



# The Voice of Blythewood

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BLYTHEWOOD, SC  
PERMIT NO. 2

## Straiter asks for full review of Mayor's treatment by government, media

**PUBLISHER'S NOTE:** On March 5, 2026, Edward Straiter sent the following email to Blythewood Town Manager Ed Driggers as a "Formal Request for Independent Review, Equity Assurance, and Governance Transparency" regarding his (Straiter's) concern for how Mayor Sloan Griffin is treated by council and the media, "Given that Sloan Griffin III is the First Documented African American Mayor of Blythewood."

Straiter is the founder and CEO of several businesses and charities, including UniversalCMG World Entertainment 1954; Straiter Enterprise, Int; and Blythewood Economic Development and Tourism, a Blythewood non-profit (not associated with the Town) with offices listed at 401 McNulty St., Suite 70, which is the location of the Blythewood post office.

*Dear Mr. Ed Driggers  
Town Administrator / Manager  
Town of Blythewood SC  
My name is Edward Straiter, and I am writing as a concerned citizen with more than three decades of experience working with*

*mayoral offices and municipalities throughout the United States. I have engaged in municipal tours, leadership initiatives, and governmental collaboration efforts across numerous cities and towns. My work has been publicly recognized reflecting my long-standing commitment to ethical municipal governance and civic accountability.*

*It is from this professional background and deep respect for public institutions that I formally request a comprehensive and transparent review of recent governance disputes involving Mayor Sloan J. Griffin III and Council members as well as related oversight and public communication practices that may be affecting public confidence in the Town of Blythewood's leadership.*

*While I respect the importance of checks and balances in municipal government, several developments over the past two years raise serious concerns regarding consistency, fairness, and transparency in how elected officials are treated.*

### 1. Allegations of Favoritism

*Recent public statements from certain council members allege that Mayor Griffin has conferred favors upon friends or associates. From publicly available records and historical coverage, there does not appear to have been comparable allegations made against previous mayors, nor similar levels of public conflict surrounding other council members in the past.*

*I respectfully request clarification on:*

- The formal standards and evidentiary thresholds used to evaluate allegations of favoritism.
- Whether these standards are written, historically applied, and uniformly enforced.
- Documentation demonstrating that similar claims, if made in prior administrations, were handled in the same manner.
- What safeguards exist to prevent reputational harm from unverified or politically motivated accusations.

See **Straiter** page 9



Straiter



Driggers



The former Wilson's store.

Barbara Ball & Jim McLean

## BAR files injunction, writes new rules to halt demolition

**Barbara Ball**  
Publisher

**BLYTHEWOOD** — A request to demolish one of Blythewood's oldest remaining commercial buildings drew strong opposition during a Feb. 19 meeting of the town's BAR (Board of Architectural Review), where residents urged the board to preserve the historic building, known as Wilson's Store, located at 300 Main Street.

Because the building sits within the town's architectural overlay district and town center area, demolition cannot occur without approval of a COA (Certificate of Approval) from the BAR.

Matthew Graham and his business partner Kimberly Bonilla, who recently purchased the 3,791 sq. ft. building for \$550,000, appeared before the board seeking that COA.

At that meeting, the board denied the request, and the owners appealed the ruling based on a 'substantial hardship'. A hearing for that appeal is set for March 16.

Graham says that, because the building is a Class II historic

structure, the statute gives the BAR 60 days (from the time the application for the COA is filed) to negotiate with the owner to reach a solution before the demolition can commence. That 60 days ended March 7, according to Graham.

The BAR maintains, according to the complaint, that Graham's interpretation of the statute is incorrect and not supported by the Town ordinances.

Nevertheless, the Town filed a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction on March 6, to further prevent demolition while the dispute is resolved.

On Tuesday, March 10, the BAR sent Graham a seven-page list of new rules that he says the BAR plans to introduce at the March 16 hearing, in order to block his appeal. Graham says the board will vote on the new rules immediately before he presents his case.

"What started as a collaborative process has revealed a pattern of bad faith, procedural manipulation, and conflicts that undermine community trust and deter investment," Graham said

See **BAR** page 9

## Richland Two to host Superintendent Town Hall at Blythewood High School March 14

**Staff Reports**  
**The Voice**

**BLYTHEWOOD** — Richland School District Two Superintendent Dr. Kim Moore is inviting the community to pull up a chair and talk about the future of local education.

The district will host a Superintendent's Town Hall on Saturday, March 14, from 9 to 11 a.m. at Blythewood High

School. The event is open to parents, students, staff, and community members.

According to district officials, the meeting is designed as an interactive session to discuss student achievement, district-wide initiatives, and strategic goals. Richland Two says Dr. Moore plans to use the platform to share updates while listening to feedback from district families to ensure

the "path forward reflects the needs and aspirations" of the community.

Those interested in attending are encouraged to submit questions or specific topics of interest in advance via the district's website at [richland2.org/our-district/superintendent/](http://richland2.org/our-district/superintendent/) superintendent-town-hall.

Blythewood High School is located at 10901 Wilson Blvd in Blythewood.

## Win \$200 in The Voice's Bracket Challenge

**Staff Reports**  
**The Voice**

**BLYTHEWOOD** — The Madness is just around the corner, and you could capitalize on that by winning some extra cash in The Voice's NCAA Men's Bracket Challenge, which can be found on page 12 of the March 19 issue.

The winner of the contest will be presented two \$100 bills after the April 8 National Championship game. A tie will be de-

See **Bracket** page 9

## Voice publisher named president of SCPA

**Ashley Ghere**  
Contributor

**COLUMBIA** — Barbara Ball, owner and publisher of The Voice of Blythewood and Fairfield County, has been elected president of the S.C. Press Association after a vote of the Press Association's membership during its annual meeting March 5-6, at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. The meeting was attended by more than 200 journalists from across the state.

She succeeds Hal Welch, editor and publisher of The Journal in Seneca.

Ball began her newspaper career at age 6, tagging along with her brother as he delivered the Wichita Falls Times in her rural hometown in Texas. She started her first newspaper in 1999, sold it in 2005,

started The Voice of Blythewood in 2010 and The Voice of Fairfield County in 2012. The Voice was honored to be invited to serve as a partner on The Post and Courier's Uncovered team in 2023.

Ball and her newspapers have won a number of Press Association awards over the years including the Montgomery FOI Award, the Jay Bender Assertive Journalism Award and the Jim Davenport Award for Excellence in Government Reporting.

