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Mo'ne Davis was thrust into the spotlight while dominating in Little League. Now she's quietly excelling at Hampton

By MARTY O'BRIEN
757TEAMZ | MAR 25, 2020

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Mo'ne Davis hits the ball during a Hartford at Hampton NCAA softball game on Sunday, Feb. 23, 2020, in Hampton, Va. (AP Photo/Amber Searls) (Amber Searls/AP)

There seem to be two schools of thought about Mo'ne Davis, the Little League World Series icon whose first season as a softball player at Hampton University was interrupted by the school's coronavirus shutdown.

One is that Davis could've considered walking on water to arrive at her new "Home By the Sea," as HU is called. She would be that dominant, the thinking went, finally focusing on softball against females after her baseball success against males.

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The second was that Davis, who gained national acclaim in 2014 for becoming the first girl to pitch a shutout in the almost-exclusively boys-populated Little League series, might have difficulty finding the normalcy she craved at Hampton because of her celebrity. Neither idea has been true.

Yes, an ESPN camera crew followed her around campus her first day of the fall semester, but Davis has otherwise blended seamlessly with the other students. And, while coaches and teammates consider Davis very good, and potentially great, her transition to playing at a high level in the markedly different sport of softball has not been without challenges.

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Hampton University freshman Mo'ne Davis is making a seamless transition into college softball. Davis received national attention for being the hero of her Little League World Series team as a baseball pitcher in 2014. (Hampton University)

"It was very important to go to a place for four years with a family atmosphere, where I would feel comfortable and secure," Davis said from her home in Philadelphia. "It was a big thing for me not to be treated differently."

"Being on the softball team is like having a bunch of older sisters. I've fit in at Hampton like any other student."

Pirates coach Angie Nicholson and her husband, assistant coach Richard Nicholson, have worked to provide her with a typical college experience. They limited who could interview her and try to allow her to be "normal and like everyone else." Nicholson said Davis has been so humble and hard-working, you wouldn't be able to tell she is famous unless you knew it.

Because of that, Davis, a communications major, has been able to enjoy her time at HU, especially her classes at the Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications that largely drew her there in the first place. Davis follows current events closely, enjoys expressing herself in writing and is not at all intimidated at the prospect of entering journalism at a time when the profession is much criticized.

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In this Saturday, Feb. 27, 2016 file photo, Mo'ne Davis, signs an autograph for a fan on the cover of Sports Illustrated magazine at PNC Field in Moosic, Pennsylvania. Davis plays second base for Hampton University's softball team -- she moved into the national limelight in 2014 as a standout pitcher for a Philadelphia-area Little League World Series baseball team. (Butch Comegys/AP)

"It (criticism) is going to happen no matter what, but you can't be the best if you're not up for a challenge," she said. "There are a lot of good journalists out there, people doing the right thing."

Brianna Anderson, a senior and team captain, was among the Pirates who felt some trepidation at Davis' joining the program, particularly because so many implied she

teammate and a darn good player.

"I didn't know what to expect and I didn't know she would be as humble as she is," Anderson said. "I was getting questions like: 'Is Mo'ne going to win you guys a championship?' and 'Is Mo'ne going to do this or that?'

"I was hoping she wouldn't come in like that because it's a team sport and takes a lot of other players. She's definitely come in and done her part and is one of the most humble people I've ever met."

Davis is, Nicholson and Anderson note, kind of shy, which explains why she ran from the room embarrassed as some of her teammates watched a video of her acceptance comments for Best Breakthrough Athlete at the 2015 ESPY Awards.

Davis received lots of other accolades for her Little League World Series accomplishments. She made the cover of Sports Illustrated, was named one of "The 25 Most Influential Teens of 2014" by Time Magazine, was the subject of the Spike Lee documentary "I Throw Like a Girl" and was praised by scores of prominent people, including then-First Lady Michelle Obama.

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Legendary director Spike Lee gives Mo'ne Davis a 'Do The Right Thing Way' sign. (Shawn Inglima/for New York Daily News)

But the biggest and most enduring thrill of celebrity for Davis was befriending Allen Iverson, an NBA legend in her hometown of Philadelphia. She said the Iversons treat her like family and have attended some of her games at Hampton.

Davis, who started all 19 games at second base for the 15-4 Pirates, is a work in progress. Although she gained fame in Little League as a pitcher, she will not try the position in softball.

"It's not my thing," she said. "It's a whole different mechanic, and I give props to the pitchers on the team because it's very hard to pitch in softball."

"I enjoy playing the field and hitting."

Although Davis says she is still becoming comfortable with the small-ball aspect of softball – things like thinking ahead and knowing when to cover the bag – Nicholson says she is a terrific fielder because of her fluid movement, great transitions with the ball from glove to throwing hand and her rocket arm. Anderson has painful experience with the latter.

