

Tey Barbour, Isaiah Vick and Dezmond Hopkins (left to right) give Patriot plenty of options.
DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA



PERFECT POSITION

Patriot has all the pieces to win the state title

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Each of the past two seasons, Patriot has moved a step closer toward a state boys basketball title. In 2022, in the state semifinals, the Pioneers lost to Battlefield 55-54 when Bryce Hammersley converted a 3-pointer with 15 seconds remaining. In 2023, Patriot reached the state final before dropping a 52-41 decision to defending champion Hayfield.

Is this finally the Pioneers' year? With 11 players back, including six seniors, and the arrival of Osbourn transfer Tey Barbour, they certainly have the experience and depth to finally claim a championship.

"Without [Tey], I told the coaches after the state final we could get back here with the team we have," said Patriot head coach Sherman Rivers. "But with the addition of Tey, people expect us to be there."

Patriot has been blessed with good scorers over the years, but none like Barbour. The 6-foot-5 Harvard commitment gives the Pioneers someone who can routinely produce 20-plus points a game from all over the floor. It's what he did last year as a junior at Osbourn, where he averaged 24.6 points a game.

Barbour left Osbourn dismissed head coach Rocky Carter in March. Barbour moved in with his father, Ikeea, who lived in Patriot's school zone before Barbour transferred.

Barbour will still wear No. 14 after Rivers ordered the number for him because Patriot did not have that number already available. But he will have a different role.

In Patriot's intrasquad scrimmage Nov. 21, Barbour

WINNING WAYS

Patriot's season-by-season record under head coach Sherman Rivers

SEASON	OVERALL RECORD	FINISH
2016-17	11-15	6A Northern Region quarterfinalist
2017-18	15-8	6A Region D second round
2018-19	23-3	Class 6 state quarterfinalist
2019-20	21-5	Class 6, Region B semifinalist
2020-21	12-3	Class 6, Region B finalist
2021-22	26-1	Class 6 state semifinalist
2022-23	27-4	Class 6 state finalist



Patriot head coach Sherman Rivers
BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

displayed his ability to score all over the floor and in droves. He converted 11 of 15 shots from the field to finish with 29 points.

But as proficient as Barbour is in recording points, there's still a key difference between his time at Osbourn and his time now with Patriot. At Osbourn, Barbour was the team's only scoring threat. As a result, he had to shoot more to keep the Eagles in games. Osbourn went 22-36 in Barbour's three seasons there.

At Patriot, Barbour will still get his looks. But he won't have to score at a high rate by taking an inordinate amount of shots to help the Pioneers win. Instead, Barbour can count on others to generate offense. His performance in the intrasquad game underscored that.

"I feel like I can rely more on others," Barbour said. "I don't have to put as much pressure on myself."

Rivers agrees.

"He prefers to win than to average 25 points a game," Rivers said.

Patriot's two returning starters – Isaiah Vick, a 6-foot-7 senior and first-team all-district pick, and Dezmond Hopkins, a 6-foot senior guard – will help shoulder the scoring load. Hopkins (12.1 ppg in 2022-23, second-team all-district) has led the Pioneers in scoring the past two seasons. Both he and Vick are four-year varsity players.

In addition, Barbour and Vick are long-time AAU teammates who have played together since the fifth grade.

Patriot will face numerous tests this season. Playing more private schools, the Pioneers have their toughest non-district schedule in Rivers' eight years as head coach. The Pioneers open Saturday at Princess Anne High School in Virginia Beach against defending Class 5 state champion Woodside.

Patriot also faces state quarterfinalist and regional

BOYS

1. PATRIOT (27-4)

The Pioneers return two starters and 11 players overall, including six seniors from last season's Class 6 state runner-up.

In addition, the six-time defending Cedar Run District regular-season champions added Osbourn transfer and Harvard commitment Tey Barbour.

Isaiah Vick, a 6-foot-7 senior and first-team all-district pick, and Dezmond Hopkins, a 6-foot senior guard, are the two returning starters.

Barbour and Mekhi Dillard will fill two of three open starting positions.

2. FOREST PARK (18-10)

The Bruins look to build on last season's breakthrough when they reached the state tournament for the first time, while also claiming their first district regular-season and tournament titles since the school opened in 2000.

Forest Park returns three starters: senior 6-4 guard Roman Hendrix, 6-7 junior center Brandon Edozie (14.1 ppg, second-team all-state) and 6-2 senior guard Jaiden McLendon-Parker.

Forest Park suffered a big loss with 5-10 junior point guard Ethan Salvatierra out for the season with a knee injury. Senior Joshua Sikyala (5-10) will replace Salvatierra as the starter.

3. POTOMAC (19-7)

The Panthers return three starters: 5-10 senior point guard Kenny DeGuzman (first-team all-district, 14.9 ppg), 6-3 senior guard Peter Mitchell (second-team all-district) and 6-5 senior guard Terrance Bethea (second-team all-district).

Potomac will count on 6-2 senior guard Jae Gowdy (transfer from Oakton), 6-5 senior forward Terrance Reese (military family transferring from Ja-



Forest Park center Brandon Edozie
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pan) and 6-3 freshman guard Zayvion Williams to contribute as well.

4. FREEDOM-WOODBRIDGE (13-9)

For the third straight season, the Eagles return their top two scorers in senior guards Tavarres Riley and Shamar Sisco.

The 6-1 Riley averaged 29.5 points a game in earning first-team all-state honors for the Region B semifinalists, while the 5-10 Sisco averaged 22.3 points a game.

5. GAINESVILLE (17-8)

The Cardinals lost their top scorer after Grant Polk transferred to St. Albans in Washington. The 6-7 senior wing averaged a team-high 18 points last season.

Gainesville still returns three starters: 5-10 senior guard Trevor Moody, 5-10 senior guard Noah Arterbery and 6-5 junior forward Preston White.

2022-23 records in parentheses

GIRLS

1. OSBOURN PARK (23-5)

Osbourn Park graduated two all-state performers in Class 6 player of the year Alana Powell and second-team pick Kori Cole, but it remains the team to beat in Prince William County.

The Yellow Jackets return four players who started at one point or another last season in 6-2 junior forward Alex Brown, 5-6 senior guard Angie Yann, 5-7 sophomore guard Jayel West and 5-8 sophomore Keyarah Rainey.

West and Rainey were second-team all-Cedar Run District selections, and Brown has six Division I offers so far – from St. John's, Monmouth, Loyola (Md.), Towson, William & Mary and Radford.

Look for freshman Payton Walters (5-6 guard) to make an immediate impact.

2. GAINESVILLE (23-5)

Second-team all-state selection Madison McKenzie (5-8 senior guard and Christopher Newport commitment) leads the way for the Class 6 state quarterfinalist. A combo guard who can score anywhere and defend as well, McKenzie averaged a team-high 14.6 points a game last season.

Peyton White, a 6-1 sophomore forward, Aashi Chhabra (5-5 senior guard) and Ella Nhek (5-3 senior guard) are also returning starters.

3. COLGAN (16-10)

The Sharks return four starters from last season's Class 6 region semifinalist: 5-4 senior guard Bea Quiroz, 5-7 junior guard Mariah Barksdale, 5-10 junior forward Audrey Williams and 5-8 senior forward Brianna Long.

Long, a first-team all-district selection, is a strong presence in the post. Williams, a second-team all-district



Osbourn Park's Keyarah Rainey
DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

choice, is a skilled and hardworking player who can rebound as well as convert the 3-pointer.

4. PATRIOT (17-8)

The Pioneers' top returner is their best player from last season and only returning starter: 5-11 senior forward/guard Ella Negron.

A first-team, all-district selection, Negron averaged 15.8 points last season. She has committed to Division III Christopher Newport and is the top returning girls scorer in Prince William.

5. POTOMAC (15-7)

Quiana Kizer takes over at her alma mater as the Panthers' new head coach.

