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## The season that never was: Pandemic stopped Amani Hankton's return to the top

Emily Brown  
May 26, 2020



Amani Hankton at Amherst County High School in Amherst County on Wednesday, May 20, 2020.

Taylor Irby/Amherst New-era progress

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring

championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in for a season that never came to be, The News & Advance is highlighting eight standout spring senior athletes from Seminole District schools as a way to honor all those who saw their high school careers come to an early end.

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**T**he long year was in the past for Amani Hankton, a senior on the Amherst track & field team. Finally, she was back with her teammates, ready to test her talent and work against the competition.

But Hankton's first meet back from injury that kept her sidelined for nearly a year — a torn anterior cruciate ligament in her knee suffered during her junior year — didn't go as planned.

Hankton, running the anchor leg of the Lancers' 4x200 relay during the indoor season, was tripped by a member of another team. Unlike the events that transpired in the 2019 season, the disappointing race didn't take her out of competition completely. In the weeks to come, though, another threat stopped Hankton's journey back toward the top.

Before Hankton, a 2018 state champ, could prove her talent, the coronavirus pandemic took hold. Her chance to shine among the area and state's best athletes on the track was dashed.

In 2019, Hankton was competing in the hurdles in an outdoor meet when she planted her foot wrong. Momentum carried the rest of her body forward, hurting her knee in the process.

At first, it seemed like just a minor setback. She experienced some soreness but continue to walk without any additional aid.

Eventually, Hankton said she was told to get her knee looked at since the swelling hadn't gone down. Then the diagnosis came, followed by surgery and nearly a year of working to get back in competition shape.

Hankton made it back to the track for one indoor race in 2020, that relay that came up short of her expectations. Still, she looked ahead with optimism.

“I was looking forward to being outside rather than being inside,” she said.

That was where Hankton could get back to competing in a full slate of events: 100 hurdles, 300 hurdles, 4x100 relay, long jump and triple jump.

In 2019, she’d qualified for states in several events outdoors before the injury scratched her from those performance lists. This year was her chance to reach those heights again, and an opportunity to add a second state title — or more — to her career haul. After winning a medal for the 55 hurdles in her sophomore indoor season, Hankton was hungry to etch her name into the history books again in her high school swan song.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic, something over which Hankton had no control, struck, dealing another blow as it knocked out the entire spring sports season for area high school teams.

“That is hard, because I did put so much work into getting back just to have it not be there,” she said.

The final chapter of Hankton’s track & field career isn’t over, as she will trade Amherst’s maroon and gray for Liberty University’s red and blue next year as a member of that Division I squad. But Hankton will always carry the “what-ifs” of the season that never was.

“I have my moments,” she said of the times she wishes she had been able to finish her senior year walking the halls at Amherst County High with classmates, and the occasions on which she thinks about getting back on the outdoor track with her teammates.

Hankton said she mourns over the “moments and memories I could have had” as she aims to move forward.

While she's not doing any intense training in preparation for college, Hankton said she still remains active. And in all her extra time, she has turned her attention to others, as she recently got a job at Walmart.

That, like the training she would have done on the track, is a learning experience, Hankton said. Normally on the quiet side, she has been forced out of her comfort zone a little in the new job.

She's hoping to make the best of the new situation, as she has over the past year.

Through her injury, Hankton said she has learned "you can get through anything," a lesson she's trying to apply now to the additional setbacks the pandemic has dealt.

Emily Brown covers the Hillcats, ODAC and high school sports for The News & Advance. Reach her at (434) 385-5529.

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## The season that never was: Gavin Leverette finding other ways to fill time without competition

Emily Brown  
May 27, 2020



Gavin Leverette at E.C. Glass High School in Lynchburg on Friday, May 22, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

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Gavin Leverette's choice in TV shows is based on entertainment factor, of course. But the E.C. Glass senior soccer player has another reason for choosing, in his newfound free time, to indulge in shows like "American Idol" and "The Voice," too.

Those shows, he said, feature competition — the thing his life is devoid of at the moment.

He craves some form of rivalry, and without getting to play with his Glass teammates anymore, against other talented players from the area, Leverette is trying to find some other way to satisfy his competitive spirit.

