

TOUGH TAKEDOWN

From the first game to the last, Gar-Field's LaTroy Askew delivered

Many young athletes dream about delivering a game-winning moment on the biggest stage and then reveling in the afterglow of their once-in-a-lifetime achievement.

The reality, though, is most never experience those moments outside of their own imaginations. But Gar-Field High School's LaTroy Askew did.



DAVID FAWCETT

And almost 31 years later it remains as it should: the most cherished memory of a short-lived varsity career that became legendary in a season like no other for the oldest high school in Prince William County's eastern end.

On Dec. 1, 1990, a cold, sunny Saturday afternoon, Askew returned an interception 30 yards down the Gar-Field sideline for a touchdown with 21 seconds remaining to seal the Red Wolves' 20-13 come-from-behind win over visiting Highland Springs in the Group AAA, Division 6 state semifinals.

That play in itself is a forever touchstone, one that took on added significance because Gar-Field's win came a day before the first anniversary of his older brother's death. Martin Askew, instrumental in developing LaTroy's football skills, died Dec. 2, 1989, in a military parachuting accident at the age of 20.

But what happened after Askew's interception clinched the movie-like ending. Fans carried Askew off the field, while others surrounded him during the post-game triumph even at the expense of their own physical well-being.

So excited by what he just witnessed, Askew's father, Henry, ran down the bleachers and jumped the fence to celebrate with his son. From a health standpoint, it wasn't the wisest move. A career Marine, Henry had suffered serious injuries to both hips from a mortar attack during his lone tour of Vietnam.

While his wife, Ora, videotaped everything, Henry knew the consequence of his decision. He didn't care.

"I'm going to feel the pain, but it was worth it," Askew recalls his dad telling him.

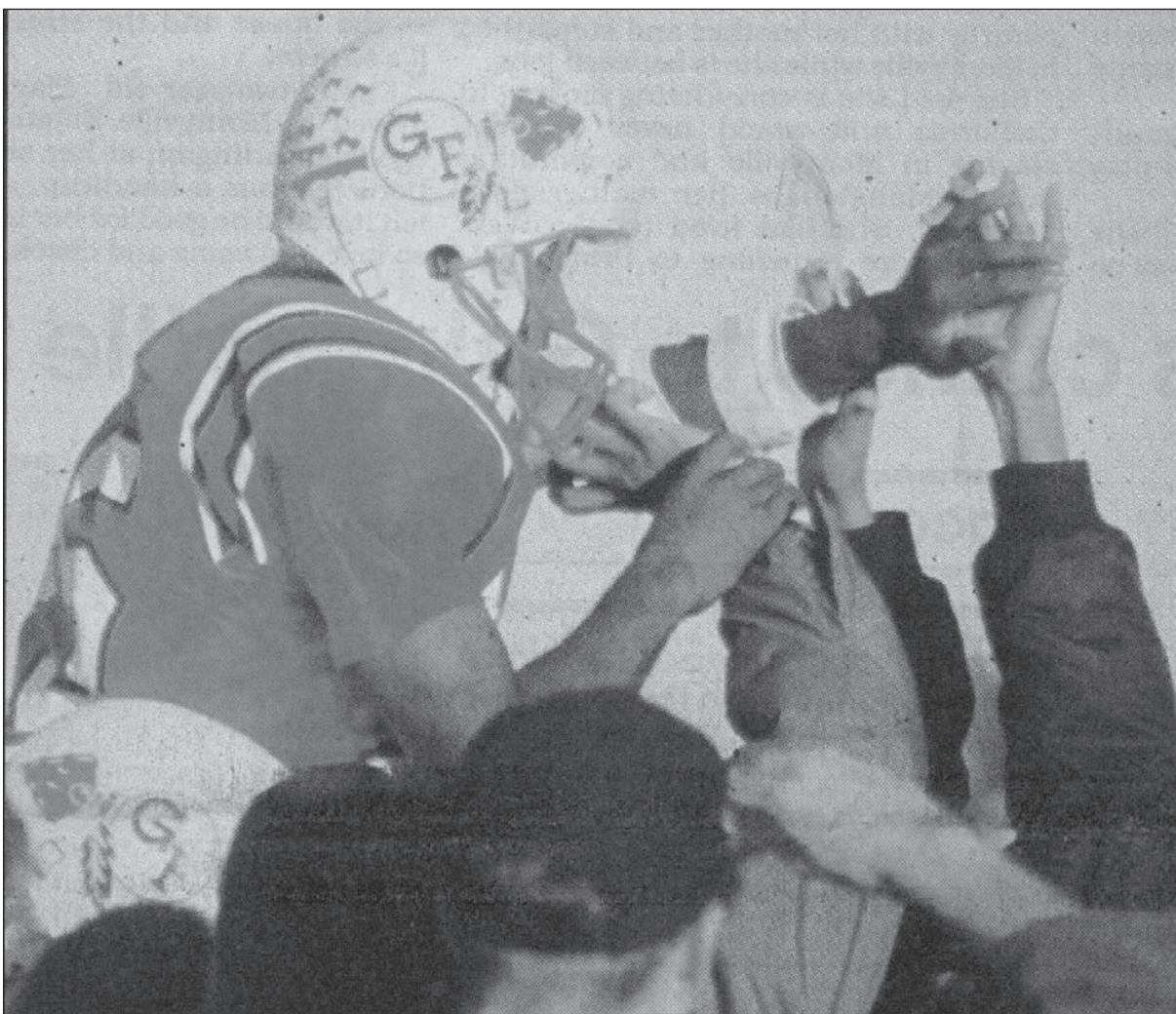
Henry still has the football Askew intercepted that day. It's one of their son's many mementoes Henry and Ora keep in boxes inside the same Woodbridge home Askew grew up in.

