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THURSDAY, MAY 29, 2025

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BCC weighs architectural services for Oakleaf Library

By Kyla Woodard
kyla@claytodayonline.com

GREEN COVE SPRINGS — Additional progress was made regarding the Oakleaf Library project at the May 13 Board of County Commissioners meeting.

The board voted 5-0 to hear presentations from the top five professional archi-

tectural services for the library's construction.

Nine total services were evaluated and scored by a committee consisting of the director of Library Services, Building Division director and Capital Projects Department project manager.

Walker Architects, Inc. topped the list with 88.8, Borrelli + Partners, Inc. with 87.8, Fleischman and Garcia & Planners, AIA, PA with 83.8, Akel Logan Shafer, PA with 83 and Harvard Jolly, Inc. with 81.9.

District 4 Commissioner Betsy Condon said that the close ranking warranted a deeper look into each.

Presentations are set for the next meeting.

The board initially approved a grant agreement with the State of Florida Department of State for \$750,000 to start the design plan on Feb. 11.

Also, commissioners honored Barbara Cornett as Volunteer of the Year.

Cornett, a devoted educator and advocate for the arts, dedicates her time to nurturing young artists from across Clay County. Her contributions include teaching budding artists at the Augusta Savage Arts and Community Center, teaching classes at



COURTESY PHOTO

County commissioners honored Barbara Cornett as Volunteer of the Year on Tuesday.

the Green Cove Springs Library and curating exhibition showcases.

Overall, she has spent more than 100

hours volunteering her time to help others in Clay County, according to the board's PIO.

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Barking space: Dog-day afternoon at fairgrounds



STAFF PHOTOS BY JIM LUKSIC

A puppy reluctantly makes a sun-baked cameo Saturday, May 17, during Barkfest at the fairgrounds in Green Cove Springs.

By JIM LUKSIC

GREEN COVE SPRINGS — Attendees at the annual Barkfest on Saturday, May 17, at the fairgrounds had their own reasons for being there.

Some of the dog lovers wanted fresh air, sunshine and exercise; others, such as vendors, were peddling their wares.

But the most common answer from those who were asked why they braved the sweltering heat: “We love dogs.”

The four-hour affair included adoptions on site and opportunities to give donations for rescue organizations.

One of those conducting a labor of love Saturday was pet photographer Brooke Stacey, of St. Augustine, who had also participated in Jacksonville’s Barkfest.

“It was a lot of fun, so I had to be here,”

said Stacey, who has been shooting professionally for 15 years.

Not far down the linear trail of tents and booths stood Amanda Tullos, an administrator for Bad to the Bone Pet Care.

“We love animals and want to support the community,” was her explanation for pitching in.

Strolling down the grassy central path was Fruit Cove’s Ellen McClure, with her pair of mini-Aussies in tow. “I have a friend working at a booth, and we both love dogs.”

Meanwhile, at the far end of the T-bone layout, was a middle-aged gentleman named Daniel poised near a handful of food trucks. He described his purpose as “Walking around, having fun” while keeping an eye on his four-legged best friends, Navy and Red.



Booths, canopies and tents fringe the fairgrounds’ central walkway.

Vendors consisted of artists and sales representatives for a raft of products including treats for dogs. Erin, a Middleburg-based veterinarian technician, said she creates dog-related arts and crafts (pillows, drink coasters, wooden signs and so forth) in her “spare time.”

Booming from distant speakers was

Baha Men’s appropriate song “Who Let the Dogs Out” — still resonating after a quarter-century.



Tongue-tied two of a kind



Paws and effect: Pet photographer Brooke Stacey finds herself in front of a camera.

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SENIOR *Spotlight*

Oakleaf's Ethan Renault pushed himself out of emotional abyss

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

OAKLEAF – Ethan Renault constantly resists his natural temperament to be shy, anxious and reclusive.

