

From Panera to pro baseball

Forest Park graduate Charles Hall was named the South Atlantic Conference Pitcher of the Year. He led the nation in strikeouts with 148.

TUSCULUM

How Forest Park graduate Charles Hall became the oldest pick in the 2019 Major League First-Year Draft

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Charles Hall arrived at the Harvey Baseball Academy in North Carolina with one thought: Make this moment count. It was late July, 2015 and the right-hander was there to convince head coach Paul Rozzelle and pitching coach Kris Harvey he belonged on Catawba Valley Community College's baseball roster.

If he succeeded, he was on his way. If he failed, there was no backup plan. Only a sober realization.

"I knew this was my last chance," Hall said.

Outside of an adult league, he had not pitched in an organized game since his senior year at Forest Park. That was three years before this day.

Hall attempted to pitch at Anne Arundel Community College (Md.) after graduating from high school in 2012, but never did after he became academically ineligible his first season. Instead of staying at school, he returned home and worked at a Panera in Woodbridge for three years as a cashier and food preparer.

His then-girlfriend urged Hall to give baseball one more try and here it was: a standard 30-minute bullpen session tossing between 20 and 25 pitches.

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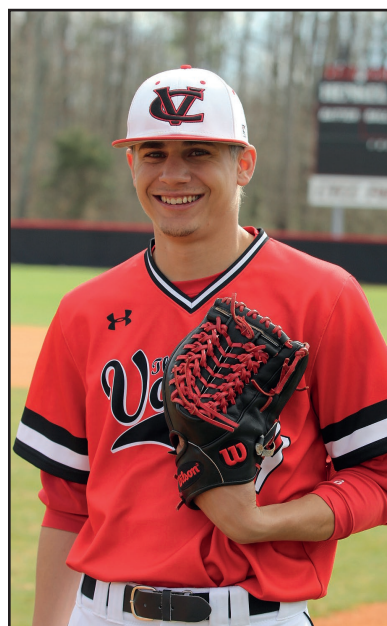
I believe in second chances. I was a second-chance guy, but I'm not a big believer in third chances. That second chance was in front of him and he held on.

CATAWBA BASEBALL COACH PAUL ROZZELLE ON CHARLES HALL

Hall's effortless pitching motion, effective breaking ball and lively fastball impressed Rozzelle and Harvey. They offered him a roster spot right then as a walk-on.

That's all he could ask for. The rest was up to him as he attempted to make up for lost time.

There were opportunities to walk away again, but Hall refused to give up. Instead he removed the rust,



After a three-year layoff from organized baseball, Hall earned a spot at Catawba Valley Community College in 2016 as a walk-on.

CATAWBA

learned his craft and matured into a pitcher good enough to set a Division II record for single-game strikeouts, lead the nation in strikeouts and become a 33rd round pick by the Oakland A's on June 5, the last day of the 40-round Major League Baseball First-Year Draft.

Of the 1,217 players drafted, Hall, at 24 years, nine-months old, was the oldest one selected. But age didn't

matter now. Opportunity did.

"I believe in second chances," Rozzelle said. "I was a second-chance guy, but I'm not a big believer in third chances. That second chance was in front of him and he held on."

A WORK IN PROGRESS

The emails kept coming. Hall estimates he sent Rozzelle at least eight in the hopes of securing a tryout.

At first, Rozzelle ignored them. He'd built his roster by recruiting high schoolers or accepting transfers from Division I or II schools. It was unheard of for the then-second-year head coach to add a player with Hall's background, especially for a team coming off a third-place finish in the junior college world series.

But Hall persisted and Rozzelle relented, realizing there was no harm in checking Hall out. Rozzelle asked Hall first for video of him pitching, but none existed. Rozzelle then told Hall he'd have to travel to him. Hall agreed and they scheduled a meeting.

"He had a lot of moxie, but he believed he could pitch here," Rozzelle said.

