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## For Rieley Taylor, support of teammates was the sweetest kind of redemption

By Ben Cates [bcates@newsadvance.com](mailto:bcates@newsadvance.com)  
Jun 14, 2019



Liberty shortstop Rieley Taylor reacts to making an error against Turner Ashby.(Photo by Lee Luther Jr.)

Lee Luther

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SALEM — There were moments Friday morning when Rieley Taylor thought she'd cost her team the game, when she felt like she couldn't field a grounder cleanly, felt upset and angry and embarrassed.

But she never felt alone.

For the junior shortstop known throughout her career as a sure-handed defender, the Class 3 state championship game against Turner Ashby was rough.

Really, really rough.

Taylor committed five errors, all within the first four innings. She made two errors in the top of the first, helping Turner Ashby to a 1-0 lead. She went 0 for 3 at the plate. And she spent at least part of the game with a tear-streaked face, hoping things would turn in her team's favor.

Then something extraordinary occurred: The Minettes bonded, embraced Taylor, told her not to worry, and then caught fire to earn a 4-1 win at the Moyer Complex.

"They pulled me out of the slump," Taylor said. "They picked me up, and every time they would make a play or get a good hit, they would look at me and say, 'That was for you.' and they would say, 'We're pulling you up, we're doing this for you.'"

Champions don't leave their teammates behind. They don't watch their friends fail without offering support. Instead, they lean on one another.

So there was Kacey Whorley, Taylor's best friend, going 3 for 3, all singles rifled up the middle, who delivered the go-ahead hit in the fifth.

There was Taylor Friess, who played sick after two hospital visits and five IV treatments, making an inning-ending diving catch in the fifth and then saving two runs by stretching out for an over-the-shoulder grab on a ball to deep center one inning later.

There was Kinnice Turner, who continued obliterating Turner Ashby pitching by going 2 for 3 with an RBI double in the sixth after bruising the Knights with game-defining hits in the 2018 and 2019 Region 3C championship games.

And there was Millie Thompson, the fiery southpaw pitcher who had her changeup working particularly well in Friday's dominant two-hit performance.

They all came together for Rieley Taylor.

“We just needed to have each other’s back,” said Friess, who underwent an IV treatment Thursday night for an abscessed tonsil and added, “I wanted to get this win for my team. That’s all I really wanted to do.”

Taylor said she struggled with the mental part of softball for a long time. In the last few years she’s made great strides in that department.

But on a day when she committed more errors in four innings than she had in her entire varsity career, the old problems flared up again.

“People were here to see me that have never been to see me before, and I was disappointed in my performance,” she said. “But my team stepped up.”

Whorley didn’t doubt her friend at shortstop.

“She had her shaky moments in the game, but I know Rieley better than anyone,” Whorley said. “When stuff like that happens, she just bounces back.”

Liberty coach Mike Thompson said the field at Moyer was dry and tough Friday, one day after it played soft because of rain prior to the semifinal round.

“I told her multiple times there’s still nobody else in the state I’d rather have at shortstop than her,” the coach said.

The championship was Liberty’s first in softball and fourth overall in school history. It taught Thompson’s players something about teamwork. The coach hopes it will have the same effect on Bedford County.

“I hope it’s the first step as far as support goes,” he said. “It’s a great community, but at the same time it can be a tough community, and we have to support each other.”

On the last day of the season, after a championship game she’ll never forget, Taylor let the tears flow one more time. She talked about friendships and about how, in just 1 hour and 30 minutes, she had learned valuable lessons.

“I was a little more independent this year,” Taylor said. “I didn’t rely on my teammates as much as I should have. But at the time when I needed them most, I knew that was what I had to do. There were people trying to talk to me from the stands. But I was like, ‘I need my team right now.’”

Sometimes teammates are the only ones who can help. And sometimes, on the long journeys like Liberty’s, those teammates become a family.

“Every one of them did an incredible job being there for me at the lowest point of my season,” she said. “And it was just incredible to see everyone come together. They didn’t turn on me, they didn’t get down on me for anything. They didn’t belittle me or denigrate me. They pulled me up. They’re family. and I love them for that.”

