

IN FOOTBALL, 'A COACH IS A COACH'

Women making headway on high school sidelines



Brooke Point assistant football coach Lindsay Sollers works with the team during practice. She played professional women's football with the D.C. Divas.

BY JOEY LoMONACO
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When the Brooke Point High School football team's film operation went down unexpectedly during a recent game against North Stafford High School, the Black-Hawks found themselves flying blind. Technical glitches prevented players and coaches from reviewing opponents' tendencies on a series of video monitors located throughout the bench area.

Fortunately, they had a contingency plan.

From a perch atop the press box, a Brooke Point assistant coach noticed that North Stafford's safety was cheating toward the center of the field on passing plays. Via wireless headset, that assistant relayed the information to head coach Dwight Hazelwood on the sideline.

"OK, what do you want to call?" Hazelwood replied.

Upon receiving the play call, quarterback Noah Sanders "looked at me like I

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was crazy,” said Hazelwood, “because he didn’t understand yet.”

But assistant coach Lindsay Sollers understood perfectly.

Exploiting the vulnerability Sollers spotted from atop the press box, Sanders dropped back and lofted a 33-yard touchdown pass just before halftime. Brooke Point would go on to win, 21-14, in overtime.

In her first season with the Black-Hawks, Sollers is already making her presence felt as a female coach in a sport dominated by men, and she’s not alone.

On the opposite sideline that night in mid-March, North Stafford assistant coach Desa Stone toted a clipboard as she huddled among a group of offensive linemen busy making their own adjustments.

Following a lifetime of interest in football—and, in Sollers’ case, a professional playing career—the two entered coaching. Sollers works with Brooke Point’s wide receivers, while Stone splits duties as the Wolverines’ JV special teams coach and a varsity assistant.

‘A COACH IS A COACH’

Following her softball career at Coastal Carolina University, Sollers was looking to replace the competitive element in her life. The North Stafford graduate thought she found it playing flag football, but even that wasn’t enough.

“I just wanted to take it to a different level,” she said.

So she tried out for the D.C. Divas, a Washington-based professional team that competes in the Women’s Football Alliance. Sollers, 37, would go on to play eight seasons for the Divas, lining up mainly at cornerback and safety.

Following her retirement, she coached high



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Lindsay Sollers speaks with Brooke Point head coach Dwight Hazelwood at halftime during a game.

school softball in Prince William County, but never lost her flame for the gridiron. She met Hazelwood through a mutual friend who works at Brooke Point and suggested he give her a call.

“I’ll give anybody a shot,” Hazelwood said. “If you’re a good coach, you’re a good coach. Doesn’t matter if you’re male or female. I met with Lindsay and she was like, on fire. It just seemed like a perfect fit.”

In 2018, Stone took a behind-the-scenes role with Brooke Point’s football program as director of NCAA eligibility and compliance. She launched a website—first at Brooke Point and later for all Stafford County high schools—that helps athletes navigate the various requirements for scholarships and competition.

When Stone’s son graduated from Frostburg State University, where he was a member of the foot-

ball team, she knew she’d have the flexibility in her schedule to pursue on-field coaching. While she’s less well-versed in some of football’s finer technical points, her dedication and attention to detail have been evident from the start.

“She’s a quick learner,” North Stafford head coach Neil Sullivan said of Stone. “She has a lot of coaching experience. The human body kind of moves the way it moves, and there’s been a lot of carryover. A coach is a coach.”

‘SHE MAKES THE GAME SO EASY’

Christian Taylor heard the grumblings. When Sollers showed up for her first Brooke Point practice, Taylor, a senior receiver, wasn’t sure whether his teammates would take a female coach seriously. Then, she opened her mouth and let forth a stream of football knowledge that quieted any po-

tential critics.

“When I can speak the lingo, I can line them up, can tell them how to run a route—that has built the foundation with me,” Sollers said. “That I actually know what I’m talking about.”

Taylor and his teammates were even more impressed by Sollers’ hands-on approach to coaching. After Brooke Point’s receivers struggled beating press coverage in their first two games, she designed a drill to target the weakness: swipe hands away, look for the ball and finish.