It makes sense. Soccer, the sport he's played for more than a decade, requires self-motivation if players are to reach a high level. But all the footwork and shooting skills won't mean much if there's not an opponent to dribble around or a goalkeeper to try to beat.

Now, with high school sports shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic, Leverette is missing out on the fight he craves.

"Definitely would have been special to have that last season," he said of the unexpected end to his high school career.

Leverette first began playing soccer when he was 7 years old. The move to join a YMCA team back then was more a result of trying to follow a friend than a passion for the game.

Not long after, though, he saw himself develop as a soccer player, and began falling in love with the sport.

In middle school, soccer turned into more of a year-round activity for Leverette, who joined up with a travel league.

All that work paid off for the forward, a three-year starter for the varsity team at Glass. He was on that upward trajectory heading into this season, too.

A first-team All-Region 4D and first-team All-Seminole District selection a year ago, he looked to be a scoring force this season.

Leverette was a captain on this year's squad, which was poised to play Blacksburg, a fellow Class 4 powerhouse that made it to the state semifinals in 2019, in a scrimmage that was the first event canceled.

The Hilltoppers, he said, had just finished up a morning practice that Friday (on a day off from school) in March and had enjoyed a lunch together before parting ways. They were to meet up again that evening for the exhibition when they heard their match was canceled.

Things spiraled downward from there.

Leverette predicted a successful campaign for him and his teammates. Most of them had been playing together since middle school or earlier, he said. Thanks to a huge contingent of upperclassmen — Leverette was one of 14 seniors on the team — Leverette said the Hilltoppers would be able to compete with and beat the best.

"That was probably the hardest part," he said. "I've been looking forward to this season since seventh or eighth grade. We could've made a run at states this year."

The group was coming off a loss to rival Liberty Christian in last year's Region 4D quarterfinals, so heading into a schedule stacked early with tough opponents, the Hilltoppers were motivated.

Leverette pulled no punches in his assessment of this year's squad. It could be — or as he believes, would be — "the greatest Glass soccer team there's ever been."

Instead of practicing, traveling and playing with his teammates, though, Leverette is putting in work on his own in this age of social distancing as he prepares for his next chapter. Leverette, recruited by a couple of schools, has committed to stay in Lynchburg and play for Division III Randolph College.

Leverette said he still plays soccer every day, though it obviously has a different feel now. He heads over to Randolph occasionally to shoot and plays some against a couple friends from the neighborhood.

Getting touches on the ball and work on other skills has lent some structure to an otherwise uncertain time.

“It’s the one thing that’s really consistent still,” Leverette said.

The soon-to-be college player is trying to make the most of his free time, he said, and is looking for the positives in an otherwise bleak situation.

Leverette is essentially getting an extra spring season of “training” with his new Randolph team, which meets often over Zoom. Getting to know his RC teammates and coach Adam Godwin, as well as what the team aims to do on the field in the fall, is a bright spot.

Otherwise, as he closes the book on his high school career, Leverette tries to remember the good times of the past and hang on to what he believes would have been a successful senior season.

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## The season that never was: Victoria Newman and JF girls soccer won't get to build on program's legacy

Emily Brown  
May 28, 2020



Victoria Newman at Jefferson Forest High School on Friday, May 22, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

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**V**ictoria Newman and her teammates on the Jefferson Forest girls soccer team found themselves in unknown territory during a scrimmage in March.

The Cavaliers were trailing, a highly unusual position given the squad's dominance in recent seasons. There were stretches during regular seasons past when JF consistently blanked opponents, outscoring them by multiple goals.

Eventually, the group regained its composure against preseason opponent Hidden Valley, knotted the contest at 1 and found itself in position to take the lead not long after.

That's when Newman struck, giving JF the lead. Then she heard a teammate yell, "Way to go out from JF with a bang!"

The statement was made with a sarcastic undertone, a joke to lighten an unexpectedly tense situation. But for Newman, one of four seniors on the squad, the phrase offered in good fun turned out to be an ominous foreshadowing of the days to come.

"What if that was actually my last memory of JF soccer?" Newman said she asked herself later. And eventually, she learned the pandemic had, in fact, made that idea into a bleak reality.

Thinking back to those moments, what turned out to be one of the last times this group would play against an opponent, "it's hard, definitely," Newman said.

