

In the news

Reports: Bird steps down as Pacers president: Larry Bird is stepping down as president of basketball operations for the Indiana Pacers, a stunningly abrupt move even for an NBA legend known for making swift decisions.

Bird made the call on Friday and general manager Kevin Pritchard will be elevated to take his place, a person with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the team has not announced the move, which was first reported by Yahoo! Sports.

Bird leaves the Pacers ahead of a pivotal summer in which the franchise will have to decide what to do with star forward Paul George. He can become a free agent after next season and there is wide speculation that he would prefer to play for the Los Angeles Lakers.

Bird coached the Pacers from 1997-2000, leading them to the NBA Finals in 2000 before walking away from the job after applying a long-held theory that a coach's effectiveness is diminished after three years on the job.

On the air**Television**

Autos: NASCAR Xfinity Series, ToyotaCare 250, FS1, noon

Autos: IndyCar, Phoenix Grand Prix, NBCSN, 8 p.m.

Baseball: MLB, N.Y. Mets at Washington, MLB Network, noon

Baseball: MLB, Cincinnati at St. Louis, FSSE, 1 p.m.

Baseball: MLB, Chicago Cubs at Boston, FS1, 3 p.m.

Baseball: MLB, Atlanta at Milwaukee, FSSO, 6 p.m.

Baseball: MLB, L.A. Angels at Texas, FS1, 6 p.m.

Football: NFL draft, fourth-seventh rounds, ESPN / NFL Network, 11 a.m.

Golf: PGA Tour, Zurich Classic of New Orleans, third round, GOLF Channel, noon

Golf: LPGA Tour, Volunteers of America Texas Shootout, third round, GOLF Channel, 2 p.m.

Golf: PGA Tour, Zurich Classic of New Orleans, third round, WREG (3), 2 p.m.

Hockey: NHL Playoffs, N.Y. Rangers at Ottawa, Game 2, NBC, 2 p.m.

Hockey: NHL Playoffs, Pittsburgh at Washington, Game 2, NBC, 7 p.m.

Soccer: Premier League, Bournemouth at Sunderland, CNBC, 9 a.m.

Soccer: Premier League, Hull City at Southampton, NBCSN, 9 a.m.

Soccer: Bundesliga, Wolfsburg vs. Bayern Munich, WHBQ (13), 11:30 a.m.

Soccer: Premier League, Burnley at Crystal Palace, WMC (5), 11:30 a.m.

Softball: NCAA, Missouri at LSU, ESPN, 7 p.m.

Track and field: Penn Relays, NBCSN, 11:30 a.m.

Track and field: Drake Relays, NBCSN, 2 p.m.

Radio

Baseball: MLB, Cincinnati at St. Louis, WMFS 92.9/680, 12:20 p.m.

Baseball: MLB, Chicago Cubs at Boston, WMC 790, 2:20 p.m.

Baseball: Ole Miss at Arkansas, WHBQ 87.7/560, 3:30 p.m.

Baseball: Round Rock at Redbirds, WHBQ 560, 6:10 p.m.

This listing is compiled using information supplied by stations and networks, and is subject to late changes without notice.

HIGH SCHOOL TRACK AND FIELD**HARDING RELAY TEAM CHASING REDEMPTION****JOHN VARLAS**

USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

Off the track, they cut up with one another virtually nonstop. But when the Harding 800-meter relay team gets on the track, it really cuts up.

The Lions' team of Austin Jackson, Nick Martin, Charles Nichols and Calvin Austin currently boasts the top time in the state and one of the better times in the nation at 1:27.16. The group hasn't been defeated in two seasons, including a victory at last week's prestigious Eastern Relays in Louisville that spurred Harding's boys to the team title.

They're the favorites to win the Division 2 championship at Spring Fling. And they're the high school equivalent of the Kings of Comedy.

"Obviously they're physically gifted," said coach Seth King. "They love running together. But they're goofy. The cameras, the attention ... they eat it up. But every single time, they're ready to roll."

Of course, a relay team only works if all the parts mesh perfectly. So take your marks ...

Leading off

Jackson is the baby of the group. And according to his teammates, the biggest liability.

"We're usually in last after the first leg," Martin deadpans.

Adds Austin in a flash of inspiration, "Maybe we should get him to carry our spikes and our blocks for us."

But seriously folks; there's no denying the importance of a good opening leg. And the sophomore provides that along with the right frame of mind to deal with being the "little brother."

"My role is to get a good start and do my best to put us in the race," he said. "I know it's not about me; it's bigger than me. My goal is to put us in first place."

Second leg

If Harding isn't in first place after Jackson's leg, Martin usually gets them there.

"At that point, we're still staggered, so my job is to make up some of the stagger," said Martin, who finished second in the state in the 200 and third in the 100 in 2016. "I try to stay more to the outside ... It's the little things, (passing) the baton, not going too fast or too slow."

King says his senior is the key member



YALONDA M. JAMES/THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

From left, Calvin Austin III, 18, Charles Nichols, 17, Nick Martin, 18, and Austin Jackson, 16, are members of Harding Academy's 800-meter relay team. They boast the top time in the state and one of the better times in the nation at 1:27.16.

of the team and the one who probably generates the most respect from the coaching staff because of his willingness to play second fiddle.

At almost any other school, Martin would be the man. But it's his misfortune to not only be the second-fastest 200-meter runner in D2 but the second-fastest on his own team behind Austin.

Or maybe his fortune.

"My attitude is we're going to push each other," he said. "He's going to make me faster and I'm going to make him faster; that's the way I look it at."

Third leg

Last season's state championship race has stuck in Nichols' craw for almost a year now. The Lions won the event but were disqualified when officials ruled that Nichols ran out of his lane, despite Harding being comfortably ahead.

"We were ahead by two seconds or more," Austin said. "We still would have won."

Added Nichols, a junior, "They said I ran 30 or 40 meters out of my lane. I take it personal. I'm using it as motivation and I'm just grateful we'll have a chance to go back this year."

Nichols is maybe a little quieter than his teammates; the junior refers to himself as "low maintenance." But on a team that jokes around about everything, his mistake last year leaves him an easy target.

"We mess with Charles about costing us the race," said Jackson. "But that's the way we are; we're cool like that."

Anchor leg

Austin started winning championships in the fourth grade and hasn't stopped. He won the 100 (10.80), the 200 (21.73) and the 400 (49.63) at state after sweeping all three races at the West Region championship meet. For that, he was The Commercial Appeal's track athlete of the year.

This year though, he's taking it easy — thanks to his teammates who more often than not have given him the baton with a nice lead leaving Austin to chase down better times instead of opponents.

"Usually we've had a 10- or 15-meter lead. My mindset is just to push it. And usually Austin will be there on the side of the track yelling 'Let's go, Calvin. Come on, get a record.'"

Reach John Varlas at john.varlas@commercialappeal.com or on Twitter @john-varlas.