

Right at Home

Osborn grad Kris Thornton succeeds at his dad's alma mater

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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The summer before his senior high school football season, Kris Thornton made a critical decision that changed the trajectory of his college career.

Believing his 5-foot-8 frame better suited to play wide receiver than running back at the next level, Thornton told then-Osborn head coach Chris Samuels he was open to a position change.

Samuels agreed. Although Thornton had led the Eagles in rushing the season before with 616 yards and 12 touchdowns, Osborn needed a new go-to wide receiver after Desmond Woodson graduated. Based on his quickness and skillset, Thornton filled the void and then some.

With everyone on the same page in that 2016 season, Thornton flourished to form a prolific passing game with quarterback Anthony Pearson. In his lone season at wideout, Thornton earned second-team all-state honors and set school records for receptions (94) and receiving yardage (1,601). Both marks also rank among the top 10 in the Virginia High School League's record books.

Not to be outdone, Thornton has racked up big numbers everywhere he has gone since then.

At VMI, he set a single-season receiving record (87) in 2018 in claiming all-America honors as a sophomore. Thornton transferred the next season to James Madison University, where he has continued his success.

Thornton captured first-team all-Colonial Athletic Association honors as a redshirt junior during the pandemic-shortened season this spring. This season, he leads the CAA with 64 receptions and 10 touchdown catches for the Dukes (9-1 overall), who are ranked sec-



Osborn graduate Kris Thornton leads the CAA in total receptions (64) and touchdown catches (10) this season.
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

ond in the latest FCS Top 25 poll.

In James Madison's 51-14 win Nov. 6 over Campbell, Thornton caught a school-record four touchdown passes and finished with eight receptions for a season-high 142 yards.

The performance earned him Washington Metro College Football Player of the Week honors from the DC Touchdown Club. More importantly, it reinforced a point he first set out to make when this transition started in high school.

"Making that switch, I had a great year that helped," Thornton said. "It showed that height does not matter."

What makes Thornton's rise even more special is that he learned to catch passes primarily through the efforts of another one-time JMU star wideout: his father Keith.

JMU never came close to throwing as much during Keith's time with the Dukes from 1987-90 as the team does now. But the elder Thornton did well despite competing in a wing-T offense that emphasized the running game and cycled through three different offensive coordinators.



Thornton's father, Keith, played four seasons at wide receiver for JMU.
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A converted quarterback who starred at Marshall-Walker High School in Richmond, Keith Thornton caught 77 career passes at JMU. In the 1988 season, he had eight touchdown receptions, tied for eighth in the JMU record books.

Kris Thornton remembers in elementary school watching his dad's game tapes at JMU. Using a field near their Manassas home, Keith taught his son the finer points of pass catching when it came to running routes and reading defenses. Thornton already had the speed and agility. He just needed work on the technical aspects.

By the time Thornton assumed the role of Osborn's top receiver his senior season, he felt more prepared.

Due to his size, however, Thornton received only one Division I scholarship offer out of high school: VMI. Thornton wanted to play at that level so he signed with the Keydets.

He enjoyed the football side of things at VMI, but the rigorous military lifestyle wore on him. After his sophomore season, Thornton put his name in the transfer portal.

JMU was the first school to contact him. Under then-head coach Mike Houston, the Dukes had offered Thornton a non-scholarship roster spot as a preferred walk-on when he graduated from Osborn in 2017.

This time, JMU, now led by Curt Cignetti, again offered him a preferred walk-on spot. Thornton liked the Dukes' winning culture. The program has reached the NCAA playoffs seven straight seasons, including a national championship in 2016 and two national runner-up finishes.

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL REGION SEMIFINALS

REGION 6B

Osborn (8-3) at Battlefield (11-0), Friday 7 p.m.
Unity Reed (6-5) at Freedom-Woodbridge (9-2), Friday, 7 p.m.

REGION 3B

James Monroe (6-5) at Brentsville (9-2), Friday, 7 p.m.
Goochland (6-5) at Meridian (9-2), Friday, 7 p.m.



For game stories and photo galleries from Friday's local games, visit INSIDENOVA.COM.



Osborn shut out Gar-Field 10-0 Nov. 12 in the first round of the playoffs. The Eagles play at undefeated Battlefield on Friday night.
BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

Break out the bats and balls

I look out my home's back window at the leaves on the ground and one thought runs through my mind: It's almost baseball time.

It's an odd thing to say, I know, at the time of year when bats, gloves and balls are packed away until spring.

But we have had a family tradition at Thanksgiving, albeit with a brief history, where after stuffing ourselves with turkey and all the fixings, we head out to the lot behind us for a game with a handful of foam balls and an assortment of plastic bats. Bases are provided, with one clearly marked as home plate.

My one nephew, James, is a huge baseball fan and we typically played a game at his home on the tennis court on his birthday in September. It was the one thing he wanted to do with everyone.

When my sister's family began coming to our house for Thanksgiving a few years ago, James wanted to hold a game afterward. We obliged. We have an open space behind us that's actually shaped like a diamond with trees serving as the outfield.

It's far from a regulation field, which is a good thing. Too much space between the bases means too much effort for us older folks. The tighter the space, the better the chance to actually reach base and score.

Despite the cold and encroaching darkness, we would brave the elements and play as long as we could. The tree branches usually prevent hit balls from going too far, but if you hit the gaps just right you guarantee yourself a home run.

Of course trying to field a ball in any scenario is a challenge for me unless it's hit right at me. And even that is difficult if I have to bend over to grab it. There was a time when that came easier. In my 50s, that time has passed.

Everyone took whatever position they wanted except for my sister, Kathleen. She was always most comfortable pitching. I'm not sure why. She wasn't



David Fawcett with his sister, Kathleen. After a long battle with cancer, Kathleen passed away in August at the age of 54. PROVIDED

the most athletic person and perhaps felt best-suited for that spot. It only required her to pitch and maybe try to make a play in the field. But it didn't stretch her too far.

But she thrived as a pitcher. She would lob the ball in and talk a little trash if the batter swung and missed. She showed no mercy – no matter whoever stood at the plate.

The last time we played ended on a climatic note. Kathleen's youngest child, Peter, drove in the game-winning run, a feat made even more special because he has a strong aversion to doing anything athletic.

We couldn't play the game in 2020 because of COVID as we each stayed in our homes.

I'm unsure whether we will play this year. It will depend on time, weather and schedule. We're doing Thanksgiving at

their house this time. Regardless, it will be different. Kathleen passed away in August from cancer.

Her husband, Russell, has done a tremendous job of forging ahead and meeting needs with three boys still in the house. He has set a fine example, and his kids have all followed suit. We all miss Kathleen, but we know she's with Jesus, no longer in pain and waiting for us all to join her when that time comes. We hold on to the special memories, and this Thanksgiving we are grateful for the 54 years she was with us instead of dwelling on the years she won't be with us.

And if we're able to play, I'm ready to go. I might even step in and pitch. A little trash talk never hurt anyone.

