

Blind wrestler sees mat as safe haven

BY JOEY LoMONACO
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

His dominance was plain to see.

Within two minutes, wrestler Jahmil Garrett-Bey had his opponent on his back, writhing in a desperate attempt to prevent both shoulder blades from coming into contact with the mat. The referee, sensing a pin was imminent, splayed down prone onto the floor for a closer look.

Before that could happen, though, the whistle blew and the period was over. From the corner, Garrett-Bey's coach relayed to the Mountain View High School sophomore 152-pounder what was obvious to anyone watching his third-place match at the Commonwealth District championships last weekend.

"It's 5-0, Jahmil," Gary Woods II shouted. "You're doing great, buddy!"

Only Garrett-Bey couldn't see the score, displayed on a TV a few feet off the mat. He couldn't see the three fingers raised by the ref to mark a near fall. In fact, he can't see anything.

Born with a rare form of glaucoma, Garrett-Bey, 16, SEE WRESTLER, A10



Garrett-Bey wrestles against Colonial Forge's Sean Meese. The rules are altered a bit so Garrett-Bey knows where his opponent is.

WRESTLER

► FROM AT

navigates the wrestling mat—and the world beyond it—completely blind.

Supported by teammates who are at times literally tied at his hip and rule changes designed to mitigate his disability, Garrett-Bey is no novelty, he's a wrestling wunderkind.

"He can easily win a state title," Woods said.

'SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT'

Delwin Garrett-Bey and his wife, Joy, always had concerns about their son's vision. As an infant, Jahmil was prone to tearing up and seemed to prefer keeping his eyes shut.

"My wife was very persistent that something's not right," Delwin Garrett-Bey said. "Something's not right."

The parents' suspicions were confirmed after they consulted Dr. Mohamad Jafaar, a nationally renowned pediatric ophthalmologist, when Jahmil was 2 years old. Dr. Jafaar diagnosed Jahmil with congenital glaucoma, a condition that affects 1 in 10,000 infants, according to WebMd.

He underwent a series of three surgeries, performed at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, with the goal of saving his sight. The procedures didn't take.

Jahmil's vision loss was gradual. For a while, he maintained sight in his right eye, while his left eye could discern only shadows. His fleeting memories of being able to see are what you might expect from a toddler: colorful cartoon characters.

"Mickey Mouse, Elmo," he said. "I know what they look like. But not a lot else."

By the time Jahmil turned 4, he was completely blind. For the Garrett-Beys, it was crushing. But the family's devastation gave way to determination as they prepared to help him live with his disability.

Like most kids, Jahmil learned how to ride a bike at age 5. Delwin crafted an old-school accommodation by sticking a baseball card in the spokes. Jahmil would follow the sound and go cruising through his North Stafford neighborhood with his friends.

With the assistance of a para-educator, Jahmil has always thrived academically, even if his parents struggle to help him with homework because it's in Braille.

"At the end of the day, we had to make sure Jahmil had a full life," his father said. "I never shielded him away from anything."

'I GO BY FEEL'

In many ways, wrestling is the ideal sport for a blind person. Hand-eye coordination isn't a



PHOTOS BY TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Coaches and teammates of Jahmil Garrett-Bey cheer him on during the Commonwealth District wrestling championships at Riverbend High School in Spotsylvania on Feb. 5.

prerequisite, and there are rules in place to level the mat for the visually impaired.

So, when the Garrett-Beys were seeking an athletic environment in which Jahmil could thrive, wrestling made sense.

And make no mistake, he needed to find a sport. Delwin played football and basketball and ran track in high school, while Joy is a former volleyball player. The eldest of their three children, Khalis, emerged as a standout running back at Colonial Forge High School last fall.

When it became clear football would be a nonstarter for his middle son, Delwin Garrett-Bey brought Jahmil, then a third grader, to Powerhouse Wrestling.

Tom Kibler didn't know what to expect. Kibler, who founded the Spotsylvania County-based wrestling club 19 years ago and serves as its head coach, had mentored kids facing various behavioral and physical challenges.

But he'd never before encountered a blind wrestler.

"I didn't know in the beginning how it would work out," he said.

Progress was slow, especially early on. Kibler would help Jahmil count off the steps for wind sprints or cartwheels so he wouldn't fear running into walls. Teaching techniques—takedowns, holds and defensive maneuvers—was an equally methodical process.

Kibler would enlist two fellow wrestlers. One would perform



Garrett-Bey, who is blind, is guided off the mat by a referee after his match against Sean Meese during the tournament.

the technique on Jahmil, then the other would serve as a defensive prop for him to try it out himself.

"I go by feel," Jahmil explained. "When the coach is showing the move, they describe it, so I go off that. I visualize it, and when the move is done on me, I get a better picture in my head."

By the time Jahmil was in seventh grade, he'd developed into a VAWA state champion wrestler whose unnatural grip strength helped him overcome any shortcomings in technique.

"Even if he's in a bad position, he's so damn strong you can't do anything about it," Kibler said.

He started to show growth

off the mat, too. A shy kid who'd just as soon spend all day tinkering with audio on his computer, Jahmil found a social outlet in grappling.

"He didn't speak much, he was very to himself," Delwin Garrett-Bey said. "But once he started wrestling, he immediately changed. It brought him out of his shell."

BANDING TOGETHER

Ten minutes before his third-place match, Jahmil paced the perimeter of the Riverbend High School gymnasium with his right arm wrapped around a teammate's elbow.

That arrangement is a fixture of Jahmil's day-to-day exist-

ence with the Wildcats. Inside Mountain View's wrestling room, there's no need for the cane he uses during the school day.

Whether he's conditioning or drilling, a partner never leaves his side. When the team runs outdoors, Jahmil is tethered to a teammate with a rubber exercise band so he can sense the pack's change of direction and adjust.

"He kind of adds a sense of family," said Mountain View 126-pounder Ben Meinert. "We're all there for him, and he's kind of that central point."

When Woods learned he'd have a blind wrestler in his room this winter, his first call was to Kibler, and he's implemented many of the same teaching strategies that worked so well at Powerhouse. He has, however, learned to be less hands-on personally.

"I'm the first one to get on the mat and wrestle with the kids," Woods said. "With Jahmil, I'm hesitant because he's so strong and so unpredictable."

With a record of 16-8 in his first high school season (he opted out as a freshman last winter due to COVID-19), Jahmil enters Saturday's Region 5D wrestling tournament with a realistic shot at earning a top-four finish and a berth in the state tournament.

His matches unfold much like his peers', with two exceptions. Top and bottom positions are the same, but when the wrestlers start in neutral, they do so with fingers touching, one palm up and the other down.

"Sight-impaired wrestlers always maintain touch, if they break apart the official is required to stop the match and restart in the correct position," reads section 30 6.2.4 in the National Federation of High School Sports Wrestling Rules Book.

It's a subtle but not insignificant deviation for his opponents, some of whom favor wrestling from space.

"They're not wrestling in a way they're comfortable with, and I've been wrestling that way my entire life," Jahmil said. "If I grab someone, I just hold on and never let go. That's my style."

Opponents can get visibly frustrated. By the end of the match, however, it's often those same opponents who guide Jahmil back to the center of the mat if they stray out-of-bounds. Regardless of outcome, he wins them over.

And there's another phenomenon at play wherever Jahmil competes.

"When we're at tournaments, we have so many kids from other schools come over to the mat just to watch Jahmil wrestle," Meinert said. "Because it's a pretty cool thing to see."

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