Whenever he feels retreating into an emotional hole, he forces himself to step out of his comfort zone. His life has become a series of challenges made, accepted and defeated.

"My freshman year, I didn't really do a lot," Ethan said. "I went to school and went home. That was about it. I didn't really get involved with a lot of clubs and stuff. That was because I was kind of shy and scared and, you know, scared of judgment."

Over time, he decided to push himself into new, often uncomfortable, situations. That meant entering talent shows, tutoring other students, signing in front of crowds and applying for summer college programs.

And becoming Oakleaf High's Prom King.

"I decided to get myself out there and get myself in front of people," Ethan said. "I wanted to push past being scared."

Ethan's first leap of faith was accepting a four-week summer program at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, called Unmanned Aerial Systems Synthetic Aperture Radar. In this program, drones systematically map an area by creating a more detailed topography.

"That really took me out of my comfort zone because I was alone, 1,000 miles from home," Ethan said. "It forced me to deal with my anxieties."

In the process, he gained confidence, the reliance of others and decided he wanted to steer his future toward engineering.

"We assembled the drone, and then we had to make some kind of program," he said.

"We had a team of five. It was a lot of fun. It was my next step in getting out of my shell, pushing my boundaries. I think that kind of showed me what happens when you do that. I talked to a lot of people there. I



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Oakleaf High's Ethan Renault was shy and scared as a freshman, but he forced himself out of his comfort zone to become a popular senior and the Prom King.

opened up. I got involved in more clubs and other stuff in my junior year."

He also entered talent shows and was accepted to another engineering conference at the University of Florida before his senior year. He plans to be a Gator, studying mechanical engineering after receiving

his high school diploma on Friday, May 23.

"These last two years cut me out of my shell," Ethan said. "I'm ready for jobs, ready for school — ready for anything. I'm not the guy who's going to sit back and be quiet anymore."

Well said.



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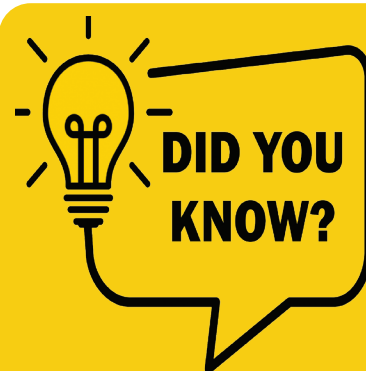
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Clay Today will test your knowledge and provide interesting facts on various topics.

Hurricane "season" officially begins June 1. Northeast Florida has experienced at least 26 hurricanes, according to Universal Property, including one Category 3 since the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale's 1 to 5 rating system; the Saffir-Simpson process was developed in the early 1970s based on sustained maximum wind speed, with Category 1 referring to those least-damaging and Category 5 being most dangerous; Jacksonville hasn't been directly impacted by a major one since the "Labor Day Hurricane" circa 1935; unlike central and western Florida, the northeast region wasn't heavily affected by hurricanes Milton and Helene in 2024.

First Seamark Rodeo at the Ranch attracts thousands

By Jenn Samsel
For Clay Today

Seamark Ranch in Green Cove Springs held its first Rodeo at the Ranch on Saturday, May 17. Cheering crowds were treated to an array of performances.

The turnout exceeded expectations. With more than 2,000 tickets sold, the event was sold out and it featured and attendees from nearly every county in Northeast Florida. Many competitors also traveled from South Florida and Georgia to participate.

The event featured a variety of competitions for all ages: Ranch Broncs, Open Bulls, Team Roping, Breakaway, Chute Dogging, Mutton Busting, Junior Barrels and Open Barrels.

Hundreds of children raced across the open field to participate in activities.

"We envision this rodeo becoming a beloved annual tradition, bringing together families from across the region to enjoy a day of fun and community, all while supporting our mission to serve families in crisis," said Director of Development Adrienne Tolbert, Ph.D.