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Freedom's JuJu Preston tries to turn the corner against visiting Unity Reed on Sept. 17. The host team Freedom would go on to win the game convincingly, 35-0. BILL KAMENJAR@INSIDENOVA.COM

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Top performances from Nov. 12 games

RUSHING

- » **Graham Jones (Battlefield) 36-147, 2 TDs vs. Colonial Forge**
- » **Bryce Jackson (Brentsville) 14-124, 4 TDs vs. Warren County**
- » **Jakari Lewis (Osborn) 17-110 vs. Gar-Field**

PASSING

- » **Blake Moore (Unity Reed) 12-22-0, 342, 3 TDs vs. Patriot**
- » **Sam Fernandez (Patriot) 20-32-2, 246, 3 TDs vs. Unity Reed**
- » **Jonathan Walters (Battlefield) 12-20-0, 147, 1 TD vs. Colonial Forge**
- » **Davis Bryson (Freedom-Woodbridge) 8-14-1, 136, 2 TDs vs. Forest Park**
- » **Tristan Evans (Freedom-Woodbridge) 6-10, 100, 2 TDs vs. Forest Park**

RECEIVING

- » **Gabe Bigbee (Patriot) 8-107, 1 TD vs. Unity Reed**
- » **Amare Campbell (Unity Reed) 6-134 vs. Patriot**
- » **JuJu Preston (Freedom-Woodbridge) 6-130, 3 TDs vs. Forest Park**
- » **Braden Boggs (Battlefield) 6-100, 1 TD vs. Colonial Forge**
- » **Matthew Boyd (Patriot) 4-66, 1 TD vs. Unity Reed**
- » **E.J. Reid (Freedom-Woodbridge) 4-57, 1 TD vs. Forest Park**
- » **DaShaun Gibson (Unity Reed) 3-114, 2 TDs vs. Patriot**

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Kris Thornton began his college football career at VMI before transferring to JMU. JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

He liked their wide-open offense. And the family connection didn't hurt either. Besides his father, Thornton's mother, Juana, also graduated from JMU.

Although his parents left the decision up to him, Thornton felt at home. He fondly recalled watching games at JMU as a child. He even still has the Duke the Bulldog stuffed animal his parents bought him as a kid at the school's bookstore.

He was ready to create new memories.

"I was excited to go there where my dad used to be on the field," Thornton said.

Because of NCAA transfer rules, Thornton sat out the 2019 season. Thorn-



KRIS THORNTON

ton said it was hard to watch from the sidelines after playing so much the season before. But he used the opportunity to get better instead of feeling sorry for himself.

He learned under Brandon Polk and Riley Stapleton, who led JMU's receiving corps in 2019 when the Dukes reached the FCS championship game.

By the following season, he was on scholarship and prepared to step in again as a leading receiver. With NCAA granting athletes an extra year of eligibility due to the pandemic, Thornton has one more season available. He is leaning toward coming back for 2022.

In the meantime, Keith has enjoyed watching his son perform in a position at a place where he once thrived.

"All the hard work he's put in," Keith said. "I'm proud to see it paying off."

Colgan heads to state final

» BY HUGH RIST
For InsideNoVa

With Colgan trailing 16-7 in the first set of its Class 6 state semifinal volleyball match Tuesday against Freedom-South Riding, Sharks coach Keith Mesa called a timeout.

He gathered his team around its bench and gave them one simple mandate: "This is the time to decide who you are. This is your chance to go out there and show it."

Immediately following the timeout, the team's second, Colgan put its mettle on display by scoring 18 of the next 24 points to win the set 25-22.

From there, Colgan won the next two sets to earn a berth in the Group 6 finals on Friday night at 8 p.m. at the Siegel Center at Virginia Commonwealth University. The Sharks (28-4) will play Herndon, which defeated defending state champion and previously unbeaten Alexandria City 3-2. Both teams are making their first appearance in the state final.

Moments after Colgan's Brielle Kemavor notched an emphatic kill to earn the last point of the match, members of the team jumped for joy, embraced each other, and gathered around Mesa and his assistant coaches for a brief celebration.

After a short moment of privacy, the Colgan administration allowed many students from the crowd to move from the bleachers to the gym floor. A crowd of at least 50 students soon surrounded the team, jumping, waving their arms and shouting with glee.

The celebration capped a riveting and electrifying match that featured several good rallies and at times put the Colgan faithful into a frenzy. In the second set, Brielle Kemavor notched five kills, but four other Sharks notched at least one as Colgan eked out a 25-20 set victory.

In the third set, Freedom-South Riding



Brielle Kemavor and her Colgan teammates are one win from a state championship. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

CLASS 6 STATE CHAMPIONSHIP

- » Friday, Nov. 19
- » Siegel Center in Richmond
- » Herndon vs. Colgan (28-4), 8 p.m.



Visit INSIDENOVA.COM for coverage of Friday night's game.

led 11-7 before Colgan notched 18 of the next 27 points to gain the victory. Kemavor recorded seven kills, and Grace Smith and Makayla Bowman each notched two during the set to win the match.

After the match, a relieved Mesa smiled a bit wryly while talking to a reporter.

"We played a bit nervous there at the beginning," Mesa said. "They [Freedom-South Riding] had us all scared. But they settled down [and got the victory]. To be honest, I still think our kids have a lot more to give and they will have to show it Friday night."

He said the coaches are proud of the players. "They've worked very hard and deserved everything they've gotten," he added, while appearing to hold back tears.

IN NEXT WEEK'S PAPER



A look at why Alden Yergey, Brentsville's first Division I basketball commitment, chose to stay at Prince William County's smallest high school. Because of the Thanksgiving holiday, next week's paper will be available on Wednesday, Nov. 24.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

LOCAL BRIEFS

LOCALS HONORED IN COLLEGE SOCCER

Tyler Clegg (Forest Park) was one of three James Madison University soccer players named to the all-Colonial Athletic Association first team.

This is the defender's third all-conference selection.

Starting all 17 games, Clegg anchored a backline that totaled nine shutouts and a .529 shutout percentage, ranked 11th in the nation. JMU allowed a league-low five goals in conference play.

Another local graduate, St. Louis junior defender Chandler Vaughn (Forest Park), earned a spot on the all-Atlantic 10 tournament team.

The top-seeded Billikens won the tournament title and are the only unbeaten team left in NCAA Division I at 14-0. St. Louis is the No. 10 seed in the NCAA tournament and plays Sunday.

Vaughn has started 14 of St. Louis' 16 games.

Meanwhile, Forest Park graduates and Bridgewater



TYLER CLEGG



CHANDLER VAUGHN

College teammates Hanna Randolph, Skyler Daum and Alicia Keo were named to the all-Old Dominion Athletic Conference women's soccer team.

Randolph, a senior forward, is a four-time first-team selection. She tied for the team lead in goals (eight) and assists (three). She also earned a spot on the all-tournament team.

Daum, a sophomore forward, tied for the team lead in assists with four and was second in points with 18. She also was selected to the all-tournament team.

Keo, a sophomore midfielder, tied for the team lead in assists and finished with six goals for a total of 16 points.



HANNA RANDOLPH



ALICIA KEO



SKYLER DAUM



JACLYN DITANNA

Also, Woodbridge High School graduate Jaclyn Ditanna was selected to the USA South All-Sportsmanship Team as Averett University's representative.

LLANEZA HEADED TO NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS

The University of Lynchburg's Sam Llaneza (Brentsville) qualified for this Saturday's NCAA Division III cross country championships after finishing eighth in the Southeast Regional in a time of 25:37.2.

ODAC RECOGNIZES CASEY

Ashley Casey (Patriot) was chosen to the ODAC third team for volleyball.

A sophomore midfielder at Bridgewater, Casey had 209 kills and 206 digs. She was the team leader in kills and also paced the Eagles in service aces with 23.



