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Skinner's retail project

After tracking Nassau County for four years, Skinner Bros. Realty is ready to make its move. **DEREK GILLIAM, 4**



COVER STORY

going LONG

Attracting niche sporting events could solidify the First Coast as a powerhouse. **JUNIOR SKEPPE, 10-13**

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UNF receives loan for downtown project

The Downtown Investment Authority approved a \$380,000 forgivable loan to the university for its pending move into the Barnett Bank building.

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Two retailers make Main Street moves

A bakery and retailer are opening up shops on the burgeoning commercial corridor. The moves are another sign the area is heating up.

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DEREGULATION

Wells Fargo economist talks First Coast biz

Deregulation, tax reform and a change in political attitudes towards business is fueling an economic boom nationally that could benefit Jacksonville.

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Top residential real estate firms in Jax

Residential real estate experts from around the First Coast talk about the rise of technology and the future of homebuying in the area.

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JACKSONVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

March 02, 2018
Vol. 33, No. 22, \$3.00
200 W. Forsyth St.
Suite 1350
Jacksonville, FL 32202



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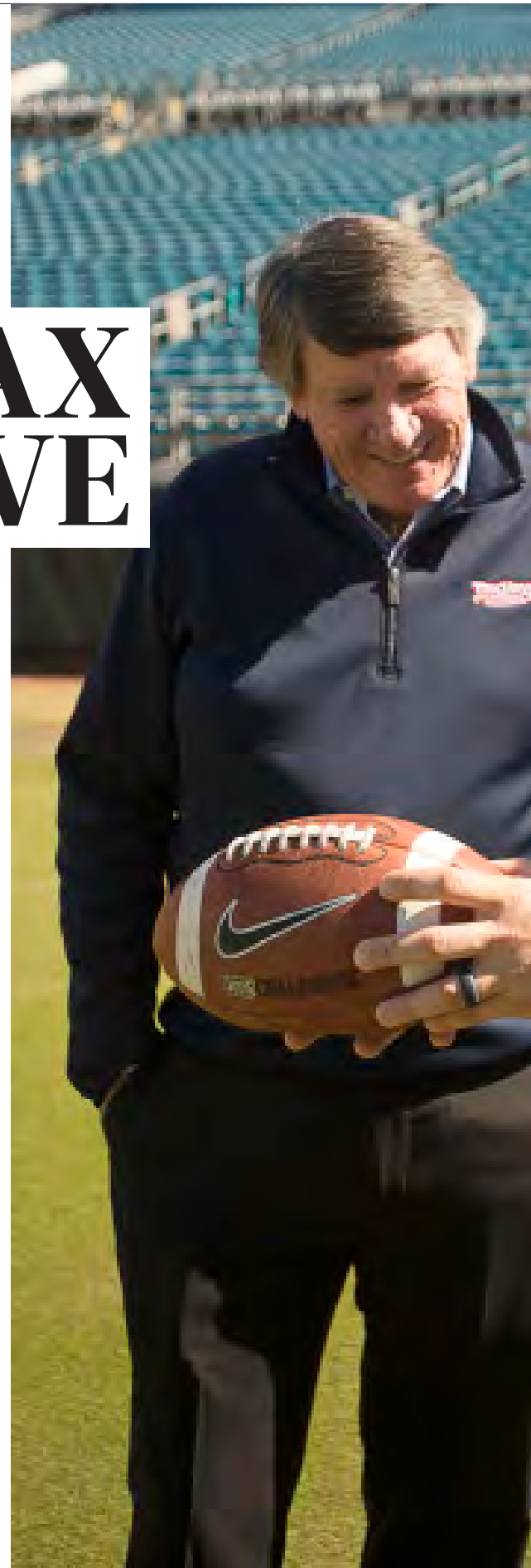
COVER STORY

MAKING JAX COMPETITIVE

The city's sports council is diversifying sporting events to capture a niche

BY JUNIOR SKEPPLE
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Spartan Race may not have the name recognition of NFL Football, but the high-intensity obstacle course competition geared towards adults, packs an enormous economic punch wherever the event is held. Next month, that's in Jacksonville. ¶ Spartan Race will bring more than 10,000 competitors to the area, thanks to the work of the Jaxsports Council and its two Jacksonville-bred executives. Rick Catlett, president and CEO of Gator Bowl Sports, and Alan Verlander, CEO of the Jaxsports Council – along with the organization's 14 or so employees – could be considered the masterminds behind what is an emerging Jacksonville sports scene. “Spartan Race is going to be a big event for this city,” Verlander said. “The economic impact of that will every bit as big as our bowl game, Navy versus Notre Dame and potentially the Florida/Georgia game.” ¶ Building on the city's history and existing sports scene could be an economic game-changer.