"Never in a million years, if you had told me I wouldn't have my senior year, ... would I have believed you," added Newman, who contributed 26 points (eight goals and 10 assists) a season ago and was a second-team All-Seminole District honoree.

Things certainly looked different this year for JF, Newman explained, but the Cavaliers were ready to build on a strong legacy.

Three seasons ago, Newman and her three classmates ended the season by hoisting the state title trophy. In the seasons that followed, they returned to the state tournament twice. This year's group, while much younger, had the mental acuity to make another similar run happen, she said.

In the offseason, after losing 12 seniors from 2019, players and coaches put aside their own preferences to ensure the team's progress.

"Everyone was really good with the transition," Newman said. "... I think this was special, what was growing from the little time we had together."

The Cavaliers plugged holes and made adjustments, Newman included.

She switched from forward to midfielder because so many of those players counted on to move the ball in the center of the pitch had graduated. In her final season with JF, ahead of her transition to her new team at the University of Lynchburg, Newman looked forward to sharpening her skills.

"Definitely think it was my best season so far," she added.

Newman and her classmates also took on the task of ensuring every player felt appreciated by and included in the team atmosphere. That chemistry could've propelled them back to the state tourney, or even another ring for the seniors, she believes.

"I wish we could've gotten the opportunity to be together as a team," Newman said. "It really hurts that we couldn't have had more time together."

There are other regrets, too.

Newman said a "one year ago" memory came up in Snapchat the other day, a photo reminding her of a win in 2019.

"That could be me right now," Newman said, "but instead I'm just sitting at home."

Seeing that and the marks on her calendar signaling what would have been game days — “seeing the days go by and seeing I was supposed to play LCA today and beat them for the fourth year in a row,” she said as an example — are still hard to deal with.

In the meantime, Newman said she’s become “kind of a maniac” about working out. She wakes up and lifts weights or runs, takes a little break and then gets back to it. She sprinkles in soccer training when she can, too.

“It’s about all I do,” she said, adding she works out “a solid three times a day.”

Although she won’t get the opportunity to leave her best on the field for JF, undoubtedly racking up goals for the powerhouse Seminole District squad, Newman said she’s still committed to the sport she loves.

As she works toward her next soccer adventure at UL, Newman is set on giving “my all and [being] the best I can for them.”

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## The season that never was: Though college golf is ahead, Nick Rakes saw baseball, his first sport, taken away

Emily Brown  
May 29, 2020



All-Area Golfer of the Year and Rustburg senior Nick Rakeson poses for a portrait on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020.

Emily Elconin/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

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**N**ick Rakes isn't stepping on to a baseball field these days, but he still gets out on a diamond weekly.

This new setup is much smaller, but it fills a void he and his Rustburg teammates are experiencing now without high school sports. Thanks to a nicely manicured backyard complete with outfield fence, provided by one of his teammates' families, Rakes still gets to throw a ball around — a Wiffle Ball, that is.

"Keeps the baseball feeling in the air," Rakes said.

Rakes is one of five or six Rustburg seniors that, thanks to the Wiffle Ball league, have the chance to trot around the bases again before their high school years are officially over. Nine RHS seniors saw their season and prep careers end unexpectedly early in the last couple months.

The group is trying to make the best of the setback and all the extra time they have now. As much as possible, the new mini Rustburg league tries to provide the athletic activity they crave.

It started several weeks back, and competition ramped up immediately. Drawing slips of paper from a hat was the athletes' form of a draft lottery.

Rakes' selection in the first round, by fellow Rustburg player Jacob Kerr, got Rakes amped up for the days ahead. As would be the case during the spring if he were pitching or covering second base with RHS, Rakes isn't satisfied for anything less than great.

As of last week when he talked with The News & Advance, Rakes and Kerr (the league is made up of two-person teams) were undefeated against the competition. And Rakes has his eyes set on the playoffs that will take place later this summer.

The opportunity to have some fun with an admittedly easier version of the spring sport they had taken from them, on a nice makeshift field, is “pretty amazing,” said Rakes, a second-team All-Region 3C selection for Rustburg in 2019.

Rakes, of course, is filling his newfound free time with other activities, too. A standout golfer who was unstoppable during the fall — when he won Seminole District, Region 3C and Class 3 state championships — Rakes also is trying to stay on top of his golf game before he joins the team at Longwood University.

