

Semones' time is now

Armed with an engineering degree from James Madison University, Fox Semones can do something besides play baseball for a living.

But before he shelves his aspirations for good, the Hylton High School graduate needs to know something else: Can he make it as a pro?

"You are only young once," Semones said. "I felt like I still have a little talent to get it done."

The 24-year-old gets his first shot when he attends an Atlantic League tryout March 22-23 in Melbourne, Fla. Players pay a \$299 registration fee with the hopes of receiving one of the 20 guaranteed contracts offered at the end of the tryout when the 10-team league holds a draft.

The league's two newest members, the Staten Island Ferryhawks and the Kentucky Wild Health Genomes, split the first 12 picks in the draft with six each, followed by the eight returning teams rounding out the final selections.

From there, who knows? The Atlantic League is a springboard for players signing with a Major League Baseball organization.

Semones enters the tryout with at least one team expressing interest already: the Southern Maryland Blue Crabs.

The infielder/outfielder caught their attention after team representatives saw him perform Feb. 7 at the R&D Baseball Pro Day in Herndon. Semones said he didn't think the team members knew his baseball background when R&D owner Rob Riley encouraged the Blue Crabs to take a closer look at Semones.

But Semones didn't care. He was grateful for the opportunity to display his abilities without any setbacks.

"It was refreshing all in all," Semones said of his pro day performance. "I surprised myself with how hard I was throwing. I feel like I'm going in the right direction."

Semones arrived at this point following an up-and-down college career at JMU.

He was a freshman all-American, third-team all-CAA and a CAA all-rookie team selection in 2017 after hitting .306 with 27 runs, three homers and 21 RBI.

As a sophomore, he earned third-team all-conference honors again, hit .291 and led the Dukes in home runs (seven) and slugging percentage (.460).

With his speed, versatility and arm strength, Semones' best opportunity for selection in the Major League Baseball Amateur Draft came in 2019.

Semones said two MLB clubs contacted him during the middle of the draft's third and final day to gauge his signability. He presented a dollar amount but said the teams passed. In retrospect,



DAVID FAWCETT

Semones believes his asking price might have been too high. And he was disappointed at not being drafted, especially when some of his JMU teammates heard their names called.

But he pressed on, hoping for another chance in 2020. A team might have selected Semones if the draft ran its full length. The COVID-19 pandemic, though, ended that possibility with the two-day draft reduced to five rounds instead of the usual 40.

Once the draft concluded, teams could sign players as undrafted free agents, but Semones, who hit .250 with a team-high four homers in 16 games, received no offers.

With schools allowed to grant an extra year of athletic eligibility due to the pandemic, Semones returned to JMU in 2021. But things did not improve. During batting practice at the season-opening series at the University of North Carolina, Semones felt pain in his left wrist.

Semones had surgery, and his final college season ended barely before it began. He played in only 21 games with 18 starts, hitting .282 with 15 runs scored.

Out of college eligibility, Semones stood at a crossroads: move on or keep pushing. Despite the injury, Semones believed he still had something to offer a pro baseball team, whether an independent one or one affiliated with a Major League organization.

To figure out next steps, Semones reached out last fall to Kyle Hayes.

Hayes, Semones' teammate and roommate at JMU, suggested working out at R&D to develop a plan. Hayes provided a roadmap for Semones. After going undrafted himself, Hayes played independent pro baseball in 2021 before the Kansas City Royals signed him in the offseason.

With his wrist fully healed, Semones trained under Hayes, Riley and James Roberts at R&D starting in December. The results encouraged him.

"The hardest thing was the mental part," Semones said. "With the wrist getting better, my confidence gets better and I don't have to worry about it."

Those who know Semones understand why he's taken this path instead of beginning the next phase of his life. He plans to use his degree. And people plan to give him that chance.

But pro baseball takes priority right now. He's come so close before reaching this point that he has no desire to let anything else stand in his way. He seeks closure. Once he has it, then he will move on without regret.

"It would be a shame to sit in a chair when I'm 24, 25 when I like what I'm doing now," Semones said.

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ELLERTS IS PITCHER OF THE WEEK

Woodbridge High School graduate Magnus Ellerts earned Florida College System Activities Association Pitcher of the Week honors following his performance March 12 for Florida SouthWestern.



MAGNUS ELLERTS

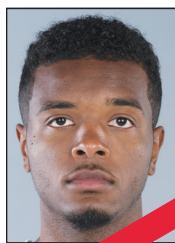
The right-hander struck out 12 in a complete-game shutout as the Buccaneers defeated visiting Hillsborough 12-0.

