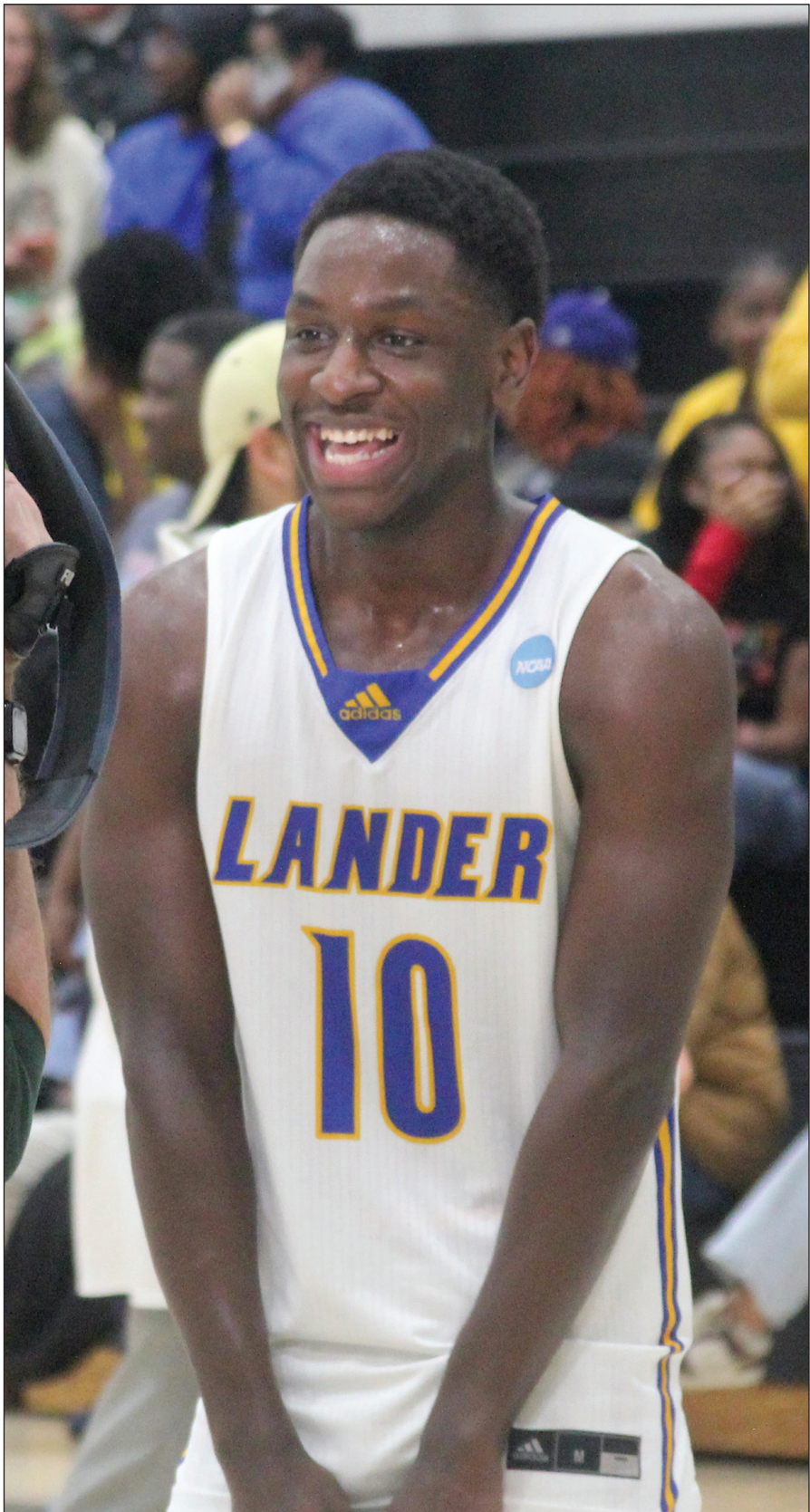




CORT STREET | INDEX-JOURNAL
Lander's Bobby Crawford Jr. celebrates during the Bearcats' Round of 32 win over Columbus State.



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Lander's Jacob Daniels is all smiles after helping the Bearcats book their first trip to the Elite Eight since 1999.

'They're just winners'



SUBMITTED
Lander's Jacob Daniels, left, and Bobby Crawford Jr., second from right, sit beside their Gibbs High School coach, Larry Murphy, after winning the school's first state title since 1969.

