

Great parade, but get Mr. Squeeze some eyes, puleeze

If you like citrus fruit, marching bands and beauty queens, downtown Orlando was the place to be Tuesday.

Seriously, you couldn't throw a tangelo without it bouncing off a tuba and hitting a tiara-topped pageant winner.

But that was all by design for the Citrus Parade, which went off under gorgeous blue skies that should showcase Orlando perfectly in delayed television broadcasts across the country.

For those who missed it, here's a rundown of highlights, low lights and memorable moments — including some rocking Bahamians and the comeback of a fallen rock star.

The floats. The citrus floats are always crowd-pleasers. The concept is creative. It's a perfect marketing gig. And did you know all the fruit goes to local food banks afterward? I just wish there were more than six floats. I helped judge this year. More on the winners — and whether those aboard the convention and visitors bureau's float threw pieces of shredded, secret documents instead of necklaces — in a moment.

The Bahamians rocked. The Legend community band from the Bahamas tore the place up. Not only did they sound awesome, but the clarinet-playing kindergartners were cute enough to stuff in a stocking. They got my vote for best non-float entry. And the other judges apparently agreed, because they won.

Fewer pageant people. There were teen queens, married queens, tiny queens — even a rodeo queen. Every few minutes, it seemed like there was another wave of mascara on wheels. Most were lovely. But maybe just a few less would, um, sharpen the focus. (And for you pageant parents out there, of course I'm not talking about your little princess. Everyone loved her. How couldn't they?)

Other top-notch paraders. The bagpipers from the Orlando Fire Department sounded sharp. The Shriners in their tiny cars were cute. And there are always big rounds of applause for the pooper scoopers. (Pity the crew that follows the Clydesdales.)

Mr. Squeeze needs eyes. Seriously. Everyone loves the little orange mascot. But I find it very unsettling that he has legs, arms — even a hat — but no face at all. Creepy.

Stapp's back. Orlando's native (and fallen) son Scott Stapp performed the national anthem and debuted a new, clean-cut look, complete with a crew cut. The bright-eyed, upbeat persona marked a stark contrast from the for-



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mer Creed frontman's episodes a few years ago, when he made headlines for his struggle with drugs, run-ins with the authorities and even a sex tape. "I'm a new man," he said after he finished the song and joined his children and wife for the parade. "It feels good to be sober."

Pick up the pace. There were many gaps — some several minutes long — where nothing happened. By the time Mickey and Minnie pulled up the rear, 2½ hours after the parade started, the grandstand was mostly empty.

Good grand. Gold-medal swimmer Ryan Lochte was a great choice for grand marshal. When searching for someone for the honor, it's hard to go wrong with a local Olympian. Much better than an *American Idol* reject.

And the winner was... the Florida Citrus Sports float featuring palm trees and two massive footballs. A lotta time and produce went into that one. Personally, I liked the Orlando/Orange County Convention and Visitors Bureau's float. It didn't feature any secret documents. But it did have a cool-looking citrus-covered hybrid sport utility vehicle and encouraged families to load up the family truckster for a trip down here. Hey, they may be rotten stewards of the public trust when it comes to tax money — but they sure can make a nice float! Now getting them to reveal how much they spent on the float may be another matter.

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PHOTOS BY RICARDO RAMIREZ BUXEDA/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Some armed with cameras, spectators watch the 29th annual Spherion Orlando Citrus Parade proceed through downtown Tuesday.

PARADE

FROM PAGE B1

six-piece jazz band from the Bahia Shrine and a group of award-winning baton twirlers entertained the crowd. A caravan of antique Ford cars, shiny Corvettes and six parade floats — a favorite of some onlookers — also captivated the audience.

"We love it. What goes into making these floats, it's beautiful," said Robert Black of Eastbourne, England. "You can't make it in five minutes."

He and his wife, Sarah, who were celebrating their 55th wedding anniversary, arrived hours early to watch.

"We don't have anything like this back home," Sarah Black said. The Blacks weren't the only people who traveled from far away.

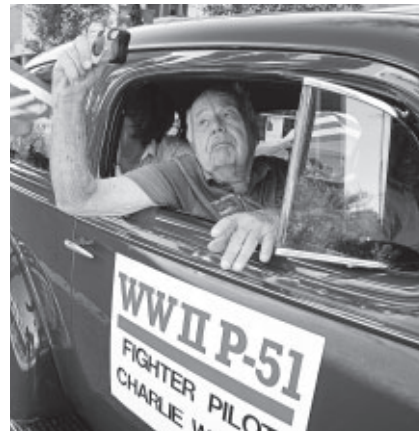
The Legend Band from the Bahamas raised money to bring 90 of its 150 members to perform in Orlando. The musicians played Goobay and Junkano music, an island sound seldom heard along U.S. parade routes.

"We wanted to bring our Bahamian cultural music to the United States," said Leslie McDonald, the group's director.

While some performers treated spectators to local culture, others provided them with a bit of nostalgia.

Members of the Model A's of Greater Orlando, a group that collects and restores Ford Model A cars produced in the 1920s and 1930s, drove their vehicles down the parade route for the 20th time.

"It's a piece of American history," said Dick Hardman, 71, a club member.



In addition to bands and homage to citrus (left), once the backbone of Orange County's economy, the Spherion Orlando Citrus Parade included World War II fighter pilot Charlie Wilson (above), snapping pictures as he rides in the procession.

"We're by far the oldest thing in the parade."

As onlookers basked in 74-degree weather, younger parade performers gave them some freebies and a little snack to go along with that nostalgia.

Toddlers dubbed "Little Ms. Citrus" and "Little Mr. Citrus" threw candy to the crowd from the back of a convertible, while some spectators clamored for beaded necklaces thrown from the Capital One float.

Strube, a first-time attendee who was on vacation, seized two beaded

necklaces for her well-dressed pooch, Babe.

She said she really enjoyed the band from Michigan State University, whose football team is playing Georgia in the Thursday bowl game. Babe flinched as the precision marchers played their trumpets and clanged cymbals.

"This so far has been the highlight," Strube said. "We'll definitely come back next year."

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