“She makes the game so easy,” Taylor said. “It was amazing to see how cerebral she was, how much a student of the game she was.”

While both coaches were initially apprehensive about how they’d be received by their teenagers, they ultimately had nothing to fear. Their competency spoke for itself.

“They listen, they don’t blow me off because I’m a girl,” echoed Stone. “I was very pleasantly surprised. I thought that would be the area where I’d get the most pushback, and it wasn’t the case at all.”

Shortly after Hazelwood hired Sollers, he pulled her aside to ask how he could help set her up for success. Her answer, much like her coaching style, was straight to the point.

“Treat me like any other coach, and if I’ve earned your respect just show it,” she said. “I don’t need to be treated differently just because I’m not a male.”

GAME CHANGERS

Sollers and Stone are part of a trend that has already taken root in professional football. Last year, NFL teams employed a total of eight female coaches.

The Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers had two women on its coaching staff. Callie Brownson, Sollers’ former teammate on the Divas, serves as chief of staff for the Cleveland Browns.

North Stafford and Brooke Point are among several Fredericksburg-area teams that feature a girl or girls on their roster this season. For Brooke Point punter Kylie Thuot, having a female coach has changed the game in ways big and small—she’s no longer the only one dressing in an empty girls’ locker room.

“It’s really nice to see a woman coach on staff, because being in a football setting isn’t so hard when you have a role model to look up to,” Thuot said.

Stone said that while female players were often pigeonholed into kicking and punting in the past, that’s no longer the case. One of Stone’s JV players, Zoey Dowdy, has made a habit of harassing opposing quarterbacks as a pass rusher, while another, Abby Morris, catches passes at receiver.

“I love that they’re letting girls have the opportunity to show this isn’t a one-hit wonder or anomaly, that this could be the norm,” Stone said.

Sollers hopes her success, and that of other female coaches, reinforces that jobs shouldn’t be viewed as gender specific, but based on qualifications alone.

“If this is what you want to do and you go for it and you’re good at it, then do it,” she said. “Who cares what outside opinions are? If you’re good at it, somebody’s going to recognize it and give you that opportunity.”

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North Stafford assistant coach Desa Stone points out a play on video during a game at Brooke Point. Female coaches are changing the game, for girls and boys.

Local athlete can't rest in battle with epilepsy

BY JOEY LOMONACO
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Izzy Gregory caught her opponent snoozing, and seized upon the lull to nab the ball and take off dribbling down the left sideline. Each powerful stride carried the Chancellor High School junior closer to the scoring circle during a recent field hockey game against Fauquier High School.

Finally cornered, Gregory wedged her body between the ball and her pursuers, ultimately earning a side-in for the Chargers.

Her alert play belies a secret: She hasn't had a good night's sleep in months, maybe longer.

Izzy suffers from nocturnal epilepsy, a condition that causes seizures that can wake her upwards of 30 times per night. Her seizures are non-convulsive, instead presenting as episodes of extreme fear.

"Imagine your worst nightmare — times 1,000 — and you can't escape," Izzy's mother Melissa explained. "And she knows that when she goes back to sleep, she's going to have them again."

These past 14 years have taken the shape of a recurring bad dream for Izzy, 17, and her family. Diets, CBD oil and a series of



Izzy Gregory defends against Fauquier's Kaylee Shuler at Chancellor. Izzy's condition leads to extremely sleepless nights.

13 different medications have proven incapable of stopping the seizures, at least permanently. So in August, she underwent her first brain surgery to remove a dysplasia, or abnormal cluster of cells, located in her frontal lobe. Two weeks later, the seizures returned.

A second surgery is scheduled for April 27, and a third sometime in May. That timing is intentional. Sports are Izzy's life, and she won't rest until the powerhouse Chargers attempt to mount another deep postseason run.

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But then she really, really wants to rest.

"I'm just hoping it's gone for forever," she said, "because it would be nice to sleep again."

'LIKE SOMETHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN'

Isabella started behaving strangely at age 3, Melissa Gregory said. The toddler would scream and clap her hands seemingly at random during the night.

For three years, the family sought a diagnosis, cycling through nine doctors. Finally, when Izzy was 6, a neurologist at the University of Virginia Medical Center asked to admit her to the hospital on a Friday and keep her there until he could determine what was causing her episodes.

