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TIDEWATER REVIEW

No Friday night lights: New Kent's new head football coach adjusts amid the pandemic

By EM HOLTER
TIDEWATER REVIEW | AUG 14, 2020



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With 20 years of experience within the county, New Kent Head Coach John McCauley said his main goal has always been consistency. (John McCauley)

Every year, as the leaves begin to change and the nights grow colder, folks watch from bleacher seats, huddled together under blankets with hot chocolate and streamers in hand waiting for those Friday night lights to come on.

Following months of hard work, dedication and sweat equity, players line up on the field. As the first ball kick soars across the sky, cheers ring out from the bleachers.

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For a community, Friday night football is a way for folks to come together and celebrate. For the players, it offers hope and opportunity beyond high school.

But this year, there will be no boys of fall. For the first time, amid the pandemic, the Virginia High School League announced all fall sports are canceled.

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Despite the gutting news, New Kent Head Coach John McCauley said he plans to keep the momentum going and is getting his team ready for a spring season.

“It’s certainly been a challenge and it’s definitely frustrating but I’m dedicated to this program and there’s no doubt in my mind, we’ll pull together,” McCauley said.

While McCauley’s day job finds him working in building inspection, it was ultimately his love of the sport that has kept his afternoons, weekends and summers dedicated to New Kent’s football program.

For more than 20 years, McCauley has coached elementary students, middle schoolers, junior varsity and, this year, he took over the varsity program as the

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“One thing about me, I’m all about consistency,” McCauley said. “I’ve watched these kids grow up. They have been coached the same thing from elementary to JV. Now, We don’t have to restart, year-in, year-out, these kids are learning the same thing, you know, they get to know the game.”

While McCauley had never planned on taking over the varsity program, he said when the opportunity arose, he knew it would be an excellent chance to continue his coaching method.

When he got the news, McCauley spent months watching films, drawing up plays, assessing each player’s talents and weaknesses and sizing up his competition. He thought he had prepared for everything. But the one thing he hadn’t planned for was a global pandemic.

“When we first got the news, we were worried,” McCauley said. “I didn’t know if we’d have a season or how we’d be able to do it with it being a contact sport but we’re working through it.”

To date, the VHSL has postponed the fall football season for the spring. While the VHSL has not issued a schedule, it will more than likely see limited dates and games, which would begin in March.

[in Newport News »](#)

While this time of year usually signaled the start of two-a-days, conditioning and practices, McCauley said he and his staff are working on strategies to keep players

“My biggest thing is getting these kids where they need to be and making sure they’re prepared and safe,” McCauley said.

While McCauley and his staff are still working through their plans, he said. Right now, the protocol will be to wear their masks and have their temperatures taken when they get to the practice field, maintain 10 feet of separation when running drills and when they are in the weight room, they will sanitize all of the equipment.

If their temperatures are above 100 degrees, they will be sent home. They will also be working under a limited practice schedule.

Despite the limitations this year, McCauley said New Kent should not be underestimated.

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With a large senior class, a strong offense and defense, McCauley said he is excited

“We’ve got a good program going,” McCauley said. “There’s a lot of talent on this team and they’re dedicated too.”

While this year was unexpected and it has come with its own challenges, McCauley said he is taking one day at a time. It takes a certain level of discipline to coach and doing it amid a pandemic is indicative of that, McCauley said.

“This job comes with a lot of pressure, and it’s a different pressure, but at the end of the day, I’m my biggest competition,” McCauley said. “You’ve got to start somewhere and my job is to win games but, more than that, it’s to teach those life lessons beyond the game. You are one team and you’re one family. You learn discipline and respect and nothing is given to you; if you want it, you got to earn it.”

Emily Holter, emily.holter@virginiamedia.com, 757-256-6657, [@EmilyHolterNews](#).

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Em Holter



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'I'll miss it, but it's my time to go:' After 27 years, King William woman says goodbye to a community staple

By EM HOLTER
TIDEWATER REVIEW | NOV 02, 2020



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For 27 years, King William resident Jeanette Whittaker has called FasMart her home away from home. Now, she plans to hang up her hat, pass her torch and enjoy her retirement. (Em Holter)

KING WILLIAM — Nearly every morning, like clockwork, King William resident Jeanette Whittaker pulls into the FasMart parking lot, finishes her slim cigarette and watches the sun rise over Richmond Tappahannock Highway.

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Before the morning crowd of commuters, passersby and locals flood the dining hall, fill up their thermoses with fresh coffee and pick through the stop's curated selections, she enjoys the calm before opening the doors and clocking in.