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"I can't stand playing first base in practice because Mo'ne throws the ball so hard," Anderson said. "She's going to have a big impact (on the program), and I wouldn't be surprised if she breaks program records.

"I love her and am close to her. She's close with a lot of the players."

Davis, who batted .333 with eight RBIs in 19 games, can't wait to return to Hampton after already building some lasting memories. She hit a two-run single in her collegiate debut, a win over North Carolina A&T. She also singled and scored the first run in the bottom of the seventh against arch-rival Howard to begin a rally from a three-run deficit that ended in a walk-off victory.

"Being able to win a game like that, to come back and never give up, is something special," Davis said. "Howard is always a big game, and the smiles on the faces of (my teammates were) the happiest I've seen.

"I'm really excited because we're going to have a great team the rest of my time here. I know the next three years are probably going to be some of the best experiences in my life."

Topics: Mo'ne Davis, Little League World Series, Spike Lee, Hampton University softball, Philadelphia, vpsports1, 7577

Marty O'Brien



A Kentucky basketball lover by night, O'Brien has reported by day for more than 21 years for the Daily Press, where he currently covers high school athletics on the Peninsula, Langley Speedway stock car racing and the occasional NASCAR race.

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He was in a coma for 17 days and almost died twice. Robert Calloway has no memory of his long battle with coronavirus.

By MARTY O'BRIEN
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | AUG 13, 2020





Robert Calloway stands in front of his house Thursday August 13, 2020. Calloway, an area high school official in multiple sports, spent 41 days in the hospital battling COVID-19. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

In late April, a nurse walked into Robert Calloway's room at the Riverside Doctors' Hospital in Williamsburg to take his breakfast order. Perplexed, Calloway wondered aloud why there was no such request his previous three days in the hospital.

"You've been in the hospital 38 days, Mr. Calloway, not three," the stunned patient recalled.

So began Calloway's return to full consciousness as he recovered from a battle with COVID-19. It was a harrowing journey that landed Calloway in the hospital for 41 days and in rehab for another 10.

Bizarre hallucinations are all Calloway remembers of his 17 days in a coma and another 21 of semi-consciousness in the Intensive Care Unit, where twice he nearly died. The virus that had just arrived in the area when he contracted it in mid-March, so weakened and nearly killed the robust 71-year-old that it left his family shocked.

Calloway officiates four youth and high school sports and had just refereed a regional high school basketball game little more than a week earlier. An avid golfer, bowler and tennis player, Calloway was in excellent shape other than nagging sciatic nerve pain.

“I’ve never seen him sick because he takes such good care of himself,” said daughter Gabby Calloway, a rising junior and volleyball player at Hampton University. “I had to pinch myself because it was unbelievable that COVID could affect someone close to me like that.”

Coldness was the first effect. Calloway returned home from a tennis match one night and had so much trouble getting warm in the family’s Queen’s Lake home that he curled up on the floor in front of the fireplace.

Calloway’s memory from the next 38 days is blank prior to the nurse’s breakfast request order in late April. His diagnosis of COVID-19 – which Calloway believes he was exposed to during a doctor’s visit in preparation for surgery on the sciatic nerve – came a week or so after his arrival at the hospital, but he already was hooked to the ventilator.

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During the 17 days he was intubated, Calloway's wife Barbara, who contracted a milder form of the coronavirus from her husband, was twice called to the hospital. Doctors feared Calloway might die because of blood clots on his lungs.

"It was a terrifying, sad and scary time for the family," Gabby said. "My mom asked us to pray and we turned to Psalm 91, which says those who dwell in the shadow of the almighty will find protection."

"We prayed that even if his mind wasn't there that his spirit would resonate with this scripture."

Deeply faithful, Calloway, had religious visions and others he'll never forget while comatose. They were typical of those COVID patients who experience delirium.

One hallucination: A 2-foot tall icon — half-bat and half-bird — elevated from a table in front of his bed and exploded in front of him, prompting death threats from those who worshiped the religious icon in faraway countries. Former Today Show host Matt Lauer grilled him about it on television.

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Another: Young men threatened Calloway at gunpoint to keep him from seeing the twins of a daughter who is, in fact, single and childless. Son Zack Calloway, a civilian, dodged rocket fire as he co-piloted an F-15 jet fighter.

Calloway, who served the Air Force for 21 years in security, photo intelligence and as a paralegal, is not given to such flights of fancy when fully conscious. Gabby describes him as a disciplinarian with a sharp sense of humor.