"It is truly an honor to be named president of the South Carolina Press Association," Ball said. "I've been a member of the Press Association for 25 years, so I'm keenly aware of what it does for its members at all levels.

It educates and informs us, encourages us, stands up for us and showcases our work.

"I'm looking forward to working with our extraordinarily capable Association leaders as well as serving with the leaders of our newspapers from across the state as we all strive to do our best to deliver the news that matters to our communities," she said.

Other officers elected were: Kyle Osteen, managing partner and co-owner of Osteen Publishing Co., which publishes The Sumter Item, as daily newspaper vice president; Jonathan Vickery, publisher and editor of The People-Sentinel in Barnwell, as weekly newspaper vice president; and John Boyette, executive editor of the Aiken Standard, as treasurer.

See **SCPA** page 9

## Village Church opens new worship center

**Staff Reports**  
**The Voice**

**BLYTHEWOOD** - Village Church will hold its first Sunday services in a new 1,200 seat worship center on Sunday, March 15.

"This new facility will be a blessing to not only our existing members, but for Blythewood and the surrounding communities as well," said Senior Pastor Erik Estep. "We will be having two grand opening services that Sunday morning, and everyone is welcome to attend either service and experience the love of God in person."

With the seating capacity increasing by 60 percent, the church will be moving from three to two services on Sundays - at 9 a.m. and at 10:30 a.m.

The church is located at 574 River Pond Road in Blythewood.

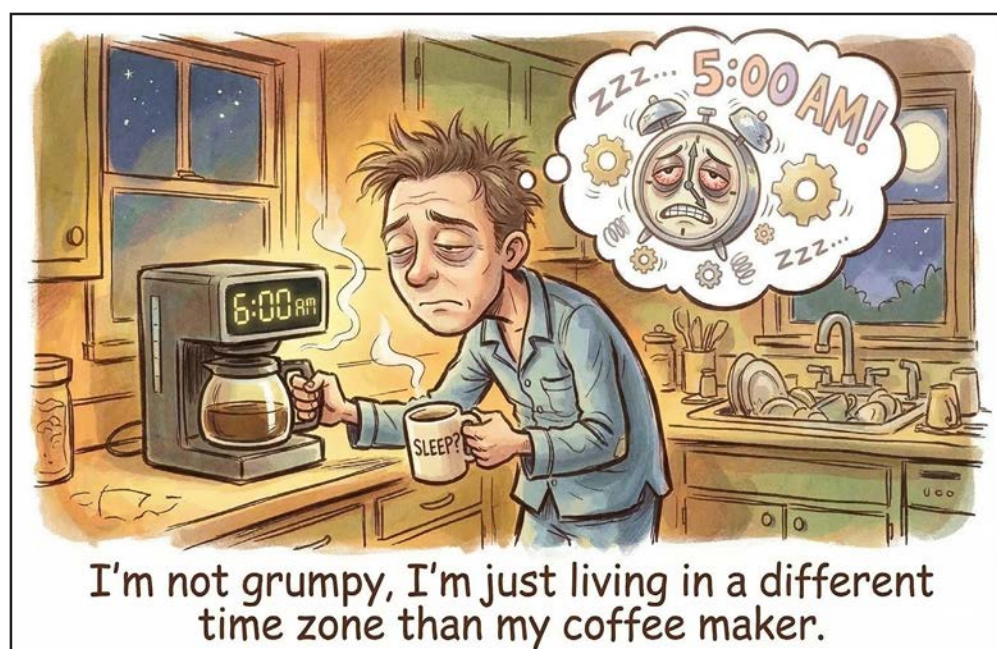
For more information, contact Village Church at 803-419-0989 or on [SocialMedia@VillageChurchSC](mailto:SocialMedia@VillageChurchSC).

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I'm not grumpy, I'm just living in a different time zone than my coffee maker.

## 25-Foot Buffer Bill for Police, First Responders



### Guest Editorial

Andy Brack  
Publisher, Satehouse Report

COLUMBIA – South Carolina House lawmakers are advancing a proposal that would make it a crime for someone, after being warned, to come within 25 feet of on-duty law enforcement officers, firefighters, EMTs or certain medical personnel while they are carrying out their duties.

The HALO bill (Helping Alleviate Lawful Obstruction) was sent Tuesday from the House Judiciary Committee to the House floor on a 15-4 vote. If passed, the measure would make it a misdemeanor to knowingly violate a first responder's order to stay back and interfere with, harass or distract that person, punishable by up to a \$500 fine and 60 days in jail.

Supporters say the bill is needed to protect first responders in increasingly tense public situations. Rep. Melissa Oremus, R-Aiken, the bill's lead sponsor, said the proposal is intended to establish boundaries so officers and emergency personnel

can do their jobs safely. J.J. Jones, executive director of the South Carolina Police Chiefs Association, called the measure a necessity for law enforcement, recalling a past traffic stop in which a man with a camcorder repeatedly approached and tried to provoke him.

Backers, including representatives of sheriffs, police, hospitals, firefighters and emergency medical responders, argued the bill would offer a deterrent before situations escalate. Attorney General Alan Wilson also voiced support, saying while people have a right to peacefully assemble, those who harass law enforcement or first responders should face consequences.

Opponents warned the proposal could violate First Amendment protections. Courtney Thomas of the American Civil Liberties Union of South Carolina said the bill could chill free speech and make it harder for the public to observe and record police activity. She argued that bystander video has played an important role in holding officers accountable, including in the 2015 Walter Scott shooting in North Charleston.

University of South Carolina law pro-

See **Editorial** page 9

### Obituary



### Veda Faye Marthers

Veda Faye Marthers passed away at home on February 17, 2026, at the age of 99. She was born in the Greenbrier community at the Brooks home place to the late Oscar Raymond and Sara Veda Miller Brooks. Faye graduated from Greenbrier school and graduated from Columbia College with a degree in business. She married her high school sweetheart William Claude Marthers Jr. on November 28, 1953. She was a wonderfully devoted wife and homemaker, and a loving, patient mother to Jennifer Brooks Marthers and Wil-

liam Claude Marthers III. Faye was a lifetime and devoted member of Crooked Run Baptist Church. She was a choir member raising her God given voice in solos and duets with her cousins and brother, Miller Brooks. She served as GA leader, Bible School teacher, and church treasurer.

