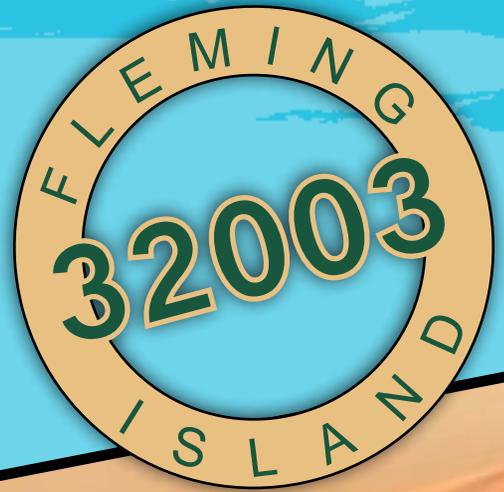


Fun on the Island



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Holeshot



Sunset Tiki Bar

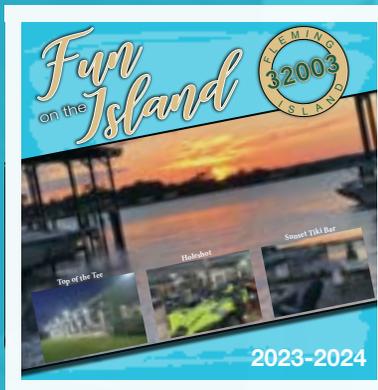


2023-2024

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Fun on the Island

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Fleming Island History

By Vishi Garig, Clay County Archives

A service of Clerk of Courts Tara Green



George Fleming received Hibernia as a Spanish land grant during the Second Spanish Period. The land is now known as Fleming Island. The area where the original homestead was is still called Hibernia. After the Civil War, Margret Seton Fleming, wife of Lewis Fleming, the son of George Fleming, opened her home as a winter retreat for northerners. She was taking advantage of the reliable railroad travel, steamboat routes and the boom in Florida tourism.

Golf at Hibernia, on Fleming's Island, was a game dominated by women – and, on top of the heap of trendsetters was Miss Fanny Brown. It was around 1880 when Fanny and the Fleming Family became acquainted. 1882, she bought five acres along the St. Johns River at Hibernia. Brown was from Pennsylvania's Philadelphia Main Line area, the upper-crust social region of suburban Philadelphia. This wealthy spinster lived off a trust fund. She named her winter home The Myrtles, which was a delightful cottage on the grounds of the old Hibernia Plantation.

The family members were personal friends of President Ulysses S. Grant. Eventually, Brown bought several more parcels of land and built a nine-hole golf course. Originally known as "The Links," the golf course surrounded Fanny's house on three sides. Today, you can still see the fairways outlining the houses of the Hibernia Links subdivision.

The course was also known as Hibernia Golf Club and officially opened in 1899. During this decade, records show the state of Florida only had about 18 golf courses in all. The oldest golf course in Florida was Belleaire at the Belleaire County Club in 1897. This course is located on our state's west coast near Tampa.

Hibernia Golf Club's 1899 opening likely means this course was just the second public golf course built in Florida and the first in Northeast Florida.

Brown's success, wealth and politics frayed the nerves of some local "gentlemen." During the suffrage movement, Brown put her money where her mouth was, leading to anti-vote protests on her golf course. Brown was undaunted. Fanny had world-class golfers playing at her course, and she had world-class tastes. A hand-written note reveals that she was fond of ordering liver pate and fancy biscuits from a northern firm, an order delivered express to her at Hibernia. The note can be seen at the Clay County Archives in Green Cove Springs along with many photos of golfers on the original course.

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The Hibernia Golf Club course was a simple affair but loved by all who golfed there. William Hoyt, a wealthy grocer from Chicago and a winter resident of Green Cove Springs, crowed about it in a 1908 golf magazine.

"I came here to my winter home in November," Hoyt wrote. "I found the golf links as perfect as ever. I play every day and am pleased to say my game is as good as ever. I wish all my friends could be here to enjoy the perfect weather we are having and see nature at its best."

A yearly tournament was held at Hibernia that attracted professional golfers. Pansy Griscom, the most famous female golfer of the time, played at the course. Pansy, winner of the Women's USGA Golf Championship in 1900, was, like Fanny, a wealthy Philadelphia Main Liner.

