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Vol .14 • No. 10

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## Painting 'paw'fection

Local self-taught artist shares the 'precious moments in life' with custom pet portraits

By Kyla Woodard  
[kyla@claytodayonline.com](mailto:kyla@claytodayonline.com)

OAKLEAF - When Oleksandra Voloboi first picked up a paintbrush a year and a half ago, she had no idea where the fresh bristles would lead her.

But still, she let the color-filled brush sweep the canvas in whatever way possible.

As a hobby turned business, Voloboi now works meticulously to craft hand-made oil paintings of everything pets.

From vibrant color schemes and gradients, she said her work is as realistic as it gets—and self-taught.

Voloboi said her love for painting and drawing began when she moved to the United States almost four years ago. Born in Ukraine, she arrived as a foreign exchange student studying software engineering.

As a previous graphic designer and illustrator, art has always been a part of



PHOTO COURTESY OF OLEKSANDRA VOLOBOI

Voloboi's husband gifted her with their golden retriever puppy, Richard. She said Richard was her first-ever pet portrait.

SEE ARTIST, 5

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# Clay athletes, Marching Championship winners recognized by School Board

By Kyla Woodard  
kyla@claytodayonline.com

FLEMING ISLAND - It was all about recognizing students' and educators' hard work and creativity at Thursday's school board meeting.

From student artists and state championship winners to scholarships, athletes and coaches of the month, many were awarded a certificate for their excellence.

### Here are some highlights:

- Lake Asbury Junior High eighth-grade student Hailey Nalepa was awarded for her first-place win in the Art in the Capitol Contest, an annual statewide competition that invites sixth through eighth-grade students to produce artwork reflecting their talent. Each county's winning piece is displayed in the state capitol during the legislative session.

- Middleburg, Fleming Island, Oakleaf and Orange Park high school bands were recognized for winning the 2024 Florida Marching Band Championships. Middleburg won the bronze medal in Class 1A, Orange Park won the silver medal in Class 3A, and Oakleaf won the silver medal in Class 5A. Fleming Island won the gold medal in class 5A, the first time in 14 years.

- The Fleming Island High boys golf team was recognized for their state championship win, while Fleming Island student Ava Brinkman was recognized for her win as the 3A state dive champion for the one-meter dive.

- Three coaches were honored for their run as "Coach of the Month" – Lake Asbury Junior High head coach Jarod Kocak, Fleming Island head volleyball coach Amy Yoder and Middleburg High head football coach Ryan Wolfe.

- Clay County Athletics donated \$7,359 to the American Cancer Society from the October Pink Out Games, an event to benefit breast cancer awareness.



Hailey Nalepa was awarded for her first place win in the Art in the Capitol Contest.



Fleming Island student Ava Brinkman was recognized for her win as the 3A state dive champion for the one meter dive.

- To celebrate Founders' Week, students throughout the district participated in an art contest to honor the people who make our country what it is. Students were tasked with drawing to the theme "America's Symbol." Seven students were awarded—Doctors Inlet Elementary kindergartener Aubrey Sparrow, Doctors Inlet Elementary fourth grader Brandi Gadson, Grove Park Elementary first grader Andrea Cross, Plantation Oaks Elementary second grader Maryelle Bailey, Swimming Pen Creek Elementary third grader Allison Reddinger, Shadowlawn Elementary fourth grader Jamison Rogers and Wilkinson Elementary fifth grader Lillith Dease.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ONE CLAY

This year's Founders' Week Art Contest winners were recognized for their work.



The Fleming Island High boys golf team was recognized for their state championship win.



Fleming Island High's Eagle Band One was recognized for winning the 2024 Florida Marching Band Championship title. It was their first time in 14 years.



# #904SecretSanta spreads holiday cheer with \$100 gift cards

CLAY COUNTY – For the sixth time, the Clay County Sheriff’s Office participated in the Community Foundation’s #904SecretSanta to distribute \$100 gift cards to leverage private philanthropy to enhance police-resident relations through random acts of kindness.

