



SCHOOL NEWS

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HAPPENINGS FROM OUR CLAY COUNTY SCHOOLS

SEPTEMBER 2023



Oakleaf High gets \$3,000 grant from Whole Foods

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

OAKLEAF – Over the course of 10 years, the agriculture beds at Oakleaf High became worn and rickety. Time, sun and rain turned once-sturdy beams into crumbled heaps that turned agriscience classes into construction lessons.

Now the school can afford to replace all of them.

Career and Technical Education teacher Victoria Gwaltney secured a \$3,000 grant from the Whole Foods Foundation to replace the beds. The overhaul was overdue – and much appreciated.

“We’ve got 16 full-size beds and then some different ones we call rounds,” Gwaltney said. “It’s a recycled culvert from a ditch that we used to raise off the ground and grow other fruits and vegetables, herbs, and things.

“The whole garden has been here since the first or second year since the school opened. So since like 2012, all that stuff out there is hidden, the 10-year mark. It’s fallen apart pretty badly and splinter-

SEE GRANT, 6

STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

Sophomore Jasmine Conliffe and CTE teacher Victoria Gwaltney said the grant from Whole Foods’ foundation would help replace dilapidated raised beds used to grow flowers, vegetables and herbs.



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Spring Park Elementary

Open for learning

Spring Park Elementary is the 43rd and newest school in the District.



Clay County opens 43rd school

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

GREEN COVE SPRINGS – The moment children walked through the front doors of Spring Park Elementary, they quickly realized subtle differences.

The building is new and still smells of fresh paint. The floors shine; the walls are bright with teal green and blue paint; and the school mascot – Owls – is prominently displayed.

That happens with a new building that opened less than a month ago.

Other changes are more profound. First, Principal Tiffany Outman calls the students who christened the school Thursday “scholars.” Not students. Not children. Scholars.

Outman and her staff and faculty of 75 welcomed 625 scholars on Thursday. Nearly 42,000 other students also returned to one of the district’s 43 schools.

“Excitement and anticipation, I think, are the best words for opening a new school and welcoming all of our scholars,” she said. “I know that they’re excited,

SEE SPRING PARK, 3



**CLAY
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Spring Park

from page 3

and they're anticipating a lot of fun. We can have happy excitement and nervous anticipation and all happening at the same time. Back to school brings a flurry of emotions.

"I like to call it the crown jewel of Clay County because if you're new, you have all of the new things."

The school was built on County Road 315 in one of the fast-growing areas in the county.


Outman came from Lake Asbury Elementary. She hand-picked every teacher and staff member.

"It was very much a blessing," she said. "We have the best of the best here at SPE. I have two brand-new teachers who have had a full year of internships. So all of the teachers on staff are well-trained and come with experience. I'm excited to see

what we learn and grow together." Outman said the scholars at Spring Park would be surrounded by the support that stimulates the mind and soul. One of her favorite sayings is on display in the front office lobby. It reads: "Believe There is Good in the World." Embedded in that saying are the words, "Be The Good."

"We also place a huge emphasis on caring for the whole child," she said. "Not only do we have to take care of their minds, we have to take care of their hearts as well."


And making sure that all children who come to school feel comfortable and are ready to learn are some of the things we've been talking about this week. How to alleviate those concerns and fears and do some daily check-ins with scholars because it is overwhelming. I remember the first time I walked the campus it wasn't finished. It didn't have a roof, and it was quite overwhelming. I know that they are going to be experiencing those emotions as well."

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- ★ All high schools have accelerated programs.
- ★ Opened 43rd school, Spring Park Elementary in August 2023.
- ★ Fleming Island Elementary recognized as a 2022-2023 Purple Star of Distinction school for supporting our military families.



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Filmmaker returns home to shoot feature film, 'Baby Tooth'

By **Kylie Cordell**
For School News

MIDDLEBURG – Drew Lewis Brown, an Oscar-winning Jacksonville filmmaker and 2010 graduate of Middleburg High, will return home next spring to shoot his debut feature film, "Baby Tooth." Filming will take place for three weeks across multiple locations in Northeast Florida.