ASHLEY CASEY

ODURO TOPS IN THE A-10

Gainesville resident Josh Oduro is the co-Atlantic 10 Conference men's basketball player of the week.

The George Mason University junior forward averaged 19.3 points, 6.3 rebounds, 2.0 blocks and shot 71.4% from the field to help the Patriots start 3-0. Oduro graduated from Paul VI.

True to her School

Brentsville's first Division I basketball commitment loves her community

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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One day in the summer of 2016, Eugene Baltimore noticed a rising sixth-grader with preternatural abilities lighting up the court.

Ball-handling. Shooting. Floor vision. Alden Yergey left Baltimore in awe by standing out in all three areas at Brentsville High School's annual basketball camp. He had coached high school and college basketball for over 20 years and had never seen a more talented player at that age.

Who was this mystery player?

Baltimore, then a Brentsville assistant, had no idea but was about to find out. He pulled Yergey aside during a break and asked her name, where she lived and where she planned to attend middle school.

Baltimore refrained from jumping too far ahead, but the program's future suddenly looked brighter if Yergey planned on enrolling in Brentsville in three years.

Shy, but polite, Yergey answered Baltimore's questions. She'd grown up in Nokesville and in the fall would start at Nokesville Middle School, a five-minute walk from Brentsville.

Intrigued, Baltimore kept the conversation going with an impromptu tour. He took Yergey outside the Brentsville gym and into the school's hallway filled with pictures and trophy cases honoring the Tigers' athletic past. He wanted to show her one section in particular.

On a shelf inside one of the glass-enclosed cases were basketballs with writing on them. Three white and burnt orange-colored balls highlighted girls who had scored 1,000 points during their career at Brentsville, with their name, jersey number, years played and total points.

Baltimore first singled out the ball on the far left commemorating 2008 graduate Kimmy Hopkins' accomplishment as the program's all-time leading scorer with 1,741 points. He then pointed out the balls stacked on top of each other acknowledging 2010 graduate Keyla Baltimore's 1,106 points and 1999 graduate Christy Lapihuska's 1,200 points.

Baltimore knew first-hand the story behind two of these balls since he coached Hopkins and his daughter in his first stint as Brentsville's head coach. Now done with the history lesson and knowing Yergey was zoned for Brentsville, Baltimore brought everything full circle.

Looking to the future, he issued a bold prediction.

"One day, you are going to be in here," Baltimore told her.

Stunned that she might someday join such an elite club, Yergey responded to Baltimore's confident declaration the only way she knew how: She asked a question of her own rooted in genuine humility: "Are you sure?"

STAYING PUT

Over the past 18 seasons, Brentsville girls basketball has enjoyed an impressive track record. The Tigers have gone 239-168 with 14 regional appearances and only two



Brentsville junior Alden Yergey is a two-time, first-team all-state selection.

BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA

losing seasons during that time.

But for all its success, Brentsville has not been a hotbed for Division I prospects since the school opened in 1965.

Then Yergey arrived, and everything changed. In early November, the junior point guard became the first Brentsville girl or boys basketball player to commit to a Division I program when she agreed to sign with Siena as its first commitment for the 2023 high school graduating class.

For a number of reasons, Yergey liked the private liberal arts school of just over 3,000 undergraduates outside Albany, N.Y.

The basketball program receives lots of attention, and she connected with Jim Jabir, a successful head coach who returned to Siena in April after leaving in 1990 following a three-year tenure and going on to coach at Providence, Marquette, Dayton and Florida Atlantic.

Jabir offered Yergey a scholarship while he was at Florida Atlantic. But after he accepted the Siena job, he offered Yergey a scholarship with the Saints while the two talked on the phone April 8 as he drove from

Florida to Siena. Yergey visited Siena the first weekend of November.

She embraced his up-tempo style of play. She bonded with the current players. And she fell in love with the tight-knit community that welcomed her.

At halftime of the Nov. 6 game, school president Chris Gibson surprised Yergey by knowing her name. Yergey also met a female season-ticket holder of 40 years who sat next to Yergey and her parents. The atmosphere enveloped her and reminded her so much of Nokesville.

"The biggest parallel is the support system and the feeling of home," Yergey said.

That matters a great deal to Yergey and explains why the 17-year-old bucked a trend and became an outlier in choosing to remain at Brentsville.

In an era and in an area where high school athletes are frequently transferring to other public or private schools they believe will increase their college exposure and help them secure an athletic scholarship, Yergey's decision to stay at Prince William County's smallest high school,

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with just under 1,000 students, is atypical.

Conventional wisdom suggests bigger is always better. The higher the level, the superior the competition and therefore the more attention you receive to improve your chances to play in college.

There's some truth to that line of thinking.

Yergey accelerated her progress and raised her recruiting profile by playing for an AAU travel team against top-flight talent at national tournaments under the watchful eyes of college recruiters.

But she never subscribed to the perception that somehow playing at a small high school would impede her development or negatively affect how college coaches viewed her ability. She took a different approach: If you can play, you can play regardless of the opponent or the teammates around you. And the college coaches will find you.

The decision raised some eyebrows.

Members of her Fairfax Stars' AAU team, who in some cases play at more well-known programs like Paul VI and O'Connell, told Yergey they had never heard of Brentsville and asked where it was located.

Others asked Yergey why she stayed at a school that was not a state power and lacked a tradition of getting players into Division I basketball programs. Didn't she know more impressive options were available, especially at nearby private schools?

Even inside her inner circle, the topic came up. Her long-time friend and current teammate, Cara Vollmer, asked Yergey last year whether she planned on leaving.

Baltimore, who returned as Brentsville's head coach for the 2017-18 season, worried whether Yergey would stay all four years. And Yergey's mother and father, Sara and Tad, asked their daughter if she wanted to go somewhere else.

Yergey understood the thinking behind the questions. On the surface, it makes little sense if your focus is all about basketball and the pursuit of a scholarship. But if a community and a coach matter, regardless of school size or basketball pedigree, then Yergey's choice to remain at Brentsville made perfect sense.

So when she told her parents and Vollmer she had no interest in leaving, they stopped asking. And when Tad and Sara told Baltimore their daughter was staying, he moved on.

Once Yergey gave her word, she kept her word.

"The biggest reason is I feel so comfortable," Yergey said of continuing at Brentsville. "I'm surrounded by people who let me be myself on or off the basketball court. Coach Baltimore gives me lots of freedom. He cares about me."

NEW AND OLD

Brentsville has changed over the years as development moved into western Prince William.

The school, which opened in 1965 with 202 students and five sports, ballooned to over 1,500 students and 20 sports by 2007-08. The opening of nearby Patriot in 2011 lowered Brentsville's enrollment



Brentsville made Yergey (No. 14) an honorary captain as a fifth-grader for a game.

PROVIDED

to the point that it currently has 935 students, but there was no turning back. Growth had left its mark.

Still, the school is affectionately known as "cow pie high," and the surrounding area retains its country charm and traditions. Farm land remains prevalent, and football cutouts labeled with the Brentsville players' last names and jersey numbers and megaphones with each cheerleader's first name dot the telephone poles down Fitzwater Drive, Nokesville's main street.

