



Haymarket resident Evan Nichols is the youngest member of the 2022 United States Sled Hockey team that begins play March 5 against Canada in the Paralympic Winter Games in Beijing.

USA HOCKEY

# A FRIENDLY PUSH

## Paralympian Evan Nichols discovers an athletic outlet

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
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**E**van Nichols trusted Alex Green. So when Green suggested Nichols try sled hockey when both were fifth-graders, Nichols listened.

Green knew how much his 10-year-old friend wanted to participate in an athletic activity without his disability standing in his way.

Nichols was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that limited his mobility by affecting his feet and his right knee. He underwent over 20 surgeries, including the first at 5 weeks old on both ankles to clip each Achilles tendon to pull the heel bone down into his feet.

At age 5, both his hips were impacted by Legg-Calve-Perthes disease.

Then as a first-grader, Nichols had hip surgery at Children's Hospital in Washington to reconstruct the ball of his left femur because the bone was dying due to the Legg-Calve-Perthes disease. Doctors performed the same surgery on Nichols' right femur at the same hospital when he

### WHAT IS SLED HOCKEY?

» Sled hockey has the same rink dimensions, and for the most part, the same rules as regular hockey. The main difference is the equipment. Sled hockey players sit in specially designed sleds and use two sticks attached to the sled to propel themselves and steer as well as to move the puck.

was in the third grade. Throughout the entire series of surgical procedures, Nichols had to learn to walk seven times.

Those surgeries allowed him to stand and walk on his own for short distances. For long distances, though, the Haymarket resident relied on crutches or a wheelchair to protect his hips from further damage.

Nichols had good upper-body strength and a desire to play sports. But his physical limitations frustrated him at times. Prior to sled hockey, Nichols played soccer, basketball and baseball until his limited mobility prevented him from keeping up with the other kids.

He wanted to do more and could not.

Then Green proposed a sport he played that Nichols knew nothing about.



**BEIJING 2022™**



### 2022 PARALYMPIC WINTER GAMES

» **When:** March 4-14 in Beijing, China. The U.S. Paralympic Sled Hockey Team begins first-round play March 5 against Canada.

» **Did you know?** The United States has medaled in five of its six Paralympic appearances (gold in 2002, 2010, 2014 and 2018 and bronze in 2006).

Sled hockey has the same rink dimensions, and for the most part, the same rules as regular hockey. But sled hockey players sit in specially designed sleds and use two sticks attached to the sled to propel themselves and steer as well as to move the puck.

Nichols attended a DC Sled Sharks' practice at the MedStar Capitals Iceplex in Arlington. The experience changed his life. He enjoyed his first visit so much he wanted to go back. Sled hockey gave Nichols a much-needed athletic outlet where he thrived in a supportive community.

Little did he know at the time it would lead to where the 17-year-old Battlefield High School senior is now: the youngest member of the 2022 U.S. Sled Hockey team that begins play March 5 against Canada in the Paralympic Winter Games in Beijing.

Green was not able to see his friend reach this point. He died June 5, 2016, from cancer at age 12.

But Green's persistence is why Nichols is here. And it's why this moment is as much about Green as it is about Nichols.

"Alex is the reason all this started," said Nichols' mom, Julie. "He opened up an entire community to us."

### BONDING EARLY

Nichols and Green met as first-graders and connected from the beginning. As the only two wheelchair-bound students in their class, they relied on each other

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# Gar-Field baseball retiring Baker's number

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
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Last fall, Gar-Field baseball coach Kenny Miller and activities director Mike Payne discussed ideas to honor Jeff Baker beyond just holding a spring break baseball tournament in his name.

"We wanted to do something that's a little more permanent," Miller said. "We're not sure if [the tournament] is a fixture or a one-year thing."

The two achieved their goal by deciding to retire Baker's number 24. The recognition made sense.

Baker started for four years for Gar-Field's baseball team then starred for three seasons at Clemson University.

The Cleveland Indians selected the shortstop in the fourth round of the 1999 Major League Baseball Draft after he hit .544 and totaled 12 homers and 30 RBIs to earn all-American honors at Clemson. A standout pitcher as well, Baker went 9-0



JEFF BAKER

with 111 strikeouts and 14 walks and 0.40 ERA in 69.2 innings during his final season at Gar-Field.

Baker embarked on an eventual 11-year major-league career with six different teams before retiring after the 2015 season.

"He was an obvious candidate for this type of honor," said Miller, who is in his third year as Gar-Field's head baseball coach. "I'm really trying to push the kids to be proud of this program's history."

Baker, a member of the school's athletics hall of fame, is one of three Gar-Field graduates who reached the majors and one of eight overall from Prince William County high schools. He recorded the longest MLB career of any of them.

The school will unveil Baker's number in the outfield as part of the April 9 opening ceremony for the four-day, five-team Jeff Baker Classic.

