

# After Further Review: All eyes on Alaysia Oakes

Ben Cates

Mar 2, 2022



Heritage's Alaysia Oakes walks off after winning the Class 3 long jump title Monday.  
Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

**A**laysia Oakes offered a quick wave to the crowd as she disappeared from view at the Liberty Indoor Track Complex late Tuesday afternoon.

No embarrassing curtain calls, no showboating, no gleeful shock at what she'd just accomplished. Just one wave after finishing her final race. And then, with a modest smile, the champ was gone.

But Oakes could have had a curtain call. She could have showboated. Could have taken a bow and demanded all the praise.

Because she was that good. Five times that good. Still, the champ exited the stage without a word, having accomplished all she set out to do.

The muffled echo of a PA announcer's voice pointed out her accomplishments to anyone not in the know: Give her a hand, folks, she won five events at this meet.

Applause rang out. Cameras clicked away. Cell phones recorded the moment. Standing stage left, this reporter thought about success — about how it ebbs and flows, how it seems so elusive at times and in abundance at others. After all, this was a state track meet, where dreams always die for many and come true for a few.

But that whole success thought really didn't get down to the heart of the matter; it seemed too accidental, like success just visits whomever it desires.

So the reporter thought instead about a Maya Angelou book he'd once read that includes this line: "Pursue the things you love doing and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you."

And that hit the mark pretty well.

Eyes were already on Alaysia Oakes long before Monday and Tuesday's Class 3 state track & field championships. Long before December, when she made public her decision to run at Stanford. Long before last summer, when she appeared at the AAU Junior Olympics and The Outdoor Nationals after putting on a show at the outdoor state championships.

Eyes were on Alaysia Oakes five years ago, when as an eighth-grader she hit 33 feet, 8 inches in the triple jump.

Eyes were on her the next year, when as a freshman she won the outdoor state long jump title and was the only first-place finisher on a team so deep that it won the state team title with 12 top-five finishes.

She was named the Seminole District's athlete of the year that season, an achievement almost unheard of for a freshman.

So no, for Oakes success was not stopping by for a visit, like some random occurrence. Tuesday's finale proved it. She entered the meet with a plan, stuck to that plan and executed it to perfection. She took hold of success and refused to let go.

And if you think that's overly dramatic, consider the score. Nineteen state championships and counting (15 individual titles and four team titles), with one more chance to garner additional hardware this spring. That's an incredible number, even though it would be higher had the pandemic not canceled the 2020 outdoor season.

By the time she's finished, she may be the most decorated track & field athlete in the history of the Virginia High School League. Jim McGrath, writing for Milestat, an online source for high school track & field and cross country, noted the state record for state titles appears to be 19, counting relays. But parsing through the state record book for an exact answer to who holds the record for most state titles can be a confusing chore.

Still, if she were to win five more individual titles this spring and deliver Heritage another team title, her count would stand at 25, an unbelievable mark.

But that kind of talk is best saved for months from now. What's important right now is the intensity she brought to this week's indoor meet. The determined look in her eyes, the focus that never left them each time she stepped onto the track. The graceful way she commanded the triple and long jumps, with an artful style all her own. The lightness of her touch in the 55 dash or the way she caught fire in the 500 or how she willed herself to the finish in the 300 at the day's end.

Those are the things this reporter will remember. There has been talk at Heritage recently about how Oakes is the greatest female athlete to ever hail from Lynchburg's westside school. They may need to amend that statement after this week, to put her in conversation for the greatest ever, regardless of gender.

And the city of Lynchburg may need to do the same. Her ceiling? That's impossible to say at this point, because she doesn't have one right now. She simply keeps shining brighter and brighter.

She jogged off her stage Tuesday afternoon, a smile briefly overtaking the game face. No, it wasn't so much a jog as a glide, which she seemed to do the entire day.