Once diagnosed with frontal lobe seizures, Izzy was put on medication, to varying degrees of success. At one point, she was seizure-free for two years. But they always came back.

Some of the medications caused weight gain, others moodiness and lack of appetite. Since many of the drugs she took are also used to treat bipolar disorder, they had the effect of muting her emotions.

"She's lost friends over it," Melissa Gregory said.

Between the seizures and the side effects of the drugs she took to treat them, there were times Izzy was afraid to go to school. Inside her desk, she kept a small red index card, which her teachers knew was a signal to dismiss her without a word.

"There's always that specter of the seizures hanging over you," said Dr. John Schreiber, a child neurologist and epileptologist who treats Izzy at Children's National Hospital in Washington. "That's a component of lots of kids' lives when they're living with this."

The fear isn't specific, but Izzy often wakes up convinced that someone is chasing her or about to hurt her. Her earliest memories of the disorder consist of running to her parents' bedroom in a panic.

"I don't know what's going



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Chancellor High School junior Isabella Gregory (5) participates in a pregame cheer before taking the field against Fauquier. Izzy finds refuge from her epilepsy in athletics.

to happen to me, I'm just really scared," she said. "Like something bad is going to happen."

'MY HAPPY PLACE'

When Chancellor advanced to the state tournament in 2018, Ashley Coleman was excited to share a hotel room with Izzy, one of her best friends on the team.

But shortly before the Chargers hit the road to Lorton, Melissa Gregory revealed to Coleman's mother that Izzy would be rooming separately with her. Sleepovers are not compatible with Izzy's form of epilepsy; what's more, her condition was suddenly thrust into the open.

"I was scared telling people—that they were going to treat me differently—but they didn't," Izzy said. "But that's why I try to think before I say certain things. When people aren't the nicest, it's probably for a reason."

Chancellor coach Jim Larkin rarely sees Izzy slack off at practice, even when she'd have every excuse in the world to do so.

"I can't imagine being able to function at a normal level or a level she performs at on a regular



Izzy shows her positive attitude as she heads to her first brain surgery in August.

basis with the lack of recuperative sleep she gets," said Larkin, who has guided the Chargers to five state championships, the most recent of which came during Izzy's freshman season in 2018. "It's very rare you ever see any of that from her."

"She actually never seems tired, unless she gets hurt or injured," echoed Ashley. "It's

actually really inspiring."

On the field, Izzy is a linchpin in Chancellor's defense and the member of a close-knit junior class that Larkin likened to a sorority. Her field vision and athleticism more than compensate for her relative lack of experience. While soccer is Izzy's first love and the sport she intends to pursue in college, she's come to consider Larkin a father figure and field hockey a refuge.

"Sports are like my happy place," she said. "When I'm out there, I forget about everything. It's probably the one thing that helps me the most through this whole thing."

'SHE'LL GET THROUGH IT'

When Izzy pulled into the gravel parking lot bordering Chancellor's field hockey practice field about 2:30 p.m. Friday, she was greeted by a sea of purple.

March 26 is Purple Day, an international initiative to raise awareness for epilepsy. Izzy's teammates surprised her by wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the words: "I wear purple

for Izzy."

The gesture was conceived by Melissa Gregory and hastily communicated by team captain Kaitlyn Bestick on a separate group chat so Izzy wouldn't find out. The mother of another player, Lindsey Loar, silk-screened the design onto the shirts.

"Oh, I was about to cry," Izzy said of her reaction. "When I saw everyone, the fact that everyone cared enough to do this, it made me so happy."

Izzy wants to do more than raise awareness, though. Her countless hospital visits led to a personal revelation that she'd like to enter the medical field one day as a physical therapist or nurse.

"I feel like it being a part of my life and going through made me realize I'm not the only one who has to deal with this, and that everybody else has something going on, too," she said. "I'm not the only one struggling. Since I want help, I know that other people do, too."

Izzy's upcoming procedure is called a stereoelectroencephalography, or S EEG. Since dysplasias are subtle, even to trained neurologists scrutinizing an MRI, surgeons will pinpoint the problem area using her brain's electrical waves.

