

On a journey of highs and lows, local coach Tye Thoreson has brought volleyball expertise from California to Lynchburg

Emily Brown

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Tye Thoreson huddles with Rustburg volleyball players during a game. Thoreson's journey in the volleyball world has carried him from playing in California to coaching in Lynchburg.

Photo provided by Kristen Hardie

Tye Thoreson was an athlete. Still is by many measures, though he may dispute the description these days.

Glimpses of him during practices at the Rustburg High School gym offer plenty of evidence. The 42-year-old Lynchburg resident still out-jumps those who line up opposite him on the other side of the net. He still out-hits younger players, still shuts down their attacks and still can offer up devastating serves.

For Thoreson, this was a destiny mapped out decades ago, in the days before volleyball became his calling card. One dreamed about by Thoreson's father, Dave, the subject of stories bandied about the family's household during Tye's childhood.

These tales of Dave Thoreson's prime years in the 1960s as a decathlete were repeated too often to be of no consequence. Dave Thoreson trained with Olympians and became, alongside them, one of the sport's most accomplished athletes on the national and world stage, reaching his peak by winning bronze at the 1967 Pan American Games.

This life Dave Thoreson had played out before Tye arrived on the scene, but the principles by which the elder Thoreson rose to prominence remained even after he'd surrendered the title of decathlete, when he became a father.

For Tye and his sisters, Dave Thoreson wanted a similar work ethic, and, perhaps, some form of athletic achievement. So, before the sun poked through the treetops, Tye and his older sister trained under the direction of their father. Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings before getting ready for school, they were preparing for their future, running a half mile as their father timed them, or completing hill sprints in the dark.

“It was work,” Tye Thoreson said of those days during his childhood in Southern California, before he traded the West Coast for the East and became a coach in Lynchburg.

Before long, that athleticism Tye possessed — be it a result of genes or workouts — was put to the test. Quickly, he passed.

As a fifth grader, Tye Thoreson began participating in grass volleyball tournaments. He won somewhere around half of the events he entered, he said.

Then came the bigger challenge: sand. Same sport, just a different venue and surface.

Unlike grass, this surface was punishing. On grass, players could glide across the court or make their approaches for attacks at the net without resistance. Sand, meanwhile, did its best to suck in whoever dared step between the lines.

Volleyball players are “twice as slow” on the sand compared to other surfaces, whether grass or gym floors, Thoreson said, so less-determined players might not have the drive to continue competing in a game that requires so much stamina and effort. But for Thoreson — now the Rustburg JV volleyball coach and an assistant with the varsity team, who also has served as a coach and mentor in the area’s non-high school volleyball club and travel teams — the reward was worth the extra effort.

The rhythm of the game made sense to Thoreson, as did the inability to hide or fade into the background while playing. With only two players on a side of the net at any given time, beach volleyball players are forced to sink or swim, and have command of every one of the sport’s fundamentals.

“I knew that beach was a sport where it didn’t favor you if you were just an amazing hitter,” Thoreson said. “I wasn’t phenomenal at any one thing, but I was great at the mix.”

And on the beach — where the breeze offered brief respite from the soaring temperatures on the Southern California coast, and where the ocean to later cool off in was waiting only feet away — there existed a freedom for players like Thoreson. There was no coach or particular play that needed to be run — “You could compete how you wanted to compete,” he said.

It all made sense for Thoreson, who worked the California beach volleyball circuit as a player throughout his teenage years.

On many of those weekends on Hermosa, Will Rogers, Playa Del Rey, Manhattan, Doheny and Huntington beaches, Thoreson added, he had the opportunity to play against players many years his senior. Whereas indoor often requires teams to compete based on the age category they fall into, he didn’t have to abide by similar rules on the beach.

“Maybe some players would see that and be like, ‘Oh, I never want to do that,’” Thoreson said of the competition or potential failure that could befall younger athletes. But Thoreson didn’t shrink away from the opportunity.

