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The Macon Melody

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Bibb schools take truancy concerns and literacy push to barbershops

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Jhanae Gainey came into Harrell's & Son's 2 Barbershop on Pio Nono Avenue with her three kids for a round of haircuts. She left with containers filled with snacks, books and other tokens for her children, courtesy of the Bibb County School District.

It was pure happenstance that Gainey ended up at the shop during one of the district's "Meet Me Where You Are" outings, part of a series of six public outreach events around Macon. But she listened with interest as officials led discussions on everything from fatherhood to keeping kids engaged in the classroom.

Gainey could understand the need for such an event. While she doesn't have trouble getting her kids to school, she said, other parents have told her they struggle to do so. Some parents aren't as actively involved in their children's education as they need to be, she added.

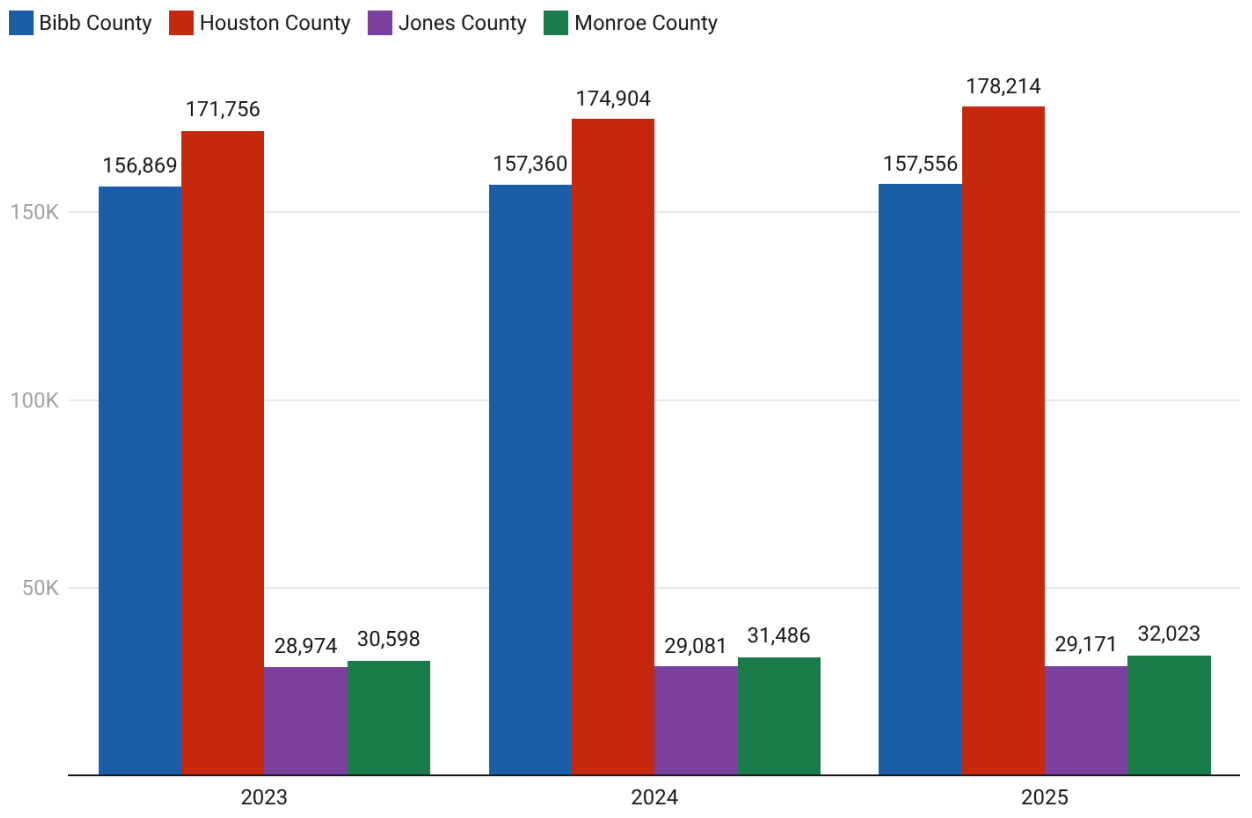
"I don't think it's the teachers. It's the parents," the Macon hairdresser said. "They just send their kids to school for a babysitter."

School leaders are trying to collaborate with the community to better address the district's pervasive truancy and literacy issues.

The district's most recent update on attendance noted 24.3% of stu-

SEE BARBERSHOPS
PAGE 6

MIDDLE GA GROWTH GAP



Created with Datawrapper

Macon's neighbors are growing. The U.S. Census Bureau released its 2025 population estimates in March, completing a three-year picture of regional growth. Monroe County grew nearly 5% between 2023 and 2025, and Houston County grew nearly 4%. Bibb and Jones counties each grew by less than 1% — fewer than 900 combined new residents over the same period. Population figures are Census Bureau estimates as of July 1 of each year.

CRACKING EASTER FUN





PHOTOS BY DSTO MOORE
Children hunt for Easter eggs during Parkway Assembly's annual hunt March 28 in Macon.

'IF YOU CAN HELP SOMEBODY, HELP'

Macon faces a homelessness crisis with no simple fix

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
Community Reporter
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From her perch on Cherry Street, Teresa Spencer has observed downtown Macon for nearly four decades.

When she assesses the homelessness problem in the city's core, she feels fairly confident in this: "It's worse," she said.

"Now," added Spencer, owner of Paramount Barber and Style Shop, "you're seeing ladies with children."

Just before the pandemic, she started noticing an uptick. It's a sad situation, and people clearly need help, she said.

Spencer is far from alone in her belief that the number of homeless people is rising. In Macon, numbers from a recent count of homeless people have yet to be released. But a Bibb County Sheriff's Office spokesperson said law enforcement officers have seen an increase in homeless encampments across Macon.

South Bibb County residents took to social media to express concern about an encampment near

SEE CRISIS
PAGE 3



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
A encampment along the Ocmulgee River near I-16 and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard reflects a homelessness crisis that Macon — like communities across the country — has yet to solve.

Assembly adjourns: Medical marijuana, historic tax credit bills go to governor

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
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Thursday marked the final day of the Georgia legislative session, meaning all bills not approved by both House and Senate chambers will have to wait until next year.

The session's last day — known as Sine Die, which is Latin for "without day"— is often marked by a chaotic scramble to get legislation passed before midnight. But some bills, passed by legislators before the frantic 40th day, are already bound for the desk of Gov. Brian Kemp to await his signature.

One, sponsored by state Sen. David Lucas, D-Macon, effectively removes the THC — that is, the active ingredient — cap for medical marijuana. Another, sponsored by state Rep. Anissa Jones, D-Macon, expands the historic rehabilitation tax credit program that officials at the Historic Macon Foundation say has been a game-changing tool for

SEE BILLS
PAGE 6

Periodical — Mail Label

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ELECTION INFORMATION CENTER

APRIL 14 RUNOFF WILL DETERMINE DISTRICT 5 WINNER

COUNTY COMMISSION DISTRICT 5
— Andrea Cooke
— Edward Foster

The seat became vacant after the resignation of Seth Clark.

Early voting runs April 6-10 at the Macon-Bibb County Board of Elections office, 3661 Eisenhower Parkway, Suite MB101 (Macon Mall, Military Recruitment entrance), 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. weekdays.

Election Day is Tuesday, April 14. Polls open at 7 a.m. and close at 7 p.m. Voters must report to their polling location.

MAY 19 ELECTION TO DECIDE SCHOOL, WATER AUTHORITY BOARD MEMBERS

BOARD OF EDUCATION AT-LARGE POST 7
— Kerry Hatcher
— Amy Morton

BOARD OF EDUCATION AT-LARGE POST 8
— Jonathan Fisher
— Lisa Garrett-Boyd *(incumbent)*
— Carlos A. McCloud
— Nola McFadden

WATER AUTHORITY AT-LARGE
— Gary Bechtel *(incumbent)*
— Desmond D. Brown
— Donald L. Druitt Sr.

WATER AUTHORITY DISTRICT 2
— Ron E. Lemon
— Shariff Robbins-Brinson
— Renoalda Scott
— Marshall Talley

The District 2 seat is vacant after Desmond Brown resigned to seek the at-large seat.

WATER AUTHORITY DISTRICT 4
— Michael McKeever
— Frank K. Patterson Jr. *(incumbent)*
— De'Ron Rogers



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
"I Secured My Vote" stickers await voters at a Bibb County precinct during the November 2024 general election.

WATER AUTHORITY DISTRICT 1
— Elaine H. Lucas *(incumbent, uncontested)*

ELECTION DAY: TUESDAY, MAY 19 — 7 A.M. UNTIL 7 P.M.
VOTER REGISTRATION DEADLINE: MONDAY, APRIL 20
CHECK VOTER STATUS AND MORE: MVP.SOS.GA.GOV

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FOOD TRUCK ROUNDUP



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APRIL 16, 2026
6:00- 9:00PM



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CELEBRATING MILITARY KIDS

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School board candidates tout community ties, classroom priorities

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

The qualifying period for the two Bibb County Board of Education races ended earlier this month, and six candidates filed the requisite paperwork to be put on the May 19 ballot.

Two candidates are running for the at-large Post 7 seat currently held by Daryl Morton, who is term-limited and unable to run again.

Four candidates, including incumbent Lisa Garrett-Boyd, are running for the at-large Post 8 seat.

Polls will be open from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. that day. The voter registration deadline is April 20.

Check your voter status, learn about your polling place and more through the Georgia Secretary of State's website at mvp.sos.ga.gov.

The Melody interviewed the six candidates:

Kerry Hatcher, Post 7

A software engineer, Hatcher has lived in Macon for 19 years.

The 40-year-old started attending school board meetings after two principals at Alexander II Elementary, where his son attends school, did not get their contracts renewed.

He said he decided to run after talking extensively with parents and learning more from the board's meetings. Hatcher said he wants to bring a new perspective to the school board.

"We need some strong change, and I think I can help bring that change because I have a fairly different background from people on the board," he said.

Hatcher said he wants to be the voice for accountability and transparency on the board while also supporting a "culture of sharing."

While he said he is concerned about the district's financial situation and believes tough decisions need to be made, Hatcher said he can't say what he would do until after this year's budget cycle.

He also said he wants to incorporate more community partners into the district's activities.

"It's important to rebuild trust in the institution and get people informed and shift that from a closed policy to an open policy," he said.

Amy Morton, Post 7

A licensed family therapist and founder and CEO of communications and PR firm Southern Majority, she has lived in Macon for 41 years.

The 66-year-old is married to Daryl Morton, the term-limited Post 7 seatholder.

The Mercer University graduate said public education is "critical infrastructure" and is no less important than roads or bridges for community success.

In her therapist work, Morton said she works with public school students. She has also served on the district's ESPLOST campaign committee.

"Education has been at the heart of everything I've ever done," she said.

Morton said she's against raising taxes and wants to ensure efficient use of funds before asking for more from taxpayers.

She said teachers have told her they want to feel supported, and her job as a board member would be to facilitate that support as much as possible.

"I'm interested in rolling up my sleeves and working with not just the school system — I'm interested in bringing the community to the table," she said.

Jonathan Fisher, Post 8

Fisher, a 53-year-old worship leader at United Community Church, has lived in Macon for 45 years.

Fisher said he thinks the board can do better and has been "inconsistent" between raising taxes and keeping the superintendent accountable.

He has made public comments at recent board meetings, including when the district uncovered a $5.5 million hole in its budget.

"I think it's time for new leadership," he said. "You have people serving on the board that's been there for 8-12 years, and instead of us going up and getting better in state rankings, we're going down."

Fisher said he wants to cut central office staff, identify extraneous services being paid for by the district, and reinvest the savings back into teachers and the classroom.

He also said he believes teachers should have more discretion in how they teach and is interested in boosting the teacher retention salary schedule. He said he wants to hire an independent auditor to determine "where all our finances are going" and pledged to be "the most transparent person ever on the board."

Fisher said he won't raise taxes until finances are "in order."

"Until we get our fiscal responsibility in place, then we're going to continue to have these problems," he said. "We have to have people in there who are strong enough and strong-minded to look everyone on that board in the eye and say 'No, we cannot amend the budget, we don't have enough information.'"