For his part, Askew doesn't think much about his highlight-filled senior year since so much time has passed since that dream season.

He's 48 now and a father of triplets who lives in Wake Forest, N.C., and drives 75 miles one way each day to work as a cybersecurity engineer for General Dynamics at the Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro.

But expect the memories to come alive this weekend when Askew returns to his hometown to join five other inductees into Gar-Field's Athletic Hall of Fame. It's a moment he can't wait for.

"It's the most prestigious honor I've ever received," Askew said. "I love that my children will see me honored



Fans carried LaTroy Askew off the field after he scored the game-winning touchdown in the 1990 Group AAA, Division 6 state semifinals. INSIDENOVA FILE PHOTO

THIS FRIDAY'S HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

- » Potomac (2-3) at Gar-Field (3-2), 7 p.m.
- » Woodbridge (1-3) at Forest Park (2-4), 7 p.m.
- » Freedom-Woodbridge (4-2) at Colgan (0-5), 7 p.m.
- » Freedom-South Riding (2-2) at Osbourn (4-2), 7 p.m.
- » Patriot (3-2) at Unity Reed (3-3), 7 p.m.
- » Battlefield (5-0) at John Champe (4-2), 7 p.m.
- » Hylton (1-4) at Osbourn Park (2-3), 7 p.m.
- » Northern Virginia Home School (5-1) at John Paul the Great (0-5), 7 p.m.

and that I'm not some old guy. To them, I'm Dad. But Dad was once a good football player."

One for the ages in the briefest of time.

There are so many storylines with so many layers to explain how Gar-Field went from a 2-8 team in 1989 to becoming Prince William's first state football champion a year later.

But there is one central figure: Askew. Mr. Clutch. From the first game to the last, he delivered in the most crucial moments.

In Gar-Field's 7-0 season-opening win over West Potomac, Askew scored the lone touchdown against a team that went on to win the Group AAA, Division 5 title.

Against Fauquier in the Northwestern Region final, Askew recorded a regional-record 96-yard run that tied the game at 7-7 and swung the momentum back in Gar-Field's favor en route to a 14-7 win.