Instead he embraced the chance to keep improving, giving in to the tug and allure of limitless potential on the beach.

“There was no ceiling,” Thoreson said.

For years, that continued to be true.

Indoors and out, Thoreson kept finding success and piled up proof of his talent on both surfaces, the abilities he built on sand only increasing his talent in the gym.

When he was 13, he was part of an indoor travel team that went to the USA Volleyball Indoor National championships. There, in Austin, Texas, in 1994, Thoreson and his 14-and-under team finished second to a squad from Puerto Rico.

At 17, he was part of an indoor team at his high school, Dos Pueblos, that won a California Interscholastic Federation state title — a feat, given how much volleyball talent was concentrated in Southern California: “a lot of athletes, a lot of coaches and a lot of people that were just great at what they did,” as Thoreson put it.

At that same age, his efforts and winning ways in tournaments on the beach resulted in his AAA rating — the highest of four ratings handed out by the California Beach Volleyball Association.

As part of that journey on the beach, he became one of the best junior players in the state and nation, recording a highlight when he and teammate Dan Matheson reached the Junior Olympics. On the way, he proved his talent against elite athletes, including Sean Rosenthal.

Like Brook Billings, one of Thoreson’s best opponents in indoor play, Rosenthal earned star status as a member of Team USA and competed in the Olympics. Rosenthal, whose nickname nowadays is “Superman” because of his leaping abilities on a surface that can swallow feet and ankles, made two appearances in the Olympics. In both 2008 and 2012, Rosenthal and teammate Jake Gibb finished fifth.

A decade earlier, as Rosenthal made his rise early in his beach career, Thoreson was responsible for one of Rosenthal’s learning experiences, handing him a loss in a junior tournament.

“It was crazy,” Thoreson said of the win in that 1998 match, “because I knew how good this guy was.”

Thoreson, on that summer day on Hermosa Beach, knew the abilities Rosenthal carried into the match at the time, having already faced him a couple times in the past. So Thoreson specifically targeted Rosenthal’s teammate, making him, rather than Rosenthal, carry the load defensively.

“I’m thinking whoever he is, it’s not Sean Rosenthal. I just drilled [the ball at] the guy nonstop,” Thoreson said.

The strategy worked and opened the door to another opportunity for Thoreson to play with the best. He ventured back indoors when he was offered a spot on the Los Angeles Athletic Club team, which became one of the best squads in the nation,

thanks again to the vast experience of volleyball players in the area, and competed against the best teams from Canada, as well.

As years passed, Thoreson also found himself competing in qualifying tournaments in the Association of Volleyball Professionals, an organization that features many of the best players in the world.

But that ceiling Thoreson failed to see years before eventually appeared. He saw glimpses during his teenage years, before it came into full view when he began his college playing career. There was a limit, he discovered, not because of any external factors — like a restricted number of tournaments he could participate in or lack of players to compete against — but because his body began to fail him.

Thoreson's health was falling off during his high school years (initial problems began earlier), but upon entering the University of California, Santa Barbara, as both a student and volleyball player, it “collapsed,” he said.

Often, Thoreson endured rashes and reactions on his skin, along with fatigue. Moments of brain fog came along for the ride, as well.

The bigger issues, though, were the allergic reactions he felt in his throat. Thoreson regularly dealt with a milder form of anaphylaxis, in which his airway narrowed.

It was hard to breathe, though not life-threatening, Thoreson said. But a partially closed airway made any athletic activity — training for volleyball or playing it — tough. The brain fog and fatigue, too, made it hard for Thoreson to play at his peak in such a fast-paced game indoors.

“I never really knew on any given day whether I would be fully functioning,” Thoreson said, because then, as now, he wasn’t able to pinpoint specific (or multiple) allergens or causes.

“Some days I was just 100% and could spring [off the ground] and had all the stamina in the world. ... You see throughout my athletic career I was great at times, and at other times I was falling apart.”