Lisa Garrett-Boyd, Post 8

Garrett-Boyd, an incumbent board member, is 71 years old and has lived in Macon for 67 years. She is seeking her third term. She has a long history in education, working as a teacher and administration for four decades.

She said she wants to continue improving student literacy — especially early literacy — and noted the state's recognition of several schools in Bibb County.

"I call myself a champion for all children," Garrett-Boyd said.

She said teachers and principals work hard and acknowledged that, since the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism and literacy levels have worsened. Addressing those issues, she said, will set students up for success after graduation.

Garrett-Boyd said the district should continue to grow dual enrollment opportunities and work with the business community to help students be "workforce ready."

She noted the negative impact of state cuts on the district's budget and said district administrators have, over the past two years, reduced that budget by millions of dollars to "strengthen fiscal accountability."

Carlos McCloud, Post 8

A 58-year-old educator, McCloud has lived in Macon for 15 years. He said he has worked his way up the school ranks, starting as a paraprofessional and eventually becoming a principal. He has more than 30 years of experience.



"I have boots-on-the-ground experience with children from low socioeconomic backgrounds because I was that child," he noted.

McCloud said the first priority should be to confront the district's financial deficit.

The district should look to go above and beyond the financial guidelines set by the state superintendent in the wake of a financial crisis at Dublin City Schools, he said.

"You want to make sure that the financial reporting is accurate and frequent and immediate," McCloud said. "We need information that is viable, that is accurate, that we can count on to make decisions for the students."

McCloud said the board must also come up with an enforceable attendance policy. The district currently reaches out to parents after a student has three unexcused absences and are referred to the district's truancy task force after demonstrating a "pattern" of absences.

"We need to come up with a policy that's realistic and enforceable and stick to it," he said. "We need to have some safety nets for those students (who), for whatever reason, have not met their attendance requirements."

When it comes to literacy, McCloud said the district needs to create an "intensive" summer academy to get kids back on track who have fallen behind.

Nola McFadden, Post 8

A 61-year-old retired federal employee, McFadden was born in Macon, lived outside of the area for a time and returned in 2015.

She said her son matriculated through the school district and, at one point, his football coach suggested that she should run for a board seat.

That was 15 years ago, she said, but it "sparked" something inside of her. She said she feels now is the right time for her to get involved. McFadden noted that she has been an active parent and district volunteer.

She said the board needs to be good stewards of taxpayer money, especially with cuts being made at the federal and state levels.

She wants to support economic growth in the county through the school district, namely through improving science, technology, education and math programs and incorporating artificial intelligence education.

Getting trust back into the school system will make the county more "lucrative" and "attractive," McFadden said.

"We have to be in the schools, with the administrators, and we have to build up a community relationship to make our school district better," she said.

CRISIS

Continued from Page 1

woods close to Houston Road and Hartley Bridge Road. Some of the residents complained about accumulating trash from the encampment and wondered whether drug and alcohol addictions prevented people from seeking help; others were sympathetic to the plight of homeless people.

That encampment was recently cleared. Another, near Riverside Drive and Spring Street, has been swept multiple times.

Communities across the country have found that homelessness is a complex problem with no simple solutions. It's driven by poverty and a lack of affordable housing, but also made more complicated because many people living on the street have mental illnesses and drug addictions.

"You have to take into consideration that there is a percentage of this world that's going to need help forever. But how do we make that happen?" said Alison Bender, the director at Brookdale Resource Center, a transitional housing and support center for people who are homeless. "How do we have enough empathy as a society to be able to do that?"

While she believes that the number of people who are homeless has increased, her center has seen a slight decrease in those seeking Brookdale's long-term services.

Bender noted that affordable housing is a crisis across the country and, specifically, that there aren't many options for housing for people who have mental health or substance abuse challenges, unless they are in a program that can provide shelter.

River Edge Behavioral Health offers help, but there are limits to what it can do in terms of housing availability, she said.

On weekdays, an average of 100 homeless people visit Macon's Depaul USA Daybreak Resource Center for meals and to take advantage of housing placement programs, laundry and shower facilities, the health clinic and enrichment classes.

Sister Deborah Mallott, a Daughters of Charity nun and director of the center, applauds Mayor Lester Miller's efforts to make more affordable housing available.

Downtown, Shauna Ramirez, store manager of Carrie's Bridal Collection on Second Street, said she often encounters homeless people outside her store.

"I find them a lot of times on my stoop or the front area wanting to sleep, and I always have to run them off," she said.

She tells them, "Listen, 10 o'clock, I have customers. You have to go away."

In early March, members of the Downtown Macon Community Association came together to discuss how to better respond to people experiencing homelessness in the area.

Last October, the Downtown Business Improvement District approved more than $100,000 to fund outreach, sanitation and safety efforts aimed at addressing homelessness.

Despite the growth of the problem, Terrence Gordon, owner of Incisura Clothing & Accessories on Poplar Street, said that the homeless people he comes in contact with downtown are very polite.

Spencer believes that the homeless people downtown won't go to the shelters because of the rules and choose to stay downtown where they can be free.

Mallott doesn't disagree. She said she would be interested in seeing if a low-threshold shelter, with fewer rules, would be accessible to more people. Having that, she said, would make it possible for people to be safe and out of the weather — as long as they aren't violent, in possession of a weapon and aren't doing drugs.

In itself, homelessness isn't a crime, and it shouldn't be treated as one, advocates for people without homes say.

Bibb deputies respond to incidents involving homeless people based on the specific circumstances.

Homeless individuals who are not engaged in criminal activity are rarely reported to law enforcement, the sheriff's office spokesperson said. However, if a person becomes a nuisance, such as soliciting money, that may be considered a criminal offense under Georgia law. If an individual is lying in a public roadway without a medical or mental health concern, that is considered obstruction of a public roadway, which is also a criminal offense.

When necessary, the sheriff's office coordinates with Code Enforcement to clear encampments. The frequency of these efforts varies depending on the location and property owner. Encampments can crop up quickly and in areas that are not immediately noticeable.

Bender at Brookdale believes that there should be a way to cater to people in different situations.

One of the reasons why her facility's name was changed to include resource center "is because the goal was to be the place where people could come to get the help that they need, in a one-stop shop situation," Bender said. "For us to continue that path is to be more open to helping folks that don't need to stay here or that need the assistance in a different capacity."

She would be interested in opening a new shelter that could do just that. Or, she said — if she had the money — she'd want to build affordable housing on the properties that have been cleared by the city in its effort to reduce blight.

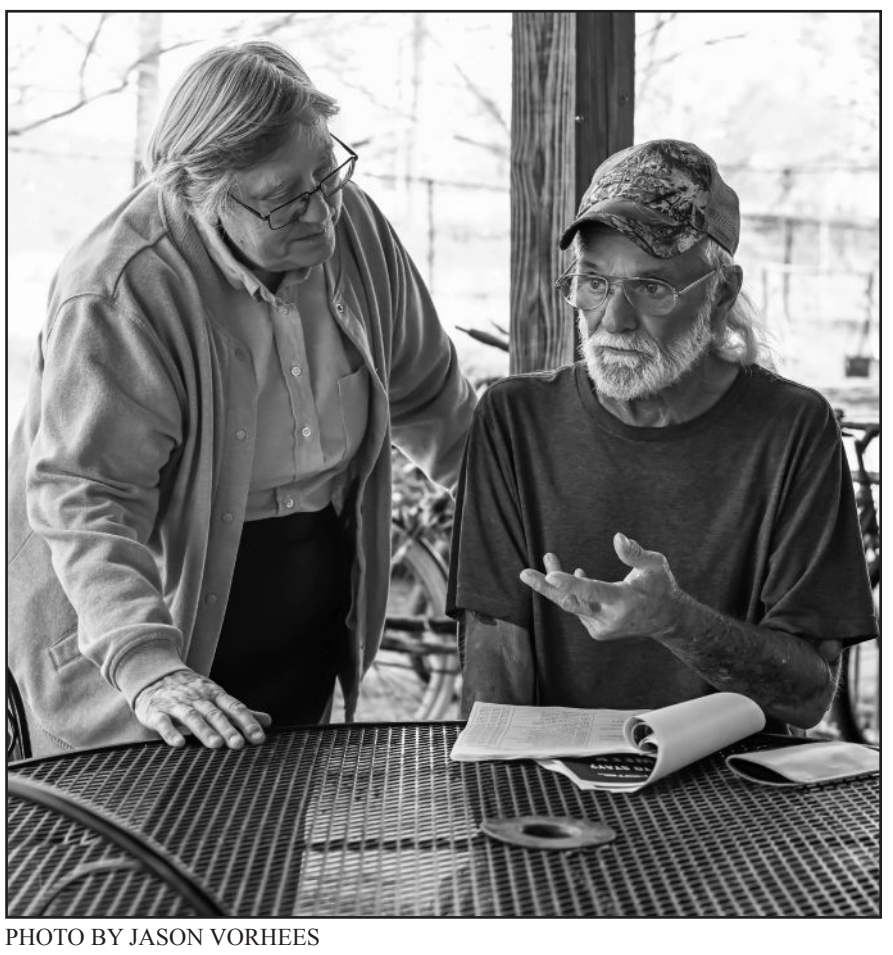


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Deborah Mallott, director of Depaul USA Daybreak Resource Center in Macon, speaks with a participant about housing options March 23.

She realizes there are limits to what Brookdale can do: "My program manager has this great saying. She says, 'We can do anything, but we can't do everything.'"

Meanwhile, many of the people who find themselves without shelter say they are just trying to survive.

Angela Payne, who is a native of Macon, has been homeless for about three years now. She has visited Daybreak, as well as Loaves and Fishes and Macon Outreach at Mulberry. But because she receives food stamps, she said, she doesn't go as often anymore and "wants to save … resources for people who actually need it."

She just wants a place to lay her head at night, she said. She was recently arrested for criminal trespass for sleeping in front of a building and would like the city to be more understanding.

Thomas Parrish III is originally from Hartford, Connecticut, but has lived in Macon for over 20 years. He said he works at a restaurant downtown.

He doesn't have a home because he doesn't make enough to be able to save and cover his daily expenses.

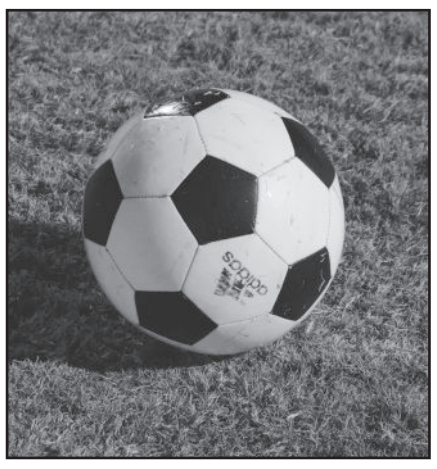
He remembers the time he saw a man going through the trash. He decided to give him his last $5. Parrish was with a woman at the time and her response was, "How can you give somebody something and you're homeless, too?'"

"I said, it ain't got nothing to do with being homeless," Parrish said. "If you can help somebody, help. Simple as that."

10 WEEKS OUT

What to know before the World Cup starts

CHRISTOPHER BLAKE
Guest Columnist



The World Cup arrives in roughly 10 weeks, and if you are anything like the friends I have been talking with lately, you are somewhere between curious and mildly overwhelmed.

Who are the teams? How does the tournament actually work? And where, precisely, does one watch a Colombian supporter in full face paint weeping with joy at 9 in the morning? These are fair questions. Consider this as your field guide.

How it works

The expanded 2026 tournament features 48 nations divided into 12 groups of four. Each team plays the other three in its group. The top two in each group advance automatically; the eight best third-place finishers join them, producing a round of 32.

From there, it is single-elimination football — win or go home — through the round of 16, quarterfinals, semifinals and the grand final on July 19.

There is no second chance, no best-of-seven — one bad afternoon and four years of effort evaporates. This is what concentrates the mind and breaks the heart.

The contenders

France enters as arguably the most complete squad in the world. They won in 2018, lost a breathtaking final to Argentina in 2022 and return with Kylian Mbappé — the finest footballer on the planet right now — leading an embarrassment of attacking riches. If you watch one team for pure technical spectacle, watch France.