Hall chose Catawba since it was close to where his sister lived in Charlotte. Without enough credits, he had

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to select a junior college first before moving on to a four-year school.

He also chose the Red Hawks because of their recent postseason success and the hiring of Harvey as the pitching coach June 9, 2015. The son of former major-league all-star reliever Bryan Harvey, Kris Harvey starred at Clemson and was a second-round pick by the Florida Marlins in 2005.

Once Catawba placed him on its roster, Hall handled things from there, starting with financing his education. Hall's grandmother paid for him to attend Anne Arundel, a school he chose since his older brother Conner played baseball there. Hall asked his grandmother again if she would pay for Catawba. But she declined. It was time for Hall to assume responsibility, something he understood. He took out loans and headed to North Carolina with his girlfriend.

He arrived as a work-in-progress. Growing up, he pitched in youth leagues and in 2005 he was the winning pitcher on his Dumfries-Triangle-Quantico 9-to-10-year-old Little League team that won the tournament of champions in a field of seven other state champions from the southeast. Fellow Oakland A's minor leaguer and Woodbridge graduate Logan Farrar was also on that team.

At Forest Park, Hall displayed a dangerous breaking ball, but said he did not throw hard and had yet to grow into his body. As a two-year varsity player, Hall pitched some in relief and had key outings his senior season in helping the Bruins win the 2012 Cardinal District Tournament title and advance to the region semifinals.

But with Chris Colletti and Kyle Staats as the Bruins' primary starters, then-Bruins' head coach Sonny Moss took advantage of Hall's versatility and started him in centerfield.

"He was so valuable," Moss said. "For us, he was a game-changer."

Hall arrived at Anne Arundel planning to return to the mound full-time as a starter. But his commitment to his grades was not as strong.

"I did not go to class," Hall said. "I was young and immature."

After leaving Anne Arundel following the fall semester, Hall competed in an adult men's league. But he remained a project.

"It was a huge process," Rozzelle said. "It was two years of absolute ups and downs, good days and bad days and everything in between. But he kept working."

Hall told Catawba he could play outfield as well, but the coaches saw his talent and kept him as a pitcher by refining, and at times, overhauling his technique.

"I had not pitched in a real game in who knows how long," said Hall, who finished his Catawba career third in career strikeouts (110), games started (19) and innings pitched (109.1). "They developed me into a pitcher instead of a thrower."

Hall had one physical advantage in speeding up the learning curve. He'd never experienced any arm trouble, something he attributes to not pitching on a



On March 15, Hall set a Division II single-game record with 22 strikeouts.

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regular basis.

While coachable, Hall's biggest struggle was mental. He needed to control his emotions when he failed on the mound.

"That was not good early on, but I give him 100 percent credit," Rozzelle said. "Some players never learn, but he did."

Hall wasn't happy when Rozzelle moved him from the starting rotation to the bullpen going into regionals at the end of his sophomore season, but he accepted the decision. Rozzelle explained to Hall he was more beneficial to the team in relief with a fastball clocked as high as 91. The move also helped Division II Tusculum (TN) notice Hall at regionals.

"I told them if he figures out the mental side, he's really good if he holds up his end of the bargain," Rozzelle said. "And he did."

Hall considered other four-year programs to transfer to for his final two seasons, but he liked Tusculum for its location, the coaching staff and the baseball facilities.

Tusculum head coach Brandon Steele, in turn, said he liked Hall's competitiveness, his clean delivery, his fastball and breaking ball.

Hall began in the bullpen his first season, but kept improving to the point that he entered the 2019 season as the Pioneers' clear No. 1 starter.

Hall's comfort level only increased after a discussion with the coaching staff on calling his own pitches and mixing them up. Steele had confidence in Hall and allowed him to do that.

"He's a very passionate and intelligent kid," Steele said. "He's very motivated and wants to beat people."

