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OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS

SUNDAY



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SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 2023

PADDLES AT THE PLEX

Pickleball brings economic impact

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With the addition of 12 new pickleball courts, Opelika's Paddles at the Plex tournament has doubled the number of players and doubled the estimated economic impact for the city.

The tournament, which started on Thursday and ends on Sunday, is the first to use all 24 courts that are individually fenced and covered with a large canopy.

Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller gives thanks to the Opelika City Council for helping the city get ahead of the curve by approving the construction of the pickleball courts.

"The popularity of our pickleball events at the Sportsplex is very widespread and players have heard about Opelika all over the nation," Fuller said. "Folks want to come here to play, and of course, they absolutely love our facilities."

Fuller said his wife, Laura, spoke to a man from New York on Thursday who said he couldn't believe a small community like Opelika had this kind of facility.

"It always makes me swell up with pride when folks brag on our community and the amenities that our community offers," Fuller said.

Brooke Kastner, vice president of Auburn-Opelika Tourism, said this year 671 players from 16 dif-



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The Paddles at the Plex pickleball competition began on Thursday at the Opelika Sportsplex.

ferent states registered to compete, and about 53% of the players came from out of state.

"Pickleball seems to be one that draws people from all over the country because people play everywhere," Kastner said.

Jim Young, president of the

Opelika Pickleball Club, said in this tournament they have players who are nationally ranked, one being 16-year-old Alia Brown who is playing mixed doubles 5.0, which is the highest rating below pro.

Young said Brown is rated No. 14 in women's doubles and No. 4

in junior's singles.

AO Tourism expects about 500 room nights over the course of the four-day tournament as 436 players, or about 65%, traveled from 85 miles away or farther.

Please see **TOURNAMENT**, Page A7

Opelika shares spotlight with Hollywood's Quaid in video

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The City of Opelika has gone Hollywood in a new video spot for the short film series Viewpoint with Dennis Quaid.

The Viewpoint Project creates short form videos, typically around three to six minutes, that highlight industries and topics around the world. Hollywood actor Quaid hosts the show, book-ending each segment with an introduction and a closing.

Opelika's Viewpoint Project video was released on the city's social media platforms late last month. The video features Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller, Opelika City Councilman George Allen, and President and CEO of AO Tourism Robyn Bridges. Each talk about what makes Opelika a great place to live and visit.

The video short begins with Dennis Quaid on a television set talking up travel destinations.

"We are a globe-trotting culture," Quaid says in the clip. "More and more of us every year get the itch to get out and discover the energy of a city, a quiet retreat, or even a foreign culture. Journey with us today as we explore some of the most beautiful destinations in the world."

The video then moves to familiar aerial shots of Opelika's downtown and the Tiger Town



Quaid

Please see **QUAID**, Page A2

WATCH: For a link to the video, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link **NEWSVU**.

Meet some of the 671 pickleball players

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From Thursday to Sunday, 671 pickleball players from 16 different states came to Opelika to play in the Paddles at the Plex tournament.

Local and out-of-town players admired the 24 covered pickleball courts at the Opelika Sportsplex, and many said they wish their hometown had the same. Opelika Pickleball Club President Jim Young said matches continued to play on Thursday and Friday even

during the rain.

Meet the people playing pickleball below:

Jennifer Enault, 51
New Orleans

Enault was a tennis coach for 25 years before she made the transition to compete in pickleball. This weekend makes her 6th tournament at the Opelika Sportsplex facility.

"Opelika puts on one of the best tournaments in the South," she

said. "It's incredibly well run and some of the best players always show up, so we come."

She played women's doubles 50+ on Friday, in which she and her partner earned gold, and on Saturday, she played mixed doubles.