CCSO joined the St. Johns and Jacksonville Sheriff’s offices to give away \$100,000 in cards this year. The cards were donated by anonymous donors through the Community Foundation, with \$50,000 going to Jacksonville residents and \$50,000 each to Clay and St. Johns counties.

“The donors behind #904SecretSanta chose to be anonymous because they truly want to keep the focus on the good

work of local deputies and the residents who will have a little extra money in their pocket this holiday season,” said John Zell, Senior Vice President of Development at The Community Foundation, who worked with the donors to accept the charitable donation, purchase the gift cards through the funds, and distribute them to the sheriff’s offices. “We’re proud to help them carry out their vision.”

The #904SecretSanta program started in 2015 when donors approached The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida through their professional advisors. A donor-advised fund was established at

SEE SANTA, 7



PHOTO COURTESY OF CCSO

Waffle House workers received their gift cards between making another order of scattered, smothered and chunked hash browns.

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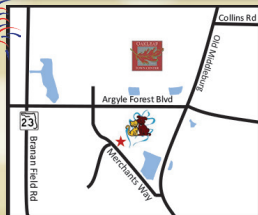
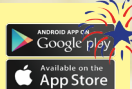
Keeping your fur babies healthy, happy and safe should be Priority #1. Strongly consider getting pet insurance to help cover costs. Be watchful as pet poisoning cases increase during the holidays. Keep curious and anxious pets in a room away from fireworks, sparklers, glow sticks, and charcoal. Strongly consider getting your fur baby microchipped. Let’s start the New Year with new beginnings. Let us help you.

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# Salvation Army distributes more than 600 Angel Tree bags

**Organization still needs donations to fill additional requests**

By Don Coble  
don@claytodayonline.com

MIDDLEBURG – Although more than 600 Angel Tree bags were distributed Friday from the Salvation Army, the need still exists.

According to Capt. Julie Chamberlain, the organization that collects and provides children with toys, bicycles and personal items for Christmas, is still getting Angel Tree requests.

“We didn’t make any promises, but we still need donations next week to fill as many Angel Tree requests as possible,” the Corps Officer said. “We’re still getting requests and we’re going to work as hard as we can to fill them.”

The Angel Tree request cards are available at the Orange Park Mall Food Court and the Corps Offices at 2795 County Road 220 in Middleburg.

Chamberlain said the corps office received more than 150 additional Angel Tree requests compared to last year. She said she also expanded the qualifications from 12 to 13 years old because there seemed to be a greater demand.

The Angel Tree program collects gift wishes from registered children and seniors in the Silver Bells Program who likely wouldn’t receive gifts or personal items



This little girl will have plenty of gifts to unwrap on Christmas morning.

during the holidays. Gracious donors can take an Angel Tree tag, buy items from the list and return them to the mall’s main office or the Corps Offices. The bag of toys and personal items will then be distributed to the family or a guardian in time for Christmas. For more information, call the Salvation Army at (904) 276-6677.



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

Salvation Army Corps Officer Capt. Mike Chamberlain loads the second of two new bicycles into a car for children who will have a Merry Christmas, thanks to the Angel Tree Program.



A family leaves with an Angel Tree bag of toys and personal items for a child to enjoy for Christmas.

## Nominations are being accepted for Clay County Veteran of the Year

CLAY COUNTY – The Board of County Commissioners is asking the community to spotlight a veteran for their contributions by nominating them for the 2024 Veteran of the Year.

This marks the second year Clay County has sought to award this title to a special veteran who has made a difference in their community through exceptional service and dedication.

The deadline for nominations is Wednesday, Jan. 15.

To submit a nomination, you must provide the following information:

- Document the nominee’s significant contributions to the local, state and national levels by highlighting how they have gone above and beyond in volunteer work supporting veterans, the military and the

community.

- Outline significant achievements and accomplishments in three areas: volunteer support for veterans, military personnel and their families and contributions to Clay County.

- List accomplishments and service activities from the last 10 years.