The slower pace and open space appealed to Yergey's parents. Tad grew up in the suburban communities of Amherst and Avon Lake, Ohio, and Sara spent her preteen years in more rural Cazenovia, N.Y. They moved from Bristow to Nokesville in the summer of 2007 when Alden was 2 and her brother, George, was 4. The family lives on a five-acre lot surrounded by farmland about six miles from Brentsville.

The community provides a huge support network no matter the need. It played a big role in helping Yergey fulfill her dream of having an outside half-court for basketball at her house.

After Sara's post on the Nokesville Facebook page, Karin Mustoe gave the family two old telephone poles to light the court. Another friend, Garrett Cooper, transported the poles on his trailer. Rob Clark, who owns a construction company and is a friend of the Yergeys from their volunteer days with the Nokesville Fire Department, provided the auger to dig the holes for the light poles. And Mike Newlin of Newtown Electric wired the poles.

Finally, Brentsville assistant TJ Mayes, an operations manager for T&T Contracting in Manassas, helped install a new backboard. Each person refused to accept payment for their time.

"One of the reasons we moved to Nokesville was its strong sense of community," Sara said. "We first felt it through volunteering at the [fire department]. Neighbors and friends always seemed to help each other out."

Yergey began her schooling at the Rainbow Preschool at Nokesville Church of the Brethren on Fitzwater Drive at age 3. Along the way, she made friends she

still has today. She also loved attending basketball games where the players "were treated like rock stars."

"I thought they were the coolest people in the world," Yergey said. "Even if I can ride the bench there in high school, I will be happy."

By the time she enrolled at Brentsville in the fall of 2019, Yergey was immersed in the program. She served as a team manager her sixth- and seventh-grade years and played on the Tigers' junior-varsity team as an eighth-grader, a move permitted by Prince William Public Schools.

Nokesville does not have middle school sports, so this allowed Yergey to play on a school team and sharpen her skills at the junior-varsity level.

Once she started at Brentsville as a freshman, Yergey stood out immediately and became the first Tiger girls basketball player to earn first-team all-state honors. She repeated the feat as a sophomore after averaging 19.0 points in Brentsville's 10-game pandemic-shortened season.

"In my 30 years of coaching, including 10 as a college coach, she is the hardest worker I've ever coached, and I have coached a lot of talented players," Baltimore said.

OFF AND RUNNING

One day as a second-grader, Yergey set up cones in her family's driveway and dribbled behind her back with ease. The move caught Sara's attention.

"Maybe we need to get her some training and see what happens," Sara recalled telling Tad.

This was all new to Sara and Tad. They wanted to feed Yergey's love for the game and help her development, but weren't sure how to do it. They asked questions and found places to nurture her.

After spending two seasons with the Nokesville Basketball League, Yergey branched out. She played in the Gainesville Basketball Association her fourth- and fifth-grade years and then joined the AAU circuit as a sixth-grader playing for Teddy Whitney. From there, she played two years under Osbourn Park head girls basketball coach Chrissy Kelly and then

became a member of the Fairfax Stars under Bob Dix from her freshman year to the present.

Sara said she doesn't know where her daughter's talent and passion for basketball originates. Sara said she had zero ability playing the sport in high school. And Tad had no interest in basketball until Yergey began playing.

There was nothing specific about why basketball appealed to Yergey. She liked all aspects of it. And once she found success, she pushed herself to become better in all facets of her game.

When she can convince Baltimore, Yergey goes to Brentsville's gym at 6 a.m. to shoot around before school starts. She works with Deante Steele to improve her strength, conditioning, speed and agility. And when time permits, she also travels to Charlottesville to enhance her basketball skills under Damin Altizer. A University of Virginia graduate, Altizer has worked with a number of NBA players.

Her efforts paid off when colleges started calling. With a 4.176 grade-point average, Yergey was set academically. She received her first Division I offer in June 2020 from Radford. Navy, Western Michigan, Florida Atlantic, Siena, Boston, Colgate and Loyola (Md.) followed.

When Yergey made her decision, she did so in a thoughtful way. The rational part of her saw why Siena made sense. But she needed to feel it emotionally as well.

She had seen Siena over the summer, but the November visit gave her a chance to interact with people at the school and convinced her it was the right place.

She told her parents of her decision that Saturday and then started letting others know. Typically, high school athletes announce their choice via Twitter immediately. But that's not Yergey's style. She preferred the personal touch. She Facetimed with Baltimore. She called others who helped her get to this point, including someone as far back as Lee Williams, her Gainesville assistant coach as a fifth-grader.

Yergey also wrote thank-you letters, including one to Steele that ran from the front page to the back. On the first day of practice Nov. 8, she informed her teammates. Two days later, she posted something on her Twitter account.

Thinking of others is Yergey's personality even on the court. Although she has the ability to score in droves on her own, Yergey gets as much satisfaction, if not more, when she sets a teammate up for a basket. One of those recipients is usually Vollmer.

Vollmer and Yergey have known each other since playing on different teams in the Gainesville league. Anytime they met, Vollmer wanted to cover Yergey.

"She's a good leader," Vollmer said. "She's always encouraging people and she pushes me. I'm competitive. We have the same end goal of winning a state championship."

To do that, Brentsville will have to go

Colgan volleyball claims school's first state title

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Brielle Kemavor bowed her head and prayed while sitting on the bench. Makayla Bowman, meanwhile, looked at her teammate and long-time friend Meghan Haldeman standing next to her on the court and gave her a knowing look as if to say, "We are going to do this."

Colgan High School's girls volleyball team needed one more point to capture the Class 6 state title Friday night at the Siegel Center in Richmond.

When the ball fell just outside the line in front of the Colgan bench, Kemavor and Bowman finally let loose. So did their teammates, coaches and fans.

The Sharks finished off Herndon 25-21 in the fourth set to secure the school's first state championship since it opened in 2016 with a 3-1 victory.

"To see this come to fruition, the emotions are completely overwhelming," said Bowman, who cried instant tears of joy and relief once the ball hit the ground out of bounds to secure the title.

Colgan, which became the first Prince William County high school to win a state volleyball title since Forest Park did it in



Colgan players celebrate moments after winning the Class 6 state championship in four sets over Herndon on Friday night in Richmond. DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

2003, took the first two sets Friday 25-17 and 26-24.

Herndon (18-6) won the third set 25-21 as standout Akasha Anderson dominated at times with thundering kills. A 9-0 run gave the Hornets a 12-5 lead. Colgan got within three before Herndon closed things out.

Kemavor said the team sometimes this season suffered letdowns in the third set.

"We fall into complacency," said Kemavor, the Cardinal District and Region B player of the year who has scholarship offers from UCLA, Brigham Young, Maryland, Virginia and Duke. "We knew we

needed to wake up."

The Sharks did just that. They never trailed in the fourth set and led by as many as seven, 24-17. Herndon then scored four straight points before Colgan won match point.

Aubrey Hatch led the Sharks with 11 kills. Bowman had eight kills and nine digs, Kemavor seven kills and six blocks, Alexis Scipione 33 assists and Alana Connor nine digs.

Colgan graduated five starters from last season, but coach Keith Mesa, Kemavor and Bowman said the team came into its own during its second regular-season game at Cardinal District rival Forest Park. The Sharks trailed 2-1 before coming back to win 3-2.

Mesa, the Sharks' only head coach after going 269-83 with two state tournament appearances in 13 seasons at Colonial Forge, said that if Colgan and Forest Park had tied for the regular-season district title, Forest Park would have earned the top seed in regionals. Instead, Colgan claimed the No. 1 spot and was able to host matches all the way through regionals.

