

All in the family

Alexander continues family legacy of OCHS athletic excellence

BY HILARY HOLLADAY
Staff Writer

Monica Alexander was telling a story that her son Jaylen had never heard before. The 17-year-old star running back with the distinctive blond topknot paid close attention as she described what was essentially the first time they played ball together.

A three-time member of the all-state softball team in Virginia, Monica had helped lead Orange County High School to two state softball championships and graduated in 2000. She followed her coach, Mickey Dean, to Lake City Community College in Florida when he took the top coaching job there.

The centerfielder was in the midst of her first year on the college team when she discovered she was pregnant. She stayed in school and on her team.

“I was five months pregnant and nobody knew but my mom and my sister,” she said. “I was still playing softball to finish out the year. So we actually won a national championship that year when I was pregnant with Jaylen.”

As Jaylen listened to this tale, a glimmer of amazement flickered in his eyes. He comes from a family of athletes—his father, Ernest Lee, is also athletic and played football and baseball in school—but who knew his mom kick-started his competitive spirit when he was still in the womb?

A family tradition of athletic excellence

Monica Alexander said her family has lived in Orange “forever,” and there are remarkable athletes on both

sides. Her father, Jeffrey Nixon, excelled in basketball, and her mother, Shelia Alexander, played basketball and softball and ran track. Her uncle, Willie Alexander, was a star basketball player. Monica and her twin sister, Monique, together were chosen most outstanding female athletes at OCHS in 2000, and both were all-state softball players.

Monica Alexander knew it was important to get her son involved in sports at an early age, because that had worked for her. When she and Monique were children, their mother coached their basketball and softball teams, and the twins played sports with their male cousins: “We were always outside with the boys playing football and basketball.”

After Monica had Jaylen and moved back to Virginia, she attended Longwood. She is quick to give her mother and grandmother credit for helping her rear her son and to say that playing sports has always been a family affair. She said she and her mother got Jaylen involved in soccer when he was 4 and took him to an Orange Stingers football camp when he was 5.

“He ended up loving it”

Monica Alexander chuckled when she recalled her son’s initial resistance to the game in which he has done so well.

“We literally took him to football kicking and screaming because he did not want to go to that first camp and then he ended up loving it,” she said.

Asked about the impact of his mother and grandmother on his athletic career, Jaylen said, “They’re the ones who put me in sports. So it was drilled into me at a young age to do something with sports.”

He played football for club teams throughout his childhood and for the team at Prospect Heights Middle School. At OCHS, he is a shooting guard for the basketball team as well as the star of the football squad.

Looking ahead to college

A single mother with three other children, Monica Alexander works as an instructional assistant at OCHS in special education classes. She has plenty to keep her busy, but these days, much of her attention is focused on her oldest child’s future in college football. He has been visiting colleges but doesn’t have a firm list of prospective schools yet, because he’s waiting to see how the football piece of the puzzle falls into place.

His mother made it clear she wouldn't mind if he chooses a Virginia school. With a chuckle, she looked at him and said, "I would hope to make some games," before adding, "It's his choice. It's what suits him and where he's going to be content and comfortable and happy."

A "phenomenal" athlete

After spending his freshman year at St. Anne's-Belfield School in Charlottesville, Jaylen came home to Orange County and has been a boon to Coach Jesse Lohr's team ever since. After the Nov. 1 game against Fluvanna, in which Alexander led the Hornets to a 36-22 win with four touchdowns and 244 yards rushing, Lohr singled out Alexander for his "tremendous" play.

Jaylen is particularly proud of the Fluvanna game, because that's when he achieved 5,000 career rushing yards. He holds the school record for rushing, with about 5,600 yards for his four years of play.

After college, he is hoping for a career in the NFL, but if that doesn't work out, he said he wants to land a job that pays well. He likes math and plans to major in mechanical engineering in college.

His favorite teacher is Rachel Carlton, chair of the OCHS history department, who taught his African-American history class. He and Carlton's son, Sihle Mthethwa, are football teammates.

"A phenomenal student"

"He's a phenomenal athlete, but he's also a phenomenal student," Carlton said.

She remarked that because he is popular and well-known at the school, he is a role model for the other students.

"I think that when you have a leader like that in the classroom, it becomes cool to learn. When you have someone in the classroom who's dedicated to learning, kids really respect that," she said. "It makes my job easier."

Carlton noted that after the death of Darius Minor, the 2018 OCHS graduate who died last year of natural causes during summer football training at the University of Maine, Alexander's success has had extra meaning.

Alexander wore Minor's number, 1, on his jersey for the past two seasons, a quiet but unmistakable tribute by one great high school athlete to another.

With his intelligence obvious in the classroom as well as on the football field, Carlton expects Alexander will go to a Division 1 school, get drafted by the NFL—and earn a college degree.

