

Tuesday, February 23, 2021 | A supplement to The Morning Journal

To the finish

Area wrestlers hope there's not a repeat
of last year's shortened season



Olmsted Falls' Nate Urry takes down Westlake's Cole Yuhas at the Southwestern Conference tournament Jan. 9. Photo by Aimee Bielozer.

Riding momentum

Keystone heading into postseason tournament behind stellar senior class

By Henry Palattella
hpalattella@morningjournal.com
@hellapalattella on Twitter

At the end Lorain County Conference Tournament on Feb. 9, Keystone's Luke Moore was the center of attention.

With all the other matches concluded, Moore's dual against Black River's Travis Owen took center stage. The Wildcats had already clinched the con-

ference title, but Moore's match still seemed like it mattered. His teammates surrounded the mat screaming words of encouragement.

A week earlier, Owen beat Moore, 2-0, in their first matchup of the year. This time, Moore got the advantage, turning Owen twice for a 7-2 win and his third conference championship.



AIMEE BIELOZER — FOR THE MORNING JOURNAL

MOMENTUM » PAGE 3 Keystone's Ryan Healy wrestles at the LC8 tournament Feb. 9.

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Momentum

FROM PAGE 2

After the win, Moore was rounded up for a post-match interview. Before he got a chance to answer any questions, however, he was interrupted by fellow senior Nick Hickman who jumped on Moore's back in celebration.

"Ew, you smell really bad," Hickman jokingly said as he jumped off Moore's back.

After Moore finished his interview, he ran into the Wildcats' team photo, clutching the conference tournament trophy with Hickman and fellow senior Ryan Healy.

For Hickman, Moore, Healy and the rest of the Wildcats senior class, it was a team photo four years in the making.

"They've been there for a long time and they can do it all," Keystone coach Christopher Vondruska said of his senior class. "They're all goofballs but really a pleasure to coach."

In addition to the aforemen-

tioned trio, the Wildcats' senior class includes Jose Morales and Nick Briswell. For the past four years, that quintet has helped establish and reinforce a winning culture in the Wildcats wrestling room, with Feb. 9's Lorain County Conference Tournament serving as a tangible example of that culture.

"We're all working hard and doing what we can to make each other better," Morales said. "It's the best feeling in the world."

With the conference wins, Moore (285 pounds, 25-4) and Hickman (195, 21-0) leave the Wildcats program as three-time conference champions. Last year, Hickman (the No. 7 wrestler at 195 pounds) qualified for the state tournament before it was postponed and subsequently canceled.

With the memory of that still burning in his head, Hickman is hoping to end his final season on his own terms.

"I didn't get to have the state tournament last year so this year I'm trying to prove to everyone that I belong on that mat," Hickman said. "Last year I didn't get

a chance to prove myself to my team and my community at the state tournament so I'm hoping to do that this year."

Even with that motivation, he still understandably struggled to get into the season at times during the regular season.

"While I'm happy I finished as a champion, this year didn't feel like a complete year to me," he said. "It doesn't feel right that this has to be my last year. I honestly feel like I'm holding back at some points because I don't know what's going to happen. I'll wake up in the morning and just wonder if we're going to have wrestling that day or if it'll be canceled."

Like Hickman, Moore's hoping the end of his season comes under his control. Moore — the No. 15 wrestler at 285 — beat Black River's Travis Owen in a battle of state-ranked heavyweights to win the conference tournament.

"Hopefully we'll be able to complete a whole season and not be in the situation Nick was in last year," Moore said. "It's something that's really out of our control so we're just trying to take things a

day at a time. If that ends up happening, we're just going to have to face it head on."

Healy closed out the Wildcats' senior conference champions with a pinfall victory over Firelands' Cayden Conrad in the 160-pound championship match. After Keystone's conference tournament loss to Firelands last season, Healy was happy his final season ended as conference champions.

"It feels great to be able to come back from last year and show that we're able to do it," Healy said. "It's been a couple years in the making and I'm glad we were able to pull together and bring it home."

The culture established by the Wildcats' seniors has already begun to trickle down to the rest of the team, with freshman Tristin Greene serving as the poster child for the culture.

After losing his first high school match, Greene has rattled off 28 straight wins, with his most recent one a 8-4 win over Wellington's Jeremiah McKee in the 132-pound conference championship match.