When he’s not working there, the multi-sport star said he gets out on the course at Falling River Country Club to play almost every day.

“Lucky to have that place to be able to do something,” he said.

Some days are devoted to just having fun with friends, but he’s also trying to keep his swing and other parts of his game sharp for the upcoming season. His putting, he said, needs some work. But for now, he’s thankful to have a safe activity to enjoy with both people his age and even those 60 years his senior.

Asked if he ever thought of giving up high school baseball to focus on his best sport during the school year, Rakes said he’s given the idea some consideration, but he loves getting to be part of a big team during the spring.

He started playing baseball, the first athletic activity he ever got involved in, when he was 3 years old. He played Dixie Youth growing up, moving up the ranks with many of the guys who made up this year’s RHS roster.

Not having the chance to get back out there in an official capacity with those teammates, and seeing that career end so abruptly, “it was heartbreakng,” Rakes said.

“Never thought that our last game would be the last game I’d step on to the field,” he said of the 2019 Region 3C quarterfinal loss.

Rakes is disappointed to be “losing a bunch of memories I could’ve made with everybody [this season],” but he’s used the time away from the field as a learning opportunity. He hopes to be able to live in and appreciate the moment as he begins his new athletic chapter in college.

“You never know,” he said, “when it’s gonna come to a screeching halt.”

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## The season that never was: Victoria Johnson's shortened high school track & field career still ended on high note

Emily Brown  
May 30, 2020



Victoria Johnson at Heritage High School in Lynchburg on Thursday, May 14, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

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**V**ictoria Johnson's response came quickly. Upon hearing her high school track & field days were over, ending much earlier than she had ever expected, Johnson let her emotions take over.

"I cried when it was canceled," Johnson, the Heritage senior athlete, said of this spring season.

The reaction makes sense, of course, especially given the path she was on.

Johnson and her Pioneers teammates, over the last year or so, showcased a wealth of talent across multiple events. And that raw ability of the HHS girls, coupled with all their hours on the track and in the field practicing, paid off in the form of a state title last spring.

That day last June displayed how the collective effort of multiple athletes could pay off, and signaled the strength of the Lynchburg city team to the rest of Class 3. It should've served as a warning shot.

The next time they got back on the track, the Pioneers were determined to build on the momentum, and they did just that. At the conclusion of the winter indoor season, they captured another trophy, this one by a wide margin.

"[We] ended on a great note," Johnson said. "Very proud."

That reality, despite the disappointment that accompanied the early conclusion of her senior season, helped Johnson shake off the sadness she initially felt.

After a few minutes, she said, "I was OK."

Johnson has taken solace in the knowledge she gave everything she had to the program. That work —being at the track on her own, well after practice, for example — paid personal dividends, too.

She capped this year's indoor campaign with an individual state title in the high jump. She took home the Region 3C championship, as well.

"If someone told me I would win when I started, I would've been shocked," Johnson said of the state title win.

To be clear, she added, that's where she would have been mentally a couple years ago. If she'd had that same conversation with someone during her senior year, her response might be different.

This year, she was confident, because she was motivated to go out on a high note. She tried to be coachable as she honed her skills, and she put in extra hours on her own, she said.

Johnson "worked hard" for her incredible progress in just two years, the short amount of time since her sophomore year, when she first picked up the event.

So Johnson's success in her high school swan song was welcome, and "not a surprise" after all she sunk into the sport.

Since she's been away from Heritage, Johnson said she's tried to look at the extra free time afforded by the pandemic as a "blessing" rather than a "curse." So for now, she's working toward her next goal: making a college team.

Johnson said she will attend Virginia Tech and intends to try out for the team there, so she's "trying to prepare myself for the future."

Heading to Blacksburg with a third state title on her list of accomplishments certainly would have been nice, Johnson said. But more than anything, the senior said she's sadder she "didn't get the experience" of one last season with her HHS teammates.

"I don't think I was doing it for a ring," she said. "... I was so excited to have my last year."

She'll miss the bus rides, overnight trips and messing with coaches — all the things she and her teammates could bond over. Johnson, though, is still grateful for the memories, and she's hopeful for the future of HHS track & field.

"I believe in them," she said.

