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# Rubama: He's the only Black person on the field at times, but this Maury star sees change coming

By LARRY RUBAMA  
757TEAMZ | DEC 01, 2020





Maury sophomore shortstop Tre Keels fields the ball during a game in 2019. Keels, who has committed to the University of Miami, recently attended the Mike Sanders Minority Baseball Prospects All-American Game at Hank Aaron Stadium in Mobile, Alabama. The game recognized and showcased the top minority high school prospects across the country.

Tre Keels has traveled to many baseball showcases over the past five months.

But none was like the one he attended last week in Mobile, Alabama.

For the first time, Keels saw baseball players who looked like him.

Keels attended the Mike Sanders Minority Baseball Prospects (MBP) All-American Game at Hank Aaron Stadium. The game recognized and showcased the top minority high school prospects across the country.

“I’ve never been to a showcase where it’s been only African-American players,” said Keels, a Maury junior middle infielder. “It was good seeing so many talented Black players out there grinding and trying to get to the same spot. You don’t see it often.”

For many people, this might not sound like a big deal. But have you ever worked for a company, attended a meeting or traveled to a conference where no one else looked like you?

If you haven’t experienced that, then you can’t understand Keels.

I can remember playing baseball in Syracuse, New York, where I was the only Black player in the entire league. I also played on an all-star team. When we traveled, I was the only Black person in the stadium.

When you walk into the stadium, you hear the comments and feel the stares. But you have to ignore that because you have to succeed, not just for yourself but for those who will hopefully follow in your footsteps.

Keels knows what I’m talking about.

That’s why he was excited when he showed up in Mobile. For the first time, he met a group of people who not only looked like him, but have walked in his shoes.

“Sometimes, I’ll be on a team and it will be just me,” he said. “But this was different to see all Black people. As soon as we started talking, I felt like I had known them for years. It felt like we were family.”

One of the players there was Andruw Jones, Jr., the son of the former Atlanta Braves outfielder. Other prospects were headed to South Carolina, Michigan, Florida State, Alabama and Tennessee.

As for Keels, he committed to nationally ranked Miami earlier this year. He also had offers from Louisville, N.C. State, Clemson and Michigan, which were all ranked last season.

At 6-foot and 180 pounds, scouts say Keels is “gifted” in the field and at the plate. He is ranked No. 43 in the nation and No. 1 in the state by Perfect Game for the Class of 2022. The site also ranks him the No. 9 shortstop in the nation. He also is ranked No. 11 in Virginia/District of Columbia by Prep Baseball Report.

As a freshman, he batted .385 with 34 runs, 24 RBIs, 21 walks, two homers and an on-base percentage near .500 for the Commodores. He missed his sophomore season because the coronavirus pandemic canceled the high school season.

But he’s attended various showcases, played on traveling teams and continued improving. His goal is to change the decline of Blacks in baseball.

This past major league season, just 7.7% of players on Opening Day rosters were Black.

According to the Society for American Baseball Research, Black players haven’t been above 10 percent since 2004. The number reached its historical peak in 1981 at 18.7 percent.

Keels thinks that’s about to change.

“The future of baseball is in good hands,” he said. “With all of the talent that was down there, we’re going to be good.”

There are already some other positive signs.

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This past season, Seattle outfielder Kyle Lewis and Milwaukee pitcher Devin Williams swept the 2020 Rookie of the Year awards. That marked the first time since 1984 – when Dwight Gooden and Alvin Davis won the NL and AL award, respectively – that Blacks swept the top rookie honors. The award was renamed the Jackie Robinson Award in 1987, 40 years after Robinson broke the baseball color line.

“It means a lot because if you look at the previous Rookie of the Year winners, you won’t see as many Black people winning it,” Keels said. “To see a face of color up there, it’s just like seeing Barack Obama up there for President. You don’t see that often. To be able to see that means something. It means that I can do it, too.”

Keels thanked his parents, Alvin and Monique, for how they prepared him and supported him on this journey. They knew the challenges their son would have being a Black baseball player.

