

Blind wrestler sees mat as safe haven

BY JOEY LOMONACO
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

His dominance was plain to see.

Within two minutes, wrestler Jahmil Garrett-Bey had his opponent on his back, writhing in a desperate attempt to prevent both shoulder blades from coming into contact with the mat. The referee, sensing a pin was imminent, splayed down prone onto the floor for a closer look.

Before that could happen, though, the whistle blew and the period was over. From the corner, Garrett-Bey's coach relayed to the Mountain View High School sophomore 152-pounder what was obvious to anyone watching his third-place match at the Commonwealth District championships last weekend.

"It's 5-0, Jahmil," Gary Woods II shouted. "You're doing great, buddy!"

Only Garrett-Bey couldn't see the score, displayed on a TV a few feet off the mat. He couldn't see the three fingers raised by the ref to mark a near fall. In fact, he can't see anything.

Born with a rare form of glaucoma, Garrett-Bey, 16, **SEE WRESTLER, A10**



Garrett-Bey wrestles against Colonial Forge's Sean Meese. The rules are altered a bit so Garrett-Bey knows where his opponent is.

WRESTLER

► FROM AT

navigates the wrestling mat—and the world beyond it—completely blind.

Supported by teammates who are at times literally tied at his hip and rule changes designed to mitigate his disability, Garrett-Bey is no novelty, he's a wrestling wunderkind.

"He can easily win a state title," Woods said.

'SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT'

Delwin Garrett-Bey and his wife, Joy, always had concerns about their son's vision. As an infant, Jahmil was prone to tearing up and seemed to prefer keeping his eyes shut.

"My wife was very persistent that something's not right," Delwin Garrett-Bey said. "Something's not right."

The parents' suspicions were confirmed after they consulted Dr. Mohamad Jafaar, a nationally renowned pediatric ophthalmologist, when Jahmil was 2 years old. Dr. Jafaar diagnosed Jahmil with congenital glaucoma, a condition that affects 1 in 10,000 infants, according to WebMd.

He underwent a series of three surgeries, performed at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, with the goal of saving his sight. The procedures didn't take.

Jahmil's vision loss was gradual. For a while, he maintained sight in his right eye, while his left eye could discern only shadows. His fleeting memories of being able to see are what you might expect from a toddler: colorful cartoon characters.

"Mickey Mouse, Elmo," he said. "I know what they look like. But not a lot else."

By the time Jahmil turned 4, he was completely blind. For the Garrett-Beys, it was crushing. But the family's devastation gave way to determination as they prepared to help him live with his disability.

Like most kids, Jahmil learned how to ride a bike at age 5. Delwin crafted an old-school accommodation by sticking a baseball card in the spokes. Jahmil would follow the sound and go cruising through his North Stafford neighborhood with his friends.

With the assistance of a para-educator, Jahmil has always thrived academically, even if his parents struggle to help him with homework because it's in Braille.

"At the end of the day, we had to make sure Jahmil had a full life," his father said. "I never shielded him away from anything."

'I GO BY FEEL'

In many ways, wrestling is the ideal sport for a blind person. Hand-eye coordination isn't a



PHOTOS BY TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Coaches and teammates of Jahmil Garrett-Bey cheer him on during the Commonwealth District wrestling championships at Riverbend High School in Spotsylvania on Feb. 5.

prerequisite, and there are rules in place to level the mat for the visually impaired.

So, when the Garrett-Beys were seeking an athletic environment in which Jahmil could thrive, wrestling made sense.

And make no mistake, he needed to find a sport. Delwin played football and basketball and ran track in high school, while Joy is a former volleyball player. The eldest of their three children, Khalis, emerged as a standout running back at Colonial Forge High School last fall.

When it became clear football would be a nonstarter for his middle son, Delwin Garrett-Bey brought Jahmil, then a third grader, to Powerhouse Wrestling.

Tom Kibler didn't know what to expect. Kibler, who founded the Spotsylvania County-based wrestling club 19 years ago and serves as its head coach, had mentored kids facing various behavioral and physical challenges.