"We are incredibly grateful and truly amazed by the overwhelming support for our first Rodeo at the Ranch. Given the remarkable response, we are already exploring ways to scale the event in the future to accommodate even more guests and to ensure an even greater impact for the families we serve."

WINNERS

Ranch Broncs:

1st: Lane Sevant, Clewiston
2nd: Jesse Kinner, Cairo, GA
3rd: Trace Ogle, Palatka

Open Bulls:

No qualified rides

Team Roping:

1st: TJ Smith Palatka (header)
Mike Landofi (heeler)
2nd: Jessie Mahew, Daytona (header)
Mike Landofi (heeler)

Breakaway:

1st: Briley Thomas, Hilliard
2nd: Kimberly Spencer, Leesburg

Chute Doggin:

1st: Nate Mathews, Glen Saint Mary
2nd: Matt Williams, Williston

Mutton Bustin:

1st: Khane Joiner, Macclenny

JR Barrels:

1st: Tucker Williams, St. Augustine

Open Barrels:

1st: Christy Honsburger, Lake Butler
2nd: Candyce Williams, St. Augustine



STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

There was plenty of dirt-flying action at the Seamark Ranch rodeo on Saturday night.



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Costly concerts

Local venues listen for affordable music shows

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

CLAY COUNTY – While most fairgoers enjoyed the Clay County Agricultural Fair, Executive Director Tasha Hyder admitted a common theme in the past few years has been a lack of interest in the concert lineups – and the complaints and financial hardships that come with those.

The cost of attracting popular bands has pushed Clay County far away from musical Main Street.

“It’s hard to afford people at the peaks of their careers. You have to catch an act on the frontside of their careers or the backside of their careers,” said Bob Olson, executive director of the Thrasher-Horne Center. “Artist’s fees are really expensive. We could get a \$300,000 band, but would our people really pay \$150 a ticket? What you can afford is really determined by the size of your venue.”

Thrasher-Horne’s theater has 1,728 seats. The Cattlemen’s Arena at the fair can seat about 3,400, with seating for as many as 300 VIPs. General admission is available at the back half of the arena.

Hyder said the fair had to charge \$5 for general admission to the grandstands and standing room only to offset more than a \$300,000 deficit in entertainment fees. Many concertgoers complained of the fee because those seats were free in the past.

“We’ve lost money on our entertainment every year,” she said. “We don’t get a share of concessions because that’s all done by

vendors. So, why do we have concerts? Because our guests have come to expect it. The shows are part of the experience. We lose a lot of money with our shows, but we are thinking about new ways to change the experience.”

The lineup in April included Clint Black, Spin Doctors and Ricky Skaggs. In their heydays, they would have filled major arenas. But Black’s last hit was “A Good Run of Bad Luck” in 1994. The only No. 1 song for the Spin Doctors was “Two Princes” in 1991, while the final No. 1 song for Ricky Skaggs was “Cajun Moon” in 1986.

A year ago, the fair managed to book Chapel Heart, an up-and-coming trio that finished among the top three on America’s Got Talent and has played at the Grand Ole’ Opry several times, as well as the Oak Ridge Boys, whose last No. 1 song, “No Matter How High,” topped the charts in 1990.

Blake Shelton played at the Clay County Fair in 2006, when his booking rate was \$40,000. Now, his rate starts at \$1 million.

Artists’ rates were more reasonable before skyrocketing after the COVID-19 pandemic. That’s why the fair was able to attract artists and bands like Lonestar, Randy Travis, The Righteous Brothers, Survivor, REO Speedwagon, ZZ Top, Nelly (twice), Lorrie Morgan, Martina McBride and Diamond Rio – all when they were either in their prime or still somewhat relevant.

“They’ve done a good job catching peo-



STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Chapel Heart played the Clay County Agricultural Fair last year and was a hit. Years from now, fans will regard them as one of the fair’s entertainment coups.

ple on their upswing,” Olson said.

Hyder said the most attended show this year was the Christian band, We the Kingdom.