The Panthers return two starters from last season's 12-0 Cardinal District regular-season champions: 5-8 junior point guard Olivea Puller (second-team all-district) and 5-9 junior guard Taylor Allen (first-team all-district).

2022-23 records in parentheses

PATRIOT » FROM PAGE 13

runner-up Forest Park, Class 5 state quarterfinalist Stone Bridge and Hayfield, as well as Riverdale Baptist (27-4 last season) and Grace Brethren (24-11).

And in perhaps a preview of a potential state final, Patriot hosts South Lakes on Dec. 19. The Seahawks feature returning first-team all-state selection Jordan Scott from last season's state semifinalist. The junior is rated the No. 2 recruit in Virginia for the class of 2025 by 247Sports.

If both Patriot and South Lakes win their respective regions, they would not meet again until the state final. If one of those two programs is the region runner-up and the other a region champion, they would meet in the state quarterfinals.

Rivers embraces the challenge of beefing up the level of competition and

raising standards in making Patriot a state power. It was the former Potomac High School standout's goal when he took over at Patriot for the 2016-17 season. And nothing has changed since then as the Pioneers have won six straight Cedar Run District regular-season titles, while averaging 21 wins over the past five seasons.

For all of Patriot's success, though, Rivers stays on his players about maintaining their focus and avoiding complacency. Opponents look forward to the chance of beating Patriot, and that will increase this season with higher expectations following them.

So with more attention comes more emphasis on doing the little things, from going after a loose ball or remembering to get back on defense. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted.



Isaiah Vick is one of two returning starters for Patriot.

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Talent helps, but that mindset makes a difference as well. Patriot has both. And that's why the Pioneers are mentioned as

a favorite to win states.

"It's a testament to these kids to be one of those teams," Rivers said.

MR. DEPENDABLE

Trent Hayes is Brentsville's most versatile player

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Request Trent Hayes' assistance on the football field and he will help anyway he can.

On defense as a safety. On special teams as a snapper or holder. Or on offense as a wide receiver and backup quarterback. No matter the job, Hayes is always available.

"If you asked him to clean the tables in the cafeteria, he'd do it," said Loren White, the Tigers' head coach.

So when the Tigers needed Hayes to step in as Brentsville's starting quarterback for the Class 3, Region B final Nov. 24, the senior assumed his new role in the same manner as he did everything else: Poised and prepared.

In a thrilling finish, Hayes threw a game-winning 2-yard touchdown pass to a wide-open Tyler Owens with seven seconds left to give Brentsville a 30-28 victory over Armstrong and a third-straight region title.

With the win, Hayes will get his second career start at quarterback when the Tigers (12-1) host Lafayette on Saturday at 2 p.m. in the state semifinals. Hayes replaced Caleb Alexander, who injured his knee in Brentsville's 28-7 win over Kettle Run in the region semifinals Nov. 17. A first-team all-district performer, Alexander has thrown for 1,972 yards and 19 touchdowns this season, while rushing for 627 yards and 12 touchdowns.

"[Trent] held it together," said Hayes' father, Troy. "My wife and I are nervous wrecks. But he did not flinch. He's just a coachable kid."

Hayes said he was nervous going into the Armstrong game because a loss would end the Tigers' season. Plus, he had thrown only seven passes in Brentsville's two prior games, including the region semifinal.

But he maintained his composure to throw three touchdown passes. White, for one, had no doubt Hayes would come through.

"He knows the system," White said. "He's ready to step in. He has that next-man-up mentality. And it's not all on him. He has weapons around him."

Those weapons include senior running back Nico Orlando (1,407 rushing yards, 15 rushing touchdowns), Owens (46 receptions, 852 yards, six TDs), freshman wide receiver Charles McCullough (24 receptions, 604 yards, 7 TDs), junior wide receiver Wyatt Vonderhaar (16 receptions, 242 yards, four TDs) and senior running back Blake Fletcher (seven rushing touchdowns).

The 5-11, 175-pound Hayes began focusing on other positions midway through his junior season when it became



Brentsville quarterback Trent Hayes holds the region trophy following the Tigers' 30-28 win over Armstrong Nov. 24.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA



Brentsville's Trent Hayes threw three touchdown passes in the region final. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

apparent Alexander was entrenched as the starting quarterback. This season, Hayes was a second-team all-district all-purpose selection on defense. On offense, he has caught 30 passes for 400 yards and two touchdowns. The only time Hayes isn't on the field is for kickoffs.

"I accepted that," Hayes said of the quarterback situation. "I needed to be more versatile."

Troy's philosophy also helped his son. "I told [him] to be a football player, not a position player," Troy said.

No player on Brentsville's roster has a deeper connection to the school than Hayes.

His paternal grandparents met as teachers at Brentsville. All four of Roger and Diana Hayes' sons graduated from the Nokesville school as well, including Troy in 1994. And the Hayes' home, bought by Roger in 1968 and located

in Nokesville near the railroad tracks, remains in the family to this day.

Troy football played for the Tigers, as did his three brothers. Trent Hayes' older brother, Guy, is a former Brentsville quarterback who was the district offensive player of the year in 2019 and now plays at Shenandoah University. Both brothers were Brentsville ball boys before joining the junior varsity team as eighth-graders since the local middle school has no football team.

In addition, Troy has been the Tigers' quarterback coach for 13 seasons under four different head coaches, including White. Troy also teaches art and computer graphics at Brentsville.

When White got the head coaching job going into the 2021 season, he made sure to keep Hayes on his staff.

"He's a teacher at [Brentsville] and has those community relationships," White said.

CLASS 3 STATE SEMIFINALS

» **Who:** Lafayette (11-2) at Brentsville (12-1)

» **When:** Saturday, 2 p.m.

» **Tickets:** \$10 apiece and must be purchased at <https://gofan.co/vhsl>

» **Next up:** The Lafayette-Brentsville winner faces the William Byrd (12-1)-Liberty Christian (12-0) winner in the state final Dec. 9 at 5 p.m. at Liberty University

Follow @InsideNoVA for updates during the game and InsideNoVa.com for a game story.

FAMILY TIES

Trent Hayes has deep roots at Brentsville

» His paternal grandparents (Roger and Diana) met at the Nokesville-based school as teachers

» His father (Troy) and his three uncles are all Brentsville graduates who played football for the Tigers. Troy also teaches at Brentsville and is in his 13th season as the Tigers' quarterback coach

» His older brother, Guy, graduated from Brentsville in 2021 and was the district offensive player of the year in 2019

Brentsville has never played for a state football championship after losing in the semifinals the past two seasons. In his new role, Hayes hopes to produce a different result.

"It feels great," Hayes said of being in this position. "It's everything I dreamed of. I want to come in and take that next step."

Preston is glad he returned to Freedom

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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By transferring to St. Frances Academy in Baltimore last spring, JuJu Preston thought he would enhance his recruiting profile because the national football powerhouse was filled with major Division I prospects.

But competition for playing time was stiff. Instead of being a go-to wide receiver like he was at Freedom, Preston discovered he would have to fight for minutes.

All of this forced Preston to rethink his decision after initially announcing March 13 he would leave Freedom for St. Frances.

Realizing he had made a mistake, Preston called Freedom head coach Darryl Overton before the school year ended in June and told him he wanted to come back to his former school. Overton gladly welcomed him back with no hard feelings.

“He didn’t feel right not being here,” Overton said. “Kids are used to being invested in for everything. It’s important to see you don’t have to go to a private school for [scholarship] offers. Schools here in Prince William County have everything you need.”

Preston’s recruitment remains active. He has 18 offers, including ones from Clemson, Michigan, Penn State, U.Va. and Virginia Tech. Preston said he hopes to announce his eight finalists sometime in December.

“I was thinking too fast,” Preston said of his transfer to St. Frances. “I thought it would be a bigger stage and impact my recruitment.”

