

ITS A DOG'S LIFE

Canine
costumes
on display.
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ATHLETE'S MENTAL HEALTH,
GATOR INTERN,
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UPbeat

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A UNIVERSITY PRESS MAGAZINE

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@uplamar

PEOPLE



Gotta 'Pop' Them All

Story and photo by **Luis Figueroa**

"I like the way their eyes look, it's like they pop out at you, literally," Eduardo Figueroa says. The Beaumont junior is obsessed with giant headed Funko figures. "I started collecting around 2013, and I have over 500," he says. He either buys the Pops in store or trades for them through online collectors. "My most expensive one is Cat Noir from 'Miraculous,'" the business major says. "He's currently valued at \$200, way over the retail price." Eduardo does not focus on specific franchises, instead he buys them based on the way they look. "I remember when the 'Gravity Falls' ones were released, me and my sister went store to store hunting for them, but we ended up only finding three." Eventually, Eduardo was able to complete the Funko's related to the series. "The last one I needed to complete my collection was Grunkle Stan," he says. "My sister surprised me when she gave it to me for Christmas in 2023, I finally completed the series six years later." Grunkle Stan was the rarest and last one he needed, His favorite from the series is the 'Hot Topic' exclusive Mablecorn Mable. Eduardo will continue to add Pops to his collection until, "I have an entire room dedicated to them," he says.



Hidden Campus Capybara Herd

Everyone has a favorite animal, but some people take their fascination and turn it into obsession. Bianka Paciorek, a sophomore from The Woodlands, has turned her love for capybaras into a part of her personality. “They’re the friendliest animals on the planet,” she says of the large aquatic rodent. “I love the fact that they interact with other animals so nicely, and there’s simply no other creature like them. They’re unique, funny, cute, social — everything you’d want in an animal.” In 2022, capybaras were seemingly in every viral meme and video. “I found out about capybaras through a video of a capybara in a passenger seat (listening) to that ‘After Party’ song,” the psychology major says. Collecting capybara stuff is unorthodox, but Bianca says she loves her collection. “A lot of this stuff is gifts,” she says. “I honestly did not spend that much. Everything except one stuffed animal was given to me by someone about her favorite animal. “They’re the largest rodents in the world,” Paciorek said. “Another thing people may not know is that they are aquatic.” One could say that the rodent swam right into her heart.

Story and photo by **Aaron Saenz**

PEOPLE

For the Fangirls

When one thinks of a fangirl one can definitely think of Haley Ryder. The Port Neches junior is passionate about collecting albums by her favorite artists and is not afraid to show it. The business major has been a fangirl for most of her life. “I have loved music since I was a little girl, but I find myself obsessed when it comes to K-Pop boy bands,” Haley says. “I started collecting albums after one my friends bought me one for my birthday.” Haley says albums often come with a photo card of the artist and a poster. “When I get a poster, I like hang it up in my room because it adds to my personality,” she says. Haley’s favorite album is BTS’ “Map of the Soul 7.” “I really connected with that album, and it was the first album I ever got,” Haley says. “I now have all four “Map of the Soul 7” albums and, of course, they are displayed on my album shelf.” Haley says she embraces her fangirl personality. “I found a new confidence in myself once I started seeing more people enjoy the same things I do,” she says. “The greatest thing about being a fangirl is the fact that I genuinely enjoy listening to their music and have a lot of fun keeping up with my favorite bands. Finding people to do that with has made life very fun.”

