

Late broadcaster Neville shined spotlight on area athletes

IF YOU WERE an athlete or a coach in the Fredericksburg area any time in the past three decades and you didn't know who Mike Neville was, you weren't paying attention.

The odds were very good he knew of you.

Local sports lost a vast reservoir of institutional knowledge (and genuine decency) when Neville died last week. The hardest-working man in local sports suffered a massive heart attack a week before Christmas and finally



succumbed to complications on Thursday.

His absence is shocking—not only because of the void he leaves, but because he had the biggest heart of anyone most of us ever knew.

“Mike was all about giving the kids in the area exposure, whether it was football, baseball, basketball—anything,” said

former Spotsylvania and Colonial Forge football coach Tim Coleman, who became Neville's long-time partner on local high school sports telecasts.

“That's what Mike was all about. That was really fun for him. You could always see the excitement in the kids' eyes when he would come around for games.”

One of those “kids” was Chris Lam, who played offensive line at Chancellor in the 1990s and later became an assistant coach for the Chargers.

He recalls his teammates' elation at being chosen for a postgame interview with Neville.

“He could make a local kid feel like an All-Pro,” Lam said. “He'd show up to games, and it was a chance to be seen for local kids. We'd keep the [tapes] as keepsakes.”

Stoking their egos wasn't Neville's only method of helping local athletes. Long before YouTube and the explosion of video, he would regularly splice together

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COURTESY MARY WASHINGTON ATHLETICS

Mike Neville calls a UMW basketball game for the school's website. The broadcaster died last week.

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action clips for athletes and coaches to send to college recruiters—often at his own expense.

He did the same for the University of Mary Washington, helping produce videos for the school's annual spring athletic banquet.

"We'd stay up until the wee hours of the morning, cutting tape," UMW sports information director Clint Often wrote in an email, "... all the while telling dumb jokes, quoting every movie imaginable, and coming to the inevitable point of each video of going from the point from where we went from 'Let's make this amazing,' to 'Let's get this finished.' One year, he handed me the finished product 10 minutes before the banquet started."

Neville was essentially a one-man show for Fredericksburg's local cable station, originally known as Prestige Cable and later Adelpia Cable CV3. That's where he and I did a weekly half-hour talk show with literally no budget, discussing everything from Washington's NFL franchise to high school field hockey.

There were no second takes and no paid advertising. Somehow, we seemed to make it work, mainly through Neville's vast reservoir of knowledge.

After the cable station went under, Neville became the voice of UMW's basketball teams for their online broadcasts, while still finding financing for taping high school football games and streaming them the following week.

"He was one of the finest announcers I've ever seen. This guy inter-

viewed people like Neil Armstrong, and yet was so humble, you'd never know it," Often wrote.

One of Coleman's favorite memories was re-watching a Spotsylvania/Courtland football game Neville broadcast in the early 1990s. Both teams ran the rather unglamorous Wing-T offense.

"I finally got to watch it, and the first thing Mike said before the game was, 'Tonight, you're going to see one of the prettiest, ugliest games you'll ever see in your life,'" Coleman said with a chuckle.

Neville had been scheduled to broadcast a basketball game on Dec. 17, the night of his heart attack, but a COVID outbreak among one of the teams forced the game to be postponed. He returned home before his wife Sharon rushed him to the hospital.

"No matter how you knew Mike, you know he never met a stranger, loved to talk sports and loved to play golf on Tuesdays," wrote Tom Cooper, general manager of radio stations Super Hits 95.9 WRGQ/Thunder 104.5, on a GoFundMe page that quickly surpassed the goal for covering Neville's medical expenses.

Truly a jack of all trades, Neville also worked as a disc jockey for WGRQ and once hosted a nightly sports talk show on a different radio station—all while being a proud father and grandfather. Local sports truly won't be the same without him.

"He was a big part of Fredericksburg area," Coleman said. "He was just a very instrumental part of people's lives."