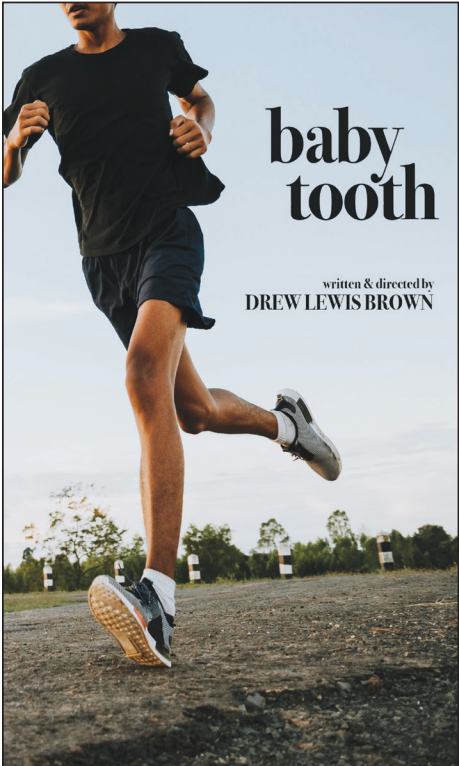
Duval and Clay counties were explicitly selected to be featured in the project. The production will employ a crew of local film professionals to tell the heartfelt story of a disconnected family coming together to provide care for their terminally ill grandmother.

"The movie takes place in a rural town that is very much based in Middleburg. I think it's quite possible that we will be able to scout specific locations that work for the film and go back to where the story really started," Brown said.

Brown started his filming career as a senior in high school, taking a TV production class to combine his interest in theater and the arts.

"I realized that film was really the medium that was for me. I was able to tap into all these different interests and really showcase who I am as an artist," Brown said. "I could not have understood that part about myself without the help of those teachers, Dave Thomas and Kim Lanoue. I am where I am today because of those experiences in the arts that I had in Clay County."

Brown graduated and later became an adjunct film professor at The Art Institute of Jacksonville, receiving a Student Academy Award in 2014 for his short film "Person." He was later awarded the Rising Star Award from the Jacksonville Mayor's Office for his "outstanding contributions



and achievements in Jacksonville's Film and Television Industry.

After 12 years, Brown will return to his roots to complete the most personal project of his career thus far.

"It's a story that is inspired by my own family's experiences," Brown said. It's a project that's really important to me, so I wanted to spend time on it."

The film tells the story of Jude, an insecure young actor, who returns to his rural hometown in northeast Florida to provide support for Grandma's caregivers – Jude's dismissive mother and resentful sister – before the family reaches their breaking point.

Brown said the film's screenplay was developed between 2019-2023, and the



project will be filmed in northeast Florida in early 2024.

The film was inspired by his family's journey with caregiving for his terminally ill grandmother in the final year of her life. "Baby Tooth" captures the selfless act of being a family caregiver with no prior medical knowledge, the looming threat of financial instability, the obligation to conform to societal expectations, and its impact on self-perception and caregiving decisions.

"I was a bit oblivious. I was living my life as a stage actor and filmmaker in Jacksonville," he said. "When I came to visit them for Christmas, I really came as an outsider. I was able to see the hard work and empathy that goes into caregiving."

This experience propelled Brown to write about his family's experience with the American elderly system, as well as a place to process his own emotions after returning home.

"The experience has been to get these words on paper. It was a private and vulnerable time in my family's life. But bridging these spaces and having these uncomfortable conversations has the ability to help others," Brown said.

Brown's "Baby Tooth" serves as a call to action for families to discuss the best path forward for aging loved ones.

"My hope with this film is that I will be able to not only help caregivers see themselves on the screen and understand the important role that they play in our society

– but also encourage families of aging loved ones to reach out to each other and have these conversations."

Additionally, Brown said the project can help communities empathize and understand their role in social change, like supporting the efforts to recognize caregiving as a job worthy of a living wage.

The film also allows viewers to support their local arts community.


