

BIG JOE

Battlefield's senior lineman makes an impression

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Sean Crandall and Ed Schultz kept referring to Joe Lubinskas by the wrong last name. But it wasn't their fault.

Instead of speaking clearly, Lubinskas – then in seventh grade – mumbled, making it difficult for the Reagan Middle School football coaches to understand him. When Lubinskas stated his surname, Crandall and Schultz heard “Lubinsky.” So that's what they called him and that's what they taped to the front of his helmet.

This went on for a few weeks until finally Lubinskas spoke up and corrected the coaches.

Why did it take so long for Lubinskas to clear up the confusion? Crandall had no idea at first. But then he learned Lubinskas' backstory. And the pieces fell into place.

AFFIRMATION IN SPORTS

Lubinskas had arrived at Reagan Middle an overweight, unfocused kid with no ambition and no self-esteem. He was also new to the area, which only contributed to his belief he'd never fit in – just like everywhere else he had lived.

But a poor self-image was just one part of the 11-year-old's struggles. He was also dealing with the recent passing of his father, Jeffrey.

On June 2, 2017, Jeffrey died at age 39 after he hit his head on a dresser and fell to the floor. A single father and decorated Navy veteran with 12 years of service, including tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, Jeffrey was living at the time with his parents and his three children in his parents' home near Richmond.

Lubinskas discovered what happened when he walked into his grandparents' home after school and saw his father on the floor with EMTs around him. Jeffrey was already dead when his mother, Judith, found him.

To spare Lubinskas any more pain, he was quickly ushered out of the home and to a neighbor's house, where he stayed with his two younger siblings.

Once things settled down, Lubinskas and his siblings needed a new place to live. Lubinskas never knew his mother, and his grandparents were getting up in age.

So Jeffrey's older brother, Pete, and his wife, Amy, took in their nephews and niece, as well as Pete's mother and father. Pete and Amy lived in Fairfax then. But needing more space at an affordable price, they moved to Dominion Valley in Haymarket.

Lubinskas greeted his new surroundings with indifference.

Pete and Amy, though, had other plans to engage him. Instead of letting him sit around the house and play video games, they suggested Lubinskas try out for football. He agreed to go – without any high expectations. But he quickly loved the sport. And Crandall and Schultz loved Lubinskas' 6-foot, 229-pound frame.

Having never played a sport before, Lubinskas showed his inexperience at times. But eager to please and receiving affirmation for his efforts, Lubinskas began to come out of his shell. With sports filling a void, Lubinskas flourished. After football season ended, he wrestled and



Besides “Big Joe,” Lubinskas also goes by “the Viking” and “Bon Jovi,” both references to his long red hair. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

then did track during the spring.

The awkward boy who shrugged his way through life now had a purpose.

“He's so disciplined,” Pete Lubinskas said. “He's so determined and focused. It's impressive.”

FILLING A NEED

Today, if you mention the name “Big Joe” around Battlefield High School, where Lubinskas is a senior, everyone knows who you are talking about.

His now 6-foot-2, 285-pound frame explains some of that. But other distinctive features single Lubinskas out as well.



Battlefield's Joe Lubinskas is in his first year as the football team's starting center. DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

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Gainesville, Woodbridge claim region titles

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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The Gainesville High School girls cross country team entered the Class 6, Region B meet on Nov. 2 content to reach states.

The Cardinals accomplished that goal, but with an added bonus. In a tight race upfront – in which the top three team finishers advanced to the state meet Nov. 11 at Oatlands in Leesburg – Gainesville prevailed to win the three-year school's first regional banner in any sport.

Competing at Great Meadow in The Plains, the Cardinals finished with 72 points, followed by Patriot and Battlefield, tied with 81 points. Patriot earned second place based on the tiebreaker as its sixth-place runner finished higher than Battlefield's.

In the boys race, Woodbridge dominated. The Vikings placed their top five runners in the first 12 positions to total 25 points. Freedom-South Riding was second with 84 and Colonial Forge third with 92.

Of Gainesville's seven runners, only one, junior Caroline Tribett, has been with the program since its inception. In fact, she's the only member of the team who had previously qualified for states in cross country.

Four current runners are on the team for the first time after running track for Gainesville. Also, the Cardinals have no seniors.



Gainesville's girls cross country team won the third-year school's first region title in any sport Nov. 2. BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

"The girls showed what they can do," said Connor Lee, one of the program's co-coaches, along with Sarah Joyner. "They've showed their potential. Today they did it."

Lee and Joyner said Gainesville's lone freshman, Riley Long, was the team's most pleasant surprise. Long was expected to finish somewhere between 40th and 50th. Instead, she came in 17th as the Cardinals' third finisher with a time of 20:28.7.

Tribett finished second overall in 18:23.9, followed by sophomore Isabella Savage (19th, 19:23.1) and junior Faith O'Shea (18th, 20:35.6).

