

## SENIOR OLYMPICS CANCELED

The Northern Virginia Senior Olympics, scheduled for Sept. 12-27, have been canceled. With COVID-19 potentially remaining a concern in the fall, organizers felt it was unsafe to continue planning. The games will return in September 2021.

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# VERY COOL, MR. KUHLER

## Late-blooming Liberty senior to play football at Virginia Tech

By Peter Brewington  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Liberty High senior center Jon Kuhler's college prospects went from murky to perfection practically overnight. Sidelined by a broken hand his junior year, he wasn't even on major football teams' radar. Fast forward to this news flash: Kuhler will be playing at Virginia Tech this fall.

The Hokies told the 6-foot-2, 285-pounder they want him as a preferred walk-on, which puts him on the roster with all benefits except a scholarship. The offer came Feb. 21, and Kuhler jumped on it, continuing his amazing rags-to-riches journey. "I feel like I won the lottery," he said.

Kuhler will become the fourth Eagle to play football at Virginia Tech, following in the footsteps of his idol, Cleveland Browns guard Wyatt Teller, as well as Brandon Gore and Kory Gough. All were offensive linemen for the Hokies.

While it may never become a blockbuster movie like "The Blind Side," the 2009 hit about former Baltimore Ravens lineman Michael Oher, Kuhler's tale is similarly uplifting, almost an impossible dream. There was very little film of Kuhler for colleges to evaluate entering his senior year. But in his only full season, he was a standout on an Eagle team that went 11-1, attracting the notice of Division 2 and 3 programs, and ultimately the legendary Hokies.

"He was a late bloomer, a guy as a freshman we said we had to have this kid for football. He played JV as a sophomore. He started as a junior, but only played two games and broke his hand. He did not play much as a junior, but you could see this kid had high potential going into his senior year and turned it on," coach Travis Buzzo said.

Kuhler's first love was baseball when he came to Liberty in 2016 as a freshman, but Buzzo noticed his size and convinced him to try out for football. "Little did I know, I'd fall in love with it," said Kuhler. "I always was hesitant about playing football because I wanted to become a big-time baseball player."

It helped that Buzzo saw great promise, calling him "Little Wyatt" after Teller, the only player from Fauquier County to play in the NFL. Kuhler embraced the nickname. He wore No. 76 as a sophomore, before the opportunity to grab Teller's No. 57 opened up as a junior. "I didn't know I'd walk in



Virginia Tech-bound Jon Kuhler wore No. 57 as homage to Liberty legend Wyatt Teller, who also played for the Hokies and now the Cleveland Browns. "Having him as a role model drove me to be motivated," said Kuhler, who was an all-region first team center for the 11-1 Eagles.

PHOTO BY KIMBERLEY HUGGINS/HUGSHOTS PHOTOGRAPHY

his footsteps," Kuhler said. "He came out of this school to Tech to where he is now in the NFL and showed he could do it. Having him as a role model drove me to be motivated."

Inserted into the starting lineup as a junior in 2018, Kuhler suffered a huge, self-induced setback when he punched a wall at halftime in the second game and broke his hand.

"It was my true second year playing, and I was thrown into the varsity level. I was missing blocks, and getting the QB hit," said Kuhler. "I was frustrated with myself. I went into the locker room and I punched a wall and it broke. I take that as a learning curve for my senior year. When you get down on yourself, you're letting your opponent get to you."

He regrets it mightily. "The whole offensive line was messed up the rest of the year. It hurt us as a team."

Kuhler broke out as a senior, earning first team all-region honors as the Eagles went undefeated and advanced to the region semifinals. He shined in baseball. Kuhler said he batted .300 as a junior first baseman, hit one home run and led the team in RBIs.

College football offers began to get more serious, with D-3 Randolph-Macon College and Emory & Henry first showing interest. He also had Division 2 offers from Frostburg State, Glenville State (W.Va.), UVA Wise and Alderson Broaddus (W.Va.). Smaller Division I schools, James Madison and Richmond, were considering him for preferred walk-on status as well.

With recruiting going well, Kuhler reached out to Virginia Tech, his dream school. Kuhler emailed John Iezzi, Tech's recruiting coordinator. "He said I had great film and we could move on with the walk-on part of it," Kuhler said.

Buzzo also got involved, contacting another Hokies' coach, Adam Lechtenberg, whom Buzzo knew at Central Connecticut State, where Buzzo played. Lechtenberg was impressed and upped Kuhler's offer from regular walk-on to preferred walk-on, which comes with added benefits. "I got a call to tell Jon to make sure he was by his phone at a certain time. Coach Lechtenberg was going to call and tell him," said Buzzo.