Steele said Hall's drive and intensity never rubbed his teammates the wrong way, even if it sometimes might come across as intentionally disrespectful toward them. They knew better, preferring to have someone fired up than someone lackadaisical in their approach. They also knew Hall wasn't like that off the field.

"He's not maliciously trying to show up anybody," Steele said. "He wants to win. It's great to have."

He started off the 2019 season sharp, but his name-recognition really took off after he struck out 22 March 15 against Queens University to set a NCAA Division II single-game record. The previous

mark was set in 1999.

Over 123 pitches, Hall totaled at least two strikeouts in every inning and struck out the side four times as he improved to 4-0 and increased his nation-leading strikeout total to 88.

"I knew the Tusculum record, but I didn't know about the national record," Hall said. "I was just pitching."

DRAWING INTEREST

Even before his record-setting game, Major League Baseball teams noticed him.

He said he first attracted attention the previous summer after being named an all-star playing for Edenton of the Coastal Plain League. The interest grew this past season at Tusculum as he finished with a 6-3 record and 148 strikeouts (tops in the nation) and earned South Atlantic Conference Pitcher of the Year honors. His fastball averaged 90 to 91 miles per hour and his breaking ball locked up hitters.

But Hall also impressed teams based on data. For example, Steele said the spin rate on Hall's slider rated higher than average.

"He passed the eye test and the math people for analytics," Steele said.

After his season was over, he did two pre-draft workouts with the Texas Rangers (May 18th in Atlanta) and the Boston Red Sox (May 20th in Ohio). As an older-than-usual senior from a Division II school who stood 5-10 and had no negotiating leverage, Hall understood why teams had him low on their draft boards if they even listed him at all.

Still at least four organizations seemed the most likely destinations, making Hall optimistic of his chances going into the draft's third and final day for rounds 11 through 40.

At the time, Hall was in his second week with the CPL's Peninsula Pilots in Hampton. After helping to lay down the tarp on the field, Hall and his teammates went to the locker room to ride out the rain delay.

Usually Hall keeps his cell phone in his locker on game days. But he received permission from his manager to keep his phone with him during pregame warmups and in the dugout in case he received word he was drafted. He still had his phone inside the locker room when his advisor Michael Giorgio texted him with big news. Giorgio had spoken with the A's, who informed him they were going

to select Hall in the 33rd round with the 1,004th overall pick.

Five minutes later, Hall, with his teammates gathered around him, saw his name pop up on his phone through MLB's online draft tracker. The celebration commenced. Hall was scheduled to pitch that night in relief, but on the advice of Oakland scout Anthony Aloisi did not. It was time to leave. The next day, Hall said goodbye to his host family and came home.

Hall was surprised Oakland drafted him. But Giorgio had a good relationship with the organization and encouraged them to select him.

"Honestly without him, I don't know if I would have gotten drafted," Hall said.

Hall's connection with Giorgio began April 27. A friend of Giorgio's who doesn't work for him messaged Hall on Facebook and asked if he'd be interested in Giorgio's services based on how well Hall pitched this season. Hall had no representation so he researched Giorgio, who is president of Trinity Sports Reps and Marketing in Altamont, N.Y. and has MLB and NFL clients. After talking it over with his father, Hall agreed to have Giorgio help him. Two weeks before the draft, Giorgio went to work.

"He has leverage with certain teams and has worked with them before so he put his name on the line for me, saying I was worth the time," Hall said. "He just made sure teams didn't forget about me."

ON TO ARIZONA

As a late-round pick with no more eligibility, Hall gladly accepted the A's offer of a \$1,000 signing bonus and a plane ticket. He left June 9 for Arizona and signed the next day. He is currently playing in the minor leagues' lowest level in the rookie Arizona League. In his pro debut June 20, Hall struck out the side in one inning of work.

Hall understands the odds are against him reaching the major leagues. From 1981 to 2010, only 17.6 percent of drafted players who signed made the majors, according to Baseball America.

