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THURSDAY NOVEMBER 30, 2023

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Clay readies for 'busiest' day of events in county history

Five parades, four special events, circus are all planned for Dec. 9

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

OAKLEAF – Of all the events planned for Dec. 9 – and there are many – none concerns first responders more than the first Oakleaf Christmas Parade.

It's not what members of the Clay County Sheriff's Office, Fire Rescue, Emergency Management and the Green Cove

Springs and Orange Park police departments know that has them scrambling to find deputies, emergency routes and where parade-watchers are supposed to park. They don't know what has them

SEE PARADE, 2
STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

Clay County Sheriff's Office Lt. Mike Lane and Sheriff Michelle Cook map out strategies to staff five parades, three special events and a circus at the Orange Park Mall – all on Dec. 9.



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Parade

from page 1

bracing for the “heaviest lift” of the busy day.

“This one scares me,” Lt. Mike Lane said.

They vividly remember issues with a Halloween party at the Oakleaf Plantation clubhouse. The private party quickly escalated into a traffic nightmare after many uninvited revelers blocked driveways and roads.

The parade will start at the Oakleaf Baptist Church, proceed north to Plantation Oaks Boulevard and end at Oakleaf High. The route includes several private developments, which will make parking a challenge.

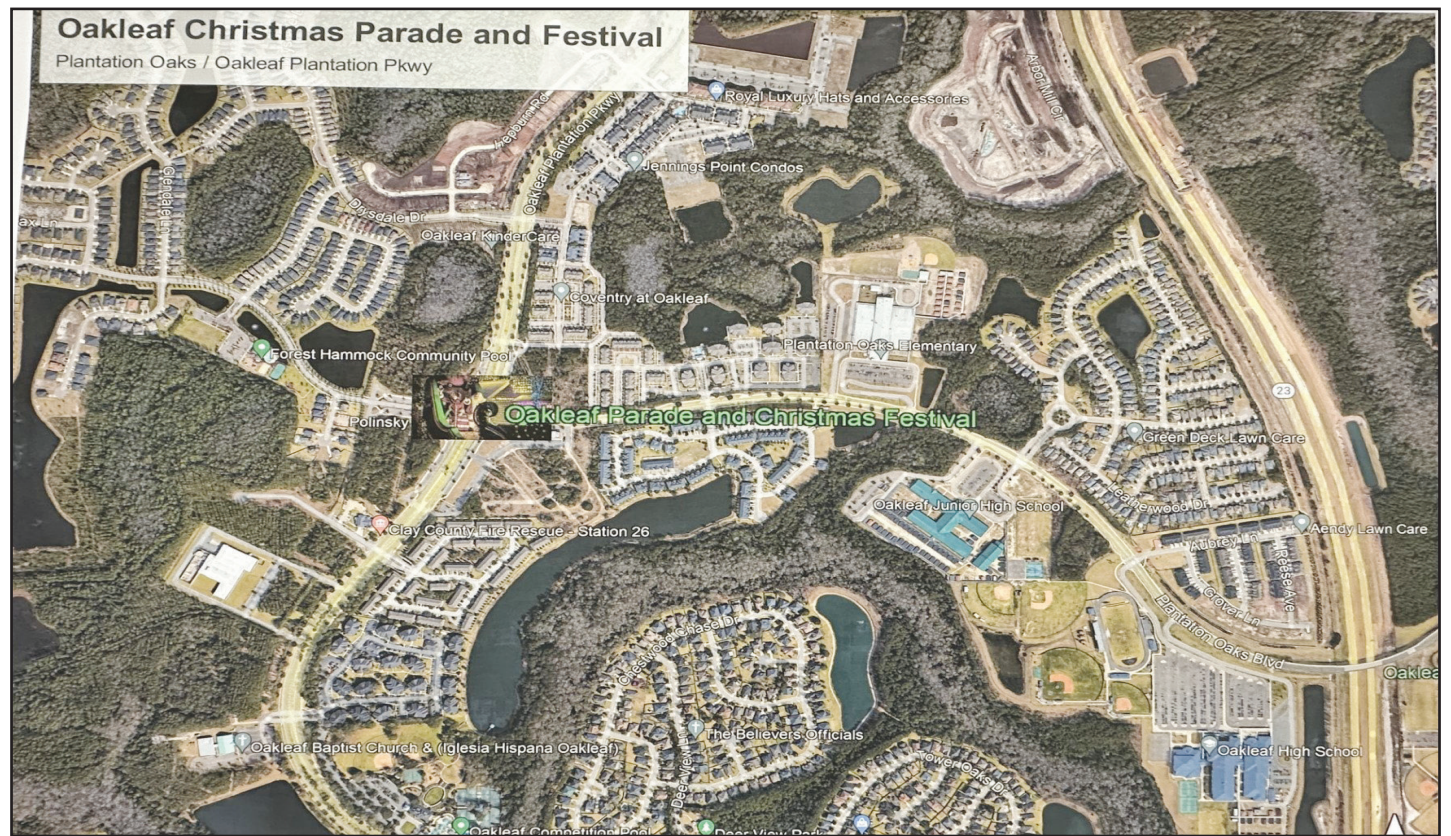
Sgt. Mike Punskey will lead CCSO at the parade. He will be joined by 19 other deputies and Public Service Aides.

“The route covers a big chunk of the resident residential area out there, so our main concern, besides obviously public safety, are the people blocking and driveways blocking those side streets, walking in entrances,” Punskey said. “People got to be mindful of all that. What happened on Halloween was they just got inundated with a lot of people.”

“We are closing two major thoroughfares and the north end of our county for an extended amount of time,” Lane said. “We’re actually cutting off a few neighborhoods while the parade’s going on.”

The sheriff’s office said it hopes Oakleaf Village Elementary, Oakleaf Junior High and Oakleaf Athletic Association will be available for parking. Lane said people shouldn’t park in the communities since it will restrict traffic and block residential driveways.

Oakleaf Plantation Parkway will be shut down to all traffic until the final float turns onto Plantation Oaks Boulevard. Oakleaf Plantation will reopen, and Plantation Oaks will be closed when the parade approaches. There are parades also scheduled for Keystone Heights, Penney Farms and



The parade will start at Oakleaf Baptist Church at 800 Oakleaf Plantation Parkway and proceed along Plantation Oaks Boulevard to Oakleaf High School. The Clay County Sheriff’s Office wants to remind observers not to park in private neighborhoods or along the roadways. CCSO hopes to use Oakleaf Junior High, Oakleaf Village Elementary and the Oakleaf Athletic Association for parking. When the parade is on Oakleaf Plantation Parkway, that portion of the road will be closed, and when it turns right onto Plantation Oaks, that road will be closed and Oakleaf Plantation will reopen.

