



THE LUMBER GAMES

STUDENTS FROM A DOZEN FORESTRY SCHOOLS GATHERED IN THE WOODS NEAR GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA, OVER THEIR MARCH SPRING BREAK TO SWING AXES, THROW KNIVES, ROLL LOGS, AND CROWN A CHAMPION IN THE SOUTHERN FORESTRY CONCLAVE, AN EVENT THAT'S PART SPIRITED COMPETITION, PART CAREER NETWORKING, AND ALL ROLLICKING PARTY.

BY PETE WILLIAMS

**PHOTOS BY SUZETTE COOK,
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA**

Rosalie McGuirk towered over the edge of an 8-by-8 block of wood, wearing orange safety chaps and wielding a bow saw. Three of her Virginia Tech teammates, clad in school colors burgundy and orange, sat just two feet away on an orange cradle that held the wood in place. Other Hokies stood nearby, one gripping a handmade Tech forestry flag. Another approached with a can of burgundy spray paint and a school logo stencil, applying a logo to the wood's edge.

McGuirk, a sophomore ag-business major, nodded at her spray-painting teammate as he finished. She paused, and steadied her saw. The onlookers grew quiet as if watching a golfer line up a put. Then, at McGuirk's first cut, a roar erupted over the 211-acre Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center in Micanopy, Florida, just south of Gainesville. The Hokies screamed encouragement. So did a crowd of students from twelve other forestry schools. Sawdust flew as the 6-foot-2 McGuirk, a former high school volleyball player, furiously pushed and pulled the saw until a two-inch "cookie" slice of wood fell off 26.5 seconds later.

Teammates swarmed McGuirk, who would finish second in the women's bow-saw competition. Opponents offered congratulations. Someone handed her the logo-cookie, a trophy for her efforts. "I black out when I'm out there," McGuirk said afterward, only half-jokingly. "The key is to use the whole saw and feed off the energy of the crowd."

Welcome to the 65th annual Southern Forestry Conclave, an event that's part spirited competition, part career networking, and all rollicking party. Over two sunny days in mid-March, with temperatures soaring into the mid-80s, more than 250 students representing 13 forestry schools competed in 16 technical and 15 physical events to determine a team champion.

Many college students spend their spring breaks on a Caribbean cruise or jetting off to Europe. Not Conclave competitors, who, along with their faculty advisors, rode in vans for two to 13 hours, in the case of the Stephen F. Austin State University contingent, to camp in tents and compete in the Florida heat.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," said Holly Parkin, a junior forestry major at SFASU, who, if there were a Conclave rookie of the year award, would have earned it after finishing top three in all five of her events, winning three. "I get to camp and compete with hundreds of people as crazy as I am."

Each forestry school fields one individual or one two-person team per Conclave event. As with forestry school enrollment, there are more men than women, though the ladies are crucial to winning since there are four physical events either women's or co-ed. Women can compete in other events and, in Gainesville, they finished in the top three in axe throw, log birling, and chain throw.

The Southern Forestry Conclave is similar to the Lumberjack World Championships, which began in 1960 and aired for decades on ABC's Wide World of Sports. ESPN, which in the early 1980s featured limited mainstream sports programming, re-aired the event frequently. The competition, held annually in recent years in Hayward, Wisconsin, features 21 events for men and women to vie for more than \$50,000 in prize money. The events include sawing, chopping, logrolling, and climbing to



Florida senior Michael Banks competes in knife throwing.

test the strength and agility of its competitors. There's also the Stihl Timbersports Series, which began in 1985 and consists of six events. The series features four 2024 competitions, three in Milwaukee and one in Stihl's hometown of Virginia Beach.

The Conclave offers similar physical challenges while testing competitors in technical events such as dendrology, photogrammetry, pole classification, timber estimation, wildlife, compass and pacing, and DBH estimation.

The Conclave predates the Lumberjack World Championships by two years. In 1958, the University of Georgia organized the Association of Southern Forestry Clubs (ASFC) and hosted the inaugural Conclave. Member schools have come and gone and Covid took its toll, canceling the events for 2020 and 2021. For some forestry clubs, that was like losing two recruiting classes. Clemson University, which hosted and won the event in 2016, the only time in a 10-year stretch SFASU had not emerged victorious, opted not to send a team this year because of declining numbers.

Others have rebuilt their rosters by asking around their forestry departments for people with experience with axes and saws or transferable athletic skills. "I grew up splitting firewood," said Jimmy Campbell, a senior wildlife major at N.C. State who won the men's log chop. "I saw pictures of the team, and it looked like a lot of fun."

Stephen F. Austin State University, located in Nacogdoches, Texas, is the New York Yankees of the Southern Forestry Conclave, having finished first or second every year but one since 1988. The Sylvans – the name is distinct from the school's nicknames of Lumberjacks and Ladyjacks – have a website (sylvanstimbersports.com) with a thorough history of Conclave, including the formation of the Sylvans as a social forestry student club in 1946. The site also is the homepage for Lumberjack Studies, a course taught by Jeremy Stovall, the Sylvans faculty advisor since 2011. (His predecessor, Michael Fountain, served in the role for three decades).

At Conclave, faculty advisors take turns as lead officials and timers. Stovall handled the crosscut events. "You're a coach, academic advisor, and official all at once," he said.

At Conclave, the Sylvans brought the biggest contingent, 39 students, and were impossible to miss with their purple T-shirts and hats. Some wore purple war paint. Throughout the event, they carried a cardboard cutout of the mascot and a pole bearing both the SFASU and Texas flags to each event site and sat under a purple tent. The Sylvans have team tryouts, corporate sponsors, and were back practicing the day after returning from Florida.