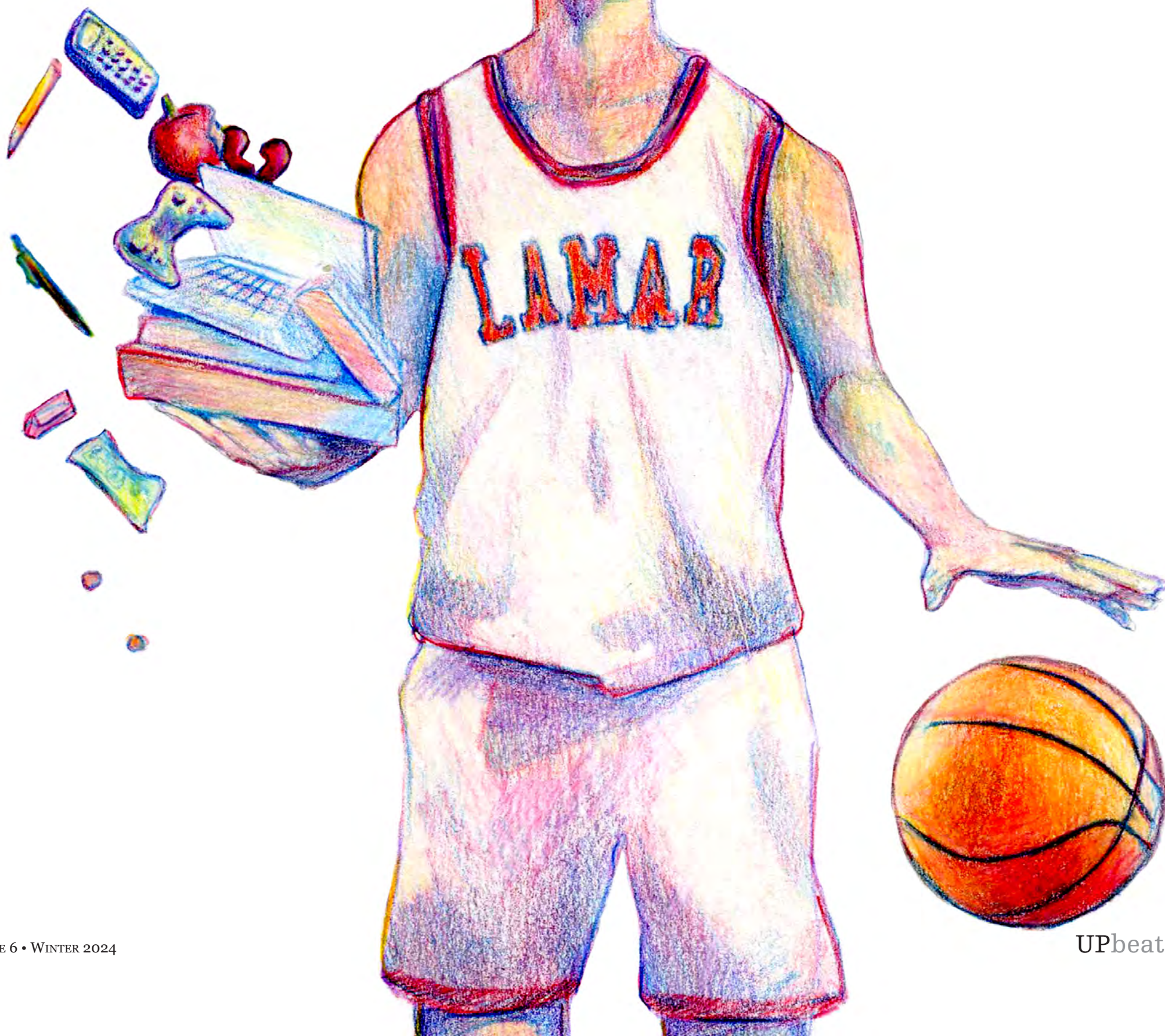
Story and photo by **Presleigh Peveto**



ATHLETICS

Story package by **Luis Lemmen**
Illustration by **Olivia Cobb**

BOOKS,



BALLS & BREAKDOWNS

Collegiate sport requires delicate balancing act

“ *I get up at seven every day. I have classes from eight to eleven. After that, I have shooting practice, go to eat lunch and get some rest in my room. I come back to the gym for weight training for one hour. After weights we have team practice till seven. Then I go eat dinner and do some homework — every day is like that.* **”**

JUNIOR JANKO BULAJIC DESCRIBES his typical day as a member of Lamar University’s basketball team.

“There are a couple of days every week where I’m tired and don’t feel good,” he said. “But I just try to go through it and get better every day. Just trying to be professional.”

At the beginning of 2023, the forward, who was born in Montenegro in Eastern Europe, committed to Lamar University.

“My goal is to get a degree and play basketball here,” he said. “After that, I want to play professional basketball. Without discipline and without goals, you can’t do anything. It’s really hard, but I like what I’m doing.”

Bulajic is one of approximately 400 student-athletes at Lamar University. NCAA student-athletes are college students who participate in competitive sports while pursuing their academic studies — a double burden that requires

an ambitious lifestyle. Balancing the intense demands of academics and athletics, student-athletes often find themselves under immense pressure. While their physical fitness is frequently in the spotlight, mental health struggles are less visible.

THE SURVEY

A 2023 STUDENT-ATHLETE Health and Wellness Study conducted by the NCAA found that 28% of student-athletes feel constantly overwhelmed by all they have to do. By comparison, a 2023 American College Health Association report found that the percentage of regular college students experiencing psychological distress is only 21%.