In addition to working closely with the Jaguars and other professional teams in Jacksonville like the Jumbo Shrimp and Icemen, the Jaxsports Council is casting a wide net while looking for events beyond the traditional "big three" of basketball, football and baseball.

"Sports, now, is anything you can compete in," Verlander said. "Those non-traditional sports bring a major impact punch to a community as well."

With the definition of what a "sport" is becoming more inclusive in the eyes of the sports council, attracting professional and amateur events to the Bold City has never been more important than now.

HOW SPORTS IMPACTS THE COMMUNITY

Beyond entertaining sports fans, the work the sports council does impacts a wide array of workers on the First Coast, from hotel workers to ticket takers. Sporting events can draw huge crowds that require hotels, food, security and many other services.

"Sports probably effects every job through the tentacles of being in this community," Catlett said. "About 43,000 jobs depends on the hospitality industry in Jacksonville."

The tourism industry also gets a major boost from the influx of out-of-town money coming to the area through sporting events.

"The restaurant and hotel workers work in our community; the more money they have, the more money they have to spend in our community," Verlander said. "Sports is enabling more employees in the tourism industry to buy from because we have helped enable their pocketbook."

The impact can go beyond dollars and cents, with council looking to bring a positive impact to areas of town that are in need.

The sports council works with 30 local youth organizations as part of its mission.

"We want to help create social change," Verlander said. "Maybe we helped areas of town better their sports facilities to create social change in that community. We want to help build a facility in a certain area of town that helps keep kids off the streets and in

◀
Catlett (left) and Verlander hope to make Jacksonville the sports capital of the South.

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JAMES CRICHLOW

COVER STORY



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to sports, which reduces crime.”

Catlett and Verlander grew up in Jacksonville and see community outreach as their personal duty, and the sports council's, to bring a lasting impact to every inch of Jacksonville.

“If you really care about your community, you want to see all areas of your community succeed,” Verlander said. “That is the next step of the sports council, investing in the lives of our citizens and seeing where we can have an impact.”

LEARNING FROM THE MUSIC CITY

When it comes to being named a top sports city in the country, Jacksonville has a ways to go, but the sports council is up for the challenge, and Catlett said one city to the north has set an example Jacksonville can follow.

Nashville, Tennessee, is home to one of the most vibrant sports complexes and downtowns in the eastern United States, the sprawling locale known as “Broadway.”

“Nashville took something the city had, they cleaned it up and made a commitment and didn’t worry about the money,” Catlett said. “Now, Nashville is one of the most dynamic southern cities going, and that is what I think we can do.”

According to Catlett, Jacksonville is what Nashville was a decade ago – but the Bold City has a chance to become what the Music City is with one thing: a vision.

That’s what it took in Nashville, according to those involved with the process.

“At the time we began our work, downtown Nashville was deteriorating and was pretty rough,” president and CEO of the Nashville Sports Council Scott Ramsey said. “The city’s commitment, at that time, to build what is now Bridgestone Arena and Nissan Stadium, a downtown library and really invest in downtown, turned Broadway and the downtown corridor to the very vibrant place it is today.”

Nashville is home to the National Hockey League’s Nash-

Here are statistics on the impact the Jaxsports Council had on the First Coast last year.

\$100M
economic impact

40,000+
jobs supported

\$2.5M+
local taxes collected

98,000+
room nights

167,000+
overnight attendees

ville Predators and the NFL’s Tennessee Titans, but professional franchises don’t pop up in major cities overnight – it takes time.

