

6 famous singers lead their choirs into TV battle.



The Huntsville Times

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E1



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2 MINUTE TIMES

Local

The Madison County Board of Education is planning to ask the Legislature to allow it to **appoint a school superintendent** instead of having voters elect one. **B1**

There wasn't a two-for-one sale or "cleanup on aisle 9," but the **"Supermarket of Veterans Benefits"** helps veterans find benefits. **B1**

State

A new criminal **background check** on existing employees and job applicants to the two-year college system and could cause some current employees to lose their jobs. **B1**

The director of Alabama's ALL Kids subsidized **health insurance program** warns that a stalemate over federal funding could force the state to end some children's coverage. **B4**

Nation

FDA panel rejects Merck's bid for over-the-counter **cholesterol drug**. **A3**

The Senate passes a trimmed-back **energy bill** that would bring higher-gas-mileage cars and SUVs into showrooms in the coming decade and fill their tanks with ethanol. **A4**

World

European nations threaten to boycott U.S.-sponsored climate talks unless the Bush administration compromises and agrees to a "road map" for reducing **greenhouse gases**. **A4**

Argentina's new president reacts furiously to accusations by U.S. prosecutors that an intercepted suitcase full of cash from Venezuela was meant to finance her election campaign. **A8**

Business

Dow +44.06 **Nasdaq** -2.65 **S&P 500** +1.82

More than 200 workers will be laid off at the Continental AG plant over the next several weeks as the **automotive supplier** struggles with fewer orders from Chrysler. **E1**

Sports

Appalachian State and Delaware square off Saturday in Chattanooga for the NCAA Division I Championship Subdivision **national title**. **F1**

Full weather, D12

Forecast: High today 59, Low tonight 39. Mostly sunny.

What's inside

Abby/C6 Editorials/A10
Bridge/C6 Horoscope/C6
Business/E1 Life/C1
Classifieds/D1 Lotteries/A2
Comics/C7 Movies/C8
Crossword puzzles/C6, D6 People/C6
Cryptquote/C6 Sports/F1
Deaths/B3 Sudoku/D9
Television/D12

Huntsville, Alabama
Vol. 98, No. 267, 48 pages
Contents © 2007, The Huntsville Times



Visiting mom in prison

When Mama's in prison in Alabama, Christmas morning happens during three hours on the second Saturday of December. Take a ride to Wetumpka along with some well-behaved children and the volunteer drivers from a Huntsville church on a trip to Julia Tutwiler Prison for women.



Kay Campbell/Huntsville Times
Montravia Watkins plays with her mother, inmate Tracy Cohen, during a visit to Tutwiler Prison.

TODAY IN LIFE, PAGE C1

County may consider vehicle-impound law

Dyer's proposal targets unlicensed, uninsured drivers

By **STEVE DOYLE**
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Rural Madison County could become the latest place to get

tough on unlicensed drivers. County Commissioner Faye Dyer wants to give the sheriff's department the power to confiscate vehicles on the spot if the driver does not have a valid license or insurance. She plans to bring up the idea at the commission's meeting Monday at 10

a.m. Dyer, a Republican, said unlicensed drivers - U.S.- and foreign-born - are causing more wrecks than ever on county roads and need to be stopped. "If we can impound their car, I think that's great," she said

Please see **LAW** on **A6**

A HUNTSVILLE CHRISTMAS COUNTDOWN: 11 DAYS TO GO

It's amazing to relate how tree comes to life

GET CAUGHT UP IN THE SPIRIT OF THE SEASON WITH **COLUMNIST LEE ROOP**



Bryan Bacon/Huntsville Times

Can you pick out writer Lee Roop in the Living Christmas Tree during rehearsal at First Baptist Church last week? Here's a hint: Conductor Billy Orton appears to be pointing his baton at a smiling Roop, who is in the center of the third row of singers from the bottom, with his head turned to the left. Ahem, all eyes on your conductor, please!

For 22 years, members have squat-walked into position for gift of song

"Everybody. Don't forget to smile," First Baptist Church music minister Billy Orton yells to his 150-member Living Christmas Tree Choir. "The only one smiling up there is Lee Roop."