"That tells us where the seizures are coming from," Dr. Schreiber said. "Then we can take out those parts of the brain, provided they don't overlap with the eloquent cortex."

"It's all real estate. It all depends where it is. We can take out a fair amount of the frontal lobe without seeing any deficits to a kid."

The Gregorys are optimistic about the surgeries. Izzy dreams of a normal senior year, one complete with homecoming and an uninterrupted slate of high school sports. The family's deeply rooted Christian faith has provided hope that her nightmare will end, one way or another.

"She's persevered through so much of it, if this is what her life is going to be, I know she'll get through it," Melissa Gregory said.

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Personal losses help fuel team's gridiron victories

BY JOEY LOMONACO
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At times, Melvin Spriggs treats his helmet less like a piece of football equipment and more like a virtual reality headset.

It's a Thursday afternoon, and Spriggs, a junior running back at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic School, has donned pads in preparation for the VISAA Division-III state championship game on Saturday night.

The Warriors' practice field isn't much, just a gently-sloped tract off State Route 688 in Spotsylvania County. Players' cars line the perimeter, and goats graze on an adjacent property.

At 5:05 p.m., an assistant coach fires up a series of por-



St. Michael head coach Hugh Brown's father died last month. Here, Brown talks to his team, which includes son Matthew.

table floodlights. Their distinct hum is comforting, a soundtrack Spriggs can lose

himself in as he dissociates.

"The thing is, a lot of people got a treehouse they go hide in

or something like that," says Spriggs. "I've got a football helmet that takes me away from everything. It's like a disconnect from the world. It's like it's a different life."

It's a life where his grandmother Verlene is still around to watch him play football. A life where his cousin was never gunned down on the streets of New Orleans. And a life in which his mother, Althea, isn't a breast cancer patient enduring daily radiation treatments.

While Spriggs tries to move past a series of family tragedies, his coach is grieving the recent death of his father. The Warriors have suffered just two defeats this season, but the team has become all too acquainted with loss.

SEE ST. MICHAEL, A10

'LIFE IS FOR THE LIVING'

Hugh Brown's phone rang seven times. The Warriors' head coach wasn't exactly in a position to talk during his team's Oct. 30 game at undefeated Portsmouth Christian. But, seeing as it was his elderly father, he answered.

"We were literally in the middle of plays," Brown recalled.

Paul Brown asked about his grandson Matthew, a standout senior line-backer for the Warriors. He demanded to know how St. Michael was faring against Portsmouth's talented offense. (Answer: quite well. The Warriors won, 21-6).

The elder Brown, whose health had been declining since an aortic aneurysm in 2019, died three days after the call in Indio, Calif. He was 83.

Matthew Brown called his grandfather every day after practice. With the time difference between coasts, it was the most convenient time to catch up, and the two bonded over football. Paul Brown was a rabid University of Georgia fan, but there was only one team he supported more ardently than the Bulldogs: St. Michael.

Their last conversation concerned the upcoming VISAA playoffs.

"He was just ecstatic talking about how awesome it was and how he can't wait to watch the livestream," Matthew Brown said.

Hugh Brown flew out to California to handle arrangements for a memorial mass that weekend. All of his children, ages 16 to 29, planned to attend. Except for Matthew.

The Warriors were set to play St. John's Catholic Prep on Saturday, and they'd already be without their head coach. As a team captain, Matthew Brown calls St. Michael's defenses, and the Warriors have just 19 players, meaning any absence would deplete an already-thin roster.

After thinking about it for a day, Matthew Brown made his decision. He'd stay and play.

"And I could tell it hurt him," Hugh Brown said. "I cried on the phone. But my father said one thing to me my entire life. He said: 'Life is for the living.'"

A CHANGE OF SCENERY

Spriggs is nicknamed "Quad"—not for his leg muscles, which are indeed massive—but because he's the fourth in a line of Melvins.

The product of a military family, he moved from Baton Rouge, La., to Virginia with his parents in 2018. Spriggs attended Colonial Forge High School as a freshman,



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Matthew Brown (right), son of St. Michael coach Hugh Brown, and running back Melvin Spriggs Jr. talk with teammates during a break in team practice.