In a 1971 newspaper interview, Griscom talked about playing golf at Hibernia. It was in 1888 that she first came to Hibernia.

"It was the year of our famous blizzard. We came to a place called Hibernia on the St. Johns River," Griscom said. "We boarded with the Fleming Family that owned Hibernia. We'd come down in a private railroad car. Father was the director of the Pennsylvania Railroad. I had never spent the night in anything other than a private railway car ... never saw the inside of a Pullman till I was 30."

Interestingly, Pansy's father, Clement Griscom, later went into the marine shipping business and invested in the White Star Line, famous for the Titanic disaster.

The Griscoms bought a few acres from one of the Flemings and built a winter home. After the father's death, Fanny Brown bought the property and the home. She later sold it back to the Flemings for just \$100. That home is all that is left of Hibernia Plantation today. It is called Holly Cottage and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Brown's 1916 will (available for public viewing at the Clay County Archives) gave the golf course land to the President and Board of Directors of the Hiber-





nia Golf Club. She left her niece, Fanny Brown Coleman, in charge and left her money to maintain the course at her discretion. In 1925, Fanny's niece sold the course back to the Flemings for, ironically, \$100. There are numerous golf courses now in operation on Fleming Island. Many of the same perks exist as were mentioned in the 1900s advertisements.

The only current course on Fleming Island is The Golf Club at Fleming Island. It was rebranded in 2019 to recognize the Hibernia brand. The Hibernia Pub inside the clubhouse. The tables and logo are fashioned after a half-penny from 2805, decorated with King George's crown and harp.

Club owner Charles Raulerson added an Irish menu and seven televisions to create an Irish pub ambiance. The renovations cost between \$75,000-\$100,000, Raulerson said, and took about 90 days.

Raulerson asked the current Fleming family members if he could use photos of their descendants. Francis Fleming, the 15th governor of Florida, is the first portrait near the entry.



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Fresh from Fleming Island – Featuring 14 Local Restaurants

By Jack Randall
Staff Photos by Jack Randall

FLEMING ISLAND - According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the population of Fleming Island is just over 29,000, which means there are over 29,000 mouths to feed. Luckily, the “island” situated between the Town of Orange Park and the City of Green Cove Springs has some of the best restaurants in Clay County.

I had the incredible opportunity to meet the faces of Fleming Island’s food industry. One thing in common is that they love what they do. The owners, chefs and servers understand the importance of families and friends sitting down for a meal, sharing stories and making memories.

Indeed, the homage “life happens at the dinner table” rings true.

The restaurant business is not an easy one. The National Restaurant Association estimates 30% of restaurants fail their first year. Many of the restaurants included have just finally recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic three years ago.

I cannot think of a more quintessentially human enterprise than the restaurant, an institution dedicated to feeding, entertaining, and fostering culture in the community.

Here are 14 local, family-owned restaurants, the “best eats” on Fleming Island in alphabetical order:

Corky Bell’s Seafood—1049 Floyd St.

From his first restaurant at Pacetti’s on the Trout Creek, to Macon, Georgia and throughout North Florida, Charles “Corky” Bell has served seafood for generations.



“There have been 30 to 40 locations and many of our customers have stayed with us since Pacetti’s,” said Manager Brittany Bell, Corky’s granddaughter.

“The original Pacetti’s burned down. The restaurant has changed locations and names over the years. Blue Marlin (was an early name). But ‘Corky Bell’s’ was what stuck,” said Bell.

Throughout the years, the restaurant has focused on the quality of its food and the quality of its service. That is how Corky Bell’s stands out. The restaurant prides itself on its Garlic Shrimp Scampi, Creamy Seafood Alfredo’s, Corky’s Stuffed Fish, Cod and Crab Legs.

Bell recommends the Cod Loin, a mild white fish with light breading and great taste. She’s been passionate about the restaurant for as long as she can remember.

“It’s been my whole life. While other kids were playing pretend, I was really playing restaurant. I was following servers around, pretending to be one and eating cheese grits. Actually, they started calling them ‘Britt grits’ because I loved them so much,” she said.