Cheryl Grisham, 59,
and **Olaf Raiskums, 68**
Auburn

Grisham is a former tennis player who picked up pickleball

about a year and a half ago. Her mixed doubles partner, Raiskums, has been playing for about 3 years. They've participated in tournaments at the Opelika Sportsplex several times before, and said they've enjoyed it because the courts are covered, which allows them to play rain or shine. "It rained here Thursday and it rained here yesterday and we didn't stop play at all," Grisham said.

Please see **PLAYERS**, Page A7

Rent growth easing, but still a burden for some, A6

Weather
Mostly sunny
High 74 • Low 51
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PFAS 'forever chemicals' about to get their first US limits

**MICHAEL PHILLIS AND
BRITTANY PETERSON**
Associated Press

The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to propose restrictions on harmful "forever chemicals" in drinking water after finding they are dangerous in amounts so small as to be undetectable. But experts say removing them will cost billions, a burden that will fall hardest on small communities with few resources.

Concerned about the chemicals' ability to weaken children's immune systems, the EPA said last year that PFAS could cause harm at levels "much lower than previously understood."

"We as a community of scientists and policymakers and regulators really missed the boat early on," said Susan Pinney, director of the Center for Environmental Genetics at the

University of Cincinnati.

There is also evidence the compounds are linked to low birthweight, kidney cancer and a slew of other health issues. It's unclear what the EPA will now propose and how well it will protect people from these recently-understood harms.

PFOA and PFOS are part of a larger family of compounds called PFAS, for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, that are widespread, don't degrade in the environment and have been around for decades. They've been used in nonstick pans, food packaging and firefighting foam. Their use is now mostly phased out in the U.S., but some still remain.

Water providers are preparing for tough standards and testing that will undoubtedly reveal PFOA and PFOS in communities that don't yet know the chemicals are in their

water.

"This rule would help ensure that communities are not being poisoned," said Jonathan Kalmuss-Katz, senior attorney, toxic exposure and health at Earthjustice.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of cities and towns, often abutting manufacturing plants or Air Force bases, suddenly realized they had a problem. In 2016, for example, Sarah McKinney was on maternity leave when she got word there was too much PFOA and PFOS in the tap water in her Colorado Springs suburb. She picked up her weeks-old daughter and hustled out to buy enough bottled water for her family of five.

"If I'm just spitting it out, can I brush my teeth?" she remembers wondering.

In response to concerns from

people who had been drinking the water for years, McKinney's water utility switched to a different source, provided water bottle filling stations and installed a \$2.5 million treatment system that was the first of its kind in the country, according to Lucas Hale, the water district manager. The chemicals had gotten into the water from nearby Peterson Air Force base, which then built a treatment facility.

For communities with the pollutants, it's not a cheap problem to solve.

Nationally, it could cost roughly \$38 billion to remove enough of the chemicals to meet a strict EPA rule limiting them to where they can't be detected, according to an estimate prepared by engineering consultant Black & Veatch for the American Water Works Association, an industry group. There also will be

ongoing costs for filter material and testing.

The consultant looked at federal and state test results and estimated that 4% to 12% of water providers nationally will need to treat for PFAS due to the EPA rule.

Smaller, poorer communities will have a harder time affording the new systems and training staff on how to use them, experts said. And in general, smaller water providers with fewer resources already violate water quality rules more often than utilities that serve large cities.

"Small systems often need technologies that are more simple to operate," said Jonathan Pressman, engineer and EPA water researcher. The agency offers technical assistance to states and communities, and it recently made \$2 billion available to states for contaminants like PFAS.

Tournament

From A1

Kastner said they're estimating a direct economic impact of about \$200,000. During last year's spring tournament, 357 players registered, and the economic impact was \$126,000.

In this year's Paddles at the Plex, 69 teams competed in men's doubles 60-plus on Thursday; 96 teams competed in women's doubles with six teams on the waitlist and 96 players competed in men's singles with eight on the waitlist on Friday; 191 teams competed in mixed doubles with 25 teams on the waitlist on Saturday; and on Sunday, 120 teams will compete

in men's doubles with eight teams on the waitlist and 32 players will compete in women's singles.

