Chris Mizelle, a Nash County native who prepped at Northern Nash.

Fike's Kailynn Williams was tabbed as the Offensive Player of the Year, while Hunt's Cali Rountree was the pick as Defensive Player of the Year.

The complete 2026 All-Big East Conference Girls Soccer Team is as follows:

- All-Conference**
- Jaide Simpkins, Wilson Fike
- Kailynn Williams, Wilson Fike
- Emily Hanchett,

- Wilson Fike
- Allerie Pitt, Wilson Fike
- Emory Skinner, Wilson Fike
- Lilah Rountree, Wilson Fike
- Brooklyn Rice, Southern Nash
- Ana Alonso, Southern Nash
- Jenny Flores, Southern Nash
- Leila Gonzalez, Southern Nash
- Hailey Couch, Southern Nash
- Mary Lewin, Wilson Hunt
- Cali Rountree, Wilson Hunt
- Caylee Rountree, Wilson Hunt
- Avalyn Hooks, Wilson Hunt
- Gray Jenkins, Northern Nash
- Aubrey Freeman, Northern Nash
- Hayden Bellamy, Northern Nash
- Ekaterina Forgette, CB Aycock
- Addison Watkins, CB Aycock

- Averi Cornutt, CB Aycock
- Abigail Ruiz, Southern Wayne
- Hayley Aldana, Southern Wayne
- Za'Nadiyah Harris, Rocky Mount
- Zaleah Christian, Rocky Mount
- Honorable Mention**
- Aspen Evans, Wilson Fike
- Erika Landa, Southern Nash
- Tate Misback, Wilson Hunt
- Ava Lloyd, Northern Nash
- Trinity Graham, CB Aycock
- Molly Barrett, Southern Wayne
- Jayden Terry, Rocky Mount
- Top Honors**
- Offensive Player of the Year -- Kailynn Williams, Wilson Fike
- Defensive Player of the Year -- Cali Rountree, Wilson Hunt
- Coach of the Year -- Chris Mizelle, Wilson Fike

KENO

continued from page 1B

114 tackles throughout his junior season en route to first-team all-region honors and a Co-Defensive Player of the Year recognition as well in the Conference Carolina.

Of course, his profile and numbers then drew attention from coaches at the Division I level, opening up a new opportunity for the former Knight.

Now a member of the Sun Belt Conference's Troy Trojans, Jones made his way down to Alabama in the spring to begin a new chapter of his athletic career, with the 2026 fall season drawing nearer each and every day.

"It felt like home," Jones said of Troy, who won back-to-back Sun Belt titles in 2022 and 2023.

"They were checking in on me day in and day out."

Jones had interest from a flurry of schools around the nation, with the Trojans inevitably being the best fit for his skillset.

Aside from the chemistry formed between himself and the school's coaching staff, one that's led by third-year head coach Gerad Parker, Jones was attracted to the attention to detail and culture promoted by the school, one that extends beyond football.

Troy has had its fair share of run in the national spotlight as of late, with the school's baseball team advancing to the Men's College World Series for the first time in program history after defeating Little Rock in a Super Regional last weekend, continuing a strong tradition of baseball in the Sun Belt.

Jones, along with many others at Troy, hope the Trojans' success on the diamond will carry over to the football field this fall.



THE GREAT KENO JONES

"They set the expectation for everyone else at the school," said Jones of the school's baseball club — who will open their first College World Series appearance on Friday afternoon against No. 16 West Virginia. "It's been amazing to see, especially in my first year here."

Aside from enjoying his counterpart's recent success on the baseball field, Jones has been hard at work with spring ball wrapping up in the last few weeks and summer workouts set to begin soon.

The Trojans are set to kick off their 2026 campaign against San Houston State on Saturday, Sept. 5, with league play

slated to begin on Tuesday, Oct. 6 against Southern Miss.

With those dates quickly approaching, Jones has set lofty — yet attainable goals for both himself and his squad as he heads into a new year in his new digs.

Statistically, Jones stated that he's hoping to keep his numbers in line with what they were at Barton, and even potentially improve them as he continues to learn the Trojan defense and system.

As a team, Jones hopes that Troy can compete and win a league title, one that would put them in the running for a College Football playoff berth.