Baker is expected to throw out the first pitch at 10 a.m. before the first game when Gar-Field faces Park View-Sterling, Gainesville, Liberty-Bealeton and Unity Reed are the tournament's other three

participants. Miller had planned on including teams from Fairfax County, but they have a different spring break schedule.

Baker is one of two Gar-Field graduates to have their jersey number retired. The other is basketball player Charleata Beale, the school's all-time leading scorer, who wore No. 42.

A retired jersey number means no one can wear that number again at Gar-Field. Miller said the school is making a temporary exception for the next few seasons after ordering jerseys with the school's new name (the Red Wolves) before deciding to retire Baker's number.

Miller said a coach will wear No. 24 until Gar-Field cycles through this batch of jerseys.

In addition to honoring Baker, Miller said the school also plans to recognize the 30th anniversary of the 1992 Group AAA state champions this season.

## HEADED TO NATIONALS

Brentsville graduate John Caraviannis qualified for the NCAA Division II Wres-

ling Championships March 11-12 in St. Louis.

Competing for Belmont Abbey at the super regionals last week in Pembroke, N.C., Caraviannis finished third in the 141-pound weight division. He is one of three Crusaders to advance to nationals, tied for most in the program's history.



JOHN CARAVIANNIS

## HUFFMAN TAKES TWO TITLES

Brentsville senior Ben Huffman capped his high school swim career on a high note when he captured the Class 3 state 200- and 500-freestyle individual titles in Richmond on Feb. 19.

Huffman set a new state record as the defending state champion in the 200 freestyle and did not lose a race all season. He has signed with Boston College.



BEN HUFFMAN

## PARALYMPIAN » FROM PAGE 24

in many ways. They never felt alone when they were together.

They liked to make people laugh. They passed the ball back and forth in physical education class and talked endlessly about their favorite sports teams, in particular the Washington Nationals and their favorite player, Jayson Werth.

And of course they shared an interest in sled hockey. After Green became sick with cancer, he encouraged Nichols to stick with the sport. Even if he could not play anymore, Green showed up at games to cheer Nichols on.

Nichols did not fully understand what was going on with his friend and held out hope Green would return to the ice.

After Nichols learned of Green's passing, he went numb, and in his words, "was out of it" for a couple of days. At the funeral, Green's mother, Jenni, hugged Nichols and they cried together. As tough as this moment was, Jenni told Nichols that everything was going to work out. Green was at peace now.

Jenni wanted Nichols to keep doing what he loved and what brought Green joy.

"The last time I saw him at a hockey game, he came to watch us," Nichols said. "We got off the ice after we had won, he said congratulations to me."

## ON HIS WAY

In late December, Nichols received an email from USA Hockey. It contained two messages: one good news, the other bad.

The bad news was that the U.S. team's trip in January to the Czech Republic had been canceled. Julie and her husband, Daniel, had hoped to see Nichols play overseas in this tournament because no spectators are allowed at the Paralympic Winter Games due to COVID-protocols.

But the mood brightened when Nichols read he had made America's 17-player roster for the Paralympic Games. Julie was driving at the time. She got so emotional Nichols worried whether she was OK.



Evan Nichols began playing sled hockey in the fifth grade with the DC Sled Sharks.

USA HOCKEY

"It was something we had not expected," Julie said. The news came as a surprise because Nichols skipped the U.S. Men's Development Team, something that usually doesn't happen. But Nichols impressed the coaches enough during camps last fall to earn a spot on this year's Paralympic team.

He continued to shine during the team's residency camp in Nashville in preparation for Beijing.

"We have seen such an improvement," said head coach David Hoff. "When we got to Nashville in January that was really the first time that we had the team all together for an extended period, and it was exciting to watch him and some of the younger guys grow from the start to the end of residency."

The U.S. is favored to win its fourth straight gold medal. After playing Canada on Saturday, the Americans have two more preliminary games before the quarterfinals begin March 10. The gold-medal game is March 13.

Nichols came home for a few days in February before

flying to Los Angeles on Feb. 27 to prepare for the trip to Beijing. Julie admits she's a little nervous about her youngest child going so far away without his parents. But she takes comfort in knowing that USA Hockey is providing a guardian and that other players have experienced this situation before at a younger age than her son.

"Evan is a really good kid and a great young player," Hoff said. "We always say we have a really nice mix of older and younger players on our team, and he's done such a good job fitting in with this group. It's always nice to see that dynamic between the veteran guys and the young, up-and-coming players."

Nichols has taken a leave of absence from school to focus on the Paralympics. But he will graduate in June and hopes to play sled hockey in college.

All because of one person's efforts. "Alex motivated me a lot more," Nichols said. "He got me into this. I need to try my best. I would say I owe him a lot. He pushed me to continue."

# JUMPING

## RIGHT IN



Battlefield's Kehler Hamilton (No. 22) celebrates his grand slam with a slam dunk. Hamilton's homer helped the Bobcats beat host and previously undefeated Colgan 7-4 in the Eddie Hope Memorial Tournament championship game April 13.

BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA

## Despite a hearing impairment, Battlefield's Kehler Hamilton excels in two sports

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Joey Swekosky felt lost. On the first day of Battlefield's baseball tryouts in the spring of 2021, Swekosky struggled to fit in with teammates he barely knew after spending the previous year at Patriot High School.

But then Kehler Hamilton introduced himself during warm-ups and Swekosky's outlook changed.

Sensing his fellow sophomore's discomfort amid the unfamiliar faces, Hamilton did what came naturally to him: He reached out to the newcomer and welcomed him. The gesture went a long way.

Swekosky experienced a wave of excitement. Hamilton's kind act eliminated his anxiety and turned his attention to something unimaginable only moments before.

"I couldn't wait for the next day of tryouts to get to know him," Swekosky said.

Hamilton affects people that way. Anyone who meets him can relate to Swekosky's story. The two-sport standout with the 3.9 grade-point average effortlessly exudes life. He was, as his father Lance put it, "born with a smile."

His coaches call him a dream. Powerfully built with a rangy frame, the 6-foot-2, 205-pound Hamilton has



Battlefield linebacker Kehler Hamilton scored a team-high three defensive touchdowns last season.

BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA

serious athletic talent. More importantly, though, he has the right attitude. He listens, works hard and does his job without grumbling or excuse-making.

So when someone mentions Hamilton's hearing impairment, the topic is almost an afterthought. Yes, those who know the 17-year-old junior's background know he was born deaf and has worn cochlear implants in both ears for most of his life.

But the physical disability is almost impossible to detect based on the way he acts in social circles and performs in the classroom and on the athletic fields, where he's earned all-district recognition as an outside linebacker for the Bobcats' football team and as a right-fielder for the baseball team.

The key, Hamilton says, starts with a proper mindset. When it became clear Hamilton had lost his hearing, his mother, Leslie, imparted to him wisdom that still guides everything he does. She told him he must adapt to the world instead of the other way around. The more proactive Hamilton became, the more success he would have.

Hamilton faced bumps in the road, including bullying at a young age when, for example, he ended up in tears after other kids deliberately left him by himself.

But Hamilton remained steadfast in living out his mother's advice. Giving up or giving in were not options. "I'm glad my mom did that," Hamilton said. "It made me who I am."

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**FINDING A WAY**

The first warning sign showed up immediately when Hamilton failed his newborn hearing test at the hospital. The hospital recommended his parents follow up with an audiologist. After a series of tests, the audiologist told Hamilton's parents he was fine based on the standards established by Virginia law.

"We were not sure what that really meant, but we accepted their professional opinion since we had no hearing loss in the family," Leslie said.

Their pediatrician also told Hamilton's parents he was fine at Hamilton's 12-, 15- and 18-month-old checkups. The doctor led Hamilton's parents to believe this was a developmental issue because Hamilton was a boy and the couple's second-born child.

Still, Leslie and Lance remained concerned their son was not speaking or responding to sounds.

Then just before Hamilton's second birthday, his parents had Hamilton evaluated by the Prince William County Parent-Infant Education Program. The results began to clear up the mystery.

"We were told he was developing above normal motor skills but his speech was significantly behind and he was not responding to sound," Leslie said.

Upon the program's recommendation, Hamilton took a hearing test called the Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response (BAER) that determined he had moderate to severe hearing impairment.

Hamilton received hearing aids when he was 2, but they helped only so much.

After searching out options, his parents decided to have Hamilton surgically receive cochlear implants at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Hamilton was approved for the procedure after undergoing a series of evaluations.

Cochlear implants connect a sound processor attached behind the outside of the ear to a receiver placed under the skin behind the ear that transmits signals to the auditory nerve (known as the cochlea) in the form of an electrical charge. The signals ultimately send audio to the brain.

Hamilton underwent three surgeries. At age 3, he received a cochlear implant in his right ear. At age 4, he received a cochlear implant in his left ear. In 2018, he received a second implant in his right ear due to a rare internal device failure. The switch made his hearing in his left ear stronger than the right.

After he received his initial cochlear implants, Hamilton began going once a week for two years to Johns Hopkins for speech and hearing therapy.

Although he was three to four years behind other kids in developing his speech and hearing skills, Hamilton still began kindergarten on time. By then, Hamilton was already talking, a result of a tireless, year-long effort to ensure he stayed on the same school schedule as his peers.

Leslie said each school Hamilton attended provided support, including the elementary and middle school levels where Hamilton received speech and



Kehler Hamilton received the MVP award for his performance in the Eddie Hope Memorial Tournament. **BILL KAMENJAR** FOR INSIDENOVA

hearing therapy twice a week.

This experience inspired Leslie to ask Battlefield about offering American Sign Language as a class. In 2019, the school added ASL to the curriculum. Hamilton is in his third year of ASL.

"ASL was important to me because I knew ASL would benefit many students in the community," Leslie said. "Many parents have thanked me. I hear it's a popular class."