In her early years she was active in the Yellow Jasmine Garden Club winning numerous awards for her arrangements. In her later years she loved spending time at her "Cottage by the Sea" with her sweetheart and cousins, Adelaide Brooks and Clyde Brooks Douglass. Faye and Claude spent hours sitting and walking hand in hand on the beach. They loved beach music, watching the shaggers and a good seafood meal at Hoskins.

If asked what her Mama was like Jennifer's response was, The Walton's TV show mama, Olivia Walton. A grand Southern Lady and cook and a mama who could be counted on no matter what.

She supported Jennifer in

her equestrian and dog endeavors and Claudie's love of motorcycles and dogs. Though these endeavors often left her praying for their safety.

Left to cherish her memories are her daughter, Jennifer Brooks Marthers; her son, William Claude Marthers, III. Her nieces Janice Raye Brooks, Veda Sandra Brooks, and her nephew, Harold Miller Brooks, Jr.

Funeral services will be held at 2 o'clock Tuesday, February 24, 2026, at Crooked Run Baptist Church. Burial will follow in the church cemetery. The family will receive friends on Monday, February 23, 2026, from 5-7 o'clock PM at Pope Funeral Home.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations for Veda Faye Marthers to Fairfield Animal Control, For: "Donation Fund", P.O. 60, Winnsboro, SC 29180 or "Because of Roscoe", P.O. Box 4095, Columbia, SC 29240 or Crooked Run Church, 7978 State Highway, Winnsboro, SC 29180.



### Lawrence Welk by Jeanette Smith

During our recent snowstorm lockdown, I ran across a Lawrence Welk show on TV.

I remember rolling my eyes at how much my mother and her friends loved watching the show every Saturday night.

Interested to see the show after twenty years or more, I was expecting to be carried away with a welcome change from today's harsh sound.

Before watching it, I remembered it as being better, but just not my style. I am not musical or knowledgeable about music at any level, but the songs did seem a little flat and certainly were slower. I hate to say draggy, but they sang at a slower tempo than I remember. I thought they would never get to their destination when a female trio sang, "Sentimental Journey."

Forgetting my efforts to not be elderly at 99, I have to tell you I did know the words to most of the songs. But where

did all those horns come from? Were my beloved Big Bands filled with that much brass? I missed the guitars. I did enjoy the tap dancing, which you don't see much anymore. They stood the whole time and didn't get their clothes ruffled.

I do remember Lawrence Welk shows had beautifully made-up women with perfectly coiffed hair. I didn't remember how pretty the men were! Oh my! Was that makeup on them too? I appreciate how they were so clean and shiny. There was not a tee shirt to be seen or a torn pair of jeans. Instead, the all-male orchestra were wearing bright yellow, perfectly tailored suits. Then, they sang a chorus number with the women in gorgeous pink evening gowns and the men in gorgeous pink suits. In a way all this pastel beauty is soothing. No hostile thoughts happen while this show is in progress.

And you do breathe more slowly. That has to be a good thing. Stick with me, I was hoping to like his show better, and now I feel unfaithful to my kinder, gentler era.

Maybe I am not as old-fashioned as I thought because Lawrence is definitely too old for me.

Jeanette Smith, 95, a Blythewood resident, has been active in the community's civic affairs for over 50 years.



### What's Missing in Government? Maybe You

by Kenny Robertson

Let's be honest. County government meetings can be... a little slow. Okay, very slow.

You ever sit through one and think: "This really could've just been a text message."

The motion. The second. Discussion. The vote. Next item. Somebody coughs. Government is slow on purpose.

If government moved as fast as a private business, a small group of people could make huge decisions affecting thousands of citizens overnight.

No chance for citizens to weigh in.

That might sound efficient... until it's your road. Your taxes. Your neighborhood. Public meetings. Committees. Procurement laws. Transparency requirements. Legal review. All those steps exist to slow power down.

Now let's talk about something interesting that happens at every council meeting. There's a section called Public Comment.

You get about three minutes to say whatever it is you need to say. Honestly, more people should take advantage of that window.

If you don't sign up to speak, Jeff Schaffer will.

Now, you would think public comments would really move the council. Because who likes getting yelled at in public while you're not allowed to respond?

It's not a discussion. It's more like being talked to by a drill sergeant during basic training.

But here's the part that surprises people—public comment doesn't always change votes.

That's because by the time the meeting happens, most of the homework has already been done. So the meeting you're watching is often the final step in a process that started days or even weeks earlier—which is why the most important document in local government might ac-

tually be the meeting agenda.

That's where you see what's coming before the vote ever happens. If you really want to know what your local government is about to do, don't wait for the meeting. Read the agenda.

Once you start reading agendas, something interesting happens. You stop being surprised by decisions... because you saw them coming a couple of days earlier.

But most citizens don't attend the meetings. Many people don't know when they happen. Or what's being discussed. Or what just got approved.

By the time people hear about something, the vote already happened. Then everybody's upset.

Now let me say something positive. There's one thing about these meetings that I actually enjoy: the meeting in between the meetings. Before the meeting starts. After the meeting ends.

That's when citizens can talk with each other. That's when people can walk up to someone from planning, utilities, or economic development and ask questions.

That's when you can walk right up to your county council representative and have a conversation.

Face-to-face. Just people talking.

And sometimes you realize something important: most of the people working in these departments are just trying to solve problems, too. They have rules. Budgets. Limitations. But they also have information the public rarely hears.

That's why I encourage people to attend meetings when they can. Not just to watch the vote. But to be in the room. At the end of the day, we're still on the same team.

Local government is basically a giant group project.

Some people do the research.

Some write the paper.

Some present it.

Some ask the hard questions.

But everybody has a role.

Next week we're going to talk about something that surprised me even more than FILOT—the U.S. Constitution and the South Carolina Constitution.

Yes.

South Carolina has its own Constitution.

And once you understand how those two documents interact, you start to see why government works the way it does.

And why sometimes the slow parts are actually the guardrails.

Kenny Robertson, an educator and comedian, is a native of Ridgeway.

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Let's go!

**Sunday,  
March 15**

## New Sanctuary, New Sunday

Village Church will host the grand opening for their new sanctuary on Sunday with services at 9 and 10:30 a.m. at 574 Rimer Pond Rd. in Blythewood. For more information, visit [villagechurchsc.com](http://villagechurchsc.com).