Moments earlier, as she recovered from the 300 dash near the finish line, she closed her eyes and breathed. Breaths of relief. The relief of a champ, her goals all met for the time being, the future spreading out before her like an endless horizon.

# After Further Review: The reporter, the fan and the honest truth

**Ben Cates**  
Mar 31, 2022

**I** have a confession to make, folks.

I've pretended for far too long, and now feels like the right time to get things out in the open. To finally be honest. So if you really want to know, I'll tell you.

The truth is this: I'm a liar.

Oh, I haven't lied to anyone in a professional or personal capacity. Nothing like that. And certainly never on the printed page.

No, I've lied to myself. Time and time again, for years.

As I reporter who loves his job and treasures his profession, I hold myself to a strict code: Objectivity at all costs. A calm, level-headed approach. No one-sided coverage, no favors, no bias of any kind, and absolutely no cheering in the press box. It's a moral code as much as a professional one, and I've always maintained it. Then the last few weeks happened.

The truth is I'm a Tar Heel born and a Tar Heel bred — as they sing down in Chapel Hill — and when I die, I'm a Tar Heel dead. And there is little objectivity to be found in that label.

So you can imagine, then, how through the roof my blood pressure is right now. How nervous and alarmed I am by Saturday's Final Four matchup against Duke.

This was never supposed to happen. Not at this grand of a stage. Not with so much on the line. Not when the Prince Of Darkness from Durham was taking his final bow, and especially not after he'd been so mortally wounded on his own floor at Cameron Indoor Stadium less than a month ago.

But there is such a thing as fate, and so here we are: hearts racing, the hatred palpable, the anticipation of Saturday's historic matchup almost too much to bear.

Duke and UNC in the Final Four: the Blue Comet that will not pass this way again in our lifetimes. How could the basketball gods inflict such indescribable cruelties?

The journalist first took a noticeable backseat to the fan during the days leading up to March 5. That's how these wild emotional swings work, I suppose. One minute you're going about your business on a normal day and the next thing you know your blood is boiling. So when Carolina spoiled Mike Krzyzewski's night, I howled to the moon in celebration unexpected.

Then the NCAA Tournament began. I've been an absolute wreck ever since.

Consider the Tar Heels' win against Baylor, the one where we blew a 25-point lead before finally winning in overtime. I'm convinced that game took a year or two off my life. I screamed indecipherable commands at the TV. Jogged around my apartment. Did sit-ups during commercial breaks. Anything to get the energy out and calm the nerves.

If you think that's bad, you need to understand how I became this person. And since I'm being honest, I'll tell you. Let's take a timeout.

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Five years old. My father watching his Blue Devils in the living room. The rest of the family was nowhere in sight, a customary occurrence whenever Duke played. I wandered into the room, and dad scooped me into his arms. "This is Duke basketball!" he said, or words to that effect. "You'll love them! You'll be a fan!"

A Baptist minister, of the Independent variety, he had one thing on his mind in that moment: Conversion. Train them while they're young, folks in North Carolina used to say. I squirmed. Something felt wrong. He kept up his smooth talk, hoping to reel me in. This divided house was a lonely place for a Duke fan, and my father needed someone on his side. I squirmed again, until I finally broke free and ran from the room. How could I stay? I'd been taught to flee from evil, to never entertain the dark side. And there were devils in that room.

The next year, our family was seated in the Smith Center. I don't remember many specifics about the game, just that it was a grueling Duke vs. UNC affair. We attended games in Chapel Hill almost as religiously as church, and certainly with as much reverence. But that night didn't go well. We'd made a terrific comeback in the final minutes, but it wasn't enough. Final: Duke 70, UNC 69. I hung my little blonde head and wept. My grandfather put an arm around my neck. Old timers filed past, patting me on the shoulder. "It'll be OK, kid."

Twelve years old. Dean Smith walked through athletic offices in his own building and greeted us with a broad smile. My uncle was UNC's sports information director at the time, and Dean had some kind words for the family, particularly my grandparents. I was awe-struck. It seemed as if Smith sparkled and glowed, a god above all gods. He looked my way. "Hi Benjamin, nice to meet you," he said. "Do you play basketball?"