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Since June 2000, Whittaker has called King William's FasMart her home away from home. As the morning manager, she said some days it seems she's spent more hours there than at her house just up the road.

But, after 27 years, Whittaker is hanging up her hat and passing the torch. Despite the outcry from her coworkers and the community, Whittaker announced her retirement and is looking forward to the years ahead.

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"I've seen a lot of people come and go and I have my regulars, that makes it all worth it," Whittaker said. "I've had a lot of fun and I'll miss it but it's my time to go."

For many, Whittaker's face is the first one they see on most mornings as folks travel outside of the county for work or travel into it for weekend river trips. With a full breakfast menu and special deals on coffee, it has become a community staple.

Every morning, the dining room fills with the breakfast crowd, turning the regular

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For Whittaker, it's the regulars she's come to know and love that will be the hardest to let go.

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“For some of my regulars, I know their lives. They talk about their kids and grandkids and what they've got going on. It's really a like a family here,” Whittaker said.

When Whittaker announced in a Facebook post that her last day would be Nov. 8, hundreds of residents expressed their bittersweet congratulations.

“Your hard work deserves all the rest and relaxation retirement can offer. But I'm going to miss seeing you there,” regular Francis Creasey commented. “I honestly can't imagine FasMart without you.”

Likewise, Whittaker saw a similar response from her coworkers. When she announced her retirement, she said many threatened to follow suit.

But, with years of experience, she is comfortable fulfilling one of her last acts as manager: keeping her team together and making sure morale is high.

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For FasMart employee Anastasia Clark, she has Whittaker to thank for the job. For a little over a year, she has worked under Whittaker's supervision; something she doesn't take for granted.

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“She’s the only reason I stay. She keeps us busy all the time, from early morning to the time we clock out but she’s right here doing it with us,” Clark said. “Don’t get me wrong, she can be a raging pit bull when she wants to be but she’s also one of the sweetest people you’d ever meet.”

From restocking the shelves, preparing the registers and managing a full crew, Whittaker wastes no time after clocking in. Her key to keeping a loyal staff: she doesn’t make her employees do anything she doesn’t do herself.

“You have to have people who have your back and who are willing to do the work,” Whittaker said. “And, I wouldn’t ask any of my team to do anything I wouldn’t do.”

With decades of experience, it’s a lesson she’s learned along the way.

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From stocking shelves to ringing up customers to overseeing the store, Jeanette Whittaker spends most days at her home away from home: King William's FasMart. (Em Holter)

As Whittaker leaned against the cement wall of the building, she took one final drag of her cigarette before stomping it out and placing it in the adjacent trash can.

With one of her fingers outstretched toward the building complex just across the street, she explained that when she first started, nothing was there except an old country store.

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While the FasMart sits in the heart of King William’s economic development site, nestled between the intersection of Route 30 and Route 360, the county’s most traveled roads, it didn’t used to be that way.

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Throughout her nearly 30-year career, Whittaker has watched the county grow and change around her. That old country store is long gone. In its place sits a Burger King, a Food Lion and another gas station.

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Similarly to how counties ebb and flow, so do its people. While life will continue for the community staple without her, it will take some time to get used to, Whittaker said.

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As for Whittaker, she is looking forward to a long and happy retirement, visiting with her grandchildren and racing go-karts with her husband.

“It’s definitely bittersweet and I already know it’s going to be a hard goodbye but I’m excited to relax and just enjoy myself and my family,” Whittaker said.

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From single to triple digits, the West Point Veterans of Foreign Wars post sees resurgence, continues outreach

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In the past few years, West Point's VFW chapter post has seen several changes including a resurgence of members, renovations and community outreach. (Em Holter)

WEST POINT — After years of fighting and living under the constant fear of fascism, the U.S. breathed a sigh of relief when radio broadcasts crackled through speakers across the country telling of Germany's defeat. When headlines read of Japan's surrender, folks rejoiced. The Second World War was over and the greatest generation was coming home.

Filing off boats, that generation returned home with unimaginable experiences and memories of war. New government programs were created for veterans who needed help to navigate life after the war, such as GI bill programs, Veteran Affairs hospitals and medical programs.



FEEDBACK

For many vets, this help came in the form of longstanding local organizations, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a national nonprofit organization formed in 1898 aimed at helping combat veterans find the necessary resources, understand paperwork and lobby for pro-veteran funding and legislature.



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In 1958, West Point's own greatest generation built the VFW Melvin Rosson Post from the ground up. For Vietnam veteran and West Point native Tom Vosnick, it is a memory he recalls well. His uncle and his father, all World War II veterans, were among the founding members of the post.