The community is welcome to apply by either filling out an online ([forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=25HINCv1eUuiDJrIoKS-dR-21A4W2keZFfCpxo-QTwwJURUFX...](https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=25HINCv1eUuiDJrIoKS-dR-21A4W2keZFfCpxo-QTwwJURUFX...)) or by downloading the nomination ([clay-countygov.com/home/showdocument?id=8880&t=638695066713096577](https://clay-countygov.com/home/showdocument?id=8880&t=638695066713096577)), filling it out, and hand-delivering it or mailing it to the Clay County Veterans Services Office at 420 College Dr., Suite 200, Middleburg, Fla., 32068.

Applications must be received by the close of business on Jan. 15.



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## Artist from page 1

Voloboi's life in more ways than one. But, she said she had never considered herself an expert.

"I was [in] software engineering, never an artist," Voloboi said.

It wasn't until her husband gifted her their golden retriever puppy, Richard. She said that watching him grow up quickly inspired her to craft an oil portrait of him—a personal snapshot of the "precious moments in life."

That's when she said she garnered a newfound skill. In what was her first pet portrait, Voloboi said she learned it all on her own. Proud of how it came out, she said she continued to practice her skills.

She began by simply making a grid on the photo and her canvas, visualizing the picture, drawing them by hand, and memorizing color mixes.

Once venturing further into the realistic aspect of her artwork, she said she began researching.

"I learned a lot of different ways in traditional [and] old ways," she said. "I bought a lot of books, and I started to read."

But, although reading books by other artists gave her knowledge, she said nothing beats making pieces just by freely using her mind and paintbrush.

"When I choose to become like them and from their book, I just lose myself," she said.

An avid animal lover, she continued into book characters, art prints, bookmarks, hardcover notebook journals, phone cases and even pencil drawings.

She said others would think it is difficult, but she finds it relaxing and peaceful.

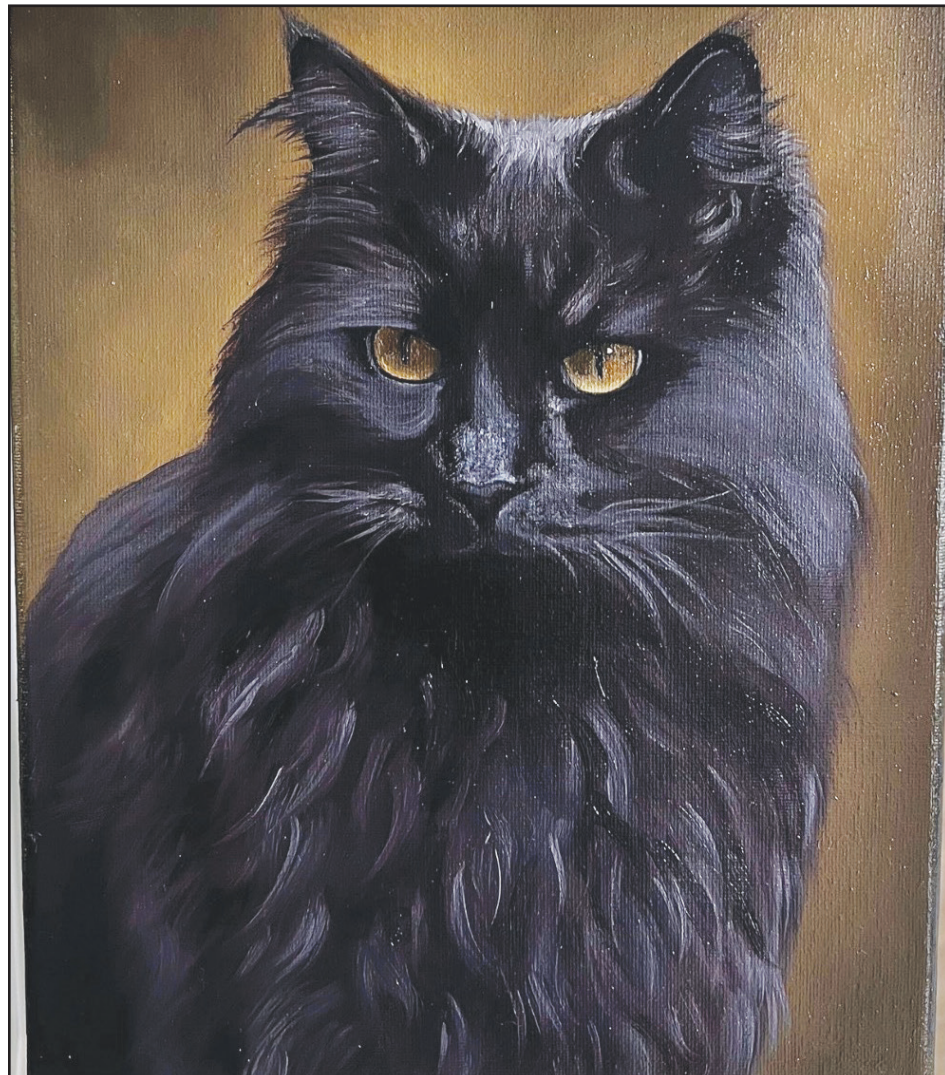
"It's my meditation," she said. "Some people think it's crazy because it's very difficult, [filled with] anxiety. But, for me, it's like meditation."

