

FEATURED

SPECIAL OLYMPICS
SO MUCH TO DO

Conchs go for gold in flag football, Tornadoes and Hurricanes claim silver, Fenney lifts 800 pounds and cornhole debuts at 2023 Fall Classic

By J.W. COOKE Keys Citizen
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ABOVE: The Key West Conchs flag football team won the gold medal.
Photos provided

The Special Olympics State Games provide so much more than sports, as during the four days of the 2023 Fall Classic held at the ESPN World Wide of Sports from Nov. 10-14 the athletes were treated to an opening ceremony with fireworks and a victory dance during the closing ceremony, along with Healthy Athletes Screenings each all in attendance in Orlando.

“We are grateful to the organizations who have helped us throughout 2023, Ocean Reef Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys with their generous grant funds that provide for all travel,” said Monroe County Special Olympics Manager Ruth Coleman “We also thank our law enforcement partners, Key West Police Department and Monroe County Sheriff’s Office for their escorts for our buses, enabling us to leave the Keys safely and arrive in Orlando on time.”



Even with the extracurriculars available during the event, the athletes are there to do one thing: “win or at least be brave in the attempt,” which the Key West Conchs traditional flag football team was able to accomplish once again claiming gold this time at the Master Level 4 led by coaches Angel Torres and Rady Acevedo. In the championship matchup, the Conch cruised to a 20-0 victory with every player on the team catching at least one pass with passing touchdowns and an extra point from quarterbacks Nelson Alejandrez and Dustin Eamilio, to Jennie Wasserman, Benny Valdez, Vincent Janecka and Jude Marceau.

“Our defense was on fire,” said Torres. “The team was clicking on all cylinders.”

It was nearly a pair of golds brought home by Monroe County flag football teams, as the Coral Shores unified unit, coached by high school junior Connor Dixon, won its first game 12-0 in the two-game Senior Level 3 bracket, led by captains Jourdynn Mosses, Zergio Ornelas, Ayden Lane and Lucas Carballo, to reach the championship match. Trailing by five points in the title tilt, the Hurricanes seemingly were running into the end zone for the game-winning score when the flags inadvertently fell off the ball carrier before crossing the goal line as time expired in the contest, leaving Coral Shores with the silver medal.

“I am incredibly proud of my team, made up of new players this year,” said Dixon. “Thank you to all of the Monroe coaching team and parents who supported us.”

The Key Largo School Tornadoes playing as part of the Junior Level 4 Jr. Unified division also garnered the silver in its two-game bracket, coming out blazing with a 30-7 victory in the first game, guided by team captain Dylan Duran. The Tornadoes’ offense was in sync with Ryland Dixon and Gavin Guazelli calling the plays, according to coach Jordan Lombard, while the defense was unstoppable led by Timothy Tyler and AJ Llanes.

“The final game was a nail biter,” added the coach, during which his team was ultimately defeated 18-12 in what he called an amazing showdown. “Silver medals and amazing medals were brought home to Key Largo School. “

The Monroe County delegate also included the Upper Keys powerlifting duo, coached by Erin Hamilton, of Coral Shores’ Laila Jones, who placed fourth in the deadlift, along with community athlete Heyden Fenney, whose combined weight in the Male Combo competition was 800 pounds that only placed him fourth overall. Fenney’s bench press of 242 pounds was good for first place, while he also squatted 237 pounds, and deadlifted 402 pounds.

Cornhole also made its debut at the State Games, this year as a demo with it officially one of our Special Olympic Florida sports going forward, and there representing Monroe County was Treasure Village’s Unified Team, Serenity Magee and Greyson Mack coached by Cricket Magee, Key Largo School’s Unified Team, Brian Leffler and James McCaffey coached by Regina Butler, and Horace O’Bryant’s Unified Doubles Team, Marvins Fils Aime and Kaden Savedra coached by Karen Leach, all of whom would be awarded gold.

During each Special Olympics Sports Classic, Coleman also selects an athlete, partner, and coach for the Inspirational Award for having “inspired all of us throughout the season, leading their teams with exceptional sportsmanship.” They were recognized with a medal and T-shirt at the Opening Ceremonies and for the fall the Inspirational Athlete was Alejandrez, from the Conchs flag football squad, the Inspirational Partner was Ryland Dixon of the Key Largo Tornadoes flag football team and the Inspirational Coach was Connor Dixon, who nearly led the Coral Shores Hurricanes to a gold in flag football.

With the close of the 2023 Fall Classic, the Monroe Country athletes will now turn their attention to the next season of sports, which includes bocce, soccer, cheerleading, and cycling. To register, visit <https://www.specialolympicsflorida.org/monroe-sports-registration>, or for a full calendar of events, visit <https://bit.ly/3QZQeP5>.

Coleman stressed while the number of athletes continues to grow in the county, they are in dire need of coaches with a clinic for interested parties being held on Dec. 17 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Contact Coleman at 305-923-0288 for information, or sign up at <https://bit.ly/3QXfCVO>.

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