Said Kuhler, "When Lechtenberg called me that night, he said we're going to treat you like a scholarship athlete and feed you as much as you want and get merchandise as part of the team. You'll practice and play with the scholarship athletes. He also said there's a chance of a scholarship down the road if I keep competing. The next thing in my mind is to get a scholarship. "My mom couldn't believe this is happening. She knows this was a dream of mine. Now that it's happening, she's very excited to go down and watch the games. My dad is a Virginia Tech grad, and he's just as excited."

Kuhler views his path to playing time as a center as realistic if he keeps developing. "I know Virginia Tech has their line set. They have a sophomore and a redshirt senior. But I'm ready to compete for that spot. I'll be competing from Day One to get myself better, or the other guys better," he said. "I'm not afraid of failure. I know it will be tough, that's why I'm doing this. This has been my dream, to get to Virginia Tech."

He plans to major in criminology, and is intrigued by possible options in the FBI, CIA, U.S. Marshals Service or Secret Service.

"Hopefully, when I get my degree I can work in federal law enforcement," he said. "The Secret Service would be my dream job."

## James, White, Harris pick colleges; Huggins, Barnes still deciding

By Peter Brewington  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Liberty is expected to have five more college football-bound seniors besides Jon Kuhler.

Guard Josh James will attend Randolph Macon College, defensive back Tre'Von White is going to Louisburg (N.C.) Junior College and linebacker Fred Harris to Shenandoah University. Offensive lineman Dylan Huggins is deciding between three schools. Defensive back Bryan Barnes is hoping to attend Gettysburg (Pa.).

Standing about 6-foot-3, 270 pounds, James had offers from two D-2 programs in West Virginia, Glenville State and Alderson Broaddus, but opted to stay closer to home, picking D-3 Randolph Macon just north of Richmond.

"Josh has been one of our most consistent linemen the last two years," said coach Travis Buzzo. "He can play all five positions on the line. When someone gets hurt he'd go into his spot."

A standout receiver and cornerback, Tre White seemed to make highlight reel plays every week during the Eagles' 11-1 season. With academic issues a factor, junior college was the best route for him.

Virginia has no JCs, so he chose one fairly close by in Louisburg, which is about 200 miles from Bealeton in north central North Carolina, about 35 miles north of Raleigh.

"When he went down for his visit he felt like a big fish in a small pond. He felt wanted there," said Buzzo.

White, who also had an offer from Lackawanna Junior College in Scranton, Pa., played his senior year at about 6-3, 140 pounds, so he'll bulk up and prepare to go somewhere else in two years. "I can see him easily at 180 with his frame. He'll let the body catch up, which it should. He'll be on the meal plan and eat as many times as he wants. Then he can go where he wants to," Buzzo said.

A rare four-year varsity starter at linebacker, Shenandoah-bound Fred Harris ended his Liberty career as the school's all-time leading tackler with 382, surpassing Wyatt Teller's mark.

"He has the natural ability to tackle and get off the block," said Buzzo. "You normally do not see that happen," the coach said about Harris' four years starting a prime-time position.

"We had some injuries freshman year and Fred was inexperienced and thrown in," said Buzzo. "He was 125 pounds then, but he did great with 60 tackles in six games. Every year he gained 15 pounds of muscle and became a much better football player."

Harris is now a solid 5-8, 185 pounds. He made 115 tackles as a senior and scored six touchdowns as running back. He led the Eagles in rushing as a junior.

## NATIONALS TICKET HOLDERS IN LIMBO

With the start of the Major League Baseball uncertain, the Washington Nationals set the start date for all ticket plans to no earlier than June 1. "When MLB announces the actual start date, we will work with our fans to adjust their plans as needed" the team website says.

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## DOING THE TANGO IN HIKING BOOTS

Sky Meadows' trails offer miles of fresh air, but be ready to step aside

**PETER BREWINGTON**  
SPORTS EDITOR



PHOTO BY LISA KIPLINGER

Sports editor Peter Brewington enjoys the view from the Piedmont Overlook Trail at Sky Meadows State Park in Delaplane. With Shenandoah National Park closed, Sky Meadows has picked up even more visitors.

An interesting dance is going on these days on the hiking trails at Sky Meadows State Park in Delaplane. It's not a waltz or paso doble. Call it a tango in the forest, inspired by everyone's nervous reactions to passing each other on trail.

My wife, Lisa, and I went for a 7.5-mile hike (estimated) there last Wednesday, and had our usual superb experience at Sky Meadows, hiking a wide loop that combined a great calorie burn with ever-changing views and broad vistas as we toured one of the most amazing public resources in Northern Virginia.

