

SPORTS

SEASONS CHANGE

The year the diamonds —
and Riverside's 'Wall' —
couldn't shine



Courtesy Photo
The picturesque softball field
featuring "The Wall" at Riverside
High School in Lansdowne.

BY ALI MONAHAN

Special to the Times-Mirror

It's known simply as "The Wall" and although its original purpose was merely structural support, it has proven — quite literally — to stand for much more.

"We have a saying in the coaching world, and this comes from Alabama, which is 'Tradition never graduates,'" said Kevin Bednoski, head coach of the Riverside Rams varsity softball team. "When you can continue a culture and grow a culture — whether that's a culture of winning, whether that's a culture of teamwork or positivity and all different ways that you could create the culture at a particular institution — that never graduates."

The culture of Lansdowne, a suburban neighborhood nestled in the rolling hills of Loudoun County, certainly grew in the fall of 2015 when Riverside High School, home of the Rams, opened its doors for its inaugural school year. With the new school arrived a new element of liveliness, community and tradition that the neighborhood would now seem incomplete without.

Riverside's signature retaining wall

We believe we've got the number one facility in all of northern Virginia — not just in Loudoun County — and we take a lot of great pride in maintaining it, preparing it and caring for it.

RIVERSIDE SOFTBALL COACH KEVIN BEDNOSKI

rests against a 50-foot grassy hill, which sits centrally between the Rams softball and baseball fields. Every March, the sharp crack of a bat and the satisfying pop of a ball meeting a glove ricochets off each stone of "The Wall" and echoes out of the valley, sending the surefire sounds of spring into the air as the season's first practices commence on the fields below.

"We believe we've got the number one facility in all of northern Virginia — not just in Loudoun County — and we take a lot of great pride in maintaining it, preparing it and caring for it," Bednoski said. "Having that sense of pride and ownership is also what comes along with being part of a competitive high school team and a program."

In just five years, both the softball and

baseball programs have established traditions of excellence and attracted loyal fanbases. Both fields feature rows of metal bleachers with more than enough seating for fans to watch a ballgame, but everyone knows the best seat in the house is atop the hill.

Families, friends, students, teachers and pets gather two or three nights a week, every week from late March through mid-June, at what becomes the unofficial heart of the neighborhood for the season. Many people bring lawn chairs or picnic blankets and spread out across the grassy knoll. Some people park along the road and watch from their cars. Others walk with their dogs along the paved walkway.

Regardless of the option they choose,

fans are guaranteed an unobstructed view of the action. The perfectly landscaped design makes sure no one misses a single pitch — only, this year, there are no pitches to miss.

Lansdowne is quieter this spring. All of America is quieter as people continue to heed the calls to stay home and avoid physical gatherings to slow the spread of Covid-19. In what seemed like one swift motion in mid-March, the best laid plans for the spring of 2020 evaporated. Included in those plans was a promising season for the Riverside Rams varsity softball team.

"I think everybody was gelling and feeling sort of the good vibes of it all, and we had a mission," Bednoski said. "We had a mission that was pretty clearly set by all the players."

The Rams' 2020 roster included seven seniors, six of whom were four-year varsity players, and the season was shaping up to be an unforgettable one if the team could manage to pull off the ultimate goal. Riverside was set to host the 2020 Virginia High School League Class 5 Spring Jubilee, the state tournament for most spring sports.

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As if the honor of showing off Riverside's prized athletic facilities to visitors from all over Virginia wasn't a strong enough incentive in itself, this scenario presented the opportunity for a picture-perfect ending to the seniors' high school softball careers.

"I told these seniors it would be a fantastic moment because graduation was set to be on a Thursday this year, the semifinals were on Friday and the finals were on Saturday," Bednoski said. "How cool would it have been to graduate on that turf behind me (referring to the football field that lies beyond the softball field) and then the next day come and play, after you've already graduated? Then, if we were fortunate enough to win it on that Saturday? That's truly a mic-drop moment for these kids and it would have been fantastic for them to walk out of this campus a graduate and a champion for the very last time."

The stage was certainly set for the seniors to bid farewell to Riverside in epic fashion, but the sequence of events that played out instead was far from the storybook ending the team had hoped for. None of the seniors anticipated that a routine Tuesday night practice in March would mark the last time they stepped onto the field as Riverside student-athletes.