"The size of it is not really comparable to the number of people that are coming in for an (Auburn) football game, which is 87,000 people, but pickleball is one of the largest amateur sports that we draw in folks for," Kastner said.

While Paddles at the Plex isn't the largest pickleball tournament Opelika hosts, Fuller said these types of tournaments are one of the biggest events for the city of Opelika, only second to swim meets.

Last year, Opelika hosted the State Parks and Rec swim meet, which had 1,400 swimmers registered to compete and more than

2,000 spectators.

The largest pickleball tournament coming up this year is the Atlantic South Diamond Regional in June, which will include about 800 players from 26 states.

Fuller said he's glad the city is able to host these tournaments and provide southern hospitality to the visiting players. The incoming revenue also benefits local restaurants, shops, hotels and other businesses.

The Opelika Sportsplex will be hosting three more tournaments this year: Alabama Senior Olympics on April 14-16, the 2023 USA Pickleball Atlantic South Diamond Regional Championship on June 6-11 and the fall Paddles at the Plex on Sept. 5-10.



The Paddles at the Plex pickleball competition began on Thursday at the Opelika Sportsplex.
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Players

From A1

Sue Marshall, 73 Huntsville

Marshall started playing pickleball 3 years ago after she said her husband told her she needed to come play with him. "I'm a former tennis player and I thought, 'I don't really want to play that game. It's not tennis.' It took me about 30 minutes to realize this is a lot of fun," Marshall said.

Through pickleball, Marshall and her two close friends, Patricia McInnis and Sherry Barnes, will be going to the National Senior Games in Pittsburgh.

Patricia McInnis, 75 Huntsville

McInnis, an Auburn University graduate, has been playing pickleball for 9 years and will be playing in her 5th National Senior Olympics in July. She finds tournaments, like the Opelika Paddles and the Plex, through a pickleball tournament website, and has played in states all over the country including Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Ohio, Wisconsin, Maine, New Mexico, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Arizona and more.

Sherry Barnes, 70 Huntsville

Barnes began playing pickleball 9 years ago, and has won silver in the National Senior Olympics women's singles division ranking her as the number two player in the nation for her age category. Barnes said she played her first mixed doubles tournament in 2014 with Opelika Parks and Recreation Director Sam Bailey. "Ya'll have a great facility," she said. "We love playing at Opelika, and Sam and the whole crew goes above and beyond."

David Scott, 64 Opelika

Scott started playing pickleball two years ago after his friends, including Opelika Parks and Recreation Director Sam Bailey, asked him to join them. He started competing and has won bronze, silver and gold in past tournaments. "It's an interesting sport because it's all ages," he said. "You can start using strategy to make up for your lack of ability when you get older."

Scott said he often plays at the Opelika Sportsplex at night after work with people of all ages, some who are in their 20s.

Jay Walters, 48 Opelika

Walters was invited by his friends to play pickleball in 2019 and hasn't stopped playing since



A couple competes in a match during the Paddles at the Plex tournament on Saturday at the Opelika Sportsplex.

then. In the Paddles at the Plex tournament he played men's doubles and mixed doubles with his wife Angie, 47.

"We play pretty regularly during the week, so it's nice to have this venue that brings the tournament here," Walters said. "We don't have to travel and can play in the tournaments. It's good for the city to have this and bring a little bit of notoriety to Opelika because this is a pretty rare venue."

The Flick Family Atlanta

Lori Flick, 60, played tennis in high school and later with the Atlanta League ALTA. With about 35 years of experience as a tennis player, Flick decided to try out pickleball about 7 years ago with a friend on her tennis team. She fell in love with it and introduced the sport to the rest of her family, including her two children Marc, 30, and Laura, 26, and her husband Mike Everling, 51.