Two months ago, Voloboi began her first Etsy Shop, Art by Alex Wolly. She said it's amazing to see her customers' faces when they receive their artwork.

By simply receiving a good-quality picture of her customer's pet, Voloboi said she could do a couple of sketches to show them beforehand.

She moves on to the real deal using her quality canvases if they like it.

Voloboi said she initially started using acrylic paint, but making her art look realistic became difficult as the paint dried too



Voloboi is an avid animal lover, and finds great responsibility when creating portraits for her customers.

fast. Her work dries slower using traditional oil paint, allowing for more detailed transitions and color schemes.

She said she worked on her pet portraits for around three weeks.

She said she feels a deep responsibility with everything she's tasked with, giving her clients access to the entire process and sending video and photo updates along the journey.

A perfectionist, she said, can sometimes be a challenge. But the result is always worth it.

"When I finish, I feel like 'Oh, my God, it's like [a] marathon,' I feel so exhausted, but I feel so good. [That's my] favorite part."

Voloboi said she credits her husband for his support and hard work in enabling her to achieve her dream and giving her

that golden retriever all those years ago—the inspiration behind her artistic ventures.

With large followings on social media and going by the username Alexandra Wolly, Voloboi said she's excited to continue getting her name out there. I have even recently become involved with the Art Guild of Orange Park.

For the future, Voloboi said she wants to produce some galleries and eventually expand into celebrity portraits, painting a forever snapshot of some famous faces.

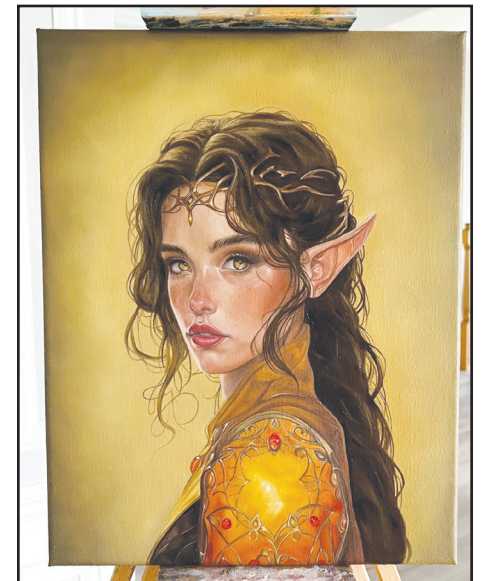
"I want to grow in this," she said.

She said she has big dreams for the future and hopes to get there one "pawfect" pet at a time.

For anyone interested in her work, Voloboi said she is available for contact at [alexandrawolly.artist@gmail.com](mailto:alexandrawolly.artist@gmail.com).



Voloboi uses traditional oil paint, as it allows her to create more detailed transitions and color schemes.



Voloboi also offers art work of book characters.



# Holiday blues or clinical depression?

How to tell the difference this winter season

By Kyla Woodard  
kyla@claytodayonline.com

CLAY COUNTY - Although this time of year comes with the spirit of holiday joy, sadness could still linger.