KEYSTONE » PAGE 4

"I didn't get to have the state tournament last year so this year I'm trying to prove to everyone that I belong on that mat. Last year I didn't get a chance to prove myself to my team and my community at the state tournament so I'm hoping to do that this year."

— Keystone senior Nick Hickman

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Keystone

FROM PAGE 3

Sophomore Devon Mayer also won the conference championship at 120 pounds.

“I think the biggest thing in winning all these duals is that it’s been fun,” Vondruska said. “The freshmen and the sophomores have had a good time winning all these duals and hopefully it helps them recruit guys because that’s what we need. We want them to have a great senior season for themselves.”

That feeling of fun has started at the top of the Wildcats’ roster. Despite having to deal with such an unprecedented season, Hickman and the rest of Keystone’s upperclassman have made it their mission to help keep things light in the wrestling room. It’s worked.

“We’re just having fun. We’re working hard and enjoying our time here,” Hickman said. “There’s not a lot of pressure, it’s just guys being guys having fun. We want to end it together at the state tournament.”

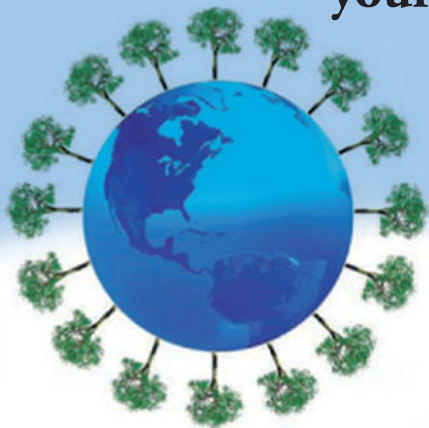


HENRY PALATTELLA — THE MORNING JOURNAL

Keystone poses with the Lorain County League trophy after winning the conference tournament on Feb. 9.

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Back to the mat

Elyria alum J.T. Brown of Army nationally ranked heading into collegiate postseason

By Henry Palattella
 hpalattella@morningjournal.com
 @hellapalattella on Twitter

For 311 days, Army's J.T. Brown went without wrestling.

On March 12, 2020, the Elyria High graduate was at a practice with his Army teammates when he was informed the upcoming NCAA Division I Tournament was canceled due to the novel coronavirus.

Later that day, he left campus as part of an indefinite dismissal that continued the entire semester. For an entire spring and summer, Brown went from training at one of the most

rigorous military academies in the nation to lifting weights in his cousin's basement.

On Jan. 17, Brown made his long-awaited return to the mat in the Black Knights' dual against Hofstra.

Brown, now a junior, finished his 197-pound match with a 3-2 win over Hofstra's Trey Rogers, but it wasn't his prettiest performance.

"I was a bit rusty," Brown recalled with a laugh. "He got in on my legs and I just wasn't looking good and I've pieced it together since then and have gotten a little bit better every week."

The Black Knights finished their regular season

Feb. 12 with a 20-13 loss to Navy in what was only their sixth competition this season.

With such a truncated regular season, Brown — like most college wrestlers — is working hard to catch up to his normal conditioning in what's been anything but a normal season.

"I'm feeling as close to normal as I could be given the circumstances," Brown said. "I'm just going to use the time we have now to work on my training for the postseason."

At the end of the regular season last year, Brown had a record of 18-6 while



COURTESY ARMY WRESTLING

Army wrestler J.T. Brown of Elyria during the 2019-2020 season.

COLLEGIATE » PAGE 6








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Collegiate

FROM PAGE 5

the Black Knights had competed in 13 duals and four tournaments. This year, he's 5-1 in Army's six competitions.

"It's strange," Brown said. "Usually, we start the year off with tournaments and you get a lot of matches in and are able to use those to gauge your training. We've had almost none of that this year. That's probably the most difficult aspect in not having a ton of opportunities to evaluate how we're doing."

Army initially had two duals scheduled against Clarion and Drexel but they were both canceled due to positive coronavirus tests within the program. Brown and his teammates are in a unique position, as the cadets can't leave campus, meaning any away dual came with its own different

set of logistics.

Army's away dual at Lehigh on Feb. 6 is the only time Brown's left campus since the season started.

"It's really difficult here at West Point coordinating events because right now we're not allowed to leave the gates of campus," Brown said. "There's a lot of hoops that the coaches and athletic facility have to jump through to set up meets with people. We were supposed to have eight duals and we only had six because two teams needed to drop out so there's been some difficulty."