### COMMUNITY EVENTS FOR BLYTHEWOOD & FAIRFIELD COUNTY

#### UPCOMING

Fair Lawn United Methodist Church will host an **Indoor Flea Market** on **Saturday, March 14** from **8 a.m. - 12 p.m.** at 9203 Wilson Blvd, Blythewood. Enter from the rear of the church. Parking is available in the back and side of the church.

**Village Church's Grand Opening** for their new sanctuary is set for **Sunday, March 15** at **9 a.m.** and **10:30 a.m.** 574 Rimer Pond Rd., Blythewood. Visit [villagechurchsc.com](http://villagechurchsc.com) for more information.

The **Youth Choir** at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church of Ridgeway will celebrate their anniversary on **Sunday, March 15** at **10 a.m.** 2092 Longtown Rd, Ridgeway.

Mt. Zion Baptist Church will celebrate its **Jubilee Choir's 95th Anniversary** on **Sunday, March 22** at **2 p.m.** 1025 Abney Hill Rd., Blythewood.

Fairfield County **Ducks Unlimited's Annual Spring Frenzy** is set for **Thursday, March 26** at **6 p.m.** at The Farm at Ridgeway, 3248 US-2, Ridgeway. Purchase tickets at [ducksunlimited.myeventscenter.com](http://ducksunlimited.myeventscenter.com).

Fairfield County Parks and Recreation will host an **Easter Egg Hunt** on **Saturday, March 28** from **10 a.m. - 12 p.m.** at Drawdy Park, 702 Eighth St. in Winnsboro. Meet the Easter Bunny, do an Easter egg craft, enjoy a bounce house.

Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church's annual **Community Easter Egg Hunt** is set for **Saturday, March 28** from **12 - 3 p.m.** Games, food, the Easter Bunny and prizes for all youth. 2092 Longtown Road in Ridgeway. This free event is sponsored by the Youth Ministry.

Mt. Pleasant Church will host **Holy Week services** on **Maundy Thursday, April 2** at **6 p.m.**, **Good Friday, April 3** at **6 p.m.**, **Easter Sunrise** on **Sunday, April 5** at **7:30 a.m.**, and **Easter Service** at **9:30 a.m.** 736 Campground Rd.

Fairfield Behavioral Health Services will host its 26th Annual **Run for Recovery 5K** on **Saturday, April 17**. Register at [strictlyrunning.com](http://strictlyrunning.com).

#### ONGOING

Ridgeway Recreation Center offers **Senior Citizen Chair Exercises** classes each **Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday** at **noon**; **Craft classes Mondays** at **1 p.m.**; **Bingo** twice a month and a **Senior Citizen trip**

once a month. Monthly calendars of events are available at the center, located at 1900 US Hwy 21 South in Ridgeway and on the Fairfield County Parks & Recreation webpage. For more information call (803)337-7358.

**Alcoholics Anonymous Doko Group** meets **Fridays** at **7 p.m.** at Trinity Methodist Church, 90 Boney Rd, Blythewood.

**Narcotics Anonymous (NA) Group** (Open Group Discussion) is hosted at Fairfield Behavioral Health Services, 178 US Hwy 321 Bypass N, Winnsboro on **Tuesdays** from **7 - 8 p.m.**

**Fairfield Community Food Bank** is open **Tues. and Thurs.** from **10 a.m. - noon** at 100 US Hwy 321 Bypass S in Winnsboro.

**Christian Assistance Bridge** is in need of donations. CAB is open at 126 Blythewood Rd., **M & Th** from **9 a.m. - 1 p.m.** 803-786-1903.

The Round Top Baptist Church **Grief Ministry** meets every **3rd Thursday** of the month from **6:30 - 7:30 p.m.** 120 Round Top Ct., Blythewood.

#### MEETINGS

**Blythewood Rotary Club** meets on **Thursdays** at Columbia Country Club, 135 Columbia Club Drive W. Coffee at 7:15, breakfast at 7:30, meeting at **7:45 a.m.**

**Town of Ridgeway Council** meets the **second Thursday** of each month at **6:30 p.m.** at 170 S Dogwood Ave., Ridgeway.



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**Winnsboro Rotary Club** meets the 1st & 3rd **Tuesdays** of the month at **1 p.m.** at 210 E. Washington Street, Winnsboro. (803) 712-6100.

**Winnsboro Town Council** meets the 1st and 3rd **Tuesdays** of each month at **6:15 p.m.** 102 S. Vanderhorst Street, Winnsboro

**Fairfield County School Board** meets on the **3rd Tuesday** of the month. Executive Session - 6 p.m.; Public Session at **6:30 p.m.**

at 1226 US Hwy 321 Bypass S., Winnsboro.

**Fairfield County Council** meets the **2nd** and **4th Mondays** of each month at **6 p.m.** at 250 N. Walnut St., Winnsboro.

**Blythewood Town Council** will meet on **Monday, March 23** at **6 p.m.** Doko Manor, 100 Alvina Hagood Cir, Blythewood.

To submit an event, meeting, cancellation or closure, e-mail [voice@blythewoodonline.com](mailto:voice@blythewoodonline.com).

## Holy Week Services

**Mt. Pleasant Church**  
736 Campground Rd

†† **Maundy Thursday**  
April 2nd - 6pm

† **Good Friday**  
April 3rd - 6pm

† **Easter**  
**Sunrise at 7:30am**  
with a light breakfast after  
**Regular Easter Service**  
9:30am

## Village Church

### GRAND OPENING

**Sunday, March 15**  
**9 AM & 10:30 AM**

**574 Rimer Pond Rd.**  
[VillageChurchSC.com](http://VillageChurchSC.com)

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1st Place Amateur Division – Hog Callers

photos/Barbara Ball



1st Place Professional Division – Big Wally's

## Ribfest: Big crowd, sunny skies, great ribs!

### Staff Reports The Voice

BLYTHEWOOD – “It was the best and biggest Ribfest we’ve ever had,” said festival co-chair Mike Ross “...10,000 pounds of ribs, great weather and at least 5,000 attendees, maybe more. It was a wonderful day, big crowd and great ribs.”

The 7th annual Doko Ribfest Cook-Off was held outside Doko Manor on Saturday, cook teams took home \$8,050 in prize money. There were also beer trucks, rib-tasting, food trucks and other vendors selling everything from t-shirts to ice cream.

