

# 'REALLY SPECIAL'

As final buzzer sounds, shot by Kevon Ferrell clinches regional championship title for Comets

JOHNATHAN KIRKLAND

Feb 28, 2020



Halifax County High School players and fans react as the game-winning shot falls through the hoop and Halifax County High School gets the win in Friday night's Region 4D Tournament championship game at Halifax County High School.

Photo courtesy Ed Fraser

An hour before Friday night's Region 4D championship game between Halifax and George Washington High School started, the stands were already full, and the anticipation of one of the biggest games in school history was high.



**[Scroll down for more photos]**

Fans for both schools knew this rivalry was getting ready to head to the next level.

The Comets made another historic comeback Friday night, capped off by scoring seven points in the final 29 seconds of the game. A shot by Kevon Ferrell at the buzzer gave Halifax a 56-54 win and the title of Region 4D champions.

A ladder was placed under the basket for the players and coaches to cut down the net for the second season in a row, but before the scissors were brought out, Halifax head coach Sterling Williams climbed to the top of the ladder and energized fans who had spilled onto the court after the game-winning shot.

Williams pumped his fists and put his hand to his ear to symbolize that he wanted to hear more noise from fans.

The fans gladly obliged, showing their appreciation for the coach who has taken their team to the state tournament two years in a row, as well as winning back-to-back regional titles.

Friday night was special in more ways than one. Danville's GW — the defending state champions — traveled to Halifax on Jan. 24 and left with a 21-point victory over the Comets. When Williams found out it was GW his team would face in the regional championship, he knew his team would be up for the challenge.

“You couldn't script it any better,” Williams said. “It was one we were really looking forward to, to get some revenge and show them that (the last time we played) isn't how we play.”

Halifax got off to an early lead on Friday night, starting the game on a 15-2 run. Feeding off the energy the raucous home crowd brought, the Comets looked as if they would run away with the game early, but GW was not about to lay down in a game of this magnitude.

“We got off to a really good start, and we were able to move the ball around and get the shots we wanted to get and were able to knock them down,” Williams said.

The Eagles went on a 9-0 run of their own in the second quarter to cut into the Halifax lead. Behind GW's Justin Bethel, the Eagles stormed back a take the lead for the first time all night midway through the second quarter. Bethel knocked down three 3-pointers in the quarter, scoring nine points and providing his team the spark it needed to get back into the game.



Halifax County High School's Kevon Ferrell (15) reacts to the cheers of the fans after cutting one of the strands of the net following the Comets' dramatic win over GW in Friday night's Region 4D Tournament championship game at Halifax County High School.

Photo courtesy Joe Chandler

The Comets battled through the GW run, and the first half ended with the score tied at 27.

“We weathered the storm, last home game when they went on their run we didn’t weather the storm and they kind of opened the lead out,” Williams said.

The theme of this postseason for the young Halifax team has been their ability to fight through adversity every night. No matter the situation, the players and coaches come together to find a way to settle down and play their brand of basketball.

“To see this group grow up throughout the year, the last few games we have kind of watched them mature, struggling throughout the first half and then in the fourth quarter really locking down when they need to,” Williams said.

“It shows their heart, it shows their dedication and commitment to each other not to get down on each other, and not to hang their head on each other. It is a good group to watch them mature into a great team, battling in these situations when at the beginning of the year when adversity punched them in the face, we didn’t respond this way,” Williams added.

The second half was a battle for the ages, as both teams put together a hard fought half. Players from both teams — drenched in sweat and breathing heavily — put on a show for the standing-room only crowd that will forever be remembered in this storied rivalry.

The Comets clung to a 39-37 lead after the third quarter, but GW put together a run in the fourth quarter to change the momentum. In the first minute and a half of the final quarter, GW reclaimed the lead, and extended that lead to 46-42 on another Bethel 3-pointer with five minutes remaining.

Bethel’s fifth 3-pointer of the night extended GW’s lead again to 49-44 with four minutes remaining. Jaden Waller knocked down a mid-range jump shot for Halifax on the next possession to keep the Comets close.

