

North Oconee gymnast has four state titles – and four published books

BY BLAKELEY HOLLINGSHEAD
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When a broken back abruptly halted her club gymnastics dreams in seventh grade, Emory Shepherd hung up her leotard. And picked up a pen.

“When I was injured,” Shepherd said, “I had a lot of time and that gave me a chance to think about the stories I wanted to do and just have a chance to get those on paper.”

By the time she was 13 years old, Shepherd had more than ideas on paper. She had published her first novel — “The Uprising,” a young adult science fiction book about Specials, people with unique abilities.

Now a high school senior, Shepherd has published four books.

And she’s a four-time state gymnastics champion.

North Oconee won its sixth consecutive state championship in April, as Shepherd competed in her final meet as a Gym Titan.

“She is just a natural leader and natural encourager,” North Oconee gymnastics coach Hillary Sanders. “With her journey through gymnastics, she’s had the mental struggles and the physical struggles. She knows how to relate to any of the girls on the team. If they’re struggling with something, she knows what to say to them.”

For North Oconee’s young team, Sanders added, Shepherd could bring “that leadership and that calmness to the floor at state.”

As a freshman, Shepherd began inspiring young authors by establishing the Writers’ Club at Malcom Bridge Middle School and speaking at Oconee County Schools’ Page Turners book club meetings.

“She wanted to help other kids get involved in writing and help them get books published,” said Mistie Reynolds, Shepherd’s eighth grade teacher and Writers’ Club faculty sponsor, “and help them kind of live out their dream, like she’s gotten to do hers.”

Shepherd’s dreams used to



NOHS gymnast Emory Shepherd with “Of Citrus and Smoke,” her fourth published book. [Photo courtesy Cynthia Shepherd]

include club gymnastics. However, following her broken back and a subsequent elbow injury, Shepherd felt the need to take a step back from the serious world of club gymnastics.

For months, Shepherd avoided gymnastics, but she rediscovered her passion with the North Oconee High School team. It all started her freshman year when Shepherd ran into Sanders in another teacher’s room. Shepherd was nervous to talk to Sanders but quickly realized that Sanders’ team was built upon one core principle: fun.

The Gym Titans are all about teamwork and exciting traditions. Every year after state, the team goes to Chick-fil-A after hours and passes around their trophy...full of sweet tea. This year was Shepherd’s last to take a sip from the Titans’ hardware before moving on to college in North Carolina.

At Duke, Shepherd will study neuroscience and law while continuing her writing journey — a journey that began in a waiting room. Shepherd’s younger brother, John Parker, has a genetic speech disorder. During his

was like, I don’t know if I can do that as a 13-year-old,” Shepherd said.

Shepherd is less concerned with sales than she is inspiring young readers and writers.

Crowe sees the connection Shepherd forms with her students. A student listening to Shepherd speak tentatively asked Crowe if she could ask a question.

“Can I do a picture book?” The student asked. “Do I have to do chapters?”

Reaffirmed by Shepherd telling her that she could write whatever she wanted as long as she was sharing her story, the student left feeling inspired on her own journey.

Younger students take Shepherd’s advice to heart because she is a student just like they are, and they see her successes as attainable for them.

“She really did just encourage them and say it doesn’t matter from this age of fourth and fifth [grade] to as an adult or even younger,” Crowe said, “your story matters and you just need to put it down on paper and share your story.”

Shepherd doesn’t just inspire students.

“I really had never thought that a student could be capable of [publishing a book], but then when she did it, I was like, well kids can do that,” Reynolds said. “It motivated me as a teacher too...Kids are capable of doing so much more than what we give them credit for.”

Using her experiences in gymnastics as well as writing, Shepherd provides lessons on perseverance.

Writing, she said, “would beat me down when I would see my editor come back with a page and it was full of red marks and comments.”

And gymnastics, when she would fall or get a bad score, or worse, an injury, she would “be like, ‘maybe I’m not cut out for this.’”

“But then,” she said, “both of them have places where they build you up.”

Blakeley Hollingshead is a student in the University of Georgia’s undergraduate Sports Media Certificate program.



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NOTICE OF BUDGET ADOPTION

The Oconee County Board of Commissioners plans to adopt the 2026 Fiscal Year Budget at 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, June 03, 2025, at the Board of Commissioners Regular Meeting which will be held in the Commissioners Meeting Chambers at the Oconee County Administrative Building, 7635 Macon Highway, Watkinsville, Georgia.