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## The season that never was: Jared Glinski persevered through multiple hits only to have final baseball season taken away

Emily Brown  
May 31, 2020



Jared Glinski at Brookville High School in Lynchburg on Wednesday, May 13, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

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**N**ear the start of the 2019-20 school year, the future of Jared Glinski's athletic career held nothing but promise.

Entering his final year at Brookville, Glinski got the chance to step into one of the most visible roles on the gridiron. He'd been tapped as the 2019 starting quarterback, a leap in responsibility after he'd previously played mostly on the defensive side.

And after the fall season wrapped up, he was primed for another impressive spring campaign on the diamond, both as a catcher and at the plate. Glinski, in his final season before heading to play at a Division I college, and the Bees hoped to build on the momentum of their 2019 state semifinal appearance.

But hits — physically and otherwise — started piling up for Glinski.

In the fall, he endured multiple blows to his 6-foot-1 frame. His elbow was roughed up, causing nerve damage, amid a tough football season. Then he broke his foot in the final game of the regular season, forced to watch his teammates enter the playoffs from the sideline.

“Broke a piece a bone off. Had a pretty good sized chunk floating around,” Glinski said of the latter injury, which required surgery.

Off the gridiron, Glinski's baseball career was in the crosshairs, too.

Glinski was set to play for Radford in 2021, the offer and his commitment a result of his obvious talent at the plate. During his junior season at BHS, Glinski led the Bees with a .400 batting average, drove in 30 runs and tallied five homers on his way to a first-team All-Seminole District selection and second-team All-Region 3C accolade.

A coaching change at Radford, though, altered the trajectory of Glinski's path.

When the previous coach, who offered Glinski a scholarship, left and a new coach stepped in, Glinski said he initially received reassurances he still had a spot on the roster.

“Everything’s good,” Glinski said the message was. “You have nothing to worry about.”

Three times he heard the same thing, but Radford later reversed course, calling Glinski’s father with the news.

At first, Glinski, who was never told personally about the decision, thought the message his dad relayed was a joke. Eventually, the news sank in.

“It sucks,” he said of the situation.

Glinski, who had been in contact with other Division I schools, said those other schools are not an option now.

So Glinski pinned some of his college hopes on his high school finale, the games that were set for March, April, May and maybe even June, if the Bees were to make a postseason run.

“I was really looking forward to the spring to help me out with that situation,” Glinski said. “But now we’re here.”

Now, Glinski, finally back from the rehab for his elbow and recovery after foot surgery, won’t get that shot thanks to the pandemic.

The Bees had pieces that could have fit together for another promising season, and Glinski undoubtedly would’ve shone at the plate again.

“Everybody wants to play,” he said of his team, adding he also hoped to find some happy ending to his high school years. “I wanted to go out there for one last season, one last time with my best friends. Definitely had a vision this year after all that happened. ...

“I built a lot of hope for what would’ve been this season, a lot of excitement. To not get to experience what would’ve been hurts.”

But Glinski, during his high school athletic endeavors, and this year especially, has always stood up again after getting knocked down.

While Glinski has had to endure more than many high school athletes, he doesn’t necessarily believe the lack of a spring season “hurts me more than anybody else.”

He doesn’t regret playing multiple sports, including one as high-contact as football, at the risk of his future baseball career.

He’s moving forward, now, as best he can, hoping to put difficulties in the past. Glinski’s exploring options for playing baseball at a non-Division I school, believing he still has more to contribute to the sport.

And he’s taken to heart, now, the lessons he’s learned this year and this spring.

He said he aims to live in and appreciate the moment and what he does have, including those who have held him up in the process, like teammates with whom he’s created a tight bond.

There’s nothing like high school sports, Glinski said. So all the moments of elation that were part of his prep career — like the celebrations that accompanied the Bees’ 2019 state baseball tourney run — and even the “devastating” times — like the injuries and a tough start for the Bees football team in the fall — are experiences that helped shaped him. No matter what is next, Glinski said, those are the BHS moments he’ll never forget.

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## The season that never was: Pandemic dropped curtain on Millie Thompson's softball stage

Emily Brown  
Jun 1, 2020



Millie Thompson at Liberty High School in Bedford on Wednesday, May 13, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

for a season that never came to be, The News & Advance is highlighting eight standout spring senior athletes from Seminole District schools as a way to honor all those who saw their high school careers come to an early end.