Middleburg on Dec. 9, as well as the annual Whitey’s Fish Camp Boat Parade, A Country Christmas festival at Elrod Acres in Green Cove Springs, Orange Park Hometown Holiday at the Clarke House, the Christmas Light Spectacular will be at 6 p.m. at Sniktaw Farm in Green Cove Springs and Journey to the Nativity display at River Christian Church on Fleming Island. And if that isn’t enough, a carnival is planned at the Orange Park Mall on the same day. The county’s Emergency Operation Center will be activated like a natural disaster or an imminent threat. To prepare for likely the busiest day in county history, Sheriff Michelle Cook organized a meeting with 34

people representing her agency, fire rescue, emergency management, county officials and members of the Green Cove Springs and Orange Park police departments.

“The goal is to go through the manpower lift,” she said. “It’s going to be a busy day. That’s why we’re going to start messaging it now.”

Just how busy is anyone’s guess. More than 2,000 people have purchased tickets to the Country Christmas festival. The boat parade is sold out. And more than 3,400 people have responded on the Oakleaf Community Events page on Facebook about the parade.

In addition to the 48 deputies on

regular patrol, Lane said CCSO will have 66 deputies and police officers working the special events from other jurisdictions, including 19 at Oakleaf.

Lane said the Oakleaf parade will follow special guidelines. Everybody in the parade must be in a car or on a float.

“We cannot have anybody walking in this parade,” he said. “That way, we don’t have to wait three hours for the marking band to come through.”

Paraders will start organizing at the church at about 5 p.m., and the event will start an hour later. Organizers said they will host food trucks and vendors during and after the parade.

School board to fold police department into CCSO

Council votes 4-1 to open negotiations between agencies

By Lee Wardlaw
lee@claytodayonline.com

FLEMING ISLAND – The Board of the Clay County School District voted 4-1 to enter negotiations that will put its police department under the direction of the Clay County Sheriff's Office for the next three years.

If negotiations are successful, the Clay County District Schools Police Department and its \$4.8 million operating budget will be overseen by the sheriff's office. CCSO School Resource Officers would start during the next school year.

Superintendent David Broskie will spearhead the negotiations, involving

SEE POLICE, 6



Clay County District Schools Police Chief Kenneth Wagner administered the oath to the first group of police officers who were hired four years ago to protect schools. The school board decided last week to enter negotiations with the Clay County Sheriff's Office to move its police department back under the direction of the sheriff's office.

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OPINIONS & VIEWPOINTS

Don't you wish you knew then what you know now?

By Don Coble
Managing Editor

According to Wikipedia, the idea behind Frisbee came about in 1937 when Walter Frederick Morrison and his future wife Lucile tossed a popcorn can lid after Thanksgiving dinner.

For most of my life, I thought my next-door neighbor Cameron and I invited the flying disk in 1964.

Instead of a popcorn lid, we used the metal lid cut from a coffee can.

We had fun tossing the flying disk until, one day, I got distracted. That happens



Don Coble

with Attention Deficit Disorder (Look! A duck!). Unlike the plastic Frisbee, a metal lid doesn't just bounce off your head when you miss the catch. It leaves a scar above your left eyebrow.

If I only knew then what I know now.

I now know you should always have on your jockstrap before applying analgesic heat balm to your thigh. That was something I didn't know when I was putting on my football uniform ahead of a game during my junior season.

That lesson was not only embarrassing, it was painful.

There's never a good time to break your ankle, but I now know that if you must, avoid doing so during the holiday season.

I played five years of junior high and high school football without any serious injuries. But I broke my ankle in two places playing flag football four months after

graduation in 1975.

The cast didn't come off until Jan.

5. For more than a month, I sat on the couch and ate. And ate. And ate. After playing three sports in high school, where I ate and burned more than 3,000 calories daily, I went to just eating 3,000 calories daily. Apparently, a waist is a terrible thing to mind. But at least my ankle is all right.

I'm so happy I wasn't accepted to any of the Ivy League schools. I knew it then; I know it now.

Did you know that it's not safe to dump a gallon of gasoline on a fire ant mound and throw a match on it? It seemed like a good idea at the time, but the Ocoee Fire Department wasn't as impressed.

I shudder every time I think about my buddy Rick and I going to Sebastian

SEE KNOW, 8



Florida retailers expect boost in Christmas spending

By Peter Schorsch
For FloridaPolitics.com

There is bad news for anyone annoyed when Christmas decorations start gracing the halls of retail establishments before kids have even said "trick or treat": Nearly half of the consumers said they have started their holiday shopping before Nov. 1.

The survey by the National Retail Federation found that was the case among 43% of respondents.

"It's clear that shoppers are already in the holiday spirit and in search of the perfect gift," Florida Retail Federation President and CEO Scott Shalley said.

"Florida retailers are here to help. Your local retail stores are the best place to shop this holiday season with great

SEE SPENDING, 5

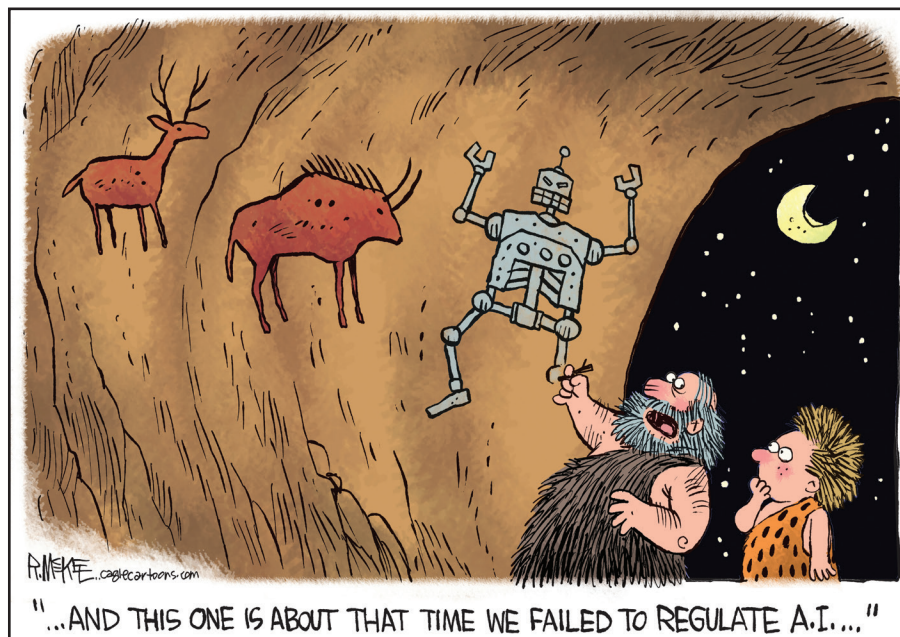
This Month in History

Five years ago, 2018

- More than 50 Orange Park Police and Clay County Sheriff's officers surrounded an Orange Park house after receiving a falsely reported incident of a suicidal man who had killed two people in his home with an AK-47. Orange Park Police Chief Gary Goble said the false call was a "swatting" prank.

