

LIBERTY SOFTBALL

Liberty, Tennessee honor legacy of JMU's Bennett

Damien Sordelett

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"LB #22" is written on the infield behind Liberty pitcher Emily Kirby during a game against Tennessee on Wednesday to honor James Madison sophomore catcher Lauren Bennett, who died Tuesday morning.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

The emotions Courtney Poulich had kept bottled in for most of Wednesday afternoon began bubbling to the surface the moment she put her helmet on and began her way to first base. The freshman, entering to pinch run for Lou Allan with two outs in the seventh inning, glanced over behind the pitcher's circle and saw the initials and number emblazoned in purple on the dirt.

Poulich, even as a pinch runner, was going to play in the spirit of her friend and former travel ball teammate, Lauren Bennett.

"I just want to play like her, play for her," Poulich said. "It was definitely emotional a little bit."

Poulich, her Liberty teammates and visiting Tennessee played in the memory of Bennett, the 20-year-old sophomore catcher at James Madison who died Tuesday morning. The 12th-ranked Volunteers defeated the Flames 7-2 in a game that featured Bennett's initials and No. 22 painted behind the pitcher's circle at Liberty Softball Stadium.

Both teams wore purple ribbons, the primary color for JMU.

"It meant a lot because she touched so many people's lives and just recognizing her for that," Poulich said. "You never want to see us have to do something like that, but she just meant so much to this game. For us being able to honor her and honor her legacy, it was really nice."

Rockingham County Sheriff Bryan Hutcheson said in a statement Wednesday the death is currently being classified as an apparent suicide.

An official report from the medical examiner's office is pending, Hutcheson added.

"The softball community is mourning for the loss of a 20-year-old, an outstanding athlete. Our thoughts and prayers are with her and her family and the JMU family as well, coaches and teammates. Today we did our best to honor her life," Liberty coach Dot Richardson said.

"It's just sad, the community is sad and it's one of those things where I just pray everybody knows their worth and their value," she added. "God just loves us so much. It's not anything of this world that should get us to that point. I just pray for them and their family and may God give them peace and comfort. There's this huge sadness and heavy hearts."

Liberty reached out to Tennessee prior to Wednesday's game and offered to provide the players and coaches with purple ribbons to wear during the game. UT coach Karen Weekly graciously accepted the offer, with players from both teams wearing the ribbons in their hair and the coaches pinning the ribbons to their uniforms.

The three umpires also wore purple ribbons pinned to the front of their shirts.

"Yesterday, the whole day, everybody just felt like they had been punched in the gut," Weekly said. "... I don't know what I would do as a coach if I was the one that got that message. It goes so far beyond athletics. We don't know the reasons, we can never know the reasons, but we have to make sure that just as a society of people we're taking care of each other from the time we're very little to the end of our days that we can take care of each other."

Both Liberty and Tennessee faced Bennett and the Dukes in last season's Knoxville Regional, which JMU won on its way to advancing to the Women's College World Series.

Bennett's two-run homer in the sixth inning of the regional final helped the Dukes eliminate the Flames, 8-5.

Liberty and JMU met again this season March 6 in the Liberty Softball Invitational.

The Flames won that matchup 4-0 as Bennett went 1 for 2.

That series allowed Poulich and Bennett to reconnect. Poulich remembered growing up watching her older sister, Chloe, and Bennett play on the same travel team with Team Pennsylvania, and Courtney Poulich and Bennett finally got the opportunity to play on the same team, Team Pennsylvania U18 Hall coached by Richele Hall, during Poulich's junior year at Mount Pleasant High School in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

Poulich and Bennett shared small talk after the March 6 game, and Poulich sat with Bennett's parents, Scott and Kim, the night before when the Dukes battled Notre Dame.

"I cherish all the memories we've had and I'm not ever going to take anything for granted because one second someone can be here and the next they're gone," Poulich said. "I'll definitely be playing for her. I know a lot of softball players will be playing for her and just the legacy she left and the passion for the game. I will always play for her because she had a huge impact. I want that same passion. She was a great

teammate, she led on and off the field, and if you were having a bad game, she'd be the first one to be like, 'Hey, you're good,' and pick you up. I just want to be more like her."