Some of the ongoing issues Thoreson deals with might be pinned to the autoimmune disorder he has, Hashimoto’s disease. It affects the thyroid gland, which produces hormones that help regulate many bodily functions.

Thoreson has seen multiple doctors from across the United States in an attempt to control the allergies, too, though there has been no definitive answer.

Instead, Thoreson eats incredibly healthy, avoiding foods he believes could be triggers and other processed foods and chemicals, and he’s undergone programs in an attempt to rid his body of any other potential toxins.

“I’ve learned a lot,” Thoreson wrote in a synopsis of his life’s journey — an attempt to ensure he covered all his bases for an interview, in the event he dealt with any adverse health reactions ahead of the scheduled meeting. “Yet not quite enough.”

Thoreson's time at UCSB ended after a couple volleyball seasons. He transferred to UC San Diego and completed another short stint on that team before closing out his playing career.

Eventually, he made his way to Lynchburg, where his parents owned a house. They ended up in Virginia because of Thoreson's sister Tiffany, who also played volleyball at nearby Liberty University.

Now, as he goes about life on the opposite coast he grew up on, Thoreson's health journey hasn't gotten much smoother. "Once you've been through it enough, you just bear it, bear and grin kind of thing," he said of the nagging issues.

But Thoreson's faith — reached via a personal foray into church attendance and avid Bible reading once he got to Lynchburg — has been one way he's been able to navigate the twists life has thrown at him.

"Jesus has carried me through," he said.

The jobs he's taken on in the area have helped, too.

"He's one of the best male players I have ever been around," said Kristen Hardie, one of the first people Thoreson met upon his arrival to the area, thanks to the sport Thoreson has loved since his childhood.

The two connected playing volleyball, of course, and immediately, Thoreson stood out to Hardie. His talent was obvious, and Hardie knew players in the area could benefit from learning from someone of his caliber and background. So Hardie got Thoreson on board as a coach in the area's indoor club league and as head coach of the JV team at Rustburg, where Hardie coached for decades until stepping down this past winter.

Jeff Shirey, who also was a major player in the area club scene, texted Hardie one night after seeing Thoreson coach, saying, according to Hardie, "This guy really knows what he's talking about."

Before long, Thoreson started to put his stamp on Lynchburg-area volleyball. With help from others and the club program, Thoreson brought beach volleyball to the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He and Hardie and others created two sand courts in Campbell County about seven to eight years ago.

At the time of the courts' beginnings, Hardie never knew there were so many kinds of sand, but Thoreson did. And she knew, given all the playing he'd done in California, "he knew what he was talking about." Now, the courts with his choice of sand are used by area teens for summer competition.

Many of the best indoor players locally have upped their skills because of the chance to cut their teeth — or gain their sand legs — on those courts for which Thoreson helped shovel tons of sand.

He also has helped the Rustburg varsity team become a statewide powerhouse. Players who've come through his JV ranks — where he patiently drilled in the fundamentals, and built a culture dedicated to hard work and becoming an athlete, just as his dad did with him — helped the RHS varsity team reach the Final Four in the state tournament each of the past four seasons and post back-to-back state titles the last two.

In those state playoff journeys, Thoreson was involved in the Red Devils' preparations as an assistant coach on the varsity team, helping the same girls he'd coached previously. An active participant in practices, Thoreson made RHS better by drawing on his years of experience to serve hard, hit hard and put up a huge block for those girls to work around with his 6-foot-4 frame.

“My seniors this [past] year, they loved that,” Hardie said. “... They fed off it.”

There were days when Hardie knew Thoreson wasn't at his best, she said. But, she added, she's “probably one of the few people who can tell when he's not feeling good. ... Even sick, he's still one of the best players I've ever played with.”

“He will push through,” Hardie said. “He's still gonna play as hard as he can.”

Because for Thoreson, at this point, given all the time and work he's poured into the sport, he can't turn his back on volleyball now.