That's why LSF Health Systems CEO Christine Cauffield said seeking help this winter season is essential.

In what is called seasonal affective disorder (SAD), millions of individuals experience shifts in mood and behavior with the changing weather periods, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). It most commonly affects women and young adults and co-occurs every year.

Cauffield said one leading cause of winter-pattern SAD is lack of sunlight.

The NIMH said sunlight affects molecules that help humans maintain normal serotonin levels, a chemical that affects mood cognition. The shorter daylight hours we experience this time of year may prevent these molecules from functioning correctly.

"Many people are affected by seasonal affective disorder, where they feel depressed moods and have some of the typical symptoms of depression," Cauffield said. "Such as lack of energy [and] lack of

interest in previously enjoyable activities."

SAD symptoms could also include restlessness, oversleeping, anxiety and physical aches, according to NIMH.

The disorder, although not full-blown clinical depression, can become more serious if not treated, which is why Cauffield said it's essential to seek help accordingly.

"Oftentimes, it lifts when the weather lifts, if you will," she said. "And when we move into more sunlight as the seasons change. But, if these kinds of symptoms persist for longer than two weeks, then it's time to really check in and get some professional help and see if this may have moved into a clinical depression."

Also, at this time of year, Cauffield said it is common to experience the general 'holiday blues'. This can be caused by stress, negative holiday memories or isolation from family. Although difficult, these feelings are more so common and only temporary.

She said it's essential to decipher the difference between the two. Is it something you always feel or only at certain times of the year? Cauffield said asking yourself these questions can help give a clear answer to the type of assistance you may need.

"The deciding factor, really, is how long the symptoms have been occurring," she said. "For example, holiday blues are different in that they can be triggered or exacerbated by mental health conditions



PHOTO BY MART PRODUCTION/PEXELS

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) happens when individuals experience a shift in mood and behavior with the changing weather periods.

that you may already be experiencing, such as depression or anxiety."

She said that if you experience feelings such as daily sadness, lack of interest in past enjoyments, loss of weight or recurring thoughts of death or suicide every day for up to two weeks, it's time to get professional help.

At LSF Health Systems, Cauffield said they provide 24/7 access to a care line operated by their clinical team. She said the line is free and can be reached at (877) 229-9098.

"You can call again, day or night, and

our clinical provider will answer and listen to what is going on with you," she said. "And, then, connect you to resources in the community that can help."

She urged anyone experiencing suicidal ideation to call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Additionally, the Clay Behavioral Health Center offers a range of mental health support, including 24/7 emergency services and in-home mental health counseling. For a list of complete LSF Health or Clay Behavioral mental health support services, visit [lsfhealthsystems.org/](http://lsfhealthsystems.org/) or [ccbhc.org/](http://ccbhc.org/).

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# 96 Florida Youth Challenge Academy cadets graduate

By Don Coble  
don@claytodayonline.com

ORANGE PARK – When 96 graduates received their Phase 1 diplomas from the Florida Youth Challenge Academy Tuesday at the Thrasher-Horne Center, it only marked the beginning of their journey.

The program, supported by the Florida National Guard, Clay County District Schools, Department of Juvenile Justice and Department of Children and Families, is a fast-track option for 16-to-18-year-olds who have dropped out or have extremely poor attendance records. It offers mentorship and training to help them turn their lives around.

The Class of 47 took that rigorous challenge. In the process, they learned the value of hard work, leadership, self-discipline, respect, moral and ethical standards and military customs to advance to the second phase of the program—the credit recovery program and their high school diplomas.

The program takes 17½ months, with the final 5½ as a residential cadet at Camp Blanding, which closely resembles military boot camp.

Tuesday's ceremony included a presentation from the academy's drill team and introductions by Platoon 1 Archers, Platoon 2 Spartans and Platoon 3 Guardians. It also recognized Valedictorian Annabel Lindsey, Salutatorian



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

Florida Youth Challenge Academy Valedictorian Annabel Lindsey was emotional after delivering her brief, yet powerful, remarks to her classmates.