EXTRA BASES: The 12th-ranked Volunteers (34-13) took a 6-1 lead in the fifth inning on Rylie West's three-run homer. It was the second of three homers hit by UT. "I think that took the wind out of their sails a little bit right there and it was the shot we needed," Weekly said. ... Liberty catcher Caroline Hudson went 3 for 4 with a solo homer in the seventh inning. It was Hudson's 14th homer of the season. ... Kiki Milloy and Zaida Puni each added solo homers for UT. ... Emily Kirby (9-5) suffered the loss after allowing two earned runs on three hits, walking two and striking out two in 2 1/3 innings. Karlie Keeney allowed five earned runs on five hits over four innings. ... The Flames (35-14) lost for the second time in the last 23 games and committed four errors. "Really when you give good hitters second and third opportunities and you don't make the plays that you need to make, that's what happens," Richardson said.

Liberty's Coleman battled injuries, mental hurdles to get back onto the field

Damien Sordelett

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Liberty wide receiver Khaleb Coleman (left) celebrates his first-quarter touchdown reception against Akron with a head butt to teammate Demario Douglas. Lee Luther Jr., For The News & Advance

A third surgery in a little less than three years awaited Khaleb Coleman prior to the 2021 season. The wide receiver, as he prepared to go under the knife yet again, had a massive decision to make regarding his future. Did he want to put his body, and more importantly his mental health, through another grueling rehabilitation process? Were the hopes of suiting up for Liberty and stepping onto the Williams Stadium turf once more enough to make those hours in the training room worth it?

“I just was like, ‘How do I want to go about this?’ I could go one way or go the other way,” Coleman revealed Monday. “So I decided to just stick with it and trust God, trust my support system and just keep going.”

The sixth-year senior has battled a host of injuries — primarily to his knees and shoulders — and was unable to build off a breakout redshirt freshman campaign in 2018 because of those setbacks and subsequent surgeries. He has seemingly turned the corner and has avoided the injury bug since the latest surgery before the 2021 season kicked off.

Coleman has played in nine straight games and three of his catches in that span have resulted in touchdowns. His latest touchdown grab, a 22-yard strike from Johnathan Bennett in last Saturday’s win over Akron, helped the Flames take a lead they never relinquished.

It was a touchdown wildly celebrated by his teammates, similar to the 63-yard score he had last season against UMass that was his first reception since the 2019 season.

“First of all, I’m impressed with just his maturity of just being a man. He’s come a long way from just his social decisions, academics, and now it’s starting to pay off on the football field. Khaleb has always been a young man that has a skill set that makes him an effective receiver,” co-offensive coordinator and wide receivers coach Maurice Harris said in training camp.

“... That was the main thing about Khaleb — the talent has always been there, but can you trust him in certain situations? I believe just because he’s gotten every other thing in order, now the football is in order. Not only is he buying into the culture, he’s leading guys as well. I’m excited for him. I think the sky’s the limit for him this season, and more importantly for his life.”

The 6-foot-2, 230-pound Coleman was supposed to be the Flames’ next standout perimeter receiver. He had a breakout 2018 campaign when he filled in for Antonio Gandy-Golden and B.J. Farrow in a pair of games and finished that season with 126 receiving yards on 11 receptions.

The thought was Coleman and Gandy-Golden could thrive on the outside as bigger targets as Liberty transitioned to the Bowl Subdivision.

However, Coleman dealt with injuries throughout the 2019 season and played sparingly until being held out for the final five games of the campaign.

As one injury led to another, the rehabilitation process and not being able to get onto the field took a mental toll on Coleman. He could easily isolate himself from the outside world and let his mind to drift away from getting back onto the field.

He admitted it was a battle mentally to fight through each injury and recovery from the surgeries.

Coleman said he turned to his parents, Jermaine Coleman and Meghan Jones, and his close friends while he was battling through injuries. One of those close friends was DJ Stubbs, who was part of the 2017 signing class with Coleman, and was there in the team building to help him through the challenging times.

“They had a huge impact. There were times when going through these injuries, I was just asking myself, ‘Do I want to continue to put my body through this, put my mind through this?’” Coleman said. “I know that through those experiences, I feel like there’s nothing I can’t do, there’s nothing I can’t overcome. I feel like certain things in life are needed to get to the heights you want to reach.”