The Bold City is already home to one of 32 NFL franchises, which in and of itself makes the area special from a sports perspective, but more franchises could choose some day to name the First Coast as their home with the help of the sports council advocating for Jacksonville.

First, though, the area has to prove the interest is there for professional leagues to look at Jacksonville as a location for a franchise.

Catlett said monitoring attendance and support for the city’s minor league teams like the Jumbo Shrimp and Ice-men it can give the sports council a gauge on what sports the city has a thirst for.

“So what if it takes 25 years to get professional basketball team? Someday there is a possibility we might get that, let’s do what we have to do to figure out if the fans want that with their attendance and support of our teams,” Catlett said. “We keep winning championships in basketball in this town, and we have a soccer team, but if you go to an Orlando City match and see that facility and what they are doing ... Why can’t we do that? Well, we can.”

It will probably be years before Jacksonville could compete for a new professional franchise – but getting the Jaguars required a lengthy, methodical process, too.

“Had Jacksonville not been a really good football town, and we proved Jacksonville is because of Florida/Georgia game and the Gator Bowl game, we would not have the Jaguars,” said Catlett, who helped lead the group that got the Jaguars here. “We proved to the NFL we were a football town. What’s to say that these minor league teams don’t someday prove that we are a baseball or basketball city or some day require us to do hockey. Maybe we have to build an arena like Nashville did, as the popularity of these sports grow.”

Sports can be a unifying force for a city and northeast Flor-



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1. The newly named Jumbo Shrimp topped all Double-A ballparks in attendance increases for the 2017 season with 325,743 fans
2. The Jacksonville Armada FC recently opened their first team store at the St. Johns Town Center
3. The sustained success of the Icemen could lead to an NHL franchise choosing Jacksonville as its next home
4. Florida fans set up for the Gator Walk ahead of the 2017 Florida/Georgia football game



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ida got a taste of something the area hasn't felt in a long time with the unthinkable season put together by the Jaguars. "Duval" chants became commonplace and ringed throughout workplaces and fast food restaurants this January.

With the Jaguars completing one of the biggest turnarounds in NFL history and the success of the Icemen, Jumbo Shrimp and a resurgent Jacksonville Armada – Jacksonville is trending upward as a sports city.

"Look how it [the Jaguars playoff run] brought us together. The Jaguars are a perfect example of how nobody was walking around Jacksonville with a frown on their face," Catlett said. "Everyone was caught up in it."

THE FUTURE OF SPORTS ON THE FIRST COAST

Although the Jaxsports Council is a young organization in only in its fourth year of existence, it has big plans for the First Coast.

Catlett, the "football guy" of the sports council, says he wants to see Jacksonville host a national

championship in college football: The sports council is currently negotiating a second natural site college football game to come to the newly reminted TIAA Bank Field.

The Jaguars home is one of the top stadiums in the NFL, and Catlett thinks Jacksonville hosting a national championship can happen in the next 10 to 15 years.

"I think we have the stadium to do that [host a national championship.] I think we have the organization that can operate it and we have the relationships to make that happen," Catlett said.

For his dream to become a reality, the city and the sports council need to work together to improve entertainment options in and around the sports complex. Most importantly, Catlett said, the city needs to build a convention center – an idea now being examined by the city's Downtown Investment Authority.

"The city needs to have the convention center and an entertainment district, and with that will come the hotels which gives us the perfect opportunity to be a top sports location," Catlett said.

A concern for Catlett with building a convention center is that it must be large enough to host the large crowds associated with major sporting events like the NCAA basketball tournament.

"The final thing you need is out-of-town money coming into conventions, it's absolutely a necessity," Catlett said. "My only fear is that it will be underbuilt and there will be no room for growth. We need something in the 250,000-to-350,000-square-foot range."

A long-term goal for the sports council, and Alan Verlander, is to be a host city for the trials of the biggest sporting event in the world: the Olympics.

"We want to be seen as an Olympic trials city," Verlander said. "We've got to forge better relationships with the Olympic committees around sports to make that happen."

Getting to that point might be a long journey, but those leading the charge are confident the city can do it.

"There is nothing more beautiful than the St. Johns River and the city that wraps around it," Catlett said. "We have everything we need."