Bell attributes the restaurant to a generation of loyal customers and their much-appreciated effort to keep Corky Bell’s afloat during the pandemic.

Dick’s Wings—1803 Eastwest Pkwy.



Owner Shannon Campos was handed the keys to the native Jacksonville franchise early in October. She’s renovating the restaurant’s interior, putting on a fresh coat of paint and sprucing up the game room. Under her leadership, she intends

to establish Dick’s Wings as a premier destination for family-friendly fun.

Campos has lived in Fleming Island for years. Now, she can follow her dream of being a small business owner. “We live here, we work here,” she said.

Her new ownership lined up well with a new revamped Dick’s menu, with new and returning classics. Burgers, hot dogs and wings, of course.

Dick’s offer a variety of sauces and rubs: Ragin’ Cajun, Florida Girl, Georgia Girl, Bourbon Traditional Parmesan, the creamy Boom Boom and the eye-watering Firestorm.

If you want to be healthy, they have the Chicken Salad. If you don’t, they have Funnel Cake Fries. You can’t go wrong with either option.

The restaurant is a community hotspot for Clay County Cruzers, Clay County Jeeps and all automobile aficionados. Tuesday is Karaoke Night. Thursday is Live Trivia Night, although Dick’s has trivia all week through TapTV.

Campos intends to host Spirit Night fundraisers for schools, sports and dance teams. As the new owner, she will prioritize family fun by making kids’ meals more affordable than ever. She is thankful for the opportunity to work alongside a dedicated staff to serve the Fleming Island community.

“The staff is amazing. And the food is, too,” she said.

Hibernia Pub—2260 Town Center Blvd.

Fleming Island is named after George Fleming, an Irish immigrant who was granted land west of the St. Johns River for his military service in Spanish East Florida. “Hibernia,” the Latin name for Ireland, was what Fleming named his plantation. The Hibernia name lives on, overlooking the 10th tee of the Fleming Island Golf Club.



Charles, his son Chaz, with the rest of the Raulerson family, purchased the golf course in 2013. The restaurant opened in late 2019 but was forced to a halt with the onset of the pandemic. Now, the Irish-American pub is a destination for golfers, families and friends.

The Big Whiskey is a favorite of Chaz Raulerson. “It’s a sweet and savory burger with crispy bacon, Monterey Jack cheese and (Colonel Lewis’s) Whiskey Glaze,” he said.

Hibernia offers club sandwiches, salads and traditional Irish dishes: Chicken and Mash, Bangers and Mash, Shepherds Pie and Guinness Beef Stew – where the stout bastes with the soup. For drinks, Hibernia offers a fully stocked bar plus the Irish favorites of Guinness, Jameson and Smithwick’s.

“It’s Irish Cuisine with an American accent. There’s a little something for everybody,” said Manager Steve Serokee, who brings extensive experience managing acclaimed restaurants in the Jacksonville area.

“He does a knock-up job!” said Raulerson. “There’s always a bit of love in the kitchen!”

“I do what I can do,” Serokee responded.

Hibernia hosts live music on Fridays from 6 to 9 p.m. Shane Myers, Steven Quinn and the Crazy Daisies are some fan favorites. The restaurant has the added benefit of being right on the golf course and driving range.

“It’s been a 19th hole for sure, but the restaurant is open to the public. The golf course is open for everyone too,” said Raulerson.

Within walking distance is the Top of the Tee driving range. It has an arcade-style take to a driving range similar to Top Golf. Patrons can order food and drinks from Hibernia and servers will drive up in golf carts, platters in one hand and the wheel in the other.

Hibernia is a culinary homage to Fleming Island's early history, considering that Fanny Brown's Hibernia Links in the late 19th century was one of the first golf courses in Florida, Raulerson said.

Home Depot Food Truck—1575 County Road 220



Construction workers and DIY enthusiasts can't ignore the sizzling aroma of Italian meats as they make their way in and out of Home Depot. The food truck has overlooked the hardware store's entrance for two decades. Less of a

food truck and more of a trailer, it is nonetheless a formidable culinary destination in its own right.

The truck is owned by Stefani Tomascelli, who brings a personal flair from her past ventures in the restaurant industry. The seasonal Dante's Sandwich is a returning favorite from Stefani's Bistro, which closed its doors in 2020.