“It was great,” Ross said. “We don’t know exactly how much profit we made, because all the receipts have not

come in, but I think it’ll be a lot,” he said. “We are especially grateful to our sponsors this year. Our premier \$10,000 sponsor was Cirba Solutions, a company that recycles batteries.

“It really does take a village of sponsors, attendees and great volunteers,” Ross said.

A VIP lounge was provided for sponsors. Awards were given out to the following winners:

### People’s Choice: Prime Time Smokers Amateurs

- 1st Place – Hog Callers
- 2nd Place – Food by TJ
- 3rd Place – Bo Boys BBQ

### Professional Division:

- 1st Place – Big Wally's
- 2nd Place – Tailgaters BBQ
- 3rd Place – Still Smokin' Smokers



Mayor Pro-Tem Andrea Fripp, read a proclamation accompanied by council members Rich McKenrick and Trish Hovis.



2nd Place Amateur – Food by TJ



3rd Place Amateur– Bo Boys BBQ



2nd Place Professional– Tailgaters BBQ



3rd Place Professional – Still Smokin' Smokers

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The Voice  
of Blythewood & Fairfield County

BOYS BASKETBALL 2025-2026 SCHSL 5A DIVISION II

**WESTWOOD HIGH SCHOOL**  
**REDHAWKS**

*State Champions*





Blythewood celebrates their State Championship win on Friday. The program went from 0-19 in 2022 to their second straight State Title.

photos/Larry Gamble

## Blythewood girls shut down Wando for second straight state title

Worthy Evans  
Reporter

COLUMBIA—Blythewood's girls basketball team fell behind early against Wando Friday night at Colonial Life Arena.

That deficit didn't bother the Bengals for long. They quickly overcame an 8-point deficit and used their pressure defense to finish with a 68-44 victory that clinched the team's second straight 5A Division 1 state championship. "It's definitely surreal," head coach Emily McElveen-Schaeffer said. "These girls and these coaches trusted the program, trusted the process, and they deserve this moment more than anything else."

Seniors Chase Thomas and India Williams led the way for the Bengals. Thomas finished the night with 28 points and 11 rebounds, while Williams scored 20 points and pulled down 10 boards.

"It feels amazing," Thomas said. "We started in June and have been playing together ever since. It was a rough start to the season, but we picked it up and we've been doing it ever since."

Blythewood (24-5) opened the season 1-3 with losses to Camden, Dorman, and North Augusta before going 24-2 the rest of the way.

"We've had chemistry over the years and it just felt great to continue that," Williams said about playing with Thomas. "I'm going to miss playing with her next year."

Thomas signed to play for South Carolina State and Williams signed with USC-Aiken.

"Both of them are very good players. They've put their name in the history books of Blythewood High School," McElveen-Schaeffer said. "They both stepped up at the right moment, as they told me they would. They've been here before, and I trust them."

Two other seniors were key in securing the victory. Hayley Hightower, the veteran point guard whom McElveen-Schaeffer said has sparked the defensive effort for years, had eight steals and five assists on top of five points. Madison Thomas, Chase's sister, had

two steals and two assists with four points. "I don't care about points, I just wanted my team to win," said Hightower, who likely played her last basketball game. "I knew that I needed to do whatever I had to do to get my team to get the Dub."

Hightower, a sprinter for Blythewood's state champion girls track and field team, signed to run for Purdue.

After last year's state title win, the seniors on the team were dead set on winning another before they graduated.

"That was their goal, to go back-to-back," McElveen-Schaeffer said. "They decided themselves: 'We're tired of losing, we don't want to lose anymore.'"

Wando's Makenna Reynolds, who finished the night with 19 points, scored nine points over the first eight minutes to vault the Warriors to a 17-9 lead.

Blythewood's defense awakened in the second quarter and stepped up the pressure. From that point on, the Bengals' points flowed.

Hightower made three of four free throws and Thomas sank a 3-pointer to get the Bengals to within 17-15 at the 6:36 mark of the second quarter.

The game stayed tight up to halftime. Williams broke a 27-27 tie with a 3-pointer with 23 seconds left to give the Bengals a 30-27 lead at intermission.

Blythewood took its defensive pressure to a higher level the rest of the way.

The Bengals outscored the Warriors 38-17 and held them to just 7-for-24 shooting.

"We just stayed together, passed the ball to the open person and we made the shots," Thomas said, adding that she and her teammates felt that winning vibe in the midst of a third-quarter run. "It was a surreal feeling, knowing that we were going to win again."

Wando (22-7) opened the third quarter with a McKevitt free throw and a basket from Reynolds to tie the game at 30, and after Hightower made a basket, Emry Crawford tied the game again at 32.

Blythewood scored seven points in quick

succession in the space of a minute. After the 5-minute mark of the third, Williams made one of two foul shots, Thomas drained a 3, and Williams returned to the basket for a 3-point play with 4:04 left.

Hightower may not have scored the points, but her defensive stances as a point guard led to a number of steals that her teammates capitalized on.

"It was me being active on the ball," Hightower said. "I knew I got a little happy and got into foul trouble, but I'm just so glad we were able to win."

The Bengals finished the third quarter leading 48-36, and outscored Wando 20-8 in the final eight minutes.

Wando, which rallied against Lexington from a 28-15 halftime deficit to beat the Wildcats in the Lower State final, had its season end with a loss, but 11th-year head coach Jeff Emory said that his Warriors proved critics wrong all year and finished high.

"Nobody wants to lose the last game, they want to win it and that's what we prepare for all year," Emory said. "We'll be back. We have a young team, but if you call this year a failure, you're not paying attention. We weren't ranked at the beginning of the year, nobody ever seems to give us credit at the beginning of the season. Two or three weeks in we beat a ranked team and we kept going and going and going, and from there we stayed in the top 10 all year long. I couldn't be more proud of them. I think they've earned everybody's respect."

Blythewood's road to state took a grinding turn after the team's second-round home victory over Clover. The fourth-seeded Bengals hit the road Feb. 27 to play No. 1 Dorman, which beat them 61-49 in the second game of the season. Blythewood led the third-round matchup 47-37 going into the fourth quarter and held off a strong Cavaliers rally to win 54-52.

That victory put Blythewood on the road again—to the Upper State championship at Newberry High School to face No. 2 Mauldin.

The Bengals battled the Mavericks tightly through three quarters. It was not until Thomas took to the foul line and made four of six shots in the final two minutes to give her team a needed cushion in the 60-54 victory.