But he'd never before encountered a blind wrestler.

"I didn't know in the beginning how it would work out," he said.

Progress was slow, especially early on. Kibler would help Jahmil count off the steps for wind sprints or cartwheels so he wouldn't fear running into walls. Teaching techniques—takedowns, holds and defensive maneuvers—was an equally methodical process.

Kibler would enlist two fellow wrestlers. One would perform



Garrett-Bey, who is blind, is guided off the mat by a referee after his match against Sean Meese during the tournament.

the technique on Jahmil, then the other would serve as a defensive prop for him to try it out himself.

"I go by feel," Jahmil explained. "When the coach is showing the move, they describe it, so I go off that. I visualize it, and when the move is done on me, I get a better picture in my head."

By the time Jahmil was in seventh grade, he'd developed into a VAWA state champion wrestler whose unnatural grip strength helped him overcome any shortcomings in technique.

"Even if he's in a bad position, he's so damn strong you can't do anything about it," Kibler said.

He started to show growth

off the mat, too. A shy kid who'd just as soon spend all day tinkering with audio on his computer, Jahmil found a social outlet in grappling.

"He didn't speak much, he was very to himself," Delwin Garrett-Bey said. "But once he started wrestling, he immediately changed. It brought him out of his shell."

BANDING TOGETHER

Ten minutes before his third-place match, Jahmil paced the perimeter of the Riverbend High School gymnasium with his right arm wrapped around a teammate's elbow.

That arrangement is a fixture of Jahmil's day-to-day exist-

ence with the Wildcats. Inside Mountain View's wrestling room, there's no need for the cane he uses during the school day.

Whether he's conditioning or drilling, a partner never leaves his side. When the team runs outdoors, Jahmil is tethered to a teammate with a rubber exercise band so he can sense the pack's change of direction and adjust.

"He kind of adds a sense of family," said Mountain View 126-pounder Ben Meinert. "We're all there for him, and he's kind of that central point."

When Woods learned he'd have a blind wrestler in his room this winter, his first call was to Kibler, and he's implemented many of the same teaching strategies that worked so well at Powerhouse. He has, however, learned to be less hands-on personally.

"I'm the first one to get on the mat and wrestle with the kids," Woods said. "With Jahmil, I'm hesitant because he's so strong and so unpredictable."

With a record of 16-8 in his first high school season (he opted out as a freshman last winter due to COVID-19), Jahmil enters Saturday's Region 5D wrestling tournament with a realistic shot at earning a top-four finish and a berth in the state tournament.

His matches unfold much like his peers', with two exceptions. Top and bottom positions are the same, but when the wrestlers start in neutral, they do so with fingers touching, one palm up and the other down.

"Sight-impaired wrestlers always maintain touch, if they break apart the official is required to stop the match and restart in the correct position," reads section 30 6.2.4 in the National Federation of High School Sports Wrestling Rules Book.

It's a subtle but not insignificant deviation for his opponents, some of whom favor wrestling from space.

"They're not wrestling in a way they're comfortable with, and I've been wrestling that way my entire life," Jahmil said. "If I grab someone, I just hold on and never let go. That's my style."

Opponents can get visibly frustrated. By the end of the match, however, it's often those same opponents who guide Jahmil back to the center of the mat if they stray out-of-bounds. Regardless of outcome, he wins them over.

And there's another phenomenon at play wherever Jahmil competes.

"When we're at tournaments, we have so many kids from other schools come over to the mat just to watch Jahmil wrestle," Meinert said. "Because it's a pretty cool thing to see."

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Late brother's memory is Lipinski's saving grace

BY JOEY LOMONACO
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A few hours before the biggest game of his high school soccer career, Max Lipinski went rummaging through his late brother's bedroom.

Most of Cole Lipinski's belongings remain there, untouched, more than six months after the Ferrum College senior died by suicide at 21.

