



ZEPHYRHILLS SPORTS

December 31, 2020

NO. 1

Sarah Vande Berg Tennis Center opens



The Vande Bergs, Todd, Charla and their daughter Emily, posed for a family photo with a statue of Sarah, one of the county's best-ever tennis players. Sarah starred at Zephyrhills High and played for the University of South Carolina Upstate before perishing in a 2015 car crash. **STEVE LEE**

Legacy of the late Zephyrhills High standout who perished in a 2015 car crash will carry on at new facility

By STEVE LEE
Sports Reporter

Oct. 22, 2020

The unveiling of a statue paying homage to a late Zephyrhills High standout was the culmination of last Saturday's grand opening of the new Sarah Vande Berg Tennis and Wellness Center off Simons Road. The legacy of Sarah, who played tennis at the University of South Carolina Upstate and perished in a 2015 car crash, will carry on.

"Forever going forward, we will see Sarah all over this

place," said Gary Baldus, who coaches girls tennis at Zephyrhills High and is a minister at New Walk Church. "We will always remember her. The legacy of her life will continue."

Numerous photos of those involved in the project of a \$5 million facility three years in the making took place around the statue near the end of the event. Perhaps none felt more honored than the Vande Berg family — Todd, the city's planner who was instrumental in pushing the effort along; his wife Charla, a language arts teacher at Stewart Middle School; and Emily, a former high school tennis teammate of her late sister.

"Nothing compares with what we've built," said Todd, who has been a longtime avid tennis player as well. "I truly believe that this is going to be a game-changer for Zephyrhills. It's going to provide an impact on Zephyrhills and Pasco County."

That sentiment was shared by many others at the new center, which features outdoor courts for tennis, pickleball and padel (a racquet sport played in a closed court; along with a 30,000-square-foot indoor facility for the United Global

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The Zephyrhills News top 10 sports stories of 2020

By ANDY WARRENER
News Reporter

Can we all breathe a sigh of relief that we've made it through 2020? This past year has presented challenges like many of us have never seen. Words like, "pandemic," "outbreak," "quarantine" and "lockdown" became part of our everyday vernacular. COVID-19 worked its way into every situation, even in regard to sports.

In spite of it, Tampa Bay-area sports teams did great. The Lightning and NHL, just like the NBA, paused their seasons only to later resume them with all sorts of quarantine restrictions. The Lightning still managed to pull off a Stanley Cup Series win, beating the Dallas Stars in six games for their second championship in franchise history.

The Rays nearly matched the feat, making it to the World Series, despite the entire playoffs being played at neutral locations. The Rays played valiantly and discovered a rising star in their ranks by the name of Randy Arozarena. Arozarena probably should have won MVP of the series, even as the Rays fell to the Los Angeles Dodgers in six games.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers made one of the biggest free agent moves in their franchise history, signing six-time Super Bowl champion Tom Brady. The Buccaneers played to empty stadiums in the early part of the season. As the season wore on, limited numbers of spectators started being permitted to attend games. Despite several tough losses, the Bucs managed to grab a wildcard spot in the playoffs, keeping their hopes alive to make the 2021 Super Bowl, which will be played in Tampa.

Locally, the Stewart Bulldogs girls basketball team kicked off 2020 in style. It was really the culmination of the 2019 season but the Bulldogs' 36-2 win over rival Pasco Middle capped a perfect 8-0 season. It was the first time in head coach Mark Holifer's 30-year career coaching the sport at Stewart. The stifling defense the Bulldogs played often held their opponents to single-digit scores. The Bulldogs would be honored with a proclamation by the Zephyrhills City Council in January.

In February, the Special Olympics split their events between the east and west side of the county. Games were held at Wesley Chapel on the east side and followed the next day with events and over 750 competitors on the west side at River Ridge High School in New Port Richey. Interestingly enough, the event billed, "summer games" took place on one of the cooler afternoons of 2020; temperatures hovering around 50 degrees. The 2020 Special Olympics stretched into its fourth decade and hit record numbers of participants, over 1,320.

Also in February, the Zephyrhills girls weightlifting team made what is likely to be their high water mark. It could have been one of the highest marks of any sport at Zephyrhills. The Bulldogs made it back-to-back regional championships by tying former state champion River Ridge in their own gym. The Bulldogs were floated by personal record lifts from Diamond Cowart. Kayla Zine, Sarah Davis and Kayla Robbins all won individual regional titles. Lakisia Thomas would add to her regional title with the program's first state title in school history. The Bulldog girls would rise to third overall at states,

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NO. 2

Zephyrhills weight room named for Bruce Cimorelli

Former Zephyrhills boys weightlifting coach and current athletic director is third to have his name on a school athletic facility

By STEVE LEE
Sports Reporter

Oct. 1, 2020

The room where Bruce Cimorelli helped the Zephyrhills High boys weightlifting team make an indelible mark in the school's athletic lore now bears his name. An official ceremony recognizing that took place at Bulldog Stadium before last Friday's football game.

The host Bulldogs lost Friday on Tom Fisher Field, which is named after its former football coach. There actually are three athletic venues at the school that bear the names of former coaches. The gym honors former boys basketball coach Alan Reed, a tribute made in 2019 with the help of Cimorelli.

"I love it here at Zephyrhills," Cimorelli said. "That's why I'm still here."

Reed, the winningest basketball coach in school history, was behind a push to have the weight room named for Cimorelli, his longtime friend and co-worker.

"It's surreal," Reed said of sharing that experience with Cimorelli. "We never got into it for (the recognition). We liked where we were. We like the kids we were coaching. We liked what we were doing. Did all this really happen over the last two years?"