"They were definitely close games," Thomas said. "I felt we had the toughest schedule out of everybody and we pulled it off. I feel like people believed that we couldn't do it, and we pulled it off and now we're champions."

Added Williams, "I think it just built us for this moment. Those games were harder than (the state final), so just knowing that we went through those hard games, the adversity, the road and all that, I think it just built us for this moment."

Even so, McElveen-Schaeffer impressed to her team that Wando's ability to play hard and rally illustrated that strong seasons and state championships are earned, not just expected.

"That's what I challenged them with," she said. "Wando in their last game came from behind to beat Lexington, and I told them that they could come back. That's a good basketball team. You've got to compete every day. You don't just walk on the court and beat somebody."

Three years ago, McElveen-Schaeffer took over a program that went 0-19 in 2021-2022 and had little history of success. Now that the program owns back-to-back state championships, she said attracting talented players to come to Blythewood will be a stronger sell.

"Winning breeds winning," she said. "When people see what we've done, they're more eager to come here. They want to be a part of that, they want to be that."

WANDO - 17-10-9-8-44

BLYTHEWOOD - 9-21-18-20-68

WANDO  
Makenna Reynolds 19, McKevitt 9, Crawford 8, Mazyck 4, Rush 3, Lovis 1.

BLYTHEWOOD  
Chase Thomas 28, India Williams 20, Fulton 8, M. Thomas 4, Hightower 5, Stovall 3.



"A lot of people doubted us, but we just stayed poised and we came out with the dub," senior Jayden Crews said.

photos/Larry Gamble

## Westwood claims first boys state championship in school history

Worthy Evans  
Reporter

COLUMBIA—Greenville broke out to an 18-4 lead on the Westwood basketball team in the first quarter of the 5A Division 2 state final.

By the second quarter at Colonial Life Arena Thursday night, the Redhawks began to turn the tide.

Westwood rattled the defending 5A Division 2 champion Red Raiders with a full-court press, while Jayden Crews, D'Marcus Thomas and other teammates piled up points to shake off the deficit and close out the school's first boys state championship with a 67-55 victory before a packed crowd at the University of South Carolina's home court.

Thomas finished with 26 points and Crews had 23 points, including four 3-pointers and nine rebounds to fire the Redhawks (25-3).

"We were just playing our game. That's our style. They say we're the best backcourt in SC and we just proved that," Crews, who signed with Converse University, said. "I had that chip on our shoulder when we lost 50-45 in Florence (Dec. 20) at Wilson. That really hurt. That was our first loss of the season."

Thomas, who signed with Southern Wesleyan University, said he and Crews worked hard all season to become the scoring and defending tandem that helped bring Westwood its first state boys championship home, two years after the Redhawks girls track team won a share of the 4A state title in 2023.

"That's really my brother, man," he said. "I told him at the start of the season that we had to get us one, me and him, in the gym, day and night, every single day, we just lived in the gym."

Third-year head coach Trent Robinson, who succeeded John Combs after coaching the junior-varsity team, said his team's start was eerily typical of the veteran team. He noted the Redhawks' first-quarter deficits in the last three road playoff games at Conway, St. James and for the Lower State championship against Goose Creek in Florence.

"When I saw that (Greenville's run), I said I think we've been playing the same guys all year," Robinson joked. "I trust my guys. I knew once we started our pressure our shots would come. Honestly, we've never started off a game good this year. ... That's pretty much how we've played. Do I want to go through that again? Never, never. But that's a strong group, seven seniors, 14 solids. I'm so proud of them."

Coaches and players alike felt the win was payback for the team's first loss of the season. Greenville beat Westwood 50-45 at the Magic City Holiday Invitational tournament at Wilson High School in Florence, Dec. 20.

Thomas, Crews, and the rest of the Redhawks had their work cut out for them on the lighted University of South Carolina floor.

Moments after the tipoff, Greenville (23-7) got started with Caden Coleman's basket and Keshun McCoy's 3-pointer after a Westwood turnover.

Thomas sank a quick field goal from just beyond the foul line for Westwood's first score, and later Crews hit a pair of foul shots to make it 10-4, but by Gavin Griffin's layup

at the 2:02 mark, the Red Raiders looked in complete control of the Redhawks.

Greenville finished the quarter leading 20-10, but that point was just beyond the Red Raiders' high-water mark. Led by Crews and Thomas, the Redhawks climbed back into the game with a 13-4 scoring run over the first three minutes of the second.

Crews opened the second quarter with a 3. After Arkies Shell's layup for Greenville, Thomas countered with a layup and Cylan McLeod made two free throws to cut Greenville's lead to 22-17.

A 3 from Thomas got Westwood to within two points, and after two foul shots from the Red Raiders, another 3 from Crews cut Greenville's lead to one by the 5:33 mark of the second quarter.

"One possession at a time, score-stop, score-stop, score-stop," Crews said. "We went three stops in a row, and that's what happened."

Westwood and Greenville battled back and forth over the next four minutes until Caden Coleman's foul shots and a Keshun McCoy layup gave the Red Raiders a 32-26 lead with 1:07 left in the half.

That was the last time the Red Raiders' lead was more than three points. Thomas ended the first-half scoring with a jumper with 23 seconds to go, and Greenville led 32-28 at intermission.

"Coach said that they were going to go on a run at the start of the game, so we handled the run and we kept going on runs," Thomas said.

The second half was pretty much one big Westwood run.

Thomas sparked the Redhawks' second-half surge with a 3 in the first 20 seconds of play, followed by A.J. Veal's basket.

Shell made a steal and layup at the 6:09 mark, and that was the last Greenville basket for four minutes.

In that time McLeod made good on a jumper and with the Red Raiders' lead cut to 37-34, Thomas turned the game around.

The Southern Wesleyan signee hit another layup at the 5:08 mark. Some 28 seconds later, Thomas made a putback to get Westwood in the lead for the first time in the game, 38-37. At the 4:13 mark, his layup with an assist from Daytron Cockfield brought the crowd noise to a crescendo around the arena.

The crowd exploded even louder when Crews, a Converse University signee, drained a 3 with another assist from Cockfield.

Cockfield himself fed the Westwood crowd when he nailed a 3 with an assist from McLeod to give the Redhawks a 46-37 lead.

