

## **Two gunshots, one murder and an unanswerable question: Why did he kill his teammate?**

**BY ERIC KOLENICH**

NORFOLK

Ruth Ackies gathered a black leather baseball mitt and a navy blue No. 77 football jersey, and placed the memories of her son in a cardboard box. She has lived almost two years without her son Nick, and now as she prepared to move, she packed his possessions into about 20 boxes and stacked them along the wall. The items that brought her joy, like the glass-cased baseball marked "home run," she kept. The ones that brought sadness, like the Lucky Brand blue jeans Nick was wearing when he was discovered by police, still stained with blood, she threw in the garbage.

During the past month, Ruth has relived the memories of her son's life and death as Jaquan Anderson, 24, the man who shot him, went on trial for first-degree murder. Anderson had been a Norfolk State football player, too. Although they didn't play on the team at the same time, Anderson knew Nick and they thought of each other as teammates. He said he loved Nick, just as he loved all his teammates.

It was self-defense, Anderson claimed. He had no choice. So at 6:01 p.m. on Oct. 27, 2017, as Nick lay there on the floor, Anderson picked up his phone and dialed 911. Anderson told the dispatcher he had just shot and killed his friend in a Norfolk apartment:

"It's me. It's me, and I had to do it. Yeah, I had to do it. He tried to rob me...He tried to rob me, I had to take him out, and he's on my floor, dead. He's my friend."

The dispatcher, a young woman, asked what Anderson had used to kill Nick, 18.

"I used a gun," Anderson responded. "I had to take him out with my gun."

Then the dispatcher asked if he was sure the man on his floor had died.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, because he's not breathing," Anderson responded.

Probing for more details, the woman asked if Anderson would attempt CPR.

"No, because I shot him in the head, and I've seen enough movies, and he has blood in his mouth, and he's just on my carpet, and he has blood in his mouth, and I love him," Anderson said, his voice resigned to the fact that Nick was gone. "He's turning blue... He's dead."

Within five minutes, Norfolk police officer Duong Phan was pounding on the apartment door, his gun drawn, shouting at Anderson to come out. Wearing a black hoodie and black backpack, Anderson emerged, squeezed through the doorway and was arrested.

The door was left slightly ajar, and Phan could see a motionless hand on the carpet. But he couldn't shove the door open any farther. The man lying on the other side was big and heavy, and his torso was pushed against the door. So Phan turned sideways and shimmied through the opening. He checked each room, his gun still in hand, and found the others empty.

Soon, medics were in the living room, kneeling over the man, checking for a pulse or a breath. Finding neither, a medic pressed the button on his radio and reported a 150 – a suspicious death.

The man lying motionless on the floor was Nick Ackies, a freshman football player at Norfolk State University, a promising young defensive lineman with an array of talents. To the shooter, he was a friend, a brother in the family of football, his successor on the Norfolk State defense.

And now, Nick's blood was pooling on the living room carpet.

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Nick Ackies sprouted early, growing to 6-foot-2, 280 pounds by the time he started freshman year at Douglas Freeman High School in Henrico. Ray Moore, the school's baseball coach, remembers seeing Nick play middle school baseball at Tuckahoe, and Nick was twice the size of the other kids. When Moore met him, he discovered Nick's monstrous hands.

"His hand completely ate my hand," Moore said. "It looked like a man with little children on the field."

Nick played defensive line, and by the 10th grade, he was promoted to the varsity. He was unbelievably quick, exploding off the line of scrimmage, and he was nimble enough to serve as the team's punter. He excelled on the baseball field, too. His right arm was a rocket, firing the ball across the plate at 90 miles per hour.

People who knew him called him happy-go-lucky. They said he had a big smile, the kind that makes other people smile when they see it. The worst trouble he got in was sometimes arriving late to school – Ruth said he was dealing with a concussion from football at the time. He didn't start fights or steal from people. His grades weren't stellar, but they weren't bad enough to cost him a scholarship either.

