

SPORTS

Gator back in name for Jacksonville's bowl

By Garry Smits
gsmits@jacksonville.com

A vital part of the identity of the sixth-oldest college bowl game has been restored.

The Gator Bowl Sports Board of Trustees announced

Thursday that the name "Gator" will be restored to the title of Jacksonville's bowl game played at TIAA Bank Field. The formal name will be the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl, after four years in which TaxSlayer, an Augusta,

Ga.-based online tax service, had increased its sponsorship to have sole possession of the game's name.

However, TaxSlayer and the board reached what was called a mutual agreement to return the name that had been

attached to the bowl since its creation in 1946. The 74th TaxSlayer Gator Bowl will be played in late December, matching a team from the SEC against an ACC or Big Ten team.

TaxSlayer is not reducing its

financial commitment to the game. It has been the game's title sponsor for eight years, and for the first four years of the partnership, the game was known as the TaxSlayer.com

See BOWL, C3



SPORTS | C3

**NBA PLAYOFFS
FIELD FINALIZED;
POSTSEASON BEGINS
SATURDAY**



SPORTS | C8

**BRETT FAVRE SAYS HE
MAY HAVE ENDURED
'THOUSANDS' OF
CONCUSSIONS**



Jacksonville owner Ken Babby watches on the field with his wife, Liz Bryan, before the Jumbo Shrimp's home opener against the Mobile BayBears on Wednesday at the Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville. [BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION]

Babby makes pitch, finds ideal baseball mate



Gene Frenette

Ken Babby first met Liz Bryan, ironically enough, while the two were paired together as groomsman and bridesmaid in 2012 at the wedding of their respective best friends,

David and Lauren Troha. Most of the conversation between the Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp owner and Bryan centered around their common bond of childhood affection for the Baltimore Orioles. She loved Eddie Murray and Cal Ripken Jr., attending the game with her father when Ripken tied Lou Gehrig's streak of 2,130 consecutive games played in 1995. Babby was there the next day with his father, Lon, then the Orioles'

general counsel, when Ripken broke the record.

So there was a baseball connection from the start, but the actual love story took far longer than instant replay. Babby, a newly-divorced father of 3-year-old son Josh when they first met, and Bryan (divorced with no kids) went their separate ways for three years, only running into each other while playing pool at a

See FRENETTE, C3

Kouvaris 37-year run as WJXT sports director is in jeopardy

By Gene Frenette
gfrenette@jacksonville.com

With his contract having expired two weeks ago, Sam Kouvaris' 37-year run as the sports director of WJXT-Channel 4 could be coming to an end soon unless the two sides can reach an agreement.

Kouvaris, 62, who hasn't been on the air since March 27, acknowledged to the Times-Union on Thursday that his status with the television station is in limbo, but that he hoped something could be resolved by end of business day on Friday.

"I still really enjoy my work and I'm hoping to continue doing that," said Kouvaris. "I sent them a proposal [Thursday] that I hope they respond to."

General manager Bob Ellis, who is responsible for negotiating contracts

with WJXT's on-air talent, was noncommittal about Kouvaris' future with the station.

"I don't talk about negotiations publicly," Ellis said. "Sam is the most talented television sportscaster in this market. We want him to be part of this market for years to come."

The sticking point between the two sides appears to be over what Kouvaris' role might be with the station moving forward. If it's no longer in a full-time capacity, can the two sides reach a compromise on how much of a reduction in air time or salary that could mean for Kouvaris?

Neither side would comment on any particulars of negotiations. Kouvaris says his last five contracts with WJXT were five-year

See KOUVARIS, C3



WJXT TV-4's sports director Sam Kouvaris (left) and former Jacksonville Jaguars defensive back Rashean Mathis during a TV segment in 2007. [BRUCE LIPSKY, FILE PHOTO]

Magic rebuilding again, fire Vogel as coach

By Tim Reynolds
The Associated Press

Frank Vogel was brought to Orlando two years ago with hopes he could get the Magic back to the playoffs, and stop the spinning of the revolving door to their

coaches' office. Neither of those things happened.

Vogel was fired by the Magic on Thursday about 10 hours after the team wrapped up a 25-57 season, its sixth consecutive losing year. Vogel, who had one year left on

his contract, went 54-110 in his two years with Orlando.

The Magic haven't been to the playoffs since Stan Van Gundy's final season with the team in 2012. Vogel, who had some successful years coaching the Indiana Pacers before going to

Orlando, simply didn't have the roster to change that.