Preston has picked off where he left off in the Eagles’ high-flying offense. In 2022, he caught 48 passes for 921 yards and 21 touchdowns (tied for fourth all-time in the state) to earn first-team all-state honors as a junior and help Freedom set a state record for most points, go 15-0 and win the Class 6 state title

This season, he has caught 57 passes for 1,118 yards



JuJu Preston caught two touchdown passes in Freedom’s 50-7 win over Battlefield Nov. 25 in the Class 6 Region B final.
DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

and 17 touchdowns for a 12-0 Freedom squad that is the favorite to repeat as state champs. The Eagles host Madison (12-1) on Saturday at 2 p.m. in the state semifinals. The game is a rematch of last season’s state final, which Freedom won 48-14.

With his elite speed and sure hands, Preston is always a threat as a playmaker. But he’s become even a bigger force to contend with in the postseason.

In Freedom’s three-game march to the region title, Preston, whose given name is Carleton, caught 20 passes for 374 yards and seven touchdowns. On Nov. 25, he hauled in six passes for 121 yards and two touchdowns as Freedom defeated previously undefeated Battlefield 50-7 in the region championship. The Bobcats, who came in allowing only 6.8 points a game, suffered their worst loss

CLASS 6 STATE SEMIFINALS

» **Who:** Madison (12-1) at Freedom (12-0)

» **When:** Saturday, 2 p.m.

» **Tickets:** \$10 apiece and must be purchased at gofan.co/vhsl

» **Next up:** The Madison-Freedom winner faces the Lake Braddock (11-2)-Highland Springs (12-1) winner in the state final Dec. 9 at 11:30 a.m. at the University of Virginia
Follow @InsideNoVA for updates during the game and InsideNoVa.com for a game story.

since a 51-0 defeat to Westfield in 2019.

Besides his quickness, the 5-10 Preston is fearless once he has the ball. Throw to him outside or inside. It doesn’t matter. He will take a hit and keep moving.

“When the ball is in his hands, he doesn’t slow down to change direction,” Overton said.

It helps as well that Preston had played with most of Freedom’s other skill players for years as members of Overton’s Playmakers youth football organization.

Although his base high school is Potomac, Preston can play for Freedom because he’s enrolled in the school’s Environmental and Natural Sciences specialty program. Prince William County Public Schools allow incoming high school freshmen to attend a high school outside of their zone if they are admitted into that school’s specialty program.

Preston started as a running back before Overton switched him to wide receiver coming into freshman year to get him more touches. Quarterback Tristan Evans-Trujillo benefitted from the move as well. The senior has tossed 47 touchdown passes this season and is two shy of the state career record.

“We have a good connection,” Evans-Trujillo said. “We know what to do.”

HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL SCHEDULE

» FRIDAY, DEC. 1

BOYS

John Paul the Great vs. Collegiate at the Potomac School Tournament, 4 p.m.

Colgan vs. Thomas Jefferson Science and Tech at Marshall HS, 6:30 p.m.

Battlefield vs. Chantilly, at South Lakes, 6 p.m.

Gainesville at South Lakes, 8 p.m.

Brentsville vs. Osbourn Park at Lightridge HS, 5:45 p.m.

Eastern View at Unity Reed, 7:30 p.m.

Freedom-Woodbridge vs. King George at Osbourn, 6 p.m.

John R. Lewis at Osbourn, 8 p.m.

GIRLS

John Paul the Great vs. Jackson-Reed at Flint Hill Tip-Off Tournament, 3 p.m.

Fairfax at Hylton, 6 p.m.

North Stafford at Battlefield, 7 p.m.

Colgan at Wakefield, 7 p.m.

Potomac at Osbourn Park, 7 p.m.

Warren County at Manassas Park, 7:15 p.m.

Gainesville vs. Hayfield at James

Madison, 7:30 p.m.

Rock Ridge at Gar-Field, 7:30 p.m.

» SATURDAY, DEC. 2

BOYS

John Paul the Great at the Potomac School Tournament

Patriot vs. Woodside at Princess Anne HS, 6 p.m.

Freedom-Woodbridge vs. John R. Lewis at Osbourn, noon

King George at Osbourn, 2 p.m.

Colgan at Marshall, 4 p.m.

Brentsville vs. Freedom-South Riding at Lightridge HS, noon

Osbourn Park at Lightridge, 2 p.m.

GIRLS

Gainesville at James Madison, 7:30 p.m.

Patriot at WT Woodson, 2:45 p.m.

Woodbridge vs. South County at West Springfield, 2 p.m.

John Paul the Great at Flint Hill Tip-Off Tournament

» MONDAY, DEC. 4

BOYS

Osbourn at Annandale, 6:30 p.m.

Fork Union at Woodbridge, 7 p.m.

James Monroe at Brentsville, 7 p.m.

Colonial Forge at Hylton, 7 p.m.

Bethel Academy at Unity Reed, 7:30 p.m.

Ballou at Potomac, 7:30 p.m.

Gainesville at Freedom-South Riding, 7 p.m.

West Springfield at Freedom-Woodbridge, 7:30 p.m.

GIRLS

Forest Park at Mountain View, 7 p.m.

Hylton at Patriot, 7 p.m.

Stafford at Manassas Park, 7:15 p.m.

Brentsville at James Monroe, 7:30 p.m.

» TUESDAY, DEC. 5

BOYS

Liberty-Bealeton at Osbourn Park, 7:45 p.m.

WT Woodson at Potomac, 7:30 p.m.

Gar-Field at Manassas Park, 7 p.m.

Hylton at North Stafford, 7 p.m.

Brentsville at Park View-Sterling, 7 p.m.

Battlefield at Colgan, 7:30 p.m.

Forest Park at Gainesville, 7:30 p.m.

John Paul the Great at Bishop O’Connell, 7:30 p.m.

GIRLS

John Paul the Great at Flint Hill, 5:45 p.m.

Woodbridge at Battlefield, 7 p.m.

Manassas Park at Gar-Field, 7 p.m.

West Potomac at Osbourn Park, 6 p.m.

Unity Reed at Brentsville, 7:30 p.m.

Osbourn at Wakefield, 6:30 p.m.

Potomac at Colonial Forge, 7:30 p.m.

» WEDNESDAY, DEC. 6

BOYS

Stafford at Woodbridge, 7:15 p.m.

Manassas Park at James Monroe, 7:15 p.m.

Colonial Forge at Unity Reed, 7:30 p.m.

GIRLS

Patriot at Colgan, 7 p.m.

Riverbend at Forest Park, 7 p.m.

Freedom-Woodbridge at Miller School, 7 p.m.

Freedom-South Riding at Gainesville, 7 p.m.

Hylton at North Stafford, 7 p.m.

Back to back

Brentsville and Freedom-Woodbridge successfully defended their region football titles last weekend and will both host state semifinal games this Saturday (see more details, Pages 15 and 16).

On Nov. 24, Brentsville needed a last-second touchdown pass to defeat Armstrong 30-28.

The following day, Freedom crushed previously undefeated Battlefield 50-7.

All photos by Doug Stroud | For InsideNoVa

 For more pictures, visit [INSIDENOVA.COM](https://www.insidenoVA.com)



Freedom's Jeffrey Overton Jr. ran for three touchdowns.



Battlefield's Brandon Binkowski (10) is upended after taking a hard hit from Freedom's Devin Reeves.



Brentsville head coach Loren White and Tyler Owens share a moment.



Brentsville's fans watched the Tigers advance to the state semifinals.



Brentsville's Nico Orlando ran for 176 yards.

Finding his 'Sweet Spot'

Gainesville's Preston Conder mixes faith and football

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Colton Kilmer drops back to pass while two defenders close in on him from either side.

With everything moving quickly and no time to spare, Kilmer has to think fast without losing his composure and forcing an ill-advised throw. It's a tall task for Gainesville's first-year varsity starter only three games into the season.

