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Dealing with personal tragedies, Appomattox's Ferguson and Baker lean on teammates

By Ben Cates bcates@newsadvance.com

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Appomattox running back Cristian Ferguson carries the ball during the Raiders' win over Rustburg at Appomattox County School on Sept. 6, 2019.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

The 35-minute bus ride from Appomattox to Buckingham County High was long, painful and full of sadness.

Raiders senior running back Cristian Ferguson began the day excited, ready for opening night of the high school football season, his final one in an Appomattox uniform.

But right before stepping on the bus, Ferguson received heartbreaking news. His cousin, 6-year-old Leighna Grace Ferguson, had died after a battle with leukemia.

The date was Aug. 30, a day suddenly filled with grief.

Cristian Ferguson, however, was not alone.

On the bus that evening was junior teammate Keyshawn Baker, who, for nearly six years, had struggled to deal with the death of his sister, Jada Pearl Baker.

And seated around those two players were their teammates, the ones who have heard of the numerous tragedies in this community, who know students affected by sudden loss, and who have struggled with personal heartbreak themselves.

So the team rallied around Ferguson.

“Everybody noticed I was crying on the bus after I got the news,” Ferguson recalled this week. “They knew the situation, that my cousin was very sick. But then everybody huddled around me and prayed.”

High school football players often play through physical pain. Sometimes, they play through other types of aches, too. Some are the kind typically associated with high school life: lost games, broken relationships or family problems. Others don’t mend so easily. Those aches, the ones Ferguson and Baker are dealing with during their formative years, never really go away.

As they struggle to find peace, though, they’ve also found something else: a family that cares.

A difficult start

Appomattox began the 2019 campaign by losing two of its first three games. To understand how much of a variance that is from the norm, you'd have to know that the Raiders reeled off three straight state titles from 2015 through 2017; that they entered this season having won 54 of their last 57 games; that they were the celebrated kings of both the Dogwood District and the VHSL's Region 2C for an entire presidential term.

Compared to the recent record, 2019 looked bleak.

It's been anything but that. The Raiders, who host Bluefield-based Graham High in Saturday's Class 2 state semifinals at 2 p.m., rallied after that difficult start.

Bragg Stadium, which has witnessed its fair share of postseason games the last five seasons, will be rocking once more. Fans will try to will to victory these Raiders, this improbable group that somehow began clicking late in September and haven't slowed since.

"We just started playing for each other," quarterback Tre Lawing said. "When you play together, and play for each other instead of playing for everything else, you play way better as a team. And that was the goal, for us to start playing for each other."

Appomattox (11-2) lost to Buckingham on opening night, hours after Ferguson received news of Leighna's death. But after falling to Heritage two weeks later, the squad won 10 straight. They captured the Dogwood and Region 2C for a fifth straight season and have won three straight postseason games.

"We're really family now"

Baker, Appomattox's 5-foot-7, 185-pound outside linebacker and running back, was 10 years old when his sister, Jada, died on Dec. 21, 2013 at age 8. Jada, Baker said, suffered from asthma.

"She was doing good," Baker recalled about the days prior to Jada's death. "She hadn't had any bad asthma attacks. That one day was the worst asthma attack she had ever had, but I thought she was gonna be ok."

There are still days, nearly six years later, when the junior struggles. He feels like he took Jada for granted, because he thought she would overcome her illness. The tears still flow, “out of nowhere,” he said.

“But everyone around this school supports me,” Baker added. “They’ve got my back and they know I have theirs.”

Through the grief, the pain and the process of healing, he’s become stronger.

“I wasn’t who I needed to be,” Baker said of the time before Jada’s death. “But that got me closer to God and made me who I am today, because I realized I can’t take things for granted.”

Baker, who has three brothers and two other sisters, also has a much bigger family. Some are the players with whom he celebrated a state championship, when he was a freshman in 2017. Others are the guys who suit up for the Raiders now, who bonded this fall after a dismal start.

“This new team didn’t really have anything,” he said, thinking back to August. “We were a team, but we weren’t yet a family. But now, we’re brothers; we’re really family now.”

Playing for Leighna

One week before her death, Ferguson found out Leighna “probably wasn’t going to make it too much longer.”

