

Behind the MASCOT

CHS alums reveal they were UCF's Knightro for 3 years.

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY
klokeinsky@lakecityreporter.com

For years, Lake City natives Danielle Mathis and Jesse Stokes had a secret.

While attending the University of Central Florida, they kept their extracurricular activities under wraps, only revealing them to people they could trust. Maintaining their anonymity was crucial.

These two weren't just any college students; they were mascots.

For the past three years, both Mathis and Stokes have taken turns being Knightro, the mascot for the UCF Knights. As members of Team Knightro, they were the symbol of school spirit for the largest university in the country, but their love for their university began before they put on the big suit.

"I'd been to every sporting event and I'd always been kind of the biggest cheerleader, besides the actual cheerleaders and Knightro," Stokes said. "I loved the school and everything about it."

Stokes and Mathis have been friends since they were 14 years old, and graduated from Columbia High School together in 2013. Their desire to show their school spirit stemmed from their early days cheering on the teams at CHS.

"I was very spirited in high school and I went into college with that same spirit," Mathis said.

Mathis and Stokes were attending a basketball game during their freshman year at UCF when Knightro was handing out flyers

KNIGHTRO continued on 4D



COURTESY PHOTOS

Knightro surfs the crowd during the University of Central Florida Spirit Splash, a homecoming tradition where students rush into the reflection pond in the middle of campus.



Columbia High School alumna Danielle Mathis is pictured with University of Central Florida mascot Knightro. Danielle was one of the members of Team Knightro while at UCF.



Lake City native Jesse Stokes poses with Knightro before graduating from the University of Central Florida. Stokes is wearing part of the mascot uniform to honor his years of being Knightro.

A toast to Columbia County's bountiful blueberries

We live in an area that has an abundant supply of delicious blueberries.

The crops are coming in now and are available in stores or you can go pick them yourself. Maybe you're lucky and have your own plants growing in your backyard.

Blueberry plants do well in hot temperature with sandy soil. They can tolerate full sun, but need 1-2 inches of water per week. They rank second to strawberries in fruit consumption. Blueberries are highest in antioxidants

of all fresh fruit. They are the "King" of antioxidants. We should all be eating them, preferably daily, as they are rich in vitamins, particularly C and K, and high in magnesium and numerous other minerals. Another plus is that they are only 84 calories per cup. Yeah!

When they are abundant, I put them onto a flat pan and spread them out evenly, and then place in the freezer. When they are frozen I put them in a bag and have them all year. I don't wash them until I get ready to use. This allows them to freeze individually

TASTE BUDDIES



Genie Norman
TasteBuddiesLakeCity@gmail.com

rather than clump together. There are a lot of ways to enjoy blueberries. My friend, Ann, puts a handful every morning on her

cereal, or you can make your favorite pancake recipe and when you place the batter on your grill, just sprinkle on a few blueberries and you have a wonderful healthier breakfast. Throw a handful on top of your salad and it changes the whole taste.

I thought I would share a few other ways that I like them. Let's start with a cool summertime sipping drink.

Blueberry daiquiri

- 1 small can of frozen limeade
- 1 small can of light rum

- 2-3 cups of fresh or frozen blueberries
- 2 tablespoons of powdered sugar

Using a blender, pulse limeade, rum and sugar. Add blueberries and pulse until blended. If you use fresh berries, add a little ice to make it icy, but if you use frozen ones, it'll be icy enough.

Blueberry muffins are probably one of the most popular ways to eat blueberries. Several years ago at the Taste of Homes Cooking School that was sponsored by the Lake City Reporter, the chef shared

a recipe for blueberry muffins that I use often. It's so easy and it requires only five ingredients. They are really easy to make and they turn our perfect every time.

Simple blueberry muffins

- 2 cups of biscuit baking mix
- 3/4 cup of sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 cup of sour cream (8 ounces)
- 1 cup of fresh or frozen blueberries
- Heat oven to 375

RECIPES continued on 4D

KNIGHTRO

Continued From 1D

advertising auditions for the role. They both decided to go for it.

"I like to say 'participate in life' and that was a way I participated in life," Stokes said.

Mathis says the auditions for Knightro consisted of a lot of improvisation to see how the candidates performed on the spot.

"When you're in suit, you never know what you're going to get," Mathis said.

What they ended up getting was the best three years of their college lives. Their roles as members of Team Knightro allowed them to travel across the country, meet countless people and make a large impact on the UCF community.

Mathis, who was the Team Knightro captain during her last year at UCF, says her favorite memory from her three years as Knightro is when she participated in Spirit Splash, an annual pre-game homecoming pep rally for UCF students where they run into a reflection pond in the center of campus. It was named one of the 10 best college homecoming rituals, and she was at the center of it all.

"Thousands of people rushed into the pond and I crowd surfed," Mathis said. "They dropped me into the water and it was like somebody paused a movie. Everyone stopped. But when I stood up and put my hands in the air it was like they pressed play again and everyone cheered."

Stokes also has some stand-out memories from his three years as Knightro. He traveled to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to participate in the Mascot Stampede with college mascots from around the country. He got to live out his dream of seeing a football game in Michigan's stadium, "The Big House." He also got to participate in the Mascot Games, where approximately 30 mascots from sports teams across the country compete in a variety of games.

"It was just chaos," Stokes said. "It was mascot debauchery."