Brazil carries the most storied name in World Cup history — five titles, the most of any nation — alongside the weight of a 2022 quarterfinal exit that still stings in São Paulo and Rio alike. They arrive determined to reclaim their identity as the tournament's most exciting team. When Brazil is playing well, there is simply nothing more joyful to watch in world sport.

Argentina are the defending champions, led still by Lionel Messi, who at 38 is competing in what will almost certainly be his farewell World Cup. In Qatar, he finally lifted the one trophy that had eluded him throughout a career of almost incomprehensible achievement.

He arrives in 2026 as the sentimental favorite of neutrals everywhere, which is an unusual position for one of the most polarizing figures the game has produced.

England — my England — comes into the tournament ranked among the top five nations in the world, carrying a squad of genuine quality and the burden of 60 years of near-misses. They have the players. They have the tactical maturity that previous generations lacked. They also have the singular capacity, as any long-suffering supporter will attest, to find entirely new ways to disappoint.

I say this with love, and with my fingers firmly crossed.

Germany, four-time World Cup winners, are rebuilding under a younger generation of players and a coaching philosophy built on pressing and creativity. They are dangerous, deep and should never be discounted.

The Americans

And then there is the team playing in front of home crowds across this country — a United States side that is, genuinely, the most talented in American football history.

Christian Pulisic, playing his club football at AC Milan in Italy's Serie A, is the fulcrum of everything the Americans do going forward — quick, technically assured and capable of moments of individual brilliance on the largest stages.

Giovanni Reyna brings creative intelligence from midfield. Tim Weah — son of the great Liberian footballer and president George Weah — provides pace and directness on the wing. Malik Tillman offers the kind of composed finishing and intelligent movement that unlocks organized defenses.

These are not fringe players in European football's lower reaches. These are footballers starting regularly for respected clubs in England, Italy, Germany and Scotland.

This generation has grown up watching the game at its highest level, competing within it and understanding that international football demands tactical sophistication as much as athleticism. Reaching the knockout rounds is a realistic expectation. A deep run is possible. The home crowd will matter.

Atlanta and beyond

For readers in Central Georgia, the World Cup is not merely a television event. Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium is one of 16 official host venues, meaning world-class matches will be played 90 minutes up the road. Tickets remain available through FIFA's official channels, though premium fixtures carry premium prices.

Fan festivals, watch parties and cultural events surrounding match days will make Atlanta worth a visit even without a seat inside the stadium. The atmosphere outside a World Cup venue on match day is a spectacle unlike anything most American sports fans have encountered: flags from a dozen nations, songs in languages you cannot identify, and joy and anxiety running in equal measure through the crowds.

What we already know

Americans sometimes approach the men's World Cup as unfamiliar territory. It need not be. Those who have followed the United States women's national team — four-time Women's World Cup champions — already understand what tournament football looks like: the group-stage tension, the knockout-round drama, the unique pride of watching a team wear your flag and mean it. The women built that framework for us. This summer, the men invite us to apply it.

The tournament is nearly upon us. Now you know what to watch for.

Christopher Blake is president of Middle Georgia State University. He is a passionate supporter of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club and the men's and women's national football teams of England and the United States.

Local news doesn't happen by accident. It happens because our neighbors make it possible. Support The Macon Melody this Local News Day, April 9.

How and why anti-ICE protesters ended the No Kings rally in Macon



PHOTO BY GRANT BLANKENSHIP FOR GEORGIA PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The No Kings rally in Macon on March 28 ended when a small group of anti-ICE protesters objecting to the inclusion of Macon-Bibb County Sheriff David Davis in the lineup of speakers shouted him down and effectively ended the rally. The protesters objected to the 287(g) agreement between the Bibb County Sheriff's Office and ICE. Davis countered that under state law he is mandated to work with ICE.

BY GRANT BLANKENSHIP
Georgia Public Broadcasting
gpb.org/news

The most recent No Kings rally in Macon, held Saturday, March 28, had gone much like the first two: an orderly crowd listened to a lineup of speakers urging support for democracy and opposition to the policies of President Donald Trump.

That was until rally organizer She Keene tried to introduce the final speaker, Bibb County Sheriff David Davis. Before Davis could take the microphone, he was met with boos and jeers from a small number of anti-ICE demonstrators intent on not letting him be heard.

"If you don't want to hear him speak, y'all can leave," said Keene, of the group Macon Rising which has organized the local No Kings events. "Y'all could leave. There are plenty of other people that would love to hear him speak."

But the assembly ended early after a protracted back and forth between the shouting protesters and No Kings organizers struggling to find a way to get the rally back on track.

At the heart of the conflict was the memorandum of understanding between the Bibb County Sheriff's Office and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. Davis argued that under a Georgia state law, HB 1105 (or the Criminal Alien Track and Report Act), he had no choice but to agree to such an MOU.

"I am statutorily required to follow the law. That's my job as sheriff," Davis said after the rally. "[The Bibb County Sheriff's Office] meets the minimum requirements of that law to be in compliance with that law."

HB 1105 requires Georgia law enforcement to do a number of things.

First, it requires a local jail to ask about the citizenship status of people when they are booked into the jail and to communicate that status to ICE. If ICE tells the jail the person is someone wanted for immigration detention (what's called "issuing a detainer"), the jail must hold the person for an additional 48 hours after their criminal charges are dealt with.

Davis said more often than not, ICE fails to act on its own detainers at the Bibb County Jail.

"We give them 48 hours to come get them," Davis said. "If they haven't gotten them in that time, we let them go. We've let several people go that they've not come and got."

In data kept by attorneys at the Deportation Data Project, ICE is recorded as having sent 26 detainers to the Bibb County Jail, resulting in 5 arrests, since the beginning of President Trump's immigration crackdown.

The second thing required of Georgia law enforcement agencies by HB 1105 is securing that memorandum of understanding with ICE about how far the local agency will go in enforcing federal immigration law.

Those relationships exist in three tiers under an ICE program called 287(g).

They are, in descending order of intensity of collaboration:

— The Task Force Model, in which officers are trained by ICE to make immigration arrests on the street.

— The Jail Enforcement Model, in which officers are trained to make immigration arrests inside their jails but not on the street.

— The Warrant Service Model, in which officers are trained to serve ICE administrative warrants in the jail.

The Bibb County Sheriff's Office agreed to the last agreement, the Warrant Service model. Sheriff Davis said that's because it offers the least involvement with ICE for his office while still satisfying state law.

"Others do a lot more than what we do here in Bibb County, but I do the minimum required in that law," Davis said. "So if you don't want that law, vote people in that's gonna change that law."

In total, 57 Georgia law enforcement agencies have 287(g) agreements on file with ICE.

Police departments which have no jail have typically signed up for the Task Force Model, but a series of recent open record requests to those agencies by GPB showed that in almost every instance, only a single officer was trained to make immigration arrests.

That includes the city of Marietta, which made headlines earlier this year because of its ICE agreement.

Though Georgia has the fourth-highest rate of immigration arrests in the country, most of those arrests are apparently occurring when people already known to the immigration system make their regularly scheduled check-in at the ICE field office in Atlanta.

Another reason Davis was invited to speak was to give people some sense of what he and his deputies would do if ICE came to Bibb County in force to make street-level immigration arrests.

"I have no control over that," Davis said. "They are a federal law enforcement agency and they can pretty much do what they need to do."

Lane Richardson was with the group of anti-ICE protesters who ultimately kept Davis from speaking at the Saturday No Kings rally.

Richardson said all the nuances of what's required by state law and Davis' assertion that he is trying to humanely thread that needle miss a very basic point. For Richardson, any collaboration with ICE is immoral, no matter how minimized.

"I would say there's a difference between legality and morality," Richardson said. "The Holocaust was legal; slavery was legal. And what they're doing is now technically legal. If [Sheriff Davis] was a man of principle, he could stand on principle."

Richardson and the other protesters, most of whom were from the local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, said they would rather see movement on deteriorating conditions and the number of deaths in recent years at the Bibb County Jail.

OPINION



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Macon Melody stickers carry Executive Editor Joshua Wilson's self-described "cheesy" but heartfelt slogan — "Local news is my jam" — a play on the newsroom's name.

Local news is my jam



Joshua Wilson

A few weeks ago, I ordered some new promotional merchandise for The Melody.

We give out merch pretty often, especially when folks stop by our office or when we set up for community events, and I'm passionate about getting good "stuff" while keeping in line with our budget.

I also want to be, well, hip — you know, in the know about what people like and won't immediately toss in the trash. Since our newsroom is on a college campus and I've worked at universities for years, I've known for a while that stickers are all the rage right now, so I decided to order some of them.

This is the part where I admit that I'm not hip. I'm closer to broken hip. But I thought of a cute little saying for them, one that ties in with our name: "Local news is my jam." (Get it? Melody? Jam? Okay.)

Anyway, they turned out great — despite my cheesiness and my inability to order things at the right size. (These were supposed to be 3" x 3" but came in at 1.5" x 1.5". Oh, well, you live and you learn. Like I said, they're cute.)

They're also true. Local news is, indeed, my jam. I've been doing it for 20 years now, and I couldn't really imagine doing anything else. I tell people all the time, and I've written it here before, that this is the most exciting time to be in journalism. And people usually look at me like I'm nuts. And honestly, they're probably right.

But I truly feel that way. It's a relatively new feeling for me. After years of working on the for-profit side of this business, I made the pivot to nonprofit journalism a few years back. Catch me around town and I'll give you my spiel about how local news is civic infrastructure, the for-profit business model is broken, the market can't be trusted to protect this public good and how philanthropy, combined with community support, is the way forward for our industry. (You can also talk to me about other things, but I'll eventually steer the conversation to this topic. Sorry in advance.)

We talk a lot in our country about the "local news crisis," or the hollowing out of our industry over the past 20-or-so-odd years. Rebuild Local News, one of the many groups working to stabilize and grow the news business, reports that, since

SEE WILSON
PAGE 6

Zombie bills rise at the Gold Dome



Marc Hyden

Few things under the Gold Dome are as alluring as legislation that is nearly law.

As you might imagine, most bills fail to meet a number of deadlines — effectively killing them — while others seem to effortlessly sprint toward enactment. As the end of session nears, authors of so-called dead bills begin to eye measures nearing the finish line and hope to tack their bill language onto them. Just like a zombie, seemingly dead bills spring to life, but instead of searching for victims, they hitch a ride on living bills.

Even for seasoned professionals, it is a herculean task to keep track of all the amendments and substitutes. Legislative session is not a marathon but a mad dash with thousands of bills and resolutions. For casual observers, keeping tabs on this is even more challenging. This makes the end of session a bit like Christmas, but instead of presents, there are a bunch of bills with language that may surprise most Georgians — highlighting the need to pay close attention.

While this sounds like an overly cynical representation of legislative mechanics, it's really not. This is how the General Assembly has operated for longer than anyone can remember, and lawmakers get an awful lot of good work done through these methods in 40 legislative days. Even so, this process can result in some strange and even unwelcome bedfellows.

I was once on the receiving end of one of these scenarios. Years ago, I had been working with lawmakers to pass legislation to make it easier for military spouses to earn a living. When the bill had nearly made its way through the legislative process, a senator amended it to legalize a funerary practice that essentially dissolves bodies.

It might be a perfectly fine method of disposing of the deceased and — in keeping with the zombie motif — a way of guarding against the undead. Yet the House determined the amendment wasn't germane and ultimately rejected it, which cleared the military spouse bill's path to enactment. There are several more examples of seemingly unrelated amendments and substitutes — some from this year even — finding life in different bills.

On March 20, the Senate Ethics Committee considered a bill originally related to license plates, but in committee, the proposal was drastically transformed. Thanks to a committee substitute, it no longer has anything to do with license plates. Rather, it is aimed at imposing guardrails around transit special purpose local option sales tax referendums.

Three days later, the Senate passed a bill whose title referenced the regulation of ambulances, but any mention of the emergency vehicles had been stripped from the bill. The proposal instead seeks to move Georgia to the Atlantic Standard Time Zone. The impetus for this updated bill language is to ensure Georgians no longer must change their clocks in the spring and fall. As someone who is annoyed by time changes, I am intrigued, although I am not entirely convinced that this is the best answer.

