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ALERT

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

## Death of offensive lineman Tajh Boyd changed the course of Liberty's season, as players grieved and then bonded

**Ben Cates**

Dec 25, 2023



Coach Jamey Chadwell celebrates winning the 2023 CUSA Football Championship at Williams Stadium on Dec. 1. Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Ben Cates

**I**t was early August, just days after the start of fall camp, and the Liberty University football team was grieving.

It was mourning the loss of Tajh Boyd, a 19-year-old freshman offensive lineman who had died from suicide and who, since arriving on campus in January, had developed a deep bond with his teammates.

Liberty was going through a period of transition: a new coaching staff, plenty of new faces on the roster, very few veterans who could rally the team or offer advice and comfort.

The new season was one month away. Plenty of work to do. But tears also needed to be shed, players needed to lean on each other.

In those moments, the team could have splintered into a thousand pieces. It could have staggered and never recovered. The season could have come tumbling down, attitudes and emotions spiraling out of control.

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Could have, but didn't.

Instead, while they grieved, the Flames decided to bond together. They dedicated the season to Tajh Boyd, who died 15 days shy of his 20th birthday. And then they strapped on helmets and secured pads and went out and started winning, remembering their teammate every step of the way. Death wouldn't stop them; it would instead lead them to a season unlike any other in school history.

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**"There's no playbook,** no map for how to deal with circumstances like this," the new, young coach said as he sat for a news conference on Aug. 11, six days after Boyd's death.

Jamey Chadwell, 46, often flashed a bright, contagious smile in his first few months as Liberty's football coach. Now he looked grim as he searched for words to describe how Boyd's death had rattled the program. He spoke in measured tones, chose his words carefully.

"We've been trying to figure out how we can grieve through this process and still try to get the guys ready for the season," he said. "There's a lot of people who are hurting because of this."

Football is, ultimately, about toughness, about smashing your opponent's nose into the ground and barreling your way toward success. There's little time for tears. But Liberty players had them in buckets. Their teammate had been a quiet guy, someone who preferred to remain reserved but who could light up the room with his smile. They mourned him openly.

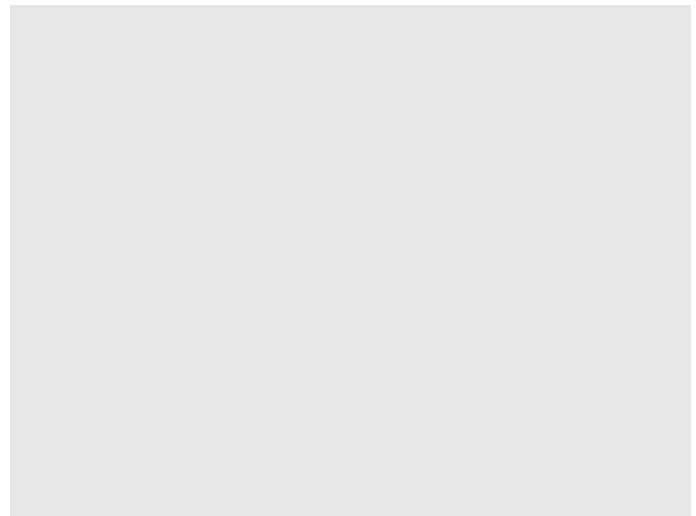
Chadwell encouraged them to do so. Took time to cry himself.

"You have to be vulnerable," he said when asked about his leadership role. "As coaches, the old way is you show toughness, right? And [as] men, you don't cry, you don't show that you're vulnerable, you don't show your emotions. And I think it's very important to show emotions and let the team know how you're feeling about [the situation] as well. ... I try not to mask what I'm feeling. If there's days that I'm not doing well, I let them know and hopefully they see it's all right to let us know when they're feeling the same way."

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**Roughly 200 miles to the east,** at Oscar Smith High School, another group was mourning, too, as another season dawned. The Tigers recently had started official practices, the first workouts without their standout lineman in several years.

The Chesapeake-based school has a long and successful football history, dating back to the early 1900s. In 2020 and 2021, it claimed back-to-back state championships in the Virginia High School League's Class 6. Tajh Boyd helped the Tigers win both titles.



He stood out, not only for his imposing frame and football prowess, but because of his personality.