Their experiences were made even better by the fact that they were able to have them with someone they have been friends

with for years.

"It was really cool because Jesse and I have known each other since we were 14," Mathis said. "We kind of had each others' backs all the time."

Being the mascot essentially makes you the most popular person on campus. For years, some of Stokes and Mathis's friends didn't even know that it was them they were excited to see every time they spotted the beloved mascot.

It wasn't until halftime at the UCF men's basketball senior night, three years after they put on the Knightro suits for the first time, that Mathis and Stokes were able to reveal themselves as the school mascot. Stepping out onto the court with their families and telling the world they were Knightro was like a superhero taking off their mask and a bittersweet moment to mark that their time as Knightro was coming to an end.

"It made me apply myself to something that was much bigger than myself," Stokes said. "It was about Knightro, not about me."

Mathis says what she will miss most about being Knightro is being able to interact with and impact so many people.

"Knightro is a celebrity," Mathis said. "If it's just me, Danielle, no one's going to come up and give me a high five. As Knightro, everyone comes up to you and wants to take selfies with you and give you a high five and meet their kids. It's the instant-celebrity status."

While they have left the mascot uniforms behind, the two AlumKnights still plan on working closely with people and making positive impacts. Mathis, who graduated from UCF in May with a degree in hospitality management, is currently out at sea, working in the entertainment department aboard the Carnival Elation. Stokes, who also graduated in May with a degree in hospitality management and a minor in sports business management, is working in Orlando as an events marketing assistant for Wycliffe Bible Translators and has started his own social media business on the side.

As they embark on their new journeys, they will always remember their years as Knightro.



Jesse Stokes (left) and Danielle Mathis show their Knightro graduation capes after their graduation from the University of Central Florida this past spring.



Knightro pumps up the crowd as he runs out on stage during the Mascot Games in Orlando.

RECIPES

Continued From 1D

degrees. Combine the biscuit mix and $\frac{3}{4}$ cups of sugar in a bowl. Add two eggs and sour cream and stir until combined. Fold in the blueberries.

Fill greased muffin tins three-fourths full. Bake at 375 degrees for 20-25 minutes. Cool five minutes before removing from the pan. Cool on wire rack. Makes 12.

I have another blueberry muffin recipe that I use that requires a little more time and more ingredients, but they are an absolute keeper. Guess you can call them my company muffins.

Company blueberry muffins

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups of all purpose flour
2 teaspoons of baking powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of ground allspice
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of salt
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of skim or 2 percent milk
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of sugar
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of vegetable oil
1 teaspoon of grated lemon rind and 1 tablespoon of lemon juice
1 teaspoon of vanilla
1 large egg
1 cup of fresh or frozen blueberries
Cooking spray

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Combine above ingredients except blueberries and mix thoroughly. Gently fold in blueberries.

Divide batter evenly among 12 muffin cups coated with spray oil. Bake at 400 degrees for 20 minutes. Remove from pans immediately and let cool. Yields 12 muffins.

My Taste Buddie Friend, Mary Kay Rutan, makes a wonderful blueberry pie and it's one of those that once you taste it you'll ask for the recipe.

Blueberry cream pie

1 prepared pie crust (Pillsbury refrigerated)



Blueberries are abundant in Columbia County and there are many recipes that use the versatile fruit. Genie Norman recommends freezing them so you can enjoy the area's good blueberries all year long.

4 cups of fresh blueberries
1 8-ounce sour cream
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar
 $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon of salt
3 tablespoons of all-purpose flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of dry bread crumbs
2 tablespoons of sugar
2 tablespoons of butter, melted
Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Place pie crust in pan and pour 4 cups of fresh blueberries into piecrust. In bowl, mix together sugar, salt, flour and sour cream until well blended. Pour over berries. In bowl, mix the dry breadcrumbs, butter and tablespoons of sugar. Sprinkle over pie. Bake in preheated

375 degree oven for 45-50 minutes. NOTE: You can use any combination of fresh fruit, such as blackberries and peaches. Just use 4 cups total.

I also use blueberries to make the blueberry cobbler that many of you are probably familiar with, but just in case you aren't, it's so simple. It happens to be my favorite cobbler recipe and you can use any fruit or combination.

Blueberry cobbler

1 cup of sugar
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of flour
2 teaspoons of baking powder



Photos by GENIE NORMAN/Special to the Reporter

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup of milk
Juice of $\frac{1}{2}$ lemon and zest
Pinch of salt
1 stick of butter
Melt butter in baking dish (9-by-9 inch or 9-by-13 inch for thinner pie). Mix all other ingredients and pour into the melted butter. DO NOT STIR.

On top of butter mixture, add 2 cups of blueberries or other fruit. Don't stir. Bake at 350 degrees for one hour.

I like to stir it after about 45 minutes so it will get more crispy on top. If you like it soft and doughy, don't stir. Also, it may not take a full hour to cook. Watch it and if it browns on top,

take it out — it's done.

When I make this cobbler and peaches are available, I use half blueberries and half peaches. It's wonderful and it's my favorite cobbler. If you make this and use apples as your fruit, be sure and add $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of cinnamon.

There are so many recipes using this versatile fruit. Remember, if you freeze them you can enjoy our good blueberries all year long.

■ Genie Norman is a Columbia County resident who loves good food and fun. Her column appears twice a month.