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Alex Barbir took long, winding journey to becoming Liberty's kicker

Damien Sordelett

Nov 10, 2020



Liberty's Alex Barbir (95) celebrates kicking the game-winning field goal in the last second of the fourth quarter of an NCAA college football game against Virginia Tech on Saturday.

Matt Gentry, The Roanoke Times/

The blaring music made the walls in the cramped visitor's locker rooms shake. Players ecstatically jumped around and sang along to whatever song was playing. It was difficult to hear, let alone think, as vibrant energy circulated throughout the Liberty football team.

Alex Barbir slipped out of the locker room and sought solace in the quiet of an empty Lane Stadium. He walked to the midfield stripe, sat down in the middle of the VT logo and let his emotions take over. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Barbir, moments removed from making a career-long 51-yard field goal with one second remaining to lift Liberty to a 38-35 victory over Virginia Tech, soaked in the magnitude of the accomplishment and reflected on the long, winding journey he took to reach this point.

He has suffered two painful injuries that tend to sideline kickers for long stretches. He gave up his dream of playing football when he transferred from Penn State to Liberty. The thought of putting on shoulder pads, lacing up cleats and being a part of a tight-knit locker room was not even on his radar.

As Barbir sat on the grass and reflected, it made the moment he was living in that much sweeter.

“Football was not in my plan for the rest of my life. I was done,” Barbir revealed after Saturday's game. “I wanted to live a normal life, be a student, get a job and move on. Deciding to play football when I pretty much was ready to graduate was a complete change in my life.”

Barbir, upon his arrival on the Liberty campus prior to the 2018 spring semester, was content focusing on his studies and not playing football again. He chose to attend Liberty because it fit his Christian faith, and he had three people close to him who had ties to the university — his older brothers, Timothy and Joshua, attended Liberty, and Seth Sasser, one of his best friends from Cumming, Georgia, was on campus.

Why didn't Barbir at least try out for the team? His reasoning was simple: Alex Probert was the entrenched starter and handled all kickoffs and field goals. In Barbir's mind, what was the point if he was just going to ride the bench?

Everything changed when Probert announced he was transferring to Iowa State.

"When the opportunity came, I pretty much decided that I'd rather say that I at least tried. If I fail, I fail, but at least I put in the effort to try, to be the kicker, versus be 20 years down the road and be like, man, if I would have kicked, would I have been good? Would I have gone to the NFL?" Barbir said. "When you close the door like that, you have no clue. ... I would rather say that I tried. If I failed, it is what it is. But there's also the possibility that I will actually be successful and maybe I'll actually play after school. I have no clue what's in store. I just didn't want to have that feeling 10, 15 years down the road that I wish I would have done it."

Matt Bevens, the program's current director of player development, saw on social media in 2018 that Barbir had transferred to Liberty, and Bevens confirmed with the university Barbir was enrolled in classes.

Bevens, a former kicker at Liberty, knew Barbir's name from 2013 when then-coach Turner Gill received an email Barbir was interested in Liberty. Gill was unable to reply because of NCAA restrictions on communications with a high school prospect, so the email went unanswered.

But Bevens kept the information of Barbir's studies at Liberty in his memory bank in case the Flames ever needed an emergency kicker.

"That time in the year, Alex [Probert] left us in the beginning of February, and that's just a really awkward time. Then the pandemic hits and then it's even more awkward to try to find a transfer kicker or a high school kicker," Bevens said. "It's just really bad timing. Thankfully, we remembered Barbir was still on campus, and we reached out to him and he was all for it."

Long snapper Austin Mock had Barbir's cell phone number thanks to sharing mutual friends, and special teams coordinator Tanner Burns wasted little time reaching out to Barbir.

The two met the day after Probert elected to transfer to Iowa State, and Burns spent an hour each of the next several days recruiting Barbir to join the roster.

It finally paid off, as Barbir was added to the active roster one week after Probert left.

"That might be my best recruiting story I have so far in my young career," Burns said.

Barbir claimed the starting job in training camp after Jason Stricker, the scholarship kicker on the roster, suffered a similar groin injury to the one Barbir suffered in May as he was working his way back into kicking shape.

Barbir had about a month and a half to prepare for this season (he said he lost three months recovering from the groin injury), and it showed early in the season when he was attempting to get into a kicking groove.

The 5-foot-9, 220-pound Barbir is 8 for 12 on field goals this season. The 51-yarder he made at Virginia Tech was his longest of the season.

He entered the game 2 for 6 on field goals of 30 yards or longer.

"That's one thing you like about him: He doesn't flinch," Burns said.

Barbir had never attempted a field goal at the college level prior to this season.

He spent two seasons at Penn State and only attempted five kickoffs in the 2017 campaign. He spent the 2016 season redshirting after he suffered an injury on the hip joint of his right leg (kicking), and then had surgery in January 2017.