'Just unbelievable': How Altavista rallied around Donnie Wilkerson, who's poured his life into his community, following serious accident

Emily Brown
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Longtime Altavista assistant cross country coach Donnie Wilkerson pauses to pose during a recent meet in Appomattox. Wilkerson returned to mentor Altavista athletes this fall despite enduring a severe biking accident in June.

Lee Luther Jr. photos, For The News & Advance

ALTAVISTA — Some of the pieces are missing still. Donnie Wilkerson can only recall so much.

For many of the details, he has to rely on his wife, Nancy, his faithful partner of half a century. So on a cloudy, windy afternoon in Altavista, Donnie listened as Nancy recounted all she remembers about that evening.

The two sat near each other inside their home on Shady Lane, Nancy on the couch and Donnie in a recliner, as they revisited the story. Ever steady, as she was that night, Nancy offers her perspective of June 21.

Most of the words that come spilling out of her mouth are colored by gratitude. A handful in her accounting of that Tuesday, though, are tinged with heartache.

They were the words she said to her daughter, Abby Eubank, that evening. At about 7 o'clock, with dinner ready for her and Donnie to enjoy together, Nancy picked up the phone to request help from Eubank, who lives just up the road from her parents, and to deliver serious news.

"Your daddy," Nancy said of Donnie, "didn't come home."

Donnie Wilkerson might be better known as Mr. Altavista, the name he's actually been called on several occasions.

Altavista always has and will be Donnie's home. He grew up here, his star status cemented in town well before this summer's harrowing tale unfolded.

Donnie, now 71, was a basketball, football and track star in his heyday. He was runner-up in the pole vault in a state track meet. Quarterback of an undefeated football squad in the late '60s.

Take away those accomplishments, though, and there are plenty of other reasons why those in Altavista know the name Donnie Wilkerson.

For more than 25 years (a stint at the now-defunct Lane Company split his tenure in two), he taught students in Campbell County, only retiring after the conclusion of the 2021-22 school year. Hundreds of kids — such as the student from the 1970s Donnie recently saw dropping off his granddaughter at the Campbell County Technical Center, where Donnie last worked — have passed through his classrooms.

Not all of those teenagers liked Donnie, he said, but he never minded that. He loved the kids too much to let it get to him.

"Some people dread going to work. I never dreaded going to work. I loved getting up every day," Donnie said. "The kids would offer something different every day. And then in the afternoon, I would get to decompress a little bit with cross country or whatever sport I was involved with. It was perfect."

He previously coached football and basketball at his alma mater, getting involved in high school sports when his two daughters, Abby and Ashley (now Ashley Moore), started on their athletic journeys. Eventually, he ended up coaching cross country, a sport he's helped lead for 20-plus years. He currently serves as an assistant under Darryl Smith, a man Donnie has described as being like a son.

Cross country, Donnie explained, gives him a chance to both mentor teenagers — a job he's always loved and wanted to do, and knew he needed to continue doing despite retiring from teaching — and indulge his own love of running.

"When I graduated from high school, I knew I wanted to be a teacher and wanted to be a coach," he said. "I had some really influential coaches in my high school career that mentored me. As a kid, you're learning so much from these coaches, and I just said, 'I want to help kids like they helped me.'"

With cross country, the coaches are "immersed" as they teach the sport. When he coached football, for example, Donnie couldn't put on pads and run through contact drills like the kids did during practices. But in cross country, he's able to run with them — although running has given way to Donnie biking alongside the athletes as they practice, he explained, because of an injury a couple years ago in which the muscle in his quad tore away from the bone.

Biking during practice is perfectly fine with Donnie, too, though. He's loved doing that since he was a boy.

"I tell people, 'The hour, hour and a half, two hours, whatever it is that I'm on that bike, I'm that 10-year-old kid that doesn't have a worry in the world,'" he said.

Donnie's hours on his bike extend beyond cross country practice, too. He likes to go on 25-mile rides through and around town regularly. Many of those paths include smaller hills or even steep inclines — all the more exciting, in Donnie's opinion.

