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EDITOR'S PICK

Locked up and locked down | Part one

'Devil's play'

Before COVID-19 hit, basketball served as an outlet for prisoners on the road to rehabilitation

Parker Cotton

Dec 20, 2020



Parker Cotton

MITCHELLS — Coffeewood Correctional Center, just south of Culpeper, is tucked away from the picturesque wineries and horse pastures that line the drive there.

It is the northernmost prison within the Virginia Department of Corrections and primarily holds offenders nearing their release dates.

As a Level 2 security facility, Coffeewood offers modest conveniences to its roughly 1,000 inmates: satellite TV, access to landline phones and, for some, email. There is also a popular basketball league.

Among Virginia correctional facilities during the past nine months, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit Coffeewood particularly hard. The DOC dashboard this week showed more than 700 cases among offenders and nearly 20 among staff members since March.

The multipurpose space where inmates used to play basketball was quickly converted into a place for more beds.



During the first week of March, before the pandemic forced prisons to restrict visits from family members or reporters, the DOC and Coffeewood offered a glimpse of how meaningful a game of basketball can be in a prison setting.

Christopher Morales of the Saints Prison Ministry defends against a member of the Coffeewood Correctional Center basketball team.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

More than just a means for physical exercise or to pass the time, the benefits of basketball covertly extend into an offender's rehabilitation efforts.

Further, basketball can allow for a sense of creativity, improvisation and fluidity that is otherwise absent under a prison's normal operations. In an environment where so many aspects of inmates' lives are restricted, basketball can provide a sense of freedom and normalcy.

"It's a way of having a positive outlet, you know, make the best, because it gets stressful in here," said Clifton Bradshaw, 41, imprisoned following assault and disorderly conduct offenses in July 2018. "It gives us peace of mind to have that free time."

Under normal circumstances, the Coffeewood staff works to prepare inmates with vital skills before their release day comes — a process that can involve vocational, educational and behavioral programs.

In addition to welding and small-engine programs, among others, inmates can earn an associate degree from nearby Germanna Community College or work toward a ServSafe certification by learning how to properly handle and prepare food in Coffeewood's kitchen.

"Guys can take those skills, those certifications, so when they get out hopefully they won't have to revert to old behaviors," said Frankie Lewis, the recreation supervisor.

Kimberly Soutter, Coffeewood's institutional operations manager, said not every offender will respond the same way to formal rehabilitation efforts, though. Some will leave and commit crimes and end up back in prison.

"We're here to make sure they serve their time and end up better in the end," Soutter said. "The way that I've learned to look at it is everyone is worth your best effort."

To a certain extent, even the inmates admit prison is what they make of it.

“Prison can be the devil’s playground. It can also be a school of higher learning,” said Edward Sparrock, who earned a 3.97 GPA at Germanna CC on his way to an associate degree.

The sports and leisure activities play a pivotal role in rehabilitation, according to both staff and inmates, who also refute the notion the competition could lead to ugly confrontations.

“We can come out here and compete within a structure and be aggressive within a structure and at the end of the day shake each other’s hands,” said Sparrock, 40, who’s been at Coffeewood since February 2014 as part of a 15-year sentence for various sexual offenses. “Basketball really helps in this environment to show you where you’ve grown while you’ve been incarcerated.”

Basketball is among the most popular programs available at the facility.

There’s a winter league played in the gymnasium and a summer league played on courts outside, where the hoops are regulation height but double-rimmed. Players organize team drafts, and just like any other league, there are stars and role players with varying levels of prior experience.

At 58, Clifton Barrett is past his playing days, but he sticks around the game to referee.



Mytchell Parmer of the Saints Prison Ministry attempts to score over a member of the Coffeewood Correctional Center basketball team.

PHOTOS BY Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

“I get a kick out of it. I get joy out of doing it,” said Barrett, who is serving a five-year sentence following a conviction for grand larceny in 2016. “It kind of builds rapport with some of the guys.”

Once the teams are decided, each player usually contributes a couple cans of soda as an entry fee to the league. Whichever team wins the championship gets to enjoy the soft drinks on ice as its prize.

Game after game and season after season, basketball serves as a reprieve from the reality of daily life in Coffeewood.

“It allows you to physically or mentally escape while you’re in prison,” Sparrock said, “and you forget all about being locked up until it’s time to go back in the building.”

On the first Thursday in March, the inmates were looking forward to a rare game against outside competition.

The players and coaches of the visiting Saints Prison Ministry team, fresh off a five-hour drive from Moorestown, New Jersey, entered the facility and placed their sweatshirts and neon-colored Adidas and Nikes into plastic bins. They opened the zippers on their bags to reveal basketballs and small, handheld copies of The Gospel of John.