But Kilmer stays calm.

As he sorts through his options, the junior remembers what Preston Conder taught him when dealing with these types of situations: Solve the problem.

Heeding Conder's counsel, Kilmer avoids the sack and creates space by sprinting to the appropriate spot on the field. He then connects with Trevor Moody for a spot-on completion during the second half of Gainesville's eventual 34-20 win Sept. 8 at Woodbridge. Crisis averted.

Thrilled with Kilmer's decision-making, Conder explodes with pride from the sidelines. Kilmer, though, deflects Conder's praise.

"We do this every day," Kilmer reminds Conder in a matter-of-fact response that is a nod to Conder's coaching acumen.

Point taken. But Conder still bursts with excitement.

Moments like this are why Conder stayed in football instead of leaving it behind to concentrate full time on ministry. And moments like this are why the 30-year-old Manassas resident is making such a positive impact as the Cardinals' first-year quarterback coach.

"There was a time when I thought I'd have to give up football or focus on church," Conder said. "Things have come full circle."

QUARTERBACK CONNECTIONS

At Gainesville's first practice July 27, Kilmer knew two things about Conder, courtesy of head coach Dan Brunton's introduction: He was a pastor and played college football.

But Kilmer became intrigued after Conder started throwing the football.

"He had a cannon for an arm," Kilmer said.

Conder isn't one to talk about himself. In fact, the last thing Conder wants is to draw attention to his athletic exploits or be known as a name dropper.

But if pressed, he shares his background and extensive football network as a way to build relationships with others and talk about things that matter more than just mastering a tight spiral.

Growing up in Texas, where football is king and a breeding ground for quarterbacks, the 6-foot Conder played quarterback at two high schools and then at Division II Arkansas Tech.

As an adolescent, he was good friends and youth league teammates with Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Manziel. He received private throwing lessons from Kevin Murray, father of Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray. And he attended camps run by Steve Clarkson, one of the nation's top quarterback coaches.

Conder even has a connection with Patrick Mahomes – both attended Whitehouse High School in Whitehouse, Texas, but they never played together. Mahomes was two years younger than Conder, who left White-



Gainesville quarterback coach Preston Conder reviews plays with Colton Kilmer during the third quarter of the Cardinals' eventual 56-20 win over Potomac Aug. 26. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA



Preston Conder is the head pastor for New Life Christian Church's campus in Bristow. DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

house four weeks into his junior year and transferred to nearby Tyler Legacy High School (formerly Robert E. Lee) for athletic reasons he declined to elaborate on.

But Conder did work with Bobby Stroupe, Mahomes' personal trainer. Stroupe founded a company called ATHLETE Performance Enhancement Center. Conder trained under Stroupe in high school and then helped train quarterbacks for Stroupe during summers when he was home from college.

Much of Conder's quarterback philosophies come

THIS WEEK'S HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, SEPT. 29

- » Forest Park (3-2) at Freedom-Woodbridge (3-0), 7 p.m.
- » Unity Reed (0-4) at Battlefield (5-0), 7 p.m.
- » Liberty-Beaeton (3-2) at Brentsville (4-1), 7 p.m.
- » Colgan (2-2) vs. Gar-Field (1-3) at Forest Park HS, 7 p.m.
- » Osbourn Park (1-4) at Patriot (2-2), 7 p.m.
- » Potomac (1-4) at Hyllton (3-2), 7 p.m.
- » Fredericksburg Christian (4-0) at Saint John Paul the Great (1-3), 7 p.m.
- » Paul Charter School (1-4) at Manassas Park (0-4), 7 p.m.
- » Freedom-South Riding (0-5) at Osbourn (0-4), 7 p.m.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 30

- » Covenant (2-3) at Quantico (0-4), 1 p.m.

from Stroupe. In particular, Stroupe taught Conder a concept he calls the "8-point Vector."

The principle focuses on movement through the use of eight different options a quarterback can use when attempting a pass. The quarterback can do the traditional drop back, go straight forward or slide to the right or left. In addition, Stroupe wanted his students to use the angles between those various spots on the field.

Conder said the approach opened his eyes on how to maximize spacing to create more chances to execute a play.

Learning all these ideas and how they work inspired Conder to consider coaching full time. He wanted to help young adults and thought this might be the best way to do it.

While he started some games at Arkansas Tech over his first three seasons, Conder realized he was never go-

ing to play in the NFL. Instead he focused on becoming a coach in the nation's most competitive college football league: the Southeastern Conference.

To pursue that goal, Conder transferred to Ole Miss for the spring semester of his junior year and served as a volunteer student assistant under head coach Hugh Freeze. He enjoyed the experience, but he figured out quickly this line of work was not for him.

"I realized how hard a life commitment it was," Conder said. "I wasn't sure I wanted to sell myself to it. The cost was too high."

Instead, Conder began pondering another vocation: Ministry. While living at an Ole Miss campus ministry house, Conder discovered a hunger for the Bible and a desire to go deeper in his faith. Those pursuits became more important than throwing a football.

But was coaching still in his future? Conder wasn't sure.

FINDING A BALANCE

God wasn't always first in Conder's life.

Growing up, he attended church with his family, but Conder had no relationship with Jesus. He checked the box on Sundays then went about his business. He considered himself a good person who tried to do the right thing. Plus, his life centered around football. That was enough.

Freshman year in college, though, Conder's priorities shifted. Involved with a campus ministry, he underwent a transformation that led him giving his life to Jesus. Football still mattered, but now Jesus took center stage.

"It hit me that God was saying, 'You are broken and you have hurts and hangups that need to change,'" Conder said. "Football was No. 1 and faith was a nice add on ... One of my biggest frustrations was that I had great potential, but never lived up to it. It made me realize football was not all my life. It's a great game, but a terrible god."



Preston Conder played quarterback at the same high school as Patrick Mahomes.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Conder left Ole Miss and returned to Arkansas Tech in the fall of his senior year. But he was unclear about his next steps when he graduated in 2015 with a degree in social studies education.

Did he want to coach at the high school level or become a pastor? One morning at breakfast, Conder's mentor, Neil Reynolds, told him to consider both, with ministry taking the lead.

"You could be a coach and impact many athletes or be a minister who equips coaches, lawyers and doctors and all walks of life so you can impact more people," Conder remembers Reynolds telling him.

Conder did a year and a half apprenticeship under Reynolds at Renew College Ministry at Arkansas Tech. In 2017, he followed Reynolds to University Church in Tuscaloosa, Ala., which serves the University of Alabama.

He liked his time in Alabama and kept his hand in football as the wide receivers coach at American Christian Academy.

But he remained conflicted about whether he was making a difference or not in his ministry. In what he called a

low point during the pandemic, Conder stood on the American Christian Academy field one day wondering what to do.

Then came a text message from Bobby Harrington, whom Conder had met at a training session for pastors Harrington held at the church he leads, Harpeth Community in Franklin, TN.

Harrington was reaching out to let Conder know New Life Christian Church in Northern Virginia was looking for a pastor for its Linton Hall campus that met Sundays at Piney Branch Elementary School in Bristow.

New Life's approach of combining sports and faith to connect with people appealed to Conder. To him, it was a different way of doing church. New Life's headquarters is in an old Anheuser-Busch distribution center in Chantilly that houses an 83,000-square-foot indoor sports complex called the nZone. Sunday services are held in a gymnasium.

A potential move meant leaving his Southern roots, as well as those of wife, Meg. But they liked New Life. The feeling was mutual. The church announced his hiring in July 2022.

AN OPPORTUNITY ARRIVES

While his job as a pastor came first, Conder still wanted to stay in football.

Patriot hired him in 2022 to help with the Pioneers' freshman quarterback, but he had to step down a few weeks later to help New Life fill a void due to a staff departure.

Once his schedule freed up, Conder went back to looking for a coaching position.