The Eagles answered every Halifax punch with one of their own, running their lead to the biggest of the night at 52-46 with 2:46 to play. It wasn’t until the final half minute of play, where one team would falter.

With under a minute to play, GW was at the foul line up 52-49. The Eagles missed the foul shot, but they were able to get the rebound off of the miss, and Bethel drove the lane to put the Eagles up 54-49 with 29 seconds remaining. Bethel's two points was the last time GW put any points on the board for the remainder of the game.

It only took seven seconds for Ferrell to get down the court and hit a shot to get the Comets within three points.



The score was 54-51 with 22 seconds to play.

GW brought the ball up the court, but before they could get to half court, freshman Kameron Roberts poked the ball loose and Ferrell recovered the loose ball. Ferrell found Roberts wide open on the right elbow and Roberts hit a 3-pointer to tie the game with less than 10 seconds remaining.

“I knew we had time left to take a good shot,” Roberts said.  
“Kevon (Ferrell) passed me the ball and no one was around me, and I just shot it.”

Halifax forced another turnover on the ensuing possession, and with 6.9 seconds to play in the game, Williams called a timeout to set up the final play.

With the game tied, and a regional championship on the line, Ferrell dribbled the ball past half court and took dead aim at the basket.

He was met at the free-throw line by a GW defender. Ferrell ran into him, and threw throw up an off-balanced shot from just inside the free-throw line that hit the backboard and then through the net as the final buzzer sounded.

“I just ran through the lane and put up a prayer, ” Ferrell said, downplaying the biggest shot for Halifax basketball in a long time.

As soon as the shot went through the net — and the final buzzer



Surrounded by a large crowd of ecstatic fans, Halifax County High School head basketball coach Sterling Williams finishes cutting down the net after his team defeated GW to win Friday night's Region 4D Tournament championship game at Halifax County High School.

Photo courtesy Joe Chandler

sounded — the Comet faithful rushed the court to celebrate with the coaches and players that had just put together an improbable comeback against GW.

Ferrell is the only player on this year's team who played significant minutes in last year's postseason, and Williams and the rest of the team knows his leadership will be invaluable to those younger guys getting their first taste of state tournament battle.

“He (Ferrell) is a silent leader for this group, and I'm really trying to get him to be more vocal, putting guys into spots offensively, telling guys what to do, just trying to get him to be that coach on the floor for those guys,” Williams said about Ferrell. “Those guys lean on him too, because he has that year of experience with major minutes and they know how well he can play.”

For the Comets boys varsity basketball team, this year has been full of plenty of highs, and a few lows midway through the season, but Williams is going to soak in Friday night's victory.

“It is really special. I didn’t get to enjoy last year because I was really just trying to move on to the next game, but I think I’m going to take some time to enjoy this one, but at the same time fill our bucket up so we can try to empty it again next Friday against Millbrook,” Williams said.

Halifax will now move on to the state tournament quarterfinals on Friday where they will meet the Millbrook Pioneers out of Winchester. Millbrook is the Region 4C runner up, losing to Loudoun County in Thursday night’s championship game.

With Averett University’s gym booked next Friday, Halifax will be playing their quarterfinal game at Heritage High School in Lynchburg. More information will be available next week.

### Scoring

**Halifax:** Kevon Ferrell 14, Kameron Roberts 14, Davon Jennings 11, Jaden Waller 7, Keshawn Wells 6, Jhamad Lawson 2, Zach Carter 2

**GW-Danville:** Justin Bethel 19, Shawn Watlington 8, Donavan Howard 7, Sha’Kobe Hairston 6, Taevon Walden 5, Kapone Barley 4, Jakobe Dixon 3, Tyler McDuffie 2

### 3-pointers

Halifax 3-14

GW 5-17

### Free throws

Halifax 17-24

GW 5-15

## Comets

## For former Comet, Past struggles fuel track career

JOHNATHAN KIRKLAND

Jul 2, 2020



Otis Slayton competes during an event earlier this year at Hampton University.