As their gear rode through a metal detector, the players handed over their driver’s licenses and walked through the security checkpoint.



Clifton Bradshaw, an inmate at Coffeewood Correctional Center, defends against Saints Prison Ministry player Sam Rempel during a game in early March. Bradshaw was released from the Virginia prison system in April.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

The traveling party of nine made its way past two sets of motorized gates, encrusted by barbed wire, that only allow groups of five through at a time, per the facility's policy.

Once they were in the gymnasium, they noticed the rims were a little higher than 10 feet, but nobody knew why.

Members of Coffeewood's team slowly trickled into the gym. They clipped off their ID badges, replaced their standard-issue black boots with all-white New Balances and began running layup lines.

Before tipoff, Coffeewood's players joked about being more rested than their visitors.

The Saints Prison Ministry team left New Jersey early that morning and was cramped in a bus. The prison, conversely, had been on its quarterly lockdown just two days before the game, so inmates could hardly go anywhere, they said.

Nevertheless, the Saints scored first on a bucket by Ethan Kennedy, who played one year of professional ball in Australia after college.

Quorshonn Thompson, another Saints player, hit a short jumper and then a 3-pointer for an 11-6 lead.

The inmates kept it close, using a series of pick-and-rolls to bend the Saints defense and create driving angles to take advantage of their superior athleticism.

Kennedy hit all three free throws after being fouled on a 3-pointer, helping the Saints take an 18-14 lead into halftime.

During the break, players from both sides gathered in one corner of the court to sit on beige plastic lawn chairs and listen to Thompson speak about why the ministry was there and what it could offer — from Bible study worksheets to birthday cards.

Thompson said he didn't have anybody present religion to him when he was younger and could have used it. He has volunteered with the Saints since 2009 in hopes of being that guide for somebody else.

"Basketball was just to get your attention," he told the group. "Jesus Christ is something that's a gift for the rest of your life."

The Saints distributed copies of The Gospel of John and briefly read aloud before play resumed.

The Saints took a 25-16 lead after buckets by Kennedy, Mytchell Parmer — a 20-year-old playing in his first prison game — and Sam Rempel, who showcased the versatility from inside and outside that allowed him to rack up a school record 1,979 career points at Lancaster Bible College in Pennsylvania.

Coffeewood posted three defensive stops in a row, along with three straight scores, to narrow the lead to 25-22.

The teams traded runs — the Saints extending their lead, Coffeewood drawing closer again — for much of the rest of the second half. Coffeewood ultimately got within three points, at 38-35, but the Saints closed the game on a 19-4 run to earn a 57-39 victory.

Despite the loss, Coffeewood's players were in good spirits following the game. The teams exchanged hugs and took photos together.

A visit from an outside group was still worth celebrating.

“I don't take that for granted,” Barrett said, “someone sacrificing their time with their family, their work and whatever else they like to do to come in here and bring us some type of joy and happiness.”



The members of the Coffeewood Correctional Center basketball teams pray with the Saints Prison Ministry at halftime of their game.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

The visit to Coffeewood was the first of four games the Saints would play in a span of two days at correctional facilities across Virginia. It would be a quick and physically taxing trip but equally rewarding.

Due to the pandemic, the ministry had to cancel summertime visits to other facilities in the state to play softball.

Some of the Saints players are pastors or are otherwise involved with their churches at home, but they rarely have the opportunity to present religion to people for the first time. In that sense, volunteering with the Saints serves as a different sort of evangelistic outlet.

“I think a lot of these guys love church, they love being men of faith, but we want to do something more,” said Jay Thatcher, the director of ministry relations. “We don’t just want to be churchgoers. We want to be used. And we love ball.”

Parmer, the rookie, almost immediately felt like he was in the right place to do some good.

“I love basketball and I’ve been in ministry my whole life, so I figured I’d give it a shot,” he said. “I loved it, so I’ll probably end up doing it again.”

Rempel graduated from LBC in May 2001 and played his first game with the Saints Prison Ministry the next month.

Earlier that spring, he said he received a Saints shirt in the mail, along with some information about the ministry. He never knew who his mystery recruiter was, but he didn’t need much convincing.

“As a senior coming out of college with no real direction, this was heaven sent,” Rempel, 41, said.

Rempel has since been on about a dozen of these athletic crusades. Sometimes his church schedule at home doesn’t allow for him to attend, but he’ll always try.

“There’s something about sports and being able to connect,” he said. “Once you play ball with someone, you’re bonded in some way.”

Bradshaw, who was released in April, elected to keep in touch with the Saints.

He said he was grateful for their visit because he felt seen as a person and as a basketball player but not as a criminal.