Coleman has been open with his teammates about the struggles he faced while battling the litany of injuries. He and DeMario Douglas spoke to the team Monday about two important aspects of not allowing players’ mental health to be affected by things that can happen during a season. Douglas, one of the nation’s top receivers this season, played in four games in 2019 to preserve his year of eligibility, and his message was to not lose hope while waiting for your opportunity.

Coleman’s personal message was centered on keeping the right mindset while battling injuries. He wanted to make sure his teammates knew they weren’t alone and had someone to talk to as they navigated setbacks.

Liberty is one of more than 115 programs participating in College Football Mental Health Week from Oct. 1 through 8. It was organized by Hilinski’s Hope, a foundation started by Kym and Mark Hilinski in honor of their son, former Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski, who committed suicide in 2018.

“I just want all my teammates to know that they can always come to me to talk about things, especially for people that don’t usually go out of their way to open up, talk to people,” Coleman said. “I know that all my teammates are there for everybody, all the coaches are there. I’m there as well.”

Coleman continued to work on his studies while recovering from his surgeries and is one of 23 graduate students on this season’s roster. He completed his bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies in May 2021, and is working on his master’s degree in human services and executive leadership.

“His personal story is one that I’m quite proud of, for him mostly, and obviously I think it speaks that our culture, at least I know we’ve changed,” Liberty head coach Hugh Freeze said. “He was a young man that he didn’t trust many people, didn’t want to fit into a different culture, didn’t want to have conversation. Now, he’s got his degree and has got wisdom. When you get a kid like that that gets to make a play and score a touchdown, that’s exciting.”

Hanshaw taking advantage of playing time as Liberty prepares to host his former school, BYU

Damien Sordelett

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Liberty tight end Bentley Hanshaw, a transfer from BYU, has appeared in all seven games this season for the Flames and is one of four tight ends used in the offense.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

The play wasn't designed to get Bentley Hanshaw the ball. It was, in fact, aimed to bring the Liberty tight end off the line of scrimmage and make sure quarterback Johnathan Bennett had clean throwing alleys. Hanshaw's position mates, Michael Bollinger and Jerome Jackson, were out running routes, and Bennett used Hanshaw's blocking to find Jackson for a touchdown.

Hanshaw's blocking last week against Gardner-Webb typically would go unnoticed, especially when blocks are executed and the play finishes with a touchdown. The highlights show the throw and catch. Not the intricacies and toughness associated with ensuring the play results in the desired outcome.

It is that type of play Hanshaw longed to experience during his three seasons at BYU. He spent those seasons standing on the sideline waiting for his number to be called, whether it came on special teams or at tight end.

Hanshaw, who entered the transfer portal following the 2021 season, has found playing time at Liberty, a faith-based institution like BYU. While he only has one catch for six yards, he is one of four tight ends who regularly play in the Flames' offense.

"When I chose to come to Liberty, it was purely a decision for football and I felt like it was a great opportunity for me," Hanshaw said.

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Hanshaw's decision to transfer was not made lightly. He was a legacy student at BYU and followed in his father's footsteps playing for the Cougars, and he was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

But as the 2021 regular season came to a close, Hanshaw's desire to get onto the field led him to meeting with BYU coach Kalani Sitake to discuss entering the transfer portal. Hanshaw brought up the long line of players ahead of him on the depth chart, starting with current starters Issac Pex and Masen Wake. There also were Dallin Holker, Carter Wheat and Lane Lunt who were getting on the field.

It was a tough decision for Sitake. His true freshman season at BYU in 1994 came as Tim Hanshaw, Bentley's father, suited up for his senior campaign with the Cougars. Sitake knew the type of family the younger Hanshaw came from and, once he realized Hanshaw's best chances to play at the college level would come elsewhere, told any coach who would listen that Hanshaw would bring a high level of character, in addition to his play on the field, to the program.

Liberty coach Hugh Freeze took notice, and Hanshaw was in the fold one month after he entered the portal.

"Didn't want to lose him, but I know that he wants to be on the field and wanted to compete," Sitake said. "I know that Coach Freeze does a great job with his program and Liberty is a really great school, a great place to be, especially for a young man coming from BYU that's used to living a disciplined life. I knew that they were going to get a really good player there."

