

| Behind The Story

All In The Family

At Rustburg, Eden Bigham following in the footsteps of her mom and coach, Katie Bigham

Emily Brown

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Eden Bigham delivers a pitch during an April 29 game against Randolph-Henry.

Lee Luther Jr., For The News & Advance

RUSTBURG — Eden Bigham, the Rustburg senior ace, was still several strikeouts away when the question came up.

Of his wife, Katie Bigham, Seth Bigham asked: Would Eden be benched before she hit strikeout No. 793?

Katie, as Eden's coach at RHS, would have the right to sit her daughter, should she so choose. Should she want to keep hold of the decades-old record, the one she set during her time in the circle at Rustburg back in 1995, she could.

But almost as quickly as the words came out of her husband's mouth, Katie answered. "Uh, no," she offered, in a tone befitting the succinct conversation.

It was a joke, after all. Putting the ball in someone else's glove would be nothing short of insane, because Eden has been among the most dominant pitchers in the state in the last several seasons.

And for Katie, such a move would be ludicrous, because seeing her daughter follow in her footsteps, at her alma mater, has been "awesome" — no matter the records she may relinquish.

On Friday, Eden topped the record she'd had her eyes on for about 10 years. The one her dad, Seth, kept in the back of his mind with each passing game this season. The one Seth spoke about when he floated that hypothetical situation to Katie.

Against Jefferson Forest, Eden struck out the second batter she faced in the second inning. Then, with five pitches, she rang up the next batter. It was the second out of the inning. Her fourth strikeout of the night. Her 222nd of the season.

And it was the 794th strikeout of her career.

"That's been something we've talked about forever," Eden said of the number her mom owned, and the thought that she'd one day surpass it, "but it was just kind of a joking thing."

The two have sparred over the years about a number of statistical categories, though neither keeps a particularly close eye on how Eden currently measures up to her mom. Those talks are for entertainment more than anything, they say.

They started back when Eden was years away from joining the varsity ranks at Rustburg. In keeping with her everyday demeanor, Eden quietly aspired to take after her mom. The number she wears now — 13 — and has for years as a member of both the RHS softball and volleyball teams serves as evidence.

Then, early on in Eden's varsity career, Katie started talking in more tangible terms. Eden definitely had the goods to one-up the numbers Katie put up at Rustburg from 1993 to 1995.

So Katie surmised Eden's career numbers would stack up well. "Of course you're gonna beat them," she said, doing so confidently also because her numbers were amassed over a three-year span, since she only started playing on the varsity team as a sophomore.

As a freshman, Eden was on her way. She posted 316 strikeouts in 155 innings (14.2 per game, which at the time would have ranked seventh in Virginia High School League history). She tallied two no-hitters, including one with 21 strikeouts, and finished with a 0.81 ERA.

Then the pandemic hit, and when Eden's sophomore season was canceled, the comparison took a little bit of a turn. Eden's final stats, like Katie's, would only be the result of three seasons.

"I do think about that kind of stuff," Eden admitted a few days before she broke her mom's strikeout record, "but it's not the end of the world if it doesn't happen."

The right-hander spoke not only of the ongoing, friendly family battle, but also of the expectations she has for herself. Ever since she started pumping pitches by batters as a freshman, Eden's been graded on a curve.

It makes sense, considering how effective she's been.

Opponents putting any runners on the base paths against Eden is worth talking about. Recording a hit when she's in the circle is especially impressive. Tallying an earned run is nearly unheard of.

Consider the 14 no-hitters and six perfect games she's amassed in the past two seasons. She's allowed just 38 hits and issued 25 walks in 211 innings. In 33 games — including the Red Devils' win in the Class 3 state championship last year — Eden has

fanned 486 batters (the strikeouts-per-game averages are among the best in VHSL history, like the one she posted as a freshman).

HOW THEY MEASURE UP Katie vs. Eden career stats		
Katie		Eden
74-4	Record	49-7
52	Shutouts	29
12	No-hitters	16
4	Perfect Games	6
49½	Innings pitched	366
793	Strikeouts	802
21	Earned runs	22
0.30	ERA	0.42
170	Hits allowed	100
43	Walks	67

Credit her genes, of course, and her natural talent. According to the woman who walked a similar path a few decades prior, though, it's Eden's work ethic that's most responsible.

"It's not just that she had the talent to do it," Katie said of her daughter, who will play at the next level at the University of Virginia, like Katie did at Liberty University. "If she hadn't worked at it, she wouldn't be where she is."

For both Katie and Eden, work didn't begin and end at the Rustburg High field. Instead, they each spent hours perfecting their craft on their own.

While Eden benefited from mom's experience, Katie turned wherever she could to learn how to be an effective pitcher.