In her view, Jaylen Alexander's success will be significant not just to him and his family but to the whole community. "He's our hope, too."

A dream come true

Twins draft former Hornet star hurler Hanner

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

There are fun summers, busy summers and then there's the exciting, strenuous summer Bradley Hanner is having in Fort Myers, Fla. The 2017 Orange County High School (OCHS) graduate is playing rookie ball for the Minnesota Twins, and he calls it "a dream come true."

Hanner, 20, got the call from a Twins scout on June 5, the third and final day of the Major League Baseball draft. He was driving in Fredericksburg with his brother, Austin Shifflett, 15, beside him. He pulled off the road and spent the next hour responding to calls and texts from family and friends who'd heard the nationally publicized news around the same time he did.

Speaking from training camp, the ace pitcher said he knew a couple of other teams were interested him, but "finally, the Twins took a chance. It's a great organization and they're playing good baseball, and I'm excited to be a part of it."

Hanner is right-handed, six feet, four inches tall and weighs 210 pounds. He said he can throw pitches in the 90 mph range and has reached 96 mph a couple of times.

He reported to Fort Myers just a few days after he was drafted in the 21st round as the 629th overall pick. Along with many other hopeful young players in the Gulf Coast League (GCL), he is running, conditioning and playing lots of ball.

His rookie season began Monday when the GCL Twins lost 4-3 to the GCL Pittsburgh Pirates in Bradenton, Fla.

By the end of the summer, he will get word on where he heads next. Typically, rookies are assigned to minor league teams allowing them time to raise their game and boost their confidence. The best of the best move up the ranks to the major league.

His mother, Tonya Shifflett of Rapidan, was at work listening to the Major League Baseball draft announcements on a phone app when things suddenly got very interesting.

"It was the most overwhelming feeling as a mother just to hear his name," Shifflett said, recalling how she laughed and cried, hardly able to put words to everything she felt.

She said his father, Todd Hanner, and paternal grandfather played sports with Bradley when he was growing up, and everyone noticed his unusual athletic ability. "We just saw the talent, especially with baseball."

Hanner played baseball at Prospect Heights Middle School and quickly became a standout player in high school. Shifflett said she's grateful to all the good coaches he's had over the years, most recently at Patrick Henry Community College in Martinsville.

At OCHS, Hanner helped his team win the district championship in 2017. He finished that season with an 8-2 record, 0.79 earned run average and 114 strikeouts in 68 innings pitched.

He was generally on the field to pitch but also played shortstop. In his senior year he hit .360 and drove in 20 runs.

Dave Rabe, Hanner's varsity baseball coach at OCHS, was impressed from the beginning. Even as a ninth-grader, Hanner stood out.

"He had as much potential as anybody I've seen. His raw ability was head and shoulders above others," Rabe said.

Rabe has watched his former player mature from a happy-go-lucky kid with a strong arm to a focused young man who knows "when to turn it on and be professional and get the job done."

Rabe was in regular contact with Hanner for the two years he played ball for Patrick Henry Community College. Although he was well aware of

Hanner's major-league ambitions, he made a point of asking about his college classes and other interests, in hopes of keeping him "well-rounded."

"He'll talk to me a lot about fishing. Most of the time when we talk, it's about fishing or family," Rabe said. "I try to talk to him about things outside baseball."

Adam Utz also got to know Hanner at OCHS. Now varsity baseball coach, he was the junior varsity coach and assistant varsity coach during Hanner's time.

He commends Hanner for his work ethic: "Minor league baseball is grueling. I think that's exactly up Bradley's alley. He wants to succeed."

Utz said Hanner has a "live arm" capable of pitching hard and fast.

"Bradley had really good velocity even in high school, mid- to upper 80s [mph], probably touching the 90s," he said.

Hanner's staying power is a key strength, Utz noted. He said Hanner can throw more pitches than many of his peers and is capable of "throwing harder at the end of games than at the beginning."

Utz added, "When he throws a baseball, it almost looks effortless. It comes out so naturally."

The pitcher is the key player on the field, the coach remarked. "They control the pace of the game; they control every aspect of the game."

With that in mind, he believes Hanner has the mental toughness to go far. "You have to be fierce. When I see Bradley step up on the mound, he is fierce. You could see it in his eyes [in high school games]. He always thought he was better than the guys at the plate."

Like Rabe, Utz remembers Hanner's playful side. In high school, he said, "He was just a pure goofball. He would make practices fun. He was constantly trying to find fun in the game."

Now that the Orange County star is playing rookie ball, Utz believes that fun-loving spirit will serve him well: "Bradley has always been able to find joy in baseball. That alone, plus his athletic ability, will drive him."

The ancient martial art of tai chi

“Body should be at ease; mind should be at peace”

The latest in a series on county residents involved in sporting activities.