She said the fair briefly considered hiring Jelly Roll, until they saw his asking price range between \$1.5 and \$2 million for a single show.

Olson said he faces challenges with his budget, but unlike Hyder, he has different charges and review streams.

Thrasher-Horne is responsible for the band’s hospitality, paying for stagehands and equipment.

However, they enjoy revenue from concessions and sponsorships. If there’s a profit, the band gets about 80% of the cut,

and the house takes home 20%.

The cost of the acts sets the starting price of tickets.

“It’s all driven by the number of seats in the house,” Olson said. “We make a little money on most of our concerts. We lose money on our Broadway shows.”

Olson said one of the largest shows — and costliest fees — was Larry the Cable Guy’s appearance last month, but the biggest crowd was for “Weird Al” Yankovic’s 2022 concert appearance.

Hyder and Olson must provide top-dollar entertainment on a budget, and the challenge is becoming more difficult.

“The bottom line is, it does cost a lot to put on an act,” Olson said.



The Oak Ridge Boys, whose last No. 1 song was in 1990, closed out the 2024 Clay County Fair last year.

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NCAA Softball Regions

OHS Gibson, CHS Ellis shine in UF Regions



STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

Former Clay High pitcher Gabby Ellis got the call for a 7-0 shutout win over Florida Atlantic University that got Mercer University a second shot at No. 3 University of Florida. Ellis was instrumental in late season rally by Mercer to take first ever Southern Conference championship prior to selection into NCAA Div. I regions in Gainesville. Florida defeated Mercer 8-0 to end Mercer season, a 40-win season.

By Randy Lefko
randy@claytodayonline.com

GAINESVILLE - Two former area high school softball aces; Oakleaf High's Ciara Gibson and Clay High's Gabby Ellis, had standout performances over the May 17-18 weekend at the NCAA Softball regions staged at University of Florida.

Gibson, a sophomore designated player at Florida Atlantic University, blasted a homer and double to push the Owls to 5-4 game one win over Georgia Tech on Friday, May 16.

Gibson hit a two run dinger in the fifth then hit a sixth inning RBI double to put the game into a 3-3 tie before Gibson scored off a double by teammate Kiley Shelton to take a 4-3 lead.

Georgia Tech would homer to tie again and put the game into the eighth inning where Gibson got on base and Shelton singled again to score the winning run.

FAU would continue into the second round where the Owls lost in a homer fest with No. 3 University of Florida with the Lady Gators' Taylor Shumaker homering

in the first inning with FAU up 2-0 to tie, then get two homers in the fourth; one with three runners on base, to go up 7-3. Shumaker had two homers in the flurry.

In the fifth, FAU's responded with their own three run blast by Chloe Yeatts to get the game to 7-6.

Florida would add runs off walks and singles off FAU relief pitchers to up the score to 10-6 before Jocelyn Erickson launched a grand slam to push the score to 14-6 and end the game.

Also on the roster for FAU is sophomore shortstop Kiley Channell of Keystone Heights High School. Channell was chosen as the American Athletic Conference rookie of the year and on the AAC All Rookie team in 2024 while starting in all 57 games.

For Ellis, a sophomore pitcher at Mercer University, now at 11-5, fueled a late season surge by the Bears that included a Southern Conference title, the first for Mercer, and a 19th win in the last 22 games, with Ellis winning a critical 11-5 elimination game against East Tennessee State to keep the Bears playing. Ellis



Oakleaf High outfielder Ciara Gibson, now a sophomore designated player for Florida Atlantic University, socked a run scoring homer and an RBI double to give the Owls a 5-4 win over Georgia Tech, but the Owls lost to Mercer and Florida to end their season.

got the win on mound with five innings of pitching with two strikeouts.

In the NCAA regions, Mercer, unranked, faced off and lost to No. 3 Florida in their opener 8-0 and faced another elimination game, but the Bears beat Georgia Tech 7-3.