"It was a light switch in everyone's head," Mesa said.



Local community members helped Alden Yergey's family build a basketball court for her. BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

YERGEY » FROM PAGE 20

through a formidable district schedule that includes William Monroe and its Division I prospect, Ella Weaver, as well as Skyline. Brentsville, which returns its entire roster, will face five 6A teams among its first nine opponents in preparation for districts.

But of all the Tigers' league opponents, Meridian remains the primary team to beat. The Mustangs bring back all their players from last season's 16-0 Class 3 state champion team.

Meridian ended Brentsville's season last year in the Region B semifinals with a 44-16 rout. Yergey tallied only three points, her lowest output of the season after reaching double figures in her previous nine games.

"[Yergey] has big-play ability, and Brentsville goes as [Yergey] goes," said Meridian head coach Chris Carrico, a 2003 Brentsville graduate. "She makes tough shots, handles the ball well, is a good passer, and is smart, so we concentrate on getting the ball out of her hands and making the game as difficult as possible for her."

Yergey used the defeat as a teaching tool. She said she's watched the game at least 100 times trying to dissect where she made mistakes. As Brentsville's best player, she expects double teams. But Meridian defended her even more closely and pressured her in unexpected ways.

She finds the exercise of reliving an unpleasant experience necessary to avoid falling into the same traps. As talented as she is, she can only improve.

"It's a good opportunity to be better this year," Yergey said.

And do it at the only high school she ever wanted to play for.

Yergey finds kindred spirit in Sam Brunelle

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Sam Brunelle understood first-hand Alden Yergey's circumstance.

Brunelle played at William Monroe High School, which is in the same district as Brentsville. And she's from Ruckerstown, a Central Virginia community of 1,482 residents that is only slightly smaller than Nokesville's 1,619, according to the 2020 Census.

As the 6-foot-2 Brunelle developed into one of the most highly sought-after high school players in the class of 2019, she asked college coaches whether staying at William Monroe helped or hindered her recruiting. The coaches assured her there was no reason to leave for another school.

Brunelle stayed put. The two-time high school All-American finished her prep career with 2,229 points and 1,272 rebounds and signed with Notre Dame. She also went on to be a gold medalist with Team USA.

Yergey viewed Brunelle as proof it was possible to play at a rural school and still attract Division I interest.

"When I saw her at a small school with the attention she got, I realized and believed I could do the same," Yergey said.

That common thread led to a friendship that began in December 2016, when Brentsville coach Eugene Baltimore introduced the two after William Monroe's visit to Brentsville for a game. Baltimore connected them because he believed Yergey could learn from Brunelle since they both displayed tireless work ethics.

Brunelle, then a sophomore, and Yergey, a sixth-grader, posed for a photo together and continued to stay in touch. Brunelle sent Yergey a Team USA t-shirt and always made a point to catch up with her when William Monroe played at Brentsville. They also caught up during state tournament time or when Yergey attended camps and training events Brunelle put on.

Brunelle also trained under Damin Altizer and



Alden Yergey (right) first met Sam Brunelle at a Brentsville basketball game in December 2016. PROVIDED

recommended him to the Yergeys.

The big-sister, little-sister relationship grew tighter after Brunelle accepted Baltimore's invitation to attend Brentsville summer camps as a guest speaker. Twice, she and Yergey played each other one-on-one. Brunelle won both times, but the last encounter boosted Yergey's confidence.

In their first game, in June 2017, Brunelle, then a senior, beat the rising seventh-grader handily. Brunelle showed no mercy, blocking one of Yergey's shots so hard it stunned the campers. The next summer, they met again, but this time Yergey felt better after losing only 5-3.

Brunelle gave Yergey her cell phone number and told her to reach out anytime if she had questions. Brunelle's parents did the same with Yergey's parents.

Yergey admired Brunelle as much for her play as her attitude. As good as Brunelle was, she never acted entitled or forgot her roots. Brunelle relishes her role as an ambassador for athletes who find success at a small school.

"I've been very outspoken on this issue," Brunelle said. "Loyalty was one of those things that was very important to me."

Nix blocks his way to the top

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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They'd reached an impasse.

The Class 3 Northwestern District head football coaches needed to select an offensive player of the year during their all-district meeting Nov. 10, but no one had agreed on a unanimous choice among the nominees.

Something had to give.

To break the logjam, Warren County's Jerry Sarchet suggested a name no one had considered until now. What about Brentsville's Tyler Nix?

In Sarchet's mind, no one was boasting phenomenal offensive stats like a rusher with 1,500 yards or a passer with 2,000 yards.

Sarchet, a former John Paul the Great head coach who also coached the offensive line there, said Nix was the top player on the field in each game he saw Nix play.

A quick look at film showed how Nix had dominated opponents all season at right guard with a mix of size, power and agility. One play in particular stood out.

It occurred in Brentsville's Sept. 24 game against Meridian. On fourth down with under two minutes left and Brentsville leading, the Tigers called timeout.

Brentsville offensive coordinator Obie Woods saw that Meridian was bringing a safety down to stack the box with more players than Brentsville and decided to run. In the huddle, Nix told Woods, "Run

**HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL
REGIONAL FINALS**

FRIDAY, NOV. 26

» **Class 3, Region B championship**
No. 2 Brentsville (10-2) at No. 1 Meridian (10-2), 6 p.m.

SATURDAY, NOV. 27

» **Class 6, Region B championship**
No. 2 Freedom-Woodbridge (10-2) at No. 1 Battlefield (12-0), 1 p.m.

» **Region winners advance to the state semifinals Dec. 4:**

- The Brentsville-Meridian winner faces the York-Phoebus winner
- The Freedom-Battlefield winner faces the Oscar Smith-Manchester winner

» The higher-rated teams based on regular-season power ratings will host the state semifinal games.

 For game stories and photo galleries from Friday's and Saturday's regional finals, visit insidenova.com

behind me coach."

Brentsville did. And the 6-foot-3, 275-pound all-state wrestler took care of the rest. With one block, he took out a defensive lineman and a linebacker to give running back Bryce Jackson enough room to scoot through for the first down and

seal a 23-20 win.

Skyline's Heath Gilbert seconded Sarchet's recommendation. As the other coaches thought more about Nix's merits, they realized he deserved the honor as well. Within five minutes of Sarchet's proposal, the district had its offensive player of the year.

"Tyler has been a big part of our offense," said Brentsville head coach Loren White. "He's earned it. I could not agree more."

White initially nominated Jackson as the player of the year. The choice made sense.

Usually skill players, especially quarterbacks and running backs, are the leading contenders for any player-of-the-year award.

And Jackson, in his first year with the Tigers after transferring from Patriot, warranted serious consideration after scoring 16 touchdowns and rushing for 890 yards during the regular season. His numbers could have been higher had White not pulled him out in the second half of four lopsided victories.

The offensive lineman, though, rarely receives such recognition given the anonymity associated with the position.

Potomac graduate Donte Wilkins was the last lineman from a Prince William County high school to earn the distinction in 2012, when the Cardinal District selected him as offensive player of the year. The only other local lineman to claim the hon-



Tyler Nix

DAVID FAWCETT FOR INSIDENOVA

or since 1998 was Hylton graduate David Stevenson.

Now Nix has joined that special club, even if it came as a surprise.