In particular, Lipinski was searching for a pair of orange goalie gloves. Cole Lipinski had worn them just once: on Sept. 18,



Lipinski

2021, when he came off the bench and led Ferrum's men's soccer team to its first victory of the season. The next afternoon, a pair of King George County sheriff's deputies were waiting for Aubree and Chris Lipinski when they pulled into their driveway.

In the days and months following Cole's death, "We were swallowed by family and friends in this community," said his mother, Aubree Lipinski.

For Max, a King George sophomore who followed in his sibling's footsteps as a star goalkeeper for the undefeated Foxes (15-0), soccer has proven a saving grace—a key part of the grieving process.

"I always just wanted to be him, and I wanted to be as good as him," Max Lipinski said of Cole, who graduated from King George in 2018. "He's the reason why I'm on this team and have the ability I have. Everything that I know, I learned from him."

'OVERTHEMOONEXCITED'

Cole Lipinski was buzzing with excitement when he called his parents—first Chris and then Aubree—to recount his exploits on the pitch that



Chris Lipinski hugs acquaintances of his late son Cole. Chris Lipinski said the King George community 'wrapped their arms around us' in the family's time of grief.

September night.

Searching for its first win of the season, Ferrum had turned to Lipinski in the second half of a tie game against Southern Virginia University. Lipinski stopped the only shot he faced, and Ferrum won 3-2 in overtime.

"He played remarkably,"

SEE LIPINSKI, B3

SCHEDULE

BOYS' SOCCER
Battlefield tournament
At King George
Wednesday's semifinals

Chancellor vs. Eastern View, 5
King George vs. Courtland,
7:30 p.m.

▶ FROM B1

recalled Andrew Porter, Lipinski's teammate at both King George and Ferrum. "He was a brick wall."

The performance appeared to signal a new beginning in a college career that had been ravaged by injuries. Cole had worked his way back from a series of knee dislocations, the last of which required reconstructive surgery.

On the phone that night, he revealed to his parents that the Panthers' first-year head coach, Matt Cureton, planned to start him in Ferrum's next match.

"Over the moon excited," Aubree Lipinski recalled. "I knew they were going to party that night, so I told him, 'Just be careful.'"

The following day was a Sunday, and Manchester United was playing against West Ham at 7:30 a.m. Chris and Cole Lipinski are both big-time Red Devils fans, and he texted his son about goalie David De Gae having uncharacteristically stopped a penalty kick.

When no reply came, he assumed that Cole was sleeping in.

'WHERE HE FINDS SOLACE'

King George is a tight-knit community. One of the deputies who informed the Lipinskis of Cole's passing was a family friend who had coached soccer with him at the middle school.

The Lipinskis moved there 15 years ago, just before Max turned 1. All three of their children—Cole, Keira, 19, and Max—attended Sealston Elementary School and King George Middle School before competing in multiple sports at the high school.

"This county just wrapped their arms around us," Chris Lipinski said. "We couldn't have picked a better place to raise our children."

All three siblings enjoyed a close bond, especially Cole and Max, who lifted weights together daily in the gym located in the clubhouse of their neighborhood, Hopyard Farm. Asked what resonated from those workouts, Max Lipinski let out a chuckle.

"Him yelling at me telling me that I'm not working hard enough," he said. "I still go every day, even though he's not here. Everything that we used to do together, I kind of still do."

Watching from the bleachers during a recent King George contest, Chris added: "He'll probably go to the gym after this game, because I think



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Goalie Max Lipinski (1) bats away a Courtland goal attempt in a game earlier this season. Lipinski has posted eight shutouts for the undefeated Foxes.



Aubree, Chris and Max Lipinski take a look at Cole Lipinski's commemorative jersey.

that's where he finds solace and everything."

It was high school football season when Cole died, and Max, an All-Area kicker for the Foxes, remembers sending his brother a clip of a season-long 40-yard field goal during their final text exchange.

Most of the brothers' conversations centered around sports. In the months preceding his death, Cole mentioned his mental health only once, Max Lipinski said.