“The hardest part about being an athlete is the consistency that is required,” Leon Nickel, a junior from Germany on Lamar’s men’s tennis team, said. “That is what takes the most strength from me, both physically and mentally. Every day, no matter whether in class or training, you have to give it your all. Even when you’re not feeling well.”

The NCAA study found there various stress factors impact student-athletes. However, academic struggles are the most frequently cited reason among both men and women.

BALANCING ACT

“It’s JUST SO MUCH that comes with being a student-athlete,” senior basketball player T’Aaliyah Miner said. “One thing that puts a lot of stress on us is schoolwork. Our coaches require us to have a good GPA in order to play. They check our grades, classes, study hall — they really make sure we are on top of academics.”

Depending on how good a player’s GPA is, they may have to spend more or less time each week in study hall. Miner said she often has homework when she comes home in the evening.

“After the long days we have, nobody

wants to go home and do schoolwork like a Google Doc or a presentation, but that’s what’s required,” she said. “I understand that in order to even get on the court, I have to take care of school.”

Road games make studying difficult. When the team is on the road for several days, Miner misses lectures and has to catch up on the material.

“Most of my teachers are willing to take extra time out to let me know what I’m missing and try to help,” she said. “But my online teachers sometimes give me a hard time.”

LIFE ON THE ROAD

ROAD TRIPS AFFECT ATHLETES in all sports at LU. In the 2023-24 season, the softball team played 18 road games, men’s golf played 26 tournament days away from home, and the women’s tennis squad spent 32 days visiting other schools. During the 2023 season, the Lamar women’s soccer team played 12 road games from late August to early November.

Away trips are time-consuming and tightly scheduled, soccer senior Trinity Clark said.

“I like them, but I don’t — It’s just too tedious, there are so many things we have to do,” she said. “If we have an away game, we’d either leave the day before or sleep at a hotel afterwards. If you have homework during those days, you’re not going to get anything done.”

Many players do their schoolwork at the beginning of the week or during the many hours of bus travel to the game.

“Not me though, because I get bus sick,” Clark said.

The days away are meticulously timed. Breakfast, game talk, snacks, stretching, lunch, warm-up, packing — Clark said she’d prefer to stick to her own routine. And the road game doesn’t end





“...for some people who don’t get to play it is definitely a stress factor.”
— Trinity Clark

ATHLETES— from page 7

when the final whistle blows on the field.

“After the game ends, we’ll go back on the bus, maybe get dinner, and then start driving for six or eight hours,” she said. “Sometimes we get back here at one or two after midnight. And then you have to wake up the next morning because you have class.”

FEAR OF GETTING CUT

ANOTHER FACTOR THAT AFFECTS the mental strain on athletes is playing time. In the 2023 NCAA study, playing time was named a stress factor by 19% of student-athletes. For Clark, who made the All-Southland Conference Second team in 2022 and 2023, not having enough playing time is not an issue.

“I know for some people who don’t get to play it is definitely a stress factor,” Clark said. “They just watch and want to play, sometimes they cry on the bench — it’s just a lot for them. They’re also nervous their scholarship might get pulled.”

ONE FALSE STEP

A LACK OF PLAYING time can lead to being cut from the team. This would result in the loss of athletic scholarship and possibly

cause the student to drop out of college. Student-athletes’ college careers hangs by a thread — and can be over any second, as Leon Nickel, a senior on Lamar’s tennis squad, knows.

“This past summer, during the off-season, I dislocated my shoulder,” Nickel said. “I slipped during practice, landed on my shoulder, and blacked out. The injury was bad, I was two centimeters away from surgery. If I had needed surgery, I probably wouldn’t have been able to play tennis the way I did before. At that time, I felt really awful. I realized that one wrong step could put an end to all of this. Fortunately, I am on a good road to recovery and can play again now.”

PREGAME PRESSURE

THE CONSTANT PRESSURE to perform well puts a heavy strain on athletes and leads to psychological stress — especially during tournaments, Nickel said.

“On game day, I really feel the tension — I’m totally tense and uptight,” he said. “I can hardly move and my legs are heavy. My teammates sometimes ask me, ‘What’s wrong?’ And I reply, ‘Nothing.’ But they can see it on my face.”

Rodna Willet, a counselor at Lamar University’s Student Health Center, works closely with students to provide emotional and psychological support. She said that

some athletes seek her help because they experience nausea before games.

“They feel sick, some have to throw up. That’s mainly anxiety,” she said. “We talk about their anxiety. Sometimes just talking about it can help.”

In her role as a counselor, Willet assists student-athletes in managing stress, developing coping strategies, and addressing mental health challenges related to the demands of collegiate sports. She teaches athletes breathing techniques or gives them other tools to redirect their thinking before a game.