The study said the number increases to 73 percent if the player was a first-round pick, but drops to under 10 percent for players selected in the 11th round and beyond. But Hall is grateful for the opportunity and doesn't forget where he came from.

Hall said he stays in touch through Facebook with some of his former co-workers from Panera. One in particular, Tony Thomas, whom he calls Charlie Rock, sends Hall messages telling him to keep believing.

He takes all that encouragement to heart. He turned his life around, even in the classroom where he was on the all-academic team at both Catawba and Tusculum. And now he's playing pro baseball for a living, and he wouldn't trade that for anything, even if it still seems a little unreal following a three-year layoff that almost led him down a different and uncertain path.

"I feel like that was a lifetime ago," Hall said. "It's a different part of my life. It's crazy. It's like I never stopped."

WELCOME BACK

Forest Park baseball standout Griffin Boone returns to football as a pleasant surprise

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The day of his first start as Forest Park's varsity quarterback, Griffin Boone texted his offensive coordinator Dan Ruppert with a simple message: "I'm nervous."

Boone's reaction was understandable. Until this season, he had not played in a football game since youth league as a fourth grader. Instead, baseball became his primary sport as Boone developed into an all-district shortstop committed to VCU.

But Forest Park football was in a jam. Their starting quarterback Mathew Talbert was still out with an injury while his replacement Anthony Moreland was unavailable for that week's game against Colgan. That left Boone as the only choice.

The cram sessions began. He stayed up late each night, including one time until 3 a.m., studying film. He constantly texted Ruppert during the week with questions. He even sneaked in a look at the playbook during classes.

There was a lot to learn in a short period of time for someone who never imagined being in this position. He'd only come out his senior year to play a sport he always loved one last time before going to college. That was it.

He faced a steep learning curve. The coaches eased him in with patient instruction and played him on a limited basis at special teams and wide receiver.

But he struggled in his first stint at quarterback the week before against unbeaten Freedom. On two of the four snaps he took during an eventual 49-0 loss to the Eagles, Boone threw an interception and was sacked on another play. Overwhelmed at times, Boone wore a "deer in the headlights" expression on his face, Ruppert recalled.

Was he ready for the next step? Everyone believed in him. The question was whether he believed in himself.

ALWAYS A FOOTBALL FAN

Boone appreciated football at an early age.

As a kindergartner living in Georgia, he, with his mother Monica's help, did a 100-day project on the nearby Starr's Mill High School football program by pasting photos of the best players to poster board. Boone wanted to chronicle Starr's Mills' history of success since opening in 1997. It helped that his teacher's son was the team's starting quarterback.

"It was a little bit obsessive, I know," Boone said.

Boone's father Lewis also influenced



Griffin Boone has played on offense, defense and special teams this season for Forest Park.

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Boone's interest in football. Lewis played fullback first at Potomac State and then at Division III McDaniel College (MD) before embarking on a career in the Army where he reached the rank of brigadier general.

Besides living in football-crazed Georgia, Boone also resided near Auburn, another football-crazed atmosphere that fueled his love of the sport.

"He liked the crowds and the camaraderie of any team sport," Lewis Boone said. "It took a hold of him."

When the family moved to Prince William County, Boone played in the American Pride Youth Football League as a defensive end and nose tackle, but never as

a quarterback.

Boone stopped competing in football going into middle school and concentrated instead on baseball. He found baseball easier. It came naturally to him and he excelled at it. A two-time all-district selection at Forest Park, Boone hit .449 as a sophomore and .326 as a junior.

"[Baseball] took over and stuck with me over the years," Boone said. "Up until this year."

The timing of Boone's decision to come out for football was in some ways surprising. This was his senior year and he had to consider the risk of injury. He'd committed to VCU for baseball July 16, the day of his visit.



Griffin Boone is a two-time all-district shortstop for Forest Park's baseball team. He has committed to VCU.
SUBMITTED

Why take any unnecessary chances that might impact his college future? Boone thought long and hard about whether playing football was the right move or not.