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**M**illie Thompson is pretty nimble when it comes to navigating interviews. A star pitcher and leader of the Liberty High softball team, Thompson is no stranger to postgame interactions with the media.

Recently, though, she found herself less than comfortable in an interview situation. That's because this one didn't take place on a diamond. This one was at a big-box store in Bedford: Walmart.

"I do interviews all the time," she said, "but I've never done a job interview."

Thompson admitted she was "stressed out" answering this new series of questions, but she landed a position, one that's helped her fill up the extra free time she now has without high school softball.

The Walmart gig is the first job for which Thompson has actually received a paycheck. Between the high school season in the spring and travel ball in the offseason, softball — her ticket to college — has consumed most of Thompson's time outside of school in the past.

Not spending the afternoons now practicing with teammates, not seeing her coach and father, Mike Thompson, call pitches from the dugout during games, is completely new to Millie Thompson.

"I miss softball a lot," she said.

Until a few weeks ago, when she started at the grocery store as an employee who fills pickup orders, Thompson said she didn't do a whole lot outside the house.

Soon, she and her parents decided she couldn't just sit around her home anymore. She needed something else to do.

The Walmart job so far has been beneficial in a number of ways. She gets to save up some money for college and keep her mind engaged without school. She sees the new endeavor as an opportunity to “better myself,” and looks forward to serving others amid the pandemic.

The job also has afforded Thompson a new, albeit heavily modified, workout routine. The other day, Thompson’s fitness-tracking watch told her she’d walked 12 miles around Walmart during her shift (which during a normal week is one of five eight-hour shifts, she said).

Staying active, although she doesn’t have a softball in her hand, is important for her future as a member of the Clemson softball team, which also has been affected by the pandemic.

Thompson initially was to head to South Carolina to start work with her new squad and begin summer school this month. Her reporting date is still up in the air.

Softball, for the time being, has been moved down Thompson’s priority list. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t think about it often. How could she not?

If the promise of a Division I softball career weren’t enough, heading into the spring, Thompson still had plenty to look forward to for her final high school campaign. A force in the circle whose changeup devastates opponents at the plate, the left-hander looked to build on the legacy she’d already solidified at Liberty.

Her junior year, when she posted a 0.75 ERA and 255 strikeouts, couldn’t have gone much better. She garnered personal accolades galore and checked off big wins throughout the season. At the end of it all, she and her teammates accomplished the task no other girls team at Liberty had ever done — they captured a state championship.

Thompson, who threw a two-hitter during that title game, crumpled to the ground after her teammates recorded the final out. All their work had finally paid off, and Thompson saw her dream come true.

Knowing how much more she could've done this season, and thinking of all the games against a slate of incredibly talented softball players in the area she won't get to play, isn't something Thompson has gotten past easily.

Her life now is devoid of the thing she loves about sports: competition.

"Not much competition in my life right now. That kind of fire is gone right now," she said. "I feel like I'm plowing through. Not much to work toward."

Thompson will stop at nothing when it comes to finding an edge over an opponent. She's focused and intense in the circle. She's the de facto leader in the dugout, too, doing whatever it takes to give Liberty the advantage.

But the dugout has gone silent this season, without Thompson leading her teammates in loud chants and using props to throw off the opposing pitcher and defense.

She won't get a chance to put on the neon blue mascara, her planned addition to her unique game day look this year, either.

Thompson paid more for rush shipping than she did for the makeup item itself to get it in time for the season. But that season, of course, never came to be; she never had the chance to test out her new look.

And without a single official game this year, Thompson won't ever get to look over to the dugout and see her dad give her the pitch signal.

"It's really hard because we have such a great bond," Millie Thompson said of her father, Mike. "I have played for him all my life."

Perhaps the extra months of just spending time with family as family, rather than as a softball coach and entourage, Millie Thompson said, will be good for her as she heads to college. Moving so quickly from her dad to a brand new coach in college, had her high school season gone on as planned, would've been a difficult transition.

Thompson said while the conclusion of her high school softball career, and everything that went with it, came about unexpectedly, she knew "it's gotta end sometime."

That's why she's just trying to make the best of the situation, whether at Walmart or at home with her family, even if it is away from the diamond.

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## The season that never was: LCA slugger Quade Tomlin only worrying about what he can control amid pandemic

Emily Brown  
Jun 2, 2020



Quade Tomlin at the Liberty Christian Academy baseball field in Lynchburg on Wednesday, May 20, 2020.