Stefani Gallmon, \$5,000 scholarship winners Mia Hoyos and Christopher Burris, and \$1,000 scholarship winners Summer Zorger and Kyla Kelley. Mia Hoyos (Most Improved), Jermelle Curtis (Physical Fitness), Leilani Arias (Service to the Community), Kenneth Butler (Life Skills) and Jeremy Perez (Post Residential Action Plan) won special awards.



The drill team provided a flawless 10-minute routine to open the ceremony.



This woman was surprised to receive a gift card while shopping from Sheriff Michelle Cook.

## Santa from page 3

The Community Foundation to carry out their wishes. After a hiatus during COVID, the project returns this year for the sixth time, with \$350,000 given to residents in three counties.

Sheriff Michelle Cook made several stops on Tuesdays, handing out cards to

convenience store clerks and workers at Waffle House.

"Our deputies are hitting the streets with \$25,000 gift cards from private donors who've stepped forward to ensure our community has a great Christmas," she said. "This is our way, on behalf of the donors and behalf of the Clay County Sheriff's Department, to all of you and #904Secret-Santa to say Merry Christmas."

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# Fleming Island hoops brings heavy hitters to the county

By Randy Lefko  
randy@claytodayonline.com

FLEMING ISLAND - Fleming Island High's annual Battle on the Island basketball tournament will feature top teams from the state in both girls and boys brackets (see left) that will be played at Fleming Island and Orange Park high schools.

Fleming Island and Orange Park boys represent local teams vying for the top spots while Ridgeview, Oakleaf and Fleming Island all bring solid seasons for the girls brackets.

In the gold bracket, featured teams include a possible rematch between Fleming Island and Andrew Jackson after the 55-54 win by Fleming Island last week at the Fortegra Invitational; Jackson No. 2 in 2A, Fleming Island No. 2 in 5A.

Jackson got the tough end of the bracket with 5A No. 1 Gainesville as their first game.