We've been to Sky Meadows four times since the COVID-19 outbreak in early March. Going twice on the weekend, we saw ample crowds and overflow parking areas in use.

Sky Meadows has seen a massive surge in usage, up nearly 50% from last year, rising from 33,625 in attendance during the January-March period in 2019 to 49,644 during the same three months in 2020.

Sky Meadows park manager Kevin Bowman says the 22-plus-mile trail system has been meeting the demands of a restless, cooped-up public. "One of the positives I see coming out of this very trying time is a growing sense of appreciation for, and people's connection to the outdoors in their local communities," said Bowman.

Last Wednesday was light. The parking lot at Turner Pond was empty at 12:30 p.m., except for us.

Thirty-five minutes after a happily lonely start, we reached the main visitor center. This is where most people start. We noted about a dozen cars there, and we started to encounter more hikers,

## A signature hike at Sky Meadows

Here's a moderately strenuous circuit hike I've done several times.

It's about 7 miles, and briefly channels you onto the storied Appalachian Trail.

It starts at the Turner Pond parking area, which makes the route about 2 miles longer and more rewarding. Walk toward what looks to be a working farm, then turn left and follow a 5K cross country course steadily up.

Stay to the right, and eventually

wind up above the visitor center.

From there take the Piedmont Overlook Trail steeply upward. It eventually connects with the North Ridge Trail, then Ambassador Whitehouse Trail, then the AT.

You leave the AT at the North Ridge Trail to come down. There are a variety of lower trails that wind back down to Turner Pond.

-PETER BREWINGTON

seeing people every 20 minutes or so over the next three hours.

We passed by a pair on horseback, two solo hikers, two or three couples, a few groups of parents with their kids and a group of five guys.

The infrequent encounters carried some mild anxiety. While Sky Meadows' trails are remarkably wide, the act of passing another person can be awkward.

Weeks of COVID-19 news bombardment have told us how contagious the virus is, with masks now encouraged nationally.

So what's the rule nowadays on a nature trail, which involves passing in sometimes narrow confines?

Bowman didn't mention masks but

he's encouraging social distancing, stressing hikers keep at least 6 feet from others at all times. "Alert others of your presence and step aside to let others pass at a safe distance," he said.

We witnessed various examples of precautions being taken ... or not. Some hikers passed by us, barreling uphill with their heads down, forcing Lisa and me to quickly whip out our home-made masks, cut from Christmas dish towels, loop them over our ears and scurry to the side.

While brief pleasantries were exchanged at times, most meetings were impersonal, characterized by a "Let's-not-get-too-close-to-each-other" vibe.

It was a tango, characterized by semi-synchronized rhythms and

## Sky Meadows Info

**-Location:** In Delaplane about 35 miles from Manassas. Take Rt. 66 West 21 miles to Rt. 17. Go six miles.  
**-Cost:** \$7 per vehicle Monday through Friday, and \$10 Saturdays and Sundays. Pay by exact cash or check to "Treasurer of Virginia" and utilize the yellow envelopes.

abrupt pauses and done with often very serious faces. Like ABC's "Dancing With The Stars" in hiking boots.

Late in the hike we met a family of four who, like us, had a strict safety routine. Seeing us, they stopped, pulled into a side area and turned their backs.

"That's been our tactic," said Jen Murdoch. "We kind of adopted that from an older gentleman we saw. It feels a little anti-social, but I think it's a smart thing."

"It feels a little rude," agreed husband Ian. "We feel self-conscious turning our backs. We try to say hi well in advance. We've seen the extremes. Some people are completely oblivious, and some are like us and very conscious."

The Murdochs came down from Brooklyn, N.Y., about six weeks ago and are staying in Warrenton along with their daughters, Isla, 11, and Elyse, 9.

Ian, with a 2-pound camera around his neck, has been exploring local hikes with his three "girls." They've been to Shenandoah National Park (now off-limits) and Shenandoah River State Park.

"It just takes your mind off everything else. It forces me to try to not do work from home. Forces us to talk and not stare at the screens. When we're out here, we're not thinking about the pandemic and the implications. It takes our mind off everything," he said.

Pleased with meeting kindred spirits like the Murdochs, we marched onward. After a break for a banana, peanuts and Vitamin Water, we reached Turner Pond about three-and-a-half hours after we started, feeling pleased to get a healthy dose of fresh air and sunshine and lucky that we live so close to such a beautiful place to safely stretch our legs.

## Bull Run Occoquan Trail offers 18 miles of natural exercise

By Peter Brewington  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Who knew there were over 18 miles of semi-uninterrupted hiking trails in Fairfax County?