The Philly Cheesesteak is the truck's signature item. It's a hearty, savory sandwich flavored with peppers and onions. "We have regulars come all the way from Green Cove for the Philly Cheesesteak. Some of our regulars are even employees from the Firehouse Subs across the parking lot," Tomascelli said.

The truck is a relaxing escape from any hardware, gardening or home improvement project. Tomascelli plans to roll out a breakfast menu based on her past venture at Stefani's Bistro. One thing is for sure: Home Depot would not nearly be the same without its welcoming food truck.

Hop Shing Chinese Restaurant—5000 US Hwy 17

Stepping into the restaurant, you'll be first greeted with a wafting aroma of garlic, ginger and soy. Then, you'll overhear the sounds of grilling chicken and frying rice. Located just two doors down from Sushi Cafe, "Hop Shing" means "United Together" in Cantonese.



The family-owned and operated establishment has served General Tso's Chicken, Pork Lo Mein, Kung Po Shrimp and more since 2002. The restaurant has established itself as the go-to Chinese takeout option.

Every meal is complimented with a fortune cookie, a fun and sweet finishing touch, and each one is stuffed with wisdom and humor.

La Nopalera Mexican Restaurant—1571 CCR 220

Few restaurants embody "family-owned" more than the La Nopalera Mexican Restaurant. The successful Jacksonville chain found its footing in Orange Park and then Fleming Island in 2006, one of its original locations.



Founder Sigifredo Valencia used to work in a factory when he lived in Atlanta. As soon as his shift ended, he'd change hats to work night shifts at a Mexican restaurant. Over his lifetime, he worked in multiple Mexican restaurants throughout the city.

"I took the best aspect of each restaurant I worked at and found ways to improve the recipes on my own," said Valencia, translated by his grandson, Daniel Rodriguez.

"La Nopalera," or "cactus patch" in Spanish, was the fitting name for his restaurant as it pays homage to swaths of prickly cacti that dotted the countryside of his hometown in Jalisco, Mexico.

He was eager for new customers, often bringing a complimentary extra dish just for them to try, take home and to tell their friends. As many restaurant owners can attest, the first few years were not easy. "La Nopalera was him putting all of his chips on the table," said Rodriguez. Once the restaurant took off, Valencia could pay for his family to come from Savannah, Georgia.

Word-of-mouth advertising and a well-curated menu allowed the restaurant to find its footing. Rice, beans, guacamole, chicken and steak are all prepared the day of. The restaurant's signature creamy queso is always made in-house. Valencia himself affirms the quality of ingredients and recipes by traveling to and taste-testing at each restaurant.

Valencia's favorites include Pollo Loco, chicken breast marinated in the family's recipe served over rice, and Platillo Del Mar, grilled white fish and shrimp served over tortillas. The California Burrito was another of Valencia's creations, inspired by his years living in Azusa, California.

The restaurant is Valencia's legacy for his family. His son, Jose Antonio Valencia, owns the Fleming Island location.

During the pandemic, restaurants across the La Nopalera family struggled. Then, a policy was passed during the pandemic that granted La Nopalera and other locally-owned restaurants permission to sell alcoholic beverages in closed containers for takeout. "Selling margaritas to-go was a substantial boost to sales," said Valencia.

The policy kept its doors open and the doors open for other local restaurants.

Mr. Chubby's Wings—2349 Village Square Pkwy

The official wing stop of the Jacksonville Jaguars offers chicken wings, tenders, wraps, burgers, club sandwiches, cold beer and more. The Fleming Island Mr. Chubby's has served the community for eight years with humor and casual charm.



The award-winning "Chubby style" wings come in a variety of fantastic flavors: Maple Cajun, Lemon Pepper, Tangy Gold, Spicy Ranch and more.

Manager Eric Dorsey's favorite is what he calls the "Eric Special." It features Chubby-style dry rub wings, charred and re-tossed, sweet and on the mild side. The Eric Special is a secret menu item (so don't tell anyone).

"It'll make you wanna smack your mother and tell her that's too much sauce!" said Dorsey.

Regular customer Ron Halczak enjoys the happy hour special, the camaraderie and the food. On Wednesdays, he comes for trivia night, where he's won a few times. "My team does the heavy lifting," he insisted.

