**Wounded warrior gets new home for the holidays**

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Army Sgt. Joel Tavera will be home for the holidays.

The highly decorated wounded Army veteran was hailed with a hero’s welcome on Saturday, as he rode in a motorcade including Hillsborough County Sheriff’s deputies on motorcycles, fire trucks, a military vehicle, biker groups and other vehicles.

The procession made its way from the James A. Haley Veterans’ Hospital through Lutz, to Grand Hampton, a North Tampa community of upscale, architecturally diverse homes. The entry of the normally gated community was opened on Saturday, Nov. 19, to allow in the flow of cars, trucks and motorcycles.

Flags lined the roads leading to the war hero’s home and people of all ages stood along the sidewalks waving flags and homemade “welcome home” signs as the procession crept through the subdivision. The procession stopped just short of Taver’s new home at 20007 Outpost Point Drive.

Hundreds of people were there, on a beautiful, breezy morning, to celebrate with the man who has endured 73 surgeries since March 12, 2008, when he was riding in an armored SUV inside the Tallil Airbase in southeastern Iraq. Five rockets struck the armored vehicle, killing three of the soldier’s friends.

Tavera initially was thought to be dead.

He suffered serious head trauma. He lost sight in both of his eyes. He lost his right leg and four fingers on his left hand. He sustained critical burns to 60 percent of his body.

At the time of the incident his parents, Jose and Maritza Tavera, were told that their son was the second most severely injured soldier to survive the Iraq war.

There was tension in the air on Nov. 15 when the Hillsborough County Commission was selecting its new chair for the next year.

Outgoing chairmen Al Higginbotham nominated Mark Sharpe to succeed him and made his opinion very well known. However, the other five commissioners backed Ken Hagan, who officially takes over the role this week with Sandy Murman serving as vice-chairman. It is the fourth time Hagan has held the gavel on the board. After the 5-2 vote, members began talking about changing the process of selecting its chair.

Commissioner Les Miller, who was also voted as chaplain for the next year, said the idea is to make the appointment process “behind-the-scenes wrangling” out of the picture.

The idea is to have the position pass to the member with the most seniority who hasn’t served at the post for the last two years.

‘This would take the politics out of the process,” Miller said. ‘I was shocked to be getting calls a month before this from people asking me to support certain nominations.”

Murman agreed with Miller’s idea.

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**New life for Gaither football**

By Kyle LoJacono

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The last few years the Gaither football team hasn’t had much to hang its 10-gallon hat on.

The Cowboys won just eight games from 2008-10, a three-year stretch that saw the program lose 23 contest including 10 straight. However, the current Gaither squad has a new level of confidence in its ability to win every time it takes the field.

With its 38-30 victory against Durant on Nov. 18 in the Class 7A regional quarterfinals, the Cowboys improved their record to 8-3, the most wins in a season since the program posted 10 in 2000. It also marked the first time Gaither has taken a postseason contest since 2007.

After defeating Durant, Cowboys senior cornerback Tyler McCollum said it was like the last few years of torment flashed before his eyes.

“It feels like my whole mind is just rushing with all the work we’ve had to do in the last four years to get here,” McCollum said.

Gaither junior athlete Shug Oyegunle added, “I can’t even explain it in words right now. We’ve come so far and worked so hard for this day.”

Oyegunle’s first year as a Cowboy was 2009 when the squad went 1-9 and was outscored 355-66. He said the players had been doing the things they needed to win the last few seasons, but the lack of Ws had

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**Messy transition spurs new idea**

County commissioners plan to make chair selection nonpolitical

By Kyle LoJacono

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After the 5-2 vote, members began talking about changing the process of selecting its chair.

Commissioner Les Miller, who was also voted as chaplain for the next year, said the idea is to make the appointments on a regular schedule to take ‘behind-the-scenes wrangling’ out of the picture.

The idea is to have the position pass to the member with the most seniority who hasn’t served at the post for the next two years.

‘This would take the politics out of the process,” Miller said. ‘I was shocked to be getting calls a month before this from people asking me to support certain nominations.”

Murman agreed with Miller’s idea.

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