He was always close with his mother, Ruth, who attended all his games, snapping photos from the stands. His father wasn't present in his life, divorcing Ruth when Nick was a child and leaving her to play the roles of both mother and father. He died of cancer when Nick was a senior.

It was undeniable that Nick was one of the most talented athletes in the building. His football coach, Mike Henderson, has coached high school football players for 23 years, and none of them has become a professional athlete. But if any of his players had that chance, it was Nick.

"I've never coached anybody like that," Henderson said.

Some Division I college football programs offered Nick a scholarship, including N.C. State. Boston College and Penn State offered, too, his mother said. But often the recruitment didn't last long. Nick made it clear he wanted to play both football and baseball in college, and for most schools, that proposal was a no-go. They shot it down immediately. Most football teams told him they couldn't afford him missing time in the weight room each spring. If a school told him it wouldn't let him play baseball, Nick crossed it off his list.

Football was his better sport – it was the one that would open doors for him – and it was the one that could offer a full scholarship. But if he had his choice of playing either sport professionally, he would have picked baseball. Generally, its players make more money, their careers last longer and they sustain fewer damaging injuries.

There was one school that would allow him to play both football and baseball, and that school was Norfolk State. By allowing Nick to play baseball in the spring, the football team had the chance to land a supremely talented defensive lineman, the kind of player who'd typically go to a bigger program.

During the winter of his senior year, Nick toured the school's campus, met its coaches and walked the halls of the dorms. And he met a man who wasn't too different from himself. Like Nick, he was from the Richmond area, he played defensive line, and he was a standout on his high school team. He was about to graduate, and Nick would replace him on the Spartans' roster. His name was Jaquan Anderson.

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On the last day of his life, Nick wasn't scheduled to play football. He had been taken out of the lineup and placed on concussion protocol – an injury he had suffered not on the field but in the locker room.

Another Norfolk State football player had borrowed a Toyota Tacoma pickup truck belonging to long snapper Zac Denton and disappeared with it for several hours, Ruth said. Nick made it clear to the player that that kind of behavior wasn't acceptable. He and the player exchanged words, and when Nick turned and walked away, the player decked him, throwing his fist into Nick's head, causing Nick to fall into a cinder block wall.

While the rest of the team was at a Portsmouth hotel, preparing for a game the next day, Nick was on his own. He borrowed Denton's truck and drove to an Old Dominion University dorm, where he would break up with the young woman he had been dating, Rachel Cooper. He returned a long-board skateboard that belonged to Rachel, and she gave back a Pandora ring Nick had given her.

Some time after 5 p.m. he arrived at the apartment of Jaquan Anderson, located in a high-crime neighborhood two miles north of campus. Nick had bought weed from Anderson at least twice before and watched game film with him once. Placed on Anderson's bed was a black Hi-Point 9mm handgun he had purchased three days earlier at Bob's Gun Shop. It was loaded – seven bullets in the magazine, one in the chamber.

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Anderson never played football before his sophomore year of high school at L.C. Bird in Chesterfield. So when he joined the varsity as an 11th grader, he was so raw, his coaches figured he'd never see a minute of playing time. But Anderson took that as a challenge, and during the offseason, he kept working and working.

Early in his junior year, a starting defensive end suffered an injury, Anderson took the starting spot, and he never relinquished it the remainder of his high school career.

“Jay took everything personally,” said Sal Camp, who was an assistant coach at L.C. Bird.

When he was a senior, Anderson sprained his ankle in the first round of the playoffs, and the injury was so bad he struggled to walk. The following Monday, coaches kept him out of practice to rest him for the next Friday. But Anderson took affront to the decision. To him, sitting out practice wasn’t OK.

“He didn’t talk to me for like two days,” Camp said.

Anderson returned to the field the following Friday and had perhaps the best game of his high school career. At one point, the running back for the opposing team, Hermitage, took a handoff and ran to the other side of the field, away from Anderson. But Anderson sprinted laterally across the field, chased him down and tackled him. Bird won the state championship that year, its first of three consecutive rings.

