

Dragon thrower heading to nationals

BY TERRY BEIGIE
Record Editor

Alex Hoffman is heading to nationals in March.

Hoffman, a junior at William Monroe High School, will participate in the National Scholastic Athletic Foundation's New Balance Nationals Indoor competition.

The Dragon thrower qualified with a shot put throw of 52 feet 8 inches earlier this month in indoor track at William Monroe.

"I've been doing shot put since middle school," Hoffman said. "It's just fun. I like the competitiveness and the journey. You're competing with yourself and the tape and achieving your goals."

Nationals is where the top third in the nation come together to compete for the title. Hoffman is first in the state and this year it'll be held March 12-15 at the National Armory in New York City.

Qualifying for nationals already was a shock for Hoffman, he said.

"It was a goal to qualify, but I didn't think it'd happen already," he said.

In the spring, Hoffman threw about 45 feet. He's spent the past eight months training about five days a week.

"I lift a lot and work on my throwing technique," he said.

Throwing a shot put

or discus is not the same as throwing a football or a baseball.

Hoffman holds the shot put—a heavy spherical ball—in one hand near his chin as he goes through his wind up before releasing it as far as he can throw it.

"It's like a whole body throw," he said. "You use every part of your body just to get it as far as you can."

While indoor track is not a very big sport at William Monroe, two of the students competed against 29 other teams last weekend at the Fred Hardy Invitational at Fork Union. Hoffman came in first for shot put with a throw of 50 feet 1.25 inches, more than four feet further than second place. Trevor Myers earned seventh place with a throw of 41 feet 5 inches.

Hoffman built a throwing ring in his yard at home, said Denise Hoffman, his mother.

"When he qualified for nationals it was the most exciting moment that we've had with track, I think, with throwing," she said. "It was so exciting. We didn't think he would throw that big yet. We expected it early spring. We're all going to New York. His work ethic is amazing."

Hoffman said for him the work is fun.

"A lot of hard work is behind it, but it's just fun to me," he said.

His father, Tommy Hoffman, volunteers to

help coach indoor track, as well as help at Blue Ridge School where Hoffman sometimes trains.

"My dad was the one who introduced me to throwing," he said.

"I was really excited when he qualified," Tommy Hoffman said. "It's not as popular as football, but we have a great influence with UVA here; they're one of the top colleges in the United States for throwing."

Hoffman said UVA has throwers from all around the world because track and field is more popular in other countries.

"The US is getting better, but it's not like Iceland or Croatia, these other countries it's the sport for primary school and elementary school kids—that and soccer," Tommy Hoffman said. "Track participates more athletes than any other sport in high school and it's boys and girls which is unique."

Tommy Hoffman said he hopes to get a record board for the sport, as William Monroe has had indoor track since the mid-1970s, but it's still in progress.

The goal for Alex Hoffman is to participate in throwing at a Division 1 college.

When asked if he hopes to get to the Olympics he laughs.

"That's a stretch, but yeah, maybe, maybe," he said.

He knows he wants



PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Alex Hoffman, a junior at William Monroe High School, went from throwing a shot put 45 feet last spring, above, to qualifying for nationals with a throw longer than 52 feet recently.

to study something that has to do with athletics, though, in college.

In the meantime, Hoffman's focus is on doing his best for his

team until the state tournament the first week of March, then he'll look to nationals.

"I'm just hoping to get better and better,

coming up to nationals and hopefully just do my best and represent William Monroe well,"

he said.

Monroe sends 5 to states for first time

BY TERRY BEIGIE
Record Editor

William Monroe High School qualified more wrestlers for last week's state tournament than any other time in its 13-year history with five heading to Salem Friday and Saturday for the Class 3 matchup. Unfortunately for Monroe Ethan Marcotte couldn't attend due to illness, but the remaining four competed: Connor Marcotte; Connor Redieske; Kaleb Doshier; and Chris Taft.

While none of the wrestlers placed at states, head coach Mark Sizemore is still pleased with the season as a whole.

"I think we had a really good season and we probably had a more consistently winning season than we've had in quite some time primarily because we fielded the full lineup at most of our events," said Sizemore, who is in his 36th year of coaching. "Our team is quite young; the bulk of the team is all made up of sophomores."

He added the team came very close to having seven qualify for the state tournament.