Barbir estimates the recovery lasted between six and eight months and was mentally tough on him. The love of football waned as he realized priorities in his life weren't where he wanted as the 2017 season progressed.

“There’s a lot of things that I value in life, and obviously football only has so much value. Football only goes on for so long, and at Penn State, I just felt like I was not getting what I needed as a person and spiritually,” Barbir said. “I have nothing to say bad against Penn State. For me, personally as a person, that’s just not where I wanted to be and I felt like I valued a lot of other things outside of football. Ultimately, I had to choose whether, do I want to stay here and persevere through what I feel like I shouldn’t and continue football here? Or do I value other things over football? I got to the point where I was like, there are a lot of other things in life I value more than me being a football player here, and that’s ultimately why I chose to leave and not play.”

Barbir was content not playing at Liberty, but his father, Daniel, and uncle, Nick, kept pestering him. They, along with Barbir’s mother, Hope, continued to encourage him to give football one more try.

“I know you can take the job, I know you can win the position, I know you can make the difference for Liberty,” Daniel Barbir told his son.

Alex Barbir’s mind kept circling back to Probert being on the roster as an established kicker. It didn’t make sense, in his mind, to return to a sport he admitted he resented because it wasn’t adding value to his life when he was at Penn State.

When Probert transferred, part of Barbir’s thought process in electing to play focused on his parents. They sacrificed the better part of a month after his hip surgery by staying with him in State College, Pennsylvania. They pushed him on a wheelchair around the snow-covered campus that winter, helped with chores, bathed him and showed him their unconditional love. And once he left Penn State and transferred to Liberty, they supported him as he transitioned to being a student.

How could he repay all they had sacrificed for him? He simply tried.

“Ultimately, a big part of why I chose to play was not really even for myself, but it was to honor my parents,” he said. “I know they had high hopes for me in terms of Penn State and playing football in college. My college career didn’t really go at all how I

thought it would, and obviously, that's a downer for them a little bit. I kind of viewed it as an opportunity where if I at least try, whether I fail or not, they at least know that I tried, and that alone honors them.”

Barbir's parents were in the east grandstands at Lane Stadium on Saturday and celebrated the moment they saw his 51-yard field goal clear the uprights with plenty of room to spare.

They were still in the grandstands when he emerged from the locker room and made his way to midfield, where he closed his eyes and let the emotions take over.

He never envisioned being in this position again. Yet here he was, fulfilling a dream he thought was lost in a former life.

“It's not what I was planning on doing at all. To go from having surgery at Penn State, coming here, not playing and then playing, and my whole life is changing, to now playing, winning the job and playing a major role in beating Virginia Tech for Liberty. I was just so blown away,” he said. “I just wanted to reflect on what's happened in my life. I'm just blessed, honestly. Honestly.”

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/oakwoods-morris-alexander-being-inducted-into-african-american-golfers-hall-of-fame/article_758c22a0-f0e8-5a25-825a-b3fb9a418911.html

Oakwood's Morris Alexander being inducted into African American Golfers Hall of Fame

Damien Sordelett

Aug 8, 2020



the News & advance file

Morris Alexander repairs an old golf club in this 1960 photo at the golf shop at Oakwood Country Club. Alexander, an accomplished golfer in the 1920s, spent the majority of his life at Oakwood tutoring state and national amateur champions and helping any golfer who sought advice.

small patch of land nestled right behind the pro shop at Oakwood Country Club was unable to routinely grow grass. It served as an instructional area between the 1920s and 1950s in which young, aspiring golfers carved hundreds of thousands of divots and refined their games under the tutelage of Morris Alexander.

These instructional sessions weren't the lessons Alexander routinely held at the No. 1 tee, the ninth hole and the No. 18 green for the flock of teenagers who came in earnest to learn. Instead, these were times during his work day when he easily walked out of the tight confines of the pro shop and freely assisted the youngsters who wanted to work on their games.

Alexander, who was Black, spent his 54-year tenure as caddymaster and golf professional at the white member-only country club giving back to the members and the golfing community.

His pupils didn't view him any differently because of his skin color. They called him "Pop," and thought of him as a mentor, father figure and friend.

"Looking back on it then, it didn't seem like much, but looking back on it, he was, I reckon we would call him a pioneer," said Ned Baber, one of Alexander's pupils from the 1950s who won the Virginia State Amateur championship in 1960. "He deserves everything he can get, all the recognition he can get."

Alexander, an accomplished golfer in the 1920s, spent the majority of his life at Oakwood tutoring state and national amateur champions, helping any golfer who sought advice and leaving an impact on the Lynchburg golfing community.

His contributions to the game are the reason Alexander is being inducted posthumously into the African American Golfers Hall of Fame on Aug. 15 at Eastpointe Country Club in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. He is the first Lynchburg native to be honored by the AAGHOF.