There's a live Trivia Night every Wednesday and a car show every Thursday. Patrons can huddle and keep warm around the outdoor fire pit on cold winter nights.

Mr. Gordo's Tacos and Cantina—3535 Hwy 17



The old Margaritas restaurant has changed hands and has rebranded to Mr. Gordo's Tacos and Cantina. "Gordo," or "chubby" in Spanish, was the nickname of the restaurant's founder from Mexico.

"The owners are from Jalisco, Mexico where tequila (was) originally made. We want to bring (the family's) flavors and knowledge to our customers," said Manager Natalia Madrigal.

The premier "Taco Tuesday" destination offers a variety of tacos in Mexican and American styles.

"Mexican tacos are always served in a corn tortilla filled with high-quality marinated meats and topped with lime, onion, and cilantro. American tacos are typically crispy or flour tortillas topped with lettuce, cheese, sour cream, and tomatoes," said Madrigal.

The selection of margaritas includes a spicy jalapeno, chille gordo, raspberry and more. The spicy jalapeno margarita has Tajin powder along the rim,

which adds a different flavor than the salt or pepper you'd expect.

Gordo's has chosen Fleming Island as its new home for its family-friendly culture and economic growth. They are eager for the new Mr. Gordo's Tacos and Cantina sign to be up by early November.

Salomas Panamanian Cuisine—1810 Town Center Blvd.



The café opened last year, making it the block's newest culinary destination. Manager Pedro Bolaños and his family bring family-style cuisine and warm, friendly service from Panama.

"When (customers) take a bite and start nodding their heads, that's what I am looking for. That is what warms my heart," said Bolaños.

Many of the meals are family originals. The signature Pollo Chupinpollo serves dark chicken breast marinated for 24 hours in a blend of herbs and spices. Another creation is the Mahi Filet with white wine sauce and mushrooms. Bolaños recommends the Panamanian Platter for those who want a wide sample.

The café has a full espresso bar that can make a rich cortado, a creamy café con leche or hot chocolate. Additionally, it offers red and white sangria as well as Limeade – a play on words since "lime" is the same as "lemon" in Spanish. However, this beverage really does contain limes, which makes for a tartier alternative.

"We bring our family traditions and (belief) in the importance of friendly conversation," said Bolaños.

Santioni's Italian Restaurant—3535 Hwy 17

Santioni's Italian Restaurant has burgeoned as the definitive Italian destination in Fleming Island, decorated with multiple "Best of Clay" accolades. Santioni's was opened in 1987 by Bruno and Sylvana Santioni and was purchased by Mike Mastrocinque in 2018.



"We stay true to the menu Bruno and Sylvana Santioni created over 30 years ago. They have become family and enjoy helping us at the restaurant a couple (of) days a week," said Mastrocinque.

The menu is chock-full of Santioni's takes on Italian classics: Tortellini Alla Panna, Fettuccine Alfredo, Filet Mignon Marsala, Veal Francese, pizza, calzones and more. Most entrees come with a choice of soup or salad, a side item and house-baked bread.

"I can't think of one dish that says, 'this is the

Santioni's experience.' The menu has a lot of depth to it and appeals to a wide range of customers. My favorite is our house made lasagna. It's a 6-layer lasagna still made each week by Mrs. Santioni," said Mastrocinque.

Mastrocinque is thankful his restaurant survived the pandemic.

"Our staff and the community came together during Covid to keep the business afloat. We wouldn't have made it without their financial and emotional support.

"What a great community we have," he said.

Sushi Cafe—5000 US-17



Located just two doors down from Hop Shing, Sushi Cafe is a one-stop shop for gourmet Japanese, Korean, and Thai cuisines. Here, you'll find delicious options such as bento boxes, hibachi, noodle soups, sushi and

sashimi. At the sushi bar the "itame," or "sushi chef" in Japanese, carefully places red-jeweled fish meats on platters.

The restaurant takes great care in presenting each dish. Love Boat for 2 comes with 10 pieces of sushi, 18 pieces of sashimi, one California roll, and one roll of chef's choice. On the platter, a beach umbrella in a dollop of wasabi, a wishing well and even a light fixture underneath rice noodles. It's less of a meal and more of a work of art.