He emailed Bruton, the Gainesville head coach, after the 2022 season ended to see whether he had any openings. Bruton gave Conder three options: he could serve as the junior varsity offensive coordinator, help with the freshman team or coach the varsity quarterbacks. The first two jobs required less of a time commitment, but Conder chose the quarterback position.

The decision forced him to give up some other things and manage his time even more. But he felt it was the best fit. And it was good timing.

A former high school quarterback in North Carolina, Bruton had always coached quarterbacks while overseeing programs at Forest Park, Briar Woods and the first two seasons at Gainesville. But his expansive list of responsibilities as a head coach forced him to relinquish the duties.

Starting out, Bruton kept a close eye on Conder, wanting to make sure Conder implemented Bruton's wishes.

Bruton, who calls the offensive plays, stepped in for a brief moment one time to show Conder what he wanted. But for the most part, he leaves Conder alone.

Conder appreciates Bruton's hands-off approach, trusting him enough to coach the quarterbacks without constant oversight. He also appreciates and seeks Bruton's input.

"He's the architect of a system that gives quarterbacks answers and options," Conder said.

Working with Kilmer and sophomore David Howe, Conder has a structured plan during the first three days of practice each week that focuses on mechanics, footwork and game-like situations. More than anything, Conder wants the quarterbacks as prepared as possible to handle whatever the defense presents. While some things are scripted, others are not – so Kilmer and Howe learn how to react.

During the game, Conder is on the sidelines. When the defense is on the field, Conder sits on the bench with the starting quarterback and reviews previous plays on an iPad when he's not filtering Bruton's words.

"He gives a lighter delivery to the [quarterbacks] and how it's received when I'm high-strung in the moment," Bruton said.

It's an exciting time at Gainesville. The third-year program is off to a 5-0 start and in good position to reach the postseason. That's due in large part to the quarterback play. Kilmer and Howe have combined for 18 touchdown passes and two interceptions along with 1,053 yards, while rushing for 378 yards and two touchdowns.

Kilmer said his work with Conder on moving in the pocket as well as throwing on the run has benefitted him the most.

"That's something I'm not used to working on so consistently and so far it's shown to be a big part of my game this year," Kilmer said.

It's taken some soul-searching for Conder to reach this point in his life. But he's discovered a balance that keeps his priorities in line without having to give up one for the other.

Conder wants the players to see him as Coach Conder on the field, not Pastor Conder. But he is open to talking about more than Xs and Os if someone wants to share about something going on in their life. To him, this situation provides the best of both worlds.

"If I can live out my faith and be involved in football, that's the sweet spot for me," Conder said.

The sacred and the secular working in harmony. He's come full circle.



Preston Conder (left) played quarterback at Division II Arkansas Tech.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA



Preston Conder spent a semester on Hugh Freeze's staff at Ole Miss.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Conder connects beyond the field

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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One day at a Gainesville football practice, Preston Conder heard one of the players ask his teammates “Who did?” Then the other players responded, “God did.”

Conder wasn't sure whether the players were serious, but he soon found out.

He approached the player leading the chant and asked if he would be interested in leading an optional Bible study at Gainesville for any player interested in coming. Another player overheard Conder and asked if he could lead a time of prayer before games.

The initial gathering for the player-led Bible study drew around four players. But since then, it has grown to 50. The total includes varsity and junior varsity players who meet in a Gainesville classroom for an hour after practice the day before a game for what head football coach Dan Bruton described as “Our FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes] for football.”

“In this generation, there's so much brokenness, but they are hungry,” said Conder, who is the head pastor for New Life Christian Church's campus in Bristow while also serving as Gainesville's first-year varsity quarterback coach. “God is awakening a movement across the nation and you are seeing it bursting at Gainesville through these student-led studies.”

Conder's only responsibility is to open and close the door for the players' Bible study. He also checks in with the leaders afterward to see how things went and if they have any questions.

Quarterback Colton Kilmer, who is Catholic, had never done a Bible study before. But he loves the opportunity to open

up about life with his teammates with the study providing the impetus.

“It was a new experience for me,” Kilmer said. “I chose to participate so I would have the opportunity to grow closer to God and build a stronger relationship with Him.”

Conder recalled one session when the players were discussing chapter 1 from the Book of Joshua. The section focuses on God reminding Joshua to remain strong and courageous and rely on Him in facing the challenge of leading the Israelites to the Promised Land.

The topic of facing challenges spoke to the players in attendance as they opened up about personal issues. In particular, they found a shared anxiety they felt as athletes.

“There was this fear that they would be found out that they are not good players,” Conder recalled. “Their identity was wrapped up in performance.”

Conder leads the Gainesville coaches in an optional Bible study when they meet Sunday evenings at the high school before discussing the previous game and preparing for the next one. Conder asked Bruton if he could lead the study.

Sometimes, there have been as many as five coaches who attend. Sometimes, it's just Conder and Bruton, who is a Christian.

Using the Bible, the coaches discuss marriage, parenting and servant leadership. The get-togethers are one of several ways in which the coaches can bond so they can be a “model for what we want the players to look like as a team,” Bruton said.

“It's good for the coaches to have relationships outside of football and to have conversations to talk about other than football,” Bruton said.

Forest Park beats Potomac in fanless finish

FOREST PARK 13, POTOMAC 7

After an intermission of four days put their immediate plans on hold, Forest Park returned to the field on Tuesday night to complete their game against Potomac.

Picking up where they left off on Friday, Forest Park's ball-control game finished off the remaining five minutes and 37 seconds en route to the win. Between Friday and Tuesday, Forest Park's Landon Hunt totaled 254 rushing yards on 42 carries.

The game ended early Sept. 22 for precautionary reasons after a fight broke out outside the stadium (For more on what happened, go to InsideNoVa.com). The game concluded Tuesday without any fans in attendance due to the brief amount of time left.

BATTLEFIELD 40, FREEDOM-SOUTH RIDING 0

After leading 6-0 at halftime, Battlefield (1-0, 5-0) recorded five of its second-half touchdowns off four rushes and a 45-yard interception return by Cole Woodson against the winless Eagles.



BRUCE BANNING

Braden Boggs got things going with a 3-yard touchdown run to start the third followed by Bryce Banning's 26-yard run and then Woodson's interception (his second of the season).

In the fourth, quarterback Calum O'Shea ran for two yards and Banning added a 45-yard touchdown run.

GAINESVILLE 59, OSBOURN PARK 0

David Howe threw for three touchdowns and Jayden Bell and Aidan McClafferty scored two each as visiting Gainesville remained unbeaten with a Cedar Run District victory Sept. 22.

Howe finished 10 of 15 passing for 140 yards and no interceptions. He also ran three times for 38 yards and a touchdown. Bell ran 13 times for 138 yards and two scores. Khali

Wilson added five rushes for 66 yards and a touchdown.

McClafferty caught three passes for 82 yards and two scores. Trevor Moody caught two passes for 15 yards and one score. Wyatt Bach returned Max Desir's blocked punt for a touchdown. Nico Sanchez was 8 for 8 in point-after attempts and converted a 27-yard field goal.

BRENTSVILLE 34, MERIDIAN 13

Caleb Alexander threw for one touchdown and ran for two more Sept. 22 as the host Tigers (1-0, 4-1) won their Class 3 Northwestern District opener.

Alexander finished the game 9 of 19 passing for 155 yards and with six carries for 36 rushing yards. Nico Orlando (12-70) and Blake Fletcher (5-64) each added a rushing touchdown.

Tyler Owens caught a team-high five passes for 119 yards and one touchdown. Owens also had six tackles and one interception. Orlando led the Tigers with 11 tackles.

FREEDOM-WOODBRIDGE 60, GAR-FIELD 0

Tristan Evans-Trujillo threw for 427 yards on 18 of 23 passing for five touchdowns Sept. 22. He also ran for a touchdown.