His football friends at school encouraged him to give football a shot. Seeing his strong arm and speed, they knew he was athletic enough to help in some way.

Former football coach Daniel Bruton saw the same potential in Boone when he witnessed the then-sophomore effortlessly throwing an accurate ball one day at school. After Bruton stepped down to take the same job at Briar Woods, he made it a point to introduce Boone to Forest Park's next head coach, John Robinette.

Robinette encouraged Boone to come out if he wanted to. That planted the seed. Boone considered playing football the following season, but decided against it since junior year was critical in the recruiting process.

Going into his senior year, though, Boone started to have a change of heart. Robinette continued to express interest. And now one of his baseball teammates, Ben Moore, wanted to come out for the football team.

A week before Forest Park's season opener Aug. 29, Boone decided to give it a

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BY THE NUMBERS

2

The number of touchdown passes Boone threw in his debut as Forest Park's starting quarterback Oct. 18

10

The number of times Boone was hit by a pitcher last spring during baseball season

.326

Boone's batting average for Forest Park's baseball team last season

shot. His first day of practice was Aug. 26.

“To say I went into this blindly is not an understatement,” Boone said. “I wasn’t sure what to expect and I had no idea what to do.”

The announcement caught his parents off guard. While Lewis thought his son was capable of doing well in football, he remained leery about Boone starting so late in his high school career.

In an era of specialization where high school athletes focus on one sport year-round, Boone’s decision defied convention. Lewis, though, understood his son’s thinking.



“To say I went into this blindly is not an understatement. I wasn’t sure what to expect and I had no idea what to do. he can to make himself successful.”

— GRIFFIN BOONE ON JOINING FOREST PARK’S FOOTBALL TEAM THIS SEASON

“The main thing I told him was not to look back years from now and wish he had done something,” Lewis said. “He loved football.”

Boone informed VCU of his plans. He also informed Steve Denard, Forest Park’s baseball coach of his decision, as well as Kevin Sisk, his travel-team baseball coach. He received no pushback from either coach, even though it meant he was unavailable to play for the Bruins’ fall-league team and his travel team.

“I would have loved for him to be on our team, but he’s a bulldog and he loves to compete,” Sisk said. “I told him he only gets one chance in high school with his last year. I told him I respected that, but

we’d miss him.”

PREPARATION

Are you serious?

Over and over, Boone heard that question from his peers about his decision to play football. To prove his commitment, he posted a picture of his Forest Park helmet to Snapchat and wore his jersey at school.

He knew the stakes and understood the quizzical looks he received from others. But curiosity got the best of him. Now he faced the next challenge. And it was a big one.

“That first day of practice, learning the playbook, it was a struggle,” Boone said. “I lost some sleep.”

Known as the “Baseball guy” by his football teammates, Boone expressed interest in playing quarterback, where Forest Park appeared thin. But the Bruins were set with Talbert as their starter and Moreland as his backup. The coaches put Boone at wide receiver and special teams and he saw his first action against Patriot, Forest Park’s fourth game of the season. Moreland took over as the starter after Talbert broke his left hand in the Patriot game.

But Boone sensed his role was about to change after Ruppert texted him over the weekend before the Colgan game, telling him to start warming up his arm. Without getting into specifics with Boone, Ruppert and Robinette were considering a switch and by Monday officially informed Boone he was the starter.

Boone helped his cause by paying attention in practice. Ruppert toned down the playbook for Boone as well. A former quarterback at Brooke Point, Ruppert coached the position in high school for 15 years. He’d seen enough over the years to know how to best equip someone like Boone.

Ruppert called the play and Boone ran it without having to read defenses and worry about making a last-second adjustment.

“He asked a lot of questions and kept asking for clips and what should he do,” Ruppert said. “For me, it was about letting him know that I had confidence in his abilities.”