Cimorelli's record is unmatched by any other boys weightlifting coach at Zephyrhills. He coached that sport at Zephyrhills for 10 seasons. "We never got into it for (the recognition). We liked where we were. We like the kids we were coaching. We liked what we were doing. Did all this really happen over the last two years?"

"It means a lot," Cimorelli said. "I couldn't have done it



Former principal Angie Stone holds a plaque dedicated to Bruce Cimorelli, the former boys weightlifting coach. **STEVE LEE**

without those kids. It was fun coaching those guys. We had some really strong kids. We had about 20 kids benching 300 pounds. They all worked hard."

Under Cimorelli's guidance, Zephyrhills had five state champions. That group included Andy Conely and Bryan Mason, who were state champions on that 1994 squad.

Among the family and friends who shared the pre-game

moment with Cimorelli on the football field before last Friday night's game against Tampa Catholic were Reed and his wife Kaye, former Zephyrhills principal Angie Stone and Judy Williams, a community liaison for the high school who formerly was an assistant principal in charge of student discipline.

"I just think Bruce is very deserving," said Andy

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► **SPORTS INTRO:** From Page 1B

both high water marks for coach Joe Rinaldo and his lady lifters.

Wrapping up the 2019-20 winter sports and still not feeling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zephyrhills boys basketball team made it their sixth consecutive trip to the regional playoffs. The squad, led by five seniors, fell to district champion Land O' Lakes in the district final but a win in the semifinals over Springstead qualified them for the regional playoffs. Also in February, a stride for youth basketball in Zephyrhills was made. The ZAL, hosted its fourth season of youth hoops but the title games were played at the East Pasco YMCA. It could spell growth in the sport for local youth athletes.

A first-year horseshoes team unseated a defending champion in March of 2020. The combined team of Sweetwater/Settler's Rest managed to top Hunter's Run for the winter league title. Hunter's Run had won six of the last seven league titles and was not going to go quietly. The Hunter's Run throwers battled to 19-13 losses in both matchups against Sweetwater/Settler's Rest. The two squads being the top performers on the season, the title went to the Sweetwater/Settler's Rest.

March also marked the Grind for Life series coming to the Zephyrhills Skatepark. The national series that helps cancer patients with travel expenses for their treatment, attracts skaters both young and old. Cocoa Beach resident Mike Rogers, a 54-year-old who survived sarcoma cancer, won the Grand Masters title. Rogers stated that the seven-year old series has raised over \$300,000.

Then it was a long, hot and dark summer

as lockdowns and runs on paper towels and toilet paper dominated headlines. The Spring sports season in high school was cancelled outright and summer rules took new shapes. Team entered the fall season in a delay to the start but managed to get their seasons off the ground, despite a bit of turbulence. One nice moment in October was when Zephyrhills High School named their weight room after athletic director and former coach Bruce Cimorelli. Cimorelli coached football and weightlifting and had some of the best seasons in school history. His 1994 state runner up weightlifting team remains a school record. Five individual state champions came out of those years at the top.

Capturing the attention of east Pasco County and far beyond was the October grand opening of the Sarah Vande Berg Tennis & Wellness Center. The new facility cracks the world of racket sports wide open. The event also had a sentimental element as the statue of Sarah Vande Berg, a star tennis player from Zephyrhills killed in a tragic car accident, was finally unveiled. The tennis center and non-profit Sarah Vande Berg Foundation are banging away, hosting events, classes and reaching out to local schools.

In the high school football regular season finale, the Bulldogs avenged their 2019 defeat at the hands of the Pasco Pirates by blanking them on their home field to the tune of 21-0. The game marked the 10-year anniversary of the game being dubbed, The 9-Mile War and the 2010 game's MVP Andrew Pope was honored at halftime. Over the course of the game, the Bulldog defense continued to answer the bell, holding off the Pirates for the shutout win. A stop on a fourth-and-2 near the goal line, just before halftime proved to be one of the most pivotal moments in the game.

► **TENNIS CENTER:** From Page 1B

Academy; and rooms for fitness, yoga, massage, a salt room and cryotherapy; and a restaurant and pro shop.

"I wanted to create something different and unique," said Pascal Collard, the new center's chief executive officer who formerly was the tennis director at the Saddlebrook Resort in Wesley Chapel. "Guys on my team, we did it!"

Among the local dignitaries and prominent figures who showed up to laud the efforts of the project were state senator Wilton Simpson and Danny Burgess, a former state representative who once again is running for office. There also were city councilmen and chamber of commerce presidents Melonie Monson and Hope Kennedy of Zephyrhills and New Tampa, respectively.

"This is just an amazing facility," Simpson said. "They went all out and they did it right. It gets people outside and will bring people from all over."

Added Burgess, "This is absolutely magnificent. It's one of a kind."

Nick Bolletieri, a mentor to Collard, showed up in support. The American tennis

coach pioneered the concept of a tennis boarding school with the IMG Academy in Bradenton, and helped develop professionals like Andre Agassi, Jim Courier and Monica Seles.

"This isn't to build champions," Bolletieri said of the new center. "It's built to give children an opportunity to pursue their dreams."

Collard and Todd Vande Berg gave special thanks to construction, architectural and design firms, along with David Waronker, a local developer who donated about 10 acres for the project. The city planner also spoke of the partnership that includes people from the private sector, along with city, county and state levels.

"It's a very unique partnership we have here," he said. "Today, this raises the bar for the city of Zephyrhills."

Two city managers for Zephyrhills also showed up. Billy Poe, the current one who formerly held that role in Dade City, and Steve Spina, who had that title when the tennis center effort began in 2018.

Two scholarships were awarded near the end of Saturday's ceremony. Zephyrhills High students Brooke Baldus, who is on the golf and tennis teams, and Jaiden Ryker, a tennis player and cheerleaders, were the recipients.