Nickel said he tries to keep himself distracted as much as possible.

“Praying also helps me,” he said. “As soon as I’m on the court and the game starts, everything is fine.”

COACHES IMPACT

THE WELL-BEING OF student-athletes is also shaped by the dynamics within the team environment. Key relationships, especially with coaches, can have a profound impact.

According to the NCAA study, 16% of student-athletes reported their relationship with their coach is a significant source of stress, highlighting the importance of this connection. Conversely, a positive relationship with coaches can greatly enhance an athlete’s mental well-being.

Miner said coaches have played an es-

sential role throughout her life, providing guidance and support both on and off the field.

“They were more than coaches, they were like family to me,” she said. “They looked out for me like my parents. They sheltered us — they did everything. Seeing how much your coaches can inspire you and change your life — I look up to all of my coaches. They do great stuff for us players and people in the community.”

Miner said that her coaches at LU proactively address their players’ concerns.

“I have a really good relationship with my coaches,” she said. “If you are in a bad spot, they’ll be like mentors and try to help you. We have mental health meetings every two weeks. All 15 players get to pick a coach who they want to talk to. You can talk about everything, it doesn’t have to be basketball. We talk about family, friends, things that are going on in the world. Some players stay there talking for two hours.”

LU Athletic Director Jeff O’Malley said nowadays coaches are not just responsible for training athletes, but also taking care of their overall well-being.

“I think it is important for coaches to have relationships with their student-athletes outside of the world of sports, to understand what kind of things they are going through, how school is going or how they can help them,” he said. “Having those conversations shows the student-athletes that you as a coach care about them.”



Jeff O'Malley

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

O'MALLEY SAID THE PERCEPTIONS around mental health have changed significantly, with more focus on the subject during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There's more conversations surrounding mental health than ever before," he said. "Individuals like Simone Biles, who three years ago took herself out of the Olympics because of mental health issues, helped to normalize it for other individuals.

"When I was a kid, you hardly ever heard about it. Now it's a topic of conversation almost on a daily basis."

As the athletic director, O'Malley oversees all sports programs. In this role, he closely observes the well-being and performance of student-athletes. He said student-athletes are monitored through close interaction between coaches, trainers, counselors and administration.

"It's a team effort," he said. "There's nobody in an athletic department who's with the student-athletes more than the strength coaches and the trainers. They help us to identify individuals who are going through things, whether it's a death in the family, tough relationship issues or other personal challenges. We also have discussions with the counseling center once a month about the number of student-athletes they're seeing."

In addition to counseling services, LU introduced TimelyCare, an online mental health support service, last year. Available 24/7, this resource is free for all students.

"The Texas State University System has invested a lot of resources in TimelyCare," O'Malley said. "We made a push on our end to make sure our athletes are signed up for TimelyCare so they know it's a resource that's available to them. If it's late at night and there's nobody in the counseling center, they can go online and schedule a session."

O'Malley said he has more plans to support the mental well-being of LU athletes.

"We try to find the resources in order to put more programming behind mental health services, both for our student-athletes and also our coaches, so that they can identify issues that they need to deal with and get the right tools," he said.

ORDINARY PROBLEMS

WILLET NOTED THAT WHEN athletes come to her for counseling, their issues are not always tied to sports.

"It's mostly regular stresses," she said. "The same things that everybody else is dealing with — relationship issues, anxiety, or family problems back home."

What distinguishes athletes from their peers, Willet said, is their drive to compete which affects everything they do.

"As an athlete, you have to focus on your sport, of course," she said. "But if you focus on your sport exclusively, then you don't do your work in the classroom. And if you do your sport and work in the classroom, you still need to have something else besides that. Many will play video games or

chat with their friends. Many have relationships. It's about finding a balance."

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

SENIOR JAYNE SEPULVEDA HAS experienced firsthand how important a healthy environment at college is. After graduating from St. Paul High School in Los Angeles, California in 2021, Sepulveda committed to Southern Utah University to play softball.

"I felt a lot of pressure coming in as a freshman," she said. "The coaches expected a lot out of me. But they didn't give me the tools to do so. All I had to focus on was softball. But I had personal stuff going on at home that I couldn't think about or deal with because of softball. I felt kinda trapped and stressed out all of the time. It wasn't a healthy environment for me to be in."

Sepulveda's coaches recommended she attend therapy sessions.

"It made me feel a little better, but at the same time, it also left me feeling more exhausted," she said. "It was another thing that was added on to my plate. I know that going to therapy is a good step in the right direction, but I just didn't feel like it was coming from a place I wanted it to come from."