Kam Courtney caught seven passes for 151 yards and three touchdowns and EJ Red caught five passes for 181 yards and one touchdown.



TRISTAN EVANS-TRUJILLO

PATRIOT 48, UNITY REED 0

Tyler Knutson threw for 177 yards and three touchdowns Sept. 22 for the Pioneers (2-0, 2-2). Knutson was 12 of 17 with one interception.

Jackson McCarter ran 10 times for 63 yards and two touchdowns. He also caught a touchdown pass. Payton Holmes added 60 rushing yards on six carries and a touchdown. Blake McNabb was Patriot's leading receiver with five receptions for



Woodbridge's Jady Lawrence-Scruggs returns an interception against Hylton. **STEVE BARRY**

84 yards and a touchdown.

WOODBIDGE 27, HYLTON 0

Following a scoreless game at halftime, host Woodbridge received a big second half outburst ending Hylton's three-game winning streak Sept. 22.

Senior Denzel Lambert was the key spark plug for the Vikings as he had a big punt return and receiving touchdown.

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL STANDINGS

(Through Sept. 28)

CARDINAL DISTRICT

Team	District	Overall	Points for	Points against
Freedom	1-0	3-0	143	27
Forest Park	1-0	3-2	78	99
Woodbridge	1-0	2-3	110	144
Colgan	0-0	2-2	119	86
Hylton	0-1	3-2	81	110
Gar-Field	0-1	1-3	81	132
Potomac	0-1	1-4	76	155

CEDAR RUN DISTRICT

Patriot	2-0	2-2	116	56
Battlefield	1-0	5-0	253	34
Gainesville	1-0	5-0	217	66
Osborn	0-0	0-4	22	127
Osborn Park	0-1	1-4	61	204
Unity Reed	0-1	0-4	19	151
Freedom-SR	0-2	0-5	21	177

CLASS 3 NORTHWESTERN DISTRICT

Kettle Run	1-0	4-0	203	71
Brentsville	1-0	4-1	138	69
Warren County	1-0	1-3	63	126
Meridian	0-1	2-2	68	78
Fauquier	0-1	1-3	89	145
Skyline	0-1	0-4	56	170

OTHERS

John Paul	n/a	1-3	95	153
Quantico	n/a	0-4	6	133
Manassas Park	n/a	0-4	16	219

LAST WEEK'S RESULTS

FRIDAY, SEPT. 22

Battlefield 40, Freedom-South Riding 0
 Patriot 48, Unity Reed 0
 Gainesville 59, Osborn Park 0
 Brentsville 34, Meridian 13
 Woodbridge 27, Hylton 0
 Freedom-Woodbridge 60, Gar-Field 0
 St. Albans 50, John Paul the Great 13
 Manassas Park at Armstrong/Kennedy (cancelled due to weather)

SATURDAY, SEPT. 23

Virginia Episcopal at Quantico (cancelled due to weather)

TUESDAY, SEPT. 26

Forest Park 13, Potomac 7

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

TOP PERFORMANCES

RUSHING

Landon Hunt (Forest Park) 42-254, 1 TD vs. Potomac
 Sage Davis (Battlefield) 15-191 vs. Freedom-South Riding
 Jayden Bell (Gainesville) 13-138, 2 TDs vs. Osborn Park

PASSING

Tristan Evans-Trujillo (Freedom-Woodbridge) 18-23-0, 427, 5 TDs vs. Gar-Field
 Tyler Knutson (Patriot) 12-17-1, 177, 3 TDs vs. Unity Reed
 Denari Hill (Woodbridge) 10-21-2, 160, 2 TDs vs. Hylton
 Caleb Alexander (Brentsville) 9-19-0, 155, 1 TD vs. Meridian

David Howe (Gainesville) 10-15-0, 140, 3 TDs vs. Osborn Park

Calum O'Shea (Battlefield) 11-20-1, 128, 1 TD vs. Freedom-South Riding

RECEIVING

Kam Courtney (Freedom-Woodbridge) 7-151, 3 TDs vs. Gar-Field

EJ Reid (Freedom-Woodbridge) 5-181, 1 TD vs. Gar-Field

Tyler Owens (Brentsville) 5-119, 1 TD vs. Meridian

Blake McNabb (Patriot) 5-84, 1 TD vs. Unity Reed

Moses Kamara (Woodbridge) 5-50, 1 TD vs. Hylton



Forest Park's Landon Hunt (8)

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

It's official now

After starting Sept. 22, Forest Park finished its game Tuesday against visiting Potomac. The Bruins won their third straight with a 13-7 victory. The game was halted Sept. 22 after a fight broke out outside the stadium. The game then resumed Tuesday without any fans since there was only 5:37 left in the fourth quarter.

Photos by Doug Stroud | For InsideNoVa

 For more pictures, visit [INSIDENOVA.COM](https://www.insidenova.com)



The Potomac at Forest Park game finished Sept. 26 with no fans in the stadium.

ERIC HOBECK



Potomac's Damian McDonald (10) is brought down short of the line of scrimmage Sept. 22.



Forest Park's offensive line sets up against Potomac Sept. 22.



Forest Park's Landon Hunt (8) and Nathaniel Wright (60) point to the sky after Hunt's touchdown Sept. 22.



Forest Park's Jaiden McLendon-Parker celebrates after a big defensive stand Sept. 22.

BACK-TO-BACK . . .



Freedom head coach Darryl Overton (middle) celebrates after the Eagles defeated Highland Springs 42-34.
DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Freedom holds off Highland Springs for second straight Class 6 state title

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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CHARLOTTESVILLE

Kam Courtney stood off to the side by himself while his teammates swarmed the middle of the field, hugging and laughing with each other.

The Freedom-Woodbridge senior would join them in a moment. But for now, Courtney, his face flush from crying, needed time to himself to soak in the dueling emotions tugging at his heart.

His high school football career was over. But, man, what a way to end it.

In the game fans wanted to see when the season started back in late August, Freedom defeated Highland Springs 42-34 to claim its second straight Class 6 state title Dec 9 at the University of Virginia.

The Eagles are the first Prince William County high school football program to claim back-to-back state titles since Hynton did it in 1998 and 1999.

The showdown between the defend-

ing Class 5 and 6 state champions lived up to its billing. After the Eagles jumped out to a 28-0 second-quarter lead that led fans to consider the possibility of a running clock starting in the second half, Highland Springs battled back to get within eight points twice before falling short.

Courtney played a big role in keeping the Springers (13-2) at bay and helping Freedom (14-0) win its 29th straight game. The University of Indiana commitment ran for two touchdowns, converted a critical first down on a fourth-and-1 and grabbed an interception.

So much to take in. And so much to let out. Why not savor it?

“This was a little different than last year,” Courtney said. “I knew I was coming back to play one more season. It’s overwhelming.”

Tristan Evans-Trujillo understood. His face was streaked with tears as well – for all the same reasons.

With all of its key skill players back from last season’s 15-0 state champion, Freedom was expected to be in this position. But it’s one thing to say you will do it and another to see actually happen.

For Evans-Trujillo, the senior quarterback who finished his high school career as the state’s all-time leader in career touchdowns (121 this season) and single-season touchdown passes (61, last season), Saturday’s outcome was a crowning achievement.

He posed for photos with his teammates and made sure he took, at his request, one with his linemen. They lifted him up and then, under center Walter Hughes’ specific instructions, let their quarterback down gently. Evans-Trujillo also gave credit to Overton and most all of to God.

“With God, all things are possible,” Evans-Trujillo said.

On Saturday, nothing was certain until time ran out after Highland Springs, with the ball, got a first down at its own 30-yard line after a pass completion.

“I was a little nervous until the clock hit zero,”



Jeffrey Overton Jr. jumps over a Highland Springs defender en route to one of his two touchdown runs.
DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

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... TO-BACK?

Can Freedom pull off a three-peat?