- Myron William Ernst, who robbed two Clay County banks with a stolen vehicle, was deemed a flight risk and a danger to the community. In one robbery, a passed note read: "I have a gun I will blow your

SEE HISTORY, 5



Send us a letter ...

We'd like to hear from you. Perhaps you are concerned about the county commission, the school board or your city council or commission, sit down and take a few moments to write us a letter. All we ask is that you keep it civil, no name-calling and write no more than 600 words. All we ask is that you stick

to local issues, be clear and make a point. We reserve the right to edit for AP Stylebook errors, grammar and spelling. In your email, type Letter to the Editor in your subject and send it to Managing Editor Don Coble at don@opcfla.com. We look forward to hearing from you!

Opinions ...

The views and opinions expressed on this page are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Clay Today.

Spending

from page 4

products, excellent customer service, and holiday deals. When you choose to 'Find It In Florida,' you're supporting local jobs and businesses this merry season."

Most consumers who planned to start shopping early (60%) said they wanted to spread out their budget for the season. Another 46% of those early shoppers said they hoped to avoid the stress of last-minute shopping, while 45% said they wanted to avoid crowds.

Despite the high number of consumers planning to get a jump on holiday shopping, most consumers (62%) said they don't expect to finish shopping until December.

Spending habits are expected to be up this holiday season, with survey respondents indicating plans to spend \$875 on average on gifts, decorations, food and other seasonal items this year. That's up \$42 from last year. Respondents indicated that most planned spending (\$620) will be

Spending habits are expected to be up this holiday season, with survey respondents indicating plans to spend \$875 on average on gifts, decorations, food and other seasonal items this year. That's up \$42 from last year. Respondents indicated that most planned spending (\$620) will be spent on gifts, while consumers have \$255 budgeted for other seasonal items such as decorations, candy or food.

spent on gifts, while consumers have \$255 budgeted for other seasonal items such as decorations, candy or food.

And as consumers are building out their shopping lists for the season, it might be helpful to know this year's gift trends. Gift cards are the top-requested item of the season, with 55% of respondents indicating that it was at the top of their wish list. Clothing and accessories followed at 49%. Books, video games or other media are also a top wish list item this year, at 28%. Among the top five are personal care or beauty items at 25% and experiential gifts at 23%.

Not surprisingly, home improvement items are toward the bottom of the list — husbands beware.

Consumers favor online shopping, with 58% of survey respondents saying they will

turn to e-commerce this holiday season.

Other popular shopping destinations include department stores (49%), discount stores (48%), grocery stores (44%), clothing stores (32%), small businesses (24%), and electronics stores (20%). Craft, outlet and thrift stores all came in at less than 20% among survey respondents.

The Florida Retail Federation is promoting its "Find it in Florida" program, a grassroots campaign encouraging consumers to shop locally.

The Florida Retail Federation notes that when consumers shop locally, they support local businesses and jobs. Florida retailers account for 1 out of every five jobs in the state, generating \$104 billion in annual economic impact, including more than \$69 billion in wages each year. Additionally, Florida retailers collect and

remit more than \$20 billion in sales taxes to support public schools, roads and infrastructure.

More information about the campaign and ways to share on social media can be found online.

The Florida Retail Federation is the statewide trade association representing retailers, who support 3.6 million jobs in the state. Likewise, the National Retail Federation represents retailers nationally, educating consumers on the powerful impact of retail on local and global communities.

Peter Schorsch is the President of Extensive Enterprises Media and is the publisher of FloridaPolitics.com, INFLUENCE Magazine, and Sunburn, the morning read of what's hot in Florida politics. Previous to his publishing efforts, Peter was a political consultant to dozens of congressional and state campaigns and several of the state's largest governmental affairs and public relations firms. Peter lives in St. Petersburg with his wife, Michelle, and their daughter, Ella. Follow Peter on Twitter @Peter-SchorschFL.

History

from page 4

brains out & everyone else in the bank \$2,500 in 100's no dye packs no alarms no tracking devices you have 30 seconds." Ernst would eventually plead guilty and be sentenced to 10 years in prison.

10 years ago, 2013

- State Sen. Rob Bradley and Representatives Travis Cummings and Charles Van Zant, Sr. were encouraged by Green Cove Springs Mayor Mitch Timberlake and their other constituents to expedite the construction of the First Coast Outer Beltway. Orange Park Mayor Jim Renninger told the three legislators that cities need a better definition of allowable phosphates in their wastewater system discharges.

- In Green Cove Springs, a committee of private citizens planned a city archives center on the ground floor of City Hall. The citizens encouraged historic preservation for Spring Park, the St. Johns River waterfront and the eight blocks of Walnut Street

stretching westward from the river.

20 years ago, 2003

- The Clay Board of Commissioners voted to spend \$130,000 to buy two tracts of land in downtown Green Cove Springs to allow expansion of the Clay County Council on Aging's headquarters at 604 Walnut St.

- The Oscar-winning film "Master & Commander" starring Russell Crowe and the Dr. Seuss film "The Cat in the Hat" debuted at the Clay Theatre in Green Cove Springs.

30 years ago, 1993

- Clay County Schools officials announced that a planned new elementary school north of Middleburg off Old Jennings Road would be named after the former School Superintendent Jesse Tynes, who served from 1965 to 1985 when the district grew from 5,000 to 20,000 students.

- Lil' Champ Food Stores were boycotted and picketed by a Christian group claiming the convenience store chain

was the largest retailer of pornography in Florida.

40 years ago, 1983

- The Clay County School Board voted to allow county voters to determine whether a \$25 million bond issue should go forward. School Superintendent Jesse Tynes said the money was needed to

repair current schools and build future schools that would be needed with growth.

- Officials with Humana Hospital in Orange Park teamed up with Ray Boylan, meteorologist for Channel 12 in Jacksonville, to kick off "The Great American Smokeout," a national anti-smoking campaign.

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Police

from page 3

multiple stakeholders, the sheriff's office, the Board of County Commissioners and others.

Broskie and School Board Attorney Jeremiah Blocker stressed the importance of complying with state statutes.

Members agreed to include charter

schools and strongly expressed mutual support for transferring the district police department's equipment to the sheriff's to avoid paying duplicate costs.

The sheriff's office would need to make a one-time \$1.7 million payment to switch the equipment back to her agency, Sheriff Michelle Cook said during a workshop on Oct. 24.

Four years ago, the district separated from the sheriff's office in 2019 amid cost



If a deal is struck between the school district and sheriff's office, the school police department and its \$4.8 million budget - will move to the Clay County Sheriff's Office.