Forest Park also featured an experienced offensive line, two quality running backs in Jerrod Woods and Justice San Agustin and a standout wide receiver in

Areeb Rashid.

Anytime Boone felt overwhelmed, his teammates kept reminding him they had his back.

“He’s fast and mobile,” said senior left tackle Jason Klink, a three-year starter. “He can take a hit and keep going.”

All the feedback strengthened Boone’s resolve.

“I’m absolutely blessed to have the coaching staff and teammates that I do,” Boone said. “They motivate me and give me every opportunity to better myself and I give them all the credit in the world.”

To help him adjust in throwing a football, Ruppert used baseball analogies. In getting him to rotate his hips properly, Ruppert told Boone to think of turning a double play. In passing downfield to a receiver, Ruppert told Boone to view the receiver as a first baseman waiting for the throw from short.

The analogies worked as did his experience playing shortstop. The position requires players to communicate well and cover a lot of space quickly with a quick release and range of motion. The 5-foot-11, 175-pound Boone checked all those boxes.

But as much as he enjoyed his time on the football field, baseball still tugged at him.

Boone was offered the chance to compete with his team at the invite-only WWBA World Championships Oct. 10-14 in Jupiter, Florida. The tournament, which brought in 92 teams from all over the United States and features numerous pro scouts, is a can’t-miss event for any elite amateur baseball player.

Boone said he “lost some sleep” over missing the tournament. But instead of showcasing his talents in Florida, he chose to remain loyal to his football teammates and fulfill his responsibility as the starting quarterback against Colgan.



Before this season, Boone last played football as a fourth-grader in a local youth league. DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

“This is a brotherhood,” Boone said. “It would have been wrong for me to leave.”

GAME TIME

This wasn’t going well. On Forest Park’s first play against Colgan, Boone fumbled the ball after he missed the handoff. On the Bruins’ third possession, he fumbled again after running the wrong play. Boone did score on a 20-yard run that series, only to see it brought back after the Bruins set up in the wrong formation and were called for holding.

Ruppert reminded Boone to remain calm. So did Klink. They told him to get the ball where it needed to go and they would take care of the rest.

Emboldened, Boone returned to the huddle for Forest Park’s fifth series and on the first play promptly threw a deep ball to Rashid for the Bruins’ second touchdown in an eventual 39-6 victory. Boone said some Colgan players taunted him by telling him to stick to baseball. He responded by pointing to the scoreboard, which read Forest Park 14, Colgan 0.

He finished the game throwing for 113 yards and two touchdowns on 5 of 9 passing and rushing 10 times for 42 yards.

Encouraged by what he saw, Robinette envisions using Boone more in some capacity once Talbert comes back.

“We’re going to have a two-headed monster out of the backfield,” Robinette said.

SEEKING SOLACE

Patriot's Zack Blue finds refuge on the basketball court following the loss of his sister

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Zack Blue never asked any questions when his mother Michele called him in the early morning of Oct. 11. Michele's quivering voice said enough. Something was wrong.

Michele wanted desperately to tell her son why she was crying. But as hard as she tried, words failed. Instead, she asked Zack to come home immediately.

Zack, Trey Nelson and Nelson's brother Chase started the morning by shooting the basketball around inside Patriot High School's gym that Friday before school.

When Michele called, Zack and Chase were on their way back to Patriot from Dunkin'.

After he hung up with his mother, Zack wondered if something happened to his 94-year-old great-grandmother Lee in North Carolina? It was possible. Over the summer, Lee was told she had two weeks to two months to live.

With the change in plans, Zack dropped Chase off at Patriot and drove the 10 minutes to his Bristow home, where at least two police cars were parked out front.

Zack walked inside to meet his parents, still uncertain why he was here. In the kitchen, Michele and her husband Wes struggled to explain the police presence so Zack turned to one of the officers for clarity.

The officer dutifully informed Zack his 13-year-old sister Ashley had died from an epileptic seizure. Attempting to process the awful but irrefutable news, Zack leaned into a couch before eventually making his way over to a corner of the dining room where he sat for a couple of hours lost in thought.