And in the state final at undefeated Hampton, he bounced back from a first-half knee injury to score two second-half touchdowns to help Gar-Field overcome a 12-0 halftime deficit and claim the state title with a 13-12 victory.

There were other outstanding performances, but you get the idea. He was Gar-Field's go-to player.

"The fact it was a dream season, that's everything," Askew said. "It could not have gone any better. Lessons from that season still reverberate through the rest of my life."

One lesson is making the most of your opportunities.

The 5-10, 175-pound Askew entered his senior season with a thin football resume. He didn't start playing the sport until the eighth grade and didn't start at Gar-Field until the sixth game of his junior season when he became the first-string running back. Even then, Askew posted so-so numbers with 280 rushing yards and four touchdowns.

But Askew remained confident in his ability and that of his teammates. He recalled how his freshman coach, Larry Bell, told these future seniors they were a special group.

"You have to believe in yourself, reach down and play with heart and courage," Askew remembers Bell telling them. "That just stuck."

Nothing came easy for the perennial underdogs. But they never felt overmatched in earning every victory during that 12-2 season.

The state semifinal was the perfect example, as the Red Wolves scored 18 points in the final six minutes to beat Highland Springs.

A flood of memories enter Askew's mind when he recalls that final play. The biggest is disbelief. With the score tied, Askew assumed Highland Springs would hold on to the ball and take its chances in overtime.

Instead, the Springers lined up at their own 8-yard line with two receivers on each side. They were going for the win rather than let the clock run out.

Playing zone, Askew watched quarterback Jonas Grant look to the right sideline. Reading the crossing route correctly, Askew jumped on the underthrown ball and, with sprinter's speed that made him a standout on Gar-Field's 1990 Group AAA indoor state track champion, raced to the end zone.

"One of the lessons I learned from that season is that life comes at you fast," Askew said. "The question isn't what you do when you are hit. It's what you do after you get hit."

Former Osbourn standout receives unexpected gift

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
dfawcett@insidenova.com

George Kelecheck wanted to give his cousin, Ron Cebula, his due.

The 75-year-old Cebula was a former Osbourn High School three-sport standout who received some interest from the Pittsburgh Pirates after a try-out at the University of Maryland.

But Cebula's athletic career ended in high school after he was drafted into the military following his graduation in 1966. When he finished his two-year service in Germany, Cebula returned to Prince William County and worked for almost 47 years at what is now the Northern Virginia Electric Cooperative.

To honor Cebula more than 50 years later, Kelecheck did what his mom did for him when his high school athletic career ended: She gave him a shadow box that displayed his prep accomplishments.

"[Ron] was never given the correct accolades to show all his activities," Kelecheck said.

In June, Kelecheck drove from his home in Conyers, Ga., to present Cebula with a shadow box and a scrapbook with 250 pictures. The book also included a history of Manassas during the time Cebula grew up there.

Cebula knew Kelecheck was coming, but didn't know the full reason behind his visit. Kelecheck planned to make the trip almost a year ago, but the surprise was postponed because of COVID-19.

Cebula appreciated the gesture. He



George Kelecheck (left) presented his cousin, Ron Cebula, with a shadow box highlighting Cebula's athletic accomplishments at Osbourn High School. PROVIDED

said his mom had put together a scrapbook as well years ago, but Cebula has lost track of it.

"I'm still looking through it," Cebula said of Kelecheck's gift, which resides in the family rec room. "There's a lot of stuff."

Through a friend, Kelecheck reached out to the Prince William County Public Library archives division to see what information they had available. The

library had old Manassas Journal Messenger newspapers on microfilm and was able to transfer the years Kelecheck needed (1964-66) to his local library in Georgia.

Kelecheck began printing out the information, but then the printer blew up. Instead, Kelecheck took photos of newspaper articles with his phone. Kelecheck said the project took about 40 hours.