"We would like to thank Frank for his contributions to the Orlando Magic," Magic basketball operations president Jeff Weltman said. "We appreciate the sacrifices he made as head

coach and certainly wish him and his family well going forward."

Vogel told his players after Wednesday's season-ending win over playoff-bound Washington he was planning to meet with them Thursday. The team had different ideas.

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It's playoff time: The NBA's first-round pairings are set

By **Tim Reynolds**
The Associated Press

MIAMI — The NBA playoffs that start this weekend already have an extremely tough act to follow.

The regular season ended with a flourish.

Wednesday's final night of the regular season was well beyond dramatic — an overtime game between Minnesota and Denver to decide the last berth, another overtime game between Miami and Toronto to determine some

NBA Playoff Glance

FIRST ROUND (Best-of-7; x-if necessary)
Eastern Conference
Toronto vs. Washington
Saturday, April 14: Washington at Toronto, 5:30 p.m.
Tuesday, April 17: Washington at Toronto, 7 p.m.
Friday, April 20: Toronto at Washington, 8 p.m.
Sunday, April 22: Toronto at Washington, 8 p.m.
x-Wednesday, April 25: Washington at Toronto, TBA
x-Friday, April 27: Toronto at Washington, TBA
x-Sunday, April 29: Washington at Toronto, TBA
Boston vs. Milwaukee
Sunday, April 15: Milwaukee at Boston, 1 p.m.

East fates, a 46-point first quarter by Philadelphia, an absurd 20-rebound, 19-assist night from Russell Westbrook.

And now, the best time of the NBA year is finally here.

The playoffs are back, with Golden State and Cleveland — who've met in the last three NBA Finals — not exactly looking like the overwhelming favorites the league has come to expect. A fourth straight Warriors-Cavs matchup is no guarantee. A fourth straight trip by either of those teams alone is far from certain,

Tuesday, April 17: Milwaukee at Boston, 8 p.m.
Friday, April 20: Boston at Milwaukee, 9:30 p.m.
Sunday, April 22: Boston at Milwaukee, 1 p.m.
x-Tuesday, April 24: Milwaukee at Boston, TBA
x-Thursday, April 26: Boston at Milwaukee, TBA
x-Saturday, April 28: Milwaukee at Boston, TBA
Philadelphia vs. Miami
Saturday, April 14: Miami at Philadelphia, 8 p.m.
Monday, April 16: Miami at Philadelphia, 8 p.m.
Thursday, April 19: Philadelphia at Miami, 7 p.m.
Saturday, April 21: Philadelphia at Miami, 2:30 p.m.
x-Tuesday, April 24: Miami at Philadelphia, TBA
x-Thursday, April 26: Philadelphia at Miami, TBA
x-Saturday, April 28: Miami at Philadelphia, TBA
Cleveland vs. Indiana
Sunday, April 15: Indiana at Cleveland, 3:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 18: Indiana at Cleveland, 7 p.m.

either.

It all starts Saturday, the 16-team tournament that will be a two-month grind following the six-month grind of the regular season.

"I feel pretty ready," Toronto guard Kyle Lowry said. "We're ready to go."

So are 15 other teams. Start with the East pairings: Lowry and the top-seeded Raptors play No. 8 Washington, No. 2 Boston faces No. 7 Milwaukee, No. 3 Philadelphia gets No. 6 Miami and No. 4 Cleveland

Friday, April 20: Cleveland at Indiana, 7 p.m.
Sunday, April 22: Cleveland at Indiana, 8:30 p.m.
x-Wednesday, April 25: Indiana at Cleveland, TBA
x-Friday, April 27: Cleveland at Indiana, TBA
x-Sunday, April 29: Indiana at Cleveland, TBA
Western Conference
Houston vs. Minnesota
Sunday, April 15: Minnesota at Houston, 9 p.m.
Wednesday, April 18: Minnesota at Houston, 9:30 p.m.
Saturday, April 21: Houston at Minnesota, 7:30 p.m.
Monday, April 23: Houston at Minnesota, 8 p.m.
x-Wednesday, April 25: Minnesota at Houston, TBA
x-Friday, April 27: Houston at Minnesota, TBA
x-Sunday, April 29: Minnesota at Houston, TBA
Golden State vs. San Antonio

Saturday, April 14: San Antonio at Golden State, 3 p.m.
Monday, April 16: San Antonio at Golden State, 10:30 p.m.
Thursday, April 19: Golden State at San Antonio, 9:30 p.m.
Sunday, April 22: Golden State at San Antonio, 3:30 p.m.
x-Tuesday, April 24: San Antonio at Golden State, TBA
x-Thursday, April 26: Golden State at San Antonio, TBA
x-Saturday, April 28: San Antonio at Golden State, TBA
Portland vs. New Orleans
Saturday, April 14: New Orleans at Portland, 10:30 p.m.

reload," 76ers coach Brett Brown said, talking about what he wants his team to do before getting ready for Game 1.