Ellerts yielded just one hit and did not allow a single hitter to reach second base in the win. Ellerts is now 4-0.

ROBINSON GOES PRO

Forest Park High School graduate Miles Robinson has signed a Major League Soccer NEXT Pro contract with the San Jose Earthquakes II.

The 23-year-old Robinson played for Santa Clara University from 2016-19. He was a second-team all-West Coast



MILES ROBINSON

Conference selection as a junior in 2017 when the 6-foot-3 forward totaled four goals and three assists. He missed his senior season with an injury.

After Santa Clara, Robinson spent the summer of 2021 for the University of Portland as a graduate student, totaling one goal and three assists in 10 games. He then finished his college athletic eligibility as a graduate

student at Florida Gulf Coast University in the fall of 2021, recording two assists in 10 games

The Earthquakes II are a third-division professional team affiliated with the San Jose Earthquakes of MLS. This is the first season of MLS Next Pro.

BARNES REPLACES LAWRENCE

Marcus Lawrence has stepped down as Unity Reed's head boys basketball coach after 21 seasons.

He compiled a 201-283 record during that time. His best run came from the 2011-12 season to the 2017-18 season when the Lions reached regionals seven straight times and posted an overall mark of 97-68.

Jeremy Barnes will replace Lawrence as head coach. Barnes graduated from Stonewall Jackson (now Unity Reed) in 1997 and served as the Lions' interim coach for the 2020-21 season while Lawrence opted out for precautionary reasons due to COVID-19.

NEC HONORS OPOKU

The Northeast Conference selected Potomac graduate Nana Opoku of Mount St. Mary's to its third team for men's basketball.

Opoku, last year's NEC Defensive Player of the Year and Tournament MVP, earned



NANA OPOKU

first time in his career.

The 6-9 forward averaged 10.8 points and 6.3 rebounds this season.

CLASS 6 STATE BASKETBALL



Battlefield's boys and Osbourn Park's girls finished as the Class 6 state basketball runners-up March 11. Here Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin hands out the medals to the Battlefield boys basketball team following its 67-47 loss to 32-0 Hayfield. Osbourn Park lost to Madison 38-29. For more than 40 photos from both games, go to insidenova.com

DOUG STROUD FOR INSIDENOVA

Bruton adopts new post-game approach

David Bruton broke tradition. No crouching on the sidelines. No breathing a sigh of relief at the end of a close game. This time, the Gainesville High School head football coach did something different.

As the Cardinals prepared for a goal-line stand Sept. 23 against visiting Potomac Falls, Bruton took off his headset and vowed that if Gainesville's defense held, he would make a beeline to the field and participate in the jubilant frenzy.

The defense did its part as time expired to claim a 24-20 victory and Bruton followed suit. He sprinted toward his players. There was no hesitation or second-guessing. Only bliss drove his decision. And boy did it feel good.

"We're a first-year varsity program and I wanted to enjoy the moment," Bruton said. "I wanted the players to see me enjoy it."

Bruton thought he was the first coach to reach the players until he looked at the film afterward and realized one of his assistants beat him. He did, however, draw attention for his athletic ability when he jumped in the air to meet any player he saw.

Noticing the former high school all-conference quarterback's leaps, one father of a Gainesville player complimented Bruton's "decent hops."

Bruton appreciated the thought before adding one caveat.

"I know I'm going to feel it tomorrow," Bruton told him.

By then, though, Bruton didn't care. If a couple of lingering pains cropped up, fine.

This was a game Bruton wanted to win. In fact, he told his wife, Caly, as much when she asked him 10 days earlier what he wanted for his birthday.

In school at the time without much time to talk, Bruton texted her back: "beat pot falls." On the day he turned 39, Bruton got his wish.

Bruton was used to dramatic endings against Potomac Falls. He experienced three of them while coaching at Briar Woods when the two Loudoun County schools met annually with the outcomes determined by a combined 17 points.



DAVID FAWCETT

He also looked forward to matching up against the Panthers' Paul Barnes, the former Shenandoah University head coach.

This latest version ended when the Panthers tried to score the game-winning touchdown from inside the Gainesville 4-yard line.

The Cardinals thought the game was over on the previous play when they stopped a Potomac Falls' runner inbounds. The officials, however, thought the Panthers still had a timeout, when in fact they did not.

With four seconds still left on the clock, Potomac Falls set up for one more play, looking to get above .500 for the first time this fall. The Panthers had experienced success running to their right. So they used the same strategy.