Therapy did not help her deal with the underlying personal problems and issues with her coaches. After two seasons with Southern Utah, Sepulveda entered the transfer portal and committed to Lamar entering her junior season.

“Every day, no matter whether in class or training, you have to give it your all. — Leon Nickel”



A NEW START

"I FOUND A NEW love for softball here at Lamar," she said. "It's like back when I was younger, when you just wanted to play."

The mental well-being of the players is genuinely prioritized at Lamar, Sepulveda said.

"We talk about how important it is to take personal time for yourself and how you're a person outside of softball," she said. "Because softball is something that I do, not something that is me. The coaches here are very personal and don't just focus on sports. I have a relationship with them outside softball."

Sepulveda said strong team chemistry is crucial for maintaining a healthy environment.

"Being able to be vulnerable with each other is very important in our team," she said. "Some people say vulnerability is a weakness, but we talk about it as a strength."

Sepulveda said she was able to help a teammate who was going through a breakup.

"I overheard her talking about it," she

“... your coaches can inspire you and change your life.”

— T'Aaliyah Milner



THAT'S SHOWBIZ

Story package by Maddie Sims



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VINTAGE CARNIVAL MUSEUM EMBRACES THE WEIRD


AN OLD TRAIN RIDE sits unused as people wander inside the old compartments, a tall looming ferris wheel in the distance. The old bells and whistles of the attractions can be heard as mannequins ride around in the carts.

Monitors play short videos telling the stories of past traveling shows, immersing the audience into the world of vintage entertainment.

Just two hours from Disney World in Riverview, Florida, is a hidden gem with a plethora of history all about the original American carnival and circus industry.



Vintage headpieces displayed at the Showmen's Museum.

UPbeat 



The International Independent Showmen's Museum has been a home and archive for show people for more than four generations, housing artifacts, photographs, paintings and an assortment of memorabilia from a century of entertainment.

The history of traveling shows across the United States is almost as old as the country itself. The first circus was owned by Bill Ricketts in 1793. These early traveling shows included theater troupes in small wagons, which would later transition into large train cars traversing the entire United States.

One of the first traveling shows was the Wild West Show at the turn of the 20th century, featuring legends such as Buffalo Bill, Chief Sitting Bull and Annie Oakley.

With traveling shows, came traveling circuses. Popular companies at the time include the Barnum and Bailey Circus, which featured people labeled as "freaks," depicting them as "nature's mistakes." These include "The Viking Giant," "The Two-Headed Baby," "The Monkey Girl,"



A vintage "The Viking Giant," display at the Showmen's Museum, top left, a display stage of several mannequins of real performers showcased, top right, and an abandoned tugboat carnival ride sits unused at the museum.

"The Living Half Girl," and "The Four-Legged Girl."

Johann Petursson, or The Viking Giant, was the tallest Icelandic man, standing at

about 8-feet, 8-inches. He took on alter egos on stage such as "Olaf" and "Der Nordische Riese Olaf" which translates to "The Viking Giant." He ended up touring

with the Barnum and Bailey circus for their 1948 season.

The Two-Headed Baby was usually a side-show piece, where showrunners would present a human fetus with two heads embalmed in a glass jar of formaldehyde. They were sometimes sold to hospitals or to traveling carnival. The practice was later disbanded in the 1950s and 1960s as an unlawful practice.

People with deformities or rare conditions also made appearances in these shows.

The "Monkey Girl," who's real name was Percilla, was born with hypertrichosis, a rare condition which causes excessive hair to grow over the face and body. This gave her a full beard as a baby, which brought her into the sideshow business at a young age.

The "Half Girl," Berniece Evelyn "Jeanie" Smith, was born without legs and her arms were twisted. Her parents put

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PHOTO ESSAY



PAWSOME PUPPIES

Photo story by Carlos Vilorio

Canines and companions dress up for Dogtoberfest

A wide variety of canines dressed their owners in fine costumes, Oct. 12, as the City of Beaumont hosted its annual “Dogtoberfest at “Central Bark” between the Julie Rogers Theatre and the downtown library.

The event was free and included a variety of activities and costume contests for dogs and humans alike.

The event began with a “Strut Your Mutt” parade, where the dogs showed off their style. Other activities included paw readings, dog adoptions, games, arts and crafts, and a bouncy castle.

Other dog modelling included “Best Dressed Dog” and “Best Tail Waggin.”

The owners also got into the spirit with the “Master/Dog Look-Alike” contest, which was won by a dog and owner dressed in colorful traditional Mexican costumes.

Vendors sold a variety of items for both dogs and their humans.