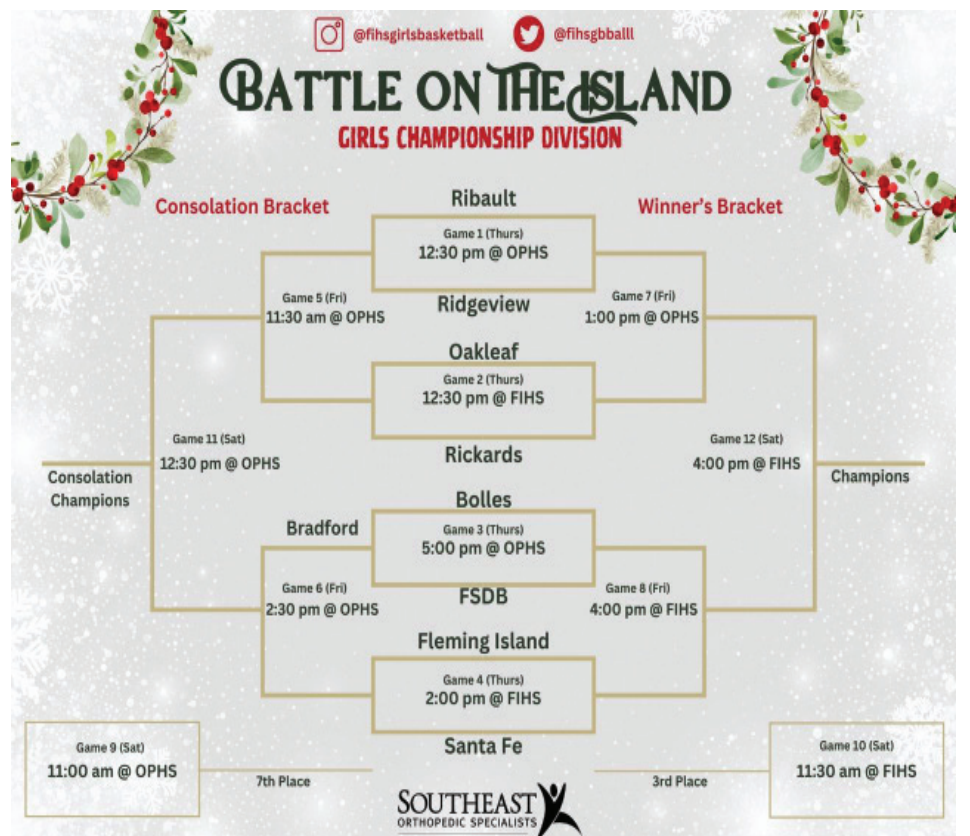
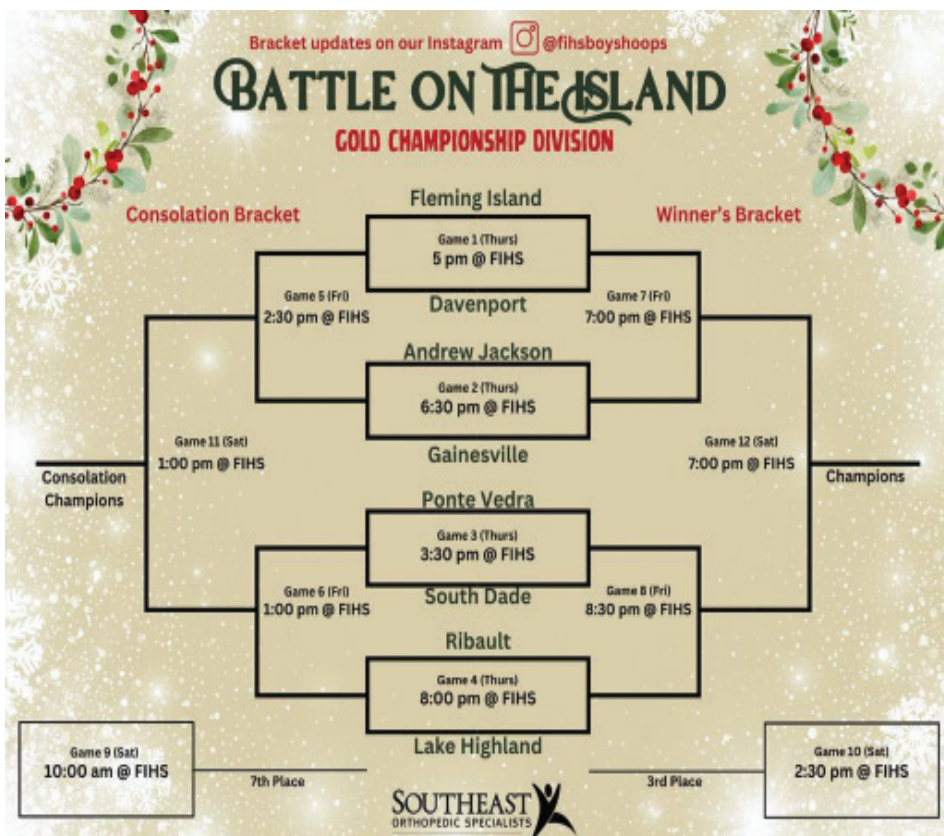
In the bottom of the gold bracket, Ponte Vedra, No. 7 in 5A opens with 7A South Dade while Ribault, No. 6 in 4A, draws Lake Highland Prep, 11th in 3A.

In the Green Bracket, with openers at Orange Park High School, the Raiders (6-4) open with Miami Ferguson, winless in 7A, with 3A-Wolfson (1-5) and 5A-Auburndale (5-3) under them.

In the bottom of that bracket, 1A-Parson Christian Academy (1-5) has Rural Branford (3-3) with unbeaten 6A Mandarin (8-0) matching with 6A Miami Braddock (2-5).

For the girls, with opening games split between Fleming Island and Orange Park, two undefeated teams will be in the mix with 8-0 1A-Florida Deaf opening with 3A-Bolles, 7-3 and unbeaten 4A Rickards drawing 5-6 6A-Oakleaf on day one.

For the rest of the brackets, 4A-Ribault has 5A-Ridgeview and 5A-Fleming Island has 4A-Santa Fe.





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