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

### An eight-part series

Hundreds of spring athletes in Lynchburg and the surrounding area saw their senior seasons cut short because of the coronavirus pandemic. Games were days away when Virginia public schools shut down for the remainder of the school year. The VHSL, after initially putting the season on hold and canceling spring championships, officially canceled the season not long after. In recognition of the work these athletes put in

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**Q**uade Tomlin has experienced plenty of highs during his high school baseball career at Liberty Christian.

The Bulldogs routinely piled up wins over the past three years with their combination of talented arms and power at the plate, and they crested the mountaintop during his freshman season when they won a state title.

Tomlin ended last season with an honor given to only six baseball players in the commonwealth when he was named the VHSL's Class 4 state player of the year.

But there were lows, too, like the Bulldogs' shocking exit from the postseason two seasons ago; they were the top seed when they fell to bottom-seeded William Byrd in the Region 4D quarterfinals. And last year, Tomlin and teammates came up short of their goal of repeating as state champs when they lost in the state semifinals.

Thanks to the pandemic, LCA baseball fans won't get to see if the Bulldogs could've shaken off those recent lows and realized the potential their stacked roster held.

"I guess it was more of kind of a shock in a way," Tomlin said of the early end to his high school campaign.

Tomlin, the infielder who also was named the Seminole District and Region 4D player of the year in 2019, was poised for another strong year.

Based on his productivity last year, Tomlin figured to be one of the league's, if not the state's, best hitters once again.

He connected at the plate at an alarming rate, catching the eyes of both baseball fans and of opposing pitchers and coaches. He hit .420 in 2019 and blasted nine home runs. His other season tallies included a team-high 47 RBIs and five doubles to go with his .913 slugging percentage.

Between the talent of his teammates — a group Tomlin described as perhaps even better than past LCA teams — and his strength at the plate, Tomlin was looking forward to another postseason run.

“It sucks that it was my senior season,” he said, adding he’s disappointed especially about “not being able to have another shot at winning another state title.”

Other opportunities may have escaped Tomlin, too, because of the unanticipated termination of the season and repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic on baseball.

In past seasons, LCA players have been intriguing options in the MLB Draft. Christian Gordon, a former pitcher, and Wes Clarke, an infielder, both were drafted in the late rounds of the draft in the past couple years.

A similar option could have presented itself for Tomlin this season, if the draft had remained 40 rounds. Instead, MLB chose to whittle it down to five rounds as a cost-cutting measure.

Tomlin still could be signed as an undrafted free agent, but his options for an easier path to the pros have been reduced.

The slugger isn’t especially worried about the future, though. Whether an avenue for professional play opens or his baseball journey instead includes a college career at Liberty University, the nearby school with which he has signed to play, Tomlin said he faces a “win-win situation no matter what.”

“Whatever happens on June 10 [and 11 during the draft], it’s gonna happen to give God the glory,” he said.

That’s the approach Tomlin’s tried to have throughout the past couple months. Sure, it hurts not having a chance to step on the diamond one last time with teammates he’s played with since middle school, he said. But there’s still a “sweet” side he’s found in the “bittersweet” season that has been this spring.

Instead of heading to class at LCA, or stepping onto a bus for a trip to play a district rival, for example, Tomlin is using his mornings and afternoons to get in some personal training.

And when he pulls out a bat to get in extra swings, he doesn't always need a tee or pitching machine. He has a pretty good partner to throw him batting practice: his coach and dad, Randy Tomlin, the former big leaguer who pitched for the Pittsburgh Pirates.

"He still has his stuff," the younger Tomlin said of his father. "Keeps the competition up. ... Having a dad that played in the majors is one in a million."

Quade Tomlin said he's learned more in this time off the field, when he's not constantly focused on the next at-bat, than he has playing. His dad has shared "tips on things I never would've thought about or considered," Quade said, adding the two have "really bonded over this time."

The next few years of his baseball career will include "an adjustment" without his dad as his coach, Quade Tomlin said.

Through the tumult of the past few months, though, and as he faces the uncertainty of a future in which the coronavirus is still a threat, Tomlin is only trying to worry about what he can actually control. Everything else, he said, "is in the Lord's hands."

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