Brown, the No. 19 wrestler in the country at 197 pounds, has five wins on the season, two of which came with bonus points. The 2017 state champion at Elyria went 15-6 in 2018-2019 after redshirting his first year at West Point. He finished last season 21-8 after wrestling five matches in the Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association Tournament.

"Obviously he's got the talent, but his work ethic always stood out to me as well," Elyria coach Erik Burnett said of Brown last year. "Even in middle school, just watching how he grinded every day in the room was incredible."

With the outside world literally shut out, Brown's been able to focus all his energy into training for the postseason, something that will no doubt be a benefit with this year's truncated schedule.

"It's almost a blessing in disguise that we're not able to leave right now," Brown said. "Same with just the overall atmosphere of West Point. It's not like we're a big party school or anything so it makes it that much easier for me. Not that I'd be going out and partying somewhere else, but it helps me focus."

Brown's final regular season turn on the mat was a successful one, as he beat Navy's Jacob Koser with a



PHOTO COURTESY OF J.T. BROWN

Army's J.T. Brown, left, of Elyria wrestling during the 2019-2020 season

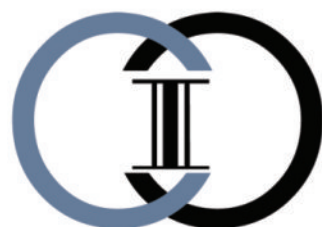
9-4 decision in the Black Knights' 20-13 team loss to the Midshipmen. That individual victory began Brown's march to the postseason, which begins Feb. 26 at the EIWA Tournament.

After that is the 2021 NCAA Tournament, which

is hosted at the Enterprise Center in St. Louis from March 18-20. The NCAA has yet to announce changes to this year's tournament, but has said it will follow the CDC's recommendations regarding capacity, face masks, physical distancing, and temperature checks.

Until then, however, it's all training.

"It's a little surreal that the conference tournament is already here," Brown said. "I'm used to such a longer season. I'm going to try to make the most out of every day. I'm trying to push and improve every day."



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Second chance

Area state qualifiers from a year ago want to finish this time

By Henry Palattella
hpalattella@morningjournal.com
@hellapalattella on Twitter

On March 12, 2020, Ohio's high school sports world froze.

A few minutes before noon, as West Branch and Dayton Carroll were taking the court to start their Division II state girls bas-

ketball, then-OHSAA executive director Jerry Snodgrass made the announcement the OHSAA had postponed all postseason tournaments because of the novel coronavirus.

It was already known there were going to be coronavirus-related changes to the tournament.

CHANCE » PAGE 8



AIMEE BIELOZER — FOR THE MORNING JOURNAL

Elyria's Jake Evans records a pin against Marysville's Christian McCartney at the Ohio High School Wrestling Coaches Association state duals tournament on Feb. 6.



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Chance

FROM PAGE 7

On March 10, the OHSAA announced it was instituting a spectator limit on all tournaments. In the end, it wasn't needed, as Columbus' area courts, wrestling mats and ice rinks sat unused.

Snodgrass' announcement instantaneously reverberated across the state. With most tournaments that upcoming weekend, countless teams and athletes were preparing to travel down to Columbus, with some early arriving teams checking into hotels as the postponement was announced.

Two weeks later, the plug was pulled. Winter sports tournaments were no more, and the spring sports season.

The cancellation snuffed out state champion aspirations for 19 area wres-

tlers. Of those 19, 10 were seniors and graduated. For the other half, that state tournament qualification serves as part motivation, part cautionary tale.

With the postseason approaching, those eight wrestlers — along with their coaches — are hoping this year comes with a full, complete postseason.

"It's been a different season," said Avon coach Jeremy Johnson.

"We've been facing adversity all season and I know we're not the only ones. We're just grateful for every practice and every week that we get. It's awesome to see the state tournament locations and see session times for sectionals and districts. Those are things our kids are really getting excited about."

Johnson's Eagles features two state qualifiers from a season ago in Cael Saxton (132 pounds) and Mason Bingham (285). Saxton — who qualified at 106 pounds

in 2019 and at 113 pounds last season — is wrestling at 132 pounds this season. He and Bingham won Southwestern Conference titles in January.