Submitted photo

Otis Slayton Jr. laid in his bed after having surgery for an ankle broken in three places, along with several ligaments being torn wondering if his plan he had worked so hard for was crumbling.

The thoughts running through his head during the eight weeks he was at home away from school, and away from sports, were not good sometimes. But Slayton decided there would be no time for sulking, and he would not let this end what he had envisioned growing up.

He would get back to where he wanted to be.

Slayton grew up playing basketball from an early age. From the time he was 5 years old he was always playing basketball and really loved it. Then he started playing football when he was in third grade. It wasn't until middle school, with a little persuasion by his mother, Lisa Slayton, that he would pick up track and field. That decision would get him a partial scholarship to Hampton University mere days before he was going to enroll at a much smaller school.

Slayton's story is one of perseverance, of heart and of faith. When he moved from the middle school to Halifax County High School, the football coach told him he wanted Slayton to play on the varsity team as a freshman. After what he described as a "phenomenal" eighth grade year, Slayton was up for the task.

It was the last game of the football season, the biggest game of the year. The rivalry game that pitted Halifax against George Washington-Danville. The stands were packed in Danville, and Slayton was tasked with playing safety on defense as one of the other starting safeties was out with an injury.

"I was playing one of my best games all year," Slayton recalls about that game. At 5-foot-10 and only 145 pounds, the freshman was much smaller than most of the players he was up against. The Blue Comets were playing a cover three defense, and that meant that Slayton was the last line of defense as the safety. Slayton went for a tackle on a GW player when all of a sudden he was blindsided by another player.

It was in that moment that Slayton's life would change. "I felt three loud pops in my ankle. It was obviously broke, I couldn't move it," he said.

Slayton was taken to the hospital where he was told that his ankle was broken in three places and had three torn ligaments as well. The injury required surgery, followed by eight weeks on homebound to recover and then four weeks of rehabilitation to regain movement in the foot.

Slayton credits this time as the period in his life where there was his biggest potential growth.

"Just have faith, put your head down and go through it," he said. "Keep going. Keep pushing."

He also knew following the injury he wasn't what he was before.

"Things were not the same. I wasn't as gifted athletically as I was before the injury. I wasn't as fast, and I had to work twice as hard every day," Slayton said. "There would be some days where I would just go out and run."

As his ankle got back to as close to full strength as it would get, Slayton went back to playing sports. After missing his first high school track season due to the injury, Slayton took on the challenge and was rewarded with a trip to the state track and field championships in the long jump. He competes regularly in the long jump, triple jump, 4X100 relay, 100 and 200 meters, but the long jump is where he excels.

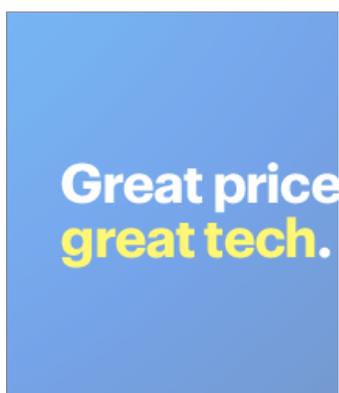
Slayton continued to play football and basketball, even earning prestigious honors at several top basketball camps when he was 16 years old.

Slayton attended the U.S. Sports Camp Nike Complete Skills Basketball Camp in Lexington, South Carolina, where he was named the MVP of the camp. With being named the MVP, he was invited to the Elite Hoops Basketball Invite Camp where out of 150 attendees, he was named one of the Elite 11. From there he was invited to the Scoutsfocus.com Elite 80 Camp.

In his junior year, Slayton continued to improve in track and field, finishing sixth in the state in the long jump and seventh in the triple jump. In the district tournament he was the top male scorer with 36 points. Slayton won three events and was third in another in that tournament. He also won three gold medals and a silver medal in the Commonwealth Games that year. Slayton won gold in the long jump, triple jump and 4X100 relay and won silver in the 100-meter dash.