I wanted to say: yes I do actually, and when I'm all alone on the court, I'm any number of Tar Heel greats and you're my coach and I always make the game-winning shot against Duke. Instead, I offered a simple 'Yes sir.' Best to show humility in the presence of Our Lord and Savior. "Keep it up!" he said.

One year later, I met Smith again, this time near a side entrance to the building. He grinned. "Benjamin, are you still playing basketball?" Yes sir. "Well, you've gotten taller. Maybe one day you'll be playing here!"

All 120 pounds of me playing for UNC? What a pipedream. But still, Smith had offered those words. Not only had he remembered my name (he had a penchant for this, I was to discover) but also found time to encourage a wide-eyed teenager with mediocre skills.

Twenty-four. It was 2005 and Duke was once again playing at UNC, this time in the final game of the regular season. We're down by nine. Three minutes left. I was sitting in the press box (how I got there is a story of its own) with strict instructions not to cheer. No problem, I can do that, I'm an adult now. But doing that proved difficult.

Another incredible comeback by the Heels. With 17 seconds left, UNC's Marvin Williams converted a 3-point play for a two-point lead, J.J. Redick missed a game-winning 3-pointer, and Daniel Ewing bricked a game-tying jumper. Sean May secured the final rebound for a 75-73 win and the Smith Center crowd, the largest in the building's history at that time, hit a new decibel level. I could no longer contain myself and sprinted into a near-empty concourse. I threw my arms out to the first girl I saw. She was beautiful, and she threw her arms out too, and we kissed. Then she was gone, each of us looking back at the other, until we were lost in a sea of blue.

One more thing: In those days, eight years after his retirement, Smith worked from an unmarked office in the basement of the building. My uncle's office was next door. I visited my uncle often, but could never bring myself to knock on Dean's door. You don't just casually interrupt the Creator when he's hard at work. But I'm convinced he would've called me by name.

All right, let's resume play ...

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This week has been agony. The entire month has been, really. The fan — temporarily at least — has defeated the journalist, and the journalist has slumped off into hiding. He can no longer abide the chaos: the crass language, the biased viewpoints, the anger and elation.

Get a hold of yourself, the journalist demands. Just a few more days, the fan replies. It'll go on this way, through the leadup to Saturday and then for 40 hellacious minutes (if the game goes any longer than that, rest assured, the universe may find itself in a perilous tilt).

I'll rant and rave. Say some things I really don't mean and other things I really do mean, and have always meant, crude though they may be.

I'll plead into the unknown for victory. And I'll ask the basketball gods, with all the humility that is humanly possible, to please, if you don't mind, blast the Prince of Darkness into his evil abode one last time.

I am able to contain myself, to overcome this childish fandom. Just not right now. And that's the honest truth.

# After Further Review: Tough as nails

Ben Cates  
May 31, 2022



Kyle Fields

**T**he Rustburg baseball team needed ace Kyle Fields on the mound for its Monday night game playoff game at Broadway. He was their best hope of advancing past the Region 3C quarterfinals.

But before he could throw a single pitch, Fields found himself writhing in the dirt, in excruciating pain.

He ended up there, when, facing an 0-2 count, he eyed what he thought was a curveball from Broadway's Ryan Martin. Instead, it was a fastball, and it zoomed his way high and tight around 85 miles per hour. By the time the ball left Martin's hand, Fields had less than half a second to react. By the time he realized the ball was speeding toward his head, it was too late. He dodged, and the ball hit him squarely in the cheek, just to the right of his nose. He fell into the dirt like a brick.

He laid there for a solid five minutes. Both completely numb and in agony. Blood poured from his nose. Rustburg coaches Chris Carr and David Brown came to Fields' aid, all three waiting for an athletic trainer to show up.