His father was absent, and Anderson was the man of the house, Camp said. He worked jobs in the offseason, giving the money he earned to his mother, who was raising two younger daughters. He took advanced classes and maintained a 3.6 or 3.7 GPA, balancing work, football and a passion for creating rap music.

Only one college, Norfolk State, offered him a scholarship, and Anderson jumped on it. He played four years for the Spartans and graduated in 2017 with a degree in communications. Having trouble finding a full-time profession, he took security jobs each weekend that paid \$10 an hour.

Armed security officers could earn more money, so he bought his first gun and prepared to earn a concealed carry license. On the last normal day of his life, he would later testify, he was packing his suitcase to visit his mother in Richmond and his girlfriend in Washington D.C.

But he never made it off the block, cuffed on the apartment landing and walked to the back of a police car. Officers later found the 9 mm handgun stashed in his suitcase – the 911 operator told him to put it away – along with 16.5 grams of low-quality marijuana and \$137 stuffed in his sock and pockets. He would spend the next year and 10 months in and out of jails and Central State Hospital.

In January of 2018, he had stopped talking and eating, and he was deemed unfit to stand trial. Transferred to Central State, he spent roughly the next four months being evaluated and treated. The onerous life of prison had gotten to him, said his mother, Tamika Williams. Anderson had never been incarcerated before.

“I think it just took a toll on him,” Williams said.

He was prescribed Olanzapine, an anti-psychotic medicine, and his condition improved. Evaluated again, he was considered fit for trial and sent back to jail. He was released on bond in Feb. 2019 as he awaited trial, because the prosecution wasn't ready to begin. But it was revoked when he missed a hearing in July. The week before the trial began, Anderson was accidentally released, the result of a

miscommunication between state prosecutors and the department of corrections, but he turned himself in the next day.

Anderson spent the majority of his five-day trial seated in a wooden chair, barely moving, never talking, gazing forward. To the close eye of a mother, he hasn't been the same since Nick died.

"He's still not the son he was before this incident happened," Williams said.

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By the time the trial began in Norfolk Circuit Court, one year and 10 months had elapsed. Thirty-eight witnesses were called – mostly by the prosecution – in an effort to shed light on what happened that evening at 815 Hayes Street. On the fourth day of the trial, the 24-year-old Anderson testified for two hours, finally unraveling his side of the story, which he had kept hidden almost two years.

He was packing that Friday afternoon, he said, preparing to visit his mother in Richmond and girlfriend in Washington D.C., when Nick showed up at his door. The two men were friends, and they'd never had a fight, but this time Nick had come over uninvited. Nick saw the gun on Anderson's bed and asked why it was there.

Anderson picked it up and made a joke, saying he worked security so he might need it for big guys like Nick. Nick joked back, saying he would take it and use it on Anderson. The joking continued.

"You're gonna shoot me?" Nick said, according to Anderson. "Go ahead and shoot me."

Then, Nick reached for the gun with his left hand. Anderson pulled back, and Nick's hand grabbed a hold of Anderson's arm. As the two jostled, the gun went off, and Nick fell backward, landing on the floor near the front door.

Dazed by what had just occurred, Anderson wasn't sure if the bullet had pierced Nick, himself, or anyone at all. He would later learn it had entered Nick's left central chest, cut through his carotid artery and stopped in his the flesh of his back, creating a partial exit wound. Nick sat up, his chest rising, his torso stiff, which Anderson interpreted as a threat, as if Nick would get up and charge him. A medical examiner testified that Nick could have lived several seconds after this shot. Anderson pointed the handgun at Nick's head and fired.

"I got scared, and I just shot him," Anderson testified. "I thought he was going to attack me again."

The second bullet tore a hole in Nick's left bottom lip, splintered his spinal cord and lodged itself at the base of Nick's skull. This shot, the medical examiner testified, would have killed him instantly and was fired from a distance of somewhere between 9 inches and two feet. When a gun is discharged, it also ejects burning gunpowder that can leave marks called stippling on a victim's flesh. Where the stippling lands can indicate the distance at which the gun was fired.