"One possession at a time," Crews said about his team's second-and-third-quarter surge. "Don't worry about scores, you've got to play defense. Defend, defend, defend. One step at a time, defend, make the right shots, don't turn the ball over."

Caden Coleman's jumper for the Red Raiders broke the momentum briefly, but one of two foul shots from Crews gave Westwood a 48-39 lead going into the final quarter—a quarter-long, 20-6 scoring run.

Greenville tried to climb back into the game with a 3 and a basket from Caden Coleman to make it 48-44 with 6:06 to go. The Redhawks, playing with mountains more confidence than they did in the first quarter, made nothing of it, as Crews sank yet another 3, and Veal scored on a 3-point play and an additional basket to put Westwood ahead by double digits, 56-45.

With 3:38 to play, the Redhawks were merely waiting to clear the bench and storm the court. Oddly, Crews fouled out with 2:28 to go after McLeod's basket gave Westwood a 58-44 lead. The rest of the Redhawks' scoring was with free throws, and after L.J. Dendy's layup for Greenville with six seconds left, the Westwood bench burst into celebration with its first state championship in hand.

"Since preseason when we were in the gym all day, we always had that chip on our shoulder," Crews said. "A lot of people doubted us, but we just stayed poised and we came out with the dub."



Westwood Coach Trent Robinson cuts a piece of the net at Westwood.

photos/Richland 2

Robinson, standing in the middle of a court that more than a dozen Westwood boys basketball teams could not reach since the school opened in 2012, took in the sights of the fans, Westwood coaches, and players as they celebrated the victory.

"Right now it's such a surreal moment," he said. "Like when you don't know how possible it is until you get closer and closer, and then like man, we have a chance to do it and we did it."

WESTWOOD - 10-18-20-19 - 67

GREENVILLE - 20-13-6-16 - 55

WESTWOOD  
D'Marcus Thomas 26, Jayden Crews 23, McLeod 8, Veal 7, Cockfield 3.

GREENVILLE  
Caden Coleman 16, Tucker Scholl 13, Shell 7, McCoy 6, Griffin 5, Farrow 5, Dendy 2, Hyde 1.



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**The Flower Farm**

Spring is almost here, and it's time to think about the gardening season ahead.

I'm excited to return to writing this column about gardening, and to tell you about my flower farm for this season. In 2019 my husband Scott and I established One Hubcap Farm on Muller Road in Blythewood. We produced pork and vegetables at first, then I discovered I could grow cut flowers and sell them in bouquets and to florists.



Flowers don't run through the woods at night or knock me flat on the ground in their enthusiasm for food, and so we decided to leave the pork and vegetables for others and grow flowers exclusively.

In addition to selling flowers to local florists, I also operate a self-serve flower stand on Fridays and Saturdays in season, host Pick-Your-Own flowers events, offer Mason Jar arrangements for Easter and Mother's Day, and I create Christmas wreaths. I expect to open the flower stand and the you-pick in mid-to-late April, depending on the weather. The best way to stay informed about the farm is to sign up for our email list at our website below.

In this column I will provide you with gardening instructions for our climate, inform you about local food and farm events, and update you about the flowers of One Hubcap Farm.

I will guide you through the year's gardening process, explain what I'm doing on the farm, help you start seeds, set out plants, create garden beds, maintain your crops, and improve your soil. I have been in the garden my entire life, and during this process I have made just about every mistake possible. I hope that in reading about my experiences, you may avoid my errors.

As I write this, it's 80°F outdoors, and temperatures are forecast to remain above 40° as of this writing. Garden centers will be full of tomato plants. The weather feels like spring, so why not get a head start on the summer garden, right? Please don't make the mistake of starting the summer garden too soon. Our last average expected frost is the first week of April. Even if the temperature never goes into the 30s again this season, temperatures below 50° will make your tomatoes unhappy. They really prefer temperatures above 60°.

Plants that begin their lives stressed will never be as productive as those that start life in warm temperatures. Resist the urge to purchase tomatoes and instead grab some cool-season plants such as broccoli and lettuce that enjoy our weather.

Stay informed about our flowers at <https://onehubcapfarm.com/>.

One Hubcap Farm is located at 1236 Muller Road, Blythewood (about 4 minutes from I 77).

# BW's Ryan Hunter earns FMU championship ring

**Staff Reports**  
**The Voice**

BLYTHEWOOD - Francis Marion University grad and MBA candidate Ryan Hunter of Blythewood, received a championship ring from FMU during a ceremony in recognition of his success in both athletics and academics.

The honor reflects Hunter's years of dedication, discipline and perseverance as he established himself as one of Francis Marion's standout athletes, particularly in track and field, where he has made his mark across multiple events.

Hunter broke a 38-year-old school record in the javelin, and then surpassed his own record. He tied a 29-year-old school record in the 100-meter dash, showing versatility as a competitor. He's also competed in sprints, throws and

relays, building a reputation as an all-around athlete for the FMU Patriots.

His multiple javelin victories placed him among the conference leaders. He's also been named McDonald's Athlete of the Week and twice earned Conference Carolinas Athlete of the Week. He has been recognized with conference awards, featured by Francis Marion as an "Athlete, Scholar, Patriot," and named his team's Most Valuable Player in back-to-back seasons.

Hunter completed his undergraduate studies at Francis Marion with a double major in supply chain management and economics and is now pursuing a Master of Business Administration. His academic honors during college include Dean's List recognition and conference academic awards. He also took part in a number of leadership programs.



Ryan Hunter Contributed

**Straiter**  
*From page 1*

**2. Consistency and Equitable Treatment**

Mayor Griffin has faced multiple council challenges, executive disputes, legal actions, and heightened scrutiny regarding administrative decisions. While disagreement is a normal part of governance, the frequency and intensity of these actions appear unprecedented compared to prior mayoral terms.

Given that Sloan Griffin III is the First Documented African American Mayor of Blythewood, it is especially important that governance actions are demonstrably equitable and free from bias. I do not presume discriminatory intent; however, perception alone can erode public trust if not addressed transparently.

Please clarify:

- Whether the measures taken against the Mayor align with historically consistent procedures.
- What safeguards exist to ensure elected officials are treated equally regardless of race, political affiliation, or personal relationships.
- Whether any formal equity or bias review has been conducted regarding the handling of disputes involving the Mayor.

**3. Mechanisms for Addressing Bias or Discrimination**

To preserve institutional integrity, I request information on:

- Internal and external processes available for reviewing claims of bias, discrimination, or unequal treatment involving elected officials.
- Whether independent oversight

mechanisms exist.