"Pickleball is more social. It's easier to get four people together to play pickleball, it seems, without having a league," she said. "And men can play against women and women can play against men."

Marc said when he came home after college he had more free time, so he went with his family to check out what pickleball was all about and fell in love with it.

"I had to figure out why they were always gone at pickleball tournaments," Laura added.

The entire family competed over the weekend in Opelika. Lori Flick won silver in the women's division on Friday and played mixed doubles with her husband on Saturday. Laura played women's doubles and mixed doubles



A woman serves the ball during the Paddles at the Plex tournament on Saturday at the Opelika Sportsplex.

with her boyfriend Ben Clifton, 44. Clifton said he's been playing for 4 years after Laura and Marc introduced him to the game.

Kelsey Brown, 32 Biloxi, Miss.

Brown, a military veteran, was introduced to pickleball through the Veterans Affairs office about two summers ago. When she was encouraged to try the sport, she said she thought, "what is a pickleball?" After she tried it, she didn't look back. This makes her 9th tournament and she plans on coming back to Opelika for the next tournament hosted at the Sportsplex.

Patrick Murphy, 54 Pensacola, Fla.

Murphy picked up the sport of pickleball about 5 years ago as a way to stay active and social. He plays singles, doubles and mixed doubles and has played in multiple tournaments every year. Murphy

also qualified for nationals for the third time. He encourages others to check out the sport as it's one of the fastest growing sports in the nation. "Come out and try it out. It's for all ages, all levels, all skills," he said. "It keeps you active and moving. It becomes addictive in a way."

Nathan Walton, 24 Birmingham

After playing tennis at the college level at Coastal Alabama Community College, Walton discovered pickleball. He's been competing for about a year and a half and said switching to pickleball is the best thing he's ever done. "I hate tennis now," he laughed. "I don't play any tennis anymore. You couldn't pay me to pick up a racket."

This is Walton's 4th time playing in an Opelika tournament, but he said he often drives down to use the Opelika facility that draws lots of good players.

John Petty, 42 Columbus, Ga.

Petty said his brother introduced him to the sport about 3 years ago. He and his brother played table tennis growing up and tennis in high school. He said pickleball is the perfect combination of both and is the best racket sport. Petty only played three times before competing in his first pickleball tournament. Last year, he and his brother played in the US Open in Naples, Fla.

Luzzet MacDonald, 55, and Shelly Martin, 59 Pensacola, Fla, and Ocean Springs, Miss.

Despite living in different states, MacDonald and Martin are doubles partners who met each other years ago at a pickleball tournament. They became fast friends and grew a friend group of players from Alabama and Louisiana too. "When you get together for a pickleball tournament, it's kind of like a family reunion," MacDonald said. "If you win a medal that's like icing on the cake, but getting together and seeing everybody is great."

Martin said they love coming to the Opelika area not only because of the facility, but also because of the welcoming community. She and her pickleball friends have attended Food Truck Friday and enjoy eating at the downtown restaurants.

Gary Preisendorfer, 66 Helena, Ala.

Preisendorfer played at the first tournament Opelika hosted and has been coming back ever since. About four years ago he planned to start playing tennis but had a difficult time finding tournaments to play at without belonging to a club. That's when his doctor recommended pickleball. He watched a match and said, "I can do that," so he did. At Paddles at the Plex, he won silver in men's singles and played mixed doubles with Pamela Thurber.

Pamela Thurber, 52 Pelham, Ala.

Thurber found pickleball in 2018. Previously she enjoyed playing ping pong with her three sons, and after she tried pickleball for the first time, she rushed home to tell them, "It's like ping pong, but on the ground! It's like you're on the table!"

She was able to recruit two of her sons to play the sport, and she's been going to tournaments ever since. Thurber said she loves the fellowship, atmosphere and camaraderie pickleball tournaments provide. She and her mixed doubles partner, Gary Preisendorfer, also teach pickleball to a Church of the Highlands small group.