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Indefatigable Gilyard leads Spiders into NCAAs

WASHINGTON—Just before Sunday's Atlantic 10 Conference championship game, a Davidson fan good-naturedly wished Jacob Gilyard "happy 30th birthday."

It was a clear exaggeration. Gilyard is still four months shy of 24, for goodness sake. It just seems he's been in the Commonwealth's capital longer than the statues on Monument Avenue.

But Gilyard, one of Richmond's six fifth-year seniors, got all of the gifts he had waited for. Tournament most outstanding player honors, a piece of the net and, most importantly, an elusive NCAA tournament bid after a dramatic 64–62 victory over top-seeded Davidson.

"He said I was 30," Gilyard said with a smile. "My goal was to score 30."

He came close, netting a game-high 26. He needed help from teammates Tyler Burton and Matt Grace, who combined for three old-fashioned three-point plays in the final 90 seconds, but there was no doubt who made the dif-

POINT AFTER

Steve DeShazo



NICK WASS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Richmond guard Jacob Gilyard (0) drives past Davidson guard Grant Huffman for a basket.

ference.

"He scored a ton, and he controlled the whole tournament," Richmond coach Chris Mooney said. "To be able to do that without coming off the court one time is remarkable."

By the time the Spiders were cutting down the

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Capital One Arena nets, the Davidson heckler had long gone, and Gilyard was instead serenaded by chants of “Gil-ly” from the Spider faithful.

Like Virginia Tech, the Spiders (23–12) needed four victories in less than 72 hours—including wins over their conference’s top three seeds—to reach the NCAA tournament. And the 5-foot-9 Gilyard didn’t miss a second.

There are a lot of numbers associated with Gilyard, including his NCAA record for career steals, which now stands at 466. He also surpassed 2,000 career points Sunday and holds the school record with 773 assists.

But the most striking statistic was his 160 playing minutes and literally willing Richmond to its first NCAA bid in 11 years.

“I think the fans ... would have fainted if I had taken Jacob out,” Mooney quipped.

At 5-foot-9, Gilyard is usually the smallest



NICK WASS / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Getting the opportunity to hold the Atlantic 10 championship trophy validated Jacob Gilyard’s decision to come back for a fifth year with the Spiders.

player on the court, but he usually has a bigger impact than men a foot taller. Veteran Davidson coach Bob McKillop, who has faced Gilyard for half a decade, is one of many Atlantic 10 coaches who won’t be sorry to see Gilyard and his teammates finally move on.

“Jacob Gilyard is a guy

who can create chaos defensively, and he can put together runs on the offense,” McKillop said admiringly. “... To be able to play 40 minutes in that situation is a real statement about how talented and valuable he is.”

The Spiders were in position to reach the NCAA tournament two years

ago before COVID wiped it out. That left a serious hole in the career résumés of Gilyard and fellow seniors Grant Golden, Nick Sherod and Grace.

They all exhausted their eligibility last winter. But when the NCAA granted athletes a waiver for an extra year, several of the Spiders were consider-

ing it.

As usual, they took their cue from the indefatigable Gilyard.

“If one of us was coming back, it was all of us. That’s how close we are,” Golden said. “I think Jacob was the first to decide, and the dominoes fell from there.”

The Spiders made a similar run through the A–10 tournament in 2011—“Grant was a sophomore,” Mooney joked—then won two NCAA tournament games to reach the Sweet 16.

They’re hoping for a reprise this year. The Spiders will be underdogs again, against a higher-seeded team. But their experience makes them a dangerous opponent, as do Gilyard’s quick hands, unstoppable motor and his will.

“Words can’t describe what this tournament means to me,” Gilyard said. “We came here with a goal and mind, and we got there. ...Nobody can call me a loser ever again. I’m a winner.”

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Schweers makes pitch to fulfill diamond dream

Life has thrown enough strikes at Homa Schweers to constitute a complete game. But as long as she can grip a bat, she vows to keep swinging.

A move from her native Iran as a teenager, a language barrier, rejection from her college softball coaches and teammates — none of that discouraged her. More recently, injuries, COVID-19 and cancer delayed the 37-year-old Fredericksburg resident's quest



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to make USA Baseball's women's national team.