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#### MORE INFORMATION



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## One powerful combination for Appomattox

By Ben Cates bcates@newsadvance.com  
Dec 14, 2019



Players hug at the Class 2 State Championship at the Salem Football Stadium in Salem on Dec. 14, 2019.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

SALEM — In between celebrations Saturday night, coach Doug Smith huddled with his team one final time. They wore smiles. They looked at one another and laughed. And they listened closely.

This is what they heard: Don't stop believing in yourselves. Don't stop being an example to others. Always keep the faith.

“Faith and hard work,” Smith said as he looked his players in the eye, “that’s a powerful combination.”

It certainly is. The Class 2 state championship game, in which Appomattox defeated Stuarts Draft 42-21, was an exercise in whether players would remember lessons Smith has tried to instill in them all year, the ones that go beyond gridiron assignments or proper techniques or executing plays to perfection.

These lessons are about character. They go to the heart of becoming not just a champion, but a better human being.

And the lessons — perseverance, love for others, faith and hard work — stuck with Appomattox players.

So Tre Lawing knelt on the turf at Salem Football Stadium after the clock expired and didn’t get up until several of his teammates pulled him to his feet.

And Cristian Ferguson felt as if he were living in a dream.

And Tyler Gilliam couldn’t stop smiling as he talked about having joy through the struggle that was the 2019 season.

Yes, the lessons stuck.

“We had a lot of struggles early on this year,” Gilliam said. “But having joy and coming together as one, it’s definitely gonna have an impact on me for the rest of my life.”

Some championships, like the ones Appomattox celebrated in 2016 and 2017, came a little easier. This one was tough.

This group wasn’t projected to win even the Dogwood District, much less a state title. This group lost two of its first three games and looked like an empty shell compared to recent teams that had come before it.

But the group few people believed in accomplished big things Saturday by claiming its fourth state championship in a five-season span.

“It’s a wonderful experience to come all the way from people doubting us to now we just won states,” junior receiver and defensive back Tez Booker said. “Because there were people who didn’t even think we were gonna make the playoffs.”

Sometimes it seems like no one believes in you. That’s when it’s so important to believe in yourself.

“We just stayed true to ourselves,” said Ferguson, who rumbled for 117 rushing yards and two touchdowns Saturday night. “We didn’t give up on ourselves. We never stopped believing.”

That’s a hallmark trait of this program. That’s why fans chanted “PO1” as the clock wound down in Salem, channeling the first great season in 2015 when Appomattox’s motto was “Power of One.” That term still means a great deal in Raider Country.

And this year’s “Joy through the struggle” motto was emblematic of the offseason trials and early-season tribulations.

“Everybody on this team has been through something,” Lawing said.

The sophomore quarterback accounted for four touchdowns Saturday, including a 5-yard run that broke a 14-14 tie and an 80-yard run that gave the Raiders a sudden 35-21 lead just five minutes later.

After the game, he took a moment to reflect on the turf.

“I was just thanking the Lord for giving me the potential,” he said.

In the post-game huddle, Smith told his group that, trophy or no trophy, the journey was worth it.

“I’d give away every ring, every single one of ‘em, for this experience with you guys tonight,” he said.

He wanted to leave his players with something they’d remember forever.

“Faith in their creator, something bigger than themselves, and then learning what he wants us to do: love other people, serve other people, which is exactly what they’re doing out here,” he said.

“That line is blocking for their backs, every special team is trying to do something for either the offense or the defense.”

That’s why Smith told his team all year to keep believing and working.

Turns out, faith and hard work was what Appomattox needed most.

“If they carry that on in life with their families, their coworkers and the people around them, their friends,” Smith said, “then I just think they’re gonna be some terrific people.”

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## Despite state championship loss, E.C. Glass players "created a brotherhood" along the way

By Ben Cates bcates@newsadvance.com  
Jun 8, 2019



E.C. Glass midfielder Max Gladioux embraces his teammates after a 12-4 loss to Riverside in the Class 4 state championship Saturday June 8, 2019 at Salem High School.

