

'He was built for this': Amherst boxer, 19, dreams of becoming world champion

Justin Faulconer

Aug 3, 2022



Austin Deanda works with his trainer, Scott Sigmon, at Hurt Factory Boxing in Forest on Monday, July 25, 2022.
Kendall Warner photos, New Era-Progress

In The Hurt Factory Boxing & Fitness gym in Forest, Austin Deanda steps into the ring with poise and determination.

His next fight is a few weeks away, and the 19-year-old boxer from Amherst County is putting in the work to keep his 8-0 record intact.

As rain fell heavily from a storm during his recent afternoon training session, Deanda circled the ring in a flurry of punches into the sparring pads of professional boxer Scott “Cujo” Sigmon, his trainer and manager coaching him on the sweet science to which both fighters have devoted their lives.

Student and teacher regularly meet in the ring with a shared goal of helping Deanda reach new levels in a sport he’s followed since he was a boy.

“It was always a dream of mine when I was younger,” Deanda, a graduate of Amherst County High School, said of becoming a boxer. “I just fell in love with the independence of the sport.”

He recalls watching boxing on television with his father, Joe Blankenship, and decided at age 17 he wanted to pursue that dream. Deanda had his first pro fight a few days after his 18th birthday and is constantly improving, according to Sigmon.

Sigmon, who has more than 50 professional fights on his record and four years ago went toe-to-toe with famed boxer Roy Jones Jr., said he’s worked with hundreds of fighters over the past decade and most of them deal with pre-fight anxiety. Deanda is

a sports psychologist's dream in how he calmly handles the pressures and performs when the bell sounds, Sigmon said.

"The bigger the moment, the bigger he shows up," Sigmon said. "He is going to be a world champion."

Sigmon boldly predicted Deanda will make \$1 million a fight minimum by the time he's 22. His faith is strong in his pupil.

"This kid, I've been in there with the guys who made millions of dollars, I fought in world title eliminators," Sigmon said. "He's cut from that cloth."

The two are working to tighten gaps in Deanda's game, and he has the ability and mental fortitude to become world champion, Sigmon said.

Deanda, who wrestled for the Amherst High Lancers, said he likes the dedication put in to boxing.

"I envision to do good for myself and set the bar extremely high," Deanda said. "I would have never thought a couple years ago I would have been doing this, but it was always a dream to do it. Now that I'm in it, that's the goal to try and reach is to be a world champion. And I'm going to make sure I get there and [Sigmon] will too."

Sigmon said many boxers start learning the sport before their teenage years and Deanda has followed in his footsteps in beginning it at age 17.

In Deanda's first week in the gym, he knocked two guys out, and Sigmon brought in an 18-fight professional a few weeks later who also was KO'd.

"He is light years ahead of his experience level comparatively," Sigmon said. "There's guys who's been in professional boxing four and five years who have not accomplished what he has done in less than a year."

As a fan of the sport, Deanda said he's picked up a lot of his skills from all different types of fighters. In the beginning of his career he skyrocketed and is tuning up what he's learned as Sigmon said the competition is getting stiffer.

"From a jab to a right hand to the twist in the hips, to make sure everything is perfect," Deanda said. "I'm gradually still growing and make sure I tune up everything."

He has fought at 154 pounds, a junior middleweight, and for his Aug. 13 fight in West Virginia is moving up to middleweight at 160 pounds.

Deanda said Sigmon is an excellent trainer who shows him ways to improve.

"And I agree with him," Deanda said. "You can't be perfect at everything you do; you've just got to make sure that you try to be. He always makes sure that I get there. We are on the same page. He's an outstanding trainer."

Sigmon said the two are vastly different fighters, he a "blood and guts" brawler and Deanda a more technical fighter who uses his speed and conditioning in wars of attrition.

"There's certain aspects of me in him, but the main thing I see that we're similar in is he is going to be the star. He's already getting that following," Sigmon said. "...He's the man now."

Deanda's fight camp is weeks or more, depending on the fight and style, and he works out constantly with rest days to give his body time to heal.