► **WEIGHTROOM NAMED:** From Page 1B

two stints at Zephyrhills and recalled the boys weightlifting team's success. "He gave a lot of his time."

Cimorelli is not a loud coach who shouts a lot. Rather, he has a soft-spoken demeanor that welcomes others to approach him.

"He's very quiet, but when he does have something to say he'll let you know," Stone said. "He cares about the kids and he cares about the community. He's a class act."

That caring sentiment is shared by Reed, who has coached numerous sports at Zephyrhills and Stewart Middle. When he and Cimorelli receive accolades for their coaching and guidance, Reed said giving is a two-way street.

"They don't understand," said Reed, who brought Cimorelli to Zephyrhills as an intern in 1979. "These kids rewarded our lives probably as much or more than what we did for them."

Cimorelli knows first-hand how much being successful in sports is a product of familiarity and repetition. That is why, in part, he lifts weights every morning in the room he coached at for so many years.

"I still go in there every morning to work out," he said.

A former baseball player for Saint Leo University who spent two years in the Cincinnati Reds organization, Cimorelli also will not soon be forgotten for coaching the Bulldogs to the baseball state semifinals in 2000. That team posted a 23-1 record and combined for 49 home runs. He also was a longtime assistant football coach.

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NO. 3

Sweetwater/Settler's Rest unseats reigning champion Hunter's Run



Sweetwater/Settler's Rest captures the championship as a first-year team in the Zephyrhills Winter Horseshoe League. STEVE LEE

First-year team clinches Zephyrhills Winter Horseshoe League title with season sweep of arch-rival

By STEVE LEE
Sports Reporter
March 19, 2020

Heading into the 2020 Zephyrhills Winter Horseshoe League season, defending champion Hunter's Run was on a roll, staking claim to six of the past seven titles. Sweetwater/Settler's Rest, a first-year team of talented players, set a lofty goal of unseating the reigning champion.

Mission accomplished for the newly formed squad.

The league's newcomer, which is comprised of players from two neighboring parks, defeated Hunter's Run 19-13, which included a 10-6 advantage in the first half of last week's match. That gave Sweetwater/Settler's Rest a two-game season sweep (including a 19-13 win on Feb. 26) and clinched the title.

Even though his team defeated Hunter's Run earlier this season, Lawrence Pittman said that for himself and his Sweetwater/Settler's Rest teammates that previous outcome had no bearing on the rematch.

"It didn't really matter, because we know they're good," Pittman said during the late stages of the rematch. "They're not the defending champions for no reason. If we can win both games we'll have it mathematically."

Now that the long winning streak for Hunter's Run is over, the team has its sights set on starting another one beginning with next season.

"It gives you more incentive to come back next year," said Bob Keefer, an 82-year-old Hunter's Run player who has pitched horseshoes for 70 years.

Added Hunter's Run player Gene Luering,

"Those guys are tough. We know them well."

Bryan Jorgensen, who along with Hunter's Run teammate Yvon Cote, won 6-2 in the second half against Sweetwater/Settler's Rest last week, gave the new league champion credit. He also vowed that Hunter's Run would be back next year to challenge for yet another championship.

"Those guys took the best players from two different parks to beat us," Jorgensen said. That was their design. Those guys are really good. They said they're going to build a new trophy room and I said don't build it too big because we're going to take it back next year."

The league, which includes a dozen 55-and-older communities in Zephyrhills and Dade City and runs from December through March, finished the 2020 season this week. The top three spots, however, were finalized last week with Sweetwater/Settler's Rest finishing two points (22-20) ahead of Hunter's Run. Morningside, a perennial challenger that ended a Hunter's Run streak a few years ago and was the league runner-up last year, placed third overall.

"This team here (Hunter's Run) and Morningside were the top two teams before us," said Cal Osmond, who pitches for Sweetwater/Settler's Rest. "It's nice to win it, but if we lost we would've lost gracefully. There's no money involved. It's good sportsmanship."

Camaraderie and sportsmanship are evident each week during the league competitions. Players routinely congratulate one another and traditionally share coffee and donuts during halftime breaks. Still, players do their best to compete at a high level with the goal of winning each and every match.

As has been the case throughout the season, Sweetwater/Settler's Rest was led in the clinching match by Ron Knowles and Dave Howes. Both are from Maine with Knowles winning an individual state title in 2019 in that New England state and Howes finishing as the state runner-up.

At the conclusion of the clinching match, Knowles and Jorgensen shook hands to signify the turning over of the league title.

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NO. 4

Zephyrhills High girls weightlifters go back-to-back with regional titles



The Bulldogs claimed their second-straight regional championship at River Ridge last Thursday. **ANDY WARRENER**

It came down to the Bulldogs' final lifter in Diamond Cowart, but her last attempt pushed the Bulldogs into a tie with host River Ridge and a split title for Class A, Region 6

By **ANDY WARRENER**
Sports Reporter
Feb. 6, 2020

Back-to-back regional titles. When is the last time a Zephyrhills athletic program could boast that? Certainly not in recent history. A glance at championship banners in the gymnasium doesn't reveal the last occasion.

"This is historic," Bulldog head coach Joe Rinaldo said. "Back-to-back district titles, back-to-back regional titles, this is history for this program. I don't know if it's ever been done, it likely won't happen again."

It did indeed happen. On the gym floor at River Ridge in New Port Richey, against a perennial powerhouse program, the ZHS Bulldogs tied the host Royal Knights to claim their second-straight regional championship, while crowning a team-first four regional champions.

"Most everyone rose to the occasion today, I don't think I could have gotten any more points out of the team," Rinaldo said.