But this time Gainesville was ready. Sophomore Jeremy Stith, the team's only two-way starting lineman, broke through the line first, followed by senior lineman Seli Agbolosu-Amison. Then sophomore JT Walker, a junior varsity player who earned more varsity playing time after a strong week of practice, finished things off to bring down the Potomac Falls' ball carrier.

No more timeouts. No more chances. The game was over. Gainesville had its second win in five attempts, and there was plenty of credit to spread around for a young program dominated by sophomores.

The defense gained a measure of confidence after allowing just under 500 yards the week before in a 47-13 loss to Freedom-South Riding.

Special teams contributed with a Michael Ramirez kick-off return for a touchdown, and the passing-receiving duo of Joshua Barido and Aiden McClafferty combined for two touchdowns.

All in all, it was a memorable outing, one that could start a new tradition for Bruton if future outcomes follow the same pattern.

"I'm not sure if it's a one-time thing," Bruton said of his post-game celebration. "I would like to be excited when we win instead of relieved."

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL STANDINGS (Through Sept. 29)

CARDINAL DISTRICT		
Team	District	Overall
Freedom	1-0	5-0
Woodbridge	1-0	3-2
Forest Park	1-0	2-3
Colgan	0-0	2-2
Gar-field	0-1	1-3
Potomac	0-1	1-3
Hylton	0-1	0-4
CEDAR RUN DISTRICT		
Battlefield	2-0	4-0
Patriot	1-0	4-0
John Champe	1-0	3-1
Freedom-SR	1-0	3-1
Gainesville	1-2	2-3
Unity Reed	0-1	2-2
Osborn Park	0-2	0-4
CLASS 3 NORTHWESTERN DISTRICT		
Brentsville	1-0	4-1
Warren County	1-0	2-3
Skyline	0-0	2-3
William Monroe	0-1	1-4
Meridian	0-1	0-5
OTHERS		
John Paul	n/a	0-4
Quantico	n/a	1-4

THIS WEEK'S SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, SEPT. 30

Brentsville (4-1) at Warren County (2-3), 7 p.m.
 Gainesville (2-3) at Patriot (4-0), 7 p.m.
 Osborn Park (0-4) at John Champe (3-1), 7 p.m.
 Freedom-South Riding (3-1) at Battlefield (4-0), 7 p.m.
 Gar-Field (1-3) at Colgan (2-2), 7 p.m.
 Forest Park (2-3) at Freedom-Woodbridge (5-0), 7 p.m.
 Hylton (0-4) at Potomac (1-3), 7 p.m.
 Osborn (2-2) at Unity Reed (2-2), 7 p.m.
 Quantico (1-4) at Rappahannock County (3-2), 7 p.m.
 Bishop Ireton (0-4) at John Paul the Great (0-4), 7 p.m.

LAST WEEK'S RESULTS

THURSDAY, SEPT. 22

Forest Park 35, Potomac 2
 Freedom-Woodbridge 61, Gar-Field 0

FRIDAY, SEPT. 23

John Champe 53, Unity Reed 22
 Gainesville 24, Potomac Falls 20
 Woodbridge 42, Hylton 0
 Patriot 56, Osborn Park 0
 Brentsville 55, Meridian 2
 Battlefield 35, Osborn 0

SATURDAY, SEPT. 24

St. Albans 37, John Paul the Great 0
 Broadwater 40, Quantico 8



For game results and photo galleries, go to Insidenova.com

SWITCH FROM PAGE 15

before me was really helpful," Odoemenem said. "I was always taught to respect my elders. I wanted to see what made him the best when he was here. You see guys like that and I'm thinking, 'I can't do this.'"

To get to this point, Odoemenem had to adjust to three coaching changes. After his first coach, Gary Wortham, resigned at the end of the 2019 season, Odoemenem said his head "was all over the place. Some of my thoughts were about transferring."

But Odoemenem stuck it out in large part because he loves attending Woodbridge and playing with teammates he's known since Lake Ridge Middle School.

Odoemenem, who turns 18 in July, is grateful for all the help he's received adjusting to linebacker. He was nervous going into Woodbridge's first scrimmage, but the game soon settled down for him.

As an inside linebacker responsible for making sure teammates are in the right spot, Odoemenem said the biggest adjustment is remembering to communicate.

One of his biggest supporters is fellow



Jaquari Odoemenem is a two-time, first-team all-Cardinal District tight end.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

senior linebacker Jesse Muange. Muange and Odoemenem have known each other since middle school.