Katie's journey started in Dixie softball. She played first base in her first year, then switched positions when her dad started coaching and saw that she, more than her teammates, could throw hard.

That's all it was at the time — strength and speed — until Katie learned the mechanics from the VHS tape her family bought and watched.

One woman taught her a fastball, another a riseball. The second pitch became the most deadly for Katie, and, later, for Eden.

"We just went with it and kept practicing, and it worked," Katie said. She learned how to place the ball by throwing toward a tire strung up between two trees in her yard.

On days with bad weather, she went down to the basement and threw from a shorter distance, using a piece of wood taped to the cement floor as the "rubber" from which she'd begin her motion.

It was hours and hours of work in the mornings, Katie said.

Eden, decades later, spent many of her evenings down the road from her house at the church field her family turned into their own practice spot.

"Daddy hooked the chain to his truck and ripped it out," Eden said of the tree that once stood near home plate, one of a number of changes they made to the facility that's been used nearly every day for the last several years. They built a shed and indoor batting cage there, too.

When it came to pitching, though, Eden couldn't retreat to a basement if the weather turned bad.

“We thought we got lucky when it snowed or it stormed, but we didn’t,” Eden said.

“We would walk with our snow boots out to the cage and once we got there we’d change into our pitching shoes.”

On several occasions during her middle school years, Eden recalled not wanting to fire off pitches on her own, preferring to stay in the house instead.

“It was a fight,” Katie said, remembering a handful of difficult conversations she and Seth had with Eden.

“I would probably start crying and say I didn’t want to do it anymore,” Eden added.

But Eden, of course, did keep pitching.

“She pushed me to do it and she encouraged me to want to do it, but at the same time she said, ‘I don’t want your whole life to be about softball. If you were to tell me now that you don’t want to play, that’s perfectly OK with me. But if you do want to play, then I’m extremely happy for you.’”

“**If she was playing basketball or soccer**, I would have no clue, no way to help, no idea,” Katie said, reflecting on what she’s been able to teach Eden over the years.

The Bighams didn’t have to hire a pitching coach, of course, because Katie had once experienced all Eden is experiencing now, and has plenty of proof that she was successful.

Katie put together a 74-4 record during her career at RHS. Fifty-two of those wins went down as shutouts. In three seasons, she gave up just 21 earned runs in 493 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings, good for a 0.30 ERA. She walked only 43 batters and gave up 170 hits.

She continued her stellar playing career at Liberty, where she is a member of the athletics hall of fame and still holds the program record for career ERA (1.59).

Eden has heard all the stories of her mom’s days in the circle, and there are times when she feels an added pressure to put on similarly impressive performances. But, Eden added, excelling in the game Katie also mastered is something she’s chosen to pursue on her own.

“I feel like she pushed me to do it and she encouraged me to want to do it, but at the same time she said, ‘I don’t want your whole life to be about softball. If you were to tell me now that you don’t want to play, that’s perfectly OK with me. But if you do want to play, then I’m extremely happy for you,’” Eden said of her mom.

That close relationship is why they both can shine now, and are in pursuit of another championship ring — what would be Katie’s fourth, after she earned two as a player and one as a coach last year, and Eden’s fourth, after earning the ring for softball last year and two for volleyball.

“We know each other,” Eden said of Katie, who calls every pitch for Eden’s high school games.

Their relationship is what made Katie rejoice when Eden broke her record Friday night, and it’s what makes the last several seasons together at Rustburg so special.

“It’s definitely something we’ll remember,” Eden said.

For football teams like Brookville and Heritage, film sessions critical to success

Emily Brown
Oct 4, 2022



Brookville quarterback Drake McDaniel celebrates with coach Jon Meeks after a touchdown run during a game against Heritage at Lynchburg City Stadium on Friday, March 19, 2021.

Kendall Warner/The News & Advance

It was Monday afternoon. Cross country runners were training for their next races, and volleyball players were in the gym preparing for their next matches at a pair of Timberlake Road schools. Football fields at Brookville and Heritage, however, sat empty and quiet.

There was plenty of time left in the week for those players to get their practice jerseys dirty. Plenty of time to install new plays, go over defensive sets and run through drills before game day rolled around. Before they put on pads for the hands-on preparation, though, they devoted time to understanding the “why” behind each of the instructions they’d soon hear from coaches on the gridiron.

It was film day. Every varsity team talks about it — “We’ll watch film and get some things corrected,” you’ll hear coaches and players say after games; “We’ll take a look at the film,” they say in response to questions about their next opponents. They’re lines used often, because film sessions are part of the routine. But for the good teams out there, those moments don’t just represent another box to check. They’re, instead, a vital part of the drive toward achieving their goals.