"Mason's a cool kid, he doesn't let too many things rattle him," Johnson said. "That said, I know he's chomping at the bit to get another opportunity to get to the state tournament and really show off all the hard work he's been putting in. Cael's been at the state meet before, he's seen it, but it was taken away from him before and he was impacted as much as Mason was."

The Eagles third qualifier last season was 195-pounder Jordan Greer, who graduated last spring and now wrestles at Ohio University. Greer's not the only state qualifier from last season to find his footing collegiately, as every senior state qualifier from a year ago is wrestling in college.

Elyria's Mick Burnett (Pittsburgh) and Dylan

Shawver (Rutgers) are wrestling at the Division I level while fellow Pioneers alum Ben Doehr (Lake Erie) and Bryce Allison (Tiffin) are in D-II along as is Firelands' Payton Burgdorf (Gannon). Olmsted Falls' Justin Jaeckin and Midview's Daniel Bucknavich joined Cleveland State's wrestling team upon graduation.

With Jaeckin leaving for Cleveland State's program, Nate Urry — an Olmsted Falls senior who qualified for the state tournament last season at 145 — has taken Jaeckin's place as a leader in the Bulldogs' wrestling room.

"I really think it helped him work hard," Olmsted Falls coach Bryce Burkhard said of Urry.

"He's seeing where he can be, and I think last season pushes him even harder because he knows how bad he wants that state trip now since he earned it but never got a chance to wrestle there. He knew it wouldn't

be easy to get back there so that's been motivating him all season. He's been leading in the room and is a hard worker. It's infectious for the entire team."

Of the nine returning state qualifiers for last season, more than half of them wrestle for Elyria, another wrinkle Pioneers coach Erik Burnett has had to manage this season.

"The whole year we've been trying to help them create opportunities for this year's state tournament," Burnett said. "The past is the past and you have to move forward and that's what we've been trying to do this year. You have to worry about what's in your control. I think overall the kids have been doing a good job getting ready."

Colin Noel (113), Peyton Fenton (120), Nate Burnett (145), Enrique Munguia (160) and Jake Evans (182) returned for the Pioneers after qualifying for the state tournament last

season. All are state ranked with Burnett (No. 1 at 145, 25-1), Munguia (No. 3 at 160, 26-0) and Evans (No. 3 at 182, 28-1) in the top-3 of their weight class.

As last year proved, it can all be taken away in the blink of an eye because of the novel coronavirus. How that could happen, however, is different. Last year, the state tournaments were canceled in a preemptive measure to reduce the spread of a virus that was largely unknown. This year, it would just take one positive test to shut everything down.

"You don't know what can happen during the postseason with the coronavirus, but we're just worried about what we can control," Burnett said. "Obviously we'll tell the kids that the coaches might be a little concerned about stuff, but the kids really can't concern themselves with what's out of their control."

QUALIFIERS » PAGE 9



**GOOD LUCK WRESTLERS AND HAVE
A GREAT SEASON!**

Qualifiers

FROM PAGE 8

What is in their control is making sure that they're staying out of large crowds and being cognizant of who they're around, and knock our kids have done a really good job of that."

Last year, Keystone's Nick Hickman was with his team in their Columbus hotel room when they found out about the postponement. This year, the 195-pounder finished the regular season 21-0 to go along with a conference championship.

"He's having a great year," said Keystone coach Christopher Vondruska. "He's working his butt off and really nothing's changed from last year. As soon as we were able to start working out at the beginning of this school year, he went right to it and really hasn't stopped. He's more motivated now than I've ever seen."

Wellington's Jeremiah McKee also returned this season after qualifying for the Division III state tournament at 126 pounds.



AIMEE BIELOZER - FOR THE MORNING JOURNAL

North Olmsted's Mahdi Shoman, left, wrestles against Avon's Cael Saxton at the Southwestern Conference tournament Jan. 9



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Historic victories

Elyria's Banyas, Keystone's Jirousek blazing a trail for girls wrestling

By Henry Palattella
hpalattella@morningjournal.com
@hellapalattella on Twitter

Last year, Elyria's Riley Banyas was Lorain County's lone representative at the Ohio High School Wrestling Coaches Association girls state tournament.

This year she'll have some company.

On Feb. 14, both Banyas and Keystone's Emily Jirousek qualified for the state tournament at the

district championship, with Banyas pinning her way to first place at 101 pounds and Jirousek finishing in third place at 170 pounds.