Like Gabby, his other two children were college athletes after starring at Bruton High. Oldest daughter Alexis Calloway, formerly Bruton's girls basketball and

at Mary Washington.

“I think the two times I dreamed I would be killed had to do with the (near-death) state I was in,” Calloway said. “I think it had do with the times they thought I wouldn’t pull through and my being so focused on death.”

It was a “horrible” time for Barbara, who is ever thankful that neighbors and the Relevant Church community provided so much support. She could see her husband only through a window on those two early-April days she feared he was close to death.

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Then a rainbow appeared in the sky outside of his hospital room and a peace she had not felt for weeks radiated inside.

“When I saw the rainbow I thought it was God speaking to me,” she said. “He was saying that everything was going to be alright and shortly after that, gradually, he started to get better.”

Calloway was liberated from the ventilator after 17 days thanks to a tracheostomy — the insertion of a tube through a cut in the neck below the vocal cords to allow air to enter the lungs — and he was again breathing on his own. He has no memory of a nurse helping him into a wheelchair days later and rolling him outside the hospital to see his wife, son and daughters.

“He ordered some Popeye’s (chicken), which was great because he still had a recollection of the things he loved,” Gabby said.

Gabby said weeks later, when Calloway gained full consciousness and could speak coherently to the family, she felt “pure joy.”

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“I was ecstatic because people his age don’t usually make it, medically speaking, when they stay on a ventilator so long and have blood clots,” said Gabby, who will become a nurse after graduating from Hampton University. “It was nothing short of a miracle that God chose to heal him and save him.”

Gripping a walker, Calloway exited his hospital room after 41 days to the stretcher that carried him to a transport vehicle waiting outside. Along the way, dozens of nurses he thinks of now as “family” cheered him as he proudly held a sign reading “I Kicked COVID’s Butt.”

“The nurses and doctors at the Doctors’ Hospital were amazing,” Barbara Calloway said.

Calloway told them he would never forget them. He added that when he got back on his feet, he would run past the hospital with a yellow ribbon tied to him and wave.

Therapists at his next destination, Riverside Rehabilitation in Yorktown, helped him get back on his feet. Initially, Calloway thought of the rehab facility as a jail and joked with the therapists they had no legal right to hold him.

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He so quickly exceeded their expectations in improving his strength, mobility and balance, his sentence was reduced from the estimated 14-21 days to just 10. On May 11, almost two months after getting the coronavirus, he returned home.

On July 4, he and Zack played 18 holes of golf. Balance and quickness are still a problem, but Calloway is back on the tennis court for the first time since that fateful night, and holding his own.

“He can still kick my butt,” Barbara, who played volleyball in college, said laughing.

Zack carries most of the load with the family lawn-care business, but Calloway helps out increasingly. His goal is to don his zebra-striped basketball referee shirt and

Meanwhile, he cherishes time with his family and they with him. COVID-19 almost separated them for good, the way it has more than 160,000 American families, and they will never again take each other for granted.

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“I’m so happy to hit the reset button,” Gabby said. “I’ve asked myself, ‘How can I be a better daughter? How can we spend more time together to love each other better?’

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“Just to hear my father’s voice again is the most amazing thing.”

Calloway said, “I don’t want to eat by myself again. I make sure we all sit down and break bread together and do family things every opportunity we get.

“I also do more witnessing when I see people and give testimony about Jesus Christ. When you get a second chance on life you learn to appreciate it a lot more.

“I’ve learned if there’s something you want to do, do it today, because you don’t know if tomorrow is promised to you.”

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Parker Topping was told he has 22 months to live, but he's fighting and coaching his son at Poquoson

By MARTY O'BRIEN
757TEAMZ | FEB 21, 2020





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Poquoson's assistant basketball coach Parker Topping hugs his son Parker Topping Jr. during senior night at Poquoson High School Friday February 14, 2020. (John Sudbrink / The Virginian-Pilot)

When Parker Topping pledged the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity at Elon University 40 years ago, he already possessed the fighting spirit that defines his battle with terminal cancer today. Henry Ayer, a TKE at Elon then, remembers it well.

"Parker nose-dived into a mud puddle as part of the initiation," said Ayer, a friend of Topping's in Poquoson since elementary school. "His face was covered with mud, and all I could see were the whites of his eyes."

"He looked up and the first thing out of his mouth, after a little mud, was 'I'm not quitting.'"

Topping's attitude was the same when doctors told him in September 2018 that surgery for liver cancer – his third bout with cancer in 11 years – would probably kill him. Ditto after he survived the surgery and his oncologist told him he had 22 months at most to live if he submitted to a rigorous regimen of chemotherapy.