One day after the Senate passed the time zone bill, the Senate Health and Human Services Committee debated HB 1138, which is one of this session's most important bills. If passed, it would allow women to obtain birth control from a pharmacist without a doctor's prescription — like most other states do — and permit patients to obtain up to 12 months' worth of birth control at a time.

During committee, a curious thing happened. Lawmakers amended the birth control bill to also include provisions related to corn masa (a dough made from corn) so that such products must be fortified with folic acid. The reasoning behind this is that folic acid is a critical vitamin that reduces the risk of serious birth defects. Regardless of whether this is good policy or not, placing corn masa on a birth control bill is sure to cause some confusion.

Again, none of this is an indictment on these measures or Georgia's mode of lawmaking. It works here, and it's how the sausage is made even if it sometimes leads to drama — although it can keep the Legislature fun and interesting if you're monitoring developments.

So, will these amendments and substitutes make it to the governor's desk? If you haven't been paying close attention, then I guess you will have to wait for Christmas — err, the end of session — to see what zombies are neatly wrapped under the tree.

Marc Hyden is the senior director of state government affairs at the R Street Institute. You can follow him on X at @marc_hyden.

Editor's note: The legislative session ended Thursday, a day after The Melody left Macon on its way to our printing press. We'll keep you updated on the life — or final death — of these zombies.



The Macon Melody

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ABOUT THE MACON MELODY

The Macon Melody is a community newsroom founded in 2024 by the National Trust for Local News, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving America's newspapers, building brighter futures for them and better serving readers in the process.

The Melody, named for Macon's enormous influence on American music, is the premier community news source in Macon-Bibb County. We are also a national innovation lab testing scalable models and tools for strengthening local news.

We follow the Code of Ethics published by the Society of Professional Journalists (spj.org/ethics), and we believe in doing what is right every time and not just when it is convenient.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND GUEST EDITORIALS POLICY

The Macon Melody welcomes letters to the editor and guest editorials from readers. Submissions should be concise, relevant to our coverage or community issues, and respectful in tone.

Letters may be edited for length, clarity and style. Submissions must include the writer's name, city of residence and a phone number for verification purposes only.

Anonymous submissions will not be published. These items are published at the discretion of the executive editor and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Macon Melody or its staff.

Submissions may be sent to joshua@maconmelody.com.

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LEGALESE

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WILSON

Continued from Page 5

2005, 3,500 American newspapers have closed. It's a sobering statistic, for sure, but it doesn't mean it's time to put away our reporters' notebooks and give up the fight.

Something that doesn't get nearly as much chatter is how the business has been reinventing itself — with cheaper reporters' notebooks, maybe, and some duct tape and a few prayers. The nonprofit model has spun up some truly awesome newsrooms across the country, and The Melody is just one example. We're evidence of what can happen when philanthropy sparks something wonderful and the community rallies around it. Of course, we have a lot of work to do, but we're not even 2 years old yet. We're still spring chickens.

Anyway, if local news is your jam, too, you'll love this cool event that's just around the corner. On April 9, newsrooms across the U.S. will celebrate Local News Day, which is designed to connect people to trusted news sources. That day at The Melody, we'll be hosting a Facebook Live — a time for you to join and ask us questions about our work or chat with us about topics you think we should cover. We'll provide more details soon, but we're hoping you'll pop in and at least say hi.

We might even send you a sticker.

Email Executive Editor Joshua Wilson at joshua@gtln.org.

Macon, join the Knight Challenge

MELODY STAFF REPORT
news@maconmelody.com

Macon is among 26 cities in the U.S. eligible to compete for grants through the relaunched Knight Cities Challenge, a $10 million initiative from Knight Foundation that funds community-driven projects in local news, economic opportunity, and arts and culture.

Grants of up to $200,000 are available, with up to $5 million awarded in this first round.

Eligible projects broadly include efforts to strengthen local information ecosystems, support entrepreneurs and economic development, and deepen community connection through arts and culture. Projects must be completed within one year.

Applications are open April 1-30 at kf.org.

Knight Foundation will host a virtual information session April 7.

The challenge originally launched in 2015 and funded 99 projects after drawing more than 16,000 applications.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Garrison Carrafield of Fine Fettle moves a row of marijuana plants at the medical marijuana manufacturing plant in Macon. Legislation passed by the Georgia General Assembly and awaiting Gov. Brian Kemp's signature would remove the state's THC cap for medical marijuana and allow patients to vape prescribed products.

BILLS

Continued from Page 1

downtown revitalization.

Legislation was also passed to elevate the penalties for blocking roads during protests, as well as a law that bans high school students from having cell phones during classes. Most Macon public schools are largely unaffected because they already have implemented such a ban.

The medical marijuana bill addresses a current state law that limits the concentration of THC, which determines the potency of the drug, to 5%. Only patients with specific ailments — such as cancer, Parkinson's disease, epilepsy or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — are eligible to receive medical marijuana cards, which allows them to buy cannabis from authorized outlets.

Judson Hill, president of the Georgia cannabis dispensary Fine Fettle, said the new law will put the state's medical marijuana program in line with states around the country. Right now, even medical marijuana patients "near death" only have access to receive a "weaker" product.

The change — which, if signed into law, will take effect this June — means medical marijuana patients can receive stronger treatment, he said.

The Putting Georgia's Patients First Act also relabels low-THC oil as medical marijuana and allows medical marijuana recipients to vape prescribed products.

"Veterans, people going through chemotherapy, they need the immediate relief that an inhalable product provides," Hill said.

Currently, the state's oil products could take hours to take effect, he added.

Fine Fettle is one of the state's handful of licensed marijuana manufacturing facilities. It's located in an industrial park in East Macon. Hill said the facility grows its own flower and is capable of producing vapes but has been operating at only 20% capacity while producing the low-THC oils.

He said the company plans on opening a store in Macon later this year.

"The goal is that we should be able to employ 200-plus people in Macon when at full capacity," Hill said. "The program hasn't developed to a point where there's enough patients."

The bill was revived from last year's legislative session.

Georgia was in the second year of its two-year session, and bills from last year's session were still eligible to pass through the legislative process.

Most of Macon's representatives voted to pass the bill, with a couple of representatives not present for the vote.

The historic rehabilitation tax credit bill doubles the annual statewide cap on credits from $30 million to $60 million. The tax credits allow owners of qualified historic buildings to receive a significant reduction in taxes in return for restoring the structures.

Advocates of the credit say it will continue to help spur the renovation of historic buildings in Macon.

BARBERSHOPS

Continued from Page 1

dents were chronically absent — or have missed 10% or more of the school year. A month ago, Superintendent Dan Sims took to Facebook to reach out to parents for possible answers.

In addition, last school year at every grade level, students in the county's public schools trailed the state's median lexile levels, which measure reading ability, according



Sims

to the Georgia Department of Education.

As part of the "Meet Me" campaign, school district officials in mid-March visited the Harrell's & Son's Barbershop in Greenwood Bottom, an event that drew a dozen parents. They've also gone to Twin Cuts Barbershop on Wimbish Road to discuss the issues. A similar event is scheduled for April 10 at Pokey's Emperial Barbershop on Billy Williamson Drive.

On the Thursday that Gainey came into Harrell's, the sound of razors filled the lulls in conversations between district officials and a handful of parents as they tried to get at the crux of what they view as a motivation problem. Everyone who walked in was asked for input and to fill out a survey.

One of the barbers suggested the district find ways to reward students for good attendance. A student suggested there be more engaging events during the school day.

Sims said the district has to walk a fine line between "interest and grinding," or between getting kids excited and getting them to put their heads down and learn.

He said the district offers plenty of programs to motivate students while they learn.

"I can't think of one thing in Bibb County a kid can't connect to," Sims said.

The district will lay out a more comprehensive truancy approach closer to the start of next school year, Truancy Specialist Dominique Johnson told The Melody.

While there wasn't an outpouring of parents, it was a good start, Steven Jones, executive officer for the Bibb County School District, said.

"We celebrate the small wins," he said.

Teachers and administrators also will be at the Macon Mall next month to continue their efforts to reach out to the community.

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April 9 is Local News Day. Help us make it count. Subscribe, donate and learn about advertising at gtln.org/localnewsday.

Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



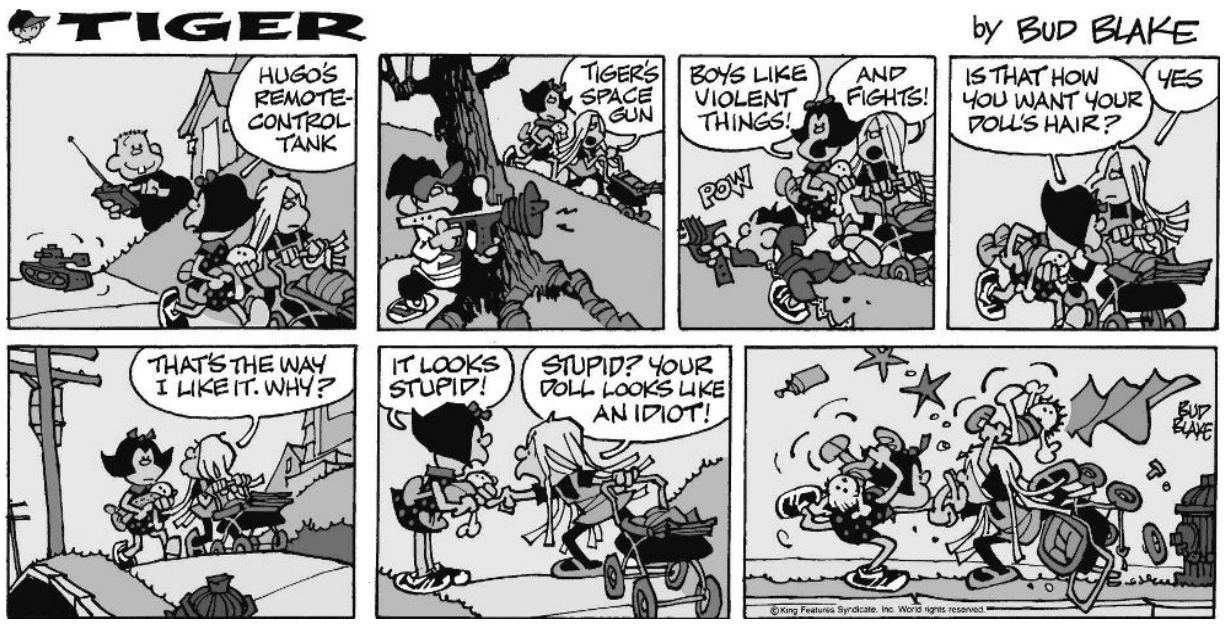
The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



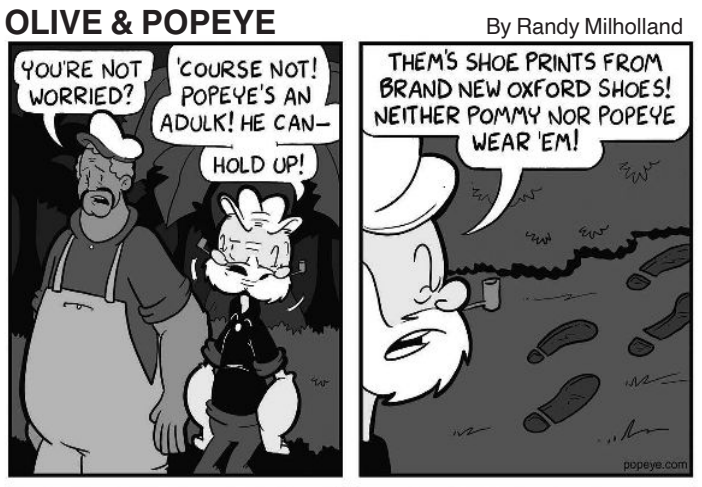
TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



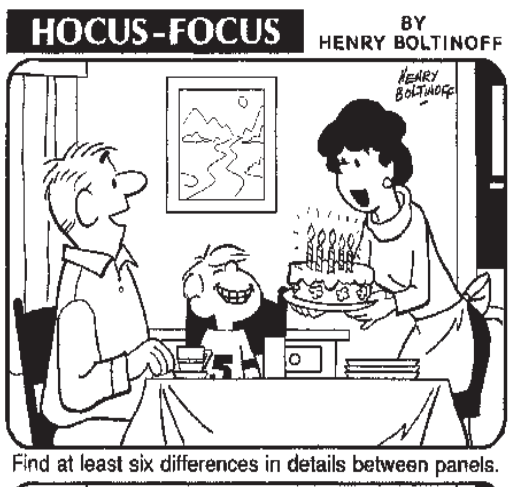
OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland

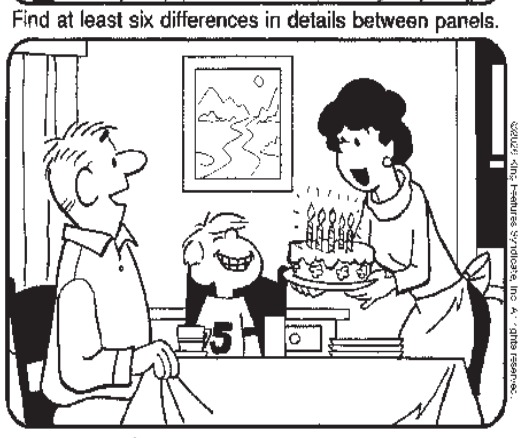


HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



Differences: 1. Picture is moved. 2. Arm is lower. 3. Plates are moved. 4. Chair is moved. 5. Table is wider. 6. Boy is taller.

Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



CryptoQuip

This is a simple substitution cipher in which each letter used stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Solution is accomplished by trial and error.

Clue: **A** equals **B**

SR BNJ LWBZVK LRRUJWX,
KBSUUJV LDT XSDPKUJC LVJ
LUU PZZT AFTTSJK, S
KFMMZKJ BNJC'VJ AJD MLUK.

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SCRAMBLERS

Unscramble the letters within each rectangle to form four ordinary words. Then rearrange the boxed letters to form the mystery word, which will complete the gag!

Refuge **MUSALY** ___ ___ [ ] ___ ___ ___

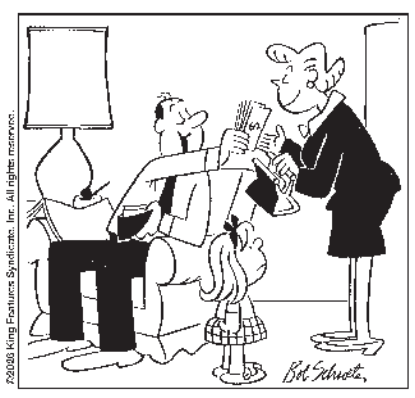
Mixture **BHIRDY** [ ] [ ] ___ ___ ___ ___

Crazy **RABUDS** ___ [ ] ___ [ ] ___ ___

Grieve **ROMUN** ___ ___ [ ] ___ ___

TODAY'S WORD

___ ___ ___ – ___ ___ ___



"Mom's going shopping — I guess you can say she's going '___ __-___ __'!"

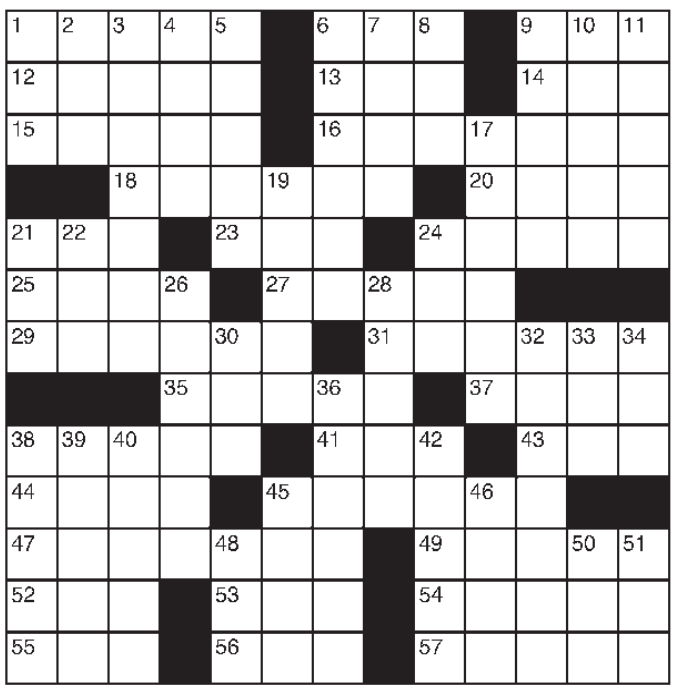
King Crossword

ACROSS

1 Purse part
6 Tatter
9 Fr. holy woman
12 Borders on
13 In the past
14 Allow
15 Trattoria offering
16 Wild hurry, as on Black Friday
18 Divides in two
20 Greek mountain
21 Rule in India
23 Goat's plaint
24 City on the Yangtze River
25 Broadway failure
27 Zaps in a microwave
29 Argue
31 Portugal's place
35 Fix a lawn
37 Bath bubbles
38 Long-legged shorebird
41 Hwys.
43 Scale note
44 Spanish "but"
45 Rob Roy spirit
47 Pressed for time
49 Garlicky mayo
52 Dijon denial
53 Blackbird
54 "What's in — me?"
55 — Lanka
56 "Acid"
57 Crusoe's creator

DOWN

1 Enervate
2 TV schedule abbr.
3 Work that's done ASAP
4 "— boy!"
5 Sacred song
6 French Baroque composer
7 Turkish officials
8 Deity
9 Melting snow
10 "Selma" actress Thompson
11 Patriot Allen
17 Awakens
19 Wind indicators
21 "Mayberry —"
22 Hearty brew
24 Spider's home
26 Sitting room
28 Youngster
30 Hanoi holiday
32 Exit in haste
33 Altar promise
34 Visual communication syst.
36 Corsage flower
38 Whirls
39 Choir member
40 Resident of Tabriz
42 Composed
45 Taxpayer IDs
46 Refer to
48 "Friendly skies" co.
50 Brit's restroom
51 Fury



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Weekly SUDOKU

		7				2	4
					9	8	
8	4	9	2	1	5	3	7
5		4	7				8
9	6	8		2			
	9			8	2	4	5
	2	5		7	3	8	1	9
3			4			7	2

Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each small 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ◆◆

◆ Moderate ◆◆ Challenging ◆◆◆ HOO BOY!

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FiveSpot™

Wedding star

F	A	N	C	Y	Have a taste for
					Word before "apple" or "dish"
					Ritual movement
					Accelerated
					Shed tears
					Bouquet tosser

Solve each row by replacing one letter from the answer above or below and scrambling to make a new word. When complete, the top and bottom words will have no letters in common.

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Trivia test

by Fifi Rodriguez

1. TELEVISION: What is Ron Swanson's favorite food group in the sitcom "Parks and Recreation"?
2. GAMES: In Scrabble, how many tiles does each player get to start?
3. GEOGRAPHY: Dubai is in which Middle Eastern country?
4. MOVIES: What is Neo's real name in "The Matrix"?
5. U.S. PRESIDENTS: Which president was born with the name Leslie Lynch King Jr.?
6. LITERATURE: Which 19th-century English novel introduces the character Mr. Rochester?
7. FOOD & DRINK: Cornelius Rooster is the mascot of which cereal brand?
8. SCIENCE: What is the process called when water evaporates from plants?
9. CHEMISTRY: What is the most abundant metal in Earth's crust?
10. ANATOMY: How many vertebrae are in the human spine?

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Trivia Answers

1. Meat
2. Seven
3. United Arab Emirates
4. Thomas Anderson
5. Gerald Ford
6. "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte
7. Kellogg's Corn Flakes
8. Transpiration
9. Aluminum
10. 33

SCRAMBLERS

solution

1. Asylum; 2. Hybrid
3. Absurd; 4. Mourn

Today's Word

BUY-BUY

CryptoQuip

answer

If the actors Affleck, Stiller and Kingsley are all good buddies, I suppose they're Ben pals.

Weekly SUDOKU

Answer

1	3	7	9	6	8	5	2	4
6	5	2	3	4	7	9	8	1
8	4	9	2	1	5	3	6	7
5	1	4	7	3	6	2	9	8
2	7	3	8	9	4	1	5	6
9	6	8	5	2	1	7	4	3
7	9	6	1	8	2	4	3	5
4	2	5	6	7	3	8	1	9
3	8	1	4	5	9	6	7	2

FiveSpot™ Solution

B	R	I	D	E
C	R	I	E	D
R	A	C	E	D
D	A	N	C	E
C	A	N	D	Y
F	A	N	C	Y

— King Crossword —

Answers

Solution time: 26 mins.

S	T	R	A	P		R	A	G		S	T	E		
A	B	U	T	S		A	G	O		L	E	T		
P	A	S	T	A		M	A	D	R	U	S	H		
A		H	A	L	V	E	S		O	S	S	A		
R	A	J		M	A	A		W	U	H	A	N		
F	L	O	P		N	U	K	E	S					
D	E	B	A	T	E		I	B	E	R	I	A		
			R	E	S	O	D		S	U	D	S		
S	T	I	L	T		R	D	S		S	O	L		
P	E	R	O		S	C	O	T	C	H				
I	N	A	R	U	S	H		A	I	O	L	I		
N	O	N		A	N	I		I	T	F	O	R		
S	R	I		L	S	D		D	E	F	O	E		

— Weekly SUDOKU —

Answer

1	3	7	9	6	8	5	2	4
6	5	2	3	4	7	9	8	1
8	4	9	2	1	5	3	6	7
5	1	4	7	3	6	2	9	8
2	7	3	8	9	4	1	5	6
9	6	8	5	2	1	7	4	3
7	9	6	1	8	2	4	3	5
4	2	5	6	7	3	8	1	9
3	8	1	4	5	9	6	7	2

The man who rolled an old church through downtown to create Macon's first theater



Liz Riley

Many prominent Maconites have beautiful statues and monuments in Rose Hill Cemetery, while others are buried beneath a simple rectangle of bricks. The latter is the case for Eliphalet E. Brown — a Macon alderman, elected magistrate and hotel-owner — and his 14 family members.

Eliphalet Edgerton Brown was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1812 and moved with his family to Jones County in 1822. His father, William F. Brown, who died in 1829, was the first man in Georgia to manufacture cotton gins, according to an article written in 1886 for The Macon Telegraph.

In February 1836, Eliphalet enlisted with the Macon Volunteers and was sent to Florida to help subdue the Seminole Tribes during the Florida Wars.

During the war, Eliphalet was injured and briefly stayed at a field hospital. After he recovered, he volunteered to carry an important dispatch to General Winfield Scott.

Eliphalet traveled 90 miles on horseback through enemy territory to deliver the message. When he arrived in camp, General Scott declared him a hero and gave Eliphalet a sip of spirits from his personal flask.

Eliphalet returned to Macon, married Margaret Hollingsworth and they had 12 children. In 1836, Eliphalet was elected magistrate and served in that capacity for 18 years. He was also a city alderman for several years.

In 1838, Eliphalet's two brothers, A. D. and Israel Brown, were hired to build a new Baptist church. The old Baptist church, which sat at the corner of Sixth and Cherry streets, was given to the brothers as payment. At some point during the project, the brothers dissolved their partnership, and Eliphalet took over.

A.D. and Israel, went on to be very successful. A. D. secured three patents related to improvements to the cotton gin, and Israel Brown held patents on a washing machine and the cotton gin.

At this time, Macon had no theater, and Eliphalet saw an opportunity. He rolled the old Baptist church building from Sixth and Cherry streets to a lot on Third Street near Mulberry. The old church was painted, the pews were used as seats, and the building was turned into a theater.

People were furious and outraged at the idea of a church building being turned into a theater. However, it continued to operate for several years and was profitable.

In 1855, the Central of Georgia Railroad built a depot at Fourth and Plum streets. Eliphalet purchased a lot across the street and built The Brown Hotel, which was also known as the "Brown House." This three-story hotel, which opened in December of 1855, included sleeping apartments, reading rooms, a dining hall, bath rooms, a barber shop and a billiards saloon. The Georgia Journal and Messenger declared it a "first-class hotel."