Joyner and Lee said they thought Gainesville won the team title after tabulating the results themselves on a calculator.

"It was a big leap," Joyner said in reference to how far the Cardinals have come in three years.

While Gainesville's finish was unexpect-

CLASS 6 STATE CROSS COUNTRY MEET

Saturday, Nov. 11, at Oatlands, Leesburg

» Girls race: 10:30 a.m.

» Boys race: 11:15 a.m.

For more photos, go to insidenova.com

ed, the Woodbridge boys' finish was not.

The Vikings have been building to this moment with a core group of juniors who started to come into their own during last spring's outdoor track season. That growth has now carried over into cross country, where the Vikings are eyeing the program's first state title since 1990.

"They came in as freshmen," said Woodbridge head coach Kelly McGreal. "They had a senior who set the standard. They bought into it and saw success. They do their training without me even having to be there ... They deserve everything. I'm super excited."

One of those juniors, Hayden Goodman, led the Vikings at regionals with a second-place finish (15:39.9) behind Brooke Point's Brady Brennan (15.30.7).

Senior Nathaneal McMahon was third overall (16:02.1), followed by junior Cameron McDuffie (fifth, 16:20.4), junior Owen Renquist (ninth, 16:37.9) and junior Deaven Roberts (12th, 16:40.3).

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Start with his flowing red hair. Lubinkas estimates his locks fall to at least the middle of his back. Pete once took him for a buzz cut, but Lubinkas hated the look. By the ninth grade, he let it grow.

His mane has inspired a few nicknames. One is Viking. The other is Bon Jovi, courtesy of Battlefield offensive line coach Joe Prince.

"I tell him he's going to have to join a rock band if that hair gets any longer," Prince said.

Lubinkas' leadership abilities also set him apart.

Coming into the season, Battlefield needed a new starting center after David Smoot graduated. One of two returning full-time starters on the offensive line, Lubinkas offered to move from guard to center to help the Bobcats at a critical position at a critical time. He figured his experience would stabilize the line and help Calum O'Shea adjust as Battlefield's new starting quarterback.

The center has responsibilities beyond blocking. He makes the calls at the line of scrimmage for the other linemen. The center must also adapt to coming off the ball after the snap and making sure he's blocking in the right scheme rather than going straight into a blocking stance.

Prince and fellow line coach Charlie Woollum agreed to let Lubinkas try playing center. As is his custom, Lubinkas went all in to make sure he understood and executed the nuances of the position.

The Christopher Newport University football commitment has flourished in that role, helping the Bobcats go 10-0 for the third straight regular season.

"He brings a construction hard hat, a lunch pail and a hammer," Prince said. "And that's one mighty big hammer. Old-fashioned, smash-mouth football is right up his alley."

O'Shea appreciates Lubinkas' veteran presence. The two, who live less than five minutes from each other, worked a lot outside of practice to get the center-quarterback exchange down. They also met outside of school, often making a run to a nearby McDonald's after practice to talk football.

When O'Shea became discouraged after throwing one of his few interceptions this season, Lubinkas was the first to pick him up and tell him to forget the turnover. Even at offseason seven-on-seven events in which only the skill players perform, Lubinkas was there to support O'Shea and his teammates.

"He's a rudder," O'Shea said.

Lubinkas gravitates toward that role.

Despite his own lack of confidence at the time, Lubinkas believed he needed to remain strong for his younger siblings after their father died. Lubinkas and his brother and sister underwent some grief counseling, and Pete said he and Amy kept a close eye for any signs of distress.

But the children were able to come to terms with it. Lubinkas' younger brother, Jake, is a 6-5 sophomore lineman on



Joe Lubinkas stands with his uncle, Pete, and aunt, Amy, on Senior Night at Battlefield Nov. 3. BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

Battlefield's junior varsity football team and his younger sister, Gabriella, is a 5-10 freshman who does not play any sports at Battlefield.

"If I couldn't get over it and be tough, then they would not have been able to do it," Lubinkas said. "This was a chance for me to be a role model."

Beyond sports – he competes in track and wrestling as well – the 18-year-old Lubinkas credits his family and faith with helping him stay grounded. He and his family attend Park Valley Church in Haymarket. And Lubinkas is also a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

Lubinkas thinks about his father and what might have been.

"I wish my dad could see where I'm at now," said Lubinkas, whose first name is his father's middle name. "I'm different

now. I think I'm the son he would love to know."

Crandall shares that sentiment. Even after Lubinkas moved on from Reagan to Battlefield, the two remained tight. Lubinkas comes back to visit when he can, something Crandall cherishes.

In his 19 years of teaching, including 12 at Reagan, Crandall has developed bonds with a number of his former students.

But there's no doubt the bond with Big Joe is among the strongest.

"He's one that sticks out in my mind and one I'm pretty sure I will remember," Crandall said. "With everything he went through and seeing where he is and getting out of his shell and being part of a team and a school, he definitely stands out."

There's no mistaking his last name anymore.