Spriggs (left) has had an outstanding season as a running back.

where he excelled on the football field but not, he admits, in the classroom.

"I let a lot of things distract me and my grades slipped," he said.

When one of Spriggs' coaches at Colonial Forge, Alex Charles, joined the staff at St. Michael, he encouraged Spriggs to interview at the school, which Brown co-founded in 2006. The Spriggs lived in Stafford County and worked in Northern Virginia, and the commute was a challenge.

"It was a logistics nightmare at first," Melvin Spriggs Sr. said.

Coaches, parents and even some teachers stepped in, giving Spriggs rides to and from school. The Spriggs, who have no relatives in Virginia, found an extended family at St. Michael. Melvin Sr. even joined the football program as an assistant coach.

When Spriggs arrived at St. Michael in 2019, he made an immediate impact for a team that won the VISAA state title with a last-second victory over Roanoke Catholic. He was the only sophomore named to the VISAA all-state team that season.

Brown would simply line up the 6-foot-2, 226-pound teen at defensive end, where opponents would prove unable—or unwilling—to block him. But questions remained, most of them unrelated to his play.

Spriggs' academic effort and grades didn't always match the intensity he displayed from whistle to whistle. Laid back to a fault, he struggled with punctuality. Spriggs

would eventually learn to value every moment, in the hardest way imaginable.

"I guess life teaches you that," Melvin Spriggs Sr. said. "You hope you don't have go through that at a young age, but he has."

'FOOTBALL IS LIKE MY THERAPY'

The tattoo snakes up Spriggs' left shoulder, its clasped hands and prayer beads serving as an indelible reminder of his grandmother's embrace. Verlene Spriggs died unexpectedly of heart failure on Nov. 27, 2020—the day after Thanksgiving. She was 64.

Spriggs and his family were still reeling when another tragedy struck. His first cousin, K'Ron Hoskins, 16, was the victim of a fatal shooting in the Little Woods neighborhood in New Orleans.

Weeks later, Spriggs' mother Althea was diagnosed with breast cancer. She's since undergone surgery and chemotherapy and is receiving radiation treatment.

"We all had to take that on at one time," Spriggs said. "It was pretty crazy."

Melvin Sr. figured that his son could deal with the adversity in two ways: retreat inward or process his feelings in a productive manner. Much to the dismay of St. Michael's opponents, he's chosen the latter option.

"Football is like my therapy," Spriggs said. "Basically, I can hit someone else however I want on the football field, but I cannot hit them like that in real life. All that anger—whatever emotions I have built up inside of me—I take it out on the field."

Facing Atlantic Shores, a higher-division team that features a handful of college prospects on defense, Spriggs rushed for 307 yards and five touchdowns despite a pouring rain.

"That's the film we show people," Brown said. "That was sort of his com-

ing-out party."

Spriggs' teachers have had reason to celebrate, as well. His GPA has steadily risen—he credits St. Michael's smaller classes—and he's never been more focused on pursuing a college career.

"He's the first kid in the building," Hugh Brown said. "He doesn't make any excuses. He's leading this football team."

On the season, Spriggs is averaging more than 15 yards per carry while bullying defenders with a running style reminiscent of his idol, Tennessee Titans star Derrick Henry.

"Not to go down, that's my main goal, just not to go down," he said.

Matthew Brown recalled drawing the unfortunate assignment of facing Spriggs in the "Oklahoma Drill" on the first day of practice in August. It was a matchup his father insisted upon.

"I could hit one of the 6-3, 300-pound linemen on our offensive line, and I have no problem with that," Brown said. "But for some reason, Melvin makes my right shoulder go limp for about 10 seconds every time."

Spriggs and the Browns haven't been numbed by tragedy. In fact, they're allowing emotion to guide them as they approach a rematch with Portsmouth Christian at 7 p.m. Saturday, at Brooke Point High School in Stafford.

If the Warriors manage to repeat as VISAA champions, there's no doubting their motivations.

"When people die, family members always want to make them happy," Spriggs said. "I feel like us winning a state championship would make people's deceased family members, or anyone who's sick or going through stuff, I feel like that would make them happy."

"That's really the reason I want to do it, to make my grandmother proud of me," Spriggs said.

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