A copy of the proposed budget is available at the Oconee County Administrative Building and on the County’s website.

OCONEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
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The Oconee Enterprise

PACS baseball player Ben Chatham signs for Oglethorpe

BY STUART STEELE

On Thursday, April 24, Prince Avenue Christian School held a signing ceremony for senior catcher Ben Chatham, who signed to continue his baseball career at Oglethorpe University.

Chatham has been a key piece of the Wolverines’ baseball team over the last four years, playing in 94 games according to MaxPreps.

Chatham recorded 59 hits, 35 RBIs and 8 doubles over the course of his high school career, posting a career batting average of .331.

Chatham said getting the opportunity to continue his baseball career at the collegiate level was an accomplishment he’d envisioned for years prior.

“It’s exciting, for sure, just getting to go play in college and Chase, keep chasing my dreams and stuff like that,” Chatham said. “I’ve been wanting this my whole life.”

Chatham said that the recruiting process was difficult, but when he visited Oglethorpe he knew it would be a great fit for him, for baseball as well as academics.

“We went down there, it felt like a great fit, beautiful campus, and all the kids seemed great,” Chatham said. “Seems like they have a real brotherhood going on, and programs on the up and coming and just everything like that.”

Yeah, good opportunities after college for jobs and stuff like that.”

Prince Avenue baseball has

been a powerhouse over the four years that Chatham has been on the team.

The Wolverines have won the region championship all four years and achieved consistent postseason success as well.

They reached the elite eight in Chatham’s freshman year, won state championships in his sophomore and junior years, and fell in the final four of this year’s playoffs, their first under head coach Doug Jones.

Chatham has been a major part of the Wolverines’ senior class, one that has led the teams to new heights over the last four years. Now, he’ll take his talents to the next level as a member of the Stormy Petrels.



Prince Avenue Christian School senior baseball player Ben Chatham signed with Oglethorpe University to continue his baseball career. [Photo courtesy Amy Frierson and PACS]

NOTICE OF BUDGET HEARING

Notice is hereby given that the City of Watkinsville will conduct a public hearing on Wednesday, June 18, 2025 at 6:30 p.m. for the purpose of considering a general budget. The simultaneous broadcast of the City Council meeting will be available online via a link on the city’s website under the Government tab at www.cityofwatkinsville.com. In addition, information on how to connect will be posted at City Hall. The proposed FY2026 budget for July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026 is as follows:

REVENUE		
	FY2026 (Proposed)	
TAXES	\$	2,767,785
BUILDING PERMITS	\$	125,226
CHARGES FOR SERVICES	\$	6,000
FINES AND FORFEITS	\$	202,000
INTEREST EARNED	\$	174,000
RENTS AND ROYALTIES	\$	33,285
OTHER FINANCING SOURCES	\$	41,000
FUND BALANCE CONTRIBUTION	\$	-
CAPITAL FUND CONTRIBUTION	\$	17,500
TOTAL REVENUES	\$	3,366,797
EXPENSES		
	FY2026 (Proposed)	
	Operating	Capital
CEMETERY	\$ 10,000	\$ -
CULTURE & RECREATION	\$ 64,712	\$ -
PARKS	\$ 428,683	\$ -
GENERAL GOVERNMENT	\$ 607,730	\$ -
HOUSING & DEVELOPMENT	\$ 85,514	\$ -
TOURISM	\$ 151,978	\$ -
JUDICIAL	\$ 190,398	\$ -
POLICE DEPT	\$ 847,044	\$ -
FIRE DEPT	\$ 15,000	\$ -
PUBLIC WORKS	\$ 782,107	\$ -
STREET LIGHTING	\$ 66,785	\$ -
CODE COMPLIANCE	\$ 99,346	\$ -
CAPITAL EXPENSES		\$ 17,500
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$ 3,349,297	\$ 17,500
TOTAL OPERATING & CAPITAL EXPENSES	\$ 3,366,797	

All citizens are invited to participate in the discussion. If you have any questions or concerns, please provide written or oral comments to Watkinsville City Hall by 12:00 noon on June 18, 2025. A copy of the proposed budget is available for public inspection at Watkinsville City Hall (191 VFW Drive) between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday and online at www.cityofwatkinsville.com. The final budget will be considered at the June 18, 2025 Council meeting.