

## The power of sports: ‘Right thing’ provides inspiration

February 02, 2023

Covering the Spread

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

LOW MOOR — It’s not all you need to know about him, but it’s a good start.

When Avery Smithers walked out with his parents, Randy and Brenda, and his sister, Rachel, during senior night ceremonies for the Allegheny High School wrestling program last Wednesday, AHS athletic director Will Fields told the crowd about Avery’s future plans.

“Avery wants to be a country singer like Luke Combs,” said Fields. “Or join the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment).”

Yep, that’s Avery. To know him is to love him.

Two years ago, the 18-year-old born with Down syndrome decided after many years of watching professional wrestling on television that he was going to join the AHS wrestling team.

“When he first went out for wrestling, he thought it was going to be like the WWE,” said his father.

A couple of seasons later, the progression Avery made both on and off the mat is noticeable. “I think it’s helped a whole lot just being part of a team,” Randy said. “He has to practice all the time and it gives him something that he has to do.”

18 seconds

Avery’s match took just 18 seconds on senior night. It’s likely 18 ticks he will remember for a lifetime.

He took down Greenbrier East Spartan sophomore Parker Hale quickly in the opening period of his 120-pound bout and before you knew it, Hale was on his back.

Referee Tim Beverly slapped his hand on the mat. Avery was a winner.

So was the wrestling community. So was everyone in attendance. And so, especially, was Parker Hale of West Virginia.

“It’s his senior night,” said Hale, who might have not put 100 percent into the match. “I don’t know how much he wins. Obviously, I’m not from around here and I don’t see Allegheny very much. I just wanted to make sure he won on his senior night. I felt like him winning would be the right thing tonight.”

It was a testament to Hale, said Burdette.

“It’s pretty awesome that somebody’s willing to sacrifice themselves to see some other kid have success,” Burdette said. “That’s pretty cool.”

Where it started

The improvement from last season to this season on the mat has been significant for Avery.

“What I think about is, every single child has different challenges, they really do,” said Burdette.

“As coaches, we try and address those challenges in different ways. Obviously, Avery’s got some different challenges that we had to attack a different way. Initially, it was really hard to get him on the mat. It’s cool to see him come around and grow in the sport.”

Randy says having Dale’s brother, assistant coach Gary Burdette, on the coaching staff has also been a bridge to wrestling for his son. “Gary is a special ed teacher,” said Randy. “He was one of Avery’s teachers.”

In fact, in an age where high school coaches are often under-appreciated, the folks on the AHS wrestling staff — Gary, Dale, Cameron Hyler and Charlie Rusmisl — get nothing but praise from the Smithers family.

“I think they do an outstanding job, not only with Avery but with every kid,” Randy said. “They treat every kid the same. And they teach them not only about being a wrestler, but also about being a better person. Other coaches from different schools come and talk to him at the matches and the guys on the team have been awesome. They really have accepted him.”

Brenda, Avery’s mother, said those teammates have had her sons’ back. “The teammates he had last year and this year treated him like a little brother, especially after he got slammed in his second match that one Saturday,” she said. “They told me if that ever happened again, they would be out on the mat.”

Behind the scenes

Wrestlers refer to their practice area as “the room.” To appreciate the sport is to appreciate the room.

It's in that room where Avery took to a particular AHS teammate — Dontae Miller. Miller scored his 100th career win last Wednesday and then enjoyed watching Avery record his senior night pin.

"I like it because I know it gives him something to look forward to," Miller said of his interaction with Avery. "He gets excited. I don't think y'all realize how excited he gets for the matches. He really does get worked up. Just like everybody else, he's got his own crazy feelings that he deals with inside. But he gets hyped up to get out there and wrestle. I love to see it."

Burdette said his teammates enjoy having Avery around. "The guys have taken to him, they urge him, and they push him like any other teammate," said the head coach. "They don't cut him slack when we are in their (room) running. Some of that, I think, has translated. He's been wrestling better because he's been practicing better. It's good to see him find some success out here."

What's next?

Avery will likely wrestle for the last time in the Mountaineer singlet next Saturday, Feb. 11, in the Class 2, Region C tournament at James River.

Technically, he's just a junior, but he ages out by Virginia High School League rules and, most likely, won't be allowed to participate next year.

So, yeah, what's next?

There may be a gig alongside Luke Combs on the country music tour, or a spot on the WWE circuit. Or it might be just hanging out with his family and extended family at Thunder Alley.

But whatever looms ahead, an 18-second memory on a January night in Mountaineer Gym will always be there.

Thanks, wrestling!

Thanks, Parker!

Thanks, Avery!

## **Life's short, play hard!**

Covering the spread

September 28, 2023

By Mark Pifer Sports Editor

COVINGTON — My buddy, the late Richard McElwee, ended each huddle on his sideline with the same phrase.

Ty Dobbs, Lee Phillips, Jeff Wolfe, Thumper Leitch — all their timeouts end in that same fashion.

"Life's short," the coach says.

The players follow, "Play hard!"

Over the last couple of weeks, we've been reminded how short life really is.

Evan Groves passed away at the age of 15 last Monday after an extended illness.

And then over the weekend, we lost Dontae Miller at the age of 18 following an automobile accident.