Talons Restaurant—2217 Eagle Harbor Pkwy.

The focal point of the Eagle Harbor Neighborhoods, Talons Restaurant offers a casual dining experience open to Eagle Harbor residents, golfers and anyone looking for a bite as the restaurant is fully open to the public.



Talons is a date night destination, a casual bar, a wedding venue, a post-game 19th hole and more, all within walking distance from much of the Eagle Harbor community.

"When our guests, members and golfers walk into Talons, they know they will be greeted with a smile, great food and impeccable service. We are known for our fun and exciting atmosphere," said Manager Helen Runjo.

The restaurant is known for its appetizers, soups, salads, club sandwiches and cocktails. The Talons Sandwich Club rewards program encourages patrons to return each month to enjoy a free sandwich with a filled rewards card.

"Personally, I love our cobb salad and Reuben sandwich for lunch. For dinner, chef's specials have never failed me, and my drink of choice is one of our great wines or specialty cocktails," Runjo recommends.

V Pizza—4477 US Highway 17

The founding restaurant in San Marco, Jacksonville is known as V1. The Fleming Island location is known as V5. "Well, I like to call it V5.2," said Manager Paul Kelly, who referred to the restaurant's new home on US-17. The new location offers a recreational area for cornhole tournaments every Monday and a pleasant outdoor seating option next to the bar.



There are no microwaves to be found – only two prominent, imported Italian brick ovens. The two ovens, named L'isola and Amore, burn up to 1000 and 600 degrees, respectively. Baking in a wood fire gives pizza, calzones and chicken parmesan a savory flavor and texture.

"I like 'Lisa' better because she's hotter," said a waitress.

V Pizza sponsors its charity, V for Victory, the nonprofit that provides resources and services to families battling cancer.

Whitey's Fish Camp—2032 County Road 220



Whitey's Fish Camp has been the cultural, boating and seafood destination in Fleming Island for 60 years. Exceptional food and service have kept the restaurant in the game for generations to be the oldest restaurant in Clay County. Shrimp,

gator tail bites and 'All-U-Can Eat' wild-caught catfish have been beloved staples of the Whitey's menu.

The fish camp offers indoor and outdoor seating, campsites for recreational vehicles, two tiki bars and a dock that allows patrons to sail in by boat.

Known in the community as the unofficial museum of Southern rock, it is decorated with memorabilia from county legends – Lynyrd Skynyrd, 38 Special and Molly Hatchet – who have called the restaurant home. Expect talented bands to perform live on weekends in the spirit of its Southern rock roots.

This holiday season, the annual Whitey's Boat Parade will process down Swimming Pen Creek – scheduled on Dec. 9.



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Fleming Island sports entering 2023 championship season

By Randy Lefko

Sports Editor for Clay Today



After a 2022-2023 sports campaign, the Fleming Island High School sports programs for the fall will be entering their respective championship seasons with swimming, golf and volleyball all toying with the possibility of state championship runs.



In volleyball, with Fleming Island alum Amy Schermerhorn returning to guide her former team, the Golden Eagles have stormed into their district 3-6A championship game with an outstanding season led by senior hitter Rauly Eason and some high-flying powerhitting from the outside from junior Savannah Jackson.

Schermerhorn had intimated prior to starting her season that she wanted focus and disciplined play from her team and, with a finals game on Thurs., Oct. 19 against Ponte Vedra (region semifinals last

year), Schermerhorn has delivered a 19 wins, six loss season with a season opener win over powerhouse Creekside giving Golden Eagle fans a sense that the Schermerhorn leadership was to deliver.

In cross country, senior Graham Myers has teamed up with senior teammate John Keester IV to give coaches Dave Allen and Jason Poole a strong 1-2 punch that gives the Golden Eagles a low point team score in the biggest meets with both running within 30 seconds of each other. Should Allen get solid runs from his 3-4-5 runners; led by 800 state medalist Roman Mollicone, a top three finish at the state championships (third last year in Class 3A with Myers third overall) is a possibility.

For the cross country girls, senior Allie Knotts, the hero two years ago as the fifth finisher on the team at regions that propel consecutive years of state meet invites, has been running her strongest times recently with sophomore Brooke Reynolds and Reece Scott staying close enough

to give the girls team scores the same advantage as the boys.