"I like the thrill of speed a little bit," Donnie said. A few seconds later, he added the operative phrase pertaining to June 21.

"And I'm OK with that if I can stop."

Donnie knows his bikes well. The one he's used more often of late, his mountain bike, was due for a safety repair.

By mid-June, or so, Donnie said he knew the brakes were in bad condition. Even if he didn't say that out loud to Nancy.

Of course, she didn't need him to say it. She'd observed and heard things becoming somewhat dangerous already. There were a few times when Donnie came down their sloped driveway and barely came to a halt before crashing into one of the cars at the bottom. Nancy heard the squealing that accompanied Donnie clamping down on the brakes to avoid collisions.

So sometime after 2 p.m. June 21, Donnie rode his bike up the road to a local shop to get the appropriate parts ordered. Donnie was on his way out when Nancy passed him coming home.

She asked why he didn't load the bike in one of the cars. Thinking "enough" of the brake pads remained for another couple rides, and knowing he "couldn't sit still" that afternoon, he figured a ride up the road was acceptable.

"I just wanted one more ride," Donnie said, "and the weather was nice."

It was around 7 p.m. when Nancy decided she needed to call her daughter.

The hours of 4 p.m., 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. had passed without Donnie coming home, but Nancy hadn't been too worried at those points.

She didn't have a way to contact Donnie, because the cellphone she'd just bought him was laying on the counter at home. So around 4, she drove to the bike shop and heard Donnie had long since left. Nancy knew Donnie had committed to help Smith with something related to track at the high school, though, and didn't know how long he'd be gone. Surely he'd be home after a couple hours, she thought, so she set about preparing dinner.

That task complete, she turned her attention back to her husband, and then to the phone call.

"I just didn't know what to think," Nancy said.

Abby Eubank and her husband, Jeremy, immediately began working to locate Donnie. Jeremy went to the place that's practically a second home for Donnie, the school, and found Smith, the Altavista head cross country coach. He asked whether Smith had seen Donnie.

Smith hadn't.

Donnie “had literally just retired,” Smith said, so when Donnie didn’t show up as he’d committed to, Smith didn’t “want to make him feel like he needed to be at our beck and call.” Smith figured Donnie had been delayed by something or perhaps forgotten a prior commitment.

But when Jeremy Eubank showed up, Smith said, “That’s when I really knew, this is not good.”

Smith, along with Donnie and Nancy’s children, quickly began searching for Donnie by driving around town. Smith, who calls Donnie his “best friend,” knew well the routes Donnie often biked, so he started a list in his head of where Donnie might’ve ended up.

The group couldn’t find him, though.

Nancy decided then it was time to report Donnie missing to authorities.

Officers from the Altavista Police Department responded, as did those from the Campbell County Sheriff’s Office, along with search and rescue crews.

“Officers came in off duty,” Altavista PD Chief Tommy Merricks said of his crew.

Others came too, turning out in droves after seeing the news through Facebook posts that were shared close to 900 times and garnered hundreds of comments.

Citizens of Campbell County, those who knew Donnie from his work as a teacher. Residents of this small town, those who’d seen him biking around the sidewalks or volunteering as part of the chain gang for Friday night football games. Members of his cross country team, those who’d learned from Donnie what it means to be good to everyone you encounter.

“Within 30 minutes, the school parking lot was full of people,” Nancy said.

“Everybody. I mean the whole town was in the parking lot.”

“I probably violated every rule of search and rescue,” Merricks said. In any other circumstance, law enforcement wouldn’t think of using untrained individuals to aid in such an endeavor.

But Merricks wasn’t going to let the extra resources go to waste.

“The longer time went on,” Merricks said, “the [higher the] chances that you won’t find him.”

So he and other professionals came up with plans for who could cover what areas of the town in the search.

Cross country runners and their parents looked up and down Bedford Avenue for signs of the coach. Others went down the old Lane Company road.