The 6-year-old Lynchburg girl with pink glasses and a sweet, wide grin underwent chemotherapy and brain surgery to fight leukemia, Ferguson explained.

Since her Aug. 30 death, Ferguson has played for Leighna’s memory. The 5-10, 205-pound senior has rushed for 1,454 yards this season, scored 17 touchdowns and averages 10.4 yards per carry. And every time scores, he honors his cousin.

“I have a certain celebration,” Ferguson said. “I point to the sky and I imagine I’m driving a car, because the last conversation we really had, she told me her dream car was a pink Altima.

“That’s one of those little things, but I’m really just making sure everybody knows this is for her.”

Because of the loss, this season has been difficult for Ferguson. But his teammates have been there for support, as has coach Doug Smith.

“He doesn’t worry just about football,” Ferguson said of his coach. “If you have family struggles, he’s gonna be there for you.”

As Appomattox’s featured running back, Ferguson will be a target for the G-Men (11-2) on Saturday. And whether Appomattox wins or loses, this will be Ferguson’s final game at Bragg, because next week’s Class 2 state championship will be held in Salem.

So Ferguson isn’t ready for the run to end. This is his group, his extended family, and together they’ve learned to have faith in each other. Together, they’ve played hard, learned to accept defeat and pulled off an improbable postseason run.

And together, they’ve laughed and cried.

“It’s just a lot of prayer,” Ferguson said when asked how he’s dealt with difficult times. “We’ve really instilled that, because since there have been so many tragedies throughout this community, we really needed somebody to just love us and be there for us, just to be strong for us.”

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https://www.newsadvance.com/sports/hill-city-s-tara-enneking-wraps-illustrious-lal-career-by/article_d7246917-1799-5efb-af7a-a5fda9b2d555.html

Hill City's Tara Enneking wraps illustrious LAL career by going out on top

By Ben Cates bcates@newsadvance.com
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All-area girls swimmer of the year, Jefferson Forest's Tara Enneking, poses for a portrait on March 26, 2019.

Emily Elconin/The News & Advance/

Emily Elconin/The News & Advance/

Tara Enneking stood on the pool deck at Oakwood Country Club on Saturday and looked around. Minutes before, the deck had been packed with swimmers and spectators as the Lynchburg Aquatic League's 'A' Meet Championships wound to a close.

Now the crowd had thinned out as little swimmers and big ones, too, exited the club.

Enneking had her own exit to make. This one would be a little slower and more reflective than normal.

“It’s sad to finally say goodbye,” she said.

Yes, goodbyes are sometimes hard, especially when laced with finality. A chapter was coming to a close; a new one about to begin.

So Enneking lingered a few moments. The Hill City swim team standout had just competed in her final LAL event.

And as far as goodbyes go, she went out in style.

Enneking won three events Saturday: the 100 freestyle (59.25), 50 breaststroke (35.07) and 100 backstroke (1:06.17).

She set two new ‘A’ Meet records. Enneking broke a 25-year-old record in the 100 back, a 1:08.99 set by Cary Chipley in the summer of 1994, and eclipsed Amber Wingfield’s 2009 mark of 35.45 in the 50 breaststroke.

And if that wasn’t enough, Enneking received what to her was the most stunning news of the day before the final set of relays began.

She was named the LAL’s Swimmer of the Year, an honor dubbed the Rob Quel Award, given to an outstanding swimmer who “embodies the spirit of competitive swimming and team” unity.

She was a lock. Coaches from the 12-team league were in such agreement that they did not consider another swimmer for the award and unanimously nominated Enneking.

Here’s a snapshot of the 18-year-old, who started out in the LAL when she was 7.

Competitive: She won two state titles while at Jefferson Forest High.

Driven: Life in the LAL took her to year-round club swimming, where the work got exponentially tougher, and to an eventual scholarship to swim at ODU.

Supportive: She hangs out with the league's younger swimmers, the ones just learning the sport, and offers them advice.

"That's what makes her unique," Hill City coach Hank Reed said. "She really does give love to those younger kids. They hang on her. A lot of teenagers, they don't want anything to do with those younger kids."

Enneking, who was described at Saturday's meet as "altruistic and passionate, competitive and encouraging," ends her career with Hill City having set 17 team records in the senior girls division.