Anderson testified that maybe 30 seconds elapsed between shot one and shot two. The upstairs neighbor said she heard two loud bangs 15 minutes apart, but the medical examiner insisted that the gun was fired with much less time in between. Both shots hit Nick when he was alive, she said.

When Anderson dialed 911, he did something that confused investigators – he reported two different addresses. He first gave his real address, 815 Hayes Street. When asked to repeat the address, he stated 843 Page Street, a road that doesn't exist in Norfolk. Realizing he had given the wrong location, he hung up on 911. When he called back, he did it again, stating 815 Hayes Street and then 843 Page Street, again hanging up on 911.

Anderson later testified that he was trying to give the address of his next door neighbor, because he was afraid if police saw Nick on his floor and a gun in his hand, the officers would kill him.

His story sounded more like an accident than a robbery, the reason he gave 911 for shooting Nick. When the prosecution questioned him, Anderson said Nick had tried to steal the gun. When police apprehended Anderson, he was wearing his black Norfolk State backpack and his suitcase was placed beside the door – Anderson said he didn't know how the suit case got there. Among his packed items, in addition to the marijuana and a digital scale, were nine pairs of underwear, evidence the prosecution used to argue he was trying to flee.

Primer residue was located on Anderson's hands, suggesting he indeed fired a gun. Two Luger 9 mm bullet cartridges were discovered on the floor, one under the coffee table and one near Nick's body up against the wall. Also found was a gun box for a Smith & Wesson pistol, but the gun itself was never found. A low concentration of marijuana was found in Nick's system, a forensic toxicologist testified.

What police didn't find, however, were the indicators of a fight or a break in – no broken furniture, no pry marks on the door, no broken lock, no mask, no foreign skin under Nick's nails, no cuts or bruises on either man's hands.

The prosecution told the members of the jury they would never know Anderson's true motivation for shooting Nick. It wasn't a robbery, it wasn't an accident and it wasn't self-defense.

"This was murder, and you know it," Deputy Commonwealth's Attorney Trish O'Boyle told the jury in her closing statement. "Somewhere deep down, he knows it, too."

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In the days following Nick's death, Ruth was in shock. It was as if a voice deep in her soul was crying out, and none of it seemed real. She used coffee, cigarettes and later counseling to numb the pain, with which she was familiar. It's a heartbreaking coincidence that Nick wasn't the first of Ruth's four children to die.

Erika, Nick's older half-sister, was a teenager when Nick was born. She was an honor-roll student, but she suffered panic attacks. Doctors prescribed Paxil, but it altered her personality, leading her to turn to

alcohol and whatever pills she could obtain on her own. Once, she swallowed a fistful of Klonopin in a parking lot outside a Williamsburg Fresh Market.

It was around this time that Nick's father, Terry, abandoned the family. Erika was placed in Central State hospital, the same hospital where Anderson would be sent years later, where she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and where doctors continued adjusting her dosages. Five months after her arrival, in the spring of 2005, not long after medical staff took her off suicide watch, she committed suicide. She was 19 years old. Nick was 6.

Blaming herself for Erika's death, Ruth felt overwhelming guilt. But Nick kept her from crawling into a hole. She learned to find joy in all aspects of his life, from football and baseball to how easily he made friends.

"Nick literally saved my life," Ruth said. "I had to get up every day."

Even Nick's death brought her small morsels of joy. While most of his organs were unsalvageable, his dark brown eyes were donated, one to a woman in Norfolk, the other to a woman in Long Island. Ruth hasn't met them, but she imagines them as grandmothers now able to see their grandchildren.

Her newest grandchild was born this summer, and because of Nick's trial, all her grandchildren were located in the same room for the first time.

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The jury had deliberated more than three hours when it presented its verdict. Its foreperson, who stood in the center of the front row, read from a sheet of paper and pushed back tears.

The seven women and five men found Anderson guilty of second-degree murder – but not first-degree – and the use of a firearm in the commission of a felony. Anderson was still as the verdict was read. The families of Nick and Anderson, seated on opposite sides of the room, were in complete silence.