It took everything the girls had. Seniors Kayla Zine, Sarah Davis, Kayla Robbins and Lakisia Thomas all walked away with regional titles. However, it was the go-big effort from Diamond Cowart that pushed the Bulldogs into the tie with River Ridge.

"Diamond lifted all of her lifts off numbers that were more than what I gave her," Rinaldo said. "She was feeling something today."

Typically, a weightlifting coach gives their lifters target weights to go for at a particular tournament. On Thursday, Cowart felt like she had more than what her coach had laid out for her.

"It's like a quarterback checking off at the line of scrimmage," Rinaldo said. "She had a gut feeling and she went for it. She saw she could climb up into second place. If she had done what I told her, there would have been no regional championship."

At 199, Kyleigh Smith did her part by getting into third behind a pair of River Ridge lifters. The Royal Knights, who led by just two points with only the 199 and Unlimited weight classes left, surged out on front with first and second-place finishes at 199. Smith's and Autumn Spoon's third and fifth-place finishes kept the Royal Knights in striking distance. They led by eight with the Unlimited class left to lift. Kyleigh Freed got a fourth-place finish for three points to cut the lead to five. Cowart would need a second-place finish to tie it. Finally, on her final clean-and-jerk, she put a personal best 170 pounds up over her head. It solidified her second place in the weight class and tied the tournament 57-57 with River Ridge.

"Last year at regionals, I didn't even place," Cowart said. "I felt some of the pressure with everyone looking at me to get my lift but having my teammates there really helped me."

The regional champions certainly did their part, too. Zine went 5-for-6 on all of her lifts, setting a new personal best 135 pounds on the clean-and-jerk. She needed it as it put her just five pounds in front of River Ridge's Katie McCullough. It was Zine's first regional title and will be her first trip to states.

"I was nervous because I had an injury (hamstring) from last week and wasn't expecting more than a tie with Brooke (Florkowski of River Ridge)," Zine said. "She had five pounds on me but when she scratched on her last lift, that motivated me to push up 135."

At 154, Davis dominated by 40 points (pounds), going 6-for-6 on both her bench and clean-and-jerk lifts. It was a step back into form for Davis after suffering a late-season setback.

"My last two meets of the regular season, I went 2-for-6, it was overwhelming and I needed to rest," Davis said. "For conference, districts and regionals, I wanted to get back where I was."

Davis met both lifts and is in prime condition for a big showing at states.

In the same class, junior Madison Aguilera placed second even though she just missed her try at 180 in the clean-and-jerk. She abandoned it on her second lift and looked as though she had it on her third try but the referee judged it a no lift.

"I think the fact that she dropped the weight on her previous lift got in her (Aguilera) head a little bit," Rinaldo said. "At states, she'll get that lift."

At 169, Robbins repeated as regional champion, going 5-for-6 on her lifts. Her third bench press (175) set a new personal record and broke the school record for bench press in the 169-pound class, previously set this season by Lakisia Thomas. This will be Robbins' second trip to states where she placed eighth a year ago. She feels like she has a shot at climbing all the way to second place. She also dominated the weight class with a composite score of 335. The runner up in the class scored a 280.

"This has been the best year I've participated in this sport," Robbins said. "We all have our goals, we all support each other, never give up and never quit."

Robbins enjoys the camaraderie not just within her team but with other teams as well.

"Someone from Sunlake came up to me to tell me how good my clean-and-jerk form was," Robbins said. "It's great to hear something like that from someone on another team."

At 183, Thomas played it safe with her lifts but still comfortably out-paced Hernando's Brianna Mobley 350 to 315. Thomas was 6-for-6 on her lifts, topping out at 175 on both bench and clean-and-jerk. It is Thomas' second consecutive regional title and will be her third trip to states. She placed sixth at states last season and hopes to climb the ladder, perhaps to the top this year.

"We're looking at numbers from the other regions and if I stay focused, I hope I can pull off top three, maybe even first place," Thomas said.

The way state qualifying works is each regional champion is an automatic bid. The other lifters must wait until all eight regions have completed their meets. Any lifter beyond first place in their class must qualify based on their score against the other scores in their weight class across the other regions. By Monday, the FHSAA had the composite scores tabulated. Zephyrhills lifters Aguilera, Smith and Cowart made it through and will be joining the Bulldogs regional champions, putting their state-qualifying total at seven. The girls compete on Feb. 14 at Arnold High School in Panama City Beach.

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NO. 5

Bulldogs post a perfect 8-0 record in girls basketball



Coach Mark Holifer and the varsity girls basketball team at Stewart gather for a team photo. PHOTO BY GIGANTE PRODUCTIONS

Stewart Middle's varsity pulled off a rare undefeated season by buying into the team concept

By STEVE LEE
Sports Reporter
Jan. 2, 2020

accounted for most of the scoring there were different players, such as Alana Standifer and Elysiana Lee, stepping up with crucial baskets in the games.

"Nobody had to be the star," Holifer said of his team's unselfish play. "We do a match-up zone and they moved as a group (on defense). They really rebounded well and got the ball out. We would fast-break when we could."

Stellar defense is why the Bulldogs held opponents to single digits in scoring for five of the eight games.

"We kept teams down below their scoring averages," Holifer said. "That was one thing we took a lot of pride in."

The 2019 girls basketball season for the Stewart Middle varsity team started with a rout of longtime nemesis Pasco at home. Perhaps that was a barometer of things to come.

As it turns out, indeed it was as the Bulldogs won all their games to finish undefeated at 8-0. That included the season-opening 36-2 blowout win over the Pirates as well as a 34-9 victory in the rematch with Pasco at Dade City. That latter game closed out the historical season.

"It increases the number of kids that want to play, which increases the number of competitors," said Mathis, a former Zephyrhills High assistant coach who has the past three unbeaten seasons at Stewart.