There's only one she doesn't own: the 100 fly. She didn't swim that event Saturday, but barely missed the team mark of 1:04.99 by 24 hundredths of a second at a recent meet.

"I swam that event the last three meets, and he [Reed] wanted me to focus on the events that I love, because it's my last meet," Enneking said. "Looking back on it, I kind of wish I'd swam it. But at the same time, I don't know if I could've gone much faster."

The Quel Award honors Rob Quel, a longtime Lynchburg City Schools administrator and LAL swim coach who died in 2017.

"I've always looked up to winners of that award," Enneking said, "because it's a big deal."

Peakland swim coach Greg Hofmann has watched Enneking progress over the years. He, too, swam at ODU.

"She's definitely, overall, the most talented swimmer that I've witnessed as a coach in Lynchburg," Hofmann said. "She doesn't have a weak stroke, so the coach can plug her in wherever and win that event. ... I'm excited to see what she's gonna do at my alma mater."

There are many different ways to view the LAL. For some swimmers, the league is just something to do in the summer. For others, it's a way to stay competitive and in swimming shape or a chance to hang out.

But for Enneking, the LAL was something more. As the smell of chlorine wafted through the humid summer air and shouts of encouragement echoed through swim clubs, she returned to the league year after year because she loved it, because it was a chance to help younger swimmers.

"I've seen kids like me who might not like club swimming, but they go into it anyway because they love the LAL," she said.

And who knows — maybe one of those girls will one day become the area's best swimmer, and fasten her eyes on all of Enneking's records, both the Hill City and the league marks.

Still, "it's cool to have such a lasting impact on the LAL," she said.

It works the other way, too: the league has impacted her.

So after receiving the Quel award, Enneking dove off the blocks one last time. She sprinted down and back in the mixed 200 freestyle relay. There were no awards this time. A boys team from Oakwood took the title.

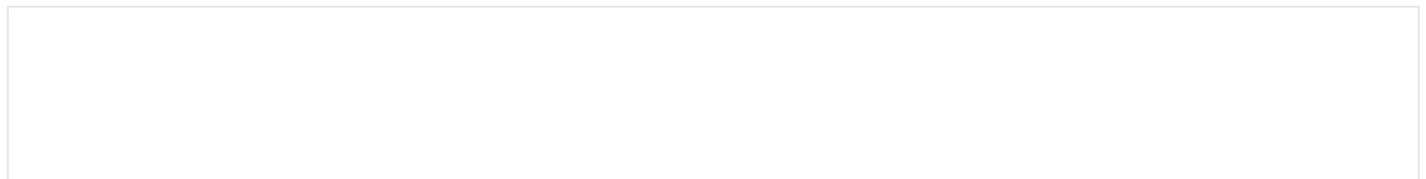
But Enneking had already left her mark.

"While I'm gone at ODU," she said, "part of me will still be here."

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MORE INFORMATION



https://www.newsadvance.com/sports/dennis-carter-a-constant-presence-on-the-lynchburg-sports-scene/article_1fdf3f5e-8356-5f70-b89a-49bea1b9ea84.html

Dennis Carter, a constant presence on the Lynchburg sports scene for 36 years, heads toward retirement with a smile

By Ben Cates bcates@newsadvance.com

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Dennis Carter, Sports Director for ABC 13, at The News & Advance in Lynchburg, on October 22, 2019.

The (lynchburg) News & Advance

For nearly four decades, there has been one constant at sporting events throughout the Lynchburg area: A sharply dressed reporter with a smile on his face and a camera thrown over his shoulder.

He might wave to the crowd, stop and talk to fans or mingle with coaches in between the action.

He's not the center of attention, of course; the games are. But inevitably the chants from student sections begin, first as a faint solo, then as a chorus complete with five rhythmic stomps.

“Den-nis Car-ter!!” *Boom boom boom-boom-boom.* “Den-nis Car-ter!!”

Yes, the students hope to get the journalist's attention so he'll turn and film them for WSET's 11 p.m. broadcast. But the chants, which began long ago at a local high school, are also a testament to how much people in Lynchburg and beyond love Dennis Carter.

He's been a staple in homes and at games for 36 years. The longevity alone is impressive. But here's something else equally striking: The Carter fans see on TV is the same one they see at games, or at the grocery store, or out at a local restaurant.