**JUMPING IN**

Although he struggled to communicate verbally, Hamilton compensated visually by reading facial expressions, lips and body language. Hamilton also displayed a precocious dexterity from an early age. At age 2, he rode his bike without training wheels.

Both sports enthusiasts themselves, Lance and Leslie encouraged Hamilton to play sports. He began playing Tee-ball at age 5 and started playing football at age 7 in the Gainesville Grizzlies' youth program.

In both cases, Hamilton's parents felt comfortable with him competing. Hamilton took the necessary precautions to protect his head from a violent collision, especially in football, by wearing a skull cap and a headband inside his helmet.

An avid student of both sports, he also entered each contest as prepared as possible for any outcome. His athleticism only enhanced his ability to anticipate the expected and the unexpected.

His parents' bigger concern was the communication between Hamilton and the coaches and officials. Would he hear the whistle or a coach's instructions? Leslie and Lance wanted to make sure everyone understood ahead of time the circumstances so they all were on the same page.

So far, Hamilton has faced no major obstacles.

It helps Hamilton that both football and baseball rely on non-verbal messaging anyway when it comes to communicating strategy. Hamilton also knows to make eye contact with someone or to

be at the front of the line when a coach speaks to ensure he understands the instructions.

And when a potential issue arises, it's addressed without alarm.

Battlefield head baseball coach Jay Burkhart said he tells the umpires before the game about Hamilton to give them a heads up in case he loses track of the count while hitting or they need to speak to him.

After a miscommunication in an earlier game, they've also figured out how to best handle a fly ball hit between Battlefield's second baseman and Hamilton in right field. If the second baseman is in a better position to catch the ball, he starts waving his arms instead of shouting so Hamilton knows to back off.

And on the rare occasion Hamilton's earpiece slips off during a football game, he comes out of the game, re-attaches the piece and heads back to the field. It's no different than if he needed to miss a play to replace a broken chinstrap or mouthpiece.

"It's hard not to smile when you are coaching Kehler," said Battlefield head football Greg Hatfield. "He's great to work with. There's never a question of whether you are getting Kehler's best."

**COMING INTO HIS OWN**

As he continues to develop in both sports, Hamilton is learning to harness his raw abilities in becoming more consistent in his play. Colleges are following him, but they need to see more of him before offering a scholarship. At this point, Hamilton is open to playing either sport in college.

In baseball, Hamilton began to show signs of his talent near the end of his sophomore season to help the Bobcats reach the region final. This season, his first as a full-time starter, Hamilton is hitting .304 with two homers and 15 RBI through Tuesday for the 17-2 Bobcats.

"He's lightning in a bottle," Burkhart said. "He's a strong athlete and an infectious kid who wants to learn. It's cool to have. No one is going to outwork that

kid."

In football, Hamilton led the 2021 state semifinalists with three defensive touchdowns.

Steve Francese, Battlefield's defensive coordinator, has coached football for 30 years, including a 14-year stop at Robinson as part of two state championship teams. Hamilton is the first player Francese has coached who wears cochlear implants.

"He's the highest energy athlete I've ever been exposed to," Francese said. "Kehler is the nuclear Energizer Bunny. He's off the charts."

Hamilton's gung-ho, team-first attitude makes those around him better.

"I can be a little bit of a hot head if I'm not performing well," Swekosky said. "He's the complete opposite. If he goes 0 for 4 with four strikeouts, he's the same kid who walked out of the dugout earlier. When I lose my cool, he calms me down."

**LIFTING SPIRITS**

The baseball soared into left field, but Hamilton ran to first base without assuming anything.

It wasn't until he rounded first base and headed to second that Hamilton realized the ball cleared the wall. Overjoyed, he raised his right index finger and pointed toward the sky. Then after crossing home plate, he capped the celebration as every Battlefield player does after hitting a homer this season: He stuffed a small basketball through a hoop held by a teammate.

Hamilton had a number of reasons to bask in the moment. His grand slam sparked a six-run third inning that helped visiting Battlefield beat previously unbeaten and preseason Class 6 state champion favorite Colgan 7-4 on April 13 to capture the Eddie Hope Memorial Tournament title.

Hamilton was also named the tournament MVP after finishing the game 3 for 4.

In describing the grand slam afterward, though, Hamilton preferred to let the home run speak for itself. It felt good to deliver such a big hit, but Hamilton expressed appreciation for helping the Bobcats to victory. That mattered most.

Swekosky, though, saw something more. The left-fielder, who hits right behind Hamilton, witnessed a play that embodied Hamilton's best attributes.

Power displayed in clutch circumstances. A fired-up personality lifting his teammates. A humble attitude grateful for the opportunity.

In the seventh grade, Swekosky first heard about Hamilton playing sports with cochlear implants and the possibility sparked his curiosity: How could someone do this?

But now he knew the answer, and the Colgan game provided another example.

This was the person Swekosky immediately connected with that first day of tryouts a year ago.

This person became his best friend. What a gift to him. What a gift to everyone.

## HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS BASKETBALL

## Forest Park's Pedersen gains new perspective after torn ACL

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
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Lydia Pedersen stared up at the cabin on the hill and decided enough was enough.

For someone unencumbered, the walk that night from the worship center to the living quarters would take two minutes tops. But not for Pedersen.

Ten days earlier, on June 4, the Forest Park High School senior had surgery to repair a torn ACL and meniscus she suffered at an AAU basketball tournament in late April.

Now with two crutches and a heavy brace on her right knee, she felt bogged down by this latest challenge. Pedersen needed extra time and stamina to navigate the gravel surface leading to the cabin, while a sharp ache shot through her arms.

It was all too much. The physical pain. The limited mobility. The stress.

Missing basketball didn't help her mood either.

If she hadn't been injured, Pedersen would have been playing at an AAU tournament in Pennsylvania, looking to attract more interest from colleges and preparing for a final high school season full of expectations. She'd come so far so fast for a player who only began playing organized basketball as a seventh-grader. Another summer of AAU would only help her development.

Instead, she was stuck at the Camp Booyah Anglican Youth Retreat just outside Charlottesville watching over 200 kids participate in fun activities like a ropes course, tug of war and swimming.

This retreat involved more than outdoor activities. There was small-group and worship time as well, designed for each of the youth to strengthen their relationships with each other and with God.

But as Pedersen struggled to see anything beyond how her injury affected her, she felt she had no other choice. It was time to leave.

When she arrived at the cabin, she planned to call her mother to pick her up. Two days into a week-long scheduled stay, she wanted to go home.

Then, something unexpected happened. When Pedersen entered the cabin, she overheard a group of middle-school girls deep in conversation about challenges they faced.

Their exchange resonated with Pedersen. Here at perhaps her lowest moment were others sharing their struggles. It didn't matter the circumstance. It only mattered that they battled the struggles together with God at the center of their discussions.

Something clicked.

"I'm not alone," Pedersen remembered thinking.

Prompted by an overwhelming sense of peace, Pedersen chose to stay and ask some hard, but necessary, questions of God during her quiet time. For the first time at the retreat, she let Him in and allowed herself a moment to present her need without a self-imposed agenda or timetable.

In particular, she wanted to know whether basketball was in her future. Pedersen didn't receive a specific answer, but she realized something else: Basketball was a part of her life, but there was life beyond basketball. And He promised to show her the way. She just had to let go.

## A PLEASANT SURPRISE

The day Pedersen arrived at Forest Park, Larry Locke took one look at her in his physical education class and asked an obvious question: Based on her height, did the

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## MOMENT OF TRUTH



Forest Park senior Lydia Pedersen is a three-year member of the Bruins' varsity basketball team.

BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA

## TALLEST GIRL ON EACH LOCAL VARSITY GIRLS BASKETBALL TEAM

## » Battlefield

5-10: Reese Burch (senior), Sofia Miller (junior), Kayla Bigsby (sophomore)

## » Brentsville

5-9: Elena Hall, Emily Spittle, Alden Yergey, all juniors

## » Colgan

5-9: Olivia Damato (senior), Audrey Williams (freshman)

## » Forest Park

6-3: Lydia Pedersen, senior

## » Freedom-Woodbridge

5-7: Melinda Boateng

## » Gainesville

6-0: Rebecca St. Germain, junior

## » Gar-Field

5-8: Ayanna Fleming, junior

## » Hylton

5-9: Farrah Abdullah, junior

## » Manassas Park

5-11: Shukri Abdullah, sophomore

## » Osbourn

5-11: Rhyannon Stanley, sophomore

## » Osbourn Park

6-1: Alexandra Brown, freshman

## » Patriot

5-10: Ella Negron, sophomore

## » Potomac

6-2 Olivia Wright, junior

## » Unity Reed

5-10: Sydney Misenko, sophomore

## » Woodbridge

5-11: Taylor Kellum (senior), Mackenzie Burke (senior), Tyriannah Smith (junior)

## HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL STANDINGS (Through Feb. 1)

### BOYS

#### CARDINAL DISTRICT

| Team        | District | Overall |
|-------------|----------|---------|
| Woodbridge  | 7-0      | 2-3     |
| Potomac     | 5-3      | 8-5     |
| Freedom-WB  | 5-3      | 7-6     |
| Colgan      | 4-3      | 0-4     |
| Hylton      | 5-4      | 3-6     |
| Forest Park | 1-7      | 5-11    |
| Gar-Field   | 1-8      | 5-11    |

#### CEDAR RUN DISTRICT

|             |      |      |
|-------------|------|------|
| Patriot     | 11-0 | 7-0  |
| John Champe | 8-2  | 0-4  |
| Battlefield | 9-2  | 3-3  |
| Osborn      | 5-6  | 5-11 |
| Osborn Park | 4-6  | 8-9  |
| Gainesville | 2-9  | 7-12 |
| Unity Reed  | 3-8  | 7-12 |
| Freedom-SR  | 1-9  | 5-14 |