Sam Rempel (21) of the Saints Prison Ministry hugs a Coffeewood Correctional Center inmate after their basketball game in early March.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

“It’s like because we did time or we got in trouble or made wrong decisions, [people] kind of tend to stereotype us instead of getting to know us,” he said. “It’s like judging a book by its cover. It means a lot to know there’s people out there that still care and still look at us like human beings.”

Sparrock is scheduled to be released in June 2022. He’s confident he will leave as a better person than when he entered. He credits sports as one of the reasons why.

“I had become a toxic individual,” he said, “and through exercise, through my journey through the different belief systems, through self-motivation, through reading different books, I’ve gotten to a place where I can reflect back on myself and say, ‘OK, you were

bad. You were a piece of crap, but you don't have to stay a piece of crap. That's not who you are. You can grow from that.' And I chose to grow.”

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Danville Braves fans brace for loss of baseball season in 2020 and beyond

Parker Cotton

Jun 21, 2020



In June, longtime Danville Braves fan Richard Dixon lamented the fact that Opening Day had been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A few months later, the team left town entirely.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

Parker Cotton

During one game of the 2018 Danville Braves season, an umpire was injured in an early inning, so H.F. Haymore Jr. was brought in from the crowd to take his place.

Haymore had 41 years of experience umpiring for the Virginia High School League, and he also worked 32 games in the Appalachian League in 1995 when there was a shortage of trained umpires, so he was a suitable replacement.

“I worked the rest of the series with the guys out there,” Haymore, 79, said chuckling when recalling the memory last week.

It’s a story that so beautifully captures the charm of minor league baseball.

Only in the rookie league can a season-ticket holder since the team arrived in 1993 be called in from the stands, like a reliever from the bullpen, and wear civilian clothes while working the basepaths.

Minor league baseball has other quirks, of course — from the kooky mascots to the eclectic promotions. But more than that, it’s a family friendly atmosphere where fans can see young players before they’re household names.

And it is in small communities like Danville where minor league baseball teams spark the love of the game in children whose families can not always justify the trip to an MLB city like Atlanta or Washington, D.C.

The stakes are not as high, but the game is possibly more fun.

But minor league baseball is in danger.

As major league owners and players continue to grapple over the terms of a shortened season stemming from the coronavirus pandemic, teams in the minor leagues remain in similar limbo.

Further, it has been well-reported that Major League Baseball is considering the elimination of at least 42 minor league teams — a group that includes Danville and its nine other Appalachian League members — following this year.

No decision has been made regarding the team's future for this season or beyond. According to a statement from the team and the Appalachian League, the season is "delayed indefinitely."

Monday was supposed to be Opening Day for the Braves, but it is now relegated to being just another Monday.

Because nothing is official, it may be too early to deliver a full requiem for the Danville Braves, but fans are already starting to fear the worst.

"It's been fun since Day One," Haymore said, "and I think all baseball fans in this surrounding area are going to miss it tremendously."

Aaron Stewart was 11 years old when the Braves arrived in 1993.

His father, Mitch, worked for an early sponsor of the team and would occasionally sing the national anthem with a few friends from the press box. Aaron usually tagged along and began lending his voice to the performance as well.



Aaron Stewart sings the national anthem at a Danville Braves game with his son Paul at his side.

Photo courtesy of Matt Bell

Now 38 and with three kids of his own, Stewart remains a frequent singer of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” but he’s unsure of when he’ll get his next opportunity.

He already misses the “Saturday ritual” of he and his wife, Nikia, taking daughters Greenleigh, 12, and Carrington, 10, and son Paul, 7, out to lunch and swinging by the ballpark early to watch batting practice.

“They were always disappointed when the club was out of town,” he said. “It’ll be kinda sad without them.”

While on one pregame stroll near the bullpens during the 2014 season, Stewart chased down an errant throw from the field where players were warming up. His return throw also had a little too much muscle behind it, but one player managed to leap up high to snag it.

“I said, ‘This kid’s going to the major leagues,’” Stewart said.

That kid was Ozzie Albies, who debuted with the Atlanta Braves three years later.

“To have that one-on-one connection with a potential major league player,” Stewart added, “that’s probably what we’re going to miss the most.”

Stewart is far from the only one who will miss experiencing the early years of these players’ careers.

Judy Merricks, 72, has been president of the team’s booster club since 2014. She always enjoyed attending the meet-the-players events. Among her favorites was Andrelton Simmons from the 2010 team.

“Over the years we’ve gotten to meet quite a few good players and some really sweet young men that we’ve followed on and are still keeping up with,” Merricks said.

Richard Dixon, 67, remembers fondly the days of Andruw Jones (1994) roaming center field and Rafael Furcal (1998) at shortstop. More recently, he marveled at Bryce Ball mashing home runs last season.