Elle Wallace, Lumberton senior, said she had a great time.

“The event’s super fun,” she said. “If you have a dog that’s super friendly and outgoing, this is definitely a place for you to go to. It’s a great way to just get out and see a different side of Beaumont.”

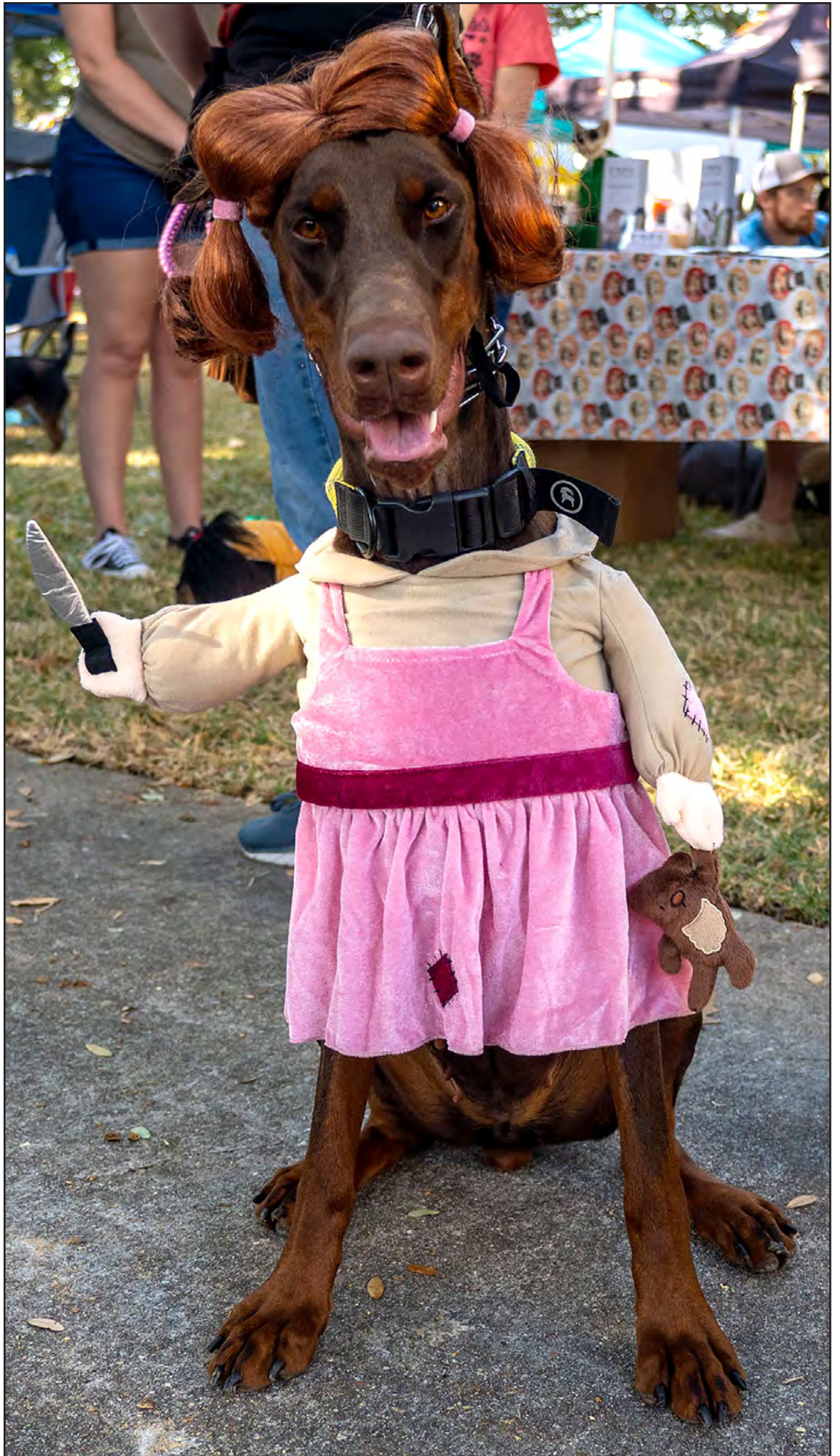
Trevor Frasier of Houston, whose dog, Ginger, was dressed a bee, said it was his first time at Dogtoberfest.