- How investigations involving elected officials are documented, monitored, and kept impartial.

**4. Media Reporting and Public Perception**

It has appeared that certain local media coverage has amplified allegations and conflicts involving the Mayor, at times presenting claims prominently while full context or outcomes receive less visibility. While I do not presume coordinated intent, the appearance of alignment between council allegations and media reporting risks undermining confidence in both governance and public information channels.

Accordingly, I request that the Town consider:

- Reviewing communication practices between council members and media outlets to ensure transparency and ethical standards.
- Confirming whether policies exist governing how and when allegations are communicated publicly.
- Evaluating whether an independent third party should review public communication practices to ensure neutrality and fairness.

**5. Request for Independent Review**

To restore and strengthen public trust, I respectfully request that the Town consider initiating:

- An independent third-party review of the procedures used to assess allegations against elected officials.
- A comparative review of how similar matters were handled in previous administrations.

- Publication of a clear, accessible summary of policies governing oversight authority, conflicts of interest, investigative procedures, and standards of accountability.

This request is made in the interest of transparency, accountability, and equitable governance, not to assign blame, but to ensure that Blythewood's municipal institutions operate under clear, consistent, and fair standards for all.

Given my decades of work observing and collaborating with municipal leadership nationwide, I recognize patterns that can either strengthen or weaken institutional trust. It is my professional assessment that a proactive, independent review would significantly reinforce confidence in Blythewood's governance processes.

I respectfully request a written response addressing each of the concerns outlined above and advising whether the Town intends to initiate a formal review process.

Thank you for your time and attention to these important matters. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Edward Straiter

Executive Director, Blythewood Economic Development and Tourism CC (for awareness; copies may be provided if necessary):

South Carolina Attorney General's Office

South Carolina State Ethics Commission  
Municipal Association of South Carolina

**Bracket**

*From page 1*

terminated by the percentage of correctly predicted games.

Rankings of teams will be presented on Selection Sunday (March 15).

So, how do you enter? Cut out the bracket on page 12, fill out the 68-team

bracket, make your picks, and make sure it's postmarked by Wednesday, March 18.

Photocopies of the entry form will not be accepted. The Voice will count only one entry per person, and all entries must be postmarked by March 18, or be delivered

to The Voice's office at 303 Main Street by that date.

Because Selection Sunday is held the same week that the tournament begins, the contest entry form will not be published again. Be sure to fill out this week's form.

**Editorial**

*From page 2*

fessor Seth Stoughton, a former police officer, said courts around the country have repeatedly struck down similar laws

as too broad or vague. He pointed to legal challenges in Arizona, Indiana, Louisiana, Tennessee and Florida, where buffer-zone laws have faced constitutional scrutiny.

The South Carolina proposal also extends to hospitals, which supporters

say face growing threats from violence in emergency rooms. But critics note that threatening behavior is already illegal and say existing obstruction laws can address many of the concerns without risking unconstitutional limits on speech and public oversight.

**SCPA**

*From page 1*

Elected to two-year terms on the SCPA Executive Committee were: Mundy Price, president, publisher and editor of the Index-Journal in Greenwood, and Leisa Richardson, executive editor of the Greenville News, Herald-Journal and Independent Mail. Cris Temples, associate publisher of Charleston City Paper, was elected to a one-year term.

Re-elected to continuing terms on the SCPA Executive Committee were: Jason

Cato, managing editor of The Post and Courier in Charleston; Ryan Gilchrest, managing editor of Greenville Journal; and Rocky Nimmons, publisher of the Pickens County Courier.

The meeting was attended by more than 200 journalists from across the state.

The press association was founded in 1852 and serves more than 100 S.C. newspapers and digital news organizations.

**BAR**

*From page 1*

about the new rulings.

He said he understands the historic significance of Wilson's store but said the building presents serious structural and financial challenges.

"We found out the crawlspace from the dirt all the way to the subfloor and everything in between is in really, really bad disrepair," Graham said. He told the BAR that to repair the foundation, the building would have to be lifted up.

"It would be six figures cheaper to knock it down than to repair that foundation," he said. "That's the bind I'm in."

Graham said he considered building a coffee shop with a drive thru window in the building to make the cost of the building's renovation financially feasible. But the drive thru would require a curb cut next to a busy intersection that SCDOT might balk at.

"Instead of engaging in simple discussion, the Town filed a preemptive lawsuit on March 6—only days after our hardship filing—seeking an injunction based on misrepresentations and accusing our company of numerous false allegations," Graham claimed. "To date, the only thing our company has done, or has indicated that we will do in the future, is continue to pursue administrative

remedies as stipulated by the Town's ordinances.

"If the injunction wasn't enough, the Town has now introduced a new set of rules that will govern our hardship meeting," he said. "These rules will be voted on mere minutes prior to our scheduled presentation, despite our application being submitted weeks ago. The document they will be voting on is a 7-page document titled "Rules of Procedure", imposing restrictive time limits (20 minutes total) that may hinder evidence presentation, and that changes rules mid-process. Further, these new rules provide for the Town to continue my appeal in an attempt to further stall the process," Graham said.

"Our preference is to preserve this building, but the Town has made zero effort to support that," Graham told The Voice. "They have instead refused any collaboration and sent lawyers and lawsuits at their constituents' expense," Graham said.

"Our goal is to protect this building, and to collaborate with the Town. We are truly hoping that the Town will right the ship," Graham said, "and prevent further costly legal endeavors."

The March 16 appeal will be heard at the Manor, at 5:30 p.m.

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ELITE 8  
MARCH 28-29
NATIONAL SEMIFINALS  
APRIL 4
NATIONAL SEMIFINALS  
APRIL 4
ELITE 8  
MARCH 28-29
SWEET 16  
MARCH 26-27
SECOND ROUND  
MARCH 21-22
FIRST ROUND  
MARCH 19-20

1

16

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6

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3

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15

**Complete the bracket.**  
 List the team you think will win each  
 March Madness game.  
 Mail entry to  
 The Voice, PO Box 675, Blythewood  
*All Entries Must Be Postmarked by March 18.*

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP  
APRIL 6

SEMIFINALS
SEMIFINALS

ONLY ONE ENTRY PER PERSON!  
 Tie will be determined by % of correctly predicted games.

Please PRINT

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

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