"That's because he hasn't sung a note yet," someone yells back. Even here they mock me. Of course I'm smiling. I'm hanging like a life-sized ornament from a 39-foot-tall, tree-shaped scaffold, and I haven't passed out yet. Hint: If you want to sing on this

Want to hear a tree?

Living Christmas Tree performances are tonight at 7:30, Saturday at 4:30 and 7:30 p.m., and Sunday at 3 p.m. (a shorter performance for younger children and their families) and 7:30 p.m. Tickets are free and available at the church on Governors Drive from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. today. If you don't get tickets, the church says come anyway. No one's been turned away yet.

tree, don't tell anyone you have vertigo.

During one of the many, many rehearsals for this weekend's live performances at the church, you have time to think about things like this. Or to text-message your wife, as the guy in the row below me seems to be

doing. The first thing you learn about the Living Christmas Tree, even when you're just guest singing for a night, as I am, is that when you're on it, you're on it. For the duration.

Forget about a bathroom break or grabbing some of the snacks downstairs. You're here. It's clear. Get used to it.

Getting here is no stroll to the kitchen for a cold Yoo-Hoo, either. Each row of the 6,000-pound steel structure is like one of those "fat man squeeze" passages at Rock City. Take a deep breath, big boy, and listen to your guide.

First, bend your knees and lower

Please see **TREE** on **A6**

Former Stars named in steroids case

Mitchell report lists Canseco, McGwire, Tejada and Giambi

By **MARK McCARTER**
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Still the most legendary name in Huntsville Stars lore, Jose Canseco has been a central figure in baseball's so-called "Steroid Era."

Canseco has even written a book entitled "Juiced," the slang term for the use of

steroids and performance-enhancing drugs. In the book, he alleged that a number of former teammates, including Mark McGwire, were steroid users.

On Thursday, Canseco even appeared briefly at the New York hotel where former Sen. George Mitchell released the findings of his long-awaited report about performance-enhancing drugs in baseball. The arrival of Canseco, who was not allowed into the news conference room, "officially... makes this a circus," said

In today's Times

Big names fill Mitchell's report. Pages **F1 & F5**.

one ESPN commentator.

Canseco, who played for the Stars in 1985, was one of several former Huntsville players named in the Mitchell report, along with Jason Giambi (1994), Cody McKay (1998), Miguel Tejada (1997-98) and McGwire (1986).

Steve Woodard, the former major league pitcher from Hartselle, was also named. He had been linked to a compa-

Please see **STEROIDS** on **A6**

Don't expect to greet Frosty

Cold weather may bring flurries, but snow won't stick

By **STEVE CAMPBELL**
Times Staff Writer
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Will it be cold this weekend? Yes. A winter wonderland of fluffy snow? Far from it.

Snow flurries may fall in Huntsville early Sunday before temperatures reach the 40s.

But that's it. No snowmen. Not this weekend.

"Close but no cigar," said Steve Shumway, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service Huntsville office.

If flurries fall, Shumway said, they won't stick. The ground is too warm from Tuesday and Wednesday, when temperatures in the 70s broke city records in December and even made some plants bud prematurely.

Shumway predicts Saturday highs in the lower 60s to accompany up to 1.5 inches of sporadic rain, but that moisture will leave Huntsville after midnight, hindering the chance for snow.

The new front will come Saturday night, bringing cold, dry air after midnight, he said, and rain may mix with snow in the early morning Sunday.

In today's Times

Northeast gets winter blast. **A3**
Parts of the country were warmer this year. **A3**

Electronic wanted posters catch thief

Mobile gets results from billboards; city to discuss use

From staff, wire reports

MOBILE - Between ads for hamburgers and liposuction, the giant digital billboards flashed an image of Oscar Finch's face taken by a surveillance camera. The young man wasn't selling anything. He was running from police.

Finch was a suspect in a bank robbery last month. More than a week after the crime, authorities obtained the photo and immediately posted it on 12 digital billboards in Mobile, using the eye-catching electronic signs as digital wanted posters.

The billboard showed a grainy mugshot of Finch taken during the Nov. 20 heist. The

Please see **POSTERS** on **A6**