"Baby Tooth" offers a unique tax benefit to all who contribute. The film is fiscally sponsored through the nonprofit organization Film Independent, meaning any monetary contribution from the general public is tax-deductible, and any non-monetary donation of goods, services, food and location rentals from local businesses is considered in-kind.

This unique opportunity allows locals to promote their businesses creatively, see their names in the film's credits, and support the Jacksonville arts community through charitable giving.


"It's important to be a champion for local arts. We can't go without them, and that starts by funding public arts education," he said.

Brown, alongside a cast of local actors, hosted live staged readings of the screenplay last weekend.

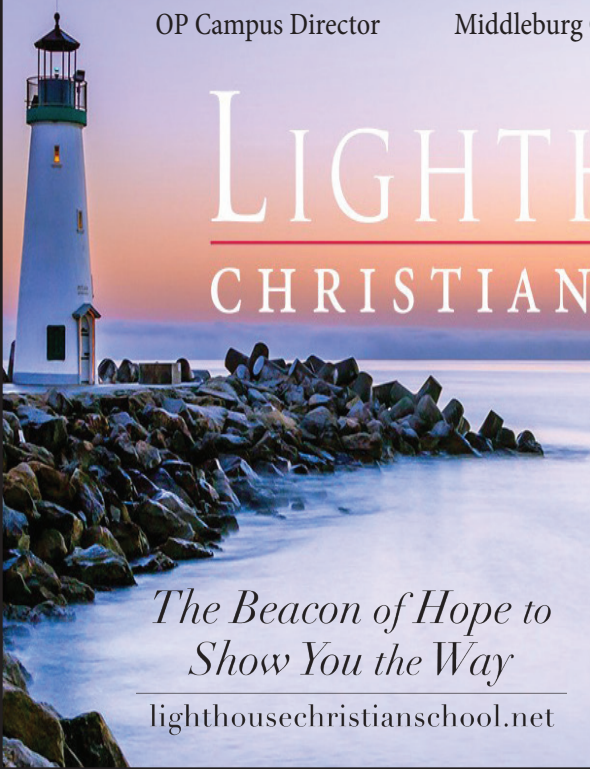
To get involved in Brown's upcoming film, attend the live readings or make a contribution, visit babytoothfilm.com. For information on Brown and his past work, visit drewlewisbrown.com.



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STAFF PHOTOS BY RANDY LEFKO

Ridgeview High senior Alex Romer flies up wall under watchful eyes of mom, Dawn, and dad, Pete, during training session at family's gym in Orange Park, Mighty Orion Fitness Gym. Romer competed on the television show American Ninja warrior recently.

Romer holds American Ninja secret

By Randy Lefko
Sports Editor

ORANGE PARK - For Ridgeview High School senior Alex Romer, the tension of competing on TV is over, but the anxiety of not being able to talk about it is probably more taxing than his adventure.

"I'm not allowed to talk about how I did because of the show," said Romer, 17, who recently returned home from Los Angeles after a stint on the TV show American Ninja Warrior. "I submitted a video of my skills and they invited me. I went out, competed and now we wait."

Romer's segment is schedule to air in episode eight of the recently restarted show. American Ninja Warrior which will be starting its 14th season on NBC and, according to the NBC.com website, the show will feature a lower age limit (15 years old), but keeps the eventual \$1 million prize at the end if competitors continue to advance to the National Finals in Las Vegas. Athletes, like Romer, compete in numerous qualifying rounds and semifinals to advance.

"We have American Ninja gyms in the area and in Georgia and there is a Ninja League that we can compete at the local level against other gyms," said Romer. "It's all designed to keep us active and developing our skill set to be able to get on to the TV show."

Romer, a soccer and band member at Ridgeview, has been an American Ninja Warrior fan for nearly a decade after seeing the highly-competitive obstacle race show on television.

"He saw the show, then told us he wanted dad to build him some obstacles in the backyard," said Dawn Romer, who co-owns with her husband, Pete, Mighty Orion Fitness Gym on Blanding Blvd. "Alex did gymnastics for while, but has had the American Ninja on his mind since that day."

Romer, who has two siblings also into the Ninja craze, credits his dad's energy and skill to replicate the American Ninja obstacles on TV to the family's backyard, first, then to the Orion gym on Blanding.