#### CLASS 3 NORTHWESTERN DISTRICT

|                |     |      |
|----------------|-----|------|
| William Monroe | 4-1 | 2-2  |
| Meridian       | 3-2 | 5-11 |
| Manassas Park  | 3-2 | 4-9  |
| Skyline        | 3-2 | 1-6  |
| Warren Co.     | 1-3 | 2-13 |
| Brentsville    | 0-4 | 1-12 |

#### OTHERS

|               |     |     |
|---------------|-----|-----|
| John Paul     | n/a | 1-3 |
| Seton         | 1-0 | 9-5 |
| Christ Chapel | n/a | 7-6 |

### GIRLS

#### CARDINAL DISTRICT

| Team        | District | Overall |
|-------------|----------|---------|
| Potomac     | 7-1      | 0-2     |
| Forest Park | 7-1      | 9-7     |
| Woodbridge  | 6-1      | 9-5     |
| Colgan      | 4-3      | 8-7     |
| Hylton      | 3-6      | 5-10    |
| Freedom-WB  | 1-7      | 2-11    |
| Gar-Field   | 0-9      | 5-16    |

#### CEDAR RUN DISTRICT

|             |      |      |
|-------------|------|------|
| Osborn Park | 10-0 | 5-0  |
| Patriot     | 8-3  | 2-5  |
| Freedom-SR  | 7-4  | 0-8  |
| Gainesville | 6-6  | 0-7  |
| Unity Reed  | 5-6  | 5-10 |
| Battlefield | 4-7  | 5-11 |
| John Champe | 2-9  | 2-12 |
| Osborn      | 2-9  | 5-13 |

#### CLASS 3 NORTHWESTERN DISTRICT

|                |     |      |
|----------------|-----|------|
| Meridian       | 5-0 | 3-1  |
| Brentsville    | 3-1 | 1-2  |
| William Monroe | 3-2 | 7-7  |
| Skyline        | 2-3 | 0-7  |
| Warren County  | 1-3 | 2-13 |
| Manassas Park  | 0-5 | 2-14 |

#### OTHERS

|           |     |     |
|-----------|-----|-----|
| Seton     | 2-0 | 4-3 |
| John Paul | 2-1 | 7-9 |

## PEDERSEN » FROM PAGE 19

6-foot-3 sophomore play basketball? It was Oct. 1, 2019, and Forest Park was about to receive an unexpected gift.

Pedersen told Locke she played basketball; that's all Locke needed to hear. He texted Forest Park head girls basketball coach Chris Baynham. Locke provided no specific details on how tall Pedersen was – nor did Pedersen's father, Art, when he emailed Baynham that same day with the news his daughter was enrolling at Forest Park. Art told Baynham his daughter played center at her old school.

Never one to turn away a player, Baynham, who did not work in the building, said he'd see her the next day after school for a team workout. When Baynham met Pedersen for the first time, the moment left him almost speechless.

Baynham saw Pedersen sitting on a cafeteria seat. He approached and asked if she was the new girl. Pedersen stood up to introduce herself. She topped him by an inch.

You can teach a player the fundamentals. Shooting. Dribbling. Rebounding. But height? You have it or you don't, which is why one thought raced through Baynham's mind as he envisioned a lineup that included Pedersen: "This is all going to work out."

In an era where scouting services rank middle-school basketball players, and names and performances are blasted all over social media, it's almost impossible for a coach to have a local player walk into their program sophomore year and have no idea who she is, let alone one as tall as Pedersen.

But Pedersen was a mystery.

She first started playing organized basketball in seventh grade at Evangel Christian, a private school in Dale City with an enrollment of 135 students from preschool through 12th grade.

Tasha Fuller, the head girls basketball coach, saw Pedersen in the gym one day and asked whether she was interested in playing. Pedersen stood 5-11 then.

Until that point, Pedersen had given no thought to basketball. She'd heard people ask her all the time if she played or not based on her height. It was a fair question.

She was always tall, but so was most of her family, which is why she never felt self-conscious about her size.

Pedersen became open to another extracurricular activity after she stopped Irish Dance in the fifth grade. Pedersen also played volleyball as a seventh-grader. So with the support of her family along with the desire to play with her friends, she decided to try basketball without any promises beyond that season. If it didn't work out, she'd find something else to do.

To prepare herself, Pedersen took basketball classes on Saturdays at the Dale City Rec Center. That helped her adjust to the pace of the game.

Although Pedersen still had much to learn, a new world opened up as she became more familiar with the sport. Pedersen found she not only liked basketball



Lydia Pedersen works out at a recent practice. She's been limited to drills due to her injury.

BILL KAMENJAR FOR INSIDENOVA

but thought she might have a future in it beyond high school.

The key was finding a place to develop her skills.

Before Pedersen went to Forest Park, her parents were already considering making a move. Until then, Art and Tara's kids were home-schooled and attended Evangel Christian.

But as time commitments and schedules began to stretch the family thin, Tara and Art felt called to a change in their daily lives.