PHOTO FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE MACON NEWS (1844-1983)

In addition to creating the first theater in Macon, Eliphalet E. Brown owned and operated The Brown Hotel, a three-story hotel which was burned by fire twice.

The Brown Hotel, which was located where WGXA News is now, went through several incarnations over the years.

In April of 1878, it was completely destroyed by fire, but by the time of the State Agricultural Fair in October of that same year, the hotel had been rebuilt. In 1921, a tragic explosion and fire burned the Brown Hotel to the ground, killing six people.

Eliphalet sold the Brown Hotel in 1880 and afterwards ran the National Hotel. While running the National Hotel, Eliphalet built The Edgerton, a new hotel that was named after his son, Eliphalet Edgerton Brown.

"Liph," as his son was known, died in a tragic accident while riding on a train. He climbed on the top of a car and was killed when his head hit a bridge truss as the train crossed the Flint River between Oglethorpe and Montezuma.

Eliphalet died in 1886 at the age of 73 after contracting dysentery. He and his family members are buried in a plot along Central Avenue in Rose Hill Cemetery.

In 2025, Liz Riley and Kathleen O'Neal began a visual inventory of every monument in Rose Hill Cemetery. The goal of this project is to provide a free, complete and accurate database of those interred, as well as maps for locating them. This column shares the fascinating stories discovered during this project.

BILLY'S LET'S EAT

Billy dishes on the Food Truck Frenzy and supporting Macon's local business scene



PHOTO PROVIDED BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Billy Hennessey met Cherry, a pink poodle at the International Cherry Blossom Festival in Macon. Hennessey enjoyed the pink festivities, but encouraged the community to support local.



Billy Hennessey

This year marked my very first time experiencing Macon's International Cherry Blossom Festival, and I have to say, I loved it. There is something special about seeing the community come alive this time of year. The streets are full, the energy is high and the entire city leans into what makes it so unique. It is, without question, the event of the year. It is our chance to show off just how beautiful Macon is, not just to visitors, but to ourselves.

For me, this season is personal. One year ago, during the Cherry Blossom Festival, I found my forever home in Macon and went into contract.

This time of year, the festival, the food as well as the community that surrounds it are deeply tied to why I fell in love with this city in the first place. The people, the local businesses, the sense of connection and the unmistakable vibe made me say, "This is home." I think I can safely say, I am a Maconite now.

So when I heard about the Food Truck Frenzy last weekend, I was excited. Even with the warnings about parking, I was all in. After a bit of a hunt, we found a spot, stepped out and jumped right into the experience. Walking through the vendor area, I genuinely loved what I saw. There were tents lined up with local businesses, familiar names and people who are part of the fabric of Macon. That is where the magic and connection was. That is where I happily stopped, supported and stocked up.

Then we made our way to the food trucks, and this is where, for me, things shifted. The first thing I noticed was that many of the food trucks were not local. Now, to be fair, I understand the appeal of bringing in outside vendors. It creates variety and gives people something different to try. There is value in that.

But the reality is, Macon already has that. We have dozens of locally owned food trucks and trailers throughout Middle Georgia, serving everything from comfort food to creative, chef-driven concepts.

These are businesses that live here, work here and contribute to our local economy every single day. And yet, at one of the biggest events of the year, many of them were not front and center.

Then came the pricing. I understand that festivals come with added costs. Vendors pay fees, they travel and they staff up. I respect that. But when a basket of wings and fries comes in at $25 without a drink, or a cheesesteak is priced at $20 on its own, it starts to feel disconnected from the reality of the community it is serving.

People are working hard for their money, and a day out at a festival should feel enjoyable, not like a financial decision that needs to be calculated at every stop. Judging by the conversations happening around me, I was not alone in that feeling.

So I did what I always do. I went local. I made my way over to Macon Water Ice and found exactly what I was looking for. A 10-piece wing combo with fries and a drink for $16.50, and a cheesesteak and wing combo with fries and a drink for $17.50. The difference was not just noticeable. It was undeniable. It felt fair, it felt accessible and most importantly, it felt like supporting the community I now call home. I saved about $30 and all my money went local.

And that is where this conversation becomes bigger than just one event. While the Cherry Blossom Festival brings in visitors from all over, it is also powered by the people who live here. The families, the workers, the small business owners and the locals who show up year after year to support what makes Macon special.

This festival belongs to them, too. That includes the businesses that operate right in the middle of it all. During the festival, many downtown streets are closed, which can make it harder for local businesses to operate as they normally would.

Parking becomes limited, access is reduced and while foot traffic increases, it does not always translate into the kind of support those businesses need.

That is why it is so important that local businesses are not just included, but prioritized. They should be made to feel like a central part of the festival experience. That could mean more visibility, more intentional promotion or even discounted vendor opportunities for those directly impacted by street closures.

Because when local businesses succeed during events like this, the entire community benefits. And when they are overlooked or priced out, that impact is felt just as strongly.

The Cherry Blossom Festival is an incredible event, organized by a dedicated team that works hard to bring something special to Macon every year. This is not about criticism for the sake of criticism. It is about recognizing an opportunity to make something already great even better.

If this festival is truly a celebration of Macon, then the focus should reflect that. Our local businesses should not just be included. They should be front and center. They should be the main event.

I loved my first Cherry Blossom Festival, and I love it even more now because I understand what it represents. That is exactly why this matters so much to me. I congratulate the Cherry Blossom Festival Committee for a job well done.

Until next time, Macon… let's blossom… together… and eat!

Billy Hennessey is the food columnist for The Melody. Write him an email at newlifenkiss@gmail.com.

"I loved my first Cherry Blossom Festival, and I love it even more now because I understand what it represents."





A parade of color: the magic of native azaleas



PHOTO BY BECCA GAY

The Magenta Rose Flame (Rhododendron flammeum) is a vibrant flower with yellow accents.

BY BECCA GAY
University of Georgia Cooperative Extension
extension.uga.edu

Spring fever always spikes for me when the first native azaleas begin blooming, brightening woodlands and landscapes with fragrance and color. Yet these spectacular native plants, with their wide range of colors and bloom times, are seldom seen in local gardens.

While azaleas have long been a popular shrub choice in the South, the familiar, evergreen azalea species came from Asia and fail to adequately support our local wildlife. Native azaleas, on the other hand, offer superior environmental adaptability and improved pollinator support, as well as being low maintenance and incredibly beautiful.

Currently taxonomists have identified 17 species of American azaleas, and Georgia is lucky to claim at least 12 as native, more than any other state! These vary in color, bloom time and fragrance, offering wide appeal. The first species to bloom is the Piedmont azalea (Rhododendron canescens) with its beautiful, pink-laced, fragrant white blossoms.

True gems of the Southeast, native azaleas are deciduous, meaning they drop their leaves in winter, but their buds develop during this time — offering a glimpse at the beauty ahead. The earliest species bloom before leaves emerge, putting on an especially pretty show. In autumn, leaves often turn vibrant colors, providing ongoing interest. With careful planning and species selection, one can have native azaleas blooming from March into September in Georgia.

Native azaleas have a more airy, freeform shape than their Asian cousins. They are also hardy, non-aggressive and well-adapted to our climate. After all, these azaleas have been growing wild as understory plants for thousands, if not millions, of years!

Consider adding these lovely plants to your landscape as borders, backgrounds or specimen plants. Here are some guidelines and features:

— Fragrant flowers often open before leaves and continue as leaves appear

— These slow growers can get as large as 8 feet wide and 15 feet tall

— Morning sun with afternoon shade is ideal, but the shrubs can often adapt

— Azaleas prefer acidic soil, pH range of 4.5-6.0. (Test soil through your local UGA Extension office to determine pH before planting)

— Fall is always the best time to plant, though any time will work with attention to site and hydration during establishment

— Though rarely needed, avoid pruning

SEE AZALEAS
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Gallery West closes doors, 'reSISTERS' exhibit opens at the Macon Arts Alliance



Michael W. Pannell

She Keene's solo gallery exhibit, "reSISTERS," opens First Friday at the Macon Arts Alliance gallery, 486 First St., with a reception from 4-7 p.m.

A Macon native, Keene has devoted herself to mixed-media art for several years now, following her retirement from a career as a Georgia Tech–trained engineer working for Department of Defense contractors in software and robotics development, as well as launching her own entrepreneurial projects.

While Keene told me her engineer's mindset and education only slightly influences her artistic approach, her career in a male-dominated field has made all the difference in the themes of her artwork — whether in paintings, posters or everyday items like stickers and mugs. Her art business, Redefining She, creates empowering work to inspire women and girls, give them visibility and representation, and educate the public about women of the past and present who make a difference in the world.

"reSISTERS" largely focuses on heroes — known and unknown — of the women's right-to-vote movement. Whether a piece carries a clear message, as many do, or is more subtly created, Keene includes a QR code linking viewers to online stories and biographies. In all her work, she also includes a somewhat hidden date representing a significant, inspiring, woman-centric occurrence or story.

Plainly put in her artist's statement for "reSISTERS," Keene writes: "My work centers on the ongoing struggle for equality and justice, viewed through the lens of women and marginalized communities whose resistance spans generations. In my series reSISTERS, I create abstract and figurative mixed-media pieces that collage historic photographs of early suffragists, layered with both bold and fading text — words that reflect the rights and freedoms people are still fighting to claim today.

"These works point to an unsettling truth: many of the battles women and minorities waged a century ago remain unresolved. By folding the past into the present, my work exposes the cyclical nature of resistance while affirming the unbreakable spirit of those who continue to rise, speak out and demand change."

Keene said she wants viewers to "feel the weight of history — HERstory — alongside the urgency of this moment; to see themselves reflected in the lineage of protest and to carry forward the courage, solidarity and hope that resistance, in all its forms, makes possible."

She is partly inspired by her own experience of being the only woman in the room as an engineer — paid less and having to "work twice as hard to get half the credit" — and partly by stories of

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Special Content furnished to the Macon Melody.

TINY HABIT SHIFTS THAT GIVE YOUR BRAIN A BOOST



Sponsored by: Carlyle Place
A Life-Plan Community of **Atrium Health Navicent**

If you've ever driven home and realized you don't remember half the trip, you're not alone.

As we get older, our brains get very good at running on autopilot. That's efficient, but it's not always great for keeping the mind sharp.

The good news? You don't need crossword puzzles, complicated brain apps, or hours of meditation to give your brain a workout. Sometimes, simply doing everyday things a little differently can help wake it up.

Researchers have found that changing small daily habits — like brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand or taking a different walking route — can help activate new neural pathways. In plain language: Your brain has to slow down, pay attention, and work a bit harder. And that's a good thing.

WHY ROUTINE CAN MAKE THE BRAIN A LITTLE LAZY

Our brains love habits. Once you've done something the same way for years (making coffee, walking the dog, driving to the store), your brain stores it as a shortcut. That frees up energy, but it also means fewer new connections are being made.

When you change up your routine, it engages your brain in a new way. You have to pay attention to new details and really focus on coordination. Over time, these moments of "mental surprise" can support memory, focus, and overall cognitive health.

THE POWER OF SMALL, EVERYDAY CHANGES

This isn't about being uncomfortable or stressed. In fact, the best changes are gentle and low-stakes. You're not trying to master a new language overnight. You're simply nudging your brain out of cruise control.Some examples:

- Brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand
- Switching which foot you step up with first
- Sitting in a different chair at the table
- Writing a short note by hand instead of typing

These small shifts create what scientists call "novelty," which helps the brain form new connections. Over time, those connections support flexibility, something that becomes especially important as we age.

A SIMPLE WEEKLY HABIT-SHIFTING GUIDE

If you like structure, here's a gentle one-week plan you can repeat or mix and match. Each idea takes just a few minutes a day.

MONDAY: SWITCH HANDS
Brush your teeth or stir your coffee using your non-dominant hand. It will feel awkward at first, but the point is to get your brain to really focus on what you're doing.

TUESDAY: CHANGE YOUR ROUTE
Take a different path on your walk, drive a new way to the store, or simply reverse your usual walking loop and pay attention to what's different.

WEDNESDAY: SIT SOMEWHERE NEW
A shift in perspective can increase your awareness and improve your mental flexibility. Try sitting in a new chair at the dinner table, or watch TV from a different spot in the living room.