"He's got a great IQ, his height and

length, you can't teach those things," Muange said. "He's tenacious and aggressive and loves to work. He's not a good fit. He's a great fit."

Confessions of a fantasy football league newbie

How do you know if fantasy football is taking over your life in unhealthy ways? Here are two indications.

The first is when I walk into church for last Sunday's 8:15 a.m. service and a mild panic sets in when I remember the Vikings are kicking off at 9:30 a.m. our time in London. Suddenly, my mind goes into overdrive.

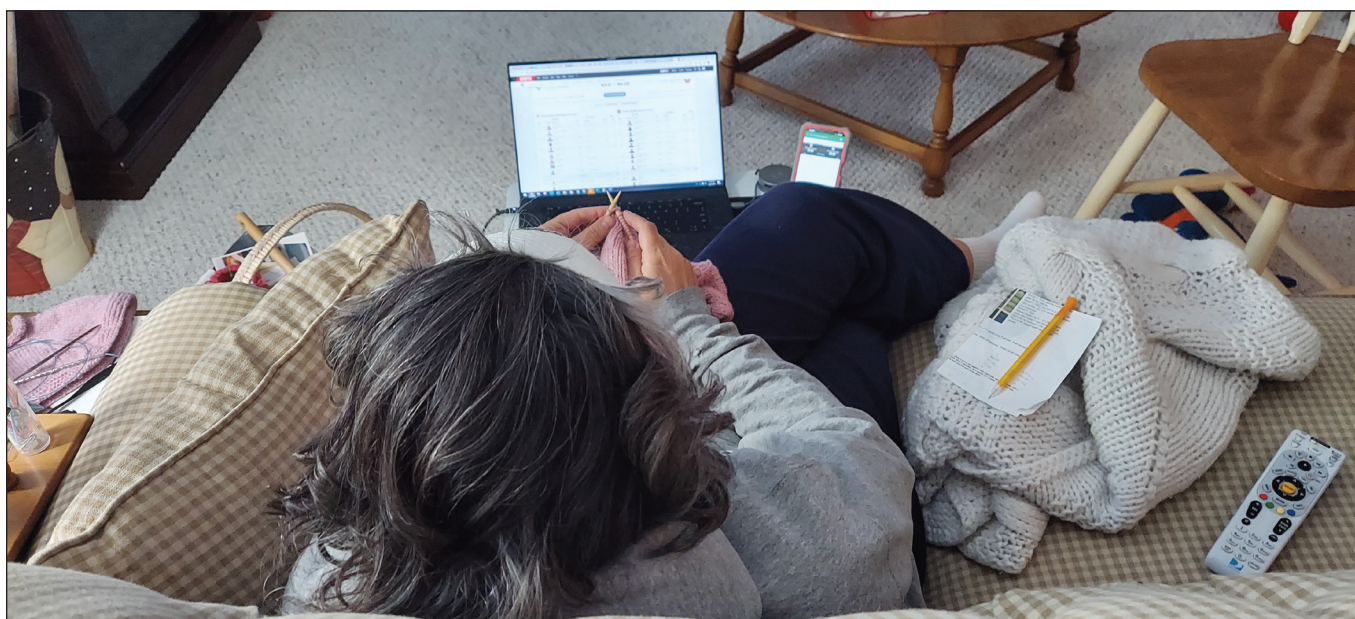
Is my top pick, Dalvin Cook, cleared to play from an injury? And if not, is there time to replace him? I also need to replace the Texans as my defense, and the Vikings are the best available unit. Again, is there time to switch them out? (There was and I did after taking a brief detour through the church hallway before entering the sanctuary).

Then comes this scene later in the day. While sitting on the couch knitting, my wife, Emily, lays her laptop and her cell in front of her to track her matchup and mine with synchronized movements. Look at TV, look at matchups and stitch. Then repeat.

Has it really come to this?

We formed fantasy football teams for the first time ever as part of a league set up by my nephew, Thomas. Yes, it's nice to see your team do well and win. But we did this as a way to stay connected with family and friends through some fun competition.

After some initial fears due to unfamiliarity, I learned quickly how the beauty of advanced technology walks you through everything – whether you are well-informed on NFL players or not. We held a draft. We selected our players and prepared for the upcoming season curious about outcomes without becoming obsessed by them. It seemed so harmless even with my slow start.