The strongest candidate for a repeat of her two state titles in swimming, Class 3A 50 freestyle champion Maryn McDade is in prime form to repeat with a flurry after series of state fast times in recent high-powered invitationals. Fleming Island's penchant for speed in the water gets a boost in the distance events with Elizabeth Loehr being strong up to events to the 500 freestyle.

Let's not forget the diving state champion Ava Brinkman returning to what should have been a third shot at a title save for a region injury her freshman season. Brinkman has a world meet invite in December that puts her talents at the international level.

Fleming Island's boys have Dylan Ducut and Luke Frisbee returning to state form with a strong season.

Swimming and cross country looking strong for both girls and boys regional

campaigns will also have the golf teams following them through district and regions with strong squads also giving both girls and boys shots at a repeat state tournament invite.

Cambree Hodges and Khalia Polete have had scorching scores through the season with Hodges being consistently in the low numbers throughout the season. For the boys, Tyler Mawhinney has been a monster in bi meets and is seasoned enough since his eighth birthday to be primed for a deep playoff run. The Fleming Island boys team is chock full of capable players that can, and have, battled with the St. Johns County stalwarts all season. The key is Mawhinney can have a sub-par (pun intended) day but guys like Emmet Kuhlenkamp, Jaylen Abbas, Ryan Houck and Dylan Frein has shown enough play to keep the team score low from their position. Football has had a somewhat surprising season, at 2-5, to the midseason point with the Golden Eagles, first, having to play in the toughest district in Florida, and, second, having a new head coach,







former Bartram Trail coach Chad Parker, with a handful of new assistant coaches and the Golden Eagles season has had its hiccups. Parker got a season opener win over Clay in that traditional rivalry game, but the season has been tough from there.

Junior quarterback Cibastian Broughton has been a human highlight reel trying to salvage a winning season for the Golden Eagles.

In National Football League news, former Fleming Island High linebacker standout Ryan Smenda, Jr., a Wake Forest University grad, was picked up by the Los Angeles Rams in the 2023 draft.

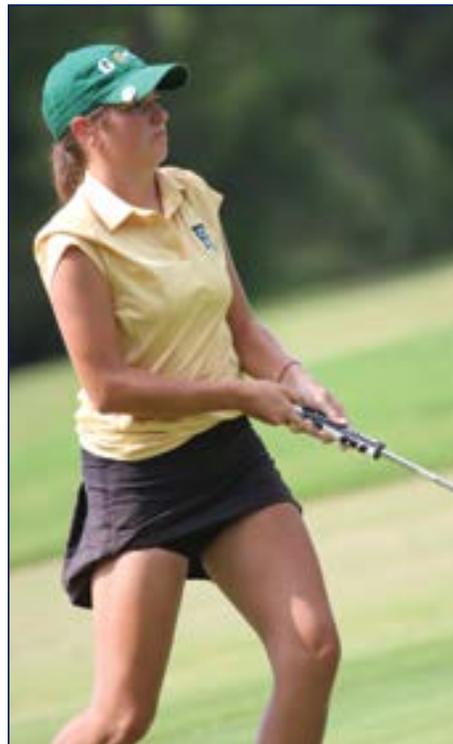
With soccer, basketball, wrestling and weightlifting coming up in winter sports, Golden Eagles fans have more great sports action to look forward to with wrestling coach P.J. Cobbert reloading his team to another top three finish with a plethora of returners from a nucleus that was second in the nation over the summer.

For soccer, Fleming Island brings a new face to the girls program with Joy Rosano, a former Golden Eagle standout, shifting to Middleburg High, and Taylor Berry, another alum, taking over for Rosano. Rosano's tenure was chock full of exciting games and Final

Four chases.

Fleming Island's boys, always a tough schedule and always a top-ranked team under coach Michael Green, will be strong despite the retirement of long-time coach and advisor Frank Pontore. Pontore, for sure, will be hovering the sidelines at most Fleming Island games.

Fleming Island girls weightlifting returns a state champion, Autumn Leviston, and a strong contingency of



lifters that battled a tough year after a strong graduation campaign two years ago. Coach Sean Coultis is a fiery leader that gets results.

