

Clay County Line

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Anne Sponholtz

Baseball fans can find joy in local games

This is by far my favorite time of year. The azaleas are blooming, the dogwood trees are all white, the robins are still hanging around and it is baseball season. Yes, from youth baseball to the big leagues, baseball is being played everywhere.

As you probably know if you have read this column for any length of time, baseball is my favorite sport. However, I have recently become a renewed fan of basketball too — at least at the junior high, high school and college level. My daughter played basketball when she was in school, and I had forgotten what fun it is. I had a chance this basketball season to attend some local games, and what an exciting sport it is.

But still baseball remains at the top of my list. Since my son is no longer playing baseball — something that I still miss — besides attending junior high and high school baseball games, we try to take in a few Atlanta Braves and Tampa Bay Devil Rays games each season, as well as trying to fit in a trip to see the Jacksonville Suns.

If you have not been to a Suns game at The Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville, it is a treat you do not want to miss. The new baseball grounds are amazing.

We are planning a trip north this summer and at the top of our agenda is to take in a game at Yankee Stadium. In fact, the first thing we did in planning the trip was to get the schedule for the Yankees' home games. This was the first of January. We had three days when we would be in the area, so we called right away to reserve our seats. Surprise. In January, mind you, the game we preferred to attend was already sold out. Another game had one seat left and the third game had the option of getting our seats spread out in the stadium with most in an area that had "obstructed views." We were told there may be some tickets that were held back could go up for sale a few days before the games.

"What is the chance?" I asked the ticket seller.

"Well, not too good," I was told.

You don't travel thousands of miles to go to a game with those odds. So we will probably opt for trying to get a tour of the stadium instead.

County not under investigation

But rumors of public works probe remain

By BETH REESE CRAVEY
Clay County Line

Clay County commissioners and the county government as a whole are not currently the targets of state or federal investigators, State Attorney Harry Shorstein said Monday.

However, Shorstein would not comment on reports that a particular part of county government — the

Public Works Department — is being probed.

But county officials said that is the case, based on questioning by FBI and State Attorney's Office investigators of Commission Chairman George Bush, other county officials and some public works employees.

Although Shorstein and FBI spokesman Jeff Westcott would not

confirm whether an investigation was under way, Shorstein said a Florida Times-Union report Saturday may have "inappropriately alarmed" commissioners that they were under the microscope of the prosecutor's office.

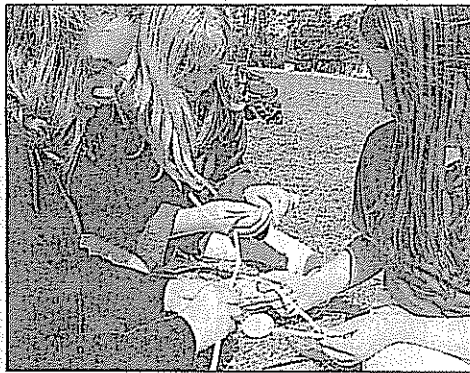
"The inference ... that there is an investigation into corruption in the Clay County Commission is wrong," he said. "As State Attorney, I have great confidence in the ... commission and my opinion of their credibility hasn't changed at all.

"Any concern about the credibility of the commission would be unwarranted."

Westcott also would not confirm whether there was an investigation. The Times-Union report said FBI and the State Attorney's Office were probing possible allegations of wrongdoing in county government including public works. The report quoted Bush as saying he talked with investigators about county

COUNTY continues on Page 7

Students learn to protect eggs on Space Day



Pinewood Christian Academy students Meagan Ball, Christen McFeeley and Kristen Mills work with the egg, 40 straws and roll of tape they were given for the "aerobrake" egg challenge.