"My older brother was tough, very tough," he said. "And he was very sensitive about me. He would not let anyone hurt me and he was proud of me. He didn't want me to know any weakness of his."

ABROTHER TO MANY

As rain fell steadily on a recent Friday evening at King George, emotions washed over the Lipinskis. Moments earlier, the Foxes had won yet again, with Cole Lipinski recording his seventh clean sheet of the season.

Now he was standing at midfield, surrounded by his parents, grandfather, and Cole's former teammates to receive a framed commemorative goalie jersey.

Along with the neon

green jersey, there was a captain's patch and a photo from Cole's senior night in 2018. Between them, a small placard ticked off various school records still held by Cole: Shutouts in a season (8), career shutouts (16), wins in a season (15), and goals-against average (1.26).

"He had all the on-the-field stuff," King George coach Jeff Butler said, "but what he did for all the young guys coming up behind him, he was always willing to lend a hand there."

Ryan Kuberek, who was two years behind Cole at King George, credits him with an opportunity to pursue a college soccer career.

"Every step of the way, every day, he told me that I was going to get there," said Kuberek, now a sophomore at Randolph-Macon College. "He was really the older brother I never had and always wanted."

A few of Cole's records will inevitably fall to Max, and that's probably how he would've wanted it.

"If you asked Cole that last year, he would've told Max, 'You're going to be a better goalie than me.'" Aubree Lipinski said.

'HE'S WITH ME'

After locating the



VIEW: To watch the Lipinski family receive a commemorative jersey in late goalkeeper Max Lipinski's honor, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link.

gloves—size 9 with orange streaks running up the fingers—Lipinski called his parents. He wanted permission to use them that evening against Battlefield District powerhouse Chancellor. Sure, they said.

Snugness aside (Cole liked his gloves on the tight side), the gesture fit the moment. Prior to April 12, King George hadn't beaten the rival Chargers in five years.

Since Lipinski donned his brother's gloves, they've done so twice.

Heading into this week's Battlefield District tournament, Lipinski has allowed just eight goals in 15 games (a 0.53 goals against average). Regardless of the outcome this week, the Foxes have already locked up a berth in the Region 4B tournament and will host a first-round game on May 26.

At every point, Cole's presence has loomed large. Before the season, Ferrum gave Max a black armband bearing his initials and 99, the number Cole wore with the Panthers. He wears it on his left bicep above a tattoo of his brother's initials that he got shortly after his death.

In Lipinski's mind, there's no question that Cole has had a hand in King George's magical run this spring.

"Every night," he said. "Every single game night. Every single night that we're on this field, he's with me."

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HARRIS, BLACK-HAWKS PIN DOWN A TITLE FOR COACH

BY JOEY LOMONACO
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T.J. Harris glanced toward the corner of the mat and couldn't help but feel a void.

For every previous match of his decorated high school career, Harris followed the booming instructions of his father, Brooke Point wrestling coach Travis Harris. But now, in the 138-pound final at Saturday's Region 5D championships, he was on his own despite the presence of two capable assistants.

Around 3 p.m. Saturday afternoon, the elder Harris started feeling chest pains. The stress of tournament coaching led him to believe it was a panic attack, but his wife drove him to nearby Mary Washington Hospital as a precaution. There, an EKG revealed an

irregular heartbeat, and Harris ultimately suffered a heart attack.

His son knew none of this as he put Riverbend's Brandon Rasmussen on his back for a second-period pin. Only after the referee raised his arm as champion did T.J. Harris learn the gravity of the situation.

"And that's when I really lost it," he said.

T.J. Harris spent the next couple hours alternatively crying and watching as his Black-Hawk teammates cemented a regional title. Despite trailing host Riverbend by three-and-a-half points entering the championship finals, the Black-Hawks surged to a 262-258.5 victory based largely on bonus points. Mountain View (225.5)

SEE WRESTLING, B6



Mountain View's Nicholas Sanders sits with his team after losing the 106 finals match against Cadell Lee.

WRESTLING

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finished third.