A day later, on Aug. 16, the jury sentenced Anderson to 27 years in prison. While he isn't eligible for parole, eventually he could be released on probation after serving a vast majority of his sentence. Prosecutor Kat Taylor later commented on how uncommon a trial it was – how two young men with no histories of crime or violence, who were seemingly liked by everyone they knew, could end up in a situation like this, one dead, the other off to prison for several decades.

While Anderson will earn his rehabilitation in prison, it's less clear if he'll ever earn Ruth's forgiveness. She isn't ready for that yet, though she wants to be, if not for Anderson, than for herself. After all, she says, it's God who will handle his ultimate justice.

"I don't want bad things to happen to him," Ruth said. "He's somebody else's child."

She considered Anderson's mother, how, she could still talk to him and watch him grow, even if it's in a prison visitation room. For Ruth it's as if her child is still off at college, frozen in time in his freshman year. Nick would be 20 years old if he were alive today, and Ruth wonders what life would be like.

Would he still play baseball? Would he continue majoring in criminal justice? There are some questions she can't let go.

Though she's never spoken to Anderson, Ruth would like to one day, just to ask one simple question, the one the prosecutors said we'd never know the answer to: "Why?" It's the kind of question that keeps her from sleeping, that keeps her from wanting to eat. It's hard to keep the sadness at bay.

Sometimes, like when she's at work, she can compartmentalize her thoughts and focus on things other than Nick. She keeps her mind pointed in one narrow direction, distracting her from reality. Then a sight or a smell will remind her of Nick, pulling her back to him.

When he was a senior at Freeman, Nick starred in his own home-made movie shot in the halls and classrooms of the school. In the first sequence, he turned to the camera with a debonair grin and introduced himself: "I'm Nick Ackies. Be prepared to witness the strength of Nick knowledge."

Throughout the next five minutes, he gave viewers advice for every-day life ("You just have to know what to say and when to say it"), shook hands with and hugged teachers and students, handed a rose to a female teacher and told a young woman walking by that she looked nice today. In one snapshot, you could see all of his personality traits together: confidence, silliness, friendliness. This is the Nick that Ruth will remember.

In the days that followed the trial, she moved out of her apartment in Henrico, the rent raised beyond what she could afford. The past month had been an arduous reliving of her son's life and death, packing up the good memories into boxes, listening to detectives recite the horrific ones from the witness stand.

A dozen or so of her family and friends were seated beside her in the pews to cry with her. When the trial had ended, some of them squeezed together into an elevator and rode it down six stories to the ground floor.

It was the evening now, and the court building had closed, the revolving doors locked and the foyer empty. Ruth wasn't sure how to feel. There was solace in a guilty verdict, but not the overwhelming sense that justice had been done – 27 years in exchange for a lost life. She didn't crave revenge, but she couldn't offer forgiveness either. While the prosecution had won, it didn't feel like a victory to her.

What lay ahead was a life without Nick, and it was her job to figure out how to cope. She pushed on the crash bar of the door, exited the building and stepped into the warm, humid air.



## **In high school athletic departments, embezzlement isn't easy to pull off**

**BY ERIC KOLENICH**

When money is handed over to a high school athletics department, it is counted, re-counted, documented and quickly deposited into a bank account.

Before it can be spent, the nature of the purchase must be justified, and the product must arrive before the check is signed. And after the transaction is final, the jerseys, balls or shoulder pads are inventoried.

Coaches and athletics directors from across the Richmond area described an environment in which it is difficult for an employee to steal, redirect or hide school money and property without getting caught.

In August, former L.C. Bird football coach and athletics director David Bedwell was charged by Chesterfield County authorities with embezzling \$5,600 worth of equipment. Hired by Hermitage High School in Henrico County earlier this year, Bedwell has been placed on paid leave and awaits a status hearing Oct. 25. He did not respond to a request for comment.