When White announced the player of the year at the end of the Nov. 11 practice, many of Nix's teammates were shocked. Even Nix was caught off-guard. He expected to hear a quarterback or running back's name as well.

"I think they thought maybe coach messed up; he's tired," White said.

But the brief silence quickly turned to applause. Nix, a modest kid, even allowed a small grin to cross his face. When Nix told his mother, Kimberly, the news that night, she burst into tears. His father Jeremy beamed with pride.

"It's definitely a confidence boost," Nix said. "That doesn't happen too much."

Jackson loves running behind Nix, especially when Brentsville runs two plays in particular. Each time either of those two plays is called, Jackson knows the outcome. It's automatic: "When I follow No. 77, we're getting 20-plus yards."



The Playmaker

Brentsville's Bryce Jackson scores on a 51-yard touchdown reception with no time remaining to give the Tigers a 13-7 win over Meridian in the Class 3, Region B final.

BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA

Bryce Jackson is Brentsville's spark on offense

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
dfawcett@insidenova.com

After spending his sophomore and junior years at Patriot High School, Bryce Jackson transferred to nearby Brentsville for his senior year for a number of reasons.

The addition of offensive coordinator Obie Woods to first-year head coach Loren White's coaching staff over the summer factored into Jackson's thinking. The two knew each other well. Jackson played for Woods as a sixth-grader on a youth football team and then again at Bishop O'Connell as a freshman and then at Patriot.

Jackson said he and his family also moved so they could live on more land.

But Jackson said the primary reason for going to Brentsville was to support Ryland Harris. Jackson and Harris are cousins who grew up playing football and baseball together on travel teams coached by Jackson's father, Jesse. They also competed in the same sports together at Gainesville Middle School.

The two went their separate ways after eighth grade when Harris attended Brentsville as a freshman and Jackson went to O'Connell, a private Catholic school in Arlington, with the hopes of increasing his college recruiting profile.



Ryland Harris, a Brentsville student who died Sept. 15 from brain cancer, is Bryce Jackson's cousin. PROVIDED

But they never lost touch, especially after Harris was diagnosed with brain cancer in May 2020.

The Nokesville community rallied around Ryland and his family. And Jackson wanted to show his support as well by coming back to an area he grew up in.

"He found the good in everybody," Jackson said of Harris. "I was always happy around him. When I was around him, all my problems went away. He helped me when I needed it."

Jackson took it hard when Harris died Sept. 15 at the age of 17. But he remained steadfast in dedicating this season to Harris and honoring him in different ways.

He always says a prayer for Ryland and his family before each game.

And sometimes after scoring a touchdown, he points toward the sky or leaps into offensive lineman Tyler Nix's arms.

His gestures were part of an overall

ON THE GROUND			
Brentsville has had 10 1,000-yard rushers since 1988, with Bryce Jackson's total this year leading the way.			
Year	Name	Yards	Games
1988	James Morgan	1,051	11
1993	Johnnie Jones	1,026	10
1994	Rodney Jackson	1,074	11
1997	Duane Thomas	1,072	11
2006	Joe Walton	1,163	11
2007	Justin Donnelly	1,116	10
2016	Dashawn Denney	1,033	13
2016	Eric Jones	1,003	12
2019	Guy Hayes	1,096	12
2021	Bryce Jackson	1,235	13

team effort to remember Ryland. The team motto is "Play Like Ry." Brentsville also unanimously voted Ryland a team captain at the start of the season and always goes out to the 12-yard line before each game to have a moment alone. Harris wore No. 12 in baseball at Brentsville.

After the Tigers defeated host Meridian on Friday 13-7 in the Class 3, Region B final, Jackson remembers the team holding up the trophy and saying these words before departing: "Ryland Strong."

"I'm still thinking of him as though he's still playing with me," Jackson said.

In the best shape of his life, Jackson has been Brentsville's go-to person in helping the Tigers (11-2) reach the state semifinals for the first time. Brentsville plays Phoebus (12-1) Saturday at 2 p.m. at Darling Stadium in Hampton.

"I know when I call on No. 2, I expect a big play," said White, referring to Jackson's

jersey number.

There was no bigger play than Friday when Jackson scored the game-winning touchdown on a 51-yard reception with no time left to lift Brentsville past Meridian.

The clock had stopped with 6.2 seconds left in regulation and Brentsville on its own 49-yard line. Jackson, quarterback Caleb Alexander and Nix approached Woods about running a play Brentsville calls "Tiger Screen."

Based on Meridian's defensive scheme with three men up front and everyone else dropped back in coverage, the players believed Tiger Screen would work. Woods agreed.

Jackson caught Alexander's pass and through some shifty moves along with key blocks by Langston White and Nix,

BRYCE JACKSON » PAGE 20

Orlando brothers are 'welcome additions'

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Loren White knew nothing about Luca and Nico Orlando when the two brothers arrived at Brentsville High School over the summer.

But as the preseason began, the Tigers' head coach quickly realized the transfers from Colgan High School could contribute right away.

They have lived up to their promise in helping the Tigers (11-2) reach the state semifinals for the first time. Brentsville plays Phoebus (12-1) Saturday at 2 p.m. at Darling Stadium in Hampton.

Luca, a senior, starts at cornerback and wide receiver, where he earned first-team all-district honors, while Nico, a sophomore, has become a valuable option as a reserve running back.

"They are definitely welcome additions," White said.

Of the two, only Luca played last season at Colgan – at wide receiver, safety and some quarterback – which went 0-6 during the pandemic-shortened season. Nico missed the season, which was moved from fall 2020 to spring 2021, after breaking his ankle in January.

They moved into Brentsville's school zone over the summer knowing a little about the Tigers' football program.

Brentsville had a new head coach in White. They had reached the postseason six straight seasons. And there was a family connection. Their cousin, Beau Lang, was a standout quarterback who earned second-team all-re-



Luca (left) and Nico Orlando became immediate contributors for Brentsville in their first year at the school. DAVID FAWCETT/INSIDENOVA

gion honors last season before transferring to Kettle Run this school year.

Luca and Nico quickly acclimated to their new teammates and school. They have enjoyed the culture change, going from a struggling program at Colgan to a thriving one at Brentsville, even if the Tigers play three classifications down from their previous school.

More than anything, it's nice to play this deep in the season, something neither is accustomed to.

"It's always exciting to play a couple extra games," said Luca as he braced for the harsh winds Monday blowing across Brentsville's practice field.

At 6-3, 160 pounds, Luca is built like his father, Mark,

a first-team all-American wide receiver at Towson who went on to play in the Canadian Football League and is a member of the school's athletic hall of fame.

Luca has been Brentsville's primary receiving target, catching a team-high 20 passes for 344 yards and six touchdowns. He can keep the secondary honest and prevent them from trying to push up and stop the run.

Over the second half of the season, the 5-9, 180-pound Nico has developed into an effective complement for leading rusher Bryce Jackson (1,235 yards, 24 TDs). Nico has totaled 613 of his 762 rushing yards and all nine of his touchdowns in Brentsville's past eight games.

"He provides a nice change of pace," White said. "He hits the holes well with speed and full force. He's someone you get out of the way for."

Nico's biggest performance of the season came at an opportune time. Brentsville trailed James Monroe 21-0 early in the second quarter of the region semifinals. The Tigers closed to within seven at halftime before tying it up at the start of the third quarter. Then Nico took over.