Against FAU in the third game of the double elimination format, Ellis stepped on to the mound in and orchestrated a 7-0 win over FAU to keep the Bears alive. Ellis got the win with seven innings on the mound with one strikeout as the Bears defense was stifling with the Bears staving off a bases loaded situation in the third and fourth innings.

In the game, FAU got two hits from Gibson with one walk with Channell left on base twice.

On the Mercer team is Oakleaf High infielder Mariah Sanchez, a sophomore.

Mercer would get their second shot at Florida on Sunday, May 18.



Mercer University entered the NCAA Div. I region tournament as an unseeded team, but also the Southern Conference champion with the play of Clay High pitcher Gabby Ellis, left, and Oakleaf High infielder Mariah Sanchez, both sophomores for the Bears. Mercer, in the double elimination format of the regions, lost two games to No. 3 Florida to end their season with wins over Georgia Tech and FAU.

OHS tackle Jalen Rivers selected by NFL Bengals



STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

Oakleaf High graduate Jalen Rivers, left, was massive presence of football field, basketball court and as a state champion shot put athlete for Knights.

By Randy Lefko
randy@claytodayonline
w/excerpts from Bengals.com

Former Oakleaf High football standout and track and field state champion Jalen Rivers was selected by the NFL Cincinnati Bengals in the fifth round, the 153rd overall pick. Rivers was a versatile offensive lineman for the Miami Hurricanes with a career that spanned all five positions on the

offensive line.

Rivers was Honorable Mention All-ACC in 2024 and was Second-team All-ACC in 2023.

Bengals Reaction: "Jalen has that versatility, and that will prove valuable for us... that versatility will factor for us, it's only a positive." - Bengals offensive coordinator Dan Pitcher on Rivers playing all over the offensive line.



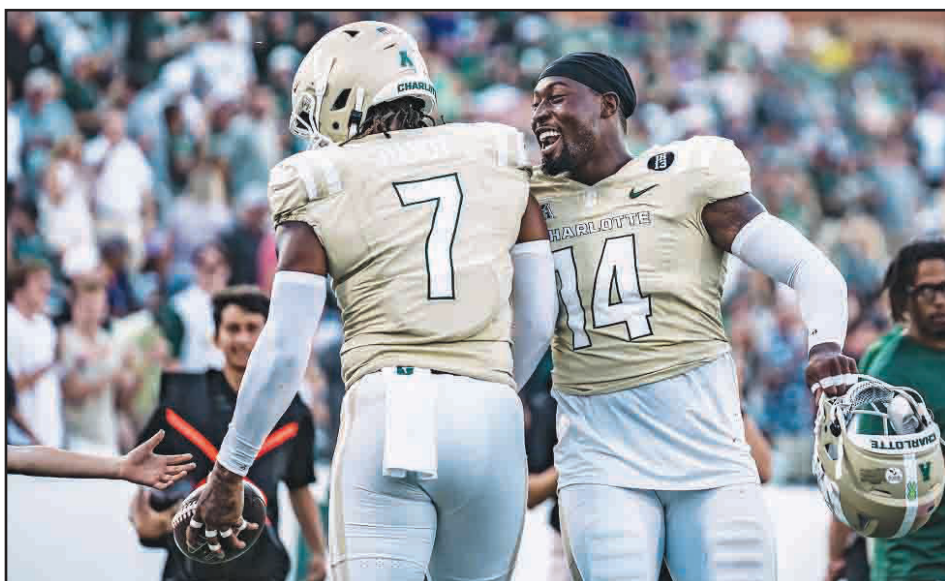
Oakleaf High got a state champion shot put medal from Jalen Rivers in his days as a Knight.

"Really impressive guy... couldn't be more impressed with him as a person..

You're not going to find anyone who says a bad word about the guy" - Bengals offensive coordinator Dan Pitcher on Rivers's character.