Embezzlement is a common crime, and it happens often enough — both in school systems and everywhere else — that school divisions have installed bulwarks against it. Student activity funds are audited each year, either internally or externally, as required by the Department of Education; employees are required to follow elaborate instructions when handling money; administrators are tasked with writing monthly financial reports.

And all employees are expected to know the division's financial policy — there's no tolerance for confusion. The two worst infractions a school employee can commit, several administrators said, are stealing money and treating a student unprofessionally.

"Everyone is told how to manage money — how to take in money, how to manage fundraisers, what not to do," said Prince George High athletics director Hez Butler.

Inside each school, a bookkeeper oversees all finances, and these employees typically own a no-nonsense approach to following the rules.

"Usually the bookkeeper runs a pretty tight ship," said Goochland High Athletics Director Joe Fowler.

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From ticket sales alone, a high school football game can generate \$10,000-\$20,000 in cash at either \$7 or \$8 per ticket, depending on location. Generally, each ticket sold is labeled with a serial number. After every game, an administrator must document the first and last tickets sold, leaving the next unsold ticket on the roll. This prevents a ticket taker from lying about the number of tickets sold and pocketing some cash. The money is counted and counted again, with two employees affirming that the amount of money received matches the number of tickets sold.

Occasionally, game employees will add up the money and find out it's off by a few dollars — maybe a patron was handed a \$10 bill in change instead of a \$5. Some school divisions will tolerate a small discrepancy, while others will not. One athletic director said his employees will take cash out of their own pockets in the rare event the total comes up short.

"They hate being wrong," Butler said.

Typically, the cash is deposited in the bank or dropped in a bank vault that night with a police escort.

Athletic departments will provide kids with the essential equipment for playing a sport — balls, jerseys, shoulder pads and helmets. But if a team wants to purchase something extra, like personalized warm-up gear or an extra jersey, it has to raise funds and pay for it out of its account.

Before a fundraiser can begin, it has to be approved by the school. Teams sell discount cards or Krispy Kreme doughnuts, they host summer basketball camps for kids or they invite the community to a fish fry. When the money is collected in Henrico County, the number of pennies, nickels, quarters, dimes and each dollar value must be recorded. At most schools, if a fundraiser spans multiple days, the amount of money raised each day must be recorded, even if it's just a few dollars.

"It's purposefully tedious to make sure we don't have mistakes made," Butler said.

Typically, all money must go the school first, and then the bookkeeper distributes it to the specific team account. Checks can't be written to Prince George athletics or Prince George softball, Butler said. Those accounts are sub-accounts of the general school account.

While most of an athletic department's income arrives as cash, in some school divisions, a slice might come electronically. There are avenues for schools to sell tickets online on websites like TicketSpicket.com or operate team clothing shops such as BSNTeamSports.com. When a patron buys a ticket or sweatshirt, the money goes to the third-party website, which later cuts a check to the school. There is less risk for malfeasance with online transactions because the money touches fewer hands.

Coaches are forbidden from operating fundraisers independent from the school or depositing team money in non-school accounts. In 1998, James River football coach Richard Fenlock was charged with stealing more than \$11,000 in school funds over three years when he opened his own account called the Rapids Youth Football Camp.

Fenlock collected donations from the community and dues from parents and directed them to his account. He later pleaded guilty to a lesser charge, petit larceny, a misdemeanor, and was sentenced 12 months with 11 suspended.

His arrest came a few months after a former bookkeeper at Meadowbrook High School, Joan East, was charged with stealing more than \$26,000 from the school's activity fund during a three-year period. She, too, was found guilty, but all 10 months of her sentence were suspended.

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It's hard to predict how an embezzlement case will end. There are sentencing guidelines based on the amount of money stolen, but that's just one of several factors that affect a case's outcome, said Robert Fierro, a deputy commonwealth's attorney in Hopewell who prosecuted embezzlement in Chesterfield for 18 years.

Restitution goes a long way toward a lesser sentence. If the defendant can pay back the money he or she stole, that weakens a prosecution's case. Bedwell returned a portion of the equipment and told police where they could find the rest, a police spokesman said.