Event aims at raising interest in spaceflight, aviation programs

By MARY MARAGHY
Clay County Line

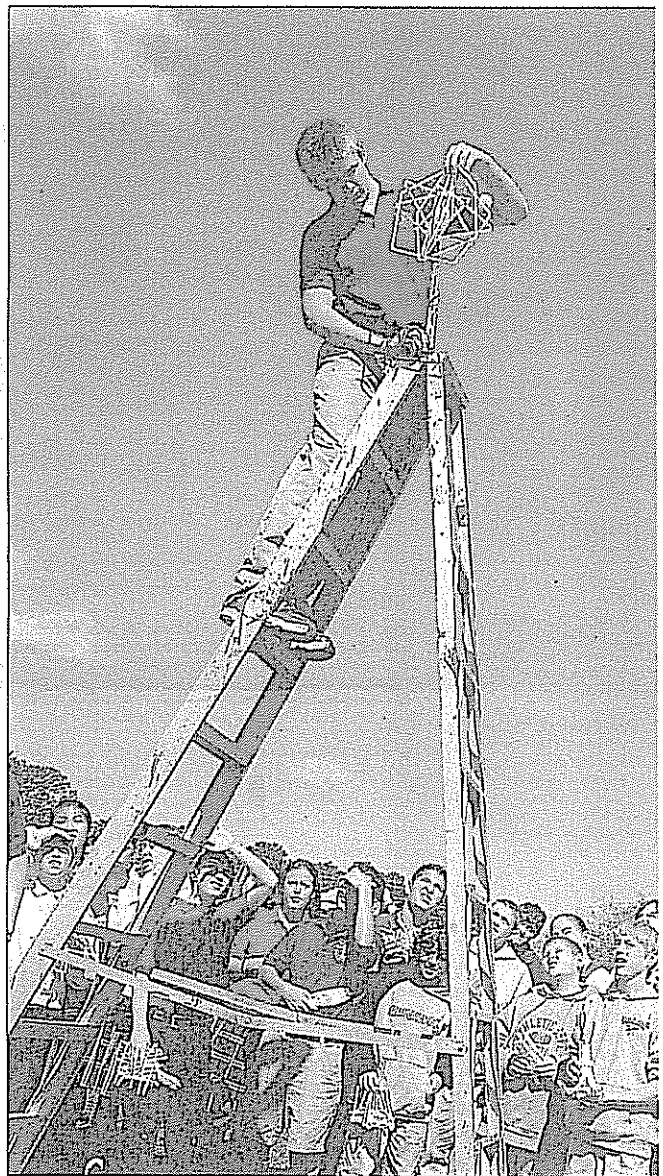
They were given one egg, 40 drinking straws and a roll of tape. Their mission: build a protective casing for the egg so it would survive a 10-foot drop from a stepladder.

Some eggs survived while others spilled their yolks before the crowd, evoking moans, cheers and laughter.

About 400 junior high students from area private schools, in teams, faced the "aerobrake" egg challenge as part of Space Day at Orange Park Christian Academy, the small private school affiliated with Orange Park Assembly of God Church on Kingsley Avenue.

Space Day, a first-time event emphasizing manned spaceflight and aviation programs, was a four-hour program presented by teacher Kevin Simmons and his grant-winning academy students known for their work with NASA engineers on a bioreactor designed to fly on a future space shuttle. The device will test the effect of gravity on bone density to support research on flight

SPACE DAY continues on Page 5



Orange Park Christian Academy student Chris Carter prepares to drop his team's egg from stepladder during the aerobrake egg challenge. The challenge was part of Space Day.

Photos by MARY MARAGHY/ST

State agencies begin testing Black Creek | Cost of new



Photos by MARY MARAGHY/staff

John Sword, a student from Sacred Heart Catholic School, looks through a telescope recently during Space Day at Orange Park Christian Academy.

Space Day

Continued from Page 1

and osteoporosis.

"I want to increase grassroots interest in our space program," said Simmons, who formed Tekna-Theos Inc., a non-profit research company that in 2003 got a \$18,640 grant from the Florida Space Grant Consortium, which is funded by NASA and supports Florida-based space research and education. "I want to spark interest in Northeast Florida."

Most recently, Tekna-Theos got a \$50,000 private donation.

During Space Day, a sea of uniformed students from private schools including Pinewood Christian Academy, Sacred Heart Catholic School, St. Matthews Catholic School and Faith Christian, heard NASA engineer Bradley Carlson discuss advanced propulsion systems in space. The lecture had some of the students pondering the universe.

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Pinewood Christian Academy student Daniel Bender shows off his team's aerobrake egg challenge project.

Pinewood student Meagan Ball. "My question is how do they launch a space ship off the moon because there is no gravity."

Students looked at rockets on display, peeped in a telescope and got lessons on stars at various exhibits by the Northeast

Florida Association of Rocketry, the Northeast Florida Astronomical Society, NASA's Kennedy Space Center, NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center and Moseley Technical Services Inc.

"This is awesome," said Debbie Reynolds, a science teacher from Pinewood Christian Academy who watched her students participate in the aerobrake egg project. Austin Blocker and his team encased their egg between what looked like two miniature rafts made of straws.

"I like this," said Austin adding that he'd done a similar experiment, testing different parachute materials using eggs as passengers. "I think, it's interesting."

He watched with interest as fellow academy student Chris Carter dropped his team's egg from the ladder. He zoomed closer as teammate Andrew Blanton cut through the straws to examine the egg. Austin grinned when the results were announced: "No cracks."

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Black Creek

Continued from Page 1

the north prong of Black Creek, said she and her neighbors adamantly oppose duPont's permit request. They, too, blame the company for the creek's poor health and diminished wildlife. Henkemeyer said she's glad the state has agreed to test the water, but she's not hopeful. She said after months of telephone calls and letters to officials, she said she doesn't trust the system.

