



In Our 137th Year

Serving Oconee County



The Oconee Enterprise

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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF Rick Garrett, Happy Birthday!

THURSDAY • 12 AUGUST 2021



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Citizen has deep roots in Bogart

Woman is seventh generation. Lifestyles, **A6**



WCA volleyball begins new year

Lady Lions aim high for 2021 season. Sports, **B1**

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17-year-old Paralympian MeiMei White has won numerous gold and silver medals with the U.S. Paralympic National Swim Team. [Submitted photo]

Local swimmer competes in the Paralympic Games

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

"I'm built tough," MeiMei White, a 17-year-old World Para Swimming World Series gold medalist said confidently while explaining the mechanics of her military-grade prosthetic leg. "Just like a Ford F-150."

White's strongly built hydraulic knee is attached to a girl whose endurance and muscle strength is a product of more than a decade of rigorous conditioning, global competitions and sunrise swims.

Up by 4:30 a.m., White takes off her prosthesis and dives into the pool with a delightful splash before propelling herself down the lane with steam-engine speed and autopilot precision.

She feels completely free—free of stress or worry or the ambient sounds of a busy room.

All she hears is the pleasant rush of water under the graceful movements of her muscular arms.

"It's so nice to feel that freedom in the water," she said gleefully. "I can do anything in the water that I want to do. I can turn everything off. All the chaos in life—I can put that aside, put my head down and swim."

In several weeks, White will be representing the United States in the Paralympic Games, which will run from Aug. 24 to Sept. 5 in Tokyo, Japan.

White emphasizes the word "elite" when explaining that the Paralympic Games is for elite athletes with physical disabilities. In a TED Talk last year, White said her disability does not define her.

"Individuals with disabilities do not want to be treated differently," she said, revealing that her greatest pet peeve is when someone calls her "an inspiration" just because of her prosthesis.

White's peers see her as an inspiration for her athleticism, endurance and perseverance—full stop.

White, who was adopted at 18 months from LianYunGang, China, was born with a birth defect called proximal femoral focal deficiency that necessitated an amputation of her right leg when she was 2.

"I was born with a small right leg, and I don't have a functioning hip," White explained.

At age 5, White began swimming as part of her physical therapy regimen. By 13, she attended her first international competition in England. At 14, she was competing in Germany, Singapore and Peru with the U.S. Paralympic National Swim Team.

In the 2019 Parapan American Games in Lima, Peru, White won a gold medal in the 100-meter



White was adopted at 18 months from LianYunGang, China. Her family has lived in Florida as well as Macon, Georgia, before relocating to Oconee in 2020. [Submitted photo]



White was born with a birth defect called proximal femoral focal deficiency that necessitated an amputation of her right leg when she was 2. [Submitted photo]

breaststroke and a silver medal in the 400-meter freestyle.

In the 2019 World Para Swimming World Series in Indianapolis, she won a gold in the 100-meter breaststroke and the 400-meter freestyle, as well as a bronze in the individual medley.

During the Paralympic trials in June of this year, White ranked 25th among the available 24 slots and was named an alternate.

Weeks later, she was on her way to a doctor's appointment when she read an email revealing that a slot opened up. After reading the first three sentences, White broke down in tears.

In the Paralympics, White plans on competing in the 100-meter breast stroke, which she described as "such a beautiful stroke but the most complicated to do."

SEE OLYMPIAN PAGE A3

Jailer arrested for sex crimes against inmate

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA,

On Friday, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation arrested former Oconee County Sheriff's Office jailer Blake Edward Patat, 30, of Comer, for one count of felony sexual assault and felony violation of oath of office.

Patat, a graduate of Oglethorpe County High School who had been working for the Oconee Sheriff's Office for less than a year, is accused of having sexual contact with an inmate on July 25.

Oconee Sheriff James Hale said in a public statement that he was made aware of an allegation on Aug. 3 and immediately launched an internal investigation.

On Aug. 4, Hale contacted the GBI to conduct an official criminal investigation.

There was enough evidence to terminate Patat and another jail employee.

Hale said of the other employee,

"We don't have any evidence to believe he did anything criminal. But he definitely violated policies."



Patat

Oconee County sheriff, I was elected to uphold the laws and protect the citizens of this county, and I will not tolerate misconduct of any kind in our Sheriff's Office."

Former Sheriff Scott Berry also had to fire jailers due to misconduct. In August 2012, a jailer sent a Facebook friend request and a text message to an inmate.

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Odom resigns from BOE Post 1, Chair

A successor will be appointed

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Board of Education Chairman Tom Odom announced on Monday that he will step down from the BOE on Sept. 1 due to health reasons.

Odom told The Oconee Enterprise that he will not disclose his health concerns at this time.

After serving as principal at several local schools, Odom was elected Post 1 BOE chairman in 2012.

"[He] has been a steadfast, wise voice for public education and has impacted the lives of countless teachers and students," said Superintendent Jason Branch.

Odom told The Enterprise that he's proud of OCS achieving equity of school facilities throughout the county, as well as the construction of Dove Creek Elementary School and the forthcoming Dove Creek Middle School.

"I had set personal goals that served as a road map for me to be effective on the board as chair," Odom said at the meeting. "All of those goals have been realized or soon to be realized."

OCS Director of Communications Anisa Sullivan Jimenez said the BOE will appoint someone to fill the Post 1 Chairman position this calendar year.



Odom

According to a 1964 legislative resolution, "Any vacancy occurring in the membership of the Board of Education of Oconee County, for any cause whatsoever, shall be filled by the majority vote of the remaining members of the Board of Education."

The BOE has made three previous appointments in the past 11 years.

In 2010, Wayne Bagley was appointed to the BOE following the resignation of Tom Breedlove. Tim Burgess was appointed in 2014 following the resignation of Mike Burnette. Amy Parrish was appointed in 2016 to fill the seat vacated by Mark Thomas.

Bagley, Burgess and Parrish were all elected when their initial appointment term ended.

Odom was last elected in 2020, so his vacated seat has a little more than three years left on its term.

County has a setback with internet initiative

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The previously approved public-private partnership to improve internet service in the county is now dead in the water.

Following an executive session for "real estate and litigation," the Board of Commissioners this month opted out of its contract with Smart City Capital to build a fiber backbone for the county.

"We just haven't gotten the progress we were hoping for at this point," BOC Chairman John Daniell told The Oconee Enterprise. "We are working on a Plan B. We are not giving up on the project by any means."

Daniell said the county spent no money with Smart City Capital and that the partnership at this preliminary stage cost "nothing but time."

The BOC convened in executive session to discuss the legality of terminating the contract. Daniell said there is no fee or penalty for opting out.

"We don't anticipate any litigation," he said.

Daniell said the county will still try to move quickly on another plan to improve broadband connectivity.

"We will hopefully have some



BOC Chairman John Daniell says broadband connectivity remains a top priority. [File photo]

news by the end of September or sooner," he said. "It's a very important project for Oconee County. We are not giving up on this."

The previous contract with Smart City Capital out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was to create a new company that would sell broadband services to citizens following the installation of 540 miles of fiber-optic cable.

SEE INTERNET PAGE A3

This issue was mailed Wednesday, Aug. 12, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.