Alexander died at age 85 on Feb. 4, 1977, following a brief illness.

“Morris was *the* everything at Oakwood. He ran the golf shop, he ran the caddies, he did a little bit of everything,” said Vinny Giles, who won seven Virginia Amateur championships, one U.S. Amateur title and a British Amateur crown during his illustrious career. “... He was a very positive influence on a lot of young and up-and-coming players in the Lynchburg area.”

Alexander’s golfers went on to win two U.S. Amateur titles, two British Amateur crowns and 11 championships in the state of Virginia. In addition to Giles and Baber’s state titles, Margaret Lucado won the Virginia women’s championship in 1923 and 1924, and Jimmy Watts claimed the 1955 Virginia Amateur Championship.

Baber and Billy Walker represented Oakwood in the 1954 International Junior Jaycee Golf Tournament in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Alexander’s knowledge of the game stemmed from his ability to win on a national level. He won the 1927 and 1928 National Caddy Championship at Cobbs Creek Golf Course in Philadelphia, and also tied the course record at Oakwood in 1928 that earned national attention in the Black press.

“You’re not going to be getting these accolades from incredible golfers unless you’ve got some serious knowledge and skills yourself,” said Lane Demas, a history professor at Central Michigan University who teaches African American and sports history.

Demas spoke at the historical marker dedication that honored Alexander in front of Oakwood back in December.

“The club seemed to have nurtured his talents. It’s interesting that he stayed and he stayed for so long in the same place with the same job and got better and better at golf,” Demas said. “I think that says a lot, not just about how good he would have been as a player, but he certainly would have had to have a diverse and savvy set of social skills to be able to continually endear himself to the other workers at the club, the club members.

“It was really remarkable at the ceremony to see there were some tears shed by people who remembered him in their youth when they were young and their parents and their families were members of this club in the 50s and whatnot. As kids, they remembered Morris and still had this bond. You could tell when they were speaking at the ceremony. It really says a lot about him as a man.”

Walker was one of three former pupils of Alexander who spoke at the historical marker ceremony. He credited Alexander with fueling his passion for the game of golf, calling him a father figure when he didn't have anyone else to teach him the game.

“Other than my family and other than school, golf was my passion and it was all due to him,” Walker said. “ ... “When he passed away, it was a big loss as far as I was concerned. It was more than golf. It was more of a passion and as a father to me.”

Alexander began working as a caddymaster at Lynchburg Country Club in 1911 when he was 20 years old and served under seven golf professionals before retiring in Dec. 1967. He operated the golf shop alone in two periods from 1932 to '35 and 1939 to '45.

LCC officially changed its name to Oakwood Country Club in 1914 after its merger with Oakwood Gun Club.

The nine holes from LCC became the back nine of a quirky 18-hole, 4,800-yard course once the layout was completed on the old Oakwood Gun Club property.

Oakwood competed for membership with Boonsboro Country Club following the course's completion in 1928. Boonsboro offered a beautiful, 7,000-yard layout that challenged each golfer and easily attracted those from Lynchburg to flock to the track just outside of the city limits in Bedford County.

The adults favored Boonsboro. The teenagers opted to go to Oakwood so they could learn from Alexander, who taught lessons for a small fee and passed along every bit of knowledge he could.

“He sort of took us under his wing,” Giles said. “He would try to help us learn how to play, learn how to have better etiquette, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. He was just kind of a jack of all trades.”

Jane White, Baber’s sister, spearheaded the effort to get the historical marker honoring Alexander’s contributions to Oakwood. The News & Daily Advance ran a 1960 story on Alexander citing his victories in the 1927 and 1928 National Caddy Championship, but White needed additional verification on Alexander’s accomplishments for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to include it on the historical marker.

She reached out to Joseph Bausch, a chemistry professor at Villanova University, in December 2018 to see if he could verify Alexander’s victories at Cobbs Creek. Bausch is one of the organizers of the Friends of Cobbs Creek, a group that has worked at compiling the history of the course, the original design of the 18-hole layout and raising funds to return it to its original design.

Bausch was unable to find the results from the National Caddy Championship for White to include on the historical marker, but he was so moved by Alexander’s accomplishments that he nominated him for the AAGHOF.

“He had to be really, really a special person,” Bausch said, “and just seemed an absolute no-brainer to suggest to get him in the African American Golfers Hall of Fame.”

Ed LaBorwit, a former sports writer for The News in Lynchburg, wrote on July 15, 1960, that Alexander’s greatest accomplishment in life would have to be his students.