Out West, it's No. 1 Houston meeting No. 8 Minnesota — which earned its berth by topping Denver in the NBA's first win-and-get-in, lose-and-go-home regular-season finale in 21 years. No. 2 Golden State opens its quest for a third championship in four seasons against No. 7 San Antonio, No. 3 Portland drew No. 6 New Orleans and No. 4 Oklahoma City opens against No. 5 Utah.

Tuesday, April 17: New Orleans at Portland, 10:30 p.m.
Thursday, April 19: Portland at New Orleans, 9 p.m.
Saturday, April 21: Portland at New Orleans, 5 p.m.
x-Tuesday, April 24: New Orleans at Portland, TBA
x-Thursday, April 26: Portland at New Orleans, TBA
x-Saturday, April 28: New Orleans at Portland, TBA
Oklahoma City vs. Utah
Sunday, April 15: Utah at Oklahoma City, 6:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 18: Utah at Oklahoma City, 8 p.m.
Saturday, April 21: Oklahoma City at Utah, 10 p.m.
Monday, April 23: Oklahoma City at Utah, 10:30 p.m.
x-Wednesday, April 25: Utah at Oklahoma City, TBA
x-Friday, April 27: Oklahoma City at Utah, TBA
x-Sunday, April 29: Utah at Oklahoma City, TBA

NHL Playoffs: Catfish come to Nashville

The Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Tossing catfish onto the ice has been a popular hockey tradition in Music City and the Nashville Predators finally have their own catfish tank inside the arena.

Team President Sean Henry unveiled the new tank hours before the Predators opened the NHL postseason against Colorado in their first-round Western Conference series. The team put the first of four catfish into the tank and No. 2 was on the way.

"Good symbolism with those four catfish," Henry said. "Four wins per series, four series gets you to the ultimate prize."

The Predators named the first catfish Gill and the second fish will be named Ben in honor of a long-time fan that died in 2017.

Thursday is the birthday of singer Vince Gill, also known as the mayor of Smashville, and Henry says Gill obviously was the inspiration. Gill was an original season-ticket holder who helped sell tickets when this franchise was getting started, and Gill was featured on billboards around town with a couple of teeth blacked out.

But Henry says Gill also can stand for how the fish breathes or for former Nashville defensemen and current team broadcaster Hal Gill.

Fans will name the other catfish through a social media poll

with suggestions so far including Stanley, of course, in honor of the Stanley Cup. Henry said he's not superstitious about naming a catfish after the Stanley Cup that Nashville wants so badly.

The catfish tradition was a response to Detroit fans tossing octopi on the ice to symbolize the number of wins once needed to win the Stanley Cup. Bob Wolf, who owned a restaurant across the street from the Predators arena, takes credit for tossing the first catfish Jan. 26, 1999, during a visit by the Red Wings. A catfish was chosen in honor of the nearby Cumberland River.

Flyers look for better defense

Dave Hakstol appears to be defying the numbers and the eye test.

The third-year Flyers coach seems to be leaning toward using goaltender Brian Elliott in Game 2 on Friday in Pittsburgh, site of the Penguins' 7-0 cakewalk on Wednesday.

After the game, Hakstol said his gut instinct was to come back with Elliott on Friday.

He stood by those comments following practice Thursday at the PPG Paints Arena.

Hakstol wouldn't confirm if Elliott would get the call, but he sounded as if the player they call "Moose" would be back in the nets.

Wednesday, April 18: Pittsburgh at Philadelphia, 7 p.m.
x-Friday, April 20: Philadelphia at Pittsburgh, TBA
x-Sunday, April 22: Pittsburgh at Philadelphia, TBA
x-Tuesday, April 24: Philadelphia at Pittsburgh, TBA

WESTERN CONFERENCE
Nashville vs. Colorado
Thursday, April 12: Colorado at Nashville, night
Saturday, April 14: Colorado at Nashville, 3 p.m.
Monday, April 16: Nashville at Colorado, 10 p.m.
Wednesday, April 18: Nashville at Colorado, 10 p.m.
x-Friday, April 20: Colorado at Nashville, TBA
x-Sunday, April 22: Nashville at Colorado, TBA
x-Tuesday, April 24: Colorado at Nashville, TBA