The amount of damage done by the embezzlement weighs heavily, too. Stealing \$50,000 and bankrupting a small business could garner a higher sentence than pilfering \$250,000 from Walmart, Fierro said.

Another factor is the number of counts charged to the defendant. A person who committed 100 fraudulent transactions across a decade could be charged with 100 counts of embezzlement. There needs to be only \$500 at stake for the embezzlement to be considered a felony.

"One thing to be said is that there is no normal," Fierro said. "Embezzlement is a broad category. Sometimes it involves money or property or any number of items, and there are many ways of resolving these cases."

Sometimes, embezzlement cases are never even reported. They bring embarrassment and negative publicity with them, and sometimes business leaders decide it's not worth the bad PR. Embezzlement can reflect poorly on the business leader who didn't notice large amounts of money gone missing.

Sometimes, if a company has an insurance policy, it will file a police report as part of its insurance claim, but it isn't interested in prosecuting the offender. And sometimes, company leadership will forgive a hard-working employee for one mistake after years of honest work.

On the other hand, company leadership might feel betrayed by employee's actions and seek revenge and the harshest punishment possible.

The one sure thing about embezzlement cases is the frequency with which they occur. Fierro worked in Chesterfield for 18 years, he said, and an embezzlement case came to his office every few months.

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When a coach wants to spend the money in the team account, he or she first has to jump through a number of hoops.

"To get money out of your account is a process that's never-ending," said Fowler, Goochland High's athletic director.

Before a coach can make a purchase, he or she must fill out a purchase order form, which assures there's enough money in the account. Generally, that money is earmarked immediately to keep a coach

from accidentally overdrawing the account. School administration and the bookkeeper will approve the purchase before it is initiated.

In some school divisions, coaches have to seek multiple bids for expensive orders. And generally, schools don't pay for the helmets, balls, shoulder pads or jerseys until after they've arrived on campus. It's easy to spend money fast because equipment is expensive. One football helmet costs \$300-\$400, and a set of jerseys is \$15,000 to \$20,000.

Over the years, schools have taken some financial transactions out of the hands of coaches. When he started 21 years ago, Manchester High football coach Tom Hall would purchase practice items such as compression shirts, shorts and chin straps for his whole team, and players would pay him back. Now the players buy the gear online, spending about \$140 and bypassing the coach in the transaction.

Hall prefers the streamlined system, because he doesn't want the responsibility of handling money.

"You don't want there to be any question about where it goes," Hall said.

Once equipment is purchased, most schools inventory it. In Henrico County, the athletic directors tally the number of hockey sticks and soccer balls for each team before and after each season. Bedwell is charged with taking equipment with him after he left L.C. Bird. The realization that items had gone missing was made during an audit, a Chesterfield police officer said.

At most local school divisions, there is no rule forbidding a coach from taking equipment off campus for a short period of time. (A Chesterfield schools spokesman would not explain the division's policy, opting not to comment on an open criminal case.) For example, a coach might transport a first aid kit to a tennis match then leave it in his car overnight.

But athletics directors from across the area emphasized that there is no reason why a coach would keep a large amount of sports equipment off campus for an extended period of time.

"It's not their equipment," Butler said. "We make that pretty clear."

## How Hopewell broke the high school football numbers game

BY ERIC KOLENICH

The champion of the Central District in 2019 is Hopewell, a football team that swept through the southern end of greater Richmond, winning every game and pulverizing most opponents. And Hopewell did it despite a major disadvantage — Hopewell is the sixth-largest school by enrollment in the eight-team district, and high school football is a sport in which bigger schools tend to beat smaller ones.

That's the reason the Virginia High School League splits its members into six classifications based on school population. Since the best team in Class 1 will never beat the best team in Class 6, they play for separate championships.

And yet Hopewell, a member of Class 3, is 11-0, has played six opponents this year from larger classifications and beat them all. It handed Thomas Dale, a school more than double its size, a 44-7 defeat. Hopewell is breaking the numbers game that normally constrains smaller high school football teams.