Basketball should again be running and running with coaches Traavis

Chandler and Mike Hayward both proponents of testing opponents cardiovascular preparedness on the hardwood.

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Sweet Home Whitey's Fish Camp

Southern Rock roots run deep at iconic restaurant

By Don Coble

Managing Editor for Clay Today



Joel Heines looked at the walls around the bar area at Whitey's Fish Camp, looking for a spot big enough to display one more Southern rock artifact.

Walls are filled with signed guitars, gold records, photographs and memorabilia of the restaurant's four favorite bands – Lynyrd Skynyrd, 38 Special, Molly Hatchet and the Allman Brothers. Heines had a new piece – the “Last of the Street Survivors Tour Lyve” album signed by every member of Lynyrd Skynyrd – and he was busy trying to find the perfect spot where everyone could see both sides of the album.

**“We’re running out of room”
Heines said.**

Whitey's turned 60 earlier in October. In addition to being the oldest family-owned restaurant in Clay County, it's become a second home to Southern rock bands and their fans.

“This all started when we went on a Southern rock cruise back in 2018,” said co-owner Greg Lawley. “There were 50 bands on the Southern Rock cruise. There were probably 16 folks from Whitey's and

their friends. We all had our Whitey's shirts on, listening to the different bands. They would see our shirts by the time it was over because we wore them to every show.

“That kind of started my thinking, ‘Hey, Southern rock needs a home.’”

The first two pieces of memorabilia were signed guitars for auction at the Rotary Club of Orange Park Sunrise's Gourmet Night. Johnny and Donnie Van Zant signed one guitar. Molly Hatchet's Bobby Ingram signed the other.

“You can't have a home unless you've got something there,” Heines said. “You've got to have some furniture. He (Lawley) pretty much said we're buying those guitars.”

Lawley's collection is extensive. There are photographs and show posters, gold album replicas and album covers, newspaper stories and painted albums featuring other Southern rockers like Curt Towne and Duval County Line.

Heines and Lawley said people often come to Whitey's to see the collection. Just how many, nobody knows.

“We really can't answer that. We don't do any polls, and it's so busy at night,” Lawley said. “When it's slow (in mid-afternoon), people come around to see the stuff, and there's a lot of conversation. That's when you find the stuff out. We think a lot of people come through. We've heard of people coming from Germany over here. We've had people come here from Finland. We've had people in here from South America.”



Skynyrd founder Ronnie Van Zant was a regular nearly 50 years ago.

“That would be back when my mother fried the griddle and made the catfish,” Lawley said.

His brothers have continued the tradition. In fact, they hosted a celebration of life on the afternoon after the last founding member, Gary Rossington, was buried in Jacksonville.

“You got to have a place to gather,” Lawley said. “This place fits the bill.”

Whitey’s also was used during the filming of the movie, “Freebird,” where some of the interviews were recorded.

Johnny Van Zant and Skynyrd guitarist Rickey Medlocke were at Whitey’s in early October for a meet and greet and to sign bottles of Hell House Whiskey, which was approved by the state for release earlier that day. Hundreds stood in line to buy the whiskey and have the bottle signed. But before they left, both joined The Curt Towne Band to play “Sweet Home Alabama.”

“That was big to have Johnny and Rickey on our stage,” Heines said.

“We also had Molly Hatchet play here for our 50th anniversary,” Lawley said. “That’s our biggest band. That was a good hit for local guys. He (Ingram) comes in here a lot because he lives just down the road.”

While Heines and Lawley talked about the connection between the restaurant and Southern rock fans, three people were across the bar taking pictures of the memorabilia. One was wearing a Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt.

They come here to see the sites, like their childhood home,” Heines said. “There’s a guy from Ormond Beach, and his sister and her husband came down here, and he brought them up here because they wanted to see all this. They came from Pennsylvania. The husband said the only way he was going to Florida was if he could go to Whitey’s Fish Camp.”

Ricky Bryan said the drive from Ormond Beach was worth the effort, especially after seeing what it meant to his brother-in-law, Bob Haney.

“This place is incredible,” Haney said. “You could spend all day looking at this stuff. It’s better than a museum.”



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