"We take it pretty seriously," said Caden Pfluger, a senior forestry major who won the pole classification technical event.

"We practice literally year-round. It's part of our culture to go out and do our best and try to win every year."

Other schools have more modest Conclave organizations. Before the crosscut saw events, team members from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, a school of 3,500 in Tifton, Georgia, huddled over their equipment.

"Other schools rely on the sharpness of their saws," ABAC forestry club president Stone Nicholson proclaimed to his colleagues as he shook a can. "We rely on grease, lube, and WD-40!"

ABAC, whose crosscut teams generated the most foam and lather in their cuts, finished a solid sixth in the final standings among the 13 schools at the Conclave, though showings don't matter as much as the camaraderie. The 90-page official Conclave handbook lists the event goals as "to encourage leadership, teamwork, competition, sportsmanship, professionalism, skill, development, and fellowship among the students and clubs of the ASFC."

That explains the raucous cheering for every competitor, especially those struggling. During the bow saw competition, a young woman paused after more than three minutes, much longer than the sub-30-second marks of the top three finishers. Instantly, the crowd was chanting her name.

"The people are what make this event," says Annie Huckaby, a Louisiana Tech senior majoring in Forest Management. "It's so rare to go to a sporting event where everyone is cheering on everyone else. Everyone wants to win, sure, but it's more about this camaraderie you build year after year and keeping these traditions alive."

Tammy Cushing competed in the event as a University of Florida undergraduate and served as a faculty advisor at Kentucky, Clemson, and now her alma mater. She marveled that, the night before Conclave, she rooted hard for the Gators basketball team on television against archrival Georgia, then cheered for



LSU students compete in log rolling, where they must maneuver a log 60 feet and back.

Bulldogs forestry students hours later.

"Where else does that happen?" asked Cushing, whose daughter Emma, a senior mechanical engineering major at Florida, competed at Conclave. "This is their first taste of professional competition, and they'll meet people from other schools that they'll run into for years in their careers."

Though some might scoff at the suggestion, Conclave requires serious athleticism. There's the hand-eye coordination

needed for knife throwing and bow sawing, core strength for pole climbing, and rotational strength for log chopping and crosscut sawing. There's the necessary balance for log birling, where participants must balance atop a floating log, an event moved to a swimming pool this year because of alligator risk. And log rolling, where two-person teams, using cant hooks, must roll a 12-foot log 60 feet and back without hitting boundary stakes.

"Is Conclave a sport?" asks Gabe Dawkins, a senior forest management major at North Carolina State, who won the log roll event with teammate Austin Davis. "It takes a lot of skill, training, and physical effort. Seems like a sport to me."

N.C. State finished second at Conclave in 2022 but dropped to fifth in 2023. "We all had down days," said Dawkins, sounding a lot like a sports coach.

Several clubs brought sports traditions from campus. Mississippi State students rang cowbells, as they would at Bulldogs sports events. Campbell, the N.C. State log chopper, competed shirtless in the red-and-white striped overalls he wears to Wolfpack football games. Before Andrew Spruill of Forest, Virginia competed in the pole fell event, his Virginia Tech teammates activated a speaker to play Metallica's "Enter Sandman," jumping up and down rhythmically as they do at Cassell Coliseum before basketball games.

The host Florida Gators could have played their football anthem, "I Won't Back Down," by the late Gainesville na-

Virginia Tech's Andrew Spruill prepares for the pole felling event.





Stephen F. Austin State students put on their game faces.

tive Tom Petty, but could be forgiven for missing that detail. Hosting a conclave is an all-hands-on-deck undertaking for the months leading up to the event and throughout the weekend. Cushing and the UF forestry club did a fabulous job while finishing fifth overall, less than two points behind fourth-place Virginia Tech.

“We gave up a lot of sleep for this but it’s worth it,” says Florida senior Marina McGonigle, the forestry club vice president who took third place in wood technology, where competitors identify blocks of wood to species. “Pulling this off was a win for us.”

Some schools host regional Conclaves such as N.C. State’s “Rolleo” held in November and Virginia Tech’s “TimberBeast” in February. Unlike those events, which make the updated team scores available during the competition, the Southern Forestry Conclave does not reveal overall results until the end. Nobody knows the outcome of the technical events, held first, until the awards dinner. Conclave officials only announce the top three finishers of the physical events in real-time.

Five-time defending champion SFASU and N.C. State seemed

even during the physical portion of the program, leaving some suspense for the overall title. The Sylvans won by a narrow 7.5-point margin, to capture their ninth Conclave in 10 years.

For N.C. State, which left after the banquet to drive home overnight as planned, the performance was encouraging, especially after last year’s fifth-place showing. Driving back to Raleigh, they streamed the final game of the ACC men’s basketball tournament, where the 10th-seeded Wolfpack knocked off rival North Carolina to win a fifth consecutive game and an unlikely berth in the NCAA Tournament. The forestry students had followed the basketball team’s improbable run all week. When the game ended, they pulled over at a convenience store in North Florida.

“They were whooping and hollering, and it seemed like a combo celebration of the basketball team and their Conclave performance,” said faculty advisor Stephanie Jeffries. “We went home with our spirits held high, looking forward to next year.”

Pete Williams is the editor of *Forest Landowner* magazine.



Annie Huckaby (left) and Louisiana Tech teammates cheer on Mason Goodrich



The pole climb event attracted the more nimble athletes.

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