Boyd

“Tajh’s impact went far beyond statistics and accolades,” Oscar Smith coach Chris Scott told The Virginia Pilot after Boyd's death. “Yes, he was a formidable force on the football field, but it was his infectious smile, his positive energy and his ability to uplift others that truly made him larger than life.”

Boyd earned second-team all-Region 6A honors as a junior, then, prior to the start of his senior year, committed to Liberty. He was considered the No. 7 recruit out of the Hampton Roads region for the Class of 2023 and ranked the No. 18 senior in the state, regardless of position, by ESPN and **Rivals.com**.

Boyd had received plenty of Division I offers: from Virginia Tech, JMU, Duke, Maryland, North Carolina and UCF. By the time he graduated, the 6-foot-4, 295-pound lineman was a three-star recruit. He chose Liberty, he said, because it had “Power 5 facilities, great coaches, great academic advisors, great atmosphere and [is] God-centered — how could I not attend?”

Receiving his first scholarship, he said, was his most memorable athletic moment. And that was so important to him because Boyd had grown up in a single-parent home, raised by his mother, Tanzania Belfield.

"She raised me by herself with no help and she['s] the strongest person I know. She never gave up," Boyd told Liberty's athletic communications department in a Q&A after he began working out with the Flames in January.

He loved fashion and photography. Chose No. 77 at Liberty because he considered them to be "God's numbers." Listened to his teammates and shared his life story with them.

"There were a lot of challenges that he grew up with that he overcame to be successful and get himself to the point where he was at," Chadwell said. "And he was really willing to share that with anybody who would listen who was going through challenging times. And he had a giving heart. If there was something that anybody was going through on the team, he was always there."

Boyd preferred pancake corn dogs for breakfast. A chicken sandwich meal from Chick-fil-A for lunch. Jerk chicken and macaroni and cheese for dinner. He grew up admiring Oklahoma and San Francisco 49ers offensive tackle Trent Williams. Hoped one day to visit Tokyo, because he appreciated how the city was portrayed in the 2006 movie "The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift."

And he treasured a pair of shoes he'd recently come across in the days between the end of his prep years and the beginning of college workouts: coveted Air Jordan Grape Fives.

Those high-tops launched in the early 2010s and were popular when Boyd was in elementary school. They were white, with a purple tongue and a neon green Michael Jordan leaping up from the ground, a sign to a poor kid that he could rise above his circumstances. The sides were lavender, highlighted by dancing aqua waves.

Tajh loved them back then, but from a distance.

"I wanted those shoes so bad when they came out and I couldn't get them due to financial situations," he said. "They were brand new in my size and affordable. I got made fun of for not getting those shoes in primary school, so it feels really good to

have them now."

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**At Liberty**, the whole squad was grieving, but Boyd's death hit his fellow offensive linemen the hardest. Players like X'Zauvea Gadlin, Jonathan Graham and Jordan White — guys who ended up taking nearly all the team's offensive snaps in 2023 — were trying to hold the O-line together as a group. A fair amount of that weight fell on Gadlin, a hulking 6-foot-4, 320-pound redshirt senior who in 2022 had started all 13 games at right tackle after transferring from Tulsa, and who had been named to the Conference USA Preseason Players watchlist prior to this, his final year of college football.

Gadlin took pride in mentoring young linemen, so it was natural for him to act as leader of the group following Boyd's death.

"He took it hard like a lot of them did in that room, because they're all so close," Chadwell said. "To his credit, he's been vulnerable, but he's also rallied that group. That is the group that spent the most time with [Boyd]; ... they were with him 24/7. So X'Zauvea has done a really nice job of the emotions he's feeling and taking the pulse of that room and understanding what they need, being a leader from that standpoint. ... He's truly stepped up in this time."

Still, no one knew how the team would respond when Liberty began its season. Liberty not only showcased a new coach, it was learning a new spread triple-option offense. Given the challenges of grieving a teammate, it was fair to imagine disjointed play, discouraging moments, maybe a low point that would cripple hopes for a respectable first season in Conference USA.

When Opening Day arrived, there was no telling what would happen.

In the days after Boyd's death, grief counselors were made available on campus. Teammates consoled one another. Chadwell spoke with players. He listened to Gadlin, who was feeding him information on how members of the offensive line were holding up. They all, the coach said, had to lean on each other.