“We’re not just getting on you,” Heritage coach Brad Bradley said to his players, wearing matching orange shorts as they sat in tiered rows in a classroom inside the expansive school. “Because look what happens when we do the right thing.”

It was one of the coach's last several statements regarding the Pioneers' previous game, a win over Rustburg. On that Monday film day, players gathered to first look back at their successes, and certainly at what they could've done better — or flat out did wrong.

"Really good job," Bradley said to a group of seniors, Rajan Booker, Terrell Washington and Markus White. In the clip they'd just watched, the Pioneers saw the three open up a lane to the end zone for Hov Bateman. "That's what it looks like when we block."

It wasn't the only praise Bradley and assistant coaches offered, but those compliments didn't exactly take over the session either.

On other occasions, the three or others heard their names called for the opposite reason.

"It ain't tag you're it," Bradley said, holding accountable an entire unit for their lack of physicality in one particular clip. "Put a hat on him."

Football, Bradley said, isn't a passive sport. His players all knew that, of course, but knowing in one's head and executing on game day are entirely different. And actually seeing how the knowledge translated, or failed to translate, on Friday nights is a part of the learning process for these high school athletes.

At both Brookville and Heritage, the big-picture concepts and minutiae of the game were drilled in on those Monday afternoons.

While Heritage looked back first, before looking ahead to its matchup with BHS — set for 7 p.m. Friday at City Stadium — Brookville took Monday to break down Heritage's offense, defense and special teams. Half of the Bees gathered around the TV in the coaches' room in the field house while coach Jon Meeks clicked through tape. The other half of players lifted weights and would follow that same process later that evening. The Bees already had gone over their own film from their previous game on Saturday morning.

Brookville, like Heritage, also watched the Pioneers' game against Rustburg to prepare. Like Bradley and his assistants, Meeks pointed out HHS' shortcomings — areas his team could exploit Friday.

At Heritage, assistant coach Jay Phares told players, "Field position is everything."

At Brookville, Meeks said, "Field position alone could've flipped that game."

There were moments in that Rustburg game when Heritage set the Red Devils up with short fields in which they needed just a few plays to score, thanks to HHS' inability to block up front to keep the offense moving, and mistakes on punt and kick returns. Then there were other times when Rustburg made mistakes — a fumble on a punt return and running East to West rather than North-South on a kick return — that made things significantly easier for Heritage.

Both coaching staffs saw those critical moments play out in real time, but with film, they could explain to the players who were on the field the significance of those plays, several days after the fact.

At both schools, too, coaches alerted their pupils about alignments to watch and particular players to be keenly aware of.

At Heritage, Bradley talked about the dominance of Brookville lineman Andrew Cole and the need to stand up to him to get to a trio of rushers in the backfield — Drake McDaniel, Michael Viar and Jor'Dyn Whitelaw, each of whom approaches his carries differently, Bradley also pointed out.

At Brookville, Washington, as both a defensive lineman and tight end, was on coaches' minds. "Bad idea to not block No. 3," Meeks told his players as they watched the havoc Washington wreaked on Rustburg. "Don't recommend it."

While both teams went through their Monday routines with the goal of turning a 4-1 record into a 5-1 mark a few days later, coaches also used film sessions to underline lessons learned from the past. They harkened back to each of last season's matchups — one in the regular season that went to double overtime, a thriller Heritage won 30-23, and the other in the Region 3C playoffs, in which Brookville earned serious revenge with a 50-21 victory — in emphasizing the importance of playing to their potential.

Meeks counted 10 things BHS did to give away the first game, from busted coverage to a bad snap. Bradley saw his team give away ground physically in the second.

Fix those mistakes, the ones they saw on film, and both teams have a good chance at a win in one of the area's best rivalries.

"We believe in you. We know what we can do," Bradley said. "We gotta do it."

And Meeks: "If y'all play our brand of football, I got my money on us."

In final football season in Nelson, Adonijah Hubbard, born with just one hand, known for 'I can' mindset

Emily Brown

Nov 1, 2022



Nelson fullback Adonijah Hubbard bulls his way into the end zone against Page County in September. Hubbard, a senior who also plays at linebacker, has tallied two touchdowns and 357 yards rushing heading into the final football game of his high school career on Nov. 4.
Lee Luther Jr., For the Nelson County Times

Adonijah Hubbard doesn't like labels.

That makes sense, because no one word could fully encompass all he is. His interests stretch too far to allow for just one descriptor.

You could call him a son or brother. A Nelson County High School student, a lover of business concepts. A player of video games or a Boy Scout. You could call him a sports fanatic, or a sprinter or linebacker.

You could call him a teammate, whose personality provides the spark for the squads on which he plays, say his coach and friends. A player whose effort can't be questioned, whose optimistic outlook toward the tasks that lie ahead can't be dimmed.