Smith, with his understanding of Donnie’s habits, was paired up with Stuart Herndon, a Campbell County Sheriff’s Office investigator, as the search continued. All the while, thoughts about Donnie being in danger grew louder in Smith’s head.

“It went from being concerned to worried, really worried to fearful,” Smith said.

“Why,” he thought, “hasn’t somebody found him?”

Between 10:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. or so, Smith found his answer.

Herndon spotted a light from Donnie's bike in the distance.

He and Smith had searched English Park, one of Donnie's regular stomping grounds, and continued along some of the area's back pathways that led to a more residential area of town. Donnie's home was on the other end of one of those "overgrown easements," as Smith described it.

The two ran toward the light and spotted Donnie, who was lying in an area only a few hundred yards from his property. Donnie, it turned out, had missed his driveway and gone down the longer incline of his neighbor's driveway.

Knowing his bike lacked proper brakes, and after surveying the landscape later, Donnie's family and friends believe he hit some type of impediment, causing him to go airborne, in a separate direction from the bike.

Donnie likely landed on his chest as he came to a rest. There, for between 7½ and 8 hours, he stayed.

Until he heard something.

"We found him."

"Had it been another hour ..." Donnie said, trailing off as he remembered some of the statements search and rescue crews and law enforcement told him well after the fact.

"... He wouldn't have made it," Nancy finished.

On first glance, Smith believed Donnie would be OK. Smith believed Donnie's head was fine because of how they found him with his helmet, and he didn't see any blood or other particularly gruesome injuries.

He knew Donnie had been badly hurt, bruised and cut up after going through foliage and sailing through the air.

Donnie broke multiple ribs, cracked his sternum and ended up with a hernia.

The more serious issues, though, lie beneath the surface. Both of Donnie's lungs collapsed because of the impact, forcing him to be airlifted to a hospital in Roanoke for immediate attention, including the first of several surgeries.

After a week, which included moments of excruciating pain, Donnie was transferred to Virginia Baptist Hospital, where he embarked on another week of grueling recovery and physical therapy.

When Smith saw Donnie, he said, Donnie truthfully looked a lot worse than he'd expected. Smith had seen Donnie push through the severe leg injury before, as well as a broken collarbone in the past, after all.

"Even when he's been at his weakest," Smith said, "he still looked like a strong person."

Despite all he'd been through this time around, Donnie was convinced he would prove that was still true.

When it comes to cross country — a sport in which there's no scoreboard, no opponent guarding you and only open landscape ahead — mental toughness is a necessity. In two-plus decades coaching those runners in Altavista, Donnie has tried to instill all the skills necessary to keep going when the hardest part of the course is ahead.

Cross country, Donnie added, is about “how tough you can be and then what your attitude is.”

In the late June and early July days of this past summer, circumstances asked Donnie those same questions, though his answers played out in a different venue.

There were days when pain management, as he went through physical therapy, proved especially difficult. Makes sense, given the extent of his injuries and how hard it was to even catch his breath after both of his lungs collapsed during the accident.

But Donnie kept going, using as particular motivation the date he saw written in his room at Virginia Baptist one day.

July 14. It was the tentative date of discharge, he explained. He wasn't about to be teased, though, so he worked to check off every box in PT and build up his stamina so he could return to life as normal.

“It was never a question,” Donnie said when asked whether he'd intended to get back to coaching cross country in the fall. “I'd be there in whatever capacity I could to help out.”

Donnie was at the high school for Day 1 of practice, a testament also to his commitment to work on his own after getting discharged.

“I think the kids every day are inspired by him,” Smith said of the members of the Colonels team.

In the days after getting home, he walked up and down the driveway and got back in the pool (another place he loves to work out), initially swimming 20 laps a day and then working his way up to where he is now, 50 laps.

“I knew for me to be who I am,” said Donnie, who ran in the Virginia 10 Miler for years and also has participated in multiple other races and triathlons, “I have to find a way. If it's in the pool, if it's on the bike, if it's walking, I've got to have that.”