"We always like to say that this past weekend (regionals) and this coming weekend (states) are

the ones that really count—everything else is glorified practice," Sizemore said. "Based on our performance we did everything we were hoping at regionals."

Sizemore said when it comes to wrestling it's a very unique sport—it's just the player and the opponent.

"If we take a loss in football it's really difficult to point a finger at any one person over the course of the game," said Sizemore, who also coaches football at Monroe. "With wrestling if you take a loss, you're the only person you can look at. Even the coaching aspect is different. Coaching really comes in at practice because in the match, we can give them brief snippets of what we see happening, but there's no timeouts and there's no breaks."

Sophomore Chris Taft, who wrestles in the 138-pound class, took third at regionals. He said he got into wrestling because his dad had competed.

"I like it because it's very physical," Taft said. "Every sport I've done is very physical, I also do MMA (mixed martial arts)."

Connor Marcotte, who wrestles at 220 and placed second at regionals, said it was his brother that got



COURTESY PHOTO

Dragon wrestlers before competing at last weekend's state tournament in Salem. From left to right, Chris Taft, Connor Marcotte, Connor Redieske and Kaleb Doshier.

him into it.

"I just thought it was really fun, so I just stayed," said Marcotte, a sophomore. He and his brother, Ethan, are identical twins.

Doshier, another sophomore at 126 pounds, also earned second at regionals.

"I like it because it's a physical sport," he said. Doshier has been wrestling for nine years and said he hopes to do it in college.

"The mental part of wrestling is pretty hard," he said. "They physical part is really tough, too. You get worn out."

Redieske, a junior is the

son of the assistant coach, Chris.

"I've been around the sport my entire life," he said. "I just like the people associated with it and I really enjoy the physicality of it."

Sizemore said that while wrestling isn't a cut sport, it takes a special kind of person who sticks with it.

"They'll cut themselves," he said. "I always say the first week is their trial period. There's nothing wrong with it; you either fall in love with it or don't. I always say to be a true wrestler you have to be a

bit weird. You have to like to work and train hard."

Redieske said he's much more exhausted from a six-minute wrestling match than from a football game.

"And at the end of the day, it's my success or failure," he said.

Doshier has played baseball, too and said wrestling is much more mentally and physically difficult.

Sizemore said the off-season is huge in whether the athlete is successful. They will do weightlifting, but it's imperative they get more wrestling practice, too.

"Once the high school season is over, if they're willing to travel, the players can get in more matches," he said. "You can go almost anywhere within a two-hour drive or less on any given weekend. In high school you're allowed a maximum of 60 matches coming into the post season. Doshier had the most matches for us coming into the post season with 48."

Sizemore said the wrestling practice is necessary.

"Wrestling is such a learned sport. It can be

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Wrestle

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frustrating for kids if they're a better athlete and getting handled up in the match by people who just know more," he said. "Wrestling is the hardest sport hands down that the high school can offer."

Chris Redieske, who coaches wrestling under Sizemore at Albemarle High School, agreed.

"It teaches you a lot of values you don't get anymore, like the concept of earning something. You will not get handed anything; nobody will give you an inch," he said. "The sport

is designed to find out who the best is. It's the closest thing we have to pure competition—one-on-one—that is offered at this level. I think we need more of this type of sport in our schools."

Another thing he loves about wrestling is the lessons about facing obstacles.

"After leaving this room, when they reach a mental point in their lives where there's a struggle that we all face, they can figure out how to overcome it. It becomes an obstacle versus a barrier in their lives," he said.

One myth Sizemore wants to bust about wrestling is that the players

starve themselves or eat poorly.

"That's not even close; we promote good nutritional healthy eating," he said. "We promote and explain and teach healthy eating to these guys better than anybody because at the end of the day it does us no good to have weak kids who haven't eaten for three days have no energy to be in there."

"I think we did pretty good on the season," Marcotte said. "Most people we have are sophomores and they've been getting better with the sport."

“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” —Joshua Medcalf’s “Chop Wood Carry Water”

It’s about impact on kids for Stafford

BY TERRY BEIGIE
Record Editor

Shots. Points. Rebounds. Steals. Fouls. Wins. Losses. In each appearance on the basketball court, teams rack up new numbers for these statistics—wearing them as either badges of honor or as albatrosses, depending on recent performance.