"Pete retired from the US Navy and then the interest grew and he just kept



ing to the business said Dawn Romer. "Our gym is a combination of seeing obstacles on TV, talking to other athletes and trying to replicate the courses we have seen."

Romer, with his freshman and sophomore years at Middleburg, then his junior year and upcoming senior season at Ridgeview, got his first whiff of Ninja in a home gym competition that Alex won that gave him the confidence of moving up.

"He won a competition in our first competition in our gym like March six years ago and then went to regionals six months later and finished second," said Dawn Romer, noting the Ninja craze has created leagues throughout the United States with a championship event in New Mexico. "From that, six years ago, and six months after his first competition, he went to the World Finals. That has put the bug in him."

Romer currently competes in the FINA League; Federation of Ninja Athletes.

"FINA has two courses, a speed course and an endurance course," said Alex Romer. "One is shorter with eight or nine smaller obstacles but it's fast. The endurance ones; 12 or more obstacles, can be brutal."

Romer has trained for his Ninja mainly with body weight fitness, technique building and running for endurance.

"I don't lift weights, but do all body weight training to simulate the needs of the course," said Romer. "I have pretty good finger strength because a lot of the courses have obstacles that you only

get fingerholds on. I carry around hand squeezing devices nearly all day; like 100 squeezes a day."

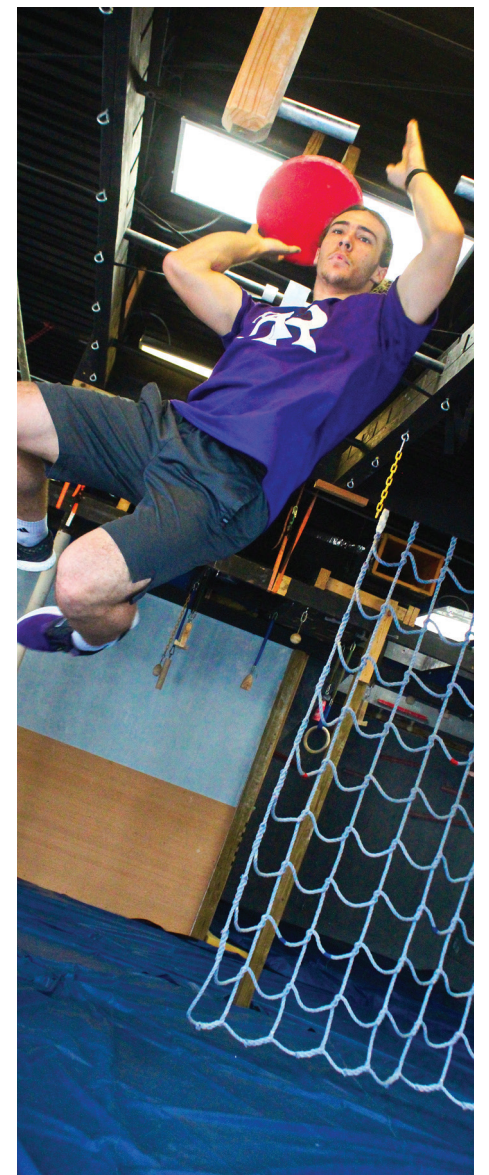
The one obstacle that is a constant in all Ninja competitions is the dreaded finishing wall; a run-up wall that stretches up to 22 feet with a lip that athletes grab with fingers and pull themselves up to the top to smash a bell at the end of a run.

"It's very daunting up close and in person," said Romer, who has three walls to train on in his home gym; 12 feet, 14 feet and 22 feet. "The key is to run up as far as you can then explode literally away from the wall before grabbing the lip. You have to fly."

Dawn Romer remarked of her son's ability in the air. "He flies and floats throughout the courses," said Dawn Romer. "It's cool to watch because he kind of floats; he flies when he launches from one obstacle to another. It's an art."

Dad Pete Romer, a former swimmer as a young athlete, appeared still fit enough to battle the courses and revelled in his family's love of the sport.