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

Leroy “Buddy” Jett Jr. has a white ponytail and a variety of tattoos. Silver rings glint along the perimeter of his left ear. His scratchy voice sounds like it’s made of the air and clay of Orange County, which it is. A member of the Patowomeck Indian tribe, he spent 32 years working in the printing industry, but for most of his life, his heart has been with tai chi.

On this particular evening, Jett, 69, is teaching tai chi to students who signed up for the class through the Orange County Parks and Recreation Department. The previous week, Jett’s mother died and earlier that day, he had major dental work. But Jett was smiling and ready to teach.

He reminded his students that the first principle of tai chi, an ancient Chinese martial art form, is to relax.

“Body should be at ease; mind should be at peace,” he told the group, five men and eight women of varying ages.

As he led them through a series of graceful postures, the room was quiet except for the sound of a ticking clock and the scrape of feet, in socks or lightweight tai chi shoes, on carpet. The group’s

movements had a flowing, liquid quality, as if they were dancing underwater.

“Every posture is an example of physics,” Jett said.

For some postures, he told his students to place 70 percent of their weight on one leg and 30 percent on the other. Accomplishing that requires bodily awareness and a good sense of balance.

He also reminded his students they needed to keep the knee and toe aligned in every posture.

“If you do that, tai chi is a very safe practice until you’re 100 years old,” he remarked.

After class, one of his students, Nancy Luja of Louisa, told him her father had taken up tai chi about seven years ago and credits it with his good mobility. His 100th birthday was coming up the following week.

Later, Jett laughed and shook his head over the coincidence. He has spent many decades studying tai chi and has taught it for the past five or so years through the local parks and rec office. If he can’t be practicing tai chi, there are few things he loves more than talking about it.

Jett’s parents split up when he was 11 years old. He grew up in Rhoadesville, where his mother, June Darnell Jett, worked next door at the country store her father owned. They were poor and Jett’s mother didn’t know how to drive. After he turned 17, he got a motorcycle, dropped out of Orange County High School and “kind of went wild.”

He was part of what he calls an “informal motorcycle club” and spent a lot of time partying around Orange.

Later he earned his GED diploma. He also married and had three daughters. That first marriage didn’t last, but he beams when he speaks of his family, including his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Having grown up without his father, he came to a crucial realization as a young man ready to change his ways: “I inherently knew I needed some discipline in my life.”

He began studying karate when he was in his early 20s and later joined the Blue Ridge Zen Group in Charlottesville. By chance, he saw a tai chi demonstration during First Night festivities in Charlottesville. The man leading the demonstration was Pete Yadlowsky.

Jett began studying tai chi with Yadlowsky in Charlottesville, and the two remain close friends. Yadlowsky and one of Jett's longtime students, Augie Ruotolo, come to Jett's classes and assist him with demonstrations.

After Jett found a new purpose in life through his study of tai chi, he packed up his Ford Grenada and headed to San Francisco to pursue it further. He studied with an aged tai chi master in Golden Gate Park and became ever more entranced with the practice that he says involves the mind and spirit as much as the body.

After eight years living in San Francisco and elsewhere, Jett returned to Orange County in 1994. He remarried and loves his family and fellow members of the Patawomeck tribe, but much of his life revolves around tai chi.

He is keenly aware of moving through both time and space as he practices it. He said his mind goes into a neutral state and he dwells in the moment, free of distraction.

That's not to say that it's easy.

"It's full of paradoxes," he said. "You have to put in effort [for it] to eventually become effortless."

Jett wants people to remember that tai chi is a martial art as well as a way they can improve their mobility, flexibility and concentration. During his parks and rec classes, he brings Ruotolo and Yadlowsky to the front of the class to show the beginners how they can defend themselves through tai chi.

A graceful flick of one's wrist or swift movement of the arm, and a would-be mugger would be left blinking in amazement. When tai chi is done correctly, no one gets hurt.

The ancient masters emphasized this lesson, Jett said: "Walk like a cat."

Doing so involves delicacy, balance and supreme self-awareness. Cats don't stomp their feet, and Jett said tai chi masters don't, either.

Jett emphasizes the spiritual part of this internal martial art form that doesn't involve striking opponents.

"It allows you to have an altered state of consciousness. It's calming," he said. He believes practicing tai chi regularly can help a person get through stressful situations—and he repeatedly tells

his students they need to practice at home, not just in class.

Tai chi has been a gift to Jett, who said he thinks of his students as brothers and sisters. He wants them to feel the beauty of what he feels when he is moving in slippers across the carpet or across a grassy lawn:

"The here and now will never come again. This is it," he said. Tai chi "becomes a profound exploration. Even more than that, it's an internal exploration."

To find out about future tai chi classes offered through Orange County Parks and Recreation, call 672-5435. For more information about Jett's approach to tai chi, go to his website, www.floatingcloudtaichi.org.