Which is also why, when the weather gets warmer again, he intends to get back on the bike he rode June 21.

Donnie hopes also to visit the spot where he landed during his accident, accompanied perhaps by Smith, who can fill in the pieces that still are missing from the eight hours or so Donnie lay alone and unconscious.

“It's a curiosity,” Donnie said. “It won't change anything. I know that.”

A visit won't change the idea in Donnie and Nancy's minds that, had he perhaps gone down his own driveway that afternoon, there could have been a much more severe outcome, given the details of their property.

“I don’t think I made that decision,” Donnie said of how he ended up traveling a unique path that night, harkening back to his faith in believing God protected him from death.

Seeing where he landed also won’t change what else happened that evening — that hundreds of people who knew Donnie shared concerns online, and hundreds more dropped their plans and showed up to find the man who’d given them so much of himself.

“The response that night, in my opinion, was a testament to the community of Altavista and a testament to what a good man Donnie is,” said Merricks, the Altavista police chief, who added in his 30-plus years in law enforcement, he’s “never seen a response from that many people” in similar types of searches.

In Altavista, Merricks said, “everybody comes together to support the Colonels,” and Donnie, of course, is part of the school community around which Altavista rallies.

That’s why Smith “couldn’t possibly tell you” how many people have stopped him to ask how Donnie was. It still happens to this day, the head cross country coach said.

More evidence of that backing for Mr. Altavista lives inside the Wilkersons’ Shady Lane home, this of the physical type. In two stacks held together by binder rings, more than 100 cards have been preserved. Each sent in the days that followed the accident offers well wishes and tells how glad those in Altavista were upon learning Donnie was found.

Donnie, sitting nearby while Nancy pulls out the cards she worked to keep, does everything he can to hold in the emotions when asked about the support offered over the last 3½ months.

“It was just unbelievable,” he said.

He could’ve been referring to the incident itself. That he’d tried to remedy the issue with the brakes on his bike, but that the preventative measure had come a little too late. Or that he’d ended up just a few hundred yards from his property. But Donnie wasn’t. The emotions he carries regarding June 21 don’t include disbelief or anger.

The only accurate word is gratitude. Gratitude for the people in the town he loves, the one he’s only ever called home.

In final football season in Nelson, Adonijah Hubbard, born with just one hand, known for 'I can' mindset

Emily Brown

Nov 1, 2022



Nelson fullback Adonijah Hubbard bulls his way into the end zone against Page County in September. Hubbard, a senior who also plays at linebacker, has tallied two touchdowns and 357 yards rushing heading into the final football game of his high school career on Nov. 4.
Lee Luther Jr., For the Nelson County Times

Adonijah Hubbard doesn't like labels.

That makes sense, because no one word could fully encompass all he is. His interests stretch too far to allow for just one descriptor.

You could call him a son or brother. A Nelson County High School student, a lover of business concepts. A player of video games or a Boy Scout. You could call him a sports fanatic, or a sprinter or linebacker.

You could call him a teammate, whose personality provides the spark for the squads on which he plays, say his coach and friends. A player whose effort can't be questioned, whose optimistic outlook toward the tasks that lie ahead can't be dimmed.

"He's a never-say die, positive young man," Nelson football coach Jack Baker said of Hubbard, one of his veteran players.

Before heading out to the field to guide one of his team's final practices of the year Tuesday afternoon, Baker talked about what Hubbard offers on the gridiron, including his contributions on both sides of the ball as a linebacker and fullback. The answers to most questions asked of Baker circled back around to that concept, though; with Hubbard as one of its leaders, Nelson doesn't ever lack hope.

True to his nature, the coach's final description of the senior — who will play his final game in a Governors football uniform against Gretna at 7 p.m. Friday — was even more concise: "He's an 'I can' type of kid."

Hubbard, more than most other football players, could choose to say "I can't" when asked to take a handoff or tackle someone. But excuses don't exist inside his head.

