

Community Spotlight

Tuscola Warriors cross country and golf team photos



TUSCOLA GIRL'S CROSS COUNTRY. Left to right, Makayela Sexson, Bella Dueker, Hanna Carswell, Bailey Ritter, Kate Foltz, Celeste Rebollo, Anne Brazzell. *Photo by Rachel Ray.*



TUSCOLA BOY'S CROSS COUNTRY. Back Row, right to left: Xander Neamtu, Braden Smith, Carson Smith, Blake McLeese, Kamden Flenner, Lucas Coll Rubio, Jaxsyn Taylor, James Jonas. Front row, right to left: Boyd Brewer, Kade Wilcox, Jackson Barrett, Will Foltz, David Hornaday, Josiah Hortin, Aaron Hegarty, Eli Hyld. *Photo by Rachel Ray.*



TUSCOLA BOY'S GOLF, from left to right, Carson Gaines, Ty Thomason, Aiden Devlin, Brayden Gough, Ryker Gough, Chris Atwater, Jacob Waugh. *Photo by Rachel Ray.*



TUSCOLA GIRL'S GOLF. From left to right, Addyson Ring, Isabelle Sturts, Christy Kerner, Zoey Thomason, Addisyn Pettry, Lanie Yantis, and Jocelyn Ford. *Photo by Rachel Ray.*

Take-off

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AJ Coady and Tuscola High School math teacher and EAA Chapter 29 President Rachel Henderson.

Branca said his interest in aviation first started out as a joke. He had a friendly relationship with Henderson who asked if he wanted to fly with her.

"I was pretty nervous, to be honest," said Branca.

The only other time Branca has flown was in a commercial airplane during a school trip to Washington D.C.

In November 2022, Branca departed from the Decatur airport, soaring through the sky in a light aircraft Cessna 172 with Henderson. She let Branca do the takeoff, with some assistance, as well as some flying. She noted that Branca was very curious throughout the entire process, from taxiing the plane to radio chatter with the air control tower before takeoff.

Taking off in a light aircraft is quite different from a commercial plane, said Branca.

"It was a bit more claustrophobic. You feel everything way more. On the takeoff, once you start to get into the air, it's nerve-wracking," said Branca. He added that once he got higher up, his nervousness changed.

"Rising up into the air was an incredible feeling. Everyone looks like ants and it was an amazing feeling that I won't forget," said Branca.

Henderson and Branca flew over Champaign and Tuscola for his first trip.

The second trip with Coady is what cemented Hunter's decision to start a career in aviation.

Coady visited Branca's family during Thanksgiving. Hunter's uncle asked Coady if they could go on a flight. Since the weather was favorable, Coady agreed and brought Branca along.

Their house is only a few minutes away from the Tuscola airport. It didn't

take long until Branca and Coady were flying over Tuscola, watching the family below waving to them. The Tuscola airport is within an uncontrolled airspace, which does not require an air traffic control tower, which allows for more freedom in taking off.

After Branca expressed his interest in aviation as a career, Coady has been helping him push toward that goal.

Coady himself was first hooked on flying when he was 12 years old, but he couldn't get into aviation until later in his 20s, mostly due to a lack of resources. Before earning his engineering degree, he would spend entire paychecks to have a singular hour of flying time.

A private pilot's license can cost anywhere between \$10,000- \$20,000, according to Coady. You also need a minimum of 40 hours of flying time. According to the Aircraft Owners and Pilot Association (AOPA), and many students usually have more than the minimum.

The end cost ultimately is dependent on the type of aircraft and what kind of flying an individual wants to do.

Coady said he wants to be a mentor to Branca because he wants to ensure that Branca gets the opportunities that Coady never received when he was growing up.

Coady said, "It's like looking into a mirror. He's such a good kid and he's from a good family. I just saw it and I wish I had that when I was 18. It's the best thing I can do for him. He's hungry for it, chomping at the bit and we're spoon-feeding him."

He's put Branca in a variety of aircraft to see what Branca is interested in. On a flight in a side-by-side aircraft, Coady let Branca take control of the aircraft and assisted him in landing it.

"There was definitely a moment of realization: 'I am 3,000 feet in the air and I'm flying a plane right now.' It was kind of a 'wow' moment. How did I even get here?" said Branca.

"I'm glad I got to that point. It's something I want to do for the rest of my life."

Coady said that Branca is a "stick," which is aviation slang for a natural at flying.

"It's not as difficult as people make it out to be. People look at the cockpit and don't know what the gauges are for. Once you put all the pieces together, it's not really that intimidating. Ninety percent of the time it's making sure you're flying straight," said Branca.

Branca has further immersed himself in the world of aviation by working an internship with a group of students from Tuscola High School this past summer. Coady described the work as being similar to a NASCAR pit crew. Branca quoted Coady: "You have to rush in there and get them in the air as soon as possible."

Branca worked at Effingham, Mattoon, Tuscola and Vandalia. He filled up airplanes with fuel and chemicals, got the pilots drinks, and cleaned wind-

shield wipers. When not servicing airplanes, he would help wash them and maintain airport grounds.

Henderson said that Hunter has been working independently on ground school. Which is training that covers the basics of flight. Students learn a variety of skills, such as reading maps, and aerodynamics. Branca said he plans to finish ground school, complete his certification and then pass the test to become a pilot.

Henderson said that Branca was able to start ground school online through EAA Chapter 29. The chapter provided him with a \$279 "Learn to Fly Course" for free, as well as a 6-month EAA membership.

"I'm very excited for Hunter because I know he is a hard worker and I know he will dive in with everything he has. It will be interesting to see when he will finish. I can see him finish this in the shortest time possible," said Henderson.

James C. and Joan L.

Ray founded the Ray Foundation. James dedicated himself to aviation shortly after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. Ray enlisted in the Army Air Corps and was involved in the D-Day invasion as a command pilot in the 8th Air Force. After World War 2, he served in the Air National Guard. Ray supported numerous EAA initiatives and his business success in the EAA's education efforts. Ray died April 1 in Naples Florida at 94 years old.

For now, Branca needs to wait on paperwork. Henderson said that Chapter 29 has to submit final paperwork to EAA before funds can start being dispersed.

Chapter 29 will help Branca find an instructor, as well as another mentor for Branca, who will keep him on track to finish his license with the scholarship's funds said Henderson. Bob Coverdill, former president of EAA Chapter 29, offered to mentor Branca as well.



JUNIOR MISS TUSCOLA 2023 JOSLYN STEFFENS, left, and Little Miss Tuscola 2023 Julianne Steffens, right, shortly before throwing candy to the onlooking crowd on Saturday, Sept. 9, during the Arcola Broomcorn Fest parade. *Photo by Dominik Stallings*



MISS TUSCOLA 2023 CLAIRE MEYER tosses a handful of candy to children Saturday, Sept. 9, during the Arcola Broomcorn Fest parade. *Photo by Dominik Stallings.*