For William Monroe High School head coach Jess Stafford, one number means more than any other: 115. Sure, she made short order of earning 100 wins in six years as varsity coach of the girls basketball team, but it’s the 115 young women she’s had the chance to help along their journey to adulthood that has meant the most.

“After winning the 100th game on Jan. 10, all weekend after it wasn’t how many games we’ve won but how many kids we’ve coached,” said Stafford, who graduated from William Monroe in 2004. “I feel like that number is more important than how many games we’ve won. We tell our kids all the time that it’s a high school basketball game; it doesn’t really matter if you win or lose. You’re not changing anyone’s life by winning a game. But, how many kids we’ve coached, that’s the number that was keeping me awake.”

Turns out in her 10 years as a basketball and softball coach she’s coached 115 kids.

“That, to me, is a better number to measure,”

she said. “How many opportunities have I had as an individual to make a positive impact on a kid?”

And if you’ve spoken with her at any length you know it’s always about the kids to Stafford.

“Honestly, I’m not gonna say it’s easy because it’s never easy, but we’ve had some really talented classes come through and when you’ve got classes of kids winning 20-plus games a season they’re going to stack up pretty quickly,” Stafford said. “The speed at which we won 100 games is a credit to the kids because they’re incredibly talented and work very hard.”

Under Stafford’s tenure, the Dragons earned their first undefeated regular season in the program’s history and the first state tournament berth since 1987. She remembered cutting the net after the team’s Conference 28 win in March 2016, calling that season “a wild ride.”

“That’s the only net we’ve ever cut down, even though we’ve won more championships, including the regional championship, but for whatever reason the ladder didn’t get brought out,” she said.

Stafford began instituting life values (pillars) into the program right away—unity, passion, humility, servant-hood, thankfulness and toughness—and they’ve become the foundation for her program. The team reads books together, the first being “Chop



Coach Jess Stafford calls for “hands in” at the start of every game.

PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Wood Carry Water” by Joshua Medcalf about the process of being great.

“The game isn’t what we’re here for. I’ve coached 115 kids, and two of them have played in college and that’s not because they didn’t want to; it’s just this is the reality of it statistically. As a high school coach, 98% of the kids that you coach are not going to go play in college so why are you focusing 98% of your time on building athletes?” Stafford asked. “That hits home for me. I want those other 113 kids to take something from this and be able to use it in their lives beyond high school.”

Stafford’s first varsity

season (2014-15) the team won eight games. And while she remembers feeling nervous and excited for the first game that season, she doesn’t recall if the team won that game or not.

“I tell the kids all the time they’re not going to remember if we win or lose, and that’s the truth. And this honestly is only, what, six years out?” Stafford laughed. “We didn’t win a lot of games, but we were on the floor, we were busting our tails. We were setting the foundation for what’s happening now. Because without that year and without those struggles and without all the lessons learned through that, we wouldn’t be

succeeding. Those kids are the same kids that won the first conference championship. They were the first kids that went to the state tournament in many years. So, you have to struggle to get there.”

The girls love when Stafford’s 4-year-old Bennett comes to the games, and she said she’s hoping to be the kind of coach she wants for her son.

“As a parent I try to be who I want him to become through example,” she said. “If he’s into sports—or whatever he’s into—I pray that there’s a program that treats him as a whole person. I want that for him in whatever he chooses,

whether music or sports or theater or whatever it happens to be. And that’s why I don’t mind sharing any of the things that we do with anybody that wants to know, and I’m always learning and trying to find different things to pull in.”

Stafford said she loves basketball—from practice to game day—but it’s her love of teaching leadership to her teams that keeps her coaching.

“I’m passionate about being a leader for them and being a role model for them,” she said. “What’s really fun is watching my players help with the Medford Basketball League or watching them serve

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PHOTOS BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Above left, William Monroe High School girls basketball head coach Jess Stafford cuts down the net after the team won the Conference 28 championships in 2016. Above right, Stafford tries to get her team back on track during last year’s state semifinal game.

Stafford

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their community or watching them walk down the hallway and pick up a piece of trash not knowing somebody was watching them.”

The Medford Basketball League allows children with special needs to experience what it means to be on a team and is at Culpeper County, Fluvanna County, Albemarle, Monticello, Madison County, Eastern View, Louisa County and Orange County high schools, in addition to William Monroe High School.