I didn't know Evan personally, but I do know the effect he had on our community. The support given to him and his family makes me proud of where I live.

Dontae, I came to know him through high school wrestling.

My first interaction with the recent Alleghany graduate came at the 2022 Class 2, Region C wrestling tournament at Radford High School.

He thought I was some kind of college scout at first, with my pen and paper, documenting the tournament.

After Dontae won the region title that day, he was probably less than excited when I introduced myself to him as a newspaper reporter. But he talked about his day and I learned a lot about his life — about how the Alleghany wrestling coaching staff and the sport itself had changed his life.

Dontae admitted to being headed down a tough path, only to find wrestling.

If that wasn't enough of a reason to root for him, last year I began to pull for the young man even more after I learned how Dontae had befriended his wrestling teammate and a friend of mine — Avery Smithers.

Avery, who has Down syndrome, decided to wrestle a couple years back, and the folks in that Alleghany wrestling community, and especially Dontae, took to him.

That friendship between them grew over the summer and I was told Dontae was on Avery's "speed call" list — and he answered every single time!

When I found out about Evan last week and heard from my daughter about Dontae Sunday, it took me back to my friend Mac.  
Yeah, life's short; play hard.

## Friday night lights: A 'Turnerific' start

| August 31, 2023

Covering the Spread

BY MARK PIFER • STAFF WRITER

**ALLEGHENY HIGHLANDS** — There's nothing like kicking off a football season with a win. How about kicking it off with a pair of kickoff returns to remember?

In Quicksburg, it was Charger Luke Turner who took the opening kick to the house. About 120 miles south, it was Purcel Turner who made Allegheny Cougar history.

Hello, high school football. Welcome back!

Luke's return got Bath County off on the right foot in a 54-8 rout of Mountain View last Friday night, while Purcel's sprint through the middle of the Waynesboro coverage team helped key Allegheny's 35-7 victory over the Little Giants.

This Friday, the Chargers face Page County in their home opener on Carl F. Williams Field in Hot Springs, while the Cougars welcome Fort Defiance to Casey Field.

But first, we need to document a little history. We spent all last year featuring lasts — here are some Allegheny Cougar football firsts.

- First touchdown: See above. Purcel covered 92 yards in 13 seconds.
- First extra point: Mason Hale booted the first of his five conversions to punctuate the Turner kickoff return.
- First tackle: Hunter Knighton picked up a TFL (tackle for loss), taking down Waynesboro running back Jonah Brent for a loss of one on the Little Giants first snap of the game.
- First offensive play: Well, unfortunately, it was a Des Jordan incomplete pass and the first AHS running play was a Hunter Knighton loss of two.
- First first down: Neeko Jeter ripped off an 11-yard run to the 50 on the Cougars' second possession.
- First offensive touchdown: Jeter's run set up Jordan, who kept the football on an option play, and went 45 yards to the end zone.
- First touchdown pass: With just 15 seconds left in the first half, it was a Jordanto Xzavier Hayslett pitch-and-catch that covered 40 yards and gave the Cougars a 21-0 lead.
- First win: Aug. 25, 2023: Allegheny Cougars 35, Waynesboro Little Giants 7.

What can the Chargers and Cougars do for an encore? Let's look at week two.

**Page County at Bath County**

The Chargers couldn't have scripted a better opener.

A pair of Luke Turner kickoff returns for scores, three rushing touchdowns and two more passing from quarterback Wyatt Campbell, a couple of TDs from Andrew Turner, a Hunter Waldeck score, a combined 29 tackles from the trio of Cooper Lowry, Dillan Royer and Ethan Bryant, four TFL's from Braiden Mabe — it added up to a big victory.

Page County provides this week's opposition and Jake Phillips and his crew are hoping to get a little revenge for one that "got away" last season. They trailed 14-13 at the halftime break, but a downpour and deteriorating field conditions hampered the Chargers in the second half of a 44-25 loss.

The Panthers, out of the Bull Run District, were just 3-7 last year and are driven by senior quarterback Hunter Pettit.

Page County lost its opener last Friday in Charles Town, W.Va., to Washington High School, 49-6.

- The pick: OK, there's nowhere to go but down with our picks after going 2-0 last week and coming within a single point of nailing the exact Allegheny-Waynesboro score, TBH. But, the opponent will be tougher for BCHS on Friday; the Chargers get to 2-0 for the first since 2003. Who was the quarterback on that team 20 years ago? Yep, you guessed it — Jake Phillips: Bath County 38, Page County 21.

**Fort Defiance at Allegheny**

For the second straight week, a Shenandoah District team visits Casey Field. The goal for the Cougars? Send Fort Defiance packing just like they did Waynesboro last Friday.

The Indians hung with the defending Valley District champion Turner Ashby Knights early in their opener before losing, 51-22.

Junior running back Bradley Hebb ran for 147 yards on 13 carries, including a 76-yard touchdown run in the third quarter and Trey Miller passed for 77 yards and a touchdown.

Fort was 3-7 last season, losing its last six.

Alleghany's historic victory last Friday had a lot of high points. But a couple of turnovers and 10 penalties is something coach Will Fields knows his team will have to clean up.

- The pick: Like the Chargers, the competition is a step up from last week. But break out the brooms — it's another area sweep: Alleghany 42, Fort Defiance 13.