

BRFHS team places ninth in state civics games

By Kyle VonRuden

The Black River Falls High School (BRFHS) civics team travelled to Madison Friday, March 29, to compete in the finals of the first annual Wisconsin Civics Games.

The Tigers finished ninth among the 11 qualifiers after dropping both of their matches on the day, first to Northland Pines, who finished fourth, and then to eventual champions Platteville. With the first two rounds scored on the basis of total points and the top eight schools advancing to the championship and consolation brackets, the Tigers narrowly missed a chance to prolong their run at the state capitol.

BRFHS qualified for the finals after winning their regional competition in early February. Mother Nature

may have gummed up the works a bit, but the team accomplished its main goal, says team coach and high school social studies teacher Paul Rykken.

“It was a fun experience, all in all. It got long because they ended up postponing [from Feb. 23] because of the weather. I think we lost a little of our momentum that way. But we got the team started, and that was the whole point. When we got the invitation last fall, we weren’t quite sure how to put it together, but we managed to figure it out and field a strong team.”

The Wisconsin Civics Games were created by the Wisconsin Newspaper Association Foundation (WNAF), a non-profit group formed in 1980 that works to support local journalism and encourage young people

to consider careers in print media. According to a statement released by the WNAF, the games were organized to “address a decline in civic education and engagement” and “inspire a new generation of leaders to become involved in the political process.”

The importance of the latter goal was not lost on sophomore Maddie Diehn, who competed on the inaugural Tiger team along with Sam Lund (captain), Zoe Dal Cerro, Graham Rockouski and Caleb Laufenberg (alternate).

“I think it’s really important for young people to get involved in government and civics,” Diehn said. “Right now the system is kind of dominated by older people, so I’d like more young voices to be heard. We’re going to be the ones to take over some day, and it’s going to be our responsibility to make our country and our commu-

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Contributed photo

The Black River Falls High School civics team competed March 29 at the state finals of the first annual Wisconsin Civics Games in Madison. Organized by the Wisconsin Newspaper Association Foundation, the games are meant to instill a greater appreciation for government, law and civic engagement in Wisconsin high school students. The 2019 Tiger team is (l-r) Sam Lund, Caleb Laufenberg, Zoe Dal Cerro, Graham Rockouski and Maddie Diehn.

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nities better places to live.”

Public officials of all stripes were on hand to voice their support for the competitors, including Governor Tony Evers, Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Patience Roggensack, and state assembly representatives John Macco (R-De Pere), Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City) and Lisa Subeck (D-Madison); the latter three served as judges in February’s regional competitions and journeyed to Madison to reprise their roles for the finals.

“Maintaining democracy requires that we be knowledgeable about democratic practices,” Roggensack said in her opening remarks. “We need to remember those practices that were required to begin our democracy and are required now to sustain it.”

The students were also treated to a special message from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who wished them all luck in a brief letter that was read aloud to kick off the first round of competition.

“I congratulate all of you on your admirable showing at the inaugural Wisconsin Civics Games,” wrote Justice Sotomayor. “As you continue the process of becoming active participants

in democracy during the years to come, I wish each of you the joy of dreaming big, working hard and succeeding in all that you do.”

Diehn said the team appreciated the support but couldn’t help feel a little nervous competing in front of so many high-level officials.

“It was really cool to have them there, and to hear [Justice Sotomayor’s] letter,” she said. “There was also a lot of pressure, being around all of these important people at the finals. We kind of felt like we didn’t want to let them down.”

Rykken said the team should be proud of their showing this year, especially given all the uncertainty around the roll-out of the games and the multiple weather delays, and he expects the Tiger squad to come back even stronger in 2020.

“We’re going to keep [the team] going, definitely, and we have some ideas about how to do that. We’re also going to find out more from [the WNA], because I think they’re going to do some refining of the games between now and next year. But we have a better idea of how to get started right out of the gate next fall. Having been down there now and involved at that level, we know what we have to do to really get competitive going forward.”