But the school's disadvantage evaporates the moment its players step foot on the field. While the school is less populated, the team is not. There are 102 players on the roster, junior varsity and varsity, based on last year's numbers. That makes Hopewell the third largest team in its district and the largest in the state in Class 3.

Across the nation, the commonwealth and the Richmond area, high school football is shrinking. Since 2012, participation in local high school football is down 16%. But at Hopewell, the team is growing. It's 20% larger than it was in 2012. And its participation rate for football is among the highest in the Richmond area. Nineteen percent of the school's boys are members of the team, making it the fourth most popular school for football in the Richmond area, based on Virginia High School League participation reports and Virginia Department of Education enrollment figures.

King William holds the title of being the Richmond-area football team that draws the highest percentage of its male students at 23.4%, closely followed by John Marshall (23.3%) and Goochland (22.8%).

If there's one single number that predicts a high school's football team's success, it might be the popularity of the team. King William and Goochland are perennial winners from the rural edges of the Richmond area, and John Marshall is enjoying a resurgence under a new coach.

So what is it that makes football so popular at Hopewell? How can the school convince 102 kids to join the football team, while down the road Petersburg fields a roster of 76, and nearby Colonial Heights lists just 35? It might have something to do with the industrial history of the city and its economy built on chemical manufacturing plants.

"It's a plant town, we're working-class folks," said Andy Clark, a 1993 Hopewell graduate. "We've always had a little bit of a grit, and we take pride in our football teams."

Clark is a vice president at Ligon Jones Insurance, and the agency often donates to the football team. It sponsors the team's radio broadcast, and it'll give \$600 or \$700 each year at the team's golf tournament fundraiser. The community has a strong reputation for financially supporting the team. This year, the players practice packs — shorts, shirts and chin straps — were paid for by a community member. Another business bought the team black and pink uniforms for breast cancer awareness. Another paid for the player's cleats.

In the barbershops, people talk about Hopewell football, Clark said. When a team wins a championship, it's honored on the steps of the courthouse. It's like a slice of 1950s America frozen in time.

Hopewell isn't rich, either. Its median household income is less than \$41,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, a good deal less than most of its neighbors. Sports, though, has a way of evening the playing field between economically disparate communities, said Jonathan Howard, who covered the city's athletics for The Hopewell News. On the football field, Hopewell is the same as any other community.

Jacen Fowlkes, a senior cornerback, understands that playing on the football team in Hopewell means being a part of something bigger. He appreciates the support local businesses give the school, and he feels a responsibility to keep up the team's tradition and give the community a reason to be proud. There are maybe 50 championship banners on the walls of the gymnasium, and many are for football.

"It's real big in the community," Fowlkes said. "Everybody wants to see everybody do better."

Coach Ricky Irby is in his 10th year coaching the team. He understands that you have to keep football fun to keep kids interested throughout the offseason. One day during practice, he might send a lineman on the field to catch a punt and tell him, if you catch the ball, the team can skip conditioning today.

Irby also focuses on making a personal relationship with each of his 100 players. He'll attend their basketball or baseball games — it's like watching his sons play, he said. And winning isn't something he really talks about that much. The conversations that occur the most emphasize character, leadership, accountability and work ethic — or C.L.A.W. Focus on those attributes, he says, and winning will come. Apparently more players will come, too.

So does winning create a bigger football team? Or does a more populated football team cause it to win? It's a chicken-or-egg question, and Irby isn't quite sure of the answer. But he knows the two are linked. The more kids you have on your team, the more you have to choose from, the more likely you are to have a talented replacement when your starter gets injured, the less likely you'll have a weak spot opponents can exploit, and the more likely you are to win. The more you win, the more kids will see how much fun it is to play football, and the more kids will sign up — at least that's the hope.

In Hopewell's case, the team didn't grow after 2017, when it won the Class 3 state championship — it shrank slightly from 103 to 102. The roster boom occurred before the championship season — Hopewell grew from 74 players in 2016 to 103 the next year.

"It probably goes hand in hand," Irby said.