Emily Fawcett keeps a watchful eye on multiple fantasy football league teams Oct. 2

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DAVID FAWCETT

I stunk in week 1. Week 2 wasn't much better as Kyle Pitts' lack of production continued to bog me down. I won my first matchup in week 3. But this came against Thomas' 7-month-old daughter. (Does this really count and is any type of boasting permitted?)

Then came week 4 and the focus reached a new manic level. Dalvin Cook. The defense. Where's the right button on the phone to switch one for the other? I did make the sermon on time, but I had become a bit unmoored in the process. Advanced technology now worked to my detriment. It was too accessible.

As it turned out, I had another lousy day (well-deserved given my misplaced priorities). Outside of Josh Allen, my team (affectionately called the EllieT-Puppies in honor of our yellow lab, Ellie) lost big again.

Emily did better, although Kyler Murray tested her patience. She did break free from her trance long enough to notice how blue Christian McCaffrey's eyes are. (Emily also has the Carolina Panthers' running back on her team.)

Our neighbor, Rob, came over to good-naturedly rib Emily after one of his clients (Rashan Gary of the Green Bay Packers) made a big play against Emily's favorite team, the New England Patriots. To honor the occasion, Rob presented Emily with a Gary autographed card.

But while the diversions came and went, Emily remained intent on following each of her players and feverishly watching how many points they racked up.

There was a time when we watched NFL games to cheer on our favorite teams. For Emily, it's the Patriots highlighted by the obligatory flag hanging under the American flag on the front yard pole. And for me, it's enduring the Commanders through another frustrat-

ing up-and-down performance.

We still followed them Sunday, but with less interest. The focus remained on how well our new favorite teams did. And, as Emily noted, it became less about the NFL teams themselves and more about the individual players. Emily was not as interested in a Patriots win, as long as Nick Folk kicked enough points to help her fantasy team's bottom line. Emily won her second straight. I dropped to 1-3.

As I reflected on the day and looked to the future, there was at least one upside: None of my players are on the field until 1 p.m. at the earliest for this Sunday's games.

Now I would have plenty of time to give my complete attention to the entire church service as I should. Unless of course, a better defense than the Vikings beckons.

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VHSL adopts realignment plan

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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The Virginia High School League's Executive Committee approved the next four-year cycle for school alignment during its meeting Sept. 21.

The new alignment plan begins with the 2023-24 school year.

The Class 6 Region B, which features primarily Prince William County schools, will have 19 schools, making it the largest region among the six classifications. Overall, there are 59 schools in Class 6.

Region C and Region D, which includes Fairfax County, Arlington County and the city of Alexandria, has 16 and 13 schools. Region A, which comprises the Richmond and Virginia Beach area, has 11. The second biggest region is Class 4 Region B with 17 schools.

The executive committee denied Freedom-South Riding's appeal to move to Class 5, Region D, saying it did not meet the criteria to move to a lower classification. The Loudoun County school will remain in Class 6 Region B. Potomac and Gainesville were originally slated for

Class 5, but both with its appeals to stay in Class 6.

The realignment changes were determined by the March 31, 2022 enrollment figures grades 9 through 11. Potomac's enrollment was listed at 1,503, a figure that was used as the dividing line between Class 5 and Class 6 for the next cycle. The first school above the Potomac is Glen Allen and they are listed as Class 6 with an enrollment of 1,505.

Class 6 Region B is a mix of Stafford, Prince William County, city of Manassas (Osborn) and Loudoun County high schools. Prince William has the most with 12. Four of the five Stafford schools (Brooke Point, Stafford, North Stafford and Mountain View) are moving up from Class 5 joining current Class 6 Region B member Colonial Forge.

Each region determines how many teams it sends to regionals. Class 6 Region B currently sends eight teams into regionals for team sports. No decision has been made yet whether the region will expand its playoff format or remain in its current form.

The Cardinal District will remain as seven teams, while the Cedar Run got down to seven with John Champe

Regional makeup for 2023-24 to 2026-27:

CLASS 6, REGION B

Battlefield
Brooke Point
Hylton
Colgan
Colonial Forge
Forest Park
Freedom-South Riding
Freedom-Woodbridge
Gainesville
Gar-Field
Mountain View
North Stafford
Osborn
Osborn Park
Patriot
Potomac
Stafford
Unity Reed
Woodbridge

CLASS 3, REGION B

Armstrong
Brentsville
Culpeper
Fauquier
Goochland
Kettle Run
James Monroe
Maggie Walker
Manassas Park
Meridian
Skyline
Thomas Jefferson-Richmond
Warren County
William Monroe