Those wide-eyed, eager-to-learn youngsters who developed into accomplished amateur golfers with pages of accolades would argue it was the other way around: Alexander’s greatest accomplishment in life was the impact he had on and off the golf course in the Lynchburg community.

https://newsadvance.com/news/local/her-senior-season-canceled-a-former-lu-lacrosse-player-ran-to-the-front-lines-to/article_aa05a69b-6336-550c-9609-cb5d9cef1a91.html

Her senior season canceled, a former LU lacrosse player ran to the front lines to become a nurse

Damien Sordelett

May 23, 2020



Liberty senior Molly Blake advances the ball during a March 5 matchup against Robert Morris at Liberty Lacrosse Field in Lynchburg. The Flames' 14-13 victory marked the final game of Morris' career as the ASUN Conference canceled the remainder of its spring sports season because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Liberty University Photo

Her passion for nursing was born in the hallways at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Molly Blake was a frequent visitor there when her father, Matthew, underwent treatment for Stage 5 kidney disease when she was growing up.

Those trips and seeing the strange faces could have made Blake skittish, but she ultimately saw the good in each nurse who provided care. They weren't looming figures who only inflicted pain when they poked and prodded or administered medication; Blake witnessed compassion, care and kindness.

The doctors and nurses offered encouragement and made sure the family felt stronger when they departed for the 30-minute drive home to Finksburg, Maryland.

“I realized I wanted to be in the profession where I was constantly serving others and building relationships with people and just interacting with people — I'm not the type of person that can sit at a desk all day and stare at a screen,” Blake said. “I just really do think it's my calling.”

That calling came into focus during her junior year of high school at the Gerstell Academy, well after she already had committed to attend Liberty University to play for the women's lacrosse team. The passion to serve others, especially children, made her want to be on the front lines, where she can help those who desperately need it.

So now she works in the neurotrauma pediatric ICU at the Children's Medical Center in Dallas, Texas, a job she accepted during the coronavirus pandemic.

“Little did I know this whole time I would be walking into my profession during a pandemic,” she said.

Blake's passion for helping others eventually became clearer when her senior season on the lacrosse field came to an unexpected conclusion March 13. The ASUN Conference announced that day it was canceling all remaining spring sports contests, a day after the NCAA canceled its winter and spring sports championships because of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

When Kelly Nangle, Blake's lacrosse coach, disclosed the news to her team, Blake went through what she described as "a roller coaster of emotions."

Her initial emotion was "just sad about everything." She and the other six seniors on the roster began to realize there would be no closure to their collegiate careers. No walks across the turf field with family on Senior Day. No opportunity to compete for a conference championship with a chance to play in the Division I national tournament.

Along the roller coaster ride, Blake felt "kind of terrified and scared of so much unknown and what to expect." Though she had accepted her job at Children's Medical Center exactly one week prior to her lacrosse career coming to an abrupt end, there was still uncertainty, as the spread of COVID-19 forced closings and cancellations across the country.

In the final two weeks of her studies, Blake saw her professors adapt course work to begin teaching about pandemics and "just what we're walking into." Blake was completing her capstone clinicals in the pediatric emergency department at Lynchburg General Hospital and was at the hospital the night before the first positive COVID-19 case was confirmed there in late March.

"They really pushed you to prepare us for going into this profession in the middle of the pandemic," Blake said. "I think it's just been certainly unprecedented times, but for me, I'm just enjoying learning and growing so much."

Blake said she was the first player in the lacrosse program's history to earn her bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) in four years, and the shortened lacrosse season was a blessing in disguise as she prepared to enter her profession.

"I think once the season was canceled, it was the first time in my four years that I got to totally focus on being a nurse and being a student. In the past four years, it's just always been a balancing act for me trying to give 100% in both my academics and my athletics," she said.

“Me trying to see the bright side in this whole situation, it was really awesome for me to spend my last couple of weeks of my senior year just focusing on being a nurse. It kind of helped me in that transition from becoming a student nurse to a real nurse. I think during that time, I was able to take more time to be in my studies and pay attention more to the news and what’s going on and just talking to other healthcare workers and kind of preparing my heart and my mind for what I’m about to walk into.”

Blake stepped into a profession that requires 12-hour shifts and constant attention to detail. That is where her lacrosse background has come into play. She played the sport for 13 years, and she applies several traits she learned during her playing career. Time management, learning how to adapt quickly, thinking on her toes, and emphasizing loving and caring relationships are the first that came to her mind.

“It’s so important because it’s scary out there right now,” she said.

The pediatric ICU at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas is split into two sides: the neurotrauma side where Blake works and the general pediatric ICU on the other side that has been turned into the designated COVID-19 floor of the hospital.

She said one of the hardest things to deal with in her first month on the job is seeing the limited interactions parents and family members can have with the young patients because of the pandemic. That is why, with each stop to a room, she tries to be an extension of the family with her calm and reassuring nature.

“I have fallen more in love with the profession,” she said, “and just realized I want to serve and I want to help.”

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