THURSDAY: SHAKE UP YOUR SENSES
Have a little fun while eating! Close your eyes and describe a snack's taste and texture, or use a new spice or herb in a meal.

FRIDAY: USE PEN AND PAPER
Instead of typing, write a short list, note, or journal entry by hand to engage a different part of your brain.

SATURDAY: LEARN SOMETHING NEW
Challenge yourself a little by looking up a fun fact or trying a simple puzzle you don't normally do. This can help improve your memory, which is important as you get older.

SUNDAY: TAKE YOUR TIME
Do one routine task, like folding laundry or washing dishes, more slowly than usual. Pay close attention to each movement.

THE KEY TO MAKING IT STICK

The key is not to overthink it. You don't need to do every activity perfectly or even remember them all. The goal is variety, not perfection.

If something feels frustrating, skip it. If something makes you laugh at yourself, that's a bonus! Laughter itself is good for the brain. Many people find that these small changes also bring a sense of curiosity back into daily life.

Tasks feel less rushed. Moments feel more intentional. And that mental engagement can be just as valuable as the brain benefits themselves.



ARTS

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women's struggles for equal rights, from voting to establishing their own economic identity.

"My art is about changing stereotypes that put women in cages," Keene said. "Growing up in the South, there were strong definitions of who and what women should be, and a lot of them are still there. Women's stories aren't told often enough. I want to spread HERstory. I want to show how, right here in the U.S., women have had to fight long and hard for basic rights, even suffering hardship, being beaten, starved and imprisoned. There's an obligation now to show and honor what women have done and to fight, ourselves, to protect what they've accomplished and to advance it."

Keene noted there's very little taught in schools about women's history and much of what exists on government websites is being removed.

"I'm happy with the work I create," Keene said. "If women and girls can look at this body of work and see themselves as a collective group, a part of the story, a part of something bigger, that will be a win. Together we can do really big things."

Keene attributes her controlled artistic approach, which she said is not "the greatest skill to have as an artist," to her background in engineering.

"I'm the kind of artist who has to have some sort of visual point of reference," she said. "I can have an idea in my head, but before I can make it into a piece of art, I absolutely have to sketch it out, lay out where I want things on the canvas."

Not being a classically trained artist has influenced Keene's style choices and how she works.

"I chose mixed media over everything else because I could bring so much into it — so many media, collage and ways of working—and, at the end of the day, I didn't have to go back to school to learn that classical skill set," she said. "Sometimes I have felt a little like an imposter because of it, but mixed media offers a grand opportunity to make something without rules. I don't have to be too hypercritical of myself for breaking rules."



PHOTO BY ANNA DANIELS PHOTOGRAPHY

She Keene at work in her studio. Keene will have a solo exhibit for the April First Friday at the Macon Arts Alliance gallery, 486 First St., with a reception from 4-7 p.m.

Keene's work and a wealth of historical information on women and women's issues can be found on her website, redefiningshe.com and her social media.

Gallery West set to close May 31

"I've been talking about this for a couple of years," said Kirsten West, owner-operator of the gallery, which primarily features the work of her husband, Kirk West, famed photographer of musicians such as Johnny Cash, Keith Richards, old Chicago blues artists and the Allman Brothers Band, for whom he served as tour manager for more than a decade.

From the start, the gallery has been a highlight for Allman Brothers and Capricorn Studios fans visiting Macon, the mecca of Southern rock. In fact, the Wests were among the first to promote Macon as a music-tourist destination by bringing the Allman Brothers' Big House back to life and starting the gallery downtown 11 years ago, when, if you'll remember, there was a whole lot of nothing downtown.

That makes the Wests not only key in promoting the arts and tourism but also among the very first to dare to envision the revitalization of downtown.

In recent years, the Wests have expanded those shown at the gallery to include local artists, as well as bringing in impressive national touring exhibits for Middle Georgia audiences.

The gallery isn't closing due to business falling of f— it's as active as ever — but because the Wests are ready to "retire" from it. It's Kirsten West's third or fourth "retirement" after a successful career as a businesswoman, her work in the early days of the Big House, the Capitol Theatre and other projects, including the gallery.

"We've reached out to try to get someone to take it over, but so far that just hasn't happened," she said. "I'd still love for it to, but it's just time for us to go ahead and close it if no one comes forward."

West said it would take a surprisingly small amount for someone to take over the gallery's lease and continue operations. Downtown leaders agree it will be a shame to see the gallery come to an end.

So be sure to drop in sometime — or make it to the remaining First Friday shows — before doors close. And didn't someone sing something about not knowing what you've got 'til it's gone?

Gallery West is at 447 Third St. Contact them at kirsten@gallerywestmacon.com and facebook.com/gallerywestmacon.

Contact writer Michael W. Pannell at mwpannell@gmail.com. Find him on Instagram at michael_w_pannell.



PHOTO BY BECCA GAY

Native azaleas are low maintence and good for pollination.

AZALEAS

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after July 1.

Among the likeliest native azaleas to find locally, in order of bloom time, are:

— Piedmont (R. canescens) white with pink

— Oconee (R. flammeum) yellowish-orange, orange, red

— Florida Flame (R. austrinum) yellow, reddish tube

— Red Hills (R. colemanii) white, pale pink, pale yellow

— Flame (R. calendulaceum) yellow to orange to deep red.

— Swamp (R. viscosum) fragrant white blooms

— Plumleaf (R. prunifolium) orange to vivid red

— Smooth, Sweet (R. arborescens) fragrant white blooms

You can see the season's earliest bloomers, R. canescens and R. flammeum, now! Visit the native plant garden beside the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Macon. This Bibb master gardener-maintained shade garden is located off the parking lot near the planetarium.

Becca Gay is a Macon-Bibb Master Gardener, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Volunteer, and native plant enthusiast. UGA's extension service in Bibb County provides resources for gardeners as well as educational services and community support. Visit their office at 715 Oglethorpe Street, call them at 748-310-5350or email their staff at bibb.extension@uga.edu.

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Crab Boi Floyd
Oh, So Fresh

ARTS & CRAFTS:
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C. Marie Creations
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STRATFORD SOCCER STAYS PERFECT

The Eagles' girls team continued their incredible season with a dominant 10-0 win over Tattnall





PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES
ABOVE: Stratford's Ava Jeshuran (17) stretches to toe the ball towards goal during the Eagles' 10-0 win over Tattnall Tuesday night.

RIGHT: Stratford's Hadley Stewart (5) controls the ball during the Eagles' 10-0 win over Tattnall Tuesday night. Stewart is one of multiple younger players on the team that pair with Stratford's four seniors and five juniors to form a remarkably well-rounded team.

BY MICHAEL A. LOUGH
Melody Contributor

Another match, another restful afternoon for Maggie Jamison.

Yet again, the Stratford goalie didn't have a whole lot to do, and after a little more than 48 minutes, she and her teammates had another mercy-rule shutout under their belts.

Stratford improved to 11-0 on Tuesday with its second 10-0 win over Tattnall, not needing the full 80 minutes to take care of business. The game ended with 11:55 left in the 20-minute second half.

And that kind of mental makeup — focused on taking care of business — is why veteran head coach Kate Blankenship leads an extraordinarily coachable team that returns most of its regulars.

"Every year, your dynamic changes," said Blankenship, who had a quality college career at UAB. "You're talking about 30 girls. From my perspective, I worry about chemistry, making sure that's all kind of working, on and off the field.

"I didn't have concerns about leadership, because this senior class is really, really good."

So are the others.

Stratford has outscored opponents — including GHSA Class 5A Lee County, which the Eagles defeated twice by a cumulative score of 14-0 — by a margin of 93-3. The last team to score on the Eagles was Central Fellowship, which accumulated two-thirds of the goals against Stratford in an 11-2 loss on March 5.

Since then, it's been shutout after shutout, now eight straight with five shortened games.

It's not necessarily a surprise, but one can't take much for granted on the high school level. Then again, Stratford's soccer tradition is long and storied.

"I feel like we've been building for this for a few years," Campbell McIntyre said. "It's really coming to light right now."

McIntyre is one of four seniors, to go along with five juniors, giving the Eagles — who went 15-2 last year — a mix of experience and youth.

Emma Lizotte and Maddie Biesterfeld entered Tuesday night with 36 points each, with four teammates at between 20 and 29 points. Seven players have at least five goals.

A testament to Stratford's balance: Lizotte was shut out against the Trojans, but Biesterfield was one of four Eagles with two goals.

Logan Maxwell doubled her season assist total with two, and was joined by six teammates, yet only one came into the action in the top four in assists.

At this rate, Blankenship may have nobody to put up for region player of the year, but the Eagles could dominate overall postseason honors.

"Whew, that's a tough one," Blankenship said. "This group is really balanced. I was talking to someone today, and you know, our last game, we won 7-0 and we had seven different people score."

She was jokingly hesitant to display her stats so as not to give anything away, but seven different scorers in a 7-0 game says enough.

"When you want to talk about one person being the team, this isn't really that team," Blankenship said. "We're not relying on one player, we're relying on the cohesion of 11 plus.

"I'm hoping I'm hard to scout."

McIntyre said Stratford is playing like it should be, and while not perfect, has few weaknesses.

"I'd say like up top wide, or wide forwards," she said of the strengths. "We've definitely improved this year, just kind of know what runs to make, where to run.

"Our speed up top is just phenomenal this year."

And Blankenship can throw almost two dozen players onto the pitch and hardly flinch.

"This group has kind of shown themselves to be a really good mixture of kind of that fiery youth and great leadership with a high level of depth throughout the team," the 2006 Stratford grad said. "From a depth perspective, I've never had this much depth."

She's not sure how many different starting lineups she's used, and guessed only a few players haven't started yet.

Despite gaining early control on Tuesday, Stratford kept going hard to eventually force the early finish.

"I just feel like our composure was here, and we knew what we needed to do," McIntyre said. "Just attack wide and come in. I think our finishing was really good today compared to our first game (with Tattnall)."

It doesn't leave Blankenship much to bark about — not that she doesn't holler at her team anyway.

"She is always trying to make us better versions of ourselves, not only on the field, but just in general," McIntyre said. "She says it's a big component to just always prove yourself and always just try to be the best version of yourself on the field and just take care of those around you.

"It's pretty much the mental side of it she gets onto us about. And always make sure you can never get beat because of fitness."

Ah, the team that outruns opponents but doesn't like to run.

SEE STRATFORD
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PHOTO BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Mercer's Eli Stephens (12) celebrates his go-ahead grand slam with a teammate as others look on during Mercer's 14-4 win on Tuesday.

Mercer baseball bounces back at home with 14-4 win

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

Mercer baseball got back on track at home Tuesday night, clobbering three home runs in the fourth inning alone — including a go-ahead grand slam from Eli Stephens — en route to a nine-run frame that helped them outpace in-state opponent Kennesaw State in a 14-4 victory that only took seven innings.

The Bears improved to 22-7 with the win and snapped a three-game skid that came at the hands of No. 13 Oregon State last weekend, where they faced some of the country's top pitchers and put up a good fight in two of the three games.

"We scored more on their Friday night (pitching staff) than anybody has all year and we had a chance to win Friday and Sunday. The end results weren't great, but I think our guys got back on track tonight," head coach Craig Gibson said. "We didn't fly 3,000 miles for a moral victory, but we played in front of a big crowd and got to see some elite arms. We played really well outside of three innings. … If you ask me, the trip was worth it."

The third and fourth innings were the key points of Tuesday night's bounceback contest contest. The Owls took the lead in the third, but reliever Andrew Garnett managed to escape a bases-loaded, nobody out jam with only two Kennesaw State runs crossing the plate.

Then came a game-tying homer from Michael Graziano in the bottom of the third, followed by Stephens' slam and two more home runs in the fourth inning that opened things up for the Bears.

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PHOTO BY MARK POWELL
Morgan Davis dives under the tag of ACE's Aiden Sanderson to score the first of Dublin's five runs in the fourth inning.

ACE baseball rolls as new coach Bubba Pool settles in with Gryphons

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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A coach's first season with a new school can be an interesting thing — a variety of factors can play a role in how the season unfolds, but at the end of the day, folks will be watching and comparing the team's new leader to past performances.