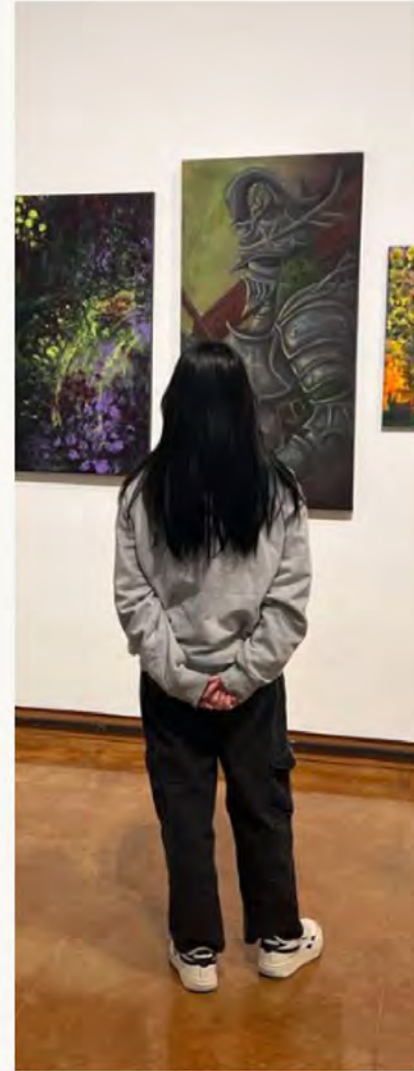
“I’m glad I got to come out with my girlfriend and my dog,” he said. “She loves it. We’re having a blast. For all animal lovers, come to this event, it’s amazing. We didn’t know there was going to be this many people, this many dogs — our dog is having a blast.”

For dog owners who want to compete, they have 12 months to prepare. Better get started on that costume now. There’s some stiff competition. And that’s no barking matter.









Dishman Art Museum



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her on stage starting when she was three, where she would perform acrobatic acts.

The “Four-Legged Girl”, or Ashley, has a rare form of conjoined twinning known as dipygus, where a variation of parasitic twins gave her two complete bodies from the waist down. The four legs she has were from an unborn twin which was absorbed into Ashley’s body during her fetal development. She is still alive today, but no longer performs in public.

Along with the traveling circus, the Showmen’s Museum shows off many do-



Mannequins display vintage showgirl costumes, top. Memorabilia of The Viking Giant and his time in the circus is displayed in a glass case, above. A replica of a conjoined twins fetus is showcased at the museum, right.

nated pieces of old-fashioned carnival rides including bumper cars, carousels, penny arcades and a ferris wheel.

The Conderman Ferris Wheel is the tallest exhibit. It was built in 1903 and donated by the Wheelock Family in 1988. Patrons cannot ride the attraction, but can admire the mannequins in many of its carts.

These traveling carnivals would supply their own power, using mules, horses and eventually transitioning to portable steam dynamos. From the 1920s to the 1960s, many of them would also use junction boxes which connected all of the shows together on a single power grid. Today, bigger carnivals use as much power as a small city.

Around the pavilion, there are also different videos to watch, which include the first silent film, “The Great Train Robbery,” and miniature documentaries about shows such as The Wild West Show and The Motordome. Mannequins are posed around the room in accurate costumes to the time period.

While the acts would now be considered insensitive, giving the public access to this information and historical context is important.

Seeing these artifacts and learning about the history of the circus is eye-opening, especially for fans of the movie, “The Greatest Showman.” Watching Hugh Jackman act as the now considered controversial figure of P.T. Barnum, sparks interest in the real stories now brought to life by the museum.

The International Independent Showmen’s Museum is open every Saturday and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. Admission for adults is \$15, \$10 for children with a school ID, and children under 10 are free.

For information, visit showmensmuseum.org.



SUMMER OF SCALES



Story and photos by Maddie Sims

A swarm of alligators swim in the ponds of Gator Country, above. Charles Holder, below, feeds 'Big Al,' during a showcase.

Gator Country intern shares work experience



LIVING IN SOUTHEAST TEXAS, it is not unusual to see alligators sunning themselves on the edges of ponds and swamps. But what if you find one on your front porch? Who are you going to call? Well, Ghostbusters aren't equipped for that, but the staff at Gator Country are.

Charles Holder interned at the reserve over the summer. He said his biggest rescue was a nine-feet, seven-inch gator.

"We caught it my third or fourth week here," he said. "The situation was we had somebody calling in an eight-foot alligator up underneath their porch. As soon as the picture rolled through, we looked at that head one time, and said, 'That's not an eight-footer.' They called it in as an eight-footer, but measured nine-foot-seven."

Holder said the preparations for catching alligators is humane and keeps the animal's health in mind. The team work together to tie the legs up, tape the mouth, and wrap the head to keep it from escaping.