Freshmen phenoms Cadell Lee and Chase Van Hoven handed the Black-Hawks a pair of pins to open the championship round at 106 and 113 pounds, respectively. Brooke Point also swept a pair of head-to-head matchups with Riverbend that were pivotal to the outcome. Besides Harris' pin of Rasmussen, 182-pounder Remus Montalvo summoned an 11th hour takedown to shock the Bears' Jacob Wright.

"I blacked out and just did what I had to," said Montalvo, who trailed 3-2 with seven seconds left in the match before earning three points in a whirl-

wind turnaround.

Riverbend got finals wins from Carson Main at 132 pounds Zach Turner (145), and Brandon Grosso (195). The top four finishers in each weight class advance to the Class 5 state tournament, which will be held in Virginia Beach on Friday and Saturday.

Meanwhile, the elder Harris underwent a procedure to have a stent inserted. Finally, around 7 p.m. on Saturday evening, he was able to call his son.

"The first thing he asked about was how I did," T.J. Harris said. "Then he asked how the team was doing.

"We had to get a regional title for him."

Team scores: 1. Brooke Point 262.5; 2. Riverbend 258; 3. Moun-

tain View 222.5; 4. Woodgrove 166; 5. Stone Bridge 108.5; 6. Independence 92.5; 7. Massaponax 92; 8. Stafford 90; 9. Briar Woods 95; 10. Riverside 81.5; 11. Patrick Henry-Roanoke 57.

106: 1. Cadell Lee (BP) p. Nicholas Sanders (MV), 3:53; 3. Matthew Parthenakis (Rb) d. Emmanuel Marin (PH), 19-11.

113: 1. Chase Van Hoven (BP) p. Nathan Sanders (MV), 1:00. 3. Nathan Gipson (Rb) d. Nic Diamond (SB), 5-1.

120: 1. Robert Whelan (MV) d. Parker Trahan (BP), 4-2. 3. Neal Dorrian (Ma) p. Gregory Upperman (Rb), 3:27.

126: 1. Austin Pollard (BP) p. Austen Watson (Wood), :10. 3. Chase Ramstead (Riverside) d. Ben Meinert (MV), 9-2.

132: 1. Carson Main (Rb) p. Ryan Yriart (Wood), :21. 3. Dominic Castrojon (MV) d. Cael Froelich (SB), 9-1.

138: 1. Travis Harris (BP) p. Brendan Rasmussen (Rb), 2:12. 3. Andrew Woodley (Wood) d. Eli Beltran (MV), 6-4.

145: 1. Zachary Turner (Rb) d. Thomas Brooks (SB), 3-2. 3. Augustus Fleming (BP) d. Aidan

Landes (Wood), 9-3.

152: 1. Jackson Bissiar (BW) p. Ethan Asimocopoulos (Mass), 2:27. 3. Logan Eastman (Rb) d. Kristian Molina-Ramos (St), 4-3.

160: 1. Rafael Hipolito (Ind) p. Stephen Mainz (BP), 2:25. 3. Chance Wingert (St) d. Nick Carlson (Riverside), injury.

170: 1. Jacob Henderson (WF) d. Lennon Soaper (Rb), 7-1. 3. Cory Bell (MV) p. Gabe Thompson (Riverside), 3:51.

182: 1. Remus Montalvo (BP) d. Jacob Wright (Rb), 4-3. 3. Ethan Lan (BW) p. Jasper Hopkins (Albemarle), 1:44.

195: 1. Jake Grasso (Rb) maj. dec. Nathan Stewart (MV), 13-3. 3. Christian Moffett (Wood) d. Jack Kellen (Ind), 4-2.

220: 1. Traquon Robertson (PH) d. Quintarius Floyd (BP), 7-2. 3. Isaac Castrejón (MV) d. Finn Gustavson (Wood), 4-0.

285: 1. Jacob Pressinger (Rb) p. Robert Cheeks (Mass), 3:43. 3. Clay Bachman (MV) d. Gage Fisher (North Stafford), forfeit.

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