"He was like a big brother to all of us who were his cousins," said Kelecheck, who played quarterback and golf at Osbourn before graduating from the Manassas school in 1975.

In 1964, Cebula earned first-team all-Battlefield District honors as a running back in helping Osbourn become the first Prince William high school football team to go 10-0. Cebula led the Yellow Jackets with seven touchdowns and 59 total points.

Cebula played four years of varsity football and baseball. He was also a three-year member of Osbourn's varsity wrestling team, reaching the state tournament his senior season.

His athletic success is part of a family tradition that has spanned three generations.

Cebula's son, Eric, went on to become an all-district defensive tackle at Osbourn Park, while his grandson, Brett, was an all-state defensive end at Hylton.

"[The book] jogged a lot of memories," Cebula said. "Some things I remembered; others I had forgotten. My [family] enjoyed it. I was never one to brag about what I did."

LOCAL BRIEFS

KING FINALIST FOR NATIONAL AWARD

Battlefield High School graduate Josh King is a semifinalist for the Walter V. Campbell Trophy presented by the National Football Foundation.

The trophy, known as the "Academic Heisman," honors football players for their academic, football and leadership performance.

A senior linebacker at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, King has 18 tackles in the Mariners' first three games. He is a marine engineering and shipyard management major who has earned Deans' List High Honors every trimester.

The foundation will announce 12 to 14 finalists Oct. 27. Each will receive an \$18,000 post-graduate scholarship.



JOSH KING

WHITEHEAD UNDERGOES SURGERY

BC Lions wide receiver Lucky Whitehead underwent surgery Wednesday after breaking his hand in last week's loss to the Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

The Osbourn High School graduate is expected back in the lineup in two to four weeks. The Lions are off this week before returning to action Oct. 16 for a 4 p.m. game against visiting Calgary.

Whitehead has recorded 36 receptions for 665 yards and four touchdowns in eight games this season. His receiving yardage is second in the CFL, and his four touchdowns are tied for second.

He also returned a missed field goal 119 yards for a score.

MEAC HONORS BROKENBURR

Colgan graduate Darrian Brokenburr was named the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Co-Defensive Player of the Week.

The Howard University junior totaled seven tackles (six solo) and 2½ sacks in the Bison's home win over Sacred Heart on Oct. 2. Brokenburr has 12 tackles on the season.

ASKEW » FROM PAGE 19

Askew faced his next challenge in college. The lone major Division I recruit on the 1990 Gar-Field team, Askew signed with the University of Maryland. Chuck White, Gar-Field's head football coach and a former Maryland star, recommended the Terrapins consider Askew. Askew received interest from other colleges, but he wanted to honor his mother's request to stay close to home.



LATROY ASKEW

At the time, Askew was on top of the world with NFL aspirations. No longer an unknown, he was an all-state performer who rushed for 1,707 yards and 24 touchdowns and would have a shot at a starting cornerback role for the Terrapins.

But then he suffered torn ACLs in his left knee in back-to-back spring practices that required surgery. He recovered from the first one. The second one ended his football career without having ever played in a college game.

Without the desire to stay in school, Askew left Maryland after his sophomore year and began working for a number of tech companies with the plan of finishing his degree at some point. He accomplished that goal and in so doing fulfilled a promise to his parents.

Paying his way through school, he received an undergraduate degree in sociology from Bowie State in 2006.

HALL OF FAME HONOREES

Gar-Field High School will honor its 2021 Hall of Fame Class this weekend.

THE INDUCTEES ARE:

- » **Lindi Arrington**, student-athlete, Class of 2010
- » **LaTroy Askew**, student-athlete, Class of 1991
- » **Brian Bassett**, student-athlete, Class of 1991
- » **Manfred Brown**, student-athlete, Class of 1963
- » **Samuel Cox**, contributor, former principal, 1963-1974
- » **Jack Haggard**, student-athlete, Class of 1962

REMEMBERING THE STATE CHAMPIONS

Players from the 1990 Gar-Field state championship team will hold a reunion Oct. 22. A meet-and-greet in the Gar-Field parking lot will start at 5 p.m. before the Red Wolves' homecoming game at 7 against Hylton. Commemorative sweatshirts are available for pre-sale. For more details, email Stevemadisongf22@gmail.com

"With honors," he says proudly.