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CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Spiritual leaders
- 7. Salt
- 13. Fortified wine
- 14. Edible mollusk
- 16. It begins with them
- 17. A way to compare
- 19. Government lawyer
- 20. Back parts
- 22. 8th month (abbr.)
- 23. Very willing
- 25. ___ ex machina
- 26. Satisfies
- 28. Quebec river
- 29. A doctrine
- 30. Popular pickup truck
- 31. Dekagram
- 33. Naturally occurring solid material
- 34. Company officer
- 36. Villains
- 38. Cricket frogs
- 40. German founder of psychology
- 41. Endured
- 43. A female domestic
- 44. A "lace" to avoid
- 45. Cigarette (slang)
- 47. Canadian politician Josephine
- 48. French ballet/acting dynasty
- 51. Employee stock ownership plan

CLUES DOWN

- 1. Animal disease
- 2. Commercial
- 3. Craft supply
- 4. Storage units
- 5. Investment vehicle
- 6. Colorado Heisman winner
- 7. In a way, sank
- 8. Post-birth brain damage (abbr.)
- 9. Lay about
- 10. Intestinal
- 11. The opposite of yes
- 12. Caused to be loved
- 13. Messianic in Islamic eschatology
- 15. Showing since conviction
- 18. Not safe

- 21. The number above the line in a fraction
- 24. Yard invader
- 26. Pouch
- 27. Swedish krona
- 30. Start anew
- 32. While white or yellow flower
- 35. Fourteen
- 37. Graphical user interface
- 38. Up-to-date on the news
- 39. Campaigns
- 42. Touch softly
- 43. Boardwalk Empire actress Gretchen
- 46. Violent seizure of property
- 47. One who supports the Pope
- 49. Anxiety
- 50. Body fluid
- 52. Phony person
- 54. Title of respect
- 55. Chilean city
- 57. City in central Japan
- 59. Silk garment
- 62. Draw from
- 63. Automobile
- 66. Man
- 68. Legal bigwig (abbr.)

concerns. After reassessment, the school board will return to the prior arrangement, citing budgetary constraints and a desire to increase safety and security.

Board Member Beth Clark said it is important to avoid duplicated costs for taxpayers, particularly equipment. She said the already purchased equipment should transfer smoothly from the district to the sheriff's office.

Board Member Michele Hanson advocated uniformly implementing security measures among charter schools, which are part of the district.

"Charter school students have taxpaying parents, and their lives matter, too. The same training, standards, expectations and procedures should apply," she said.

Cook said once an agreement is reached, school resource officers would

change their uniforms and continue their basic duties. She also said the sheriff's office would intend to hire as many former district officers as possible for the same positions. A director would also be employed to oversee operations and report to an undersheriff.

Board Member Mary Bolla agreed.

"They will simply be in different uniforms. They will go from blue to green, and their cars will be wrapped differently," she said.

Bolla also said in a one-on-one meeting with the sheriff, they agreed more coordinated training by the sheriff's office would be "beneficial."

"School policing is different than community policing, and we need to make sure that our staff are trained," she said.



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Game plan *for* Tallahassee

Local lawmakers' hopes for next year

By Jack Randall
jack@claytodayonline.com

FLEMING ISLAND – Florida Sen. Jennifer Bradley had big shoes to fill left from her term-limited predecessor and husband, Rob Bradley. The Bradleys have been a dynamic duo at the state level since Rob Bradley was first elected in 2022.

Now in her second term, Jennifer Bradley is optimistic. She finds it fulfilling to foster safety in the state she is proud to call home. However, she seemingly faces a paradox as chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee on Criminal and Civil Justice. Despite strides in reducing the crime rate to its lowest in 50 years, there are more inmates in prisons than ever before.

"The issue is that while the crime rate is at a historic low, Florida's growing population means that the total amount of crime is going to increase," she said.

There are about 80,000 people incarcerated in Florida state prisons.

"The Department of Corrections is in crisis. I've visited prisons that are substantially understaffed. One prison was a security concern, where the glass could be easily broken and used as weapons."

Lack of resources, such as faulty or absent air conditioning systems, has made prisons incredibly stressful for deputies and inmates. In Tallahassee, Bradley is committed to appropriating the funds for deputies to do their jobs and the resources for inmates to successfully transition back to civilian life.

"It is in the interest of public safety to make the necessary investments for our inmates since 85-to-95% of them will eventually be getting out and coming back to our communities."



Jennifer Bradley

Bradley said she is committed to fighting recidivism by expanding educational and vocational opportunities for inmates. As they serve their sentences, inmates can finish their GED and receive vocational training for trades in crucial demand in their communities, she said.

"Sometimes they'll have a job lined up right when they get out," she said.

Bradley also has sponsored legislation that would expand legal protections for animals, allowing the court to have the discretion to appoint an advocate in cases of animal abuse.

"Animal cruelty is a sign of deeper issues," she said. "It's the greatest telltale sign of abuse toward other people. This actually advances public safety as well."

When he's not at home in Palatka, Rep. Bobby Payne lives in a house he rents in Tallahassee with "housemates" in more ways than one. Payne shares the home with Reps. Tom Leek and Chuck Clemons, current Speaker pro tempore.

"Yes, the joke is that they're my 'housemates,' so I usually just say 'the house we lease together,'" Payne said while driving to Tampa for a Clean Water Conference.

It's a house that current Speaker Rep. Paul Renner also used to crash at, although he just moved out.

"We're as tight as you can get. We want to improve Florida to the nth degree. We're teammates. Sam Garrison used to say to me, 'You're the quarterback, and I'll block for you,'" said Payne.

There's a sense of college dorm camaraderie at the Tallahassee house, but it's not a vacation home. Payne, the Infrastruc-



Bobby Payne

ture Strategies Committee chairman, is there for business. His efforts in the House focus on improving Florida's three facets: natural resources, natural waterways and transportation.

"They're all connected," said Payne. "We're working to find commonality for the growth of Florida."

One example of legislation that ticks all three boxes simultaneously was the 2020 Clean Waterways Act, which Payne co-sponsored and spearheaded in the House. The bill was authored to address algae blooms, often toxic, that plagued the coastlines of Florida's waterways. It passed unanimously in the Florida legislature.

Payne is preparing for the Regular Session to start again on Jan. 9. The state transportation budget is increasing from \$12 billion to \$16 billion, and he is brainstorming ways to decrease congestion. A bus fleet and high-speed rail are some methods that are not off the table.

"A thousand Americans move to Florida every day. One person using public transportation means one less person off the roads," he said.

Payne is scheduled to be term-limited in 2024, concluding an era of eight years representing his hometown and sponsoring bills increasing environmental protections in the state legislature.

Just across from Bradley's district office is the district office of Rep. Sam Garrison. The self-described "legislative lineman" is slated to become the next Speaker of the Florida House, contingent upon Republicans retaining a majority in 2024.

"It would be such an honor. First, I need



Sam Garrison

to be reelected and continue caring for things at home. But I'm proud of what this means for our community," he said. "When doors open, I walk through and never allow myself to be outworked."