“You just have to fight through it. If it was easy, then everybody would be doing it,” Keels said. “And to all of the Black players out there, keep grinding. It’s going to be



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SPORTS COLUMNISTS   SPORTS

# Rubama: More than 2,700 Virginians have died from the coronavirus. My brother was one of them.

By LARRY RUBAMA  
757TEAMZ | SEP 15, 2020





COVID-19 continues to claim lives across the state. Last week it hit close to home when my brother, Ed Coleman, passed away on Sept. 11. (Courtesy photo)

Each day, The Virginian-Pilot and Daily Press run stories on new coronavirus cases reported by the Virginia Department of Health.

As of Monday, at least 2,724 Virginians had died from the virus.

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For many, those numbers are just that, numbers.

It's different when you can put a face to those numbers.

Since March, I've had several friends and family members test positive for the virus, but thankfully they survived.

But in July, it got closer to home when a friend of mine, Christopher Jones, died from it. Jones, a husband and father of two, was a sports statistician on the high school and college level. He was passionate about what he did, and he did it well and with a smile.

As tough as his death was to accept, COVID-19 got even closer on Sept. 11.

That's when I learned my brother died after contracting the virus.

Edward Coleman was 57.

Just writing it still seems unreal.

We affectionately called him "Big Daddy." We are actually cousins but he – along with cousins Kevin Coleman and Kenny Orr and my sister, Michelle – were raised as siblings. Ed was the oldest grandchild.

Here's an old family photo from the 1970s. Front row (l-r), Kevin Coleman and Michelle Rubama. Back row (l-r) Ed Coleman, Kenny Orr and Larry Rubama. Our brother, Ed Coleman, passed away Sept. 11 from COVID-19. (Courtesy photo)

Ed was a huge sports fan and was a walking encyclopedia of sports information. He used to joke, “I got all of this worthless information in my head.”

But I admired it.

Trying to come to grips with his death, however, has been tough.

You hear some people talk about how the virus is a conspiracy or a hoax. You hear others complain about having to wear masks. And over the past several months we've heard crazy stories about taking hydroxychloroquine to prevent it.

Don't worry, this is not a political column.

For those who doubt whether this virus is real, I just pray that someone you love doesn't get affected by it. Then you'll know our pain.

My brother moved to Hampton Roads in the early 1990s. When I told him I got a job at The Virginian-Pilot, I think he was more excited than me.

He educated me about all of the exciting sports I was about to cover, especially football. He also told me about many of the great athletes from Hampton Roads, including NFL Hall of Famer Bruce Smith, boxing great Pernell "Sweet Pea" Whitaker, and NBA Hall of Famers Allen Iverson and Alonzo Mourning.

Ed read everything I wrote and seemed to know when I appeared on local television or radio shows.

He was, no doubt, my biggest fan and so proud of me.

And even when he relocated to Northern Virginia and later to Stafford, he always kept up with me, including driving here to see me participate in the annual Priority Toyota Charity Bowl Celebrity flag football game.

Two months ago, he and I took a trip to Syracuse, New York, for my mother's birthday.

The seven-hour ride went by quickly as we reminisced about our childhood, listened to oldies but goodies and talked sports.

We spent time visiting family. We drove past Nottingham High, where he played football and lacrosse. We visited the gravesite where his mother, our grandparents and other families are buried.

Here's a family photo from 2018. (l-r) Larry Rubama, Kevin Coleman and Ed Coleman. Ed Coleman passed away on Sept. 11 from COVID-19. (Courtesy photo)

The trip concluded with a visit with our brother, Kevin, sister-in-law, Durriyah, and nieces in Northern Virginia.

Ed later wrote on Facebook about the trip, “Since June 4, 2013, I finally made (it) home. I Thank God for his Grace allowing me to see Family.” In another post he wrote about how that trip gave him closure.

I didn't realize that would be our last trip together.

A few days after we got back, Kevin told me Ed was in the hospital with COVID-19. We were concerned that I possibly could have contracted it, too, but learned Ed got it after we returned from Syracuse.

He went to the hospital but was sent home. We thought he would recover like so many others. But a few days later, he went back to the hospital and never returned home.

Kevin informed me Friday evening that Ed had died. I wasn't totally surprised, but it was still gut-wrenching.

Every day since his death, I've thought about our trip. Our talks. The laughs and stories we shared.

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Rubama: She was the biggest sports fan. She was also my Gram and it's hard to believe she's gone.

DEC 28, 2020

I thought about him again on Sunday as his beloved Oakland Raiders – I know they are the Las Vegas Raiders, but for my brother's sake they will always be the Oakland Raiders – won their season opener. His son, Rob, posted on his father's Facebook page, "Raiders are 1-0!!!"