Winnipeg 1, Minnesota 0
Wednesday, April 11: Winnipeg 3, Minnesota 2
Friday, April 13: Minnesota at Winnipeg, 7:30 p.m.
Sunday, April 15: Winnipeg at Minnesota, 7 p.m.
Tuesday, April 17: Winnipeg at Minnesota, 8 p.m.
x-Friday, April 20: Minnesota at Winnipeg, TBA
x-Sunday, April 22: Winnipeg at Minnesota, TBA
x-Wednesday, April 25: Minnesota at Winnipeg, TBA

Vegas 1, Los Angeles 0
Wednesday, April 11: Vegas 1, Los Angeles 0
Friday, April 13: Los Angeles at Vegas, 10 p.m.
Sunday, April 15: Vegas at Los Angeles, 10:30 p.m.
Tuesday, April 17: Vegas at Los Angeles, 10:30 p.m.
x-Thursday, April 19: Los Angeles at Vegas, 10 p.m.
x-Saturday, April 21: Vegas at Los Angeles, TBA
x-Monday, April 23: Los Angeles at Vegas, TBA

Anaheim vs. San Jose
Thursday, April 12: San Jose at Anaheim, night
Saturday, April 14: San Jose at Anaheim, 10:30 p.m.
Monday, April 16: Anaheim at San Jose, 10:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 18: Anaheim at San Jose, 10:30 p.m.
x-Friday, April 20: San Jose at Anaheim, TBA
x-Sunday, April 22: Anaheim at San Jose, TBA
x-Tuesday, April 24: San Jose at Anaheim, TBA

multiple changes in recent years, starting with Graham Media acquiring the station from Washington Post-Newsweek in 2016. Longtime news anchor Tom Wills was replaced by Kent Justice for the 10 p.m. newscast, with Wills moving to the 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. newscasts.

Besides Kouvaris, the other sports anchors for WJXT are Brian Jackson and former Jacksonville Armada FC play-by-play voice Cole Pepper, who was hired in December, 2016, to work on the desk and has since transitioned into an on-air role.

gfrenette@jacksonville.com: (904) 359-4540

BOWL

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Gator Bowl.

"We love college football and what it means to the history of our city," said game chairman Jamie Shelton during a news conference held at Best Bet, the site of the quarterly board meeting. "TaxSlayer working with us to help preserve our heritage is nothing short of spectacular. They have great people, and they love college football like we do. They understand what it means."

TaxSlayer director of partnerships Josh Gaudin — a Ballers graduate — said the move "makes

sense."

"I think it can only help the game," Gaudin said. "The name has history, and it's synonymous with the game."

Game president Rick Catlett pointed out that in 2020, the TaxSlayer Gator Bowl will celebrate its 75th anniversary during the same year that college football will celebrate its 150th.

"If you grew up in Jacksonville like I did, you grew up with the Greater Jacksonville Open, Georgia-Florida and the Gator Bowl," Catlett said. "To have TaxSlayer make this decision speaks to the history and tradition in this community and their respect for college football in general. We've married two great

brands back together, and I think it's going to continue our major economic impact."

Estimates are that the game brings between \$14 million to \$16 million in economic impact to Northeast Florida. More than \$500,000 annually is donated to charity, and last year's game launched a program in which free tickets were given to active duty and retired military and their families.

The date and time for this year's game will be announced later this month. It will be televised on one of the ESPN networks. Tickets go on sale Sept. 1.

Mississippi State beat Louisville 31-27 at last year's game.

FRENETTE

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a friend's birthday party.

But once his life became a real traveling whirlwind, after purchasing the Double-A baseball franchises in Akron, Ohio, and then Jacksonville's Suns in late 2014, it hit Babby that he'd probably be better off dating a woman who liked coming to the ballpark almost as much as he did.

"I saw photos of Liz on social media with her father at baseball games," Babby said. "It seemed like a good idea to date somebody who liked going to ballgames. Seeing her go to Orioles games made her even more attractive."

So he asked Bryan to accompany him for a New Year's Eve dinner party. She turned him down. Babby, being the ambitious, baseball-smitten man he is, kept asking her out until she finally relented.

"I asked her out at least five times before she agreed to have dinner with me," Babby said. "I was raised if you were interested in somebody, you were persistent. Perseverance is a strong skill in the sports marketing world."

"Actually, obsessive is probably the better word. I think I probably wore her down"

Their second date was the 2015 Orioles home opener, a 12-5 loss to the Toronto Blue Jays. But it wasn't a loss for Babby, who forged a relationship with a woman perfectly aligned with his passion for baseball.