Garrison currently serves as Health Care Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman, where he oversees allocating healthcare's budget of \$49 billion – nearly half of Florida's total budget of \$115 billion.

"The only constitutional requirement of a state representative is implementing a balanced budget. That's the bare minimum," he said.

Garrison is committed to getting the most "bang" for the billions of "bucks." He sponsored legislation that expanded resources for biomedical centers researching cancer treatments. He is opposed to expanding Medicaid across the state and the resulting costs that would occur. However, he supports the Florida KidCare Programs – Medicaid, MediKids, Florida Healthy Kids and the Children's Medical Services Health Plan – which provide health and dental insurance for children up to 18.

"My No. 1 priority is mental health," he said. "Since I first ran for office in 2020, everyone has been touched by an acute crisis: anxiety, depression and suicide. We need to figure out why. Then, we need to appropriate resources to fix these issues in a post-COVID world. This is the biggest challenge of our generation."

Garrison believes the mental health crisis is at the root of many issues that plague the state.

"Substance abuse, addiction and mental health are linked," he said, referring to the opioid epidemic.

Garrison admires current Speaker Paul Renner as his mentor. He is grateful for his relationships with Payne, Bradley and Sheriff Michelle Cook. Cooperation is what makes the county special, he said.

"Clay County has developed a reputation in Tallahassee where the leadership can be trusted and depended on," he said, mentioning the speakership of John Thrasher as an influence. "We'll have a big voice. It'll be an important role that touches on all aspects of Florida."

"Everyone is going to know Clay County. I won't let them forget it."

Orange Park Florist and Gifts rejoice at colorful mural at shop

Project completed after two years of planning

By Lee Wardlaw
lee@claytodayonline.com

ORANGE PARK – Thanks to the creative hands of two dedicated and talented local artists, Sophie Destine and Kathy Plante, the Orange Park Florist and Gifts shop has a colorful new look.

At the shop's back entrance is a towering masterpiece of a mural that stretches over the shop's back door. The work features sunflowers, a monarch butterfly and an array of purple, red, orange and light blue flowers against a dark blue background backdrop, similar to the mural on the town water tank in 2021.

Facilitated by the Town Art Guild, the project highlights the exciting future for the arts.

Owner Carol Berg said in the past, the florist shop has tried to create other welcoming "arrangements" at her entrance, where 70% of her customers walk in.

"We've tried using plants and other elements to welcome people, but a mural is a bigger statement, and most people love it," she said.

The project is the culmination of an exhausting two-year journey for Berg, who has faced several hurdles.

"I had one person lined up to do it two years ago, and they dropped out. Then, we had another (individual) lined up, and they (canceled), too," Berg said.

The reasons were numerous. The first artists left for college. The timing wasn't right for the second person. Weather also created further delays.



The mural is finally complete, all thanks to the art guild.

"Finally, it was perfect, and (Destine and Plante) from the Art Guild of Orange Park stepped up and did a wonderful job," she said.

Work on the project broke ground on Nov. 6 and was completed four days later. Plante used traditional paintbrushes, abandoning any use of spray paint or commercial paint cans. The dynamic duo even mixed their paint, creating a unique color palette.

Destine and Plante met challenges like working through warm temperatures, putting together and taking down scaffolding and staying careful while working high up



STAFF PHOTOS BY LEE WARDLAW

The beautiful array of nature, featuring sunflowers, a monarch butterfly and a combination of red, orange and light blue flowers against a dark blue background, towers over the back entrance of Orange Park Florist and Gifts.

in the air. The project was also redesigned to go around the awning for cost purposes.

"It was just a fun and interesting (challenge) considering how hot it was in November. But we worked like a well-oiled team. We play to each other's strengths," Plante said.

There were obstacles along the way, but Berg gave the artists few restrictions regarding creativity. Both artists are excited about the mural's completion and what it could mean for the future of local art.

"This is one more thing that is beautiful to the town and a nice attraction for people coming through the area. This is something that people are going to be talking about for a long time," Destine said. "It's just exciting for both of us to have this

painting on the wall. It's gratifying that (Orange Park Florist) chose to support local artists and public art. It beautifies the town," Plante said.

Destine and Plante are members of the art guild. They have considerable experience and have worked together on multiple projects.

Destine earned her bachelor's degree in fine arts from the University of Georgia and previously owned an art business in Ponte Vedra Beach, where her work captured exotic gardens, foliage and wildlife aesthetics. She designed the St. Michael's memorial mural in Green Cove Springs and helped work on the 40-foot natural mural wall with a 52-item scavenger hunt across the street and several other projects.

Know from page 4

Inlet on the weekends to fish and collect oysters and clams in the inlet.

We found that the best way to reach the oyster and clam grounds in the Indian River was to embark in a big washtub that we held onto like a raft.

When we filled the tub with our bounty, we waited for the tide to change to float us back through the inlet. The current was dangerously strong, and we usually had to crash into the rocks on purpose to keep from being swept away into the shark-infested ocean.

We realized what we were doing was stupid when we saw a boat overwhelmed

and sinking while trying to navigate against the current. To be young and dumb again.

I now know using a wooden candle holder in a treehouse isn't intelligent. I came to know everyone at the Ocoee Fire Department.

Sally Kettering. That's all I have to say about that.

But most of the time, I miss being young and naive. There are things I didn't know then that I really wish I didn't know now. Like property taxes. Cholesterol. Prostate exams. Hateful politics. "The View." Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift.

It makes me want to tune everything off and have fun throwing a Frisbee – a real one, not a coffee can lid.

Less than a year left to 'Save the Bees'

Local beekeeper hopes to make a 'buzz'

By Jack Randall
jack@claytodayonline.com

MIDDLEBURG – “Oh, I’ve been stung plenty!” said Christine Nicolodi, a backyard beekeeper. “I’ve been stung too many times, even with my hood on. But as long as they’re not in my hair, I don’t mind.”

Nicolodi is a Clay County Beekeepers Association member, and she loves her Italian honeybees. They pollinate the flowers in her garden, fruit trees and any flowering plant within a three to five-mile radius. She loves their honey, too. This honey season, she harvested 70 pounds of tangy, golden, sweet wildflower honey from just two hives.

“Honey is like liquid gold,” she said. “It has antimicrobial (and anti-inflammatory) properties. It’s an all-natural antibiotic. Honestly, it’s the number one cure-all. It makes for a great gift.”

The honey season is between June and September. In the offseason, Nicolodi has been busy raising awareness for The Florida State Beekeepers Association’s “Save the Bees” license plate program. The association hopes to raise funds by selling specialty license plates to support the Honey Bee Research Laboratory at the University of Florida, an invaluable resource for residential and commercial beekeepers.

The UF Honey Bee Lab has extension programs across the state, where they reach out to beekeepers and offer solutions to keep hives healthy.