The workouts continued: whistles cutting through the summer air, iron clanging in weight rooms, the muted sounds of plans being drawn up from coaches offices. Sometimes the barbells chimed as just a few players lifted together in an effort to escape, or deal with, the pain. Therapeutic sessions, perhaps.

"You've got to find your sanctuary in the challenges of life," Chadwell said. "And for these guys, [football] can be that sanctuary for two hours or whatever that may be. I think it allows them to get some of the emotions out and brings some of the emotions up. They need it more than ever now."

\*\*\*\*

**Saturday, Sept. 2.** A noon kickoff at Williams Stadium. Liberty, beginning a new era by hosting Kentucky-based Bowling Green. It was sunny, the temperature near 80 degrees, when the school paid homage to Tajh Boyd with a moment of silence and a pre-game tribute.

Running back Quinton Cooley, a Wake Forest transfer who arrived at LU in January, the same month as Boyd, wore a T-shirt with Boyd's likeness after the game. Cooley would continue to wear several T-shirts with Boyd's profile throughout the season. On Opening Day, he also wore a T-shirt of his friend under his uniform during the game. A way to keep him close to the heart.

"Tajh will always be with us," Cooley said after the game. "He's always gonna be here with us. He's our brother. ... He walks with us every day. We love him and his family. He'll always be part of the Flames. ... God took him. It was his time."

Then Cooley said the words that would define Liberty's season.

"We'll always [play] for him."

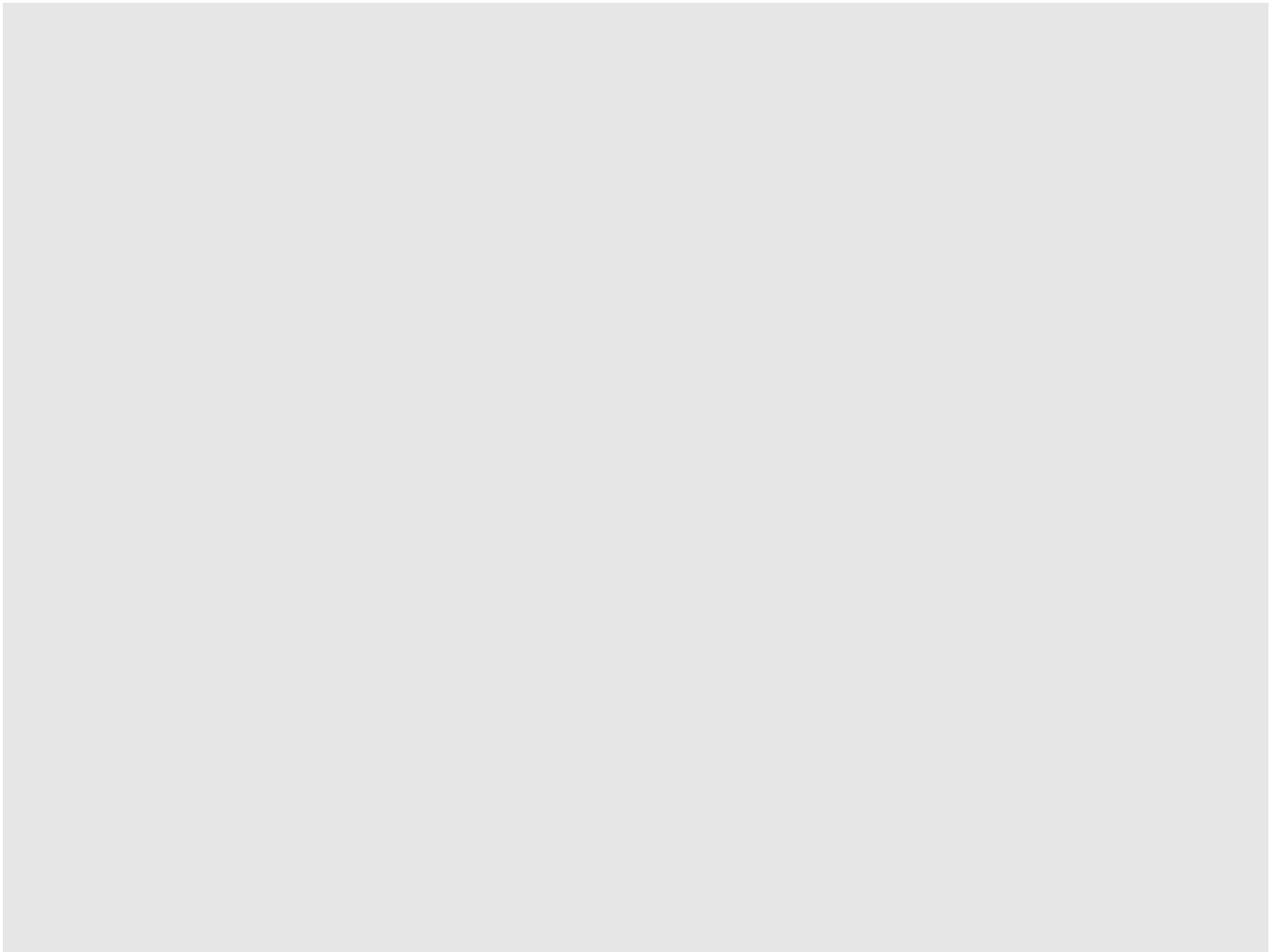
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**And that's just what** Liberty did. A 34-24 win against Bowling Green. Convincing wins the next two weeks against Buffalo and FIU. A 21-16 squeaker against Sam Houston State. A dismantling of a handful of other opponents. A winning streak that hit eight, nine, then double digits.