“I just loved to watch them,” he said. “They were hungry ballplayers and they played good ball.”

Judy Keesee, 76, was an original member of the Piedmont Professional Baseball nonprofit that, with the help of the local American Legion team, helped secure enough money for a new stadium to lure a team to town. She’s been a season-ticket holder from the beginning, and she partnered with the booster club to put together scrapbooks for players to remember their time in Danville.

“You really got the chance to know them while they were here,” she said. “We won’t get that chance this year, it doesn’t look like.”

If professional baseball is stripped away from Danville, Keesee believes it’s the younger generation of fans that will miss out the most.

“Even though we call it the rookie season, to a lot of young people they think it is like the Atlanta Braves,” she said. “When you start with the younger age group ... it instills that love of baseball and it continues on.”



Longtime Danville Braves fan Richard Dixon shows off an Appalachian League ball and a mitt signed by the entire 2009 team.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

Merricks said she is “apprehensive” about the future of the team. She understands the pandemic taking away one season, but to lose baseball altogether would be quite sad.

Dixon, who had spent past summers in Chatham after teaching at Episcopal High School in Alexandria for 27 years, just moved to the area full-time and hopes the Braves are able to stick around.

“[Danville is] big enough to have a minor league team,” he said.

When presented with the possibility of a team from a college summer league or an independent league without any MLB affiliation, Dixon didn’t hesitate to say he’d still support whatever team was here.

“If Danville had a team, I’d go see it,” he said. “If they don’t have a team, I’d drive up to Lynchburg and spend my money in Lynchburg.”

There is still much to be decided regarding the fate of the team, and fans are still holding out hope, but they are also careful to not get too optimistic.

If the last Braves game has already been played, Haymore will miss the “family” he’s made in the section of fellow season-ticket holders. And he will continue to cherish the memories of watching Mike Soroka, Adam Wainwright and Ronald Acuña Jr. on their respective paths to stardom.

He said his most thrilling memory of the Braves, though, came in 2001, when he filled in as umpire for another game. He got to call the balls and strikes behind Joe Mauer, then an 18-year-old catcher with the Elizabethton Twins.

“His first game away from home was in Danville, and I had the honor of being behind the plate,” he said.

When asked if there was ever a conflict of interests in having a Danville fan and season-ticket holder serve as an umpire, Haymore laughed and said, “Nobody ever said anything about it.”

Of course not. That’s the beauty of the minor leagues.

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https://godanriver.com/sports/high-school/elijah-bam-moshenek-claims-dan-rivers-first-wrestling-state-championship/article_3b9a7774-4bfb-5e4f-825d-b86018fe4301.html

Elijah 'Bam' Moshenek claims Dan River's first wrestling state championship

By PARKER COTTON

Feb 22, 2020



Dan River junior Elijah Moshenek flexes for the crowd as he has his hand raised following his 13-5 major decision victory in the Class 2 126-pound championship match on Saturday at the Salem Civic Center.

Parker Cotton/Register & Bee

By PARKER COT



SALEM — Since Dan River High School brought back its wrestling program six years ago after a 20-some-year hiatus, the Wildcats have had state qualifiers and state placers.

But one thing the program has never had was a state champion.

Junior Elijah “Bam” Moshenek became the first on Saturday, winning by 13-5 major decision over Appomattox County’s John Martin at 126 pounds in the VHSL Class 2 Wrestling State Championships at the Salem Civic Center.

Fresh off the mat, through deep breaths, he reflected on what it meant to place first and be his school’s first champion.

“I’m proud to represent Dan River,” he said. “I’ve been doing this for a long time, and this was the goal.”

This year was his third trip to the state meet, and he finally found the success he had long hoped for.

“Freshman year I got fourth, wasn’t happy. Came back sophomore year and got third, still wasn’t satisfied,” Moshenek said. “Came here, got in the finals and won it all.”

Satisfied?

“Yes, sir.”

After yelling and flexing at the crowd, Moshenek came off the mat and embraced his father and head coach Chris Moshenek.

“I knew this was gonna come eventually for him,” Chris said. “He just worked too hard to not ever get it, and it’s here, and I couldn’t be more proud of him.”

Just as the early exits from the state meet took their toll on his son, the losses were similarly tough.



Moshenek tallied another takedown to open the final period, and he stayed just out of Martin's reach thereafter en route to a 13-5 final.

With one year left in his high school career, Moshenek hopes to return to state next year and become a two-time champion. Until then, though, the feeling of winning — finally — will suffice.

“Best feeling I’ve ever felt,” he said.

Dan River Moshenek day 2.jpg



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