The FSBA successfully lobbied at the state level to list their design in the specialty license plate program. According to the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, all license plates must sell at least 3,000 pre-sale vouchers before the new specialty plate can be manufactured and made available. Based on the pre-sale data from their website, only 527 “Save the Bees” license plates have been sold. The deadline is Oct. 15, 2024.



STAFF PHOTOS BY JACK RANDALL
Nicolodi holds up a frame from a brood box. The “brood box” is where the queen lays eggs and raises new bees.

In response, Nicolodi and the Florida State Beekeepers Association have galvanized their efforts in a statewide grassroots movement. Even if the campaign is unsuccessful, Nicolodi is optimistic. The vouchers are just a means to an end.

“Bees are making a comeback,” she said. “Between 75 and 85 percent of pollinations are from honey bees. If you like flowers or fresh produce, you need bees. We cannot reproduce their contribution, and watching them do their thing is fun. You can see how the pollen sticks to their legs.”

“Honey bee populations have stabilized,” said Professor of Entomology Dr. Ellis James, director of the UF Honey Bee Lab.

Since 2006, honey bees have been dying at an alarming – albeit stabilized – rate of about 30%, says James in his “Field Guide to Beekeeping” article. James explains hives’ high annual death rates, most notably due to Varroa mites. These mites and the viruses they transmit wreak devastation across hives throughout the U.S.



Beekeeper Christine Nicolodi holds up a sample of the “Save the Bees” license plate in front of two beehives while wearing her beekeeper attire. The two “honey super” hive boxes store the bees’ honey.

As Dr. Ellis and other researchers continue developing efficacious treatments against Varroa and their viruses, the FSBA raises awareness for the pre-sale license plates. The fundraiser’s success depends on backyard beekeepers like Nicolodi and generous contributions from the community.

To purchase a pre-sale voucher, visit flstatebeekeepers.org/the-plate-voucher.

“The vouchers are non-refundable. But if the campaign is unsuccessful, the money won’t just disappear. Instead, it will just go toward your

next tag renewal,” said FSBA member Kent Woodridge. “The UF Honey Bee Lab relies on grant funding but that could dry up at any time.”

Indeed, saving the bees will “bee” a community-led effort.



Operation Barnabas making a difference by providing hope, homes

Community of tiny houses to get veterans off the street, back on track

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

MIDDLEBURG – There is a lot on Old Jennings Road that looks rough on its surface. Under construction, the land is susceptible to flooding and adorned with mounds of debris. But for veteran Keith Mitchell, the land is one of opportunity. For him, it's an oasis. Appreciating the land's true beauty requires vision, faith and hope. These virtues got the veteran off the street and ultimately saved his life.

The recent ribbon-cutting for Fort Barnabas is the beginning of an ambitious project to provide housing for former soldiers who've fallen into financial hardship.

The plan includes clearing and leveling the property, followed by installing eight

tiny houses and as many as 10 small single-family homes for at-risk veterans.

The first tiny house was donated by "a beautiful family," according to Operation Barnabas. It still needs county approval and some plumbing and electric work before it can be called a home.

"We're going to take the first veteran off the street and put him in that house," Mitchell said. "It's ready to go. We're going to start getting people in here around the first of the year."

According to its website, Operation Barnabas is a Clay County nonprofit that is committed to providing hope, encouragement and mentorship to at-risk veterans and first responders through outreach and resources in a swift and timely manner. By providing sanctuary, meeting physical



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE, OPERATION BARNABAS

Keith Mitchell lives on the lot where Operation Barnabas will build Fort Barnabas, a conclave of tiny, single-family houses to help homeless veterans rebuild their lives. Mitchell said Operation Barnabas saved his life and will forever be committed to the organization's cause.

needs and linking resources, the nonprofit aims to ignite a positive transformation in those striving to find purpose and meaning.

Fort Barnabas will put a roof over their heads while they find the training and life skills to succeed independently.

"We have a place where they can be at peace," said Operation Barnabas Lead Officer Tyler Summers. "That's our vision – having a sanctuary place in Clay County to serve veterans and first responders that's never been done before. We are going to be on the map with this."

The organization used to get 10 hotel rooms a night in Orange Park, but new ownership at the hotel forced Summers to find a different solution. Fort Barnabas will soon be a temporary home to some of society's most vulnerable and deserving members.

"Since we started this in 2017, we've taken 160 people off the street," Summers said. "We're getting permitting done. We're getting things rolling."

"People who've served this country should never live on the streets, or under a bridge or in the woods. We address homelessness, suicide and hopelessness. We don't want to put a bandaid over a gash. None of this is possible without God. We're

here to navigate through his purpose."

Fort Barnabas will allow veterans to rebuild their credit scores, replenish their bank accounts and rebuild skills and purpose without worrying about a place to sleep. It's designed to be a stepping stone toward a positive outcome.

"We want our veterans to give back," Summers said.

Mitchell said he was homeless near Tampa when he was arrested for criminal mischief. When he was released, a woman deputy noticed he was despondent. She told him of programs that focused on assisting veterans.

"That night, I was back in Green Cove Springs," he said. "I found people to lean on. I haven't been in trouble since 2006. I've seen a lot of good coming from faith-based programs."

Mitchell lives on the property in a mobile home. He knows he eventually will have to move because the mobile home will be removed for a permanent structure. Until then, he said his employer, Black Peral Plumbing of Middleburg, has offered to provide plumbing materials, while he said he would do the work for free.

"It's all about lifting your brother up," Mitchell said. "When you do that, you lift yourself up."



Operation Barnabas Lead Officer Tyler Summers and Impact Clay CEO Connie Thomas joined a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Old Jennings Road where Fort Barnabas will become a "sanctuary for veterans and first responders," Summers said.

OAKLEAF

SPORTS

FLORIDA HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION STATE CHAMPIONS



CORRESPONDENT PHOTO BY NOAH WYATT

Middleburg High setter Olivia Callipo holds up the Class 5A championship trophy after her Broncos beat Barron Collier 3-0 in Winter Haven to secure the first volleyball state title.

Rahn-led Broncos take 5A volleyball state title

By Randy Lefko
Sports Editor

WINTER HAVEN - Everyone kind of figured that the Class 5A title game would feature three of the best hitters in Florida all patrolling above the net creating fireworks and drama, but it was Middleburg High's three-man frontal attack; Connor Rahn (2nd in 5A, 425 Kills), Brooke Forkum (4th in 5A, 373 Kills) and Camden Rahn (three double-digit kill games in playoffs), that neutralized the threat and gave first-year head coach Meredith Forkum the Class 5A title over Barron Collier High out of Naples Thursday afternoon in Winter Haven.

Barron Collier, last year's runner-up to Jensen Beach, got the better of Jensen Beach in their semifinal to advance while Middleburg handled a game Merrit Island team, 3-1, to advance.