Slayton also set the school record his junior year in the long jump when he jumped 23 feet, 11 inches at the Division 5 Region D championships.

Before his senior track season started, Slayton finished his football and basketball careers on high notes. He was a member of the regional champion basketball team that made it to the state tournament for the first time in over 40 years.



He also was awarded the Blue Comet Pride Award for Sportsmanship for the football team at the fall sports banquet, along with the National Burlsworth Character Award. That award is named after Brandon Burlsworth who walked on at the University of Arkansas. Burlsworth had no scholarship offers and no one knew of him, but through his hard work and dedication he became an all-American and was drafted 63rd overall in the NFL draft. Burlsworth died tragically in an automobile accident only 11 days after the draft.

The award is given out nationally to a player that exhibits outstanding character and sportsmanship. Their website states that the award is given to a “player who represents the ideas and values that Brandon Burlsworth had: to give 100% on the field and to stand as a moral example to his team.”

Slayton still doesn't know how he was nominated for the award and says that he was shocked when he heard his name called for it. He credits what he went through his freshman year with the injury on his mindset change and how he began to exhibit all of the qualities that the award is given for.

In his senior track season Slayton would finish first in the long jump and triple jump at regionals and third in the 4X100 relay. In the state tournament he finished third in the long jump and seventh in the triple jump. His results in the long jump earned him a spot in the 2019 New Balance Nationals Outdoor held at North Carolina A&T University.

Slayton was the only Comet that went to nationals that year and when he arrived he realized that he didn't have anyone to help him get his mark, so he knew where to jump from in the event. It was then that Slayton got his mother Lisa's attention in the packed stands. "I was waving my hands, and I had to yell at her across the track," he said. From her spot in the stands, with other events going on all around them and the fans loudly cheering on their favorites, Lisa helped Slayton get his mark so that he could be prepared for his jump.

"She is just a phenomenal mother," Slayton said. "She and my father and my whole family are the reason I am the person that I am today," he added.

Slayton would finish 18th in the long jump at nationals and from there he was looking toward the future. As the days started ticking away before the start of college, Slayton only had offers from several smaller local colleges to come run track. He knew that his statistics spoke for themselves, but he wasn't getting the responses he had hoped for. That's when one of his former coaches, Darius Jennings stepped in.

Jennings had called to check on Slayton, and they ended up meeting to talk and catch up. Jennings told him that his statistics were really good and asked about colleges contacting him. When Slayton told him about the smaller colleges, Jennings told him to send him all of his statistics, and Jennings sent the information to every coach he knew.

The time to decide his future was inching close, and Slayton had still not heard from any bigger schools that he wanted to hear from. Then one night Slayton, his mother Lisa and little sister Olysia were sitting down for dinner at Applebee's and discussing his plans for college when a text came in on his phone. It was the head track and field coach at Hampton University. The coach told Slayton they were interested and could possibly get him a partial scholarship and get him on the team.

"I was so emotional," Slayton said. "I started tearing up, I got a chance and that is all I wanted was just one chance," he added.

The coaches at Hampton and Slayton began talking back and forth on the phone, and he was offered a partial scholarship to come and be a part of the track and field team. Due to time constraints Slayton had to sign his letter of intent online and never got an official signing day or official visit to campus.

Slayton stressed the importance of having good grades and getting a good education starting freshman year. "That was one of the biggest things that helped me," he said. At Hampton Slayton was required to have a 3.3 grade point average to be accepted, even with his scholarship so he saw firsthand what it means to earn good grades from the start.

"Start getting good grades early because if you start getting them early and get a solid foundation it is not as hard and is easier to get recruited," Slayton mentioned.

Arriving on campus was a culture shock for Slayton who is a self professed "small town country boy from Halifax." It was an adjustment for the first few weeks, but things fell into place quickly. "One thing I promised myself before I left was that I would not change who I am to fit in. That's the one

thing I didn't want to do," he said. He held himself to that promise and began to adjust and get the feel for life at a big university.