What you see is what you get. And what you get with Carter is this: No matter the day, no matter the season, no matter how he feels, the smile is always there, genuine and bright.

“I think I'm happy because I have a great job,” Carter said in an interview Tuesday. “I'm happy because I wouldn't want to do anything other than what I've been doing for a lot of years now. And I know I'm gonna miss it.”

He'll miss it because on Dec. 31, Carter will sign off at ABC 13 for the final time. The outlet's sports director announced his retirement, effective at the year's end, on the air last week.

His departure will mark the end of an era for local sports. He began working at WSET in 1983 after a four-year stint at a Danville radio station, WBTM, where he first broke into the communications field writing 30-second commercials and jumpstarting a three-to four-minute sportscast during evening commutes. During that time, Carter also wrote part-time for the Danville Register and provided occasional stories to WSET, which did not have a Danville bureau in the late '70s and early '80s.

He became a fixture on the Lynchburg sports scene by regularly working six days a week, plowing through 80-hour work weeks and getting to as many games as possible, all while anchoring the 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. sports segments.

“He has a genuine passion for what he does,” WSET anchor/reporter Dave Walls said. “... To do this for 36 years, you have to love it, or it will break you down, and he never has, because he still gets the same kick out of it now that he did on Day 1.”

Walls said he and his coworkers have a nickname for Carter: “Smilin’ Dennis.”

“He’s the same smiling guy off the air,” Walls added. “That’s kind of rare to find in our work.

“He’s exactly the same off the air as he is on the air. ... He’s just the nicest man you’ll find in this business.”

Carter began this year by trying to cut back on his work load.

“But I failed miserably,” he said. “I find myself wanting to come in on the weekend, ‘cause I know if I don’t come in and work, then we’re not getting things covered that we need to cover. And then I’d feel guilty that I’m not doing my job.”

That job took him to the 1999 college football national championship game, when Virginia Tech played Florida State. It took him to the Elite 8 this year, where he watched Virginia’s men’s basketball team win in thrilling fashion before claiming the national title in April. It’s taken him to local stadiums for countless Friday night football games. He’s watched athletes come and go, some to the next level and some to the level beyond that.

No level of competition, though, has been more important to Carter than high school sports. After all, it was in a high school gym that the chants began. And it was a high school, Appomattox County High, he had in mind years ago when he developed his now famous growl on the air: “The Raiders.”

“I just liked the way it rolled off the tongue,” Carter said of the nickname, which has sort of become his calling card over the years, one of the things he does on air to have fun with his broadcasts.

He’s always found the atmosphere at high school games appealing.

“People just seem so excited about it,” he said. “It’s just fun to be out there, and they’re out there playing for the love of the game. It’s not like they’re trying to get out there for their personal stats or anything. They want to go out there and see their team win that game, and they’ll do whatever they can.”

Now, after a career that spans more than 40 years, Carter hopes to settle down and spend time with family: his son, 28-year-old Ryan, lives in Richmond; his father, 92-year-old Lewis, is a Danville native.

And there’s Carter’s wife, Regina. The couple has been married 30 years and dated for 6½ years prior to that, but they’ve always worked opposite schedules. Regina gets up early and works during the day; Dennis works in the afternoons and usually doesn’t arrive home until about 2 a.m.

“We’ve been like two ships passing in the night,” Carter said. “And it’s mainly my fault. I take the blame. So I decided to spend more time with Regina.”

He’s received all sorts of letters and messages since announcing his retirement, and there likely will be sendoffs at local games the next few months, creating something akin to a victory lap for Carter.

But he’ll miss the action. You don’t put in long hours doing that sort of work if you don’t love it. He’ll miss telling stories about local athletes. And he’ll miss talking to his audience, although he’s already told people at WSET he’s willing to fill in occasionally after he retires.

“When you feel like you’ve done a good job, a good story, a good piece on someone, there’s a certain amount of satisfaction that you have,” Carter said. “It’s a good feeling inside when you feel like you’ve made someone happy by reporting on them or telling their story to a lot of people.”

Still, he said, “I’m looking forward to that next phase.”

Then he smiled, and it was the same big, jovial and passionate smile that’s lit up his face — and passed along happiness to others, too — for decades.

“But,” Carter added, “I will miss sports. No doubt about that.”

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[The full Dennis Carter interview](#)

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