"We were well aware of their girl upfront; senior hitter Aisha Keric (3rd in 5A, 413 Kills), and that she would be formidable," said Bronco first-year head coach Meredith Forkum, who followed a 40-year career of mentor Carrie Prewitt on the Bronco sideline in getting that elusive title despite Prewitt's six trips to the Final Four with two championship runner-up finish-

SEE VOLLEYBALL, 12



STAFF PHOTO BY RANDY LEFKO
Fleming Island sophomore golfer Tyler Mawhinney scored the top score in the Class 3A golf championship tournament in round one then held his lead to win the individual title as well as lead the Golden Eagles' boys team to a first school and Clay County title. See story on page 13.

Volleyball

from page 11

es. "Our approach was to play our game, move the ball around quickly and try to defend her the best we could."

With her three-man wrecking crew up front delivering 25, 14 and 10 scoring bolts in the 3-0 win (25-23, 25-17, 25-23) Forkum's strategy proved fateful to Keric's game-leading 27 scoring kills. The difference was Barron Collier's second and third hitters only delivered four and three kills to supplement Keric's efforts.

"The key to our strategy was setter Olivia Callipo who was reading their defense and putting the ball in play to the best hitter in position," said Forkum, with assistants Kory Camp and Tony Valentin. "She had a great game at the net and Kate Lowery had a great game blocking or deterring much of Keric's attack."

Forkum's first season proved magnified by the aura of former coach Carrie Prewitt's contribution to the program's strong history.

"I got lucky with the right group of kids, a good schedule of matchups and a little luck," said Forkum. "Coach Prewitt set the standard but had some bad luck in some of her Final Fours (food poisoning in 2003 fi-

nals). I talked to Coach Prewitt and she was overjoyed. She told me she was at peace and happy for the whole team and where the program is going."

Forkum gave kudos to the Middleburg softball team that had followed the volleyball team throughout the journey.

"They were like our biggest fans," said Forkum. "Ashley (Houston, softball coach, first team state title for Middleburg) knows the value of a team spirit and her girls were awesome."

Against Merritt Island, won 25-20, 25-17, 16-25 and 25-20, Forkum got some bench inspiration help from sophomore libero Morgan Padgett who noticed the team's face were a little mopey after the third game loss. "Morgan, who has played lights out the second half of the season, noticed and said something that they were not smiling and having fun out there," said Forkum. "Sometimes the team tends to think too much about the game at hand and the fun of it all gets away from them. She made a pretty good statement about it and the team responded. I just let it happen because I could not have said it better."

After their third game loss, 25-16, Middleburg responded with a 25-20 final game to propel themselves into the final.

Rahn led the attack with 15 kills, but For-

kum was equally formidable with 14 kills on her left hand. Camden Rahn added seven.

"Merritt Island was the hardest serving team we have ever seen," said Forkum. "We had a little trouble getting the ball to the net, but we figured it out."

Barron Collier, 26-7, got up by as much as 17-13 in game one to put a slight pause in the Bronco enthusiasm, but a double-edged sword of attack from Padgett serves and two blocks from Callipo flipped the momentum to Middleburg and the game got tied at 20-20 before a huge block by Camden Rahn ignited a five-point winning swing to 25-23 with Forkum delivering the final blow.

"They were staying close to us in all three games and we just had to settle down after that game one to get into our game," said Forkum. "We got to a point where we were just tipping the ball and I told them we need to start swinging away."

In the second game, Barron Collier kept pushing Keric to the net, but it was laser-like serves from Kendyl Wahl that backed up the Barron Collier defense and kept Keric a foot or two away from her spot at the net.

"Kendyl has been our momentum shift most of the season with her serves to control the pace of the game," said Forkum. "Because their girl was six foot tall, she would

have had more strikes if she was closer to the net. Kendyl's serves forced them to set up a foot or two off her mark and we had the defense set up waiting for her."

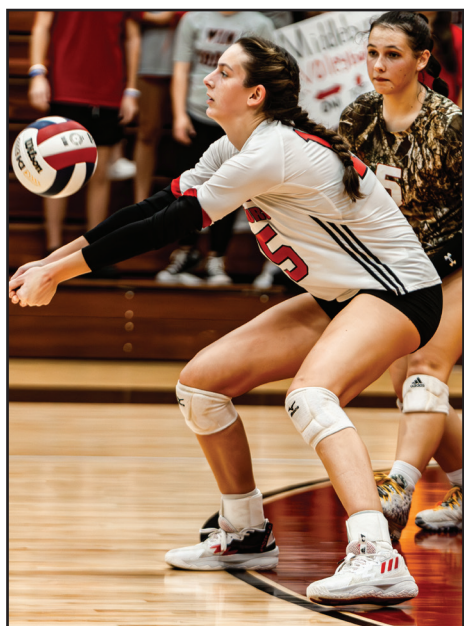
With Middleburg holding a two-point edge most of the game; at least to a 14-14 tie, Connor Rahn took over the domination end of the Bronco attack with a seven scores in 10-point swing from above the net.

"Hey, she's the top hitter out there and she wanted to assert herself," said Forkum. "I think she took the signing for a scholarship the night before (to the University of Tampa) as a big proving point for her game."

Rahn's A-10-like scorching of Barron Collier's defense pushed the game to a 25-17 win. In game three, Rahn opened with a massive swing to open up the contest then Middleburg shifted to Camden Rahn getting shots on the opposite end of the net to put the Broncos up 14-9 and cause Barron Collier to take a time-out and catch their breath.

"I had to settle them in to finish the game and not look ahead to the celebration," said Forkum. "I don't think they wanted to play a fourth game, but we still had to finish."

Barron Collier got as close as 23-22 and caused some heartburn for Forkum, but the match ended 25-23.



CORRESPONDENT PHOTOS BY NOAH WYATT

Left: Middleburg senior Connor Rahn will be a candidate for best player in Florida after her outstanding final season with a state title and a top five hitter in the state finish. Center: Middleburg mobile fan base; filled with state champion softball players, was a key motivational aspect of the strong Bronco following. Right: Setter Olivia Callipo was dynamic at the net in orchestrating coach Meredith Forkum's three-pronged attack with Connor Rahn, Brooke Forkum and Camden Rahn all hitting double figure scores for the Final Four campaign.

Mawhinney rocks 3A state golf title

By Randy Lefko
Sports Editor

HOWEY IN THE HILLS - Behind a sizzling first round at the Mission Inn Resort Golf Course, Fleming Island sophomore Tyler Mawhinney had a hole-in-one and an eagle enroute of a first-round 4-under-par 68. He fired an even-par 72 on Saturday to win the individual title by three shots and lead the Golden Eagles to its first team championship.

"I think we are the only Clay County team to ever win a state golf team championship with the Middleburg guy (Cody Carroll) the last individual champion a few years ago," said Fleming Island golf coach Bruce Cloud, noting Mawhinney was seventh last year as a sophomore in a one round championship (73) due to weather. "To say this was a challenging finish of the season is an understatement, but the boys got their heads right and played a great weekend of golf."