At the Liberty University Kickoff event, Slayton set a personal record of 24'1.5" in the long jump to win first place. In the Big South Championships he placed fifth in the long jump and seventh in the triple jump.

In the Dick Taylor Carolina Challenge at the University of North Carolina, Slayton finished second in the long jump and third in the 200-meters.

Slayton's performance at Hampton this year has him close to earning a full scholarship that will pay for the rest of his education while he is there.

Slayton says that his relationship with God has helped him get through the tough times, and continues to help him daily. It was in those days in his bed at home after the gruesome injury his freshman year that Slayton's relationship with God really blossomed.

"Through all of this God was the main focus and the only reason I was able to get through. You just have to go with what you have, whatever you get make the best of it and just have faith."



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# GOALS OFF THE COURT

For Halifax head coach, it's about more than basketball

JOHNATHAN KIRKLAND Mar 3, 2020

If you were to watch Halifax County High School boys basketball head coach Sterling Williams on the sidelines during games you would see a man who is passionate and animated.

You can see and hear him from the very top of the gym, but the man behind that passion on the court is much different. The Williams that his family, players and other coaches see is a man who is caring, kind and would do anything for those closest to him, and even for those he barely knows.

Williams is a homegrown coach who graduated from Halifax County High School, played basketball for the Comets and continued his basketball career at Averett University. After Averett, one of his coaches was able to get him an opportunity in Iceland to play basketball, where he eventually ended up as a player coach for close to a year.

He then moved back home and began his career as a physical education teacher in his hometown. That was 10 years ago, and since then he met and married his wife, Kimberly, rose through the ranks in the Comet basketball system from the middle school, ninth grade team, junior varsity, varsity assistant, and then four years ago, head coach.

Williams took the Comets to their first state tournament appearance in 44 years last season and has repeated that feat again this year with a team that is much younger and inexperienced. Looking around Virginia, there aren't many other coaches who have been able to accomplish what Williams has in the four short years since he took over the reigns at Halifax.

He began his head coaching career at 32. Now almost 36, he is still considered one of the younger coaches in Virginia high school basketball. But don't let the age fool you, Williams has established himself not only with other coaches around the state, but most importantly he has established relationships with the players he coaches each day.



Halifax County High School head coach Sterling Williams, reacting to a play, makes a point on the sideline during Friday night's Region 4D Tournament championship game against GW at Halifax County High School.  
Photo courtesy Joe Chandler

Watching Williams on the sideline throughout games, one can see the players respond to him with everything he says. Whether it is in the heat of the moment and the tone is a little less friendly, or if it is during one of the calmer point, the players listen intently to Williams, and more importantly they take to heart everything he is saying.

One person who has been with Williams since day one is his right hand man and assistant coach, Nathan Lantor. Lantor and Williams didn't come together through coaching; their relationship goes back a lot further.

"Sterling and I have known each other since high school. When he played varsity, I played JV (basketball). We played pick up ball together and played intramural ball together. We have known each other for a long long time. It's just natural I guess when we started coaching together. We were friends, and we trusted each other," Lantor said.

Lantor is Williams's closest confidant on and off the court. They discuss just about everything, and it is almost as if they know what each other is thinking when they are on the sidelines during a game.

Lantor also has seen first hand the impact Williams has had on the players who have come through the program since he took over. Lantor knows that for him and Williams, those relationships with the players are extremely important.

"You can't think that you can get on a kid or get the most out of a kid if he doesn't trust you or you don't have a relationship with them, and I think that's the No. 1 thing Sterling tries to do. I know I do. We try to build relationships with the kids more than x's and o's," Lantor said.

"We spend a lot of time with the kids, and we do a lot of basketball, but it's not a lot of x's and o's. It's more team building. We go on camping trips, pick up trash, charity events, we got out to eat, he has them over to his house. A kid has to know that you care about them for them to respond the way they respond," Lantor added.