All season long, the Flames kept winning, and sometimes someone would mention the name of Tajh Boyd and Liberty players would talk about how all their efforts were for him.

During the winning streak, which has reached 13 games, something else remarkable happened: the offensive line, Boyd's group, became responsible for Liberty churning out more rushing yards per game than any team in the country. Ahead of Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 1 against No. 8 Oregon, 23rd-ranked Liberty is the only FBS team averaging better than 300 rushing yards per game (302.9). That number was aided by the team's performance in the CUSA championship game, when Liberty racked up 712 total offensive yards, with 393 on the ground.





Liberty quarterback Kaidon Salter (7) celebrates his touchdown with X'Zauvea Gadlin during a game against UMass on Nov. 18 at Williams Stadium.

Ryan Anderson, Liberty Athletics

"There's no secret recipe, there's no shortcut," said Gadlin, who helped his teammates deal with Boyd's death. "You've just got to go out every day and prepare like you want to be the highest rushing group in the country."

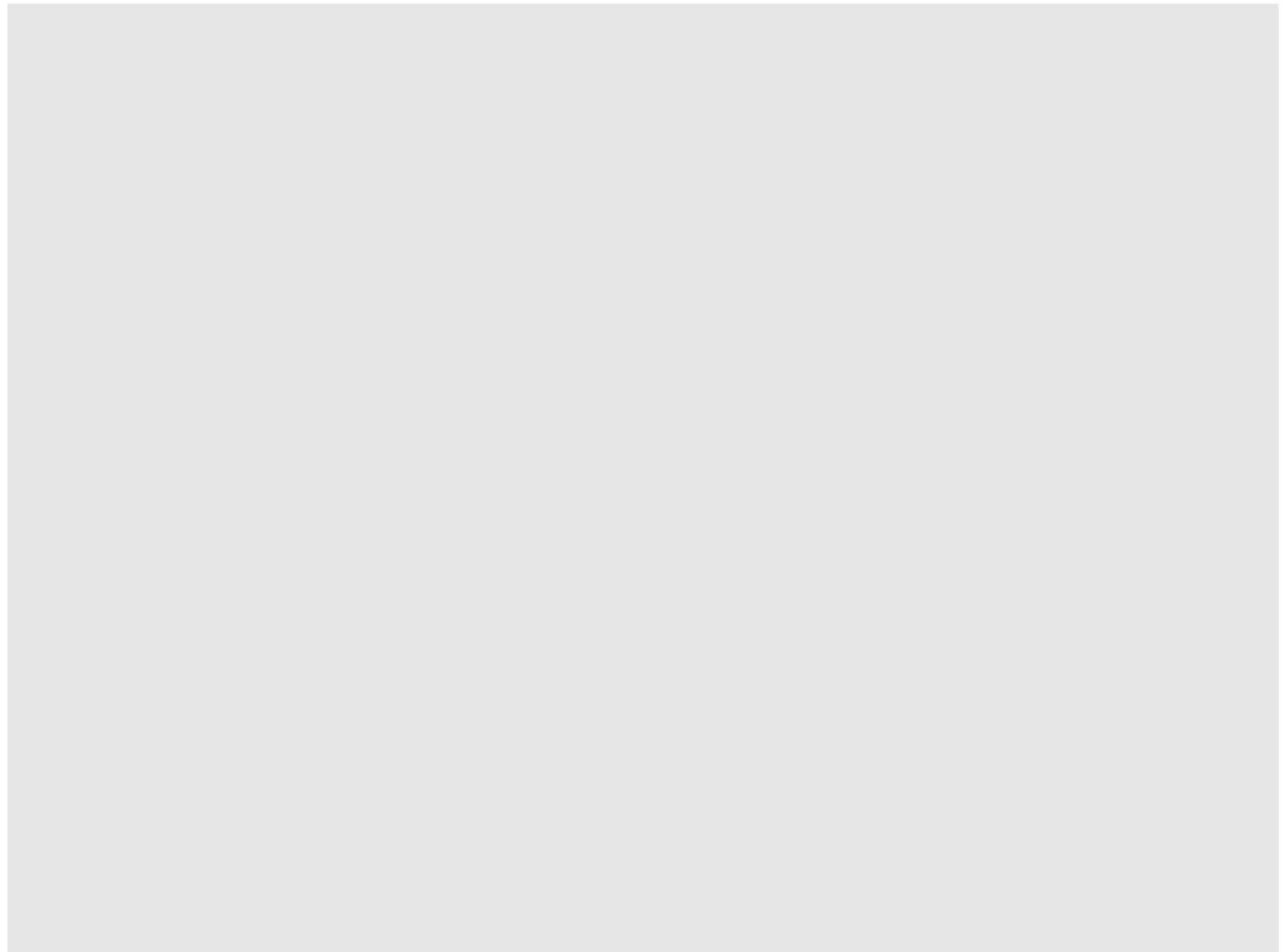
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**Sunday, Dec. 3.** The conclusion of a tense afternoon. Smiles all around.