Jalen Rivers Reaction: "I'm extremely excited to be a part of this program. This

program, I've visited and I've talked to coaches and I've been watching for a long time, so I'm excited to be a part of building an organization and a team that's going to be great. I'm just another addition to it, so I'm ecstatic right now. Lost for words." - Jalen Rivers



Another former Oakleaf High football player and basketball standout; Chantz Williams, No. 14, was a teammate of Jalen Rivers at Oakleaf and at University of Miami before transferring to University of Charlotte. Williams, who declared for the draft prior to his senior season, was waiting for his phone call from the NFL.

FHSA Track and Field Championships

OHS Lawson third, Autry seventh at track states

OPHS Verger gets silver; MHS Underwood, OHS Lawson, RHS Taravine thirds



STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

Oakleaf High sprinter Rayna Lawson barreled down the final 50 meters of the Class 4A 100 to secure third place in a tie that was separated by .002 seconds.

By Randy Lefko
randy@claytodayonline.com

JACKSONVILLE - Oakleaf High track sprinter Rayna Lawson got a medal, but missed a bigger one by just about a whisker with her third place finish in the Class 4A 100 the best finish for the Knights tracksters at the FH-SAA state championships held at University of North Florida.

In the Class 4A 100 sprint, Oakleaf High sophomore Rayna Lawson got second in her heat one race with an 11.96 showing up on the clock, but with Winter Haven's Desirae Murray having the same time, 11.96, forcing officials to dig a little deeper. Lawson wound up third at 11.956 with Murray given an 11.954 for the silver. Gold went to Laiana McClinton of Largo in 11.75.

McClinton would double with gold in the 200 in 23.67 with Lawson ninth in 24.59. Murray wound up 16th.

In Class 4A, with Lawson the top finisher, Oakleaf also got a seventh in shot put from sophomore Rayna Autry with Autry also finishing 18th in discus. Oakleaf teammate Gloria Lewis finished 14th in discus.

In the 400, Rodney Townsend, Jr., finished 12th with a 49.03 split with Devin Collins taking 18th in long jump at 20'-3.5".

In Class 3A, Fleming Island High junior triple jumper Mikayla Shavers could measure between her forefinger and her thumb the distance that put her in second place twice in the last two years in her specialty.

"I knew that this year I was going to do whatever I needed to win this thing finally," said Shavers, who executed her plan off a first jump that put the rest of the field on their heels. "I was in first after the first jump, but I was ready to go bigger if I had to. The plan was to not leave without the gold medal."

In the field, Shavers, with a previous best of 40 feet, 1.25 inches, blasted off and sailed to her landing at just 39'-1/2".

"Nothing big, but enough to put down a spot that would make the other girls think about it," said Shavers. "I was ready to go bigger."

Almost equal to the chase, Hillsborough High's Jayce Miller landed a hair off at 38'-11" inches to kind of turn the tables on the Shavers jinx of less than half inch and quarter inch second place finishes.

"I try not to think about the how closes I have had and just work on getting better as an athlete and just compete," said Shavers, who was second in 2024 at 39'-5" by .75", and second in 2023 at 39'-6.5" by a half inch. Hillsborough's Miller was fourth in 2024 with Anya Carey of Somerset winning with a 39'-5.75" jump.

Shavers' gold was the lone state title for Clay County, but there was a handful of top eight medalists that came home from the University of North Florida track with Orange Park long jumper Nethan Verger taking silver in his Class 3A field, and a handful of thirds from Middleburg discus thrower Madison Underwood and Ridgeview long jumper Ann-gellica Taravine, both in Class 3A, and Oakleaf sprinter Rayna Lawson in the Class 4A 100 by a scant 0.002 of a second.

For Verger, his first jump like Shavers in triple jump was his best of the day with a 24'-1.5" leap that held for just about 10 minutes as Manatee's Candler Johnson lofted himself to a first place 24'-4.25" winning jump. Both jumpers equalled their best jumps in later jumps, but could not extend the distances.