Emily Elconin

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SALEM — Eddie Ranuska stood under the shelter of the stands at Salem High School on Saturday afternoon, the sheets of rain and gloomy skies signaling the end of the season for his E.C. Glass lacrosse team.

“This is family,” Ranuska said, watching as his players exited the stadium, some with their heads hung low, others with eye-black smeared across their faces, all of them soaking wet and thinking about how a morning that began with such promise could end with such heart-wrenching disappointment.

“I look at those kids like little brothers,” a solemn Ranuska added, almost fighting back tears.

Many of those players, seniors like Matthew Gallagher, Wyatt Hamilton and Andrew Kayes, were playing youth lacrosse as 7- and 8-year-olds when Ranuska first began coaching in the area. They were among the first kids he led as a 19-year-old coach.

Wait until they get in high school, the coach told himself back then, and we’ll win state championships together.

They did, last year. Glass entered Salem High hoping to defend its 2018 Class 4 state title Saturday morning, but Riverside dampened the mood from the outset.

The Rams scored almost at will, setting the game’s tone, and then continued pouring it on, like the rain that pounded onto the field’s artificial turf.

Down 8-2 at halftime, Glass’ hopes appeared slim. By the end of the third quarter, the eight-goal deficit was insurmountable. By the fourth, reality set in: Riverside was going to win another state championship by doing the same thing it did in 2017 — upending E.C. Glass.

The dream of two in a row died a soggy death in the 1 hour and 45 minutes between first whistle and final horn. Sometimes, though, losing a championship makes you appreciate the one you have a little more. So amid the disappointment, there were also memories of the successes: a 2018 state title, three straight trips to the championship game and the dismantling of many of Glass’ opponents the last two seasons.

But a family doesn't need accolades to forge a bond. Sometimes family is everyone working together and giving their all to make things work.

"Of course I hoped we would win some more [state championships]," Ranuska, a Long Island, New York, native, said. "But this was the group that kept me in Lynchburg, kept me staying here, kept me wanting to fight for E.C. Glass lacrosse, because I knew these kids were locked in, and I knew they were gonna do everything they could, just like me."

For Gallagher, the day started with a loss on the game's first faceoff. The reigning Class 4 player of the year made some adjustments and ended up winning 12 of 20 battles in the X. Riverside, he said, kept Glass from establishing a rhythm on offense and was tough in every aspect. Then the senior began talking about his four years in a Hilltoppers uniform.

"We created a brotherhood," he said. "I'm an only child, so [lacrosse] created new friends."

In 2016, this senior class' first season on varsity, Glass went 12-7. "We weren't very good," Gallagher said.

But they soon got the hang of varsity lacrosse, reeling off 18 wins the next year, going 21-0 in 2018 and finishing with a 17-3 record this year.

Asked to put his career into perspective after Saturday's loss, Hamilton called it surreal. The senior was injured most of the season, only to come back for the final nine games and unleash an eye-popping 19 goals and 29 assists in that span.

"I'll get to, fortunately, play with Matthew next year at Washington and Lee," he said. "And Andrew is going to Clemson. Hopefully he can play club and we can stay close and play together in summer leagues. But it's sad. It's sad to think that it's over. But it was enjoyable for what it was."

The day was frustrating for Glass, make no mistake about that. Riverside, with its five Division I recruits, was dominant. Its attacking midfielders were smooth, its defense solid and its goalie, Josh Ruwe, almost impenetrable.

Success comes and goes. Ranuska knows that. Sandwiched between Glass' only lacrosse state championships are two title-game losses, and those to the same team.

But the coach had more than wins and losses on his mind Saturday.

"You want to go out on a higher note," he said, "but these guys, they'll be doing bigger things in their lives than playing in the state championship game. And that's really what's more important."

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#### MORE INFORMATION



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E.C. Glass falls in rain-soaked state lacrosse championship

- 📷 +21 Photos: E.C. Glass falls to Riverside in Class 4 lacrosse championship
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