Liberty had sat on pins and needles during its watch party, waiting for its name to be called for a bowl invitation. When the LU logo appeared next to Oregon's in the Fiesta Bowl, the watch party on campus erupted. For the first time in program history, the Flames were headed to a New Year's Six bowl.

It was the type of moment Tajh Boyd would have loved. He would've prayed for a New Year's bowl, as other players might have, a goal that weeks before had seemed so unlikely.

"I pray before every game," Tajh once said. "I do that because anything could go wrong and if you ask God to cover you in Jesus' blood, everything will go your way, or the best way that God has in store for you."



Liberty players kneel in the end zone prior to kickoff of the Flames' season opener against Bowling Green at Williams Stadium on Sept. 2.

Paige Dingler, The News & Advance

Quarterback Kaidon Salter summed what it was like playing all season for Boyd and finishing undefeated.

"He was supposed to be here with us today, although he still is here with us today. It's just a big blessing, honestly," Salter said. "We had a lot of long nights and a lot of things going on when that happened, and we just knew that this season we'd have to fight hard for him and fight hard for his family, and that's what we did. Words can't explain it."

Speaking in a joint news conference after the bowl invitation, Chadwell was asked to tell people who might be unfamiliar with Liberty what they should know. He talked about Tajh Boyd. About his death on the fourth day of practice. And about how players responded.

"Going through his death really brought this group together," the coach said, "because I think they realized how special it is to be with a group of people and all working toward one common goal. ... They realized, 'Hey, we're in this thing together.'"

His team, he told reporters, played hard. It was consistent. And all of that, he said, was because they started believing in each other after Boyd's death.

"That brought us together more than anything else could have," Chadwell said, "because we went through such strong adversity. And you'll see [on Jan. 1] they play that way. They'll never waiver and they'll never quit.

"They'll keep fighting."

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**Sunday, Aug. 5.** Five months before Liberty earned that New Year's Six bowl bid. The day after coaches and players found out about Tajh's death.

They held a service, and players shared their feelings and memories of their friend. Outside, rain began to fall and soak the ground. One player listened to it and remarked that "rain brings growth."

The next few months would be difficult. No one knew what they might hold.

Chadwell walked out onto the turf at Williams Stadium. Clouds still filled the sky. But there was a rainbow, its faint arc painted against a gray background.