As far as debut seasons go, ACE baseball coach Bubba Pool is cruising along.

The Gryphons are off to a roaring start as baseball teams pass midseason, boasting a 16-4 record and an 13-1 record in Region 2-A Division I with Pool at the helm, who came to ACE after spending more than a decade coaching at Mount de Sales.

"Coach (Robert) Slocum gave me the opportunity to come to Mount de Sales and I really loved it," said Pool, who racked up more than 150 wins with the Cavaliers. "I had other opportunities while I was there, but they never felt right. (ACE) just felt like the right move for my family … it's the start of a new chapter."

There was no doubt when he arrived that expectations would remain high at ACE, which has won several region championships since the school opened in 2017. Much of that success came under former head coach and athletic director Josh McLendon, who also brought the softball team to a state

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MERCER

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"To stop it right there and then for the hitters to get us a little breathing room, you can't say enough. I think what we've done offensively, our guys have created (and) sort of suffocated the other pitcher where every pitch is a big pitch. We have the ability to do that, one-through-nine," Gibson said.

Stephens' big fly felt like the most crucial of the bunch, as it came with the contest still tied in the fourth and felt like the dam breaking open after Mercer had stranded a handful of runners in the first three innings.

"We saw the best pitching staff in the country. I feel like seeing that type of stuff… coming back and seeing this, it makes everything look easier," Stephens said. "That guy (for Kennesaw) was a good arm, mid-90s guy. A lot of fastballs, though. So when I got to two strikes … I was late on the fastball, but that's our two-strike timing.

"I got lucky, I guess," he added with a small smile.

The homer was one of three hits on the night for Stephens and netted him four of his six RBIs. Both of those numbers led the team.

The home runs that gave Mercer the momentum were set up by smart at-bats by the top of Mercer's order. The grand slam, for instance, was set up by a walk, a single and a hit batter by the 2-4 spots in the lineup. The entire lineup seemed to click for the Bears when it counted.

"Just a great team win tonight," Stephens said. "Drew Johnson came in and hit a massive home run, couldn't be more happy for that guy. Then (Chris) Katz hit a homer in that inning, too, I think. We have guys like Drew who can come off the bench and hit a ball 108 (mph)."

It was a close game early, though both teams struggled with command on the bump and issued free passes that led to runs. Braydon Kersey, who is typically a contributor at the dish for the Bears and leads the team with 10 home runs this season, got the start on the mound.

"We wanted to get Braydon to focus on pitching tonight. He's been giving us a great boost offensively in the cleanup spot, but we wanted him to just be a pitcher tonight. And of course (Kaleb Huffman's) at-bats have been great," Gibson said. "We had an opportunity to get Drew Johnson in there. He hit a double out at Oregon State and we felt like we wanted to get him a matchup tonight."

Mercer plated two runs in the bottom of the first but left runners on base, and it looked like the missed opportunity might come back to bite them when a rough outing from Aidan Hayse allowed Kennesaw State — which had scored in the second inning — to plate three runs in the third to go ahead 4-2.

The Bears shrugged it off in the bottom of the same frame with Graziano's blast, the first of many blows that would come courtesy of the bottom part of the lineup. The nine-spot came in the next inning, which sealed the deal for good.

Mercer's bullpen did an excellent job keeping the Owls in check after the first three innings. Jess Ackerman was particularly key, coming in after the big fourth inning and striking out four batters in a clean two frames to set things up for Collin Ewaldsen and Kai Decker to finish things off in the seventh.

"We wanted to get Ewaldsen back in there. He's had some scuffles. We've never scuffled on him, we believe in him, but I think tonight was good for him. I think he was up to 94-95 mph," Gibson said. "Decker looks like he may be a guy who can help us at the end of the game, so we wanted him to get out there. I think he was up to 95-96 mph with balls in the strikeout.

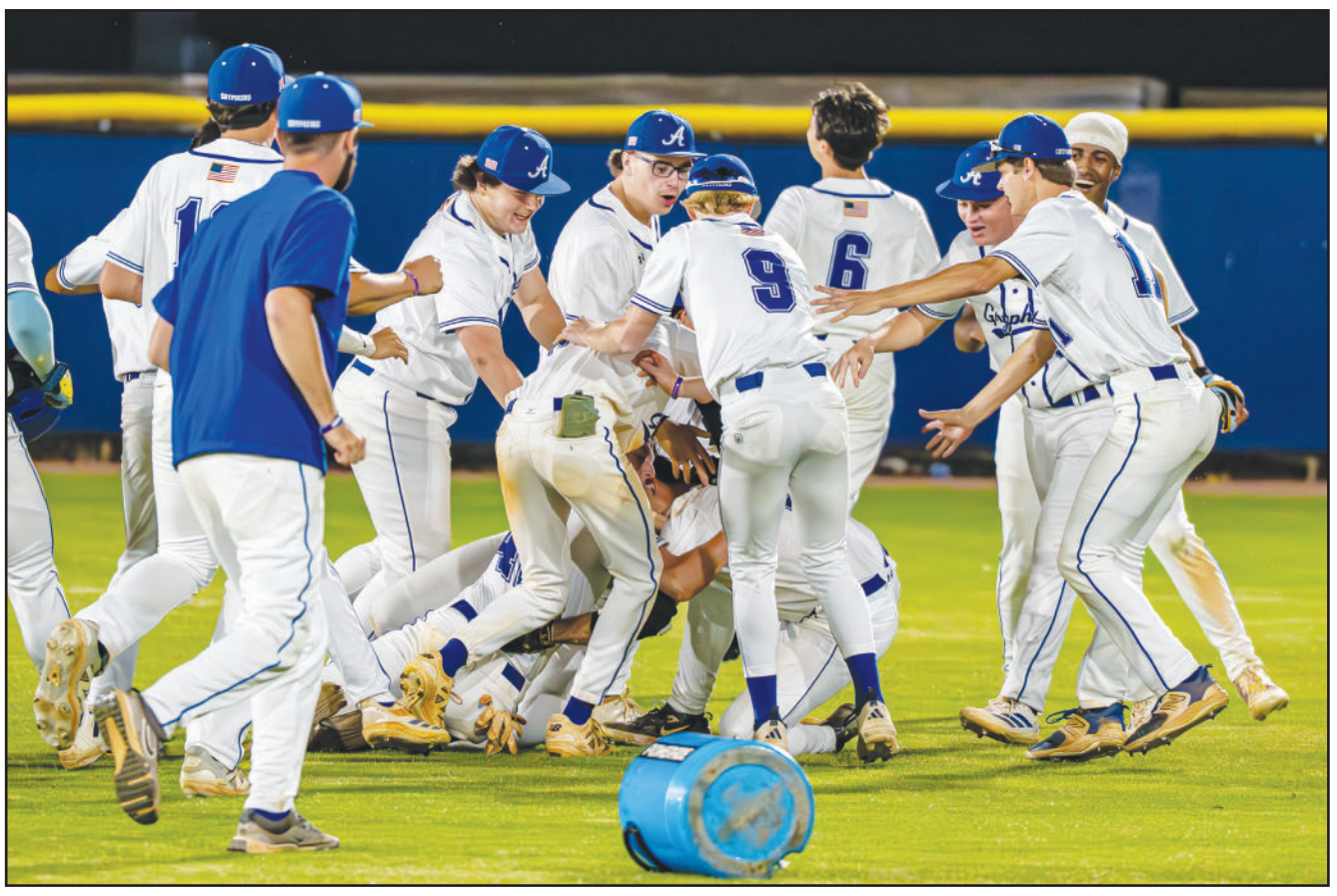
The victory continued Mercer's winning ways at home — the Bears are now 17-2 at OrthoGeorgia Park on the year. A critical Southern Conference road series against UNC Greensboro beginning Thursday, which puts Mercer on a short week.

"We're in great position for this weekend on a short week," Gibson said. "They're gonna play well at home, a couple years ago they won the league. … They're gonna be ready to play, and we know going on the road you gotta be offensive and they're gonna pitch well."



PHOTO BY MICAH JOHNSTON

Mercer first baseman Chris Katz celebrates as he crosses home plate following a home run in the fourth inning that capped a nine-run frame for the Bears. Katz has been one of the key bats for Mercer all year.





PHOTOS BY MARK POWELL

ABOVE: The ACE Gryphons mob Sebastian Falduti after his walk-off hit seals a 9-8 win over the Dublin Fighting Irish last week.

LEFT: ACE starting pitcher William Makowski slings a pitch toward the plate as a Dublin batter steps in during the Gryphons' win over their fellow Region 2-A Division I opponent last week. The win puts ACE in a great position moving forward with important games against Washington County and Bleckley County coming up.

ACE

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championship while he was at ACE.

"That was part of why I came here. I knew I wouldn't be taking over a struggling program, obviously ACE has had a really good program here," Pool said.

And Pool has stepped right into said program and not missed a beat, as ACE has outscored region opponents 182 to 36 en route to another dominant campaign thus far. The offense hums on a regular basis and is led by senior Slade Hodge, while the Gryphons' ace — no pun intended — is William Makowski.

"We trust him the most, and we're going to throw him until he tells us he can't throw," Pool said of Mawkowski after a recent game against Dublin.

That game, which ended in a thrilling 9-8 win on a walk-off double by Sebastian Falduti, had a great energy to it, even with other ACE students away on spring break. The Gryphons manufactured the walk-off in the seventh inning by getting multiple walks to load the bases, reflecting a disciplined approach Pool said he's preached all year.

ACE turned around and beat the Fighting Irish again the next day after that win, this time by a score of 17-8. They are in first place in the region. The Gryphons' two games against Bleckley County, a perennial powerhouse in the region which is 18-3 so far this year, should decide who takes home the first-place trophy and gets a higher playoff seed.

That's another key difference between Pool's old gig at Mount de Sales and the job at ACE — while the Cavaliers spent some time in the GHSA, they were typically in the private school classification; Mount de Sales has been in the GIAA, with fewer teams, for several years now.

"I haven't noticed a difference talent-wise necessarily. In GIAA you have your top eight or top 10 teams kind of together, in GHSA it's a little more spread out," Pool said. "A big thing is we're in a big region this year with 10 teams."

That's why ACE's current separation is so important going forward — and why that upcoming series against Bleckley County, as well as the one against a talented Washington County team currently in fourth in the region, loom large as the Gryphons hit the stretch run of this season.

ACE should be prepared for that run with its balanced offense and pitching so far. Pool said he's gotten along well with all of the players on the team and enjoys watching them play, though he's still settling in just a bit.

"It's a new challenge every day, and I love it. I love being in a new environment. There were some growing pains early because I had to get to know all the kids and they have to trust me, but things have been so much fun," Pool said. "I'll be honest, practice is the most fun for me. It's just exciting. I get out there and tell 'em, that ought to be the best part of your day, the two hours you come to practice."

As far as the games go, Pool said he was relying on that age-old mantra that many coaches lean on as the season progresses: just take it one game at a time.

STRATFORD

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"Fitness started the first day, and it still does not stop," McIntyre said with a chuckle of exasperation. "Trust me, those hills are killing us."

Perhaps a little exaggeration?

"They were fit from the day that we started," Blankenship said. "That's a testament to what they put in prior to the season. That meant that immediately, we were working on soccer."

The Eagles are a collection of Energizer Bunnies in soccer uniforms — they're almost too zealous when it comes to practicing against one another.

"I have to reign them in a little bit. They want to go hard, they want to tackle, you know, for an hour and a half straight," Blankenship said. "And I'm like, 'Hey, look, that's your teammate, too, right?'"

At least there are only the routine bruises so far of going hard in practice and on gameday. The sharpness in all phases is evident.

"Everybody's doing what they should be doing," McIntyre said. "Everybody fits the role they're supposed to fit, and everybody is doing what they're supposed to be doing to help us have such a great season.

"It's just our discipline and trust in each other. It's not necessarily something that we physically have, but just the connection we have with each other."



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Stratford's Eva Morehead (6) knock down the ball during the Eagles' 10-0 win over Tattnall Tuesday night. The Eagles have gotten goals from a variety of players and started nearly everyone on the team at least once across their undefeated season, which has them poised for a playoff run in the upcoming state tournament.