Those team building trips and dinners also have included Williams's wife, Kimberly. Each year she cooks what she calls a "teams giving" around the Thanksgiving holiday, and they invite the team over to their home for dinner and fellowship. Williams and his wife, along with the assistant coaches also rented a cabin at Staunton River over the summer for everyone to have team bonding and fun. She also cooks breakfast on Saturdays during the season when the team holds practice in the mornings. These are ways that the team becomes more than just individual players on the court. They become a family.

"We always try to encourage kids to do things off the court to help them come together as a team," Kimberly said.

She also went on to speak about Williams at home, "What you see on the court while he's coaching is the complete opposite of what he's like at home. He's very laid back. He's a big family man whether it's fishing at the lake, riding four wheelers or playing in the yard," she added.

Williams also has bigger goals for his player than winning on the court. His wife spoke about the impact he tries to make on the players in all aspects of their life.



“I think the biggest difference in him as a coach is the kids know that it’s not all about basketball. They know that he’s there for them regardless whether it’s on the court or in the classroom. When kids know you care about them, it’s easier to form those relationships,” she said.

“It takes a special kind of person to build those relationships with kids. It’s not about winning or losing. It’s about helping these kids get into school or helping them to be better people. If you are doing everything you are supposed to be doing, the wins come, and that has been a big part of his coaching,” she added.

For Kimberly Williams, she knows that the journey to where her husband is today is one they have dreamed about.

“I could not be prouder of Sterling. This is what we have talked about for so long,” she said. She also referenced a Facebook post she made shortly after her husband and his team won the Region 4D Championship. In the post she said that her and Williams used to sit by the fire pit and talk and dream about that moment.

What Williams and his staff are building at Halifax County High School is special. It took 44 years for the Comets to get back to the state tournament, and Williams has now done it in back-to-back seasons. With the majority of this year’s team returning next year, don’t look for that trend to change.

When Williams took over the varsity head coaching job four years ago, Hakeem Pettus took over as the head coach for the JV boys program. Pettus has seen first hand what it takes to build a program, and with those players shining on the big stage for the varsity team, it wasn’t that long ago that they were preparing for



Halifax County High School head coach Sterling Williams kisses the Region 4D Tournament championship trophy as the celebration swirls around him following the Comets’ win over GW Friday night in the Region 4D Tournament championship game at Halifax County High School.

Photo courtesy Joe Chandler

this moment with Pettus.

“My first year as a head coach he took me under his wing, and I feel the program has been excelling ever since he took over,” Pettus said.

Pettus also talked about how his JV team, and Williams’ varsity team, are able to work together in preparing the players.

“Having the same language, using the same terminology, using the same plays and doing everything pretty much the same so they are accustomed to doing the same thing for four years,” Pettus said.

“It’s been a wonderful experience. He’s the type of guy that if you need anything or if you don’t understand something, he will explain it to you. He will guide you and lead you. Anything you need he will help you. He’s a good guy that loves the game of basketball, coaches hard and I try to have that same intensity at the JV level so they will be used to it when they come up to the varsity level,” Pettus added.

For Lantor, being a part of building Halifax basketball into a perennial powerhouse is not something that just happens. Lantor knows what Williams is building takes commitment.

“I think that’s something you look forward to. You build upon your success, and you hope to establish that winning culture so you always get that, and it’s not just a flash in the pan,” Lantor said.

“You hope that every year you are getting kids to come out, and of course talent changes but if you can establish that work ethic, you can establish kids showing up in the springtime, in the summer, in the fall, in the weight room. You are going to be better. You are going to be good because many teams around the state, most teams don’t have that level of commitment.

“Coaches don’t commit that much to the kids, and the kids don’t commit that much to the program. I think that our level of success is directly tied in to the amount of work that he (Williams) does, and the amount of work the kids are willing to do. That’s the key, to get the kids there to commit, and you reap the awards from it,” Lantor added.

When Halifax takes the floor on Friday night against Millbrook in the Class 4 state tournament quarterfinals, the Comets will be looking to continue their historic run that has seen its fair share of magic so far this postseason, but no matter the outcome Williams has established himself and Halifax basketball as one of the top teams in the state, but more importantly Williams and his staff have established a culture of winning on and off the court.