On his second carry of the game, he ran for a 40-yard touchdown to give Brentsville the lead. He followed up with two more touchdown runs of 10 and 35 yards in the fourth quarter as the Tigers rallied for a 48-28 win. He also had a 70-yard touchdown run called back because of a penalty. Nico finished with 161 rushing yards on nine carries.

"They've gelled with the team from day one," White said.

BRYCE JACKSON » FROM PAGE 19

ran for the score.

"That's Bryce," Nix said. "When we are in need of a big moment, that's what he does."

Jackson arrived at Brentsville without any promises of taking over as the starting running back. He had backed up Keith Jenkins at Patriot while starting at safety.

As Patriot's cornerbacks coach, White was familiar with Jackson. Jackson's father also served as Patriot's safeties coach before joining White's staff at Brentsville as the defensive coordinator.

The Tigers needed a running back. And as the preseason wore on, it became apparent that Jackson was the most familiar with the offensive scheme Brentsville wanted to run.

He has scored at least one touchdown in 12 of Brentsville's 13 games. And for the season, the Merri-



Bryce Jackson (right) is in his first year at Brentsville after spending his sophomore and junior school years at Patriot. BILL KAMENJAR/FOR INSIDENOVA

mack commitment has rushed for 1,235 yards, unofficially the most by a Brentsville player since the school fielded its first varsity team in 1965.

"I'm happy to produce," Jackson said.

CLASS 3 STATE SEMIFINAL

Brentsville (11-2) vs. Phoebus (12-1)

Saturday, 2 p.m. at Darling Stadium, Hampton

» **Next up:** The Brentsville-Phoebus winner plays the winner of the Abingdon (12-1)-Liberty Christian (12-0) game for the Class 3 state title Dec. 11 at 4:30 p.m. at Liberty University.

» **Did you know?** This is Brentsville's first state semifinal appearance since the school opened in 1965... Phoebus last won a state title in 2018.

» **Brentsville offensive leaders:** Senior running back Bryce Jackson (184 carries, 1,235 rushing yards, 24 TDs); sophomore running back Nico Orlando (82-762, 9 TDs), sophomore quarterback Caleb Alexander (84 for 152, 1,182 yards, 13 TDs and 6 interceptions), senior wide receiver Luca Orlando (20 catches, 344 yards, 6 TDs), junior lineman Tyler Nix (the Class 3 Northwestern District Offensive Player of the Year).

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL SCHEDULE (DEC. 3-9)

FRIDAY, DEC. 3

» BOYS

Woodbridge vs. Westfield at WT Woodson, 6 p.m.
Osborn vs. Herndon at South Lakes HS, 5:45 p.m.
Unity Reed at Heritage-Leesburg, 6 p.m.
Colgan vs. Thomas Jefferson Science and Tech at George C. Marshall HS, 6:30 p.m.
Gainesville at Brentsville, 7 p.m.
Virginia Academy at Seton, 7:15 p.m.
Manassas Park at Kettle Run, 7:30 p.m.
Battlefield at South Lakes, 7:30 p.m.
Osborn Park at North Stafford, 7:30 p.m.
Forest Park at Colonial Forge, 7:30 p.m.
Gar-Field at Justice, 7:30 p.m.
John Paul the Great vs. St. Mary's Ryken at the Potomac School Tip Off Tournament, 4 p.m.

» GIRLS

Gar-Field at Justice, 5:45 p.m.
Seton vs. McLean at the Potomac School Tournament, 6 p.m.
Osborn at Freedom-Woodbridge, 6 p.m.

Stafford at Potomac, 6 p.m.
Colgan vs. Centreville at Osborn Park, 6 p.m.
Brentsville at Gainesville, 7 p.m.
Colonial Forge at Forest Park, 7 p.m.
Kettle Run at Manassas Park, 7:30 p.m.
Highland at Osborn Park, 8 p.m.

SATURDAY, DEC. 4

» BOYS

Woodbridge at WT Woodson, 7 p.m.
Colgan vs. Dominion at George C. Marshall HS, 1 p.m.
North Stafford at Potomac, 2 p.m.
Unity Reed vs. Riverside at Heritage-Leesburg, 2 p.m.
Gar-Field at Justice Tournament
John Paul the Great at the Potomac School Tip-Off Tournament, TBA

» GIRLS

Gar-Field at Justice Tournament
Seton at the Potomac School Tournament
Colgan vs. Highland at Osborn Park, 4 p.m.
Centreville at Osborn Park, 6 p.m.

Forest Park at Paul VI, 7:30 p.m.

MONDAY, DEC. 6

» BOYS

Brentsville at Park View-Sterling, 7:30 p.m.
Hylton at Annandale, 8 p.m.

» GIRLS

Hylton at Annandale, 6 p.m.
Osborn at Brentsville, 7 p.m.
Manassas Park at Park View-Sterling, 7:30 p.m.

TUESDAY, DEC. 7

» BOYS

Patriot at Hylton, 7 p.m.
Freedom-Woodbridge at Highland, 7 p.m.
Trinity School at Meadow View at Quantico, 7:15 p.m.
Brentsville at Liberty-Bealeton, 7:30 p.m.
Osborn Park at Forest Park, 7:30 p.m.
Osborn at Potomac, 7:30 p.m.
Gar-Field at Battlefield, 7:30 p.m.
Colgan at Unity Reed, 7:30 p.m.
John Paul the Great at St. John's, 7:30 p.m.

Gainesville at Manassas Park, 7:30 p.m.

» GIRLS

Osborn Park at Forest Park, 5:30 p.m.
Gar-Field at Battlefield, 5:30 p.m.
Seton at the Madeira School, 5:45 p.m.
Mountain View at Colgan, 7 p.m.
Hylton at Patriot, 7 p.m.
Manassas Park at Gainesville, 7 p.m.
Liberty-Bealeton at Brentsville, 7:30 p.m.

WEDNESDAY, DEC. 8

» GIRLS

Osborn at Hylton, 7 p.m.

THURSDAY, DEC. 9

» BOYS

John Paul the Great at Episcopal, 6 p.m.
Colgan at Brooke Point, 6:30 p.m.
Colonial Forge at Hylton, 7 p.m.
Christ Chapel at Osborn Park, 7 p.m.
James Monroe at Woodbridge, 7 p.m.
Forest Park at Unity Reed, 7:30 p.m.
Gainesville at Rappahannock, 7:30 p.m.

» GIRLS

Foxcroft at Quantico, 6 p.m.
Unity Reed at Forest Park, 7 p.m.
Woodbridge at Battlefield, 7:30 p.m.

Battlefield players, coaches on the same page

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Ty Gordon had never played defensive line before. But one day during a summer camp at Westfield High School, Greg Hatfield noticed how well Gordon moved off the ball. With some coaching, Hatfield believed Gordon could fit into Battlefield's defensive scheme and become a standout worthy of accolades.

The only question was whether Gordon believed the same thing.

When the players broke into position groups, Gordon asked Hatfield where to go. Hatfield told Gordon he wanted to convert the linebacker into a defensive tackle.

The news shocked Gordon at first. But he trusted his coach's judgement, and he wanted to help his team wherever he could.

"He sees something in me, so I decided to go for it and have an open mind," Gordon said.

Their faith in each other did two things: It turned Gordon into a first-team all-Cedar Run District performer, and it allowed Hatfield to implement his system without any disruptions or distractions.