For Pedersen, basketball played a part in the decision to attend Forest Park, her base school.

She had learned as much basketball as she could at Evangel Christian. She needed a new challenge, even if it meant going to a school of over 2,200 students where she did not know any of the coaches or the players or know about the program's history, which included two state titles.

She was grateful for her time at Evangel Christian, but she welcomed the change.

"I was super excited to play at a higher level," Pedersen said. "I wanted to get better."

Pedersen had already started to expand her horizons after joining the AAU Gainesville Hurricanes the summer before ninth grade.

Pedersen's confidence grew as others saw her potential and encouraged her to continue basketball. Then came Pedersen's first AAU tournament in Manheim, Pa.

"There were so many teams and so many players," Pedersen said. "I could not believe how many girls played AAU. It made me realize how many options there were. I was an average player. But I was watching the girls with the same skill set and it made me realize AAU was meant to help you grow."

The Pedersens, who live in Montclair, found an AAU program closer to home when Lydia enrolled at Forest Park. Bruins assistant coach Dwight Micheal Jr.

### HEIGHT AWARENESS

Lydia Pedersen comes from a tall family. Her father, Art, stands 6-0. Her mother, Tara, is 6-1½. Here's how her siblings stack up from tallest to shortest:

- » Luke, younger brother, a junior at Forest Park: 6-5
- » Connor, older brother, a senior at James Madison University: 6-4
- » John, younger brother, an eighth-grader at Potomac Shores Middle School: 6-1
- » Susannah, younger sister, seventh-grader at Potomac Shores Middle School: 5-11

invited her to play for his team, and she's been with him ever since.

Like Baynham, Micheal saw her potential from the start. So excited by her arrival in fact, he took a photo of her the first day he saw her at the Forest Park workouts and sent it to his best friend.

"We've never had a big player like that," said Micheal, in his sixth year as a Forest Park assistant. "6-foot-3 is huge for the girls game around here."

To ease her transition into a more competitive environment, Pedersen wanted to play junior varsity her first year. But Baynham placed her on varsity because of her height.

Pedersen played sparingly as a sophomore, but her attitude, commitment and work ethic accelerated her learning curve as she absorbed her coaches' instructions.

Baynham and Pedersen credit 6-foot senior center Kayla Burton with pushing her during her sophomore year as well. Burton was the second-tallest player on Forest Park's team and challenged Pedersen every day in practice to become more physical. The time paid off.

By her junior season, Pedersen started and earned second-team all-Cardinal District honors in helping the Bruins go 10-3 and reach the regional semifinals



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# Potomac rallies past Colgan

» BY JASON SALLADE  
For InsideNoVa

Potomac's girls basketball team forced multiple turnovers in the fourth quarter Tuesday night en route to a 44-40 comeback victory at Colgan.

Colgan (8-7 overall, 4-3 Cardinal District) had led up until the last two minutes of the game.

Potomac (10-2, 7-1) began the game with two steals in the first minute and a half, scoring the first four points behind freshman Taylor Allen and senior Natayvia Lipscomb.

Capitalizing off of a subsequent 4½-minute scoring drought for the Panthers, Colgan outscored them 7-3 over the rest of the first quarter behind a three from Najah Perryman and two each from Bea Quiroz and Peyton Ray.

Colgan's offense exploded in the second

 For more than 30 photos from the Potomac at Colgan girls basketball game, go to [INSIDENOVA.COM](https://www.insidenova.com)

quarter. After a fairly back-and-forth first few minutes that saw the two teams battle to a tight 13-12 game halfway through the quarter, the Sharks went on a 10-2 run over the final three minutes.

Perryman kicked it off with her second of two three-pointers in the half, as did Ray with a minute and a half left. The only scoring for the Panthers in this period came via a layup for Allen with two minutes left.

The third period was another tight, closely fought affair that for the first few minutes literally had the teams trading baskets. Allen scored almost immediately in the third,

followed by Perryman shortly after Ray hit



Potomac's Natayvia Lipscomb ignites a fast break on a turnover against home-standing Colgan Tuesday. **BILL KAMENJAR** FOR INSIDENOVA

another three, Quiroz scored four, and Lipscomb was good for six for the Panthers. Potomac dominated the fourth quarter.

turnover into a pair of successful free throws by Kristina McWhinney, Potomac forced three straight turnovers en route to

**PEDERSEN » FROM PAGE 20**

for the second straight year. She averaged only 4.9 points a game and totaled double figures just once during the pandemic-shortened season. But Forest Park had plenty of scorers. They needed help under the basket. And that's where Pedersen made her presence known, averaging 5.6 rebounds and 1.2 blocks a game.

While she improved, Pedersen's success also led to something else: interest from a number of Division III schools.

No doubt about it. Coming into senior year, things were looking up.

"I thought she was going to have a breakthrough season," Baynham said.