"I bleed for this sport. I love this sport," Deanda said. "A lot of people never thought I would be dedicated in something like this. They see I'm serious. I'm here to bring the business. That's what I'm here for."

Sigmon predicts Deanda will have 13 fights in his first two full years of competing in what he sees as a "golden era" for boxing with an unheard of amount of action across the country and fight purses there for the taking.

Bree Adams, Deanda's longtime girlfriend, said ever since they met he's been committed to the sport.

"First day I met him, we came here," Adams said while watching him train with Sigmon. "It's been like that ever since. I've always told him stay committed to what you love, what you believe in. This is what he loves. This is truly his passion."

Deanda's "Native Nightmare" nickname comes from his Blackfoot and Cherokee Native American heritage.

Blankenship said he has boxed and remembers watching it with his son. "He was paying more attention than I thought," he said.

Blankenship said his son has come a long way as a man and he and his wife are supporting his dreams and doing what they can to help him fulfill them.

"He's just a really, really responsible kid," Blankenship said. "I'm excited for him. I just think he was built for this."

Blankenship said he knows how brutal and dangerous the sport is and if his son wanted to be a boxer he would support him in his goals.

"He was picked on at a young age," Blankenship said. "Now he's a bully in the ring, in a good way."

Blankenship said he feels his son has found his calling in boxing.

"I think this is what he is meant to do and when all is said and done he'll be a world champion," Blankenship said. "I really believe it."

Sigmon said many times fighters can get in their own way but Deanda doesn't.

"He is very humble. He trusts everything I'm telling him," Sigmon said. "He checks all the boxes. He stays in the gym. He doesn't live his life outside the ring problematically."

Deanda is very coachable and listens to instruction like it's the law, Sigmon said.

"He's listening to the people who have walked these steps before and it's going to pay huge dividends for him. I'm really excited for this future."

Local bestselling author captures 'beauty of the words' in Southern fiction

Justin Faulconer

Nov 9, 2022



Lynchburg author Leah Weiss is pictured on Oct. 27. Her debut novel, "If the Creek Don't Rise," has sold about 140,000 copies. Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

Self-described as Southern by grace, Lynchburg author Leah Weiss published her debut novel "If the Creek Don't Rise" at age 70.

The North Carolina native whose roots run deep in the Tar Heel state started writing in her mid-50s, finding her literary voice with stories inspired by family members and personal experiences that center on characters who are hard-working, self-sufficient and humble.

"Call me a Southern writer," Weiss said in a recent phone interview. "It has to do with the beauty of the words."

At age 10, Weiss moved to the mountains of Central Virginia, home to her father's family, and grew up on Wells Road in Amherst County. While living in Madison Heights in a house her dad built, she attended Holy Cross Regional Catholic School in Lynchburg.

Weiss also attended Dunbarton College of the Holy Cross, a school that formerly operated in Washington, D.C. She loved spending much of the late 1960s in the nation's capital in an extraordinary decade at the height of the Vietnam War.

"It was an electric place to be," Weiss said.

She still maintains close relationships with many of her classmates. She also earned a degree from Kent State University, was a public school music teacher, taught piano lessons for many years and worked 24 years as assistant to the headmaster at Virginia

Episcopal School in Lynchburg.

Weiss began writing memoirs of her late mother that were published in magazine articles, she said. After retiring from VES in 2015, she signed with a New York-based agent and began her writing career.

Describing her work as Southern Appalachian fiction and historical fiction, she published her second novel, "All the Little Hopes," last year.

"It is a tedious, time-consuming journey," Weiss, 75, said of writing a novel. "I thoroughly enjoy talking about the process because that's what people are curious about."

She recently shared insights on her literary journey during a book signing event at Madison Heights Library.

"I always had a gift for words," Weiss said. "If I wrote you a letter, you probably kept it somewhere tucked in a book. But I never thought about ever having the wherewithal to tackle something like a novel."