"Reminds you of God's promises and that better days are coming, and to rely on him and lean on him," Chadwell said. "Sometimes when you go through certain challenges, you ask why. Why did this happen? And you just trust."

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**By Ben Cates**

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ALERT TOP STORY

## Steve Bozeman says goodbye to the Color Guard, the running group he started in 2001

Ben Cates

Sep 28, 2023



The Color Guard, including Steve Bozeman (center), nears the finish line of the Virginia 10 Miler on Sept. 25, 2021. News & Advance file photos

Ben Cates

**S**teve Bozeman will line up with his beloved Color Guard members Saturday morning for the 49th running the Virginia 10 Miler. Then, the man who for more than three decades has held the American flag high at the annual event, will

begin to fall back.

Bozeman, age 77, announced in July that he no longer would chug along with his band of flag bearers, but instead run at his own pace, handing the reins over to two first responders: Lynchburg Chief of Police Ryan Zuidema and the city's Fire Chief, Greg Wormser.

His is a notable departure, because Bozeman has been running with the Color Guard since he first conceived of the idea following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The Guard made its first appearance at the 10 Miler a couple weeks after the attacks. They've been a staple at the event ever since, receiving cheers along the course as they run to pay homage to service members, veterans and first responders.

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Health issues have slowed the Vietnam veteran in the last couple years. Still, he's confident he can finish the course Saturday.

Explaining his decision in an interview this week, Bozeman offered a quick laugh and quipped, "I'm an over-the-hill runner, but I can still run."

The fact that he can proves one thing about Steve Bozeman people have always known: he's tough as nails. And although the Color Guard will likely finish long before he does Saturday, his legacy will live on within the group, for everyone to see if they look close enough.

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**Steve Bozeman began running** in the 10 Miler in 1977, three years after it began. He hasn't missed since. Saturday's race will represent his 46th straight appearance. Even when the event was cancelled in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, Bozeman trotted out on the course anyway, with fellow Color Guard members in tow.

He watched as the race evolved over the years, attracting thousands of participants rather than a few hundred. Along the route sprang up volunteers by the hundreds, stationed at posts where they offered water and encouragement. Rock bands began blasting cover songs along Rivermont Avenue as spectators created a party atmosphere. Folks cheered from folding chairs outside their residences. And an early morning tailgate-like ambience took over along city curbs and on carefully manicured lawns.

All the while, Bozeman kept running.

He had served as a helicopter door gunner in Vietnam, joining the Marine Corps in 1966 until he was honorably discharged in 1970. He participated in more than 300 combat missions and medical evacuations in Vietnam. On May 4, 1967, the helicopter he was in was shot down; Bozeman exited, with his M60 machine gun, just before the helicopter crashed, but he suffered second- and third-degree burns to his arms, face and neck, and was awarded the Purple Heart. He was awarded another Purple Heart later that year, in an attack that wounded 44 Marines.

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**Running was cathartic.** Running was peaceful. Running was a way to keep himself in shape and challenge his body and mind. Bozeman found all that out after leaving the Marine Corps, knowing he needed to deal with the stress placed on him by the weight of war, not knowing he was finding an outlet to help with PTSD.

He entered the 10 Miler in '77. Posted a time of 1:00.46 at age 31. The next year, an 85:27. The next, 77:28. Steady improvement each time.

He began competing in other events, too. The Marine Corps Marathon, held annually in Washington, D.C., became a regular in his running circuit. He even entered ultra marathons, grueling 50-mile events.

He was inspired after Sept. 11, 2001, to begin the Color Guard.

"Everyone was excited about it," Bozeman recalled. "It's grown over the years and we've had a lot of good experiences. [People] were very supportive and endorsed it, and still do. We're gonna carry on with it."

He hoisted the American flag — something he's done for 36 years, long before the Color Guard formed — and became the group's central figure, a recognizable one because of his athletic build, white mustache, and ability to connect with people and get them excited about cheering on the group.

He commanded the group every year. And he was there early one Saturday morning in September of 2020, outside E.C. Glass High School, with a small band of other Color Guard members. Officially, the 10 Miler was canceled, for the first time in its history, because of the pandemic.

The streets weren't closed off to traffic that cool, overcast morning, but they sure were lonely. The Color Guard took to the sidewalks for their 10-mile trek, their familiar call-and-response cadences echoing out along the course, keeping a tradition alive.