It wasn't necessarily a culture shock for Hanshaw, 23, when he arrived in Lynchburg for the spring semester. Sure, there are differences in how BYU and Liberty approach faith and ways to worship, but Hanshaw was mentally prepared for being in a different environment.

He spent the 2018 and 2019 academic years on a two-year mission to Sydney, Australia. Those missions are designed for enrollment at BYU to be deferred so students can not only serve the church, but communities in need to learn about faith.

He said those two years spent overseas on his mission allowed him to learn and grow as a person. He worked with communities and served people, in addition to spending time in one-on-one sessions "teaching them about Jesus Christ to whatever their level of understanding may be."

"That's why it helps you out because you're pretty young — I was 18 when I left — and you're thrown out there and forced to grow up a little bit, get outside your comfort zone," Hanshaw said. "I'd say it prepared me for things like growing up in California on the West Coast, moving from there to Virginia would be a lot harder thing to do had I not already lived super far away from home and spent time in an independent way."

BYU is rooted in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while Liberty's mission statement does not align with a particular denomination, despite its prior Baptist affiliation. That meant Hanshaw did not have to change his way of worshipping as he adapted to the new surroundings in the Hill City.

“As I made that decision, as I came on to visit here, spent time with coaches and around the team and university, that’s where I kind of learned the devout faith that Liberty has, and it’s honestly been really cool,” he said. “There are definitely theological differences, but there’s a lot of commonalities and the belief of how you should live your life and how one should behave, if you will. Just been super cool to broaden my perspective, meet people with a different perspective, and then share with people what I’ve been used to, what I’ve been raised with and what makes sense to me. I think it helps everyone.”

Hanshaw knew this week was eventually going to arrive. Part of Liberty’s pitch during the latest recruiting cycle was highlighting what was being billed as the best home schedule in program history. The first game highlighted in that schedule is Saturday’s 3:30 p.m. showdown between Liberty and BYU, marking the Cougars’ first trip to Lynchburg.

That meant Hanshaw would line up across the field from a coaching staff who invested in him for three seasons and teammates he grew with on the field.

Sitake said he’s not going to cheer for Hanshaw this weekend. That won’t stop him from giving Hanshaw a hug before and after the game.

“It will be good to see him,” BYU left tackle Blake Freeland said. “Bentley Hanshaw is a really, really good player, really fun to play next to. He didn’t get many opportunities to play on the field during games, but in practice, I thought he was a really good contributor — great blocker, great route runner. I just know his game’s developed a lot since being there, so I’m excited to see what he can do.”

Hanshaw appeared in only one game during his three seasons on the BYU roster, receiving playing time and recording no stats in mop-up duty during a 45-14 win over Louisiana Tech on Oct. 2, 2020.

His six-yard reception in the Sept. 3 season opener at Southern Miss gave him more catches and receiving yards than he had in three seasons at BYU.

Hanshaw is technically a redshirt sophomore and has two more seasons of eligibility remaining. The 2017 season counted as his redshirt year and the following two seasons (2018 and 2019) didn’t count while he served on his mission. The 2020 campaign, played during the coronavirus pandemic, did not count toward eligibility, so the 2021 season was categorized as his freshman season by BYU.

While he didn’t have playing experience, he had gone through enough practice reps at BYU and during this past spring at Liberty that he was going to be ready to contribute immediately.

“He’s getting a lot more playing time now because he’s starting to get comfortable with the system; he’s starting to understand the tight end room and what we do,” tight ends coach Ben Aigama said. “Some things go unspoken and we’ve got to know what Coach is thinking, we’ve got to be the coach out there, but to see him gaining confidence as the game and as the season goes on has been really fun to see. It reminds me of Jerome and Mike when we first got here, them gaining that confidence as the year goes on.”

Hanshaw said his family is making the trip from Moorpark, California, for this weekend's game, and specifically pointed out his dad will "be definitely wearing red" while in town.

It isn't the first trip the family has made to watch Hanshaw play this season, and they've been able to see him contribute to a team that is 6-1 heading into what is being called the Flames' biggest home game in program history.

"I'm super fortunate and blessed to be healthy and able to be on the field. Having experienced not being on the field playing college football, it's a whole lot more fun and a lot better being on the field," Hanshaw said. "There's a ton of learning that goes through playing in games and the speed of things and the environment that you're in. It's been neat."