"It just ended so abruptly," said Courtney Kuzbel, senior second baseman for the Rams. "The last day of practice we were all fighting about pre-game meals, and it just doesn't even matter anymore. I bought all this equipment that I never even got



Courtesy Photo

Riverside High School was scheduled to host a portion of the 2020 Virginia High School League Class 5 Spring Jubilee in June.

to use. I wish we all knew that day that it was going to be the last, so there was some form of closure."

Closure for high school seniors is that intangible but highly anticipated parting gift that's expected to arrive in the form of well-deserved milestones such as a senior year softball season, prom and graduation. After all, life's little moments are supposed to lead up to big, exciting moments worthy of grand celebrations, right?

Well, as the constant turn of events in 2020 so far has painstakingly demonstrated, life doesn't always go the way it's "supposed to."

"Sometimes there's just things we don't have control of. It's okay to be upset about what happened, but — just like a bad game — you don't want to dwell on it forever and you don't want to let it affect your life for a really long time," said Gracie DeBergh, former co-captain and member of the first

graduating class of Riverside softball players in 2018. "To know that there is a bigger plan, even though it's scary in the moment, is very comforting."

While there's nothing that can bring back those final, closing moments for the class of 2020, there's also comfort in knowing that nothing can take away their accomplishments and their impact on

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SPORTS

VHSL STATE CHAMPIONS

LCPS varsity teams have combined to win 158 titles



Loudoun County public high schools have combined to win 158 Virginia High School League state championships in varsity team sports.

With 12 of its athletic programs claiming titles, Loudoun Valley, opened in 1962, leads all Loudoun public high schools with 28 state championships.

Broad Run (1969) and Loudoun County (1954) have both racked up 19 titles, while Briar Woods (2005) has claimed 18 championships.

Park View (1976) has hoisted

15 championship trophies, Stone Bridge (2000) has won 13 titles and Woodgrove (2010) has claimed 12 crowns.

Potomac Falls (1997) has collected nine championships, followed by Freedom (2005) with eight titles and Riverside (2015) with seven titles.

Tuscarora (2010) has claimed four championships, Dominion (2003) has collected three titles, while Heritage (2002), Independence (2019) and Rock Ridge (2014) have each claimed one championship.



LOUDOUN VALLEY (28)

- Boys Cross Country (2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015)
- Boys Outdoor Track (2019, 2018, 2017, 2015)
- Volleyball (2009, 2004, 2002, 2001)
- Boys Indoor Track (2020, 2019, 2018)
- Girls Cross-Country (2019, 2018)
- Golf (2015, 1994)
- Baseball (2014, 1972)
- Softball (2005, 2003)
- Girls Indoor Track (2020)
- Boys Basketball (2017)
- Boys Lacrosse (2015)
- Girls Outdoor Track (1976)



PARK VIEW (15)

- Gymnastics (1990, 1989, 1988, 1983, 1982)
- Boys Soccer (2016, 1992, 1991)
- Softball (2002, 1990, 1989)
- Girls Outdoor Track (2008, 2007)
- Football (1988)
- Baseball (1984)



RIVERSIDE (7)

- Boys Lacrosse (2019, 2017)
- Boys tennis (2018)
- Boys Soccer (2017)
- Girls Lacrosse (2018)
- Girls Swimming (2017)
- Competition Cheer (2016)



LOUDOUN COUNTY (19)

- Volleyball (2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007)
- Girls Soccer (2018, 2016, 2015)
- Boys Soccer (2014)
- Girls Basketball (2009)
- Boys Tennis (2006)
- Girls Tennis (2003)



STONE BRIDGE (13)

- Competition Cheer (2008, 2006, 2005, 2004)
- Softball (2019)
- Girls Soccer (2010, 2005)
- Baseball (2015)
- Boys Cross Country (2015)
- Boys Lacrosse (2015)
- Girls Lacrosse (2015)
- Volleyball (2015)
- Football (2007)



FREEDOM (8)

- Gymnastics (2020, 2019, 2018, 2016)
- Girls Lacrosse (2019, 2018)
- Girls Basketball (2010, 2009)



HERITAGE (1)

- Girls Cross Country (2015)



BROAD RUN (19)

- Girls Soccer (2015, 2011, 2010, 2009, 2008, 2001)
- Softball (2009, 2008, 2007, 2000)
- Competition Cheer (2019, 2018, 2016)
- Football (2009, 2008)
- Boys Soccer (2014)
- Baseball (1991)
- Gymnastics (1991)
- Boys Cross Country (1973)