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Graduation will hit Freedom's football team hard. The two-time defending Class 6 state champions will return only four starters on offense and four on defense from a program that has won 29 straight games – and they will face a challenging non-district schedule again next season with rematches against programs like DeMatha and Varina.

But despite the impending losses, there's still plenty to work with as Freedom eyes doing something only one other Class 6 program in Virginia (Westfield) has ever done: win three straight state titles.

For openers, two of the returning starters are all-state performers Jeffrey Overton Jr. and JuJu Preston.

Juniors who play on both sides of the ball, Overton totaled 2,355 rushing yards and 42 rushing touchdowns this season, while Preston caught 67 passes for 1,295 yards and 19 touchdowns. Overton is only 415 yards from becoming Prince William County's all-time leading rusher.

Preston has already committed to Clemson, while Overton has a host of scholarship offers from Power Five colleges, including his most recent one from Ohio State, which he announced Monday.

In addition to playing on offense, the two also play in the secondary. Overton was a first-team all-region defensive back this season, and Preston rotated in as well to the point that he was essentially a fifth starter at times

back there.

The two are even a passing-receiving threat. Overton connected with Preston on a 53-yard touchdown pass Saturday in Freedom's 42-34 win over Highland Springs in the state final.

"JuJu and Jeff are enough," Darryl Overton said. "They are a lot to deal with."

In addition to Overton and Preston, Freedom brings back junior offensive linemen Jonah Fuga and Justyce Robinson, first- and second-team all-district picks.

On defense, first-team all-district junior linebackers Devin Reeves and Braxton Hunt return, along with junior defensive back Jachai Hughes (second-team all-district). Hughes returned an interception for a 38-yard touchdown in the state final.

As for up-and-coming players, Overton is high on 6-4, 165-pound freshman Tyson Washington and 5-7, 155-pound junior Derek Moore to complement Preston at the wideout positions after the graduations of EJ Reid, Aaron Duncan and Kam Courtney.

Overton said Washington will be a Power Five recruit and Moore would be a starter on any other team. Moore recorded three touchdowns this season and caught 10 passes.

Sophomore Daylen King (6-1, 270) should step in as one of the starting offensive linemen. Freshman Karmine Stanley (5-10, 160), the younger brother of senior all-district lineman Ju'elz Stanley, is another player Overton said will be a Power Five recruit. Karmine Stanley is listed as an athlete on Freedom's 2023 roster.



Freedom's Caleb Tucker is next in line to start at quarterback. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Freshman defensive lineman Alpha Conteh (6-3, 200) will make an impact as well and is another projected Power 5 recruit.

Junior running back/defensive back Darrell Fansie (5-9, 165) will contribute. He ran for one touchdown this season.

Sophomore Caleb Tucker (5-11, 190) is next in line to start as Freedom's quarterback with record-setting senior Tristan Evans-Trujillo graduating. Tucker has been Evans-Trujillo's backup the past two seasons.

With Freedom leading by such large margins in most of its games this season, Tucker saw action in seven contests as a reserve, going 18 of 29 passing for 320 yards with one interception and three touchdowns.

"[Caleb] is physically gifted," Darryl Overton said. "He has the throwing power and the arm strength. He has to mature and get some of the leadership Tristan had. The physical ability is there. I need to see him take strides with the intangibles."

FREEDOM » FROM PAGE 18

Evans-Trujillo said. "Then a wave of emotions hit me. It came to me. It's over. It's a great way to finish."

A FORMIDABLE FOE

Head coach Darryl Overton could not have been prouder of his team. He has coached many of these players for years, starting in his youth organization.

Overton knew Highland Springs presented a formidable foe. And indeed the Springers were, scoring the most points on a Freedom team since the Eagles lost to Stone Bridge 38-35 on Sept. 10, 2021.

Highland Springs also forced Freedom to do something it had not done (gasp) in 12 games: Punt.

In addition, questions lingered about how Freedom would react in a pressure-packed situation against a formidable opponent. Would the Eagles cave when pressed or persevere?

Overton knew the answer. He had full confidence in his players and they responded in kind.

Highland Springs scored back-to-back touchdowns in just under two minutes to make the score 28-13 with 6:04 left in the second quarter.

Still up by 15 just under four minutes into the third quarter, Freedom went to its diverse and deep offensive playbook to call on Jeffrey Overton and have him

throw to JuJu Preston.

Seeing Highland Springs closing on the line of scrimmage, Darryl Overton called for the ball to be snapped directly to his nephew. In the state semifinals, the Eagles tried the same play with Jeffrey Overton only to see the ball hang in the air and fall way short.

"It was a duck," said Jeffrey Overton, goggles hanging off the side of his head in preparation for a possible dousing during the post-game celebration.

This time was different. He hit Preston in stride along the Freedom sideline. The Clemson University commitment took it from there. With an outstretched left hand, Preston grabbed the ball at the 30-yard line, pulled it into his chest and ran untouched into the end zone. EJ Reid's extra point gave Freedom a 35-13 lead with 8:47 left in the third.

A RISK PAYS OFF

Courtney provided the second momentum-swinging moment. After Highland Springs closed within eight (35-27) with 1:17 remaining in the third, Freedom faced a big decision to start the fourth quarter: Go for it on fourth-and-1 at its own 39 or punt?

Never averse to taking risks, the Eagles went for it. Courtney took the hand-off and, aided by great blocking, burst



Freedom prepares in the locker room before the start of the state final. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

through a hole on his left side.

He saw nothing between him and the end zone except an official. Courtney attempted to sidestep the official, but the official moved the same way. With nowhere to go, Courtney ran into the official. The collision slowed him down and allowed Highland Springs to tackle him.

Undeterred, Courtney ran the ball two plays later for a 49-yard touchdown that gave Freedom a 42-27 lead.

As he continued to sort through his emotions after the game, Courtney still faces big decisions. This weekend, he will return to Virginia on an official recruiting trip. From there, he will graduate early and enroll at the college of his choice in January.

It was all a lot to consider, but it could wait. He worked so hard to reach this point and took none of it for granted. He never will. Let the tears flow.

"It's joy," Courtney said.



Is Freedom the best team ever? You decide

Is the 2023 Freedom High School football team better than the 2022 version that went undefeated as well and won a state title?

What about Hylton's back-to-back unbeaten state champions in 1998 and 1999? Or Osbourn's 14-0 state champion in 2006 and Manassas Park's 14-0 state champion in 2004?

All talented, successful and dominant in their own right. But is there a clear winner for the best and most talented high school football team to come out of Prince William County, the city of Manassas and Manassas Park?

Depends on who you talk to and what criteria you use. To say you're the best means you've won a state title. Add to that an unbeaten record and perhaps a big difference between points scored and points allowed and you bolster your case even more.

You might also consider how far some of the players went in their playing careers. Did they play in college and at what level and did they ultimately reach the NFL? Or maybe not – as long as you had good players regardless of whether they competed beyond high school?

There's also this thought: To say one team is the best doesn't mean they were the most talented. There have been teams who have fallen short of a state championship, yet still fielded a loaded lineup. And teams who have won state titles with no Power 5 recruits.

Understanding then that any discussion like this is always subjective, here are some points to ponder:

Let's start with the best team.

Combined, Prince William County, the city of Manassas and Manassas Park have produced nine state champions in football. Of those nine, six went undefeated and two, Freedom and Hylton, won back-to-back titles.

At 12-2, Gar-Field, an underdog story if there ever was one, made history by becoming the county's first state champion in 1990.

Osbourn and Manassas Park were blessed with talented quarterbacks in future NFL defensive back Brandon Hogan and Zach Terrell, respectively, who spearheaded their teams' drive in winning it all.

In 2010, Battlefield, like Gar-Field, overcame one favored challenger after another to go 13-2 and finish on top. And Hylton showed its mettle going 13-1 with a championship in 2002.