"To see him get to the show is awesome," said Pete Romer, noting he did plenty of obstacle courses in his Navy tenure. "I get inspiration from other gyms and other people to keep building the obstacles in our gym. We have one of the premiere obstacle builder's autograph on one of my designs."



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Grant

from page 1

ing. It was getting a little dangerous.

"We've had to focus a lot on finding money to refurbish the raised bed garden. Now we have the money to actually do something."

The agriscience program is thriving at Oakleaf. In addition to beds used to grow flowers, herbs and vegetables, the school has a greenhouse and livestock barn.

Sophomore Jasmine Conliffe said learning how to build a new bed, not just maintain it, is something she's eager to learn.

"I just think it's a really good opportunity because learning how to plant stuff," she said. "For me, it's really fun. I like the fact that you can learn while planting stuff at school. Over the summer, I came out and helped pull weeds and made sure that we turned over crops."

"I don't know how they did that before. It's a classroom out there. I think it'll be a lot better now that we have new stuff."

Oakleaf is the second high school in the county to earn grant money. Ridgeway High received a \$5,000 ProStart Grow Grant from Rachael Ray's foundation two months ago. The money was designated to promote the school's culinary program. Gwaltney said she applied for the grant last February. She said she applied for the same grant a year ago, but the application was rejected.

"They told us they liked our request, and they kind of suggested if we kept applying, we'd get it," she said.

The school was notified of the award a couple of weeks ago.

The agriscience program is so popular at Oakleaf that master gardeners and garden clubs are frequent guests. Everything grown attracts butterflies and is given away to hungry families.

"We send a lot of stuff home with the kids," Gwaltney said.

Conliffe said she didn't know some

"I just think it's a really good opportunity because learning how to plant stuff. For me, it's really fun. I like the fact that you can learn while planting stuff at school. Over the summer, I came out and helped pull weeds and made sure that we turned over crops."

– Sophomore Jasmine Conliffe

organizations were willing to help.

"I didn't know you could apply for school grants," she said. "I never really questioned where that money came from. That's good for future knowledge."

Despite the deterioration, Oakleaf earned the "People's Garden" designation from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Conliffe said her attraction to agriscience is based on a desire to find ways to grow things in restricted spaces.

"The class teaches about garden spaces in an urban area," she said. "That's cool because we have so little space here, and it's so much fun. You can do raised beds at my house if you have the stuff to do it – and you want to do it."

STAFF PHOTO BY DON COBLE

Sophomore Jasmine Conliffe said the agriscience program at Oakleaf High has taught her how to be more self-reliant when it comes to growing flowers and vegetables. A \$3,000 grant from the Whole Foods Foundation will provide more resources to satisfy her thirst for knowledge.



FIHS Cambree Hodge places 12th at World Teen Golf



Fleming Island senior golfer Cambree Hodge, center was in the mix for a top 10 finish into the third round of the US Kids World Golf Championships in North Carolina but finished 12th overall after three days of golf against the top teens in the world. Pictured left is junior, Chloe Blanc and senior Kalia Polete who all attended the US Kids World Championships.

6 • Clay County School News • September 2023

For School News

With a scintillating three under par 69 on her second round of championship play, Fleming Island High golfer Cambree Hodge battled the top leaders at the U.S. Kids Golf World Teen Championship to finish tied for 12th in the prestigious event held July 27-29 in Pinehurst, NC.

Hodge, who started with a somewhat sub-par 76 (4-Over), off a first-hole triple bogie, turned her game around in the second round and powered through with five birdies and just two bogies to knock her score to a three under 69 and position herself for a top 10 finish.

Eventual winner Olivia Hasselbach of Tampa (Carrollwood Day School) and Dagmar Soerensen of Denmark took a two-stroke lead into round two with a 71 and 70 to open the tournament in front of a handful of 73s behind them. Hodge was at 76.

In the second round, Laura Sofia Espinosa Gonzalez of Colombia torched the course with a 68, but Hodge was on her

tail with her 69 to move up in the standings quickly.

Espinosa's round put her in the lead after two rounds with plenty of golfers lingering around for a shot to move up.