He and his girlfriend Hannah Nugent were scheduled to participate in that night's festivities as the homecoming king and queen. But Zack wasn't going anywhere.

"Everything was kind of a blur that day," Zack said.

No one expected Zack to participate the next day in Patriot's fall league boys basketball game either. In fact, head coach



Zack Blue is the Patriot varsity boys basketball team's most experienced player this season.

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Zack and his sister Ashley.

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Sherman Rivers told his team he planned to cancel the game.

Zack, however, wanted to play. In the middle of this turmoil, he needed an outlet to ease his pain. And his favorite sport provided the necessary escape. He had a choice.

Stay home and grieve. Or compete and begin the healing process even if it only kept the emptiness at bay for the length of a two-hour or so game.

The choice was easy.

Separated by three years and three months, Zack and Ashley had a typical big brother-little sister relationship. They got on each other's nerves and found ways to poke each other with an occasional push.

They were also quiet unless they knew you well. Then you'd see a sillier, goofier side.

Of the two, Ashley was more open with her feelings. She was the one who'd draw a picture for you on your birthday. Or in Zack's case, scratch his back while the two of them watched a movie or TV together.

Zack kept his emotions more in check. But don't be fooled. Underneath his reserved demeanor lay a competitive streak in which he found subtle ways to let you know he held the upper hand. It could be a sly smile after he won yet another sprint by a wide margin in conditioning drills. Or it could be an under-his-breath remark after blocking an opponent's shot.

Ashley was no wallflower either. If she beat you in H-O-R-S-E or her favorite board game Sorry, you'd hear about it for days.

Athletics connected the two. No surprise given the household they grew up in. Michele and Wes played volleyball and basketball at Osbourn Park High School and Michele returned to her alma mater to coach volleyball and swimming. In five seasons as head coach, she led the Yellow Jackets to three district volleyball titles and two state tournament appearances.

Their kids added to the family legacy.

Ashley proudly let people know she was a three-year member of Gainesville Middle School's varsity volleyball team. She also competed in softball and basketball growing up, while Zack played basketball and soccer.

The highlight of all, though, was Ashley's perseverance even when epilepsy started to interfere with her activities in the seventh grade.

She suffered her first seizure right before turning three and until middle school, most of her seizures occurred at night. After undergoing a number of tests and four brain surgeries, no one knew the seizures' cause. The only remedy was taking medication to control them.

But once the seizures started occurring during the day and sometimes at middle school volleyball practice, Ashley stopped competing at Gainesville. It was the winter of her seventh grade year.

Though not playing at Gainesville, she remained active on local rec basketball and softball teams and continued with her club volleyball team. The only difference was that Michele and Wes had to monitor her more closely. Instead of dropping her off to run to the store, they stayed in case Ashley had a seizure.

In late spring, Ashley switched medications to decrease the number of seizures. It seemed to work.

"We thought we were on the right track," Michele said.

The Blues had a baby monitor in their bedroom to keep an ear out if they heard Ashley in distress during the night. But it was impossible to receive any warning for what she ultimately died of: sudden unexpected death in epilepsy. Wes found Ashley unresponsive after going into her bedroom at 7 a.m. to wake her up for school. Fifteen minutes later, Michele called her oldest child to return home.

SUDEP is a rare occurrence with just over one in 1,000 people with epilepsy dying from the affliction each year. It's so rare Michele had never heard of it until 20-year-old actor Cameron Boyce died from it July 6.

Michele said the results of Ashley's autopsy found fluid in her lungs, something that is in 75 percent of people killed by SUDEP. As baffling as it was, there was nothing else to point to as the cause.

"She was so low on the risk factor," Michele said. "It's so crazy and awful."

Zack handled Ashley's condition like he did most things: He stepped in when needed. While sharing a room while they were little, Zack always knew to yell downstairs to let Wes and Michele know Ashley was having another seizure.