"We finished as undefeated in stroke play for the regular season, a strong district championship tournament, then a disastrous region finish," said Cloud. "We got the at-large bid to come here probably because of our regular season finish and record finish at districts, but talk about stress."

Adding to Cloud's stress level before the tournament event started was a flu attack on golfer Dylan Frein.

"He was just not feeling right and we figured a flu, we pulled him and he was very gracious about it, not being at full strength, and sophomore Carson Moore stepped in and did a nice job," said Cloud.

For Mawhinney, who has been the top striker for Cloud for most of the season, round one was about as good a round as a state championship round could get.

"The first nine holes of the Campeon course are very difficult and he opened with four pars and a double bogie," said Cloud. "He stayed calm like he does, made some adjustments then hit three more pars and a birdie to finish just one over (36, par 72 course). From there, he was on fire."

Mawhinney regrouped with his eagle

three on a par five 10th hole; 562 yards, a bogie and par, then two birdies; 335 and 524 yard holes, before spinning in a hole in one on a par three 139 yarder.

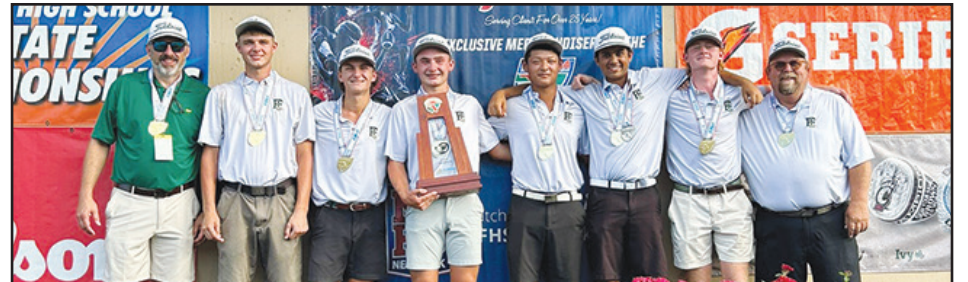
"I knew what I had to do and my dad; assistant coach Joey Mawhinney, kept telling me to stay calm and play my game," said Mawhinney. "The second nine of the course was a little easier than the first nine. My driver is the key to my end game."

Mawhinney finished with three pars to close at 68 and lead the field with a first nine of 36 and a second nine at 32.

Mawhinney's two main challengers, junior Anthony Monteleone of Winter Haven (45th last year) and junior Parker Severs of Lakewood Ranch (seventh last year), both second at 143 to Mawhinney's winning 140 total (68, 72), could not keep pace with Mawhinney's total game with Severs rolling through a 33 first nine holes, but going par for a 70 off the final nine holes to finish at 70 (2-under par).

Severs momentarily took the tournament lead over Mawhinney in round two, but went 36 (three bogies) and 37 (two bogies) for a 73 (1-over) final round.

"I was in one of the last groups to go out and all the golfers in front of me were making their moves to catch up," said Mawhinney. "I just wanted to play my game, make pars and let them chase me. I knew



the second half was going to be where I could get back in the lead. I had some trouble on four (bogie), but kept playing par and got three birdies to finish."

Monteleone opened with a 34, 36 combo in round one with four bogies and seven birdies to stay within two strokes of Mawhinney, but round two saw Monteleone crumble in the first nine with three bogies and a disastrous double bogie to a 39. Monteleone recovered with three birdies and pars to finish, but Mawhinney stayed focus with two birdies, six pars and one bogie.

"We had a substantial lead in the team scores and I told the team to stay with pars for the win," said Cloud. "We didn't need to risk shots for birdies and we wanted the team title. Tyler was going to do Tyler and finish strong which he did."

Behind Mawhinney, also having astounding rounds of golf to supplement Mawhinney's front running pace were senior Jaylen Abbas at fourth in a tie with a 145 (75, 70) total and junior Emmet Kuhlenkamp in sixth at 146 (74, 72). "All of these guys were talking before the season that they were going to win the state title and do what it takes to get there," said Cloud. "For the whole season, they kind of watched out for each other and got on to each other when the intensity went down. If one of them missed a practice, he got the talk about letting the team down. I was pretty lucky to have a strong team; mentally tough and focused."

The rest of the scoring came from Ryan Houck, a sophomore, with a 152 total and Moore at 160.

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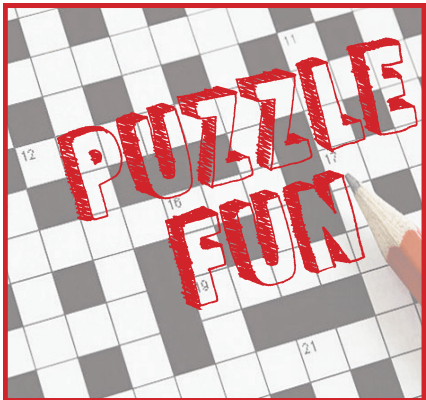
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Level: Beginner

CRYPTO FUN

Determine the code to reveal the answer!

Solve the code to discover words related to men's health.
Each number corresponds to a letter.
(Hint: 15 = E)

- A. 26 4 23 10 6 11 21 8**
Clue: Annual exam
- B. 7 9 16 19 6 13 15**
Clue: Occurs regularly
- C. 15 14 15 7 11 6 10 15**
Clue: Physical activity
- D. 3 21 8 15**
Clue: Man or boy

Answers: A. physical B. routine C. exercise D. male

WORD SCRAMBLE

Rearrange the letters to spell something pertaining to men's care.

RHTAE

Answer: Hair

Guess Who?

I am a journalist born in London on November 3, 1949. I am well-known in the fashion industry. For many years, I was the editor-in-chief of a well-known fashion magazine, then going on to direct the publishing house of that magazine. I am known for my signature sunglasses.

Answer: Anna Wintour

MEN'S HEALTH WORD SEARCH

K N R N H D P R V R D O E E M H M B L K
E D I A L C Y K C B F D I H R E C N A C
G S T T L W W S Y P O C S O N O L O C K
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WORDS

ANXIETY
BALDING
BENIGN
CANCER
COLONOSCOPY
DEPRESSION
DIABETES
DOCTOR
DYSFUNCTION
EXAM
GENETIC
HEALTH
HEART DISEASE
INFERTILITY
KIDNEYS
MOVEMBER
OBESITY
OVERWEIGHT
PROSTATE
STRENGTH
STROKE
TESTICULAR
TESTOSTERONE

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

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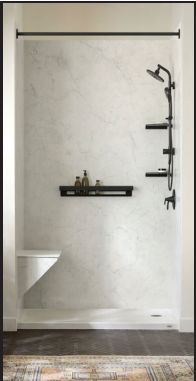
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