



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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Evan 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

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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.



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, Rockton, and Unity

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 championships this season.

HEADED TO NATIONALS

Brentsville graduates John Carayiannis and Ben Huffman are the tournament's other three

qualifying for the NCAA Division II Wrestling Championships March 11-12 in St. Louis.

Competing for Belmont Abbey at the super regionals last week in Pembroke, N.C., Carayiannis 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 CARAYIANNIS

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

A standout pitcher as well, Baker went 9-0

Reed are the tournament's other three

qualified for the NCAA Division II Wres-

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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."