It was the third round that separated the leaders with four golfers punching in under 70; Hasselbach 68, Lavanya Gupta of India 68, and 69s from Ava Bunder of Indiana and Natalie Blonien of Oklahoma.

Hodge opened with a birdie for some optimism and hit for five pars to stay in the mix, but birdies at six, 11 and a nine on the par five 13 finished her with a 73 on the day and her 12th place finish.

Hasselbach and Gupta both crushed the course with 68 with Hasselbach winning by a stroke over Gonzalez's 211-212. Gupta finished at 213.

Also playing were Addy Vogt of St. Johns Country Day School who finished at 25th with a 224 total (77, 75, 72), Kalia Polete of Fleming Island also who was 63rd with a 239 total (82, 76, 81) and Chloe Blanc of Fleming Island who was 95th at 253 (89, 86, 78).

Ridgeview earns \$5,000 Rachael Ray ProStart Grow Grant

High school one of only 40 nationally to get rare award from TV star

By Kayden Zamor
For School News

ORANGE PARK – Ridgeview High was honored with a grant from the Rachael Ray Foundation's ProStart Grow Grant to help the school improve its student experience and update its curriculum, classroom supplies, and educational opportunities for its culinary students.

More than 1,850 schools from 40 states representing nearly 165,000 students, participate in the program. Ridgeview was one of only 40 schools nationwide with a \$5,000 grant.

"The culinary program will benefit heavily from this grant, allowing us to purchase a new refrigerator and buy more pasta," said culinary instructor Amy LaPierra.



Rachael Ray



LaPierra and two students were asked to write a three-paragraph essay on why Ridgeview should be considered. LaPierra said trying to condense so much information into three paragraphs was no easy task.

"This is huge for the culinary department. This will help us greatly for years to come," she said.



Culinary students at Ridgeview will benefit with additional resources and supplies after earning a \$5,000 grant from the television food star.



According to the foundation, ProStart, a two-year technical education program focused on culinary arts and restaurant management who are closely connected to industry experts through guest speakers, class mentors, tours of local facilities, student competitions, and more – all to ensure the real-world experience is brought directly to the classroom. ProStart students finish the program ready to join the workforce and make an immediate impact in restaurants and food service.

Funding from RRF will allow schools to

upgrade or purchase new resources, build up their classrooms in preparation for return to school, and support teachers with whatever they need to help their students learn career-building skills.

"We are optimistic that these grants will give teachers some fresh opportunities to capture the imagination of their students and teach them why our industry is a place where they can build a career," Ray said.

Ridgeview was one of five schools selected from Florida.



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Brinkman goes from state, nationals to world

By Randy Lefko
Sports Editor

FLEMING ISLAND - Fleming Island High diving state champion Ava Brinkman made her big splash as a highly touted freshman with a record setting district title, but missed her shot to flash the cash at region and state with an unfortunate diving mishap that left her bruised and unable to continue.

"Just a freak accident, but enough to concern me a little," said Brinkman, now a junior to be and a sophomore district, region and state champion for the Golden Eagles swim team. "There was some anxiousness along the way, but I knew I just had to get back out there and dive."

Brinkman's storming-of-the-castle state title last year pushed her street cred to the highest level and, with a USA national championship meet coming up in Mission Viejo, California, a national title to add to her state awards is imminent.

Thus, with all the state accolade, Brinkman has been named a NISCA (National Interscholastic Swimming Coaches Association of America, INC) All American (Top 100 in USA) All American, according to a NISCA press release.

Brinkman is one of just four Florida divers on the list which includes Ava Anderson of Fort Lauderdale, a senior at Pine Crest School; Antonina Harned, a 4A state champion senior at Windermere High School, and Juliet Radich, a freshman at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Fort



Fleming Island High School celebrated state championships at pregame ceremonies before the Clay vs. Fleming Island football game. Pictured is state champion Diver Ava Brinkman.