Aside from the notoriety the girls receive, on and off campus, a perfect season also give players coming up from the Stewart junior varsity squad as well as from area youth teams something significant to strive for.

"It'll attract more students that want to play," Mathis said. "I am so proud of them."

As the season progressed, Stewart's junior varsity team witnessed the older group's success. Those seventh-graders, with a few sixth-graders as well, fared well too by posting a 4-3 record. And that, Holifer said, bodes well for the future.

"We should be good again," he said of next year's varsity team.

The achievement of this year's middle school team resonated throughout the Zephyrhills-based campus with principal Shae Davis, who attends many games, congratulating the effort.

Aside from the notoriety the girls receive, on and off campus, a perfect season also give players coming up from the Stewart junior varsity squad as well as from area youth teams something significant to strive for.

"It doesn't happen much," she said. "It just shows how much the girls worked together as a team. I just want to congratulate them. They did a great job."

As the season progressed, Stewart's junior varsity team witnessed the older group's success. Those seventh-graders, with a few sixth-graders as well, fared well too by posting a 4-3 record. And that, Holifer said, bodes well for the future.

The team concept was a key to the Bulldogs' success and no one is happier or more proud of the players buying into that than longtime coach Mark Holifer, who retired as a teacher several years ago but still coaches girls basketball at Stewart.

As the season progressed, Stewart's junior varsity team witnessed the older group's success. Those seventh-graders, with a few sixth-graders as well, fared well too by posting a 4-3 record. And that, Holifer said, bodes well for the future.

"This is the first time," Holifer said of his first unbeaten team in nearly 30 years of middle school basketball coaching, which included stints at Pasco and Hudson as well. "Mainly it was the girls committing to work together. They worked so well together on the court."

As the season progressed, Stewart's junior varsity team witnessed the older group's success. Those seventh-graders, with a few sixth-graders as well, fared well too by posting a 4-3 record. And that, Holifer said, bodes well for the future.

Holifer observed something in that first game that led him to believe that this team was indeed special and had the makings of becoming record-setters.

As the season progressed, Stewart's junior varsity team witnessed the older group's success. Those seventh-graders, with a few sixth-graders as well, fared well too by posting a 4-3 record. And that, Holifer said, bodes well for the future.

"That was a fun game, because everybody played," he said, noting that eight players scored in that game.

As the season progressed, Stewart's junior varsity team witnessed the older group's success. Those seventh-graders, with a few sixth-graders as well, fared well too by posting a 4-3 record. And that, Holifer said, bodes well for the future.

Allison McCullough, Timneta Clemons and Bailee Hitchner ranked among the top scorers throughout the season. But unlike some previous seasons in which a couple of key players

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NO. 6

Bulldog defense and Pirate meltdown make for lopsided 21-0 shutout in 9-Mile War



The Pirate defense stacks the line of scrimmage, anticipating a run during the 9-Mile War. **ANDY WARRENER**

The Bulldog defense helped foster the utter collapse of the Pirate effort in the 9-Mile War

By **ANDY WARRENER**
Sports Reporter
Nov. 12, 2020

The stage was set. The patriotic pre-game pageantry gave way to the historic rivalry game on a night that celebrated the 10th anniversary of the event being dubbed, "The 9-Mile War." Zephyrhills and Dade City Rotary Clubs commemorated the occasion at halftime as the most valuable player from the 2010 game, Andrew Pope, was recognized.

Yet, it would be the Zephyrhills defense that stole the show Friday night in a dominant, 21-0 performance that frustrated the Pirates and caused a mental and emotional meltdown that exploded after the final buzzer sounded.

It was going to be a defensive battle all the way. There was no question about that. The question was, which offense would blink first and which defense would be able to capitalize. Both defenses were keyed in early. The Bulldogs forced the Pirates back two yards and into a three-and-out their opening drive. Gabriel Barnes and the Pirate defense recovered a Bulldog fumble on their opening drive. Barnes and EJ Redfield were stuffing everything the Bulldogs threw at them until the third Bulldog drive.

The third drive started on a short field, the Pirate 18-yard line and even after back-to-back false start penalties, the Bulldogs broke through on a 3rd-and-7. The Bulldogs setup a trips left. The Pirate bench yelled out, "screen, screen." The Bulldogs were one step ahead. Instead of the screen pass, quarterback Jaxson Rivera hit Tre Gallimore on a short hook route, over top of the screen. It was wide open and Gallimore spun around and scored from 15 yards out to make it 7-0 with 10 minutes left in the half.

Late in the half, the Pirate offense go their try on a short field. Working from the Bulldog 35-yard line, the Pirates converted a 4th-and-1 with a 17-yard run from Malcolm Gibbs. The Pirates made it all the way to the three-yard line and went for it on a 4th-and-2 with 22 seconds left in the first half. A reverse to Devin Jernigan was sniffed out and caught from behind by Zephyrhills' Maguire Neal. The stop for a loss forced a turnover on downs. It would prove to be the pivotal play in the half and in the game.

"That was huge," Bulldog head coach Nick Carroll said. "It took away any momentum they had and kept points off the board."

The Pirates would never recover the momentum. An interception by Pasco's Kaleb Myers to start the third quarter, went for naught as the Pirates punted the ball away. The Pirate defense was still fighting. They stopped the Bulldogs again, a sack by Ja'Barri Mention and Barnes dooming the drive. Zephyrhills' TJ Jackson made an incredible play on fourth down as the long snap sailed over his head on the punt attempt. Jackson managed to run it down and still get a decent punt off to start the Pirate offense at their own 36, instead of deep in Bulldog territory. The Bulldog defense forced a three-and-out.