WOODGROVE (12)

- Softball (2018, 2017, 2016, 2014, 2012)
- Girls Soccer (2019, 2013, 2012)
- Girls Lacrosse (2016, 2015, 2014)
- Football (2018)



TUSCARORA (4)

- Girls Cross Country (2017, 2015, 2014)
- Volleyball (2017)



ROCK RIDGE (1)

- Boys Tennis (2017)



BRIAR WOODS (18)

- Competition Cheer (2017, 2015, 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009)
- Boys Lacrosse (2019, 2018, 2016)
- Football (2012, 2011, 2010)
- Girls Soccer (2018, 2014)
- Baseball (2017)
- Boys Soccer (2017)
- Volleyball (2014)
- Softball (2011)



POTOMAC FALLS (9)

- Girls Lacrosse (2017, 2016)
- Boys Basketball (2011, 2010)
- Girls Soccer (2004, 2000)
- Boys Soccer (2006)
- Boys Tennis (2002)
- Golf (2001)



DOMINION (3)

- Girls lacrosse (2019)
- Girls Soccer (2014)
- Boys Lacrosse (2016)



INDEPENDENCE (1)

- Golf (2019)

SPORTS



Photo Courtesy/Chas Sumser Photography

Lightridge Lightning student-athletes display the uniform of their respective sports.

LIGHTRIDGE READY TO PLAY

First-year Aldie school closing in on varsity debut

BY CARL LUKAT
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Lightridge High School athletic director Jason Treon has ample experience in being part of a new school opening in Loudoun County. He has done it twice as a student at Algonkian Elementary School and Potomac Falls High School and once as an administrator at Rock Ridge High School.

A three-sport athlete at Potomac Falls who continued his baseball career at Tusculum University in Tennessee, Treon coached varsity football and baseball before being hired as assistant athletic director at Rock Ridge when the Ashburn school opened in 2014.

Lightridge opened this fall in Aldie with an enrollment of 950 students, a number that is expected to nearly double by the 2022-2023 school year. Lightridge — Loudoun County's 17th public high school — is located less than two miles from John Champe and four miles from Freedom.

“We are here to support our student-athletes and our community in a transformational way versus being transactional.”

JASON TREON

While Lightridge's first official athletic competition has been placed on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first-year school has 14 sports programs engaging in out-of-season workouts in conjunction with state and local health guidelines.

“Among those 14 programs, we have more than 200 students participating,” Treon said. “We are just thrilled to see that participation.”

Treon is joined by assistant athletic director Brian Schmidt at Lightridge. Schmidt coached varsity cross-country and track and field for more than 20 years, most recently at Rock Ridge.

Coaches have been hired for all Lightridge Lightning varsity teams outside of girls' lacrosse, which is currently in the vetting process.

“We have been very fortunate to find

coaches across the board that are aligned with our vision,” Treon said. “They all understand that we are here to support our student-athletes and our community in a transformational way versus being transactional.”

That vision is aligned with Lightridge principal Dr. Ryan Hitchman, whom Treon describes as “very selfless.”

“Dr. Hitchman is such a strong leader, and everyone's voice is heard throughout the community,” Treon continued. “He desires for Lightridge to be a place students, teachers and community stakeholders want to be, not a place they have to be.”

With the 2020-2021 athletic calendar set to begin in December, Lightridge will compete with Loudoun schools Broad Run, Dominion, Heritage, Independence, Loudoun County, Loudoun Valley, Park

LIGHTRIDGE LIGHTNING

- **Town:** Aldie
- **Principal:** Dr. Ryan Hitchman
- **Athletic director:** Jason Treon
- **Assistant athletic director:** Brian Schmidt
- **District:** Dulles
- **Level:** Class 3
- **Feeder school:** Willard Middle
- **First varsity game:** Dec. 21, LHS basketball vs. Heritage

View, Rock Ridge and Tuscarora in the Dulles District. The Lightning will spend one year at the Class 3 level before moving up to Class 4 for the 2021-2022 school year.

Lightridge will begin its journey into varsity competition Dec. 21 with boys' and girls' basketball games versus Heritage.

“We have a solid group of talented student-athletes, but we are not going to measure success by wins and losses,” Treon said. “It's how we treat our kids, the life-long lessons that our student-athletes learn, how we are going to be good citizens upon completion of high school and moving on in life. Those are our measures of success.”