"I can play sports. I lift weights. I bench, I squat, I deadlift. ... I do all these things," Hubbard said, before explaining that there are two words, two "labels" some people outside his circle have used to describe him in the past, he hates.

"Don't ever call me disabled or handicapped."

Hubbard's heard the adjectives applied to him in the past because he has one hand rather than two. His left arm ends at his wrist. It's what he calls his nub.

Hubbard was born with his nub, and he's never shied away from showing it off.

"It's not like I try to hide it," said Hubbard, who aims to continue as a sprinter and long jumper with the NCHS track and field team this year and hopes to potentially play basketball and baseball, as well.

If you know him, he added, you know his nub: "It's part of me." And you also know he's never let it hold him back.

On the gridiron, that means being fully involved in the Governors' offense and defense, especially this year under Baker, who's about to finish his first year at the helm in Nelson.

Unlike many athletes in the county, Hubbard — who wears the No. 6 because of his six "digits" ("1-2-3-4-5" fingers on his right hand and his nub) — has played football since he was a child. Because of a lack of youth programs in the county over the years, many of his teammates don't have an extensive background with the sport, but Hubbard has been able to draw from about a decade's worth of practices and games as he took on an expanded role this season.

Sniffing out ball carriers is how Hubbard derives most of his joy when on the field. He likes hitting opposing players in an effort to keep those teams from getting to the end zone.

"It gives me confidence that there's somebody back there ready to make a tackle," said Nelson junior Carson Becerra, who lines up in front of Hubbard both ways, as a defensive and offensive lineman.

Hubbard said his offensive skills have become sharper this year, too, since aiming to "play smart" on each handoff. When he began playing with Nelson years ago, his mindset in the run game more closely mirrored that of a linebacker constantly searching to make contact. He wanted to run over opponents more than find and maneuver through gaps.

That running-through-players method also was a tall task because Hubbard stands just 5-foot-9 and 170 pounds, despite continuous work on his own — running or walking the slope at his Roseland-area home, or doing extra pushups at the house — and in the weight room at NCHS.

"But I make up for it in other places," Hubbard said of his smaller stature.

Specifically, Baker and Hubbard's teammates say he never holds back when it comes to effort.

That's paid off for Hubbard in tangible ways. As part of the Wing-T Baker implemented this year, Hubbard is second on the team in total carries (99), behind only Colton Baker (102). He has scored twice (for about 10% of Nelson's total scoring) and also is third in total rushing yards at 357.

The last of those numbers is well off his current goal of 800 — one he's keeping in mind in case he ever gets the shot to walk on to a team in college — but well over the objective he set for himself (200 rushing yards) at the beginning of the season.

"Midway through I was like, 'That was a little low,'" Hubbard said.

Hubbard bolsters his team off the field, too.

"Once I get to getting loud and boisterous," Hubbard said, "the boys wake up."

Becerra agreed. "He brings an energy that not a lot of people have."

Nelson will miss the intangibles Hubbard brings to the program next year, when he heads off to college in pursuit of a career in business. It'll miss the optimism that says that "even though we haven't won but one game [this season], I still see progress."

NCHS has gone through plenty of lean campaigns of late, and during Hubbard's time with the team. But it's been more competitive this year under Baker, Hubbard said, adding he and his classmates have aimed to pour a foundation this year on which future teams can build.

The younger players who've toiled alongside Hubbard over the past few years should be able to use his story as fuel, too.

They've seen him make tweaks to a traditional lifting regimen in the weight room, but they didn't see him let any one type of training get the better of him. They've seen him show up at practice daily, unafraid to take a hit or deliver one. They've seen him expend all his effort on game days.

They're all reasons teammates are unafraid to call Hubbard an inspiration.

But even that label, Hubbard's not ready to take it on quite yet, either. For now, he hopes to have served as a testament to what an "I can" mindset can lead to.

"The inspiration that I'm giving you [to reach your potential]," Hubbard said of those who've surrounded him during his athletic journey in Nelson, "that was in you all along. I just help you see it."