Meet the Bull Run Occoquan Trail, which is still open, despite some parking inconveniences.

The trail's length is daunting for weekend warriors tackling it in one day, although die-hards do it. "It's kind of a rite of passage to walk the whole thing. The majority of use is shorter segments," said Chris Pauley, parks operations director for NOVA Parks, which owns and operates more than

12,000 acres of parks in Northern Virginia.

Forming the border with Prince William County, the Bull Run Occoquan Trail runs from Bull Run Regional Park on the edge of Manassas Park through Clifton to Fountainhead Regional Park in Fairfax Station. While entirely in southern Fairfax County, its proximity to Prince William means heavy usage by Manassas and Woodbridge residents. Most jump on for a walk, run, hike or bike ride.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created some logistical challenges. Bull Run Regional Park and Fountainhead Regional Park are now gated. There is no parking, although people can walk into the

park to exercise or use trails.

Pauley mentioned limited parking at Route 28 near Compton Road in Centreville, Hemlock Overlook Regional Park and Bull Run Marina.

Pauley is happy NOVA parks are still open for social distancing walks, but he's also suggesting people find ways to recreate closer to home.

"We'd love to have you, but parks everywhere are inundated," Pauley said. "That's why we got to the point where we had to close gates. We had so many (people) that our usage exploded, and it was difficult to social distance."

## MEET THE GAINESVILLE HIGH CARDINALS

After looking at names such as Red Fox, Wolves, Black Bear, Gators and Gorillas, Gainesville High School will become the first Virginia public high school to call itself the Cardinals. The Cardinals received the most votes in a survey to parents and students. The school opens in fall, 2021.

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# SPORTS

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## NO RUNNING, NO HITTING, BUT IT'S FOOTBALL

### Northwestern District schools link up in 7-on-7 fall passing leagues

By Peter Brewington  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Who says there's no high school football this fall?

Thanks to the presence of a 7-on-7 passing league, Fauquier and Liberty went toe-to-toe last Saturday morning in a renewal of their age-old rivalry. Fauquier led most of the game before Liberty pulled out a 33-29 victory with the game over in about an hour.

While the result mattered, the bigger news is the presence of football, made possible by the impetus of the three Fauquier County high school activities directors, who found an outlet for their kids and coaches this fall.

"We're ecstatic the kids get to play. We can work on our stuff," said Fauquier coach Karl Buckwalter. "We're not trying to play gadget defenses or do things just to win the passing league. We're working on our stuff and our coverages. We're changing coverages and it's being filmed."

The six-school league began Sept. 23 and runs until Nov. 7 when a postseason tournament will be held at Liberty.

The league consists of separate "A" and "B" and teams from FHS, LHS, Kettle Run, Culpeper County, Skyline and Warren County high schools. There are also four "C" squads consisting of freshman and eighth grade teams, one each at FHS, LHS, Kettle Run and Warren County.

Elsewhere, three other Winchester-area Northwestern District teams — Millbrook, Sherando and James Wood — are competing in a six-week 7-on-7 league sponsored by Frederick County Parks & Recreation.

Unity Reed activities director Kevin Turner was not aware of any Prince William County schools encouraging participation in 7-on-7 leagues, but wouldn't be surprised if some players were playing somewhere.

Fauquier County coaches and officials emphasize their league is being run by an AAU program called Team Virginia Athletics, and is not a formal high school league. "You have to be a member of a high school team, but it doesn't have anything to do with the high school. It's an AAU team paying to use our fields," said Kettle Run activities director Paul Frye.

Players registered with Team Virginia Athletics and paid a \$60 fee to join.

"There are rosters that are turned into the ADs everyday from the schools," said Fauquier AD Mark Ott. "Those rosters have to match up with who registered for the league. You can't add kids part of the way through. It's only the kids who originally signed up."

They're using only Liberty, Fauquier and Kettle Run as venues.

They play on a condensed field of



The presence of 7-on-7 football leagues is bringing relief to some local football programs in the Class 3 and 4 Northwestern District. Because it's a passing league, linemen don't play, but still, "It's phenomenal," said Fauquier High coach Karl Buckwalter.

PHOTO BY THE OLNEY FAMILY

40 yards with the regular end zone used. No pads are worn and play is one-hand touch. There's no contact and the ball is only advanced by passing. They play 20-minute halves with a running clock. The rules are intriguing. Defenses can score points by stopping the offense from getting a first down or producing a turnover.

The league employs the officials used in the regular season. "They're having their football fix and we're having our football fix. It's well-run. Kudos to the three athletic directors," said Fauquier's Buckwalter.