"At that point, I was looking for teeth on the ground," Brown said. "I was like, 'This could be catastrophic.'"

What followed, Brown recalled as "one of the most courageous, epic feats I've ever seen in high school baseball."

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When it happens, it amounts to one of the most horrendous moments in all of sports. A train wreck difficult to look away from. A shocking moment that makes one cringe, even from the couch or stands. So imagine standing in the batter's box and seeing a fastball barreling straight at your head. And realizing there's nowhere to hide.

After taking a fastball to the face in 1995, the Brewers' Kevin Seitzer described it this way: "It was like my face was crushed by a bowling ball, a bowling ball going 95 mph."

Fields' nose began bleeding instantly. He laid for what seemed like forever around the right side of the batter's box.

Eventually a trainer showed up. The Rustburg senior was evaluated for concussion symptoms.

And Fields had a message for the trainer and anyone else within earshot.

"I knew I was staying in the game the whole time," he recalled Tuesday. "I told them I was staying in the game. I told the trainer, 'You ain't takin' me out of this game. This could be my last game.'"

He said those words with swollen lips, one of them, as Brown recalled, "fully five times its normal size."

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And then there he was, out on the mound, after at least five terrible and uncertain minutes in the dirt, after a trainer decided he wasn't showing signs of having suffered a concussion.

Let that sink in. After being hit in the face by a fastball, Kyle Fields went out on the mound and threw six strong innings, allowing just four hits, one unearned run and leading Rustburg to the semifinal round with an 11-1 victory.

It was an astonishing feat. He threw 101 pitches, 67 of them for strikes, and fanned seven.

"It was hard to breathe with two plugs up my nose to keep me from bleeding," he said, then added about his performance: "I was feeling everything. All my pitches were working. My fastball, I was hitting spots with it. Then my curveball was keeping them off balance."

It's hard to keep a good man down. Fields was named the Seminole District player of the year for a reason, primarily because the 6-foot-1 pitcher and shortstop hit .509 in the regular season, blasted six home runs, drove in 25 runs and slapped an additional eight extra-base hits, while also going 6-1 on the mound with a 1.70 ERA.

But Monday, he became the stuff of legends.

"I've never seen anything like it in all my 45 years around baseball," said Brown, who played at Rustburg in the mid-1970s and has been around the game ever since graduating. He and Carr monitored Fields the entire game, looking for any signs out of the ordinary. Fields also received an additional evaluation from Rustburg's trainer Tuesday.

"He could've said, 'I can't go. I can't play.' But he manned up," Brown added. "I think he really understood the gravity of the situation. We had to have this win to move on."

The win vaulted Rustburg to Wednesday's semifinal, where it will play LCA. Luck of the draw could spell the end of the season for the Red Devils, who fell twice to the Bulldogs in the regular season, once 10-0 and again 9-2. But these are the playoffs, anything could happen, and a group of talented players might just be inspired by the indomitable will of their teammate, who showed no quit Monday.

Some players just always want to be around the game. No matter what. For Fields, the love started before T-ball, when he recalls an aunt throwing him whiffle ball, the little kid holding an oversized plastic bat.

"I figured out that I was pretty good at it," Fields said, "and that it's what I like to do. I knew I wanted to be out there someday with people watching me play."

Loves the game so much he's betting on a future in it past high school, even if it's a cloudy one right now.

"I don't even know what I want to do if this doesn't work out," he said. "I don't have a Plan B right now."



He's looking at junior colleges: like Patrick Henry, Louisburg College, Gulf Coast State College and Richard Bland.










On Tuesday, Brown called all four institutions to tell them the story of the guy who got hit in the face in his first at-bat, then went out and fired off six lockdown innings. Rustburg's guy.

"I think he wants to do JUCO and play a year or two and then go DI or get drafted," Brown said. "But he's our guy, and he's been our guy for four years. He's there everyday. He comes to practice and he works hard."

In other words, tough as nails.

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