With the wins, Banyas and Jirousek became the first Lorain County girls wrestlers to secure district championships.

Last year, there were no qualifying events, thus allowing every girl to compete at the state tournament.



RANDY MEYERS - FOR THE MORNING JOURNAL

Jason Craker of Lake Catholic has a hold advantage over Elyria's Riley Banyas during a 106 pound match at the Elyria Duals on Dec. 30, 2020.

HISTORIC » PAGE 11

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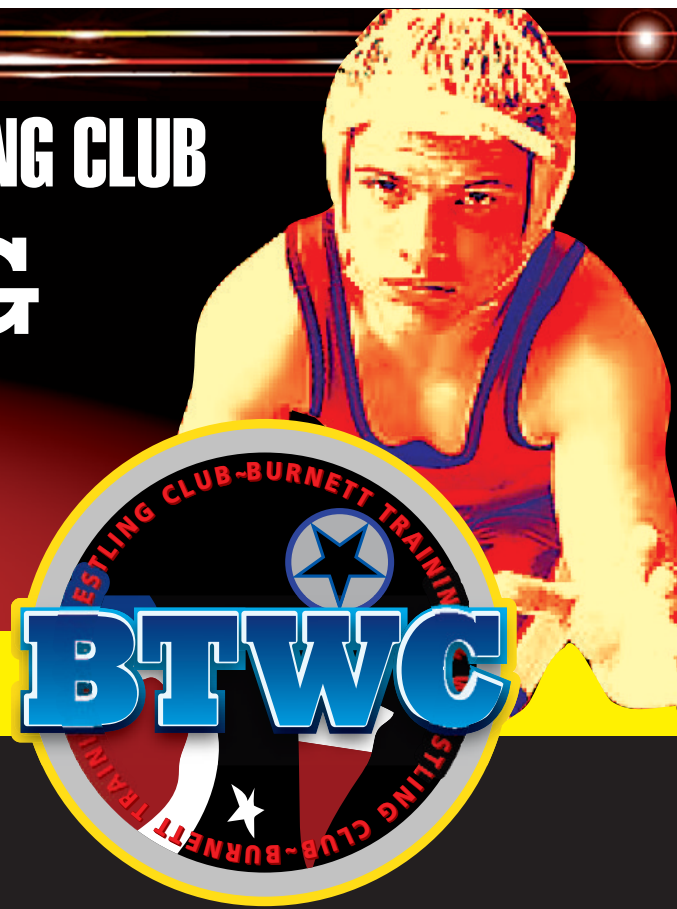
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Historic

FROM PAGE 10

“It’s great to see girls wrestling develop the way it is in Ohio,” Elyria coach Erik Burnett said. “They’re at where they are now because of a lot of hard work by a lot of officials and coaches. You’ve got a lot of people on both the front and back sides helping develop girls wrestling to where it is today.”

Banyas made short work of her competition, with her matches lasting a combined time of 1:52.

After opening the tournament with a bye, Banyas pinned Marlinton’s Maddalyn Bean in 50 seconds in the semifinals before pinning Painesville Harvey’s Melany Herrera in 1:02 in the championship match. Banyas opened the state tournament last season with a pinfall victory over Herrera in 48 seconds.

For Burnett, Banyas’ two wins were tangible examples of the progress she’s made this year.

“She’s doing some really good stuff transitionally on her feet hitting some shots she might not have hit last year,” Burnett said. “It wasn’t always a strength for her and I think she’s turned that into a strength.”

The girls state tournament was held Feb. 20 and 21, with Banyas wrestling all her matches on the 20th and Jirousek wrestling all her matches on the 21st.

This year’s been an up and down year for the Elyria sophomore.

After opening the season as the Pioneers’ main 106-pounder, she ran into some midseason struggles and has since shared 106-pound duties with Alex Green. Still, Burnett likes what he’s seen out of Banyas, who entered the state tournament with a record of 18-12.

“She’s made some nice

improvements from last year to this year and throughout the season,” Burnett said. “She had a really tough start to the year and wrestled two No. 1 boys at 106 and she’s at 101 so she’s essentially wrestling up a weight class against really strong boys. She never got down about it. She took some losses, but she kept grinding and won a lot of matches too. She beat some pretty good kids and has made a lot of progress.”