Askew never let football define him. It's a point his mom, dad and two older brothers emphasized to him time and time again. It's why Askew made sure he had other interests, including creative outlets like writing poetry and short stories.

But the sport still defined a turning point in his life. During his senior season, Askew remembers a conver-

sation with his dad. Henry asked Askew a question that tied football and life together: How did Askew plan to avoid a would-be tackler?

As a 17-year-old full of confidence and invincibility, Askew told this dad, "I will make them miss."

His father then warned Askew, "You can't miss them all the time."

Henry's counsel hit home during the state championship game. With Gar-Field down 12-0 in the first half against Virginia's most successful high school football program at their home base, Askew limped to the sideline. In a sign of things to come, he'd hurt his left knee for the first time, the same one he would injure at Maryland.

But Askew never gave up. When he returned to the field for the second half, Askew recalled Henry's words. He faced his opponent head-on by going through the heart of their defense. The hits would come, but so would the success if he persevered.

Askew took the opening second-half kickoff 28 yards to the 50-yard line. From there, he gained critical yards before running the ball in from 2 yards out to spark Gar-Field's comeback.

And in the process, he learned another timeless truth he still carries with him to this day.

"Even if you do everything right, you will still face adversity," Askew said. "It will test your mettle. But when it happens, you have a great opportunity."



The Manassas Park girls basketball team stretches before the start of practice.

DAVID FAWCETT|INSIDENOVA

STANDING IN THE GAP

King's patience, experience give Manassas Park hope

Nothing escapes John King's attention while he stands near the half-court line and watches his Manassas Park girls varsity basketball players run an inbounds play.



DAVID FAWCETT

When something goes awry, King quickly steps in.

He talks to the girls about proper positioning first and then proper movement. When one of the players sets an illegal screen, King explains why that's a foul.

"You can't move," King tells the player. "You have to remain stationary."

King has pointed out all of this many times before in previous practices, but he doesn't revisit it. It's in the past as though he's never mentioned it.

With a third straight winless season underway, King instead teaches the only way he can for a program in which most of the varsity players have little to no basketball experience. He relies on a short memory and infinite patience. Anything else would lead to unending frustration in the face of constant defeat.

Over the past 15 seasons, no local varsity basketball team has struggled like the Cougars. Due primarily to changing demographics leading to declining interest, Manassas Park has not had a winning record since going 12-11 in 2006-07 or won a conference or district game since the 2013-14 season.



Manassas Park head girls basketball coach John King with senior Nina Lanier. DAVID FAWCETT|INSIDENOVA

Since 2013-14, the Cougars have never won more than two games in any season and are currently 0-6 and owners of a 53-game losing streak. Seven of those losses have been by 10 points or less, but they still count as losses.

King wants nothing more than to turn around Manassas Park's fortunes.

"It would be nice to hang a banner in here," he noted one day before a recent practice while looking at the district, region and state title winners inside the Cougars' gym that make no mention of girls basketball.

But King knows that's a long way off. For the moment, success isn't measured by wins or losses, but by mastering the basics.

Back in his customary position at half-court, King observes the players run another in-bounds play. This time, they have more success and move to the other side of the basket.

King maintains his calm demeanor the entire time.

There are no eye rolls, exasperated

facial expressions or heavy sighs, no matter how many times it takes to correctly execute the play and ensure everyone understands their responsibility.

Just a calm, firm voice mixing truth and grace with one goal in mind:

"I don't get upset over a mistake," King said. "I explain what they did wrong. In basketball, you can't dwell on [the mistake]. You have to move on."