It's not that Topping is in denial, but life and family are too precious, too joyful, for him to just accept someone else's word about *his* time remaining. There were still kids to coach, and his son's Senior Night basketball game and graduation ahead, cancer be damned.

"When I heard that I thought, 'I'm not going in 22 months, you're not going to put a toe-tag on me,'" Topping said. "Cancer will probably get me, but I'll never give in to it."

"It sucks every day to get up, but I'm fighting my ass off."

His battleground much of this winter was the Poquoson High gymnasium. He served for the second consecutive season as assistant coach to Todd Bowden on the boys basketball team. He'd coached most of the players before — either on rec-league or AAU teams.

More than anything, he wanted to be there for his son, Parker Jr., an Islanders team captain, regardless of how miserable he felt. The cancer — which started in his colon in 2007 and has, since its latest recurrence in 2018, spread to his liver and lungs — has been a physical nightmare.

Topping is often short of breath, his nose and mouth are always sore, the constant chemotherapy makes him nauseous, and he no longer has feeling in his fingers or

Poquoson game this season and almost every practice.

Poquoson assistant basketball coach Parker Topping, who is fighting cancer, watches his team play a home game against Grafton on Feb. 14, 2020. (John Sudbrink / The Virginian-Pilot)

By doing so, he wrote an unforgettable profile in courage for the Islanders' coaches and players while cementing an already strong bond with his son.

"This was all for Parker (Jr.)," Topping said. "I didn't want to put pressure on him, but basketball is a love and passion that is very special and powerful for us both."

That passion prompted Parker Jr. to move back to Poquoson from the Outer Banks, where he lived with his mom, Topping's ex-wife, and younger sister, Grace. The decision wasn't easy.

"I really did want to live with my mom and sister, but when the cancer came back, I just felt something in my heart," Parker Jr. said. "I had to come back and finish my

“It was a tough choice, but I prayed on it and God told me to come home and be with my dad.”

Other than a benign tumor on his skull in 2015, Topping was cancer-free in the decade after he underwent surgery, 28 radiation treatments and 12 rounds of chemo in 2007 for the colon cancer. So he was angry, scared and distraught in 2018 upon hearing that the lump he felt under his ribs in bed one morning was terminal.

He has since discarded the fear and anger and been all fight.

“I was not going to let my son see me become soft,” he said. “It means a lot to do this the right way, to represent myself, Poquoson and my family the right way.”

Bull Islanders have responded with kindness, conducting a charity event that raised more than \$20,000 for his medical expenses. Friends cart home-cooked meals to his house.

“There’s nothing more this community can do that it hasn’t done already,” said Topping, who was a banker before retiring. “There’s always somebody around to give you a hug.”

He’s given back by throwing his heart into the basketball team. More of a golfer than a basketball player as a high school student at Poquoson, he fell in love with basketball in the 1970s and ’80s watching the North Carolina teams coached by Dean Smith, who became his coaching template.

For every game, Topping wears a replica of the No. 23 jersey Michael Jordan wore in hitting the national championship-winning shot for the Tar Heels in 1982, and screams loudly at the television from start to finish. He is more subdued at Poquoson practices, but just as involved.

“He gives us passion because he’s one of the most passionate people I know,” Islanders guard Wyatt Freeman said. “He loves us and encourages us to play our hardest because you never know how long you’ve got.”

heeded the encouragement. Although they finished 3-19, seven of their final eight losses came by single digits.

Topping was there through it all, helping organize the defense, offering in-game adjustments or just encouraging the players. His hope that the players and coaches would see him handle his situation with “grace and dignity” was more than realized.

“It’s unbelievable how positive Parker is with what he’s going through, and that really helped me as we struggled to win games,” Bowden said. “The kids love him, and I really think it helped them get through tough practices and tough times when they saw what he was going through just to be there.”

Islanders forward Jackson Harper said, “Honestly, he’s the biggest inspiration in my life. He walks through the gates of hell every day and he’s still out there for us at all times.

“It’s amazing to have someone like that in my life.”

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Topping’s best memory the past two seasons was watching Parker Jr. sink the game-clinching free throws a year ago in an upset win over Jamestown. Topping called that win “mind over matter” and told himself repeatedly that if the Islanders could do that, he could keep his promise to be at his son’s Senior Night, cancer be damned.

He did, and they shared one final poignant moment in the Poquoson High gym.

“He looked at me, hugged me and said, ‘Dad, we did it! We did it!’” said

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his son's graduation in June. "That made every chemo treatment, every surgery and all of the radiation worth it.

"I told him I loved him and was jello after that."

Jello for a moment, perhaps. But even after all these years, Parker Topping is still tough as nails.

Topics: Poquoson High School, boys basketball, cancer, coaching, vpsports4, dpsports4, 7574

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