Meet the freshman duo behind Lander's Final Four breakthrough

By Cort Street
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It was fitting, in a way, that Lander's Final Four upset win over Nova South-eastern was set in motion, then iced in the final moments, not by any of a plentiful number of experienced Bearcats' transfers, but by a duo of freshman standouts.

A duo of freshmen, that is, who, from their first year of high school on, have never failed to reach the Final Four in

their team's season-ending tournament. And a duo who, despite the vastly different paths their basketball journeys took, have enjoyed one constant through it all — each other. Jacob Daniels and Bobby Crawford Jr. remember meeting years ago, through the unbroken thread that has bound them together, as freshman at Gibbs High School in St. Petersburg, Florida. "We met as soon as we got there, ninth grade, when I had just started playing basketball," Crawford said. "We played

AAU basketball every summer for all of high school." By the time Daniels stepped foot in the Gibbs High School gym his freshman year, he had already spent years developing his skills as a scorer and facilitator. But with little experience at the high school level, Gibbs coach Larry Murphy kept his expectations low at first. "We viewed it as kind of a rebuild year," Murphy said. "We had cleaned house, we got rid of all our older guys, and we went young. But Jacob ended up having a really great freshman year." Daniels not only adjusted immediately to the next level, but thrived, leading Gibbs High School in scoring in his first

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Saluda softball held scoreless in loss to Batesburg-Leesville

By Zemina White
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SALUDA — The Saluda softball team stayed within striking distance early, but couldn't generate any offense in a 6-0 loss to Batesburg-Leesville. Strong pitching on both sides kept the game close, but missed chances at the plate proved costly for Saluda. "I just kind of told them, you know, we didn't make any adjustments, and we got to move forward from this," Saluda coach Hannah Towery said. "Let it hurt tonight, and then tomorrow's a new day, and we have another region game tomorrow, so we just got to keep going." Ace pitcher Miller Martin got the start for Saluda and opened the game strong, striking out all three batters in both the first and second innings. Miller Martin finished the game allowing six runs, only one earned on four hits,

with 15 strikeouts and one walk. At the plate, Saluda had trouble getting anything going. The lineup went down in order in the first and second innings, failing to spark early momentum. Towery pointed to hitting struggles as a key factor in the loss. "Definitely our hitting," Towery said. "We didn't make any adjustments. We just continued to do the same thing every time we went up to bat. We knew what was coming, and we just didn't make any adjustments." In the third inning, Saluda showed solid defensive execution as Karen Almarez connected with Ava Martin at second base to record an out. Offensively, Nyla Jordan provided a spark at the plate, leading Saluda with two hits. The game shifted in the fourth when Batesburg-Leesville broke through with a solo home run to take a 1-0 lead. Miller Martin responded by striking

out all three batters in the inning. In the bottom half of the fourth, Saluda had runners on base, with Ava Martin and Jordan each reaching first, and Ava Martin advancing to second, but the inning ended on a strikeout. Batesburg-Leesville pulled away in the fifth inning, turning a two-out situation into a big scoring opportunity. After loading the bases, they capitalized with a surge at the plate, highlighted by a home run, to extend the lead to 5-0. Even after surrendering a four-run stretch, Towery encouraged her team to stay focused. "Take it one at-bat at a time," Towery said. "If anybody can do it, it would be them. But we just got to take it one at-bat at a time, and we got to keep moving forward." In the sixth inning, Batesburg-Leesville added another run to stretch the lead 6-0. Defensively,

Saluda responded as third baseman Kamryn Campbell recorded an out by throwing to Jordan at first, and Miller Martin closed the inning with another strikeout. Saluda's defense held strong in the seventh, recording three quick outs. Jordan made a catch at first base, and later Miller Martin connected with Jordan for another out. Ava Martin secured the final for her team. In their final at-bat, Jordan reached first on a hit past left field, but Miller Martin popped out to left field, and the Panthers made the second out. Later on, Batesburg-Leesville recorded the final out, giving Saluda their second loss of the season. With little time to dwell on the defeat, Saluda turns its attention to the next opportunity. Another region game awaits, and Towery remains confident in her team's ability to

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Saluda's pitcher Miller Martin dominated in the circle, striking out 15 batters against Batesburg-Leesville.