The two unbeaten Freedom and Hylton teams, though, headline the discussion.

Statistically speaking, Hylton's 1998 team was more dominant than the 1999 squad. The Bulldogs outscored opponents 469-134 in 1998 with only two games won by 10 points or less, including the state final.

In a more pass-heavy era, no one's offense compares to Freedom's. The Eagles set a state record in 2022 for single-season points with 952.

Although overshadowed, Freedom's defense is impressive as well. In 2022, the Eagles allowed only 9.9 points a game with six shutouts. This year, they gave up 10.8 points a game and posted five shutouts.

When comparing his two teams, Freedom head coach Darryl Overton gives a slight edge to the 2023 version. For the most part, both teams featured the same players, especially on offense with all the skill players back.

Overton said it was harder to eclipse last season's point total because Freedom played one less game after the DeMatha contest was called because of bad weather. Running clocks also made it difficult to have time to score more points, Overton said.

"[The 2023] team was offensively a little better,"



Freedom head coach Darryl Overton gets the Gatorade bath.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

Overton said. "[The skill kids] were bigger, faster and stronger. The offensive line was all back."

Defensively, Overton said this year's team had more depth. But the quality was higher last year with seniors TJ Bush (Class 6 defensive player of the year) and Kendall Bannister (all-state defensive back).

As far as most talented team, here are six candidates to think about, using Division I as a measuring stick:

- Freedom's 2022 team had five players who signed with Division I colleges or have made Division I commitments. The 2023 version features three Division I commitments and counting.
- Hylton's 1998 and 1999 teams had numerous Division I players both seasons, including future NFL linebacker Ahmad Brooks, Virginia Tech defensive back DJ Walton, Auburn defensive back Karibi DeDe and quarterback Kenny Irby. The 1998 team also included North Carolina lineman David Stevenson, while the 1999 team included Bowling Green linebacker Jason Kaminski.
- The 1974 Woodbridge team, which finished 12-1 as the Group AAA state runner-up after losing 24-21 in the last minute to Bethel, featured eight players, who went on to play at Power Five schools, including Michigan, Kansas, Alabama and North Carolina. Running back Russell Davis, who went on to play for the NFL's Pittsburgh Steelers, still holds state playoff records for most rushing yards in a game (384) and best rushing average in a game (22.4 yards per carry) when Woodbridge defeated Lee-Davis in the semifinals 35-12.
- The 1988 Potomac team, which went 10-2 and

Freedom's 2023 game-by-game results

Freedom went 14-0 this season in winning the Class 6 state title and has now won 29 consecutive games over two seasons.

Date	Opponent	Score
Aug. 26	at Coolidge (DC)	48-0
Aug. 31	at Varina	35-27
Sept. 22	vs. Gar-Field at Hylton	60-0
Sept. 29	Forest Park	64-6
Oct. 6	at Colgan	66-0
Oct. 13	at Woodbridge	63-7
Oct. 20	Potomac	65-0
Oct. 27	Hylton	73-0
Nov. 3	St. Michael the Archangel	65-20
Nov. 10	Potomac	75-7
Nov. 17	Colonial Forge	52-16
Nov. 25	Battlefield	50-7
Dec. 2	Madison	55-14
Dec. 9	Highland Springs at U.Va.	42-34

lost 21-3 to eventual state champion E.C. Glass in the Division 5 Northwestern Region final, had six major Division I players on its roster, including two NFL draft picks (Tommy Thigpen and Craig Novitsky).

So there you go. Much to consider. Much to debate. And much merit to whoever you choose as your favorite. David Fawcett is the sports editor for InsideNoVa. Reach him at dfawcett@insidenova.com



DAVID FAWCETT



CLASS 6 STATE CHAMPIONS



Fly, Eagles, Fly

Freedom jumped out to a 28-0 second-quarter lead in the Class 6 state championship game on Dec. 9 before Highland Springs made things interesting to get within eight points twice in the second half.

But the Eagles held on to complete their second straight undefeated season, defeating the defending Class 5 state champions 42-34 at the University of Virginia. Jeffrey Overton Jr. ran for 264 yards and two scores, and Kam Courtney added two rushing touchdowns for Freedom.

All photos by Doug Stroud | For InsideNoVa

 For more pictures, visit [INSIDENOVA.COM](https://www.insidenova.com)



Freedom players wait for head coach Darryl Overton, I to give his pre-game talk.



Freedom assistant coach Jeff Overton, left, and activities director Tom Annunziata after the awards ceremony.



Freedom's Tristan Evans-Trujillo (12) in a tender moment with his girlfriend after winning the state title.



Freedom fans cheer on their team.



Freedom's Jachai Hughes returned an interception 38 yards for a touchdown.



Tony Keiling led Gar-Field for seven seasons.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

Gar-Field and Hylton seek new head coaches

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Gar-Field High School has parted ways with football coach Tony Keiling. Keiling said he was informed of his dismissal on Dec. 7 by Red Wolves' athletic director Mike Payne.

"It was the right time to have a change in the program," Payne said.

Keiling was surprised by the decision.

"It was a little shocking and disappointing," Keiling said. "[Payne] said he wanted to have a coach in the building."

A retired Army veteran, Keiling works at the Pentagon.

Payne said there were no football coaches in Gar-Field's building this season.

"Ideally now in high school athletics the impetus to have someone in the school is important," Payne said. "You want that direct connection to the school."

Keiling led Gar-Field for seven seasons, going 30-40 overall. The Red Wolves finished 4-6 this season. They had an outside shot at the playoffs, but that ended after losing to Woodbridge in the regular-season finale.

During Keiling's tenure, the Red Wolves reached the playoffs four straight seasons. Before Keiling took over for the 2017 season, Gar-Field had not made the postseason since 2011 nor posted a winning record since 2010.

Under Keiling, Gar-Field won its first district title in football since 1994 when it defeated Freedom on March 26, 2021. The game was played then after the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the 2020 season into the spring of 2021.

MURPHY STEPS DOWN

Nate Murphy has resigned as Hylton's head football coach. Murphy led the Bulldogs for four seasons and went 10-27. The Bulldogs will now look for their fifth head coach since the school opened in 1991.

"It was time for a change," Murphy said. "I don't want to stand in the way of progress."

The Bulldogs were once a state power. In its first 28 years at the varsity level, Hylton produced 23 playoff appearances, 24 winning seasons and three state titles.

Murphy said low turnout has been the primary reason for Hylton's recent struggles. The Woodbridge school is dealing with declining enrollment overall, and

The records

Tony Keiling was 30-40 in seven seasons at Gar-Field.

Season	Record
2017	0-10
2018	3-7
2019	7-4x
2020	6-1x*
2021	5-6x
2022	5-6x
2023	4-6

Nate Murphy was 10-27 in four seasons at Hylton.

Season	Record
2020	4-3*
2021	3-7
2022	0-10
2023	3-7

* – shortened season due to pandemic
x – made playoffs

Murphy said the pandemic did not help.

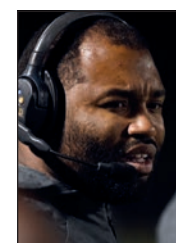
Murphy was announced as Hylton's head football coach Feb. 24, 2020, just under a month before the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools. The 2020 football season was pushed back to the spring of 2021 with teams playing a compressed schedule.

Although the Bulldogs compete at the state's highest classification (Class 6), Murphy said their enrollment is at the Class 5 level.

The 2006 Gar-Field High School graduate said he also felt as though he lost support of the Hylton football community after running for the Democratic nomination to represent Prince William County's Neabsco District on the Board of County Supervisors. In June, Murphy lost to incumbent Victor Angry by 104 votes in the primary.

The narrow defeat motivated Murphy to keep pursuing political opportunities.

"I felt like I was successful at doing both," Murphy said of running for office as well as overseeing Hylton's football team. "I think there was this perception it couldn't be done."



NATE MURPHY