The combination is a big reason why Battlefield is 13-0 and one victory from playing for its first state title since winning it all in 2010.

Hatfield is the Bobcats' third head coach in four seasons. And although he arrived in Haymarket with an impressive track record after successes at Central-Woodstock, Fauquier and Eastern View, Hatfield understood that the players needed to buy into his approach if they were to do well.

Any pushback would only derail things, especially among the seniors.

"If the [players] are not open-minded, then you are going in a completely different direction," Hatfield said.

CLASS 6 STATE SEMIFINAL

**Battlefield (13-0) at Oscar Smith (11-1)
Saturday, 2 p.m., in Chesapeake, Va.**

» **Next up:** The Battlefield-Oscar Smith winner faces the winner of the South County (10-3)-James Madison (12-1) game for the state title Dec. 11 at noon at Old Dominion University.

» **Last meeting:** Dec. 3, 2011 (state semifinals): Oscar Smith won 42-14.

» **Battlefield offensive leaders:** Senior running back Graham Jones (198 carries, 890 yards, 8 TDs), senior quarterback Jonathan Walters (123-242, 1,794 yards, 19 TDs, 5 interceptions), sophomore wide receiver Braden Boggs (52 receptions, 967 yards, 11 TDs), junior wide receiver Caleb Woodson (22 receptions, 226 yards, 1 TD), sophomore wide receiver Brandon Binkowski (22 receptions, 229 yards, 2 TDs), senior kicker Vadin Bruot (49 extra points, 7 field goals).

» **Oscar Smith offensive leaders:** Senior quarterback Ethan Vosko (135-208, 2,505 yards, 32 TDs, 4 interceptions), senior running back Kevon King (110 carries, 1,376 yards, 21 TDs), senior wide receiver Amonte Jones (38 receptions, 801 yards, 11 TDs).



For coverage of Saturday's state semifinal, visit INSIDENOVA.COM

Hatfield ensured that Battlefield stayed on course when he accepted the job by showing the players he was invested in them from the start and would do everything he could to play to their strengths.

Hatfield left an impression on senior quarterback Jonathan Walters when the two met for the first time in person. Before Battlefield announced Hatfield's hire May 25, Walters had already heard Hatfield was the new coach. Walters looked Hatfield up online and liked what he saw.

But Walters still had some reservations. In his first

season starting at quarterback, Walters clicked with then head coach Scott Girolmo.

Would the new coach stifle Walters' passing game by relying more on the run?

Whatever concerns Walters had about Hatfield disappeared when he stuck out his hand to introduce himself to Hatfield.

"He told me I did not need to introduce myself," Walters said. "He knew who I was. That boosted my confidence."

So did Battlefield's coaching staff. Hatfield brought two coaches from Eastern View, Butch Fettig and Steve Francese, who are the Bobcats' defensive coordinators.

But he also retained Tre Cage, John Knouff, Casey Kroll, Marcel Smith and Charlie Woollum from Girolmo's staff, while also bringing back two coaches from Mark Cox's staff, Rob Mello and Bobby Coleman. The biggest addition was hiring Cox as Battlefield's quarterbacks coach.

As the school's first head coach when it opened in 2004, Cox turned Battlefield into a regular playoff contender before retiring after the 2018 season.

"He's made things so much easier," Walters said of Cox, a former Virginia Tech quarterback.

Duke commitment Wesley Williams, a four-year starter at defensive end, said Hatfield's collaborative effort is what stands out most to him.

"He's a great leader and delegates," Williams said. "He asks for opinions and gets a lot of people involved."

Walters thought Battlefield had the makings of a special season led by a senior class who as eighth graders led Ronald Reagan Middle School to its first undefeated season. Williams played on that team, as did starting running back Graham Jones and wide receiver/defensive back Dominic Taylor.

"With the way he has us focus on the present, I knew we had a chance of being great," Walters said.

LOCAL BRIEFS

MURPHY A FINALIST FOR TOP LINEBACKER AWARD

Unity Reed's Shawn Murphy is one of six national finalists for the Butkus Award.

The award goes to the top high school linebacker. Murphy, the Cedar Run District Defensive Player of the Year, has committed to Alabama.

The award, which also recognizes the top NFL and college football linebackers, will be announced by Dec. 7.

The other finalists are: Joshua Burnham, Traverse City (Mich.) Central; Jalon Walker, Salisbury, N.C.; C.J. Hicks, Archbishop Alter, Dayton, Ohio; Jaylen Sneed, Hilton Head, S.C., and Harold Perkins, Cypress Park, Texas.



SHAWN MURPHY

was a first-team all-Eastern Collegiate Football Conference selection.

Kidd finished with a team- and-conference high five interceptions. He was second with 78 tackles and tied for first with seven pass breakups. He led the conference with 35 solo tackles.



ANDRE KIDD

WHITEHEAD A CFL ALL-STAR

Osborn graduate Lucky Whitehead was one of three BC Lions named a Canadian Football League West Division All-Star.

Whitehead, who signed as a free agent with the Lions this season, finished with 60 receptions for 932 yards, which ranked him in the top five in the CFL in both categories. He also caught four touchdowns.

Whitehead also made an impact on special teams, where he returned 12 punts for 130 yards and a touchdown and also had a 118-yard missed field goal return touchdown during a victory over Ottawa.

Whitehead led all Lions with 1,212 combined yards. His accomplishments also helped him earn the team nomination



LUCKY WHITEHEAD

for CFL Most Outstanding Player.

SLAIBY SECOND-TEAM ALL-NEC

Saint Francis University punter Jordan Slaiby (Patriot) was named to the all-Northeast Conference second-team for football.

Slaiby booted a conference-leading seven punts of 50-plus yards, led with 22 punts inside the 20-yard line and ranked second with 38.9 yards per punt.



JORDAN SLAIBY

THORNTON ALL-CAA AGAIN

James Madison University wide receiver Kris Thornton (Osborn) earned first-team, all-Colonial Athletic Association honors for the second straight season.

Thornton leads the conference in receptions and is tied for the league lead in receiving touchdowns while ranking second in receiving yards. He has tallied 69 receptions for 896 yards and 11 touchdowns.



KRIS THORNTON

MEAC HONORS HALL

Norfolk State middle linebacker Marquis Hall (Potomac) was chosen to the all-MEAC

second-team for football.

Hall finished the season with 49 tackles, including four for loss, with 1.5 sacks and a fumble recovery. He also forced two fumbles, tied for the most among conference players.



MARQUIS HALL

FOUR NAMED ALL-STATE IN FIELD HOCKEY

Colgan's Carley Mayers earned a spot on the Virginia High School League's all-6A field hockey first team.

Colgan's Alexis Andrews-Thompson, Patriot's Claudia Lenahan and Battlefield's Natalie Moul were second-team picks.

KING IN RUNNING FOR NATIONAL AWARD

Battlefield High School graduate Josh King is one of 13 finalists for the 2021 William V. Campbell Trophy, college football's premier scholar-athlete award.

King was selected from 176 semifinalists that cover all three NCAA divisions and NAIA. King is a U.S. Merchant Marine Academy senior linebacker and team captain. The winner will be announced Dec. 7.

As a finalist, King will receive an \$18,000 postgraduate scholarship as a member of the 2021 NFF National Scholar-Athlete Class Presented by Fidelity Investments.