With much encouragement from friends, Weiss said the uphill climb of writing was tremendous with so many books on the market and striving to make her work stand out. She recalls being inspired at just the right moment to spend time with her mother, tape recorder in hand to capture her memories.

"She was one of 15 children born on a tobacco farm with no running water and no electricity," Weiss said of recording those experiences. "I slept in the feather beds, I went to the outhouse, I saw the iceboxes, I dug sweet potatoes and scrubbed them and ate them raw out of the garden. We had a very humble east North Carolina life."

Weiss said while writing she aims to create a "collection of characters like a perfect buffet" appealing to the reader. One such character, a third-generation Appalachian preacher, is based on her uncle, Willis, a Baptist minister of more than 50 years.

Reading from one of her books to the Madison Heights crowd, she set the scene of a fictional rural mountain exorcism.

"Daddy took me to see the devil when I was 9 years old," Weiss said in reciting the opening line of a chapter.

Another chapter opens with a declaration she again read to the audience: "Hell is being born into a family of preachers named Eli."

She said honest critiquing of polishing the writing is needed to get it past "the keeper of the gate", referring to literary agents and interns in the publishing business who routinely read from a multitude of writers.

"If the Creek Don't Rise" has sold about 140,000 copies, Weiss said. She's blessed to see the numbers twice per year.

"...They say it's a huge seller if they sell 20,000," Weiss said during the Madison Heights Library event. "I was aiming for a million... I'm on my way."

Her first book was honored as a 2018 finalist for the Library of Virginia's Literary Fiction and People's Choice Awards. The second novel also was a 2022 finalist for the Library of Virginia's People's Choice Awards.

She said it takes her about four years to write a book. "All the Little Hopes," was from a nugget of history from her mother she wasn't aware of about German prisoners of war sent to live in rural North Carolina working the tobacco markets.

Her mother told her of the POWs: "We were told not to look at them and talk to them." Just more than 350 such prisoners came to her birth town of Williamston, she said, adding she expected find horror stories of Nazis when she went to research those stories.

"I mean, I have to," Weiss said. "We all know what the Nazis are capable of, so certainly they had to be a danger to this community."

She recalls looking through newspaper archives for articles with her husband and visiting the site where the POWs were held. Weiss spoke of interviewing six people, all in their 90s, who remembered the prisoners on their family farms who described forging close relationships with the foreigners, a collection of artists, musicians, carpenters and farmers.

"Never in a million years did I expect to find that," Weiss said.

Weiss enjoys participating in book clubs and speaking about becoming a bestselling author in her retirement years. She's also working on a third novel.

She believes first-person present tense is the most powerful way to write.

"You feel like you know these characters," Weiss said. "You have literally crawled into their skin."

Amherst public safety director Brad Beam serving new post with passion, purpose

Justin Faulconer

Dec 6, 2022



New Amherst Public Safety Director Brad Beam is pictured in the operations room on Nov. 22. Beam served in fire departments throughout Virginia before taking t role in Amherst.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Growing up in Henry County, volunteerism and public safety was all in the family for Brad Beam.

His father was dedicated to service in the local department and his mother was a 911 dispatcher.

“It was instilled in me as a child,” said Beam, who recently began his current post as Amherst County’s director of public safety. “The joke was I ran my first call at 6 months old with my dad.”

Beam, 44, started volunteering in the local department in Henry County at age 16.

“It became a passion of mine,” he said. “I grew up with it and knew that it was what I wanted to do with my life.”

After graduating from high school in 1997, Beam originally intended to enter law enforcement and was an auxiliary deputy with the Henry County Sheriff’s Office, he said. But at age 21, he went to work for the Martinsville Fire and EMS department.

“Fire and EMS, I gravitated toward it and have never looked back 23 years later,” Beam said.

He also volunteered in the Collinsville Volunteer Fire Department. For a good part of Beam’s childhood, his father was chief there and still is active in Henry County’s volunteer community, Beam said. His nephew is the current fire chief in the

Collinsville department and his brother is also active in serving, he said.