"I really enjoy the pace of it, the sounds of it," Bryan said. "In college [at Western Maryland, now McDaniel College], I picked my dorm room my sophomore year because it was the closest one to the baseball field. You could hear the pop of the bat. When I would study, I'd listen to that and found it very relaxing and calming."

To anyone who knows Babby, that fits the profile of a woman after his own heart. Over time, a love connection evolved.

Fast forward to the Jumbo Shrimp home opener Wednesday night, a 9-5 win over the Mobile BayBears. Right there sitting together behind home plate were Babby and Bryan, who were

married six months ago and purposely delayed their honeymoon on the remote Hawaiian island of Lanai ("My favorite place in the world," says Babby) so they wouldn't miss the World Series.

"I knew what I signed up for," said Bryan, a senior vice president for a pharmaceutical public relations company in Washington, D.C. "My love for baseball isn't at all completely normal, either. I wouldn't want to go on a honeymoon and not be able to watch the World Series."

"We looked into bringing a TV screen into our wedding reception if the Cleveland Indians had made the next round of the AL playoffs [they lost to the New York Yankees in the divisional round]. We were going to jerry-rig the signal so we could watch the game as we danced at our wedding."

That kind of baseball dedication is an ideal fit for Babby, who immerses himself in every aspect of the Jumbo Shrimp and Akron RubberDucks. His social demeanor won't allow him to stay in the background.

For Babby, it's a lot more than just throwing free T-shirts into the stands at every home game possible. On a 24-7 basis, he literally eats and sleeps baseball. This week alone, he did two Rotary Club speeches and a Chamber event in Jacksonville, attended Shrimp games Wednesday and Thursday, then will fly back to Akron on Friday for the RubberDucks' home opener.

Saturday morning, he boards a plane to catch son Josh's Little League opener in Gaithersburg, Md. (35 minutes from his third home in Arlington, Va.), then returns to Jacksonville on Sunday for the Jumbo Shrimp's home game with the BayBears.

"No matter where I wake up, I get to go to a baseball game," Babby said. "A lot of people would kill for that. I just go where I feel I can add the most value, whether it's to be with a client or helping out our staff."

"In a perfect world, I want to be at one of our ballparks every night there's a home game. That involves careful scheduling, detailed planning and a very patient wife and son."

The schedule works out where Babby and his wife will have only two weekends in 2018 when the Jumbo

Shrimp and RubberDucks don't have home games. And even then, it's a guarantee they'll somehow be preoccupied with baseball.

"We talk nightly about pitching matchups and rotations," Babby said. "We have pillow talk that's different than most couples."

The Jumbo Shrimp owner can't help himself. He seeks no cure for his baseball addiction, which includes constantly exploring ways to make the fans' game-day experience better. When surveys last year showed fans wanted more fireworks, Babby extended that promotion from Fridays and holidays to Saturday as well in 2018, where he hopes to see a repeat of last year's 23 percent attendance increase after changing the team's name from the Suns.

"Fireworks was the No. 1 thing people asked for," said Babby. "We need the community more than the community needs us. That's an important thing for all of us to keep in mind."

"The offseason is always hard for me. I get antsy wanting to get back to work. I'm happiest when I'm at the ballpark with our fans night after night."

There's no doubt the 38-year-old Babby is all in with the Jumbo Shrimp and RubberDucks for the long haul. He agrees it's conceivable he could own a team in Jacksonville longer than the Bragan family, who owned the Suns for 31 years (1984-2015).

Babby says he has reached a verbal agreement with the city on a 15-year lease extension at the Baseball Grounds of Jacksonville, which currently runs through the 2019 season, and expects the new contract to be signed in the coming weeks.

Bryan appears ready for a life of being married to Babby and baseball. It's what she grew up with, and where she feels comfortable.

"It wasn't until we started dating did I realize that Ken's brain has the capacity to remember anything when it comes to baseball," said Bryan. "I thought my dad knew a lot about baseball. Ken is a little crazy."

You might say both Ken and Liz are a little crazy for baseball, and crazy in love with each other. It sure looks like a perfect diamond matchup.

gfrenette@jacksonville.com: (904) 359-4540

KOUVARIS

From Page C1

deals. Paul Harden, a long-time Jacksonville lobbyist who does work for the Jaguars, is Kouvaris' agent.

Kouvaris, who came to WJXT in May, 1981, after serving as a sports anchor at Charleston (S.C.) WCBD-Channel 2 for three years, was initially hired as a sports anchor and was elevated to sports director a few months later. In the Jacksonville market, he's the longest-running, on-air sports talent in history.

WJXT has undergone