“I’ve come away from this a better person than I was when I started, significantly,” Stafford said. “If I tell you to take school as important and as serious as you do basketball, then I need to take school as serious as I do basketball. If I say I want you to be the person who when you walk by a piece of trash you pick it up, then I need to be that person. And I wasn’t always that person.”

In “Chop Wood Carry Water,” Medcalf tells the reader to let go of the outcome of the event and keep the mind in the present, on the process.

While Stafford was OK surrendering the outcome prior to a match-up, she wasn’t always able to let it go after the game—saying goodbye to the critic, even if it’s coming from within.

“I’ve learned that sometimes it’s OK to lose a game if that means you learn a lesson, and not letting a win or a loss define who I am as a person,” she said. “When you’re the coach it all kind of falls on your shoulders. People sit back and pick apart what you do. So, if you put your whole heart into this, you know, you did the best that you could, it really doesn’t matter. Nobody else is in here with us in the trenches like we are.”

Stafford said she felt the pressure through Samantha Brunelle’s time on her court. Brunelle, the No. 1 2019 college recruit played varsity all four years for William Monroe and now plays for Notre Dame. With that talent comes expectations to do more, be more.

“Very early on I beat myself up a lot, trying to reach an expectation of a community,” Stafford said. “It wasn’t ever malicious, but as a young coach you’ve got college coaches coming in all the time, you’ve got the pressure of the community kind of on your back. It wasn’t in a negative way; they didn’t intend to do it that way. But when I learned to let go of those expectations is when the kids learned to let go. The year we read “Chop Wood Carry Water,” that changed it. You’re never going to get it right for everybody and that’s a lesson you can’t learn until you’re in it.”

Not only did Stafford feel pressure through that time, but so did Brunelle and her teammates. When Brunelle was hurt at the Holiday Hoops tournament in winter 2018 it was time to show the doubters what they’d learned.

Brunelle was out for weeks with a broken foot and the girls won the tournament and made it



PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

On the way to last season’s state semifinal game, the Lady Dragons hang out of the window full of energy and excitement while coach Jess Stafford is all smiles.

to state semifinals. “We went into the locker room and just believed and the kids banded together. They stepped up and there’s no more adverse situation than that,” Stafford recalled. “And they shined and nobody thought we could do it. For years we’d heard that Samantha was the whole team. That’s not true; it’s never been true. But that’s hard to prove and then they got the opportunity to prove it and it made me so happy.”

Stafford doesn’t have a plan for how long she’ll continue coaching; she’s taking it year by year. “I don’t know that

you can put an expiration date on it,” she said. “I do have a 4-year-old who’s just now getting started in his own activities and passions and I’ve already missed a lot. In all honesty here’s what happens: you go in with a plan and then you fall in love with the kids and you can’t let them down. I’m just going to follow my heart.”

Stafford takes the time prior to each game to remind the team of their love of the sport.

“This is the game that we love, so let’s go play like it. And we have a lot of fun; it’s almost mandatory, like if you’re not smiling on the court,

we’re not doing what we’re supposed to be doing.”

Stafford remembered the mentors in her life who got her to this point: a high school coach who really cared about her kids; a college coach who taught the techniques and a lot of what not to do; a different college coach who showed her the value of team unity; and a high school teacher (Mr. Nyrop) who showed her video broadcasting. However, the person who’s had the most influence on her, she said, is her father.

“When I was younger, he coached our travel teams for softball and

AAU basketball and always would help me. He taught me a lot of life lessons that I now teach the kids,” she said. “But we definitely butted heads, too. I mean, he was hard on me. I dreaded those car rides home. He was coming from a place of love, and I knew that it was coming from love and it absolutely molded me into the person and coach and that I am, so I fully appreciate him for all that he did for me and continues to do for me.”

Stafford was certainly not built by basketball, but the experiences it brought have shaped her into the person she

wanted to become. “It’s been a growing and maturing process for me,” Stafford said. “All these kids—all 115—every single one of them I was able to have an impact on them in some way, but they had an impact on me, more than they probably know. They’ve made me a better me. Without question, if I had not done this, I would not be the same person that I am. So, it’s changed me. I will love them for the rest of my life, even if I only coached them for a year. That’s why I do this.”



PHOTO BY BRIAN MELLOTT/FOR THE GREENE COUNTY RECORD

Coach Jess Stafford motivates from the sideline during February 2016 game against John Marshall High School.

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