Frye said COVID-19 safety practices are an important part of the league. "There were other private leagues doing it. We didn't really like the way they were being run with the protocols they had in place," Frye said. "But our kids wanted something to do, and we weren't going to allow our coaches to encourage them to go down there."

Seven-on-7 passing leagues are normally played in the summer before fall football, but with the Virginia High School League (VHSL) pushing the fall sports season to late winter, there was a void.

Liberty coach Travis Buzzo said the league is a huge boost to his players' self-esteem.

"Even if this league does not help them get better, at least it helps them get out there and have fun. This (pandemic) has been tough on the kids. When we came back (to workouts) in July, most of the kids were struggling mentally," said Buzzo.

Buckwalter says safety protocols are being enforced. When players come to a game, they wear a mask as they approach a coach, who screens them by asking a series of questions. A player's temperature is taken, then they can enter the stadium. When the game is over, they leave via a different direction.

The league is helping coaches get their skill players real action, which has been elusive since the pandemic hit. Until this week football players could only work out in pods of ten, with no formal practice. With between 60 to 85 football players working out, Buzzo said Liberty is often on the field from 3:45 to 7 p.m., getting everyone in. On Tuesday, guidelines loosened up, allowing for pod size to grow to 30 players and coaches combined for workouts.

Buckwalter said he's carrying 17 players on the "A" team, 17 on "B" and 15 or so on the youth team. The top team consists of most of his projected starting receivers and secondary, with chances for players to move up or down between teams.

"We're using all the kids to see how they react. It's competition for our team. The kids want jobs," said Buckwalter.

Buzzo is using 13 players each on two of his teams, and 11 on the other. "It's returning starters and seniors on the A team. Our B team is sophomores and some juniors not on

the team last year, or not projected starters. Our C team is eighth and ninth graders," he said.

Because teams cannot safely huddle under pandemic protocols, coaches cannot mingle in the huddles like a normal 7-on-7 summer league.

Last Saturday's FHS-LHS game was played at 11 a.m. on a sunny, crisp 50-degree morning. While it didn't have the importance of their regular season Bird Bowl matchup, the game was certainly a preview for the upcoming season with two of the Northwestern District's top returning quarterbacks in Liberty's Dylan Bailey and Fauquier's J.T. Diehl on display.

"I was not very excited. They jumped on us quick. It was under two minutes when we took our first lead of the game," said Buzzo.

"The kids get after it. There's no casualness with any of the teams. They want to win, the coaches want to win. But you have to keep it in perspective, it's touch football," said Buckwalter.

Liberty's "A" team is 5-1, with its lone loss to Kettle Run. Fauquier's "A" team 4-2, with both losses to Liberty.

## Fauquier's new turf field should be finished soon

By Fred Hodge  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Work to retrofit the former tennis courts above Falcon Field to a practice field is nearing completion at Fauquier High.

The contractor has installed the artificial turf atop the compacted rock dust base. The new fencing, however, must be erected before the more than 29,000-square foot facility will be available, emphasized Mark Ott, Fauquier's director of student activities.

An invitation-only opening ceremony will be held in November.

All the Falcons' outdoor sports have experienced numerous canceled practices during the prolonged periods of wet weather in recent years. Many of those missed sessions came with games scheduled for the next day. Now, there will be a safe surface for conducting practices.

The Fauquier marching band, physical education classes and other school groups also will benefit. Ott has said the facility may be rented to community organizations to help fund maintenance.

Last spring, the Falcon softball unit rarely was able to use its home field for preseason practices due incessant rains and poor drainage in spots. Fauquier has a significant edge over all other teams in the area with

covered batting cages. However, other aspects of softball ideally require a field for work that cannot be done adequately in the gymnasium.

"Having turf as a base to practice is huge. It's definitely going to help us," predicted Fauquier's softball coach Erika Lamper. "We could do all our throwing, field work and pitching catching up there. We technically could do a full size infield," she continued, with the squad then adjourning to its field for hitting drills.

Lamper pointed out the new area will open up space and time for teams who need the gym floor. "That (new) field is huge," she said, noting multiple teams may use it concurrently depending on their needs. "It's a good thing for the entire school."

FHS girls lacrosse coach Ken McInnis said the new field will be a huge asset, especially with the revised Virginia High School League calendar creating an overlap with field hockey and lacrosse using the same regular practice fields for up to three weeks.

"The turf field will definitely be needed. It doesn't take much rain to turn our practice field into a swamp," McInnis lamented. "That new field will have a wonderful impact on all sports and provide us with a way to practice after heavy rains besides the gym."