"He's a never-say die, positive young man," Nelson football coach Jack Baker said of Hubbard, one of his veteran players.

Before heading out to the field to guide one of his team's final practices of the year Tuesday afternoon, Baker talked about what Hubbard offers on the gridiron, including his contributions on both sides of the ball as a linebacker and fullback. The answers to most questions asked of Baker circled back around to that concept, though; with Hubbard as one of its leaders, Nelson doesn't ever lack hope.

True to his nature, the coach's final description of the senior — who will play his final game in a Governors football uniform against Gretna at 7 p.m. Friday — was even more concise: "He's an 'I can' type of kid."

Hubbard, more than most other football players, could choose to say "I can't" when asked to take a handoff or tackle someone. But excuses don't exist inside his head.

"I can play sports. I lift weights. I bench, I squat, I deadlift. ... I do all these things," Hubbard said, before explaining that there are two words, two "labels" some people outside his circle have used to describe him in the past, he hates.

"Don't ever call me disabled or handicapped."

Hubbard's heard the adjectives applied to him in the past because he has one hand rather than two. His left arm ends at his wrist. It's what he calls his nub.

Hubbard was born with his nub, and he's never shied away from showing it off.

"It's not like I try to hide it," said Hubbard, who aims to continue as a sprinter and long jumper with the NCHS track and field team this year and hopes to potentially play basketball and baseball, as well.

If you know him, he added, you know his nub: "It's part of me." And you also know he's never let it hold him back.

On the gridiron, that means being fully involved in the Governors' offense and defense, especially this year under Baker, who's about to finish his first year at the helm in Nelson.

Unlike many athletes in the county, Hubbard — who wears the No. 6 because of his six "digits" ("1-2-3-4-5" fingers on his right hand and his nub) — has played football since he was a child. Because of a lack of youth programs in the county over the years, many of his teammates don't have an extensive background with the sport, but Hubbard has been able to draw from about a decade's worth of practices and games as he took on an expanded role this season.

Sniffing out ball carriers is how Hubbard derives most of his joy when on the field. He likes hitting opposing players in an effort to keep those teams from getting to the end zone.

"It gives me confidence that there's somebody back there ready to make a tackle," said Nelson junior Carson Becerra, who lines up in front of Hubbard both ways, as a defensive and offensive lineman.

Hubbard said his offensive skills have become sharper this year, too, since aiming to "play smart" on each handoff. When he began playing with Nelson years ago, his mindset in the run game more closely mirrored that of a linebacker constantly searching to make contact. He wanted to run over opponents more than find and maneuver through gaps.

That running-through-players method also was a tall task because Hubbard stands just 5-foot-9 and 170 pounds, despite continuous work on his own — running or walking the slope at his Roseland-area home, or doing extra pushups at the house — and in the weight room at NCHS.

"But I make up for it in other places," Hubbard said of his smaller stature.

Specifically, Baker and Hubbard's teammates say he never holds back when it comes to effort.

That's paid off for Hubbard in tangible ways. As part of the Wing-T Baker implemented this year, Hubbard is second on the team in total carries (99), behind only Colton Baker (102). He has scored twice (for about 10% of Nelson's total scoring) and also is third in total rushing yards at 357.

The last of those numbers is well off his current goal of 800 — one he's keeping in mind in case he ever gets the shot to walk on to a team in college — but well over the objective he set for himself (200 rushing yards) at the beginning of the season.

"Midway through I was like, 'That was a little low,'" Hubbard said.

Hubbard bolsters his team off the field, too.

"Once I get to getting loud and boisterous," Hubbard said, "the boys wake up."

Becerra agreed. "He brings an energy that not a lot of people have."

Nelson will miss the intangibles Hubbard brings to the program next year, when he heads off to college in pursuit of a career in business. It'll miss the optimism that says that "even though we haven't won but one game [this season], I still see progress."

NCHS has gone through plenty of lean campaigns of late, and during Hubbard's time with the team. But it's been more competitive this year under Baker, Hubbard said, adding he and his classmates have aimed to pour a foundation this year on which future teams can build.

The younger players who've toiled alongside Hubbard over the past few years should be able to use his story as fuel, too.

They've seen him make tweaks to a traditional lifting regimen in the weight room, but they didn't see him let any one type of training get the better of him. They've seen him show up at practice daily, unafraid to take a hit or deliver one. They've seen him expend all his effort on game days.

They're all reasons teammates are unafraid to call Hubbard an inspiration.

But even that label, Hubbard's not ready to take it on quite yet, either. For now, he hopes to have served as a testament to what an "I can" mindset can lead to.

"The inspiration that I'm giving you [to reach your potential]," Hubbard said of those who've surrounded him during his athletic journey in Nelson, "that was in you all along. I just help you see it."