I can see Ed's wide smile now.

He's gone, but never forgotten.

Love you, Big Daddy.

Ed Coleman, a huge Oakland Raiders fan, passed away on Sept. 11 from COVID-19.

*Larry Rubama, 757-575-6449, [larry.rubama@pilotonline.com](mailto:larry.rubama@pilotonline.com)*

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## Larry Rubama



Larry Rubama is a columnist for The Virginian-Pilot. He joined The Pilot in 1999 after writing for The Journal-Gazette (Ind.) A former track athlete at Ohio University, he became a sports reporter so he could tell other athletes' stories.

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# Rubama: COVID-19 pandemic is causing athletes to lose their identity

By LARRY RUBAMA  
757TEAMZ | SEP 29, 2020





Green Run High School football players practice on Monday, July 13, 2020, in Virginia Beach, Va. (Kaitlin McKeown/Virginia Media)

It has been a long, rough six months for many, including high school athletes.

They were told back in March that they would be taking some time off because of COVID-19. Unfortunately, no one realized it would take this long to return to the fields and courts.

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After several changes, the Virginia High School League implemented a return plan, but there's no guarantee it will happen.

That's not what athletes want to hear. They spent years dedicated to their sport. Countless hours were spent training and conditioning. Many times, they sacrificed sleep, their health and time with their family. Sports became their identity.

COVID-19 has taken away their identity and these young athletes feel lost.

This feeling is real.

Catholic athletic director Lyndsey Boyce said it best when she explained that high school athletes are experiencing periods of depression and anxiety as they wait to play again.

“We try to tell them that their sport doesn’t define them,” she said. “But there comes a point when there’s only so much pep talking you can do.”

Nansemond-Suffolk Academy football coach Mike Biehl knows this feeling all too well.

As a junior at Salem High in Virginia Beach, he missed his junior season because of a knee injury.

He went from being the star quarterback on the football team and the “big man on campus” to being a “regular student.”

“It was tough,” he said. “My identity at the time was of an athlete. And in an instant, I was no longer an athlete. I was someone trying to go back to being an athlete.”

He also knows first-hand the effect COVID-19 has had on his players as their schedules and lives have been altered and halted.

They feel a sense of emptiness. There is no one there to tell them how great they are or how they can't wait for that next game.

"I think that's what a lot of these kids are going through right now," Biehl said. "They put so much time and effort into being the best athlete that they can be, and now, without having an opportunity to display that, I guarantee some kids are kind of searching to replace that with something."

Biehl bounced back. His senior season, he threw for 3,639 yards, then the VHSL's single-season record. He set South Hampton Roads' single-season passing yardage record with 3,223 regular-season yards. He was named the 2001 All-Tidewater Player of the Year and was an all-state selection.

Biehl earned a football scholarship to Iona, where he started 21 games before injuries ended his playing career.

Once again, he was forced to deal with his identity. He turned to coaching.

But dealing with your identity goes beyond sports.

My son, Robert, is a professional dancer. His passion began in middle school and then at Salem High and George Mason. After college, he danced with companies in Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and now Brooklyn.

Then COVID-19 hit and put him on the sidelines.

Now, there are significantly fewer opportunities for him to dance.

"I'm finding it difficult to engage with the art form in ways that fully allow me to pursue my passion," he said.

And it's definitely affected him.

“Oh, 100 percent,” he said. “Because since I was 7 when I started dancing, I haven’t done anything else. You spend all of your time dedicated to this one thing, and then you can’t participate in it fully. It’s sad. However, it’s just our reality right now.”

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When the dance world shut down in March, he, like so many others, thought it was going to be temporary. He’s worked some odd jobs, but he wasn’t doing what made him feel special.

“It’s been very difficult because dancing is the one thing that I love,” he said. “It’s what makes me happy. It’s the one thing that I know how to do.”

Sounds familiar to athletes, doesn’t it?

The one piece of advice he had for athletes was “surround yourself with positive people,” he said. “That’s really it because you can’t change anything until things change.”

*Larry Rubama, 757-575-6449,*

Larry Rubama



Journal Gazette (and) former track athlete at Ohio State, he became a sports reporter so he could tell other athletes' stories.

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