Dedication. That's another term that describes Steve Bozeman.

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**Last September, he had** a tough time keeping up with the Color Guard. At the Marine Corps Marathon last October, Bozeman said he fell three times during the 26.2-mile race. He runs despite a diagnosis of severe nephropathy in his legs due to Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam.

"I just said, 'Damn, I want to keep running and keep what nerves and feeling I have in my feet working,'" Bozeman said.



He also began experiencing soreness in his right knee toward the end of last year's Marine Corps Marathon. Later, when the pain became extreme, he discovered he had a torn tendon.

"So I quit running for eight months, had to just power walk three to four times a week," Bozeman said. "I said I'll just walk and hopefully be in shape for the 10 Miler, and if nothing else I'll just walk the 10 Miler."

He's improved since then. In the spring, Bozeman began jogging roughly 3.5 miles, slowly. He said he has since been running miles and miles to prepare for Saturday's event.

"I need to run it at my own pace, make sure I don't find a root or a pot hole, so I don't trip in it," he said.

The Color Guard will carry on. Zuidema and Wormser agreed to take over when Bozeman emailed them about the possibility.

"Words cannot do justices to the honor that Ryan and I share in you entrusting us with such a sacred and time honored tradition that you created," Wormser emailed back. "... I am looking forward to carrying on your legacy."

The Color Guard has always been **a tight-knit group, one focused on togetherness.**

"When you've got a group like this," Zuidema said in 2020, "you could run 20 or 30 miles. They lift each other up."

Bozeman won't run alone this year. His wife, Debbie, will accompany him, and the two, he said, will run "in the back of the pack."

Determination. That term, too, describes Steve Bozeman.

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**The Color Guard** will welcome the Bozeman's daughter Meegan to its ranks, and she will carry the American flag in Steve's absence. Attached to the flag will be one of the Purple Hearts he was awarded in Vietnam.

Look around Saturday and there will be, within the Color Guard, tokens like that — reminders of duty and sacrifice, memorials to those who served and did not come back, testaments to honorable and courageous acts.

"My legacy, I guess, will carry on," Bozeman said, noting a granddaughter, Reagan, also will run — making three generations of Bozemans in the field.

Perhaps there's no secret to Steve Bozeman's abilities. Simply iron grit.

"I just push myself," he said, "make myself get out there and do it."

His goal is to make it 50 in a row. He's four 10 Milers away.

"That would be my lifetime goal," he said. "We'll see. One year at a time."

One year, and then another. He keeps putting one foot in front of the other and marching ahead. Yes, he's slowing down, admittedly so. But Steve Bozeman also made this next statement this week, and to know him is to know how much he means it:

"Endurance and confidence are coming back."

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ALERT

## After undergoing cancer treatments, Doug Smith is back full-time at Appomattox, instilling life lessons into his team

**Ben Cates**

Oct 5, 2023



Appomattox head coach Doug Smith looks on during his team's game against Rustburg at Bragg Stadium on Sept. for cancer, Smith is back teaching at the school and with the team full time.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

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Ben Cates

**L**ast Friday, as Appomattox's football team went to the locker room trailing Altavista by 20 points at halftime, players might have expected to hear about their dismal first-half performance, and how to turn it around.

Instead, they received a visit from an 8-year-old girl named Abby, who has gone through multiple rounds of surgery and treatments for cancer.

They told her to keep fighting. They told her, in a room full of brawny teenagers who play a sport where toughness is required, that she was the real tough one. And they told her she was brave.

A halftime talk void of X's and O's. A lesson more important than how to defeat your opponent. Education that extended beyond the classroom and gridiron, and struck to the heart of existence.

Also standing in front of the teenagers Friday night was their head coach, Doug Smith, who also has undergone his fair share of cancer treatments. A man who is now attempting to resume a full slate of duties. A man who wants his young players to know there's more to life than football.

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Appomattox lost the game that night, suffering its first defeat to Altavista in nine years. It sent the Raiders, a perennial powerhouse in the Virginia High School League's Class 2, to their fifth straight loss.

It was a stunning defeat, just the program's second to a Dogwood District opponent in its last 50 district contests. And it showed just how much work this team has to do if it wants to earn a spot in the playoffs, which it's done for 10 straight years, winning five state titles in that time.

