

# 2014 A YEAR IN LOCAL SPORTS IN REVIEW

Year gone by featured cheers, tears ... and these 10 major stories

2014, take a bow. Heck, take a victory lap. You deserve it. The joys of winning, the heartache of defeat, the drama in between ... you did not leave the area sports fan wanting for action.

On the prep scene, you delivered eight state titles, countless Final Four runs and several memorable county, district and region titles from the Daily News' expansive 12-school coverage area.

Collegiately, Northwest Florida State once again shined on the tennis courts, Tampa Bay defensive tackle Akeem Spence wreak havoc on quarterbacks and running backs, and Jimmy Nelson toss 1-2-3 innings for the Milwaukee Brewers.

The list goes on. Yet no list can truly do justice to what transpired this year. I was there through it all with my notepad and pen, iPhone, laptop and tennis jug, taking copious notes, tweeting like a madman, interviewing athletes and coaches and trying my darndest to capture each rich scene.

I laughed and cried. I was locked into stadiums burning the midnight oil. I left games and venues shaking my head at the sheer amount of talent I had witnessed.

It was truly a memorable year. So without further ado, I present our Top 10 Sports Stories of the Year.

Professionally, we saw Wil Spencer and Alexa Guarachi shine on the tennis courts, Tampa Bay defensive tackle Akeem Spence wreak havoc on quarterbacks and running backs, and Jimmy Nelson toss 1-2-3 innings for the Milwaukee Brewers.

## 2. PATRICK HARRINGTON DIES



Northwest Florida State women's basketball head coach Patrick Harrington gathers the team before the start of a game.

FILE PHOTO | Daily News

**NWF State women's basketball coach Patrick Harrington dies after car wreck** — In early October, Northwest Florida State College and the Emerald Coast were rocked by the passing of Raider women's basketball coach Patrick Harrington.

Just 51 when he succumbed to injuries suffered from a head-on car collision, Harrington was a brilliant basketball mind, loving husband and caring father to three.

From his locker-room speeches to his postgame interviews to every moment he wielded the Raider clipboard, he exuded class and humility. Brought in to put

NWF State back on the map, he did just that and more. In just four years, he built the Raiders into a perennial power.

He did so by preaching fundamentals, lauding effort and championing the values of a lockdown defense. Reinforcing those basic principles were an unmatched sense of humor and passion for the game.

He won an average of 25 games a year during his tenure. He also broke two 18-year droughts in the 2012-13 campaign with a Co-Panhandle Conference championship and an NJCAA tournament appearance, the first of back-to-back Elite Eight appearances.

## 1. NICEVILLE AND CHOCTAW FOOTBALL



Niceville's Chase Outzen (6) and Scott Armfield bring down Rutherford receiver Justin Parker during an August game against Rutherford.

FILE PHOTOS | Daily News



Choctaw's Quint Gornto makes a play during a game against Ed White in the playoffs.

**Niceville and Choctaw football teams make Okaloosa County history by advancing to Final Four** — Their narratives couldn't have been more disparate.

In one corner you had perennial power 7A Niceville, celebrating its 14th straight playoff trip with its second consecutive Final Four.

In the other was 6A Choctaw, building off its first district title since 2002 with its first Final Four in 24 years.

Together they made Okaloosa County history, becoming the first football teams to simultaneously represent the county — a 1,082-square-mile stretch extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Alabama state line — in the state semifinals.

The two played each other during the season, with the Eagles turbo-clocking the Indians at Joe Etheredge Stadium. Yet the programs found solidarity in their historical accomplishment.

Neither won — Niceville was routed on the road by Osceola and Choctaw lost a heartbreaker at home to nationally ranked Armwood — but that didn't lessen the significance of their deep postseason runs.

## 3. NICEVILLE TENNIS

**Niceville girls win first state tennis title** — It was inarguably the most dominant display the tennis state tournament had ever seen.

After a region final sweep of rival Leon — a powerhouse that celebrated state titles in 2010 and 2011 — the Niceville girls tennis team headed into the 3A state tournament humble and hungry.

What transpired was perfection. Niceville wasn't seeded like a favorite. But its swagger said otherwise.

Sam Sepe won her quarterfinal. As did Maddie Hsiang, Alexis Hruby, Antonia Poate and Antonia Vonhilsheimer followed suit in their respective draws.

Then for an encore in the semifinals, they did it again in convincing fashion, earning 10 points.

To cap the 12-point day, Sepe and Poate and the Hsiang sisters won their doubles matches.

The next day, the Eagles rode the perfect start to a 13-12 win over Creekside to capture the program's first state title.



SAM SEPE

## 4. PAXTON AND CHOCTAW GIRLS BASKETBALL

Paxton's Emily Murray dribbles past Poplar Springs' Shanearia Jones.

**Paxton girls basketball wins state title, Choctaw is runner-up** — They had the seasoned coaches, Paxton with Steve Williams and Choctaw with Don Brown.

They had the clutch seniors, Paxton with Emily Murray and Choctaw with Brittany Washington.

They had the go-to scorers, Paxton with Bethany Neale and Choctaw with Nadia Fingall.

Class 1A Paxton and 5A Choctaw each possessed the formula for a deep postseason run. And that's what both teams accomplished.

Paxton defeated Chipley 39-34 to win its fifth state title and first since 1997, while Choctaw advanced to the program's second straight title game before losing to top-ranked Bradenton Southeast.



FILE PHOTO | Daily News

THE LIST CONTINUES ON PAGE B2