ENCOURAGING SIGNS

As he discusses his program, King sees positives.

Twenty-seven girls came out this season for junior varsity and varsity, the most in King's five seasons. Through word of mouth from either himself or the returning players, King expected a good turnout coming off a pandemic-shortened season where the Cougars only had enough players to field a varsity team.

He mentions freshman guard Da'Nayah Cuthbertson as someone to watch. She and senior forward Nina Lanier are the only varsity players who play basketball

CHALLENGED COUGARS

The Manassas Park girls basketball team hasn't won a game since the 2018-19 season. Here's the team's record over the past nine seasons:

Season	Record
2013-14	2-21
2014-15	0-21
2015-16	1-10
2016-17	1-22
2017-18	2-19
2018-19	2-20
2019-20	0-23
2020-21	0-13
2021-22	0-6

year-around.

He also points to continuity. Four of his players are in their fourth year with the program.

He points to a promising future with two 5-foot-9 freshmen, Anna Koroma and Shukri Abdullahi, joining the junior varsity.

He talks about how he bonds with his three-person coaching staff – Tracy Reed, Cierra Brown and Shannen Cochraham – all of whom played college basketball.

Then there's the junior varsity's 21-19 win Dec. 6 at Park View-Sterling. No one knows the last time the girls won a junior varsity game, but it's been awhile.

All steps in the right direction.

"It helps our middle school kids to see the growth in the program," King said. "We need to build the program starting with the younger kids. That's our lifeline."

King himself brings a wealth of basketball experience. He played the sport

KING >> PAGE 24

at Justice High School (formerly J.E.B. Stuart) and for two years in college. His younger brother, Billy, starred at Duke before becoming the general manager of the Philadelphia 76ers and the Brooklyn Nets. And his cousin, Penny Moore, played in the WNBA.

King, who retired in 2020 as the town of Vienna's superintendent of parks and recreation, has coached high school for 37 years, including stints as the head varsity boys basketball coach at Yorktown, Edison and Justice. He also spent four years as a scout for the 76ers during his brother's tenure in Philadelphia.

The 66-year-old Manassas resident arrived at Manassas Park through his relationship with Gary Chicko, the Cougars' head boys basketball coach. Their connection started at Osbourn Park, where King took over the boys freshman team after spending five seasons as the junior varsity girls coach. Chicko was the boys junior varsity head coach at the time.

After Chicko moved to Manassas Park, he convinced King to join him as the boys junior varsity coach. When the girls job opened, Chicko encouraged King to apply.

"I knew John would be perfect for Manassas Park," Chicko said. "Besides being a great coach he is one of the nicest and most patient men I know. John has a great attitude and knows how to motivate and bring people together as a team. I knew John was exactly what the girls at Manassas Park needed."

Manassas Park activities director Dan Forgas agreed.

King had experience, but also the right personality to lead a program in need of a guiding hand over the long haul. He has a tireless work ethic and, in Chicko's words, "is a basketball junkie." If he's not helping the girls, King will break down film for the boys team.

He is also a realist. He knew what he was walking into when he accepted the position.

"He's all about the process and not about himself," Forgas said.

Even though the losses continue, Forgas sees a team coming together this season.

"I look at the product on the court, and these girls are getting it," Forgas said. "They are fun to watch. It's a basketball team, not just girls playing basketball."

King is not a yeller. He never has been. Forgas jokes that King is so quiet that Forgas has to turn off the radio and unplug the fridge when King comes into the office just to hear King speak.

Nor is he a control freak. He prefers a collaborative approach where his assistants and players have a say in how things are done. He encourages them to speak up to have ownership. Most of all, if they have a question or concern, he or his assistants are there to help them through it.

"If they are asking questions, that's good," King said. If they don't ask questions, that means they think they know it all. We are doing our job. They are listening and paying attention"

A four-year varsity player, Lanier is by



John King is in his fifth season as Manassas Park High School's head girls basketball coach. DAVID FAWCETT|INSIDENOVA

far the team's most experienced player. She appreciates King's approach.