"Once it's taped, you can tie the legs behind them in a comfortable position," he said. "We call it swaddling, where we just hold those legs tied up against the tail, do a couple of racks and tape to secure those back legs, because that's where it gets 90% of his power from. Once we get the timeouts secured, we just pick them up, bring them to the ponds or put them back in the truck. They're usually pretty chill after that."

Holder is an online student at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, currently majoring in communications with a minor in Fisheries and Wildlife Science, both coming in handy for working with the amphibious reptiles.

Holder said he's always loved animals, especially reptiles.

"My mom would yell at me when I was little for bringing snakes in the house — and now she still yells at me for bringing snakes in the house," he said. "It's come full circle for sure."

After participating in activities such as speech and debate and the theater arts, Holder knew he could use his love for communication to advocate for wildlife.

"I saw a job posting that said venomous snakes and alligators, and I applied first thing," he said. "I knew I wanted to do something for the summer, work with some animals. It was just a matter of where. And with how far reaching this job was, I figured I could get so much experience in different areas."

A standard week for Holder included off-site and on-site shows introducing the different animals.

"The whole thing that we're about here is giving guests that personal experience with an animal to get to learn about it," he said. "It's one thing when you're



Charles Holder holds Padmé, a Coatiundi which is native to Mexico and South America.

watching it on a documentary and hearing about these snakes and lizards, and it's another thing when somebody's holding it right in front of you. I suppose that's where that blending of communications and fisheries and wildlife comes in. I always say I'm not smart, but I take what the smart people are saying and repeat it with passion."

Holder said his favorite part of working at Gator Country was the guest interactions.

"Seeing the look on people's faces that never in a million years thought that they could hold a snake, or who are deathly terrified of snakes, lizards or frogs, and actually working them up to eventually getting to hold one is just a big full-circle moment for me," he said. "Hands down the best job I've ever had in my entire life. It is the perfect blend of Communications and Fisheries and Wildlife Sciences in my opinion. You get to not only work hands-on with these incredible animals every single day, but you also get to talk to others about it."

Gator Country is open daily 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. General admission is \$17 for adults and \$14 for children ages 3-12.

To apply for an internship, contact Gator Country at (409) 794-9453

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“Some people say vulnerability is a weakness, but we talk about it as a strength.”
— Jayne Sepulveda

ATHLETES— from page 9

said. “And while we were picking up balls, I asked her, ‘Hey, are you okay?’ Then we ended up talking about it. That’s a universal thing among us players, we’re able to talk about things. Our coaches made it a point for us to be that way. I think that’s a really good thing for everybody.”

In addition, Sepulveda said her coaches are constantly educating themselves in the area of mental health and encourage the players to engage with the topic as well.

CREATING AWARENESS

LAST YEAR, THE HILINSKI’S Hope Foundation, an NGO dedicated to promoting mental health awareness, visited campus. The organization was founded in memory of Tyler Hilinski, a college football player who died by suicide.

“They did a whole presentation that was really heavy and something that I think we all needed to see,” Sepulveda said. “Even though someone is loud in the locker room, smiling and having a good time, you don’t know what their personal life is like. You could never guess that someone’s going through something like this if you don’t ask.”

Being in a healthy environment positively impacts Sepulveda’s performance on the field, she said.

“Sometimes people get caught up in wanting to be perfect,” she said. “For example, you may want to hit the ball over the fence, or field every single ground ball that comes your way. But in softball, specifically, you’ll fail more often than you actually succeed. But having a healthy environment makes

you feel okay with failing.

“For example, I’m not going to criticize someone because they missed the ball. Being comfortable with failing means that you’re comfortable with the people around you. That’s something that makes you even play better because you are not scared. When you’re not thinking about it, that’s when you do best.”

DOING WHAT THEY LOVE

SEPULVEDA SAID THERE IS NO place she would rather be than playing softball at LU — despite all the inconveniences that come with being a student-athlete.

Nickel said he is grateful for the opportunity that being a college-athlete provides.

“Being here is everything to me,” he said. “I’m really glad I had the opportunity to come to the States to study and play tennis. I’m pushing myself hard so that after my four years in college, I can say, ‘I gave it my all and had an amazing time.’”

Clark said she does not take being a student-athlete for granted.

“Other people would do a lot to be in this position and get a scholarship and go to college,” she said. “Some days are just harder than others, and I think that’s just life. But I keep a positive attitude, because I think God will take care of everything.”

Despite tight schedules, daily hours of practice, and extensive travel, Bulajic said he enjoys his life as a college basketball player.

“If you think about it, there is no kind of negative pressure on us,” he said. “We do what we love — we play basketball.”

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