**A CHANGE OF PLANS**

During an AAU tournament game in Manheim last April, Pedersen went up for a rebound and an opposing player pushed her, forcing her hip to turn awkwardly. When Pedersen hit the floor, she felt a shooting pain in her right knee and heard what sounded like a crack.

As the other players raced up the court, the referee realized Pedersen was down. Her coach ran onto the court, followed by a trainer. They took her to a room for injured players and asked her to straighten her leg. She couldn't do it.

She was taken to a nearby hospital. The facility did not have an MRI machine, but the doctor didn't think Pedersen's ACL was torn. Pedersen remained hopeful. But when she arrived home and had an MRI, the news was bad. Both the ACL and the meniscus were torn with an expected nine-month recovery ahead.

To increase her chances of playing again, Pedersen opted for surgery, which took place June 4. But she did so filled with uncertainty. She might not have a high school season, and colleges might back off. Like many kids her age, this was already a stressful time as she contemplated the next phase of her life after high school. And now this happened. It seemed so unfair.

"I was very frustrated," Pedersen said. "I had come such a long way. I felt like I had plunged down to the bottom and was starting from square one."

With free time on her hands, Pedersen needed something to do. Her mother had a suggestion: attend the Camp Booyah retreat with her fellow All Saints' Church youth members and her siblings. Reluctantly, Pedersen agreed to go – if for no other reason than it was better than staying at home and doing nothing.

Pedersen's decision to attend the camp pleased Jedd Trenum.

Trenum, All Saints' associate rector, had already



Lydia Pedersen is considering competing for three Division III programs: Virginia Wesleyan, Shenandoah and Kean (N.J.). **BILL KAMENJAR** FOR INSIDENOVA

played a big role in helping Pedersen grow in her faith. The two met twice a month for coffee to discuss whatever she wanted: school, family basketball, life. They'd grown so close that Pedersen's favorite scripture (Psalms 4:8) is one Trenum prayed over her before her surgery.

Now, Trenum saw another opportunity for Pedersen to go deeper in her relationship with God. To make sure she still felt a part of things at the retreat, Trenum kept a close eye on Pedersen, the oldest member of the church's youth group.

Trenum said basketball was a primary focus for Pedersen before the injury. But after the retreat, she clearly had a different perspective.

"A reset button had been pushed," Trenum said. "She had a moment of clarity as far as what life should revolve around. Basketball fit into that, but it wasn't the axis around which it revolved."

Tara saw an immediate difference.

Pedersen delved into Anglican liturgy so she could understand its meaning rather than recite it each Sunday to check a box. She also served her church in new ways.

All Saints' Vacation Bible School in July offered one example. One day while driving, Tara, who is All Saints' director of children's ministry, mentioned off-handedly she needed a keynote speaker at VBS each day. Pedersen perked up and asked to fill that role.

For five days, she welcomed 75 elementary children and introduced the Bible topic. Pedersen also helped the children with science experiments, high-energy activities and discussions before closing out the day with a 30-minute wrap-up.

"All the kids knew who Lydia was and they looked for her," Tara said. "It was quite a dynamic approach."

**HOLDING COURT**

Sometime in February, Pedersen will decide what college she will attend. The 18-year-old has narrowed her choices to three Division III programs: Shenandoah, Virginia Wesleyan and Kean (N.J.). The main factors in her decision will come down to the school having her major (physical therapy), as well as her rapport with the basketball team and coaches. All three programs still want her to join them even if she doesn't play this season.

Pedersen may still get a chance to play this year as her doctor continues to evaluate her. But even if she's cleared, Pedersen will play only on a limited basis as she eases back into games after such a lengthy layoff.

In position to win its first Cardinal District regular-season title since 2011, Forest Park would love to have her back.

Pedersen, Prince William's tallest female varsity basketball player this season, is the one missing piece the Bruins need, especially when they face teams with a formidable inside presence. Forest Park's regular season ends Feb. 11. The four-team Cardinal District tournament begins four days later, followed by regionals Feb. 21.

"Her size makes a huge difference [and] makes them a lot tougher to guard," said Potomac head coach Shanice Fuller. "Angel [Jones] did a great job last year of finding her underneath the basket, and she has the skills to catch and finish, but size is always a plus in this conference. So I know they miss her on both ends of the floor."

Jones, a four-year starter and the Bruins' leading scorer, as well as Pedersen's AAU teammate, feels the same way.

"Every time I see her, I tell her the same thing: I miss her," Jones said.

Although she remains sidelined, Pedersen practices with the team for certain drills, while still doing physical therapy twice a week. Her personality also provides a lift.

"She's so good for our program," Micheal said. "Not just because of basketball, but the smile and energy she brings every day to our program."

Pedersen, of course, will play one more time for Forest Park since this is her final high school season.

But as she's grown in her faith, Pedersen remains rooted in a larger truth that continues to anchor her. Her time will come, however God reveals it to her. And when it does, she will embrace it.

"Basketball is not my identity, but I was making it my identity," she said. "Basketball is still part of my identity, but it's not the only part or the only thing I do."