"He encourages," Lanier said. "A lot of girls are new to the sport, and he wants to help us get better"

Lanier admits the stress of losing affects her at times. She's hard on herself for mistakes she and her teammates make on the court.

To help reduce the pressure, Lanier has a post-game ritual where she goes home and vents for a moment to her mom, Ashley, and then draws on her iPad images of Black women inspired by those close to her like her mom and her aunt or those on a bigger stage like Michelle Obama.

An excellent student who carries a 4.3 grade-point average and plans to play basketball at Division III Albright College (Pa.), Lanier said Manassas Park's struggles have helped her grow as a person.

"You have to learn patience, and I'm an impatient person," Lanier said. "I've grown as a leader. The other day a couple of junior varsity players asked me for advice and what they can work on."

King likes to hear that.

"That to me is saying, 'We're one big

family,'" King said

ALWAYS TEACHING

Another inbounds play is about to take place. This time, the varsity is facing the junior varsity.

King helps the inbounds player step back so she doesn't cross the baseline and commit a turnover. He then walks over to the players about to receive the ball and tells one of them where to move once the play is live.

He steps to the side and lets them begin. The sequence ends quickly when the player inbounding the ball throws it too high and it ends up in King's hand.

His honest, caring and straightforward personality shines through again. He grabs the ball and returns it to the player. Then he does what he always does in these circumstances. It's a teaching moment with another opportunity to learn.

The girls line up and he utters his common refrain, which never gets old.

"Run it again."

David Fawcett is the sports editor for InsideNoVa. Reach him at dfawcett@insidenova.com

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL STANDINGS (through Dec. 14)

BOYS

CARDINAL DISTRICT

Team	District	Overall
Hylton	1-0	6-1
Colgan	1-0	6-1
Potomac	1-0	4-1
Woodbridge	0-0	3-1
Freedom-WB	0-1	1-1
Gar-Field	0-1	3-3
Forest Park	0-1	2-4

CEDAR RUN DISTRICT

Patriot	1-0	4-0
Osbourn Park	1-0	5-2
John Champe	1-0	2-0
Battlefield	0-0	3-1
Freedom-SR	0-0	1-3
Gainesville	0-1	4-3
Osbourn	0-1	2-4
Unity Reed	0-1	2-4

CLASS 3 NORTHWESTERN DISTRICT

Skyline	0-0	3-1
William Monroe	0-0	2-1
Meridian	0-0	2-3
Manassas Park	0-0	1-3
Warren Co.	0-0	1-5
Brentsville	0-0	0-4

OTHERS

John Paul	n/a	1-3
Seton	0-0	2-2

GIRLS

CARDINAL DISTRICT

Team	District	Overall
Potomac	1-0	4-1
Colgan	1-0	4-3
Forest Park	1-0	3-5
Hylton	0-1	2-4
Woodbridge	0-0	2-2
Freedom-WB	0-1	1-4
Gar-Field	0-1	0-6

CEDAR RUN DISTRICT

Osbourn Park	1-0	6-0
Osbourn	1-0	4-2
Patriot	0-0	2-1
Battlefield	0-0	2-2
Unity Reed	0-0	1-3
Freedom-SR	0-0	2-3
Gainesville	0-1	3-2
John Champe	0-1	0-3

CLASS 3 NORTHWESTERN DISTRICT

Brentsville	0-0	6-1
Meridian	0-0	5-1
Skyline	0-0	4-2
William Monroe	0-0	1-3
Warren County	0-0	1-6
Manassas Park	0-0	0-6

OTHERS

Seton	0-0	1-2
John Paul	0-0	3-4



For more information, visit INSIDENOVA.COM

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.

David Fawcett is the sports editor of InsideNoVa/Prince William. Reach him at dfawcett@insidenova.com



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."