Given her age and recovery status, her odds may not be much better than that of the Washington Nationals winning the 2023 World Series. But she's determined to keep trying.

"Life will continue to punch us in the face," she said. "We just have to learn how to fight back."

Schweers is currently in Sarasota, Fla., preparing to participate in the four-day inaugural All-American Women's Baseball Classic that begins Saturday. It's a legacy event from the World War II Era All-American Girls Baseball



Homa Schweers (right) talks with Ernie Baker, one of her coaches, before doing some tee work to hone her swing.

League featured in the 1992 Tom Hanks/Geena Davis film, "A League of Their Own."

Just getting there has been an accomplishment for Schweers, who finished chemotherapy in March after undergoing a hysterectomy and was well below full strength for national-team tryouts.

"I feel so much better than I did 2-3 months ago," Schweers said in a recent interview. "I had to finish what I started, even if I'm not at full strength. I had

to go out and try out one more time, to finish what I started. I had to keep my word to myself."

Her journey has taken plenty of twists.

Ahmed and Mitra Shafrii moved their three children from Iran to California when Homa was 10. Despite speaking no English when she arrived, she quickly assimilated and became a standout softball player at Santa Clara High School.

She then made a tour of several California junior colleges,

getting cold shoulders from several teammates and, she recalls, the following evaluation from one of her coaches: "You have the desire to play college softball, but you don't have the ability."

Determined to prove him wrong, Schweers transferred to West Valley College, where she hit .396 for a team that went 48-2 in 2006. She later landed at Cal State Monterey Bay, where she batted .333 for an NCAA Division II tournament team and was named female athlete of the year in 2008.

After graduation, she joined a men's recreational baseball league and served as commissioner for eight years. She also became a firefighter, a California Peace Officer and a rare female on the state's Crisis Response Team.

When he husband took a job at the Pentagon, she moved east, worked as an executive bodyguard and opened a fitness consulting company that has counseled over 300 clients.

Still, her baseball dreams never died. She sought out Ernie Baker, a longtime area instructor, who became her coach at Competitive Edge in Spotsylvania.

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“We kind of struck up a friendship,” Baker said. “I like her a lot. I wish her the best. I know she’s been up against all kinds of odds.”

In 2018, Schweers was invited to Team USA’s tryouts for the biannual World Cup—an event Mountain View High School graduate Megan Baltzell played in—but tore a biceps muscle.

The COVID-19 pandemic wiped out the 2020 event. She was the second-oldest player on last summer’s 58-player Women’s National Open roster, but was still recovering and didn’t make the squad for a five-game “friendship series” against Canada.

“I wasn’t as strong. I got winded, but I still ran the bases, and I hit the (stuffing) out of the ball. I was so happy,” she said. “I thought, ‘This is it. I’ve

“She’s not going to overpower you, but she can throw three pitches for strikes, and she can hit with anybody.”

— **Coach Ernie Baker**, on Homa Schweers

done everything I possibly could.’ “

Then a spot opened at this weekend’s event in Florida, and her career hopes got extended for at least a little longer.

“I thought, ‘You love baseball, and here’s an opportunity for a fully-expense-paid trip to Florida to play baseball for four days.”

Schweers has played outfield for most of her career, though she caught for a season in college. But Baker, whose last female protégé was Julie Croteau in the 1980s, thinks pitching might be her ticket to finally making the national squad.

“She’s not going to overpower you,” he said, “but she can throw three pitches

for strikes, and she can hit with anybody.”

Schweers plans to bask in more than the Florida sun this weekend. She’ll also soak in the chance to compete, and then button-hole the national team’s coaches before determining whether her quest will continue.

“After it’s over, I plan to go up to the coaches and say, ‘You saw me play. What do you guys think? I’m six months post-chemo; do I have a chance?’ “ she said. “They’ll be honest with me. If they say yes, the quest continues. If it’s no, then at least I did everything possible.”

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