The Bulldogs' longest drive of the game followed as the Pirates began to melt down. A stop by Jabrounze Cooley and Barnes turned into Cooley lifting Rivera off the ground and body slamming him. The ensuing 15-yard penalty set the Bulldog offense up at the Pirate 14, as the third quarter gave way to the fourth. A run by Zyrie Roundtree went for five yards and a facemask flag added five more. Roundtree made another five-yard run, this one into the end zone for a 14-0 Bulldog lead. And that's when the Pirate meltdown accelerated.

The Pirates hit a big pass play from Jernigan

to Omarion Harrison but coughed up the ball in the backfield on the ensuing play with the Bulldogs' Neal recovering. Things went from bad to worse for the Pirates. Jernigan refused to take the field to play defense and Roundtree finally broke a big gain, going 48 yards to the Pirate 9-yard line. A seven-yard run by Gallimore put the Bulldogs into a commanding lead, 21-0 and further precipitated the Pirate collapse. On the first play of the Pirates next possession, Jernigan having been excused from the field, the Pirates threw an incomplete pass that was ruled a lateral and Mike Barber jumped on the loose ball to recover for the Bulldogs.

From there, the Bulldogs just wanted to wind down the clock and get out of there. The Pirates were still collapsing. On their next offensive play, a fumbled snap saw big Dajuan McCullough jump on the loose ball and recover for the Bulldogs. The Bulldogs turned the ball over on downs but the final straw would snap the Pasco backs, as the third play of their ensuing drive resulted in another Bulldog fumble recovery, this one by Brian Ashmore.

The socially-distant post-game handshake, where players just wave from across the field, was probably a good idea in the boiling tension in the air. That's when Theotis Smith grabbed a Zephyrhills flag from the visitor stands and ran it out to midfield. Chaos erupted as the Pasco players rushed the field and some tense moments had to be broken up by coaches. When the two sides were finally separated, the Zephyrhills celebrations began.

"We played tonight with a big chip on our shoulders," McCullough said. "We can't be lovebugs anymore."

According to McCullough, there's been a long-standing grudge dating back to Pasco's win in 2019, where Pasco players said the win was easy, like, "wiping love bugs off a windshield." The orange-and-black Bulldogs took exception to being compared to love bugs. It was bulletin board material for nearly 12 months and the Bulldogs were ready to squash it. They even brought out a gallon jug of orange-colored love bug repellent and dumped it on first-year volunteer coach Tom McHugh, who coached several years at Pasco.

"After they beat us last year, this was our opportunity for redemption," Roundtree said. "I had to sit back and trust my O-line to come through for the win."

There were very few offensive stats for either team but Roundtree managed to tally 102 yards and a touchdown on 13 carries. The Bulldogs spread the ball out to Jackson, Gallimore and Jaylin Thomas on the ground. The Bulldogs completed just one pass, the touchdown to Gallimore. Outside of the Jernigan completion, the Pirates completed three passes for -13 yards.

The Bulldog defense was ready. Defensive coordinator Matt Jackson practiced at quarterback during the week leading up to the game. He was particularly proud of the Bulldog defense keeping the Pirates off the scoreboard.

And so turns another page of the storied rivalry in the 9-Mile War.

NO. 7



Zephyrhills defenders keep close tabs on Land O' Lakes guard Mekhi Perry in the district championship game. **STEVE LEE**

Zephyrhills is a district runner-up for the third straight season

Bulldogs, led by five seniors, are playoff-bound for a sixth consecutive year

By **STEVE LEE**
Sports Reporter
Feb. 20, 2020

Make that six in a row for Zephyrhills High's talented boys basketball team — as in six consecutive playoff berths. The Bulldogs (19-8) travel to Sebring (18-6) on Thursday for a region quarterfinal game at 7 p.m.

The senior-laden Bulldogs clinched a spot in the postseason by playing in last week's Class 5A, District 6 championship game. Despite that 61-57 home loss to Land O' Lakes, which has won back-to-back district titles and is in the midst of its own four-year playoff run, Zephyrhills advanced as a district runner-up for a third straight time. That stretch followed two district titles by the Bulldogs, which included a state semifinal appearance in 2016.

"The kids did a good job. They played their butts off," said fourth-year Zephyrhills coach Mike Novak, who also was an assistant on the 2014-15 team that started the current playoff run.

Zephyrhills is led by five seniors, all of whom have been part of the school's basketball varsity and junior varsity programs for the past four years. That group includes guards Dontae Marchman, Austin Linville and Harrison Barker, along with forwards Derico Quiles and Garrett Price.

"We've got great senior leadership," Novak said. "Basketball's always been important to these kids."

Home-court advantage came through last week with Zephyrhills winning two of three games at Alan Reed Court Reed, a former high school basketball official who also had several stints coaching that sport at Zephyrhills, started the current run and is now an assistant for the Bulldogs.

Zephyrhills began the district series with a

decisive 79-41 win over River Ridge. The Bulldogs swept the Royal Knights in the two-game series during the regular season.

Next up was Springstead, which Zephyrhills also beat in the regular season. The Bulldogs defeated Springstead 62-57 in the district semifinals to advance to the championship game. Zephyrhills got balanced scoring against the Eagles as four players scored in double figures. Gavyn Dorsey had a team-leading 15 with Linville, Marchman and Kevin Pagan, a promising sophomore post player adding 12 apiece.

Zephyrhills led from the outset, maintaining an 8-point margin after the second and third quarters before Springstead made a late run on the strength of David Battle's inside scoring. Battle had 12 of his game-high 18 points in the second half.

Afterward, Novak was not quite as enamored with Dorsey's scoring as he was for the defensive job he did in holding down Springstead scoring threat Unique Torain, who lost the ball inside on several occasions.