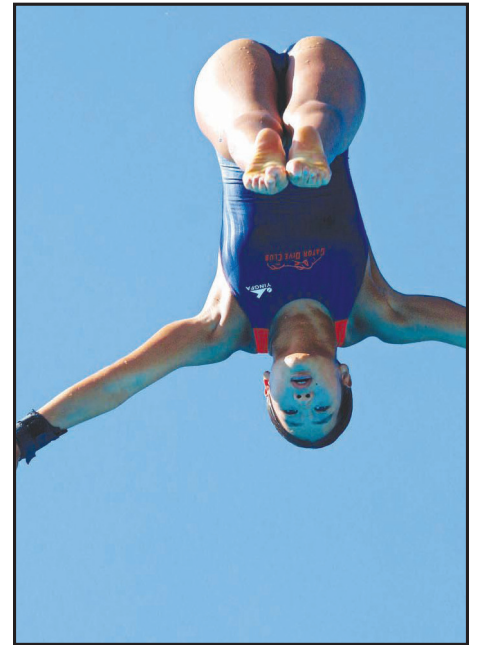
Lauderdale.

"I've competed this summer in regionals in Columbus, OH, then Zones in Cleveland to qualify for the national meet," said Brinkman. "I got second in platform in regions, and top 10 in zones. Top 10 goes to Nationals."

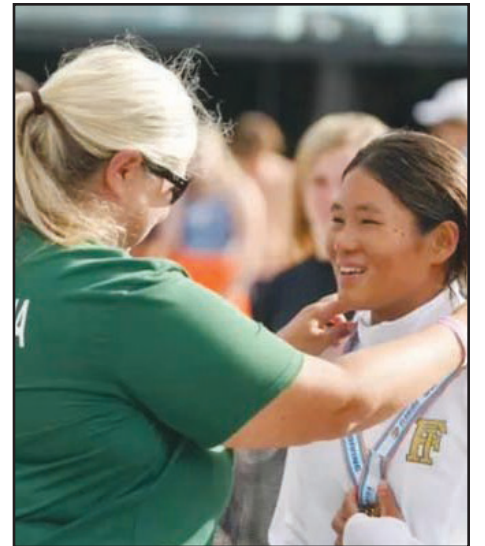
Brinkman qualified in the AAU Nationals in Orlando for a trip to Scotland to



Fleming Island High's first All-American diver, Ava Brinkman, displays her majestic style while getting congrats from Fleming Island High swim coach Sondra Santana after her state title last year.



Fleming Island High junior diver Ava Brinkman, left, has been mentored through a stellar career on the national scene and now on the international scene by coach Laurent Perez Gillooly, the assistant diving coach for the University of Florida.



compete at the international level in the Scottish National and Open Championships, including the British National Diving Cup, in Edinburgh on Dec. 14-17.

"I won platform in Orlando to qualify for Scotland," said Brinkman. "That will be my first international meet and very exciting."

One diver who has attacked the international scene in the past was former Orange Park High state champion Melisa Moses, now 51, and an area coach working with the University of North Florida. Moses was a springboard diving fourth place finisher in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics by less than two points and also a US National Champion in 1994-95 and a 1995 Pan American silver medalist in 1995.

"I have worked with Ava and she is such a smart athlete and a student of the sport," said Moses. "The journey into international competition is a matter of fine tuning every little detail of the dive from start to finish."

Moses commented that her fourth place finish in Atlanta, by a score of 509.64 to Canada's Annie Pelletier for third to 507.99 for Moses for fourth when asked if

she could have done anything in her dives to better her finish said a simple toe flex could have swayed the judges. Fifth place was equally close with a 507.27 score.

"When people ask me that, I say I could have flexed my toes a little bit more to finish my entry into the water," said Moses. "It's funny, but that little piece of the dive is what the judges see last. I was within two points of third and just .72 points ahead of fifth with the silver medal at 512.19."

For Brinkman, ironically, who acknowledged and concurred with Moses that the physical training of bettering her diving is important, but it truly is the little fine points of the dive.

"I'm going up against older, more experienced divers that have been subject to the judges nationally and internationally that see those little pieces of the dive," said Brinkman. "It's funny, but a perfectly executed dive in the air and heading to the water relies on the position of my feet and toes at the end of the dive to not negate the beautiful work in the air. The toes are the last thing they see. Loosely flexed toes or feet separated can become a major deduction."

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