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Throughout the years, the post rose within the community and maintained a presence. But after the death of some members and others unable to make it to meetings, membership began to dwindle. The Melvin Rosson Post saw near extinction with few new members.

For 52 years, Vosnick has seen the post through its beginning, its rise in the community and its near extinction.

“I watched the greatest generation build this post and I have to say, this generation is just as great,” Vosnick said. “We almost lost this post and the young people have done a great job keeping it going strong.”

The post's saving grace

In 2017, the post's numbers were dwindling. In order to meet national requirements, it needed five members in attendance at each meeting. It had three.

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For several months, VFW members and Iraq war veterans David Jones and David Ebersole were running the meetings, hosting events and providing veteran services. They were burnt out and spread thin, Ebersole said.

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“The state representatives showed up to a few of our meetings and saw we didn’t have enough members,” said Junior Vice Commander Jones. “They told us if we didn’t have our numbers up by next meeting, then they were going to come shut us down and change the locks.”

FEEDBACK

As numbers dwindled, the state threatened to shut West Point's VFW Melvin Rosson post down. As a cry for help, the post turned to the community. Now, the post is thriving. (Veterans of Foreign Wars Melvin Rosson post)

With just a month to get numbers up, Jones made a Facebook post in a last-ditch effort. It was a post seen around the region.

At the next meeting, veterans from across Tidewater filled the post's main room, Jones said. That night, there were 25 people sitting in chairs, many of whom were part of the younger generation who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Three years

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In the past three years, the post has won an All-State award from the VFW for its exceptional growth and community outreach.

Community outreach

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Wasting no time, the post’s local outreach consists of hosting Memorial Day and Veterans Day services at West Point schools, awarding scholarships to students, offering support networks and information for veterans in need of medical assistance and resources.

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Hosting several events throughout the year, the VFW honors veterans at Memorial and Veterans Day celebrations. (Em Holter)

Each year, the post remembers the lives lost all while teaching the next generation about the organization and the important jobs service members hold.

“This post has never been this or that. None of us forget those who didn’t come home,” Vosnick said. “West Point has always been generous to its veterans, and West Point schools have been good to us.”

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Continuing its longtime presence in the community, the VFW Melvin Rosson post sets up informational booths at events in order to educate folks on the VFW and its outreach. (Em Holter)

A community staple at Crab Carnival and other town events, the VFW continues to educate anyone who might be eligible to receive services.

Folks line up at every event to take a look at the war memorabilia the post displays, Ebersole said. His collection of souvenirs serves as a talking point, and often draws more members in.

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“Regardless of whatever war you fought in, we all share similar experiences and we just fought with different technologies,” Ebersole said. “Oftentimes, we all bring home something and seeing someone else’s sparks a conversation.”

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The government offers many services for veterans, but there is not a lot of information on how to claim those benefits, Jones said. The post helps alleviate this problem. With four accredited offices across the state, people can call the local office or the VFW to find out where to go and what is available.

This year alone, the post has helped veterans get to and from the Veterans Affairs hospital in Richmond, paid for funeral services for widows, offered job support to get veterans on their feet and helped with disability and health care paperwork.

"A lot of people don't realize how much we do," said Senior Vice Commander and Iraq war veteran Anthony Magovero. "Our main thing is to help all vets and their families any way we can."

Passing the baton

According to Ebersole, the VFW has had a stigma of excluding the younger generation. But, at 25, Ebersole took a risk, joined and said he didn't look back.

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“I had always liked the idea and the support the VFW gave, but I also didn't know a lot of my guys my age weren't members,” Ebersole, now 32, said. “I live in Virginia Beach now and I don't miss a meeting or an event. I drive here every time.”

And Ebersole is not alone in his commitment. At one time, Jones drove from North

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In 2017, West Point's Veterans of Foreign Wars post was close to shutting down because of low attendance. Now, the post is alive and well continuing to help veterans get the resources they need. (Em Holter)

With some of the older members unable to attend, the newer generation took over with a fervor.

“After I made the (Facebook) post, we had phones ringing off the hook,” Jones said. “I haven’t seen that amount of energy, and really, it energized me.”

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Since then, the younger veterans have been working diligently to keep traditions alive and continue the post's outreach. For many, the post is a sanctuary.

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“When I came home and talked about it to people who didn't serve, it was like speaking French,” Magovero said. “This is my home away from home.”

Emily Holter, emily.holter@virginiamedia.com, 757-256-6657, [@EmilyHolterNews](#)

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For more information about eligibility and advocacy, visit vfw.com.

For more information about the Melvin Rosson post, visit facebook.com/VFWPost8356/.

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