"The story was his defense on No. 1," Novak said of Dorsey's play against Torain. "We couldn't take him out of the game."

Against Land O' Lakes, the Zephyrhills defense fought valiantly but simply could not stop Mekhi Perry, who scored 22 of his game-high 34 points in the second half. Novak was somewhat frustrated that his team did not much of an answer for Perry, who drove into the lane at will when he was not pulling up to make five 3-pointers.

"He just had a lights-out game," Novak said of Perry, a senior guard. "We were guarding him. He was just making his shots."

Chase Farmer added 22 points for the Gators and Levi Downing had five, including a bank shot from near-midcourt for a 3-pointer as the halftime buzzer sounded.

"That crazy 3-pointer, that was big," Novak said.

Pagan led Zephyrhills with 13 points and Linville made four treys to add 12.

Land O' Lakes has defeated Zephyrhills three straight times, including twice during the regular season. A possibility exists for a fourth matchup if both teams advance further in their quests for a state title.



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NO. 8

East Pasco YMCA hosts youth basketball title games



The AdventHealth Zephyrhills team celebrates with their trophies after winning the Division II championship.

STEVE LEE

Zephyrhills Athletic League's fourth-year program unites east and central Pasco athletes

By STEVE LEE
Sports Reporter
Feb. 13, 2020

For many years the Zephyrhills Athletic League was solely an option for football and cheerleading programs that were based at Charles M. Krusen Memorial Field. Now, the longtime area youth league known as the Bulldawgs incorporates basketball as well as track and field.

The ZAL just concluded its fourth basketball season on Saturday with three championship games played at the East Pasco YMCA. The league's co-ed teams range from age five through the eighth grade with boys and girls dotting rosters in each category. Division I is for ages 5-7, Division II includes ages 8-10 and Division III consists of 11-year-olds through eighth-graders.

Many of the ZAL players have gone on to play for boys and girls basketball teams at Stewart Middle, Centennial Middle and Zephyrhills High. Since the league also includes players from Dade City and Wesley Chapel, those schools include Pasco, Wesley Chapel, Wiregrass Ranch and Cypress High, along with Pasco, John Long, Weightman and Cypress at the middle school level.

"We don't have any boundaries when we sign these kids up," league director Damien Pickett said. "It's good to see them play here and they go on to play at different middle schools."

Kenny Roberts, who coaches Pin Chasers in Division II, knows a thing or two about representing two communities. A 2003 Wesley Chapel graduate who starred in football, basketball and track, he grew up playing youth sports in Dade City before transferring with several other of his former Dade City teammates to that

central Pasco-based high school back in the day. "Hopefully, we can create an Amateur Athletic Union team in Wesley Chapel with kids from Zephyrhills and Dade City," Roberts said. "It's a blessing to have kids come from all around and work together."

An AAU team based in Wesley Chapel and including basketball players from central and east Pasco actually existed in the early part of the 2000s. Eventually, however, that team, run by former Wesley Chapel High and Zephyrhills High basketball coach Conrad Foss, eventually disbanded after a handful of seasons.

Currently, some travel basketball teams exist for male and female players in central Pasco and northern Hillsborough counties, but there are no area recreational programs for that sport. Aside from that, former Zephyrhills High boys basketball coach Michael Smith, a sergeant who oversees that school's JROTC program, has organized a travel boys basketball team of east Pasco players for the past two summers.

Valerie Vann, ZAL's assistant director who has done a lot with the football and cheerleading program, pushed the concept of basketball and eventually Pickett and the board approved the sport. The catch was allowing Pickett to form a track and field program as well.

"This is the thing she wanted," Pickett, a former standout athlete at Zephyrhills, said of Vann's preference for a recreational basketball program. "She wanted basketball and I wanted track. We both got what we wanted."

As for the championship games, Roberts coached Pin Chasers in a 16-11 loss to AdventHealth Zephyrhills in the Division II title game.

In the older age group, Cry-X Therapy handily defeated Alterius Career College 45-25 for the championship. Kingston McCullough and Joseph Stosh paced the winning team's offense while the opponents were led by Jakobe Campbell, who made a half-court shot at the buzzer that ended the first half.

Since there were only two teams in the 5-7 age group, league organizers decided that regardless of the outcome both teams would be acknowledged as winners. Those squads were sponsored by the ZAL and City of Zephyrhills.

NO. 9



Young and old alike competed in the Grind for Life Series, which returned to Zephyrhills for a fifth straight year.

STEVE LEE

Zephyrhills hosts fifth annual skateboard competition

Local skatepark hosted Grind for Life fundraiser that has benefitted cancer patients since its inception

By ANDY WARRENER
Sports Reporter
March 19, 2020

The first major event at the Zephyrhills Skatepark was part of the nationwide Grind for Life Series in which skateboarders help raise funds for cancer patients. Last Saturday marked the fifth anniversary of the annual event in Zephyrhills, which remains that skatepark's most notable competition.

Zephyrhills resident Glenn Capps, a 48-year-old who has skated at the park since its inception and at the former skatepark adjacent to Charles M. Krusen Memorial Field before that, has yet to miss Grind for Life at the skatepark that opened five years ago.

"It's amazing how what we saw on a piece of paper when we were having meetings with the city, for it to come alive like this," said Capps, who has been on skateboards for 40 years including time spent as a youngster in North Carolina. "This is a destination place."

Grind For Life, which also was represented at the local skatepark's grand opening in 2015, was founded in 2003 by longtime skateboarder Mike Rogers after his second battle with sarcoma cancer. He had a tumor behind his right eye and nasal cavity with surgery resulting in a facial restoration. He beat cancer as a pre-teen, again 25 years later and today is a competitive skateboarder.