He brought his sister milkshakes after episodes and, trained in first aid, stayed with her as he got older if their parents needed to run out. Now he was at a loss.

Zack stayed home for a week after Ashley died, but he was not alone. His coach, teammates and friends surrounded him with non-stop support.

After learning of Ashley's death from Patriot principal Michael Bishop, Rivers left Patriot and went straight to Zack's house.

Rivers had never dealt with this type of situation directly in his nine-year ca-



Zack will be counted on to lead the Pioneers in scoring.

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Wes Blue, Michele Blue and Zack Blue stand on the sidelines of Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia Nov. 24 for the Eagles-Seahawks game holding a Nick Foles jersey in honor of Ashley Blue. The Eagles were Ashley's favorite team.

SUBMITTED

reer as a head coach or an assistant. But he knew to keep the conversation light. He asked Zack about his pet guinea pig named Jamal. Zack and Hannah planned on picking up a male from the litter. But when they arrived, there were only female guinea pigs. They stuck with the original name.

Rivers and Zack also talked about Zack's favorite team, the Los Angeles Lakers.

"I tried to be as normal as possible," Rivers said.

Nelson took the same approach.

Nelson knew something was up with Zack after Zack dropped Chase back at Patriot following the run to Dunkin'.

But Nelson didn't know specifics until Rivers held a meeting after school and told the team of Ashley's passing. Nelson, who will start alongside Zack this season in Patriot's backcourt, raced over to see his friend. At the time, Zack was downstairs in the basement watching a movie with Hannah. Nelson gave Zack a hug and told him how sorry he was. He and his family got a card and the entire team and coaching staff signed it.

When Zack returned to school, no one brought up Ashley's death unless he wanted to talk about it.

Zack still keeps to himself, but he constantly thinks of his sister. He'll sometimes watch Nickelodeon, Ashley's favorite TV network.

Her image is the wallpaper on his phone and he wears a bracelet that advocates for SUDEP awareness, something Patriot will honor when it hosts Osbourn Park Jan. 14.

Ashley would have turned 14 Nov. 23. To celebrate her life, the Blues and their extended family played volleyball that day, including Michele's 69-year-old father with his two knee replacements.

The next day, the family attended the Philadelphia Eagles' home game against Seattle after friends gave them field passes. To honor Ashley's beloved Eagles, the Blues brought to the game her Nick Foles jersey from the 2018 Super Bowl championship season.

"It was good, but also very hard," Michele said. "It was the first of many firsts without her."

Since his sister's death, basketball has provided Zack with a healthy distraction.

"The biggest thing for him was he couldn't wait for the season to start and take his mind off it," Rivers said.

There's plenty to keep Zack's attention.

After biding his time the last two seasons as a reserve, Zack is the Pioneers' go-to person for a team in need of experience. Patriot lost all its starters from last season's 23-3 squad that set a school-record for wins and reached states for the first time in the program's history.

The 6-foot-1 senior guard is Patriot's best defender and shooter. He's tough enough to battle under the basket for rebounds and agile enough to create space for an outside shot.

Zack admits some days are longer than others. His mind drifts during school without any prompting. He's still unsure what to say and feel at times. And the Blues' house is much quieter with Ashley gone.

But then Zack heads to the basketball court and all is well. He'll utter a sarcastic comment like 'nice shot' after Trey Nelson shoots an air ball. Or he'll win another sprint and makes sure everyone notices without attracting too much fanfare.

Patriot opened its regular season Monday against Woodbridge and no one looked forward to tip-off more than Zack. He, of course, played with a heavy heart. There's no defined timetable for grieving a loss. And the moment did not replace the loss of Ashley. It did not come close. But it filled a hole however temporary.

That was enough as one thought raced through his mind in scoring a game-high 17 points in the Pioneers' 76-43 win.

"I'm ready," Zack said.