Jirousek opened the district tournament with one of the toughest draws in the state, as she went against Brookfield’s Bailey Hackett, the No. 2 wrestler in the state. After being pinned by Hackett in 29 seconds, Jirousek pinned Lutheran West’s Amy Zell in 3:40 before beating Green’s Katie Emery 10-9 to secure third place. Jirousek entered the state tournament with a record of 7-4.

“Emily had kind of a one-sided loss in the be-

ginning and then had two close wins,” Keystone coach Christopher Vondruska said. “Both of the girls she beat will be down in Columbus in the bracket so we’re looking at the bracket and planning out her matchups like we normally do.”

Additionally, Oberlin’s Lashell Bell was headed to the state tournament as the alternate at 143 pounds. Bell was pinned by Salem’s Karlie Smith in the 143-pound semifinal before losing 7-2 to Brush’s Ernestine Underwood in her consolation match.

Banyas entered the state tournament as the top seed at the bottom of the bracket at 101 pounds, with Bellefontaine’s Makayla Young opening as the No. 1 seed. Last year, Banyas defeated Young in the state semifinals before falling to Hayley Snyder of Warren Local, 8-1 in the finals.

“Riley’s been doing a lot of technical work at practice and been making a ton

of progress, it’s just a matter of fine-tuning,” Burnett said.

“She’s been a lot more selective in a couple of her go-to moves and she’s not forcing them as much, which is a good thing. That’s more of a mental thing so she’s come a long way with that as well.”

Jirousek opened the tournament as a No. 3 seed against Marysville’s Olana Chapman.

“It was my first time going to an all-girls tournament,” Vondruska said. “It was really awesome to see all the girls put their skills on display. It’s really cool to see some high-quality high school girls wrestling.”

Editor’s note: This story was published ahead of the Ohio High School Wrestling Coaches Association girls tournament on Feb. 20 and 21. For full coverage of the tournament, visit morningjournal.com.

“It was really awesome to see all the girls put their skills on display. It’s really cool to see some high-quality high school girls wrestling.”

— Keystone coach
Christopher
Vondruska

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Tony DeAnna
Director of Business Development
Tony@Century21DeAnna.com



Jim Fowler
Office Manager
Jim@Century21DeAnna.com



Mike DeAnna
Broker
Mike@Century21DeAnna.com



Denise D'Orazio
Administrative Assistant
Denise@Century21DeAnna.com



Bill Bowles
Realtor
bbowles@Century21DeAnna.com



Gayle Carrothers
Realtor
gcmc1026@gmail.com



Chris Heinebrodt
Realtor
cheinebrodt@Century21DeAnna.com



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Realtor
beble@Century21DeAnna.com



Denny Krasienko
Realtor
dskhome@windstream.com



Pati Kriaris
Realtor
pkriaris@Century21DeAnna.com



Lynn Moore
Realtor
lmoore@Century21DeAnna.com



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Realtor
blagrotteria@Century21DeAnna.com



Tony Tenorio
Realtor
ttenorio@Century21DeAnna.com



Yuwei "Sophia" Zhao
Realtor
yzhao@Century21DeAnna.com



Kathleen Bartos
Realtor
realtorklb@gmail.com



Allison Frolo
Realtor
afrolo@Century21DeAnna.com



Fran Campana
Realtor
campanabiz@gmail.com



Brittany Burkey
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jfarkas@Century21DeAnna.com



Sergei Jegorov
Realtor
sjegorovpro@gmail.com



Shelma Bockey
Realtor
sbockey@Century21DeAnna.com



Stephanie Pounds
Realtor
216.815.keys@gmail.com



Jennifer Adelman
Realtor
jadelman@Century21DeAnna.com



Pete Algothon
Realtor
palgothon@Century21DeAnna.com



Bill Baker
Realtor
bbaker@Century21DeAnna.com



Colleen Fitzgerald
Realtor
cfitzgerald@Century21DeAnna.com



Ben Gertz
Realtor
bgertz@Century21DeAnna.com



Kia Hale
Realtor
khale@Century21DeAnna.com



Shona Jalowiec
Realtor
sjalowiec@Century21DeAnna.com



Traci Kogut
Realtor
tkogut@Century21DeAnna.com



Carly Sell
Realtor
csell@Century21DeAnna.com



Roxana Rodriguez
Realtor
rodriguez@Century21DeAnna.com



Scott Smith
Realtor
ssmith@Century21DeAnna.com



Shane Teter
Realtor
steter@Century21DeAnna.com

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