"I got a little sideways on the second jump and the runway felt weird," said Verger, who had a nation leading 25 foot jump earlier in the season in Gainesville.

In the girls 3A long jump, Taravine used the energy from Shavers to pick up a third place finish ahead of Shavers in fourth with her 17'-11.75" jump. Shavers was fourth at 17'-8'75". Winner was Miami Northwest-ern's Nyla Christian at 19'-8".

"I wanted to get a medal this year after last year finishing out of the medals," said Taravine, who was also 13th in triple jump at 36'-7.5". "I had a good jump and improved to my best by almost five inches."

Shavers, who also competed as the anchor for the Fleming Island High 4 x 100 relay, took the baton from Juliannah Santana to outsprint a handful of runners to give Fleming Island an 11th place finish at 48.72 with Dillard winning at 45.85.

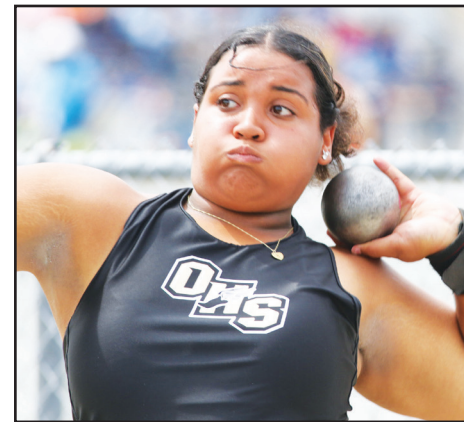
"The long jump and the sprints were all used to be better in the triple jump," said Shavers.

In the Class 3A girls discus, Middleburg senior Madison Underwood completed her steady improvement in her state finishes with her third place finish at 142'-7" behind first placer and defending champion Lauren Kirby of Somerset with a 161'-8" toss on her second to last throw and second placer Julia Lemmon of Fort Myers at 158'-3". Lemmon was second last year.

"I was 10th as a sophomore, fourth last year and now, I got a third," said Underwood, who had a best of 145'-6" in the Clay County Championships and threw 132'-1" for fourth last year with an injured shoulder hampering her throwing technique.

In other races, in Class 1A, the St. Johns Country Day School girls and boys 4 x 800 relays both had top 20 finishes with the girls, led by senior leadoff Kaitlyn Sunderhaus and senior anchor Rebecca Stratton, plus eighth graders Kate Staten and Matilda Morris, finishing their high school track with a 13th place finish while the boys, all underclassmen including seventh grader Judson Myers, finished 17th in 8:42.69.

Also in Class 3A, Orange Park discus thrower Jeremiah Hamilton threw 172'-0"



Oakleaf High sophomore Rayna Autry got her experience of the state meet with plenty of potential still in her speciality.

for his best throw to take a sixth place with Chiles thrower Jason Atwood, the national record holder heading to FSU, rocking a 218'-5" throw for gold.

"Everything felt good today," said Hamilton, who hit a 169'-3" toss to finish sixth in region 1-3A. "I was due to let a big one go."

Also from Orange Park, triple jumper Calder Datilus finished 11th with a 43'-3.25" leap.

Fleming Island got a ninth in the 110 high hurdles from Jarius Rodgers in 14.98 with sprinter Sebastian Cruz 12th in the 100 in 11.06 and 3200 runner Jacob Campbell 13th in 9:34.95. The Fleming Island boys 4 x 800 was 14th with long jumper Tysen Janda 12th in 21'-2" and discus thrower David Fuentes 15th in 136'-6". Fleming Island's 4 x 100 girls finished 11th in 48.72.



Fleming Island High junior triple jumper Mikayla Shavers got her best jump on her first jump then held on to secure her first gold medal in the Class 3A Track and Field Championships held Saturday at the University of North Florida. Shavers was also fourth in long jump and the anchor for the girls 4 x 100 relay team.

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