"Thanks for not hugging and doing fist-bumps," said Rogers, in reference to the coronavirus precautions taken by the nearly 100 skateboarders and fans at the weekend event. "There's a lot of interest, but (the virus precautions) hurt a little bit."

Rogers, a 54-year-old from Cocoa Beach who won the Grand Masters title, noted that more than \$300,000 has been raised since the Grind for Life Series began seven years ago. Grind For Life provides financial assistance to cancer patients and their families when traveling long distances to doctors and hospitals.

"We've saved a lot of lives doing these events," he said.

Rogers and many other skateboarders drew plenty of cheers and applause from family members, friends and other competitors who gathered around the skatepark. Among those who drew the loudest support was Tampa's Gabriel Lavallee, who on Saturday took first in the Street 9-and-under Division.

For the longest time he wanted a skateboard, Finally, when Gabriel was 7, his parents bought him one.

"From that point on he kept with it and just kept getting better and better," said Kenny Lavallee, his father. "He's had an inner drive. He likes to do well."

Another skateboarder at Saturday's event was Dillon Brown, a 20-year-old from Boca Raton with eight years of experience and never missed the Zephyrhills competition.

"I like this place," he said before dropping off into the deep concrete bowl. "The best part is the long rail, for sure, and the tortilla chip (an angled part of the track)."

While Rogers won his age group the best local finisher was Wesley Chapel's Abe Stewart, a runner-up in the Masters Division (ages 40-49).

Other winners in various categories were: Advanced — Jake Yanko, Melbourne; Street Advanced — Haze Miller, Port Richey; Masters — Jimmy Marcus, Clearwater; Women's — Autumn Tust, Deerfield Beach; Street Women's — Shiloh Catori, Sarasota; Street 30-and-up — Tiago Christian Alves De Oliveira, Brazil; Street 16-29 — Fernando Ruiz, Plant City; Street 13-15 — Cass Hecht, St. Louis; Street 10-12 — Hunter George, Lake Worth; 13-39 — Gavin Liller, New Smyrna Beach; 10-12 — Landon Zanfardino, Columbia, S.C.; 9-and-under — Cole Liller, New Smyrna Beach.

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Dated: December 7, 2020
Clerk of the Circuit Court By: Kelly Jeanne Symons
Deputy Clerk
Published: December 10, 17, 24 & 31, 2020

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Published: December 24 & 31, 2020

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NO. 10

Wildcats Stadium hosts Pasco County Special Olympics Summer Games



The East Pasco Bombers, most of whom are from Zephyrhills, took on the Wiregrass Ranch Bulls in a soccer game.

STEVE LEE

East-side games in Wesley Chapel followed Thursday's event featuring 750 athletes at River Ridge

By STEVE LEE
Sports Reporter
Feb. 27, 2020

A gathering of 570 eager competitors on Friday afternoon at Wesley Chapel High's Wildcat Stadium was about as special as it gets. That group ranging from young boys and girls to older adults, along with their families, friends and other supporters, were on hand for the 2020 Pasco County Special Olympics Summer Games.

Although it could have been more aptly referred to as the winter games due to a chilling wind and temperatures in the low 50s, Friday's athletic event brought out hundreds of families, friends and supporters.

"It's freezing," was a refrain echoed by more than one student volunteer from area high schools and middle schools.

The cold weather, however, did nothing to dampen the spirit of the athletes and those who helped. In fact, the combined turnout for two days of the Pasco County Special Olympic Summer Games amounted to 1,320 athletes. That easily surpassed last year's turnout and included 750 athletes who competed last Thursday at River Ridge's Jim Valentine Stadium in New Port Richey.

The event at Wildcat Stadium began with Special Olympians representing high schools, middle schools and elementary schools in east and central Pasco who lined and were introduced to a cheering crowd in the stands on both sides of the field. The teams followed the lead of the Wesley Chapel High Marching Band in making their way to the center of the football field.

Val Lundin, the county's Special Olympics director who has worked for the county

organization for 37 years, officially welcomed the athletes and supporters.

"She's Superwoman when it comes to Special Olympics," said Joeyn Dearsman, a volunteer and the River Ridge girls basketball coach. "She does so much when it comes to these kids."

Pasco School Board member Alan Altman also had some welcoming words. Then came Matt McDermott, Wesley Chapel's principal and a former vice principal and teacher at Zephyrhills High.

"Special Olympics is one of the most exciting events we host on this campus," he said.

"Let the games begin," boomed the voice of an announcer, and athletes went to various stations that included bocci ball, soccer games and soccer skills, running and bicycle races.

On a soccer field just outside of the stadium and adjacent to the east-side grandstands, scrimmages took place between a handful of teams. The East Pasco Bombers and Wiregrass Ranch Bulls played the closest match, winding up in a 1-1 tie.

Zephyrhills' Ernie Schultz found the back of the net quickly for East Pasco, giving that team a 1-0 lead in the first minute of play. Wiregrass Ranch tied it midway through the first of two 12-minute halves on a goal by Noah Brooks. The match ended in a draw after neither team scored in the second half.

"It's all about working together and enjoying the ride," Wiregrass Ranch coach Bonnie Norman said. "Having fun and sportsmanship."

Unlike in past years when Belinda Brown and Judy Brunner, who formerly coached soccer and softball on the east side, both took a backseat to new soccer coach Stacy Morris.

"Stacy has stepped up and is dedicated to the kids," said Brunner, a former Woodland Elementary physical education teacher. "We're just happy to leave it in the hands of someone we know is going to do a great job."

Watching his 6-year-old son Dennis Smith, of Sand Pine Elementary try his luck at a soccer skills competition Jason Smith beamed with pride.

"He loves playing sports, so this gives him a chance to get out there and be with other kids that are like him," Jason said.

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