Spending 12 years in the Martinsville department, most of that time as a firefighter and paramedic, Beam also was a deputy fire marshal for a period and an on-call fire marshal as needed. The fire marshal who promoted him was Clarence Monday, a former county administrator in Amherst.

Beam said it was neat serving the county he grew up in, which still is predominately served by volunteers in fire and EMS.

A sense of community motivated him to devote much of his free time to fire and EMS service, Beam said.

“It’s a sense of you’re part of something bigger than yourself,” Beam said. “We have that in Amherst. As I spend time with our volunteer departments, I see that. I see that in the men and women here dropping what they are doing and responding to a call, day or night. I get it. I totally get it. It’s a sense of purpose, community, family. Public safety, fire and EMS, is truly a family atmosphere — it kind of gets in your blood.”

After serving in Martinsville, he said he was lucky to get picked up by the Williamsburg Fire Department, moving to a part of the state where his wife is from. A firefighter and paramedic for three years there, he was promoted to captain and became a battalion chief in the administration overseeing EMS. In just more than 10 years in the city of Williamsburg, he said he helped manage construction of a new fire station.

The department in Williamsburg runs about the same number of calls as in Amherst County but the difference is a much smaller geographical area of 10 square miles, he said.

Coming to Amherst is a return to his roots in serving a largely rural community that relies heavily on volunteers, he said.

“I really felt drawn to the community, the profile of the community,” Beam said. “It took me back to my childhood and my 20s and what was really making this a fun job and a rewarding job.”

Amherst County has just fewer than 50 full-time employees and 20 part-time employees between public safety and dispatchers, Beam said.

“It’s been tougher to recruit volunteers on the EMS side. That’s a nationwide thing,” Beam said. “It remains tough for Amherst on the EMS side. On the fire side, there’s been the opportunity to recruit.”

The Amherst Fire Department recently brought in eight new volunteers, which Beam said is “awesome.”

“While volunteering has been tough throughout the country, I see a lot of good things happening in Amherst County volunteerism,” Beam said.

Amherst County’s public safety department works to do as much as it can in supporting volunteer departments, a critical component of the community.

“They are pillars in the community,” Beam said of volunteer agencies. “As I’ve told people, my goal is have more volunteers when I leave than the day I came in because we have been able to attract volunteerism and continue that tradition.”

Beam began serving in the Amherst post on Oct. 24. He is the county's fourth director of public safety, succeeding Sam Bryant, who served in the position since April 2018 and retired at the end of August.

Jeremy Bryant, interim county administrator, said Beam has acquired multiple certifications and training credentials in his career of more than 20 years in public safety. Beam, a graduate of Radford University, also currently is enrolled in the Graduate Leadership Government Graduate Program at Virginia Tech.

"We're happy to have him here," Bryant said at a recent county meeting.

The public safety department is working to establish a new shift model where employees work 24 hours on and have the next 72 hours off, a system he feels gives Amherst County a niche in attracting and retaining employees. Buckingham County is the only nearby locality currently doing that 24/72 model, he said.

Another focus is building up staff so a fourth ambulance that is fully operational can be put into place. The county has a fourth medic unit that was incremental at times but never fully operational and it recently had to be discontinued because of staffing challenges the county is working to remedy, he said.

The department plans to apply for a federal grant that could help fund additional fire and EMS positions.

Beam said the Amherst County Board of Supervisors has been extremely supportive of public safety and he understands the need to make the most efficient use of taxpayer dollars in tough economic times.

"It's a balancing act of asking for what we need, not what we want," Beam said. "We are using each position to its best ability and we are getting the highest quality work. I can tell you, the men and women of this organization have been true producers."

During a recent interview, Beam said the previous day saw Amherst County's fire departments come together to handle two incidents happening at the same time: a structure fire and a car wreck. Their teamwork prevented those affected by those two incidents from having a catastrophe, he said.

"It's an example of career and volunteer working together seamlessly to serve Amherst, and they did an awesome job," he said.