"I've lost faith. They want to blame it on anything but duPont. duPont is big. They are just going to try to make it look good on paper," she said. "It's just a bad situation. It takes its toll on you."

Meanwhile, the state DEP is trying to determine if external factors are damaging the creek. Johnson said development is expected to be a factor.

"We are using the best available technology to assist us in researching and locating potential influences," said William Green, acting director of the DEP's-northeast district. "Several upcoming tests will provide us with valuable information about the health of the creek."

So far, the 2005 tests have shown that the fish seem to be generally OK.

Actually, the trend shows a slight improvement in the fish population over the years, according to Gary Byerley, freshwater fishery biologist of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Byerley said in January researchers collected 43 kilograms of fish per minute at the Florida 21 bridge in Middleburg. The same procedure done in 1990 resulted in .35 kilograms of fish per minute and .11 kilograms per minute in 1982. Fish counted include large-mouth bass, blue gill, shell cracker, war mouth, spotted sunfish, black crappie, red breast sunfish, mud fish and chain pickerel. Also, researchers are surveying anglers who fish the creek to see what they are catching. A report on those results is ex-

School

Continued from Page 1

\$421,702 — was for a road connection to adjacent Lake Asbury Elementary and a related water main. That work was not technically part of the

about \$20 million.

District staffers and Barton Malow redesigned the project and got the cost down to \$15.5 million, but said that was as



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Continued from Page 1

services.

"The construction manager had nothing to do with initiating these changes," said Elliott. "All this took place after the construction contract was approved."

About \$367,855 was for power, networking, sidewalks and canopies for 20 portable classrooms to be added to the site. And about \$144,569 was for a variety of added items ranging from power circuits and light fixtures to exterior kitchen range hoods and modified dry-wall in the gymnasium. Many of those items were mandated by the state Education Department, which completed its review of the design plans after the contract was awarded, Elliott said.

Funding for the portable classroom requirements was part of a recent \$2.9 million districtwide allocation that also included the purchase of 75 new portable classrooms, as a result of increasing enrollment and the class size reduction requirements. "We can choose to do it, or not do it and put kids in the parking lot," Elliott said.

Funding for the \$144,569 worth of add-ons came from savings from direct purchasing and interest earned by the money borrowed to pay for the school. The remaining extra cost for the junior high school

\$421,702 — was for a road connection to adjacent Lake Asbury Elementary and a related water main. That work was not technically part of the construction project and was funded separately but was needed to make the two schools better coexist.

The road connection and water main were included in site design plans approved by the board, but mistakenly not submitted to the board for specific funding approval, Elliott said. The best way to get that required approval was to include the side projects along with the portable classroom requirements and other add-ons as part of a large "change order," he said.

When Elliott brought the change order to the Clay County School Board Feb. 24, to be funded from reserve accounts, board members were dismayed at the amount.

"This is an almost \$1 million change order," said board member Wayne Bolla.

"We made him [Barton Malow] swear and sign in blood," said board member Charles Van Zant.

After Elliott assured the board the extra cost was not the responsibility of the construction manager, members grudgingly approved the change order.

This was not the first time the district was stung by a higher than expected cost for the junior high. The district initially committed \$15 million to the project, but when the initial bids came in, the lowest was

about \$20 million.

District staffers and Barton Malow redesigned the project and got the cost down to \$15.5 million, but said that was as low as they could go, largely due to the rising cost of construction materials.

As construction manager, Barton Malow will be paid 2.75 percent of the total cost of the school and is responsible for getting it built on time and on budget.

Michigan-based Barton Malow has also been selected to provide construction management services for a planned combination elementary-junior high school to be built in the OakLeaf area. That school is to be under way by the end of this year and completed by 2007.

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Black Creek

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Meanwhile, on March 2, wearing pea-soup green rubber boots, state biologist Pat O'Connor of the northeast district floated what he called critter condos in different parts of the creek, tying them to trees to keep them stationary.

The devices, known as Hester Dendys, are made of PVC pipe and plastic floaters. Attached are three rotisserie-type sticks each holding 15 round masonite disks, designed to attract tiny creek creatures. The disks are left under water for 28 days and



On March 2, Pat O'Connor put a few Hester Dendys in Black Creek. The devices will stay in the creek for 28 days, then be sent to a lab in Tallahassee for testing.

on Wednesday, March 30, O'Connor will go back for the devices and laboratory tests will determine the amount and types of wildlife inhabiting the disks. Also, at that time, he will sweep parts of the creek with nets 20 times and examine the contents, which should include various types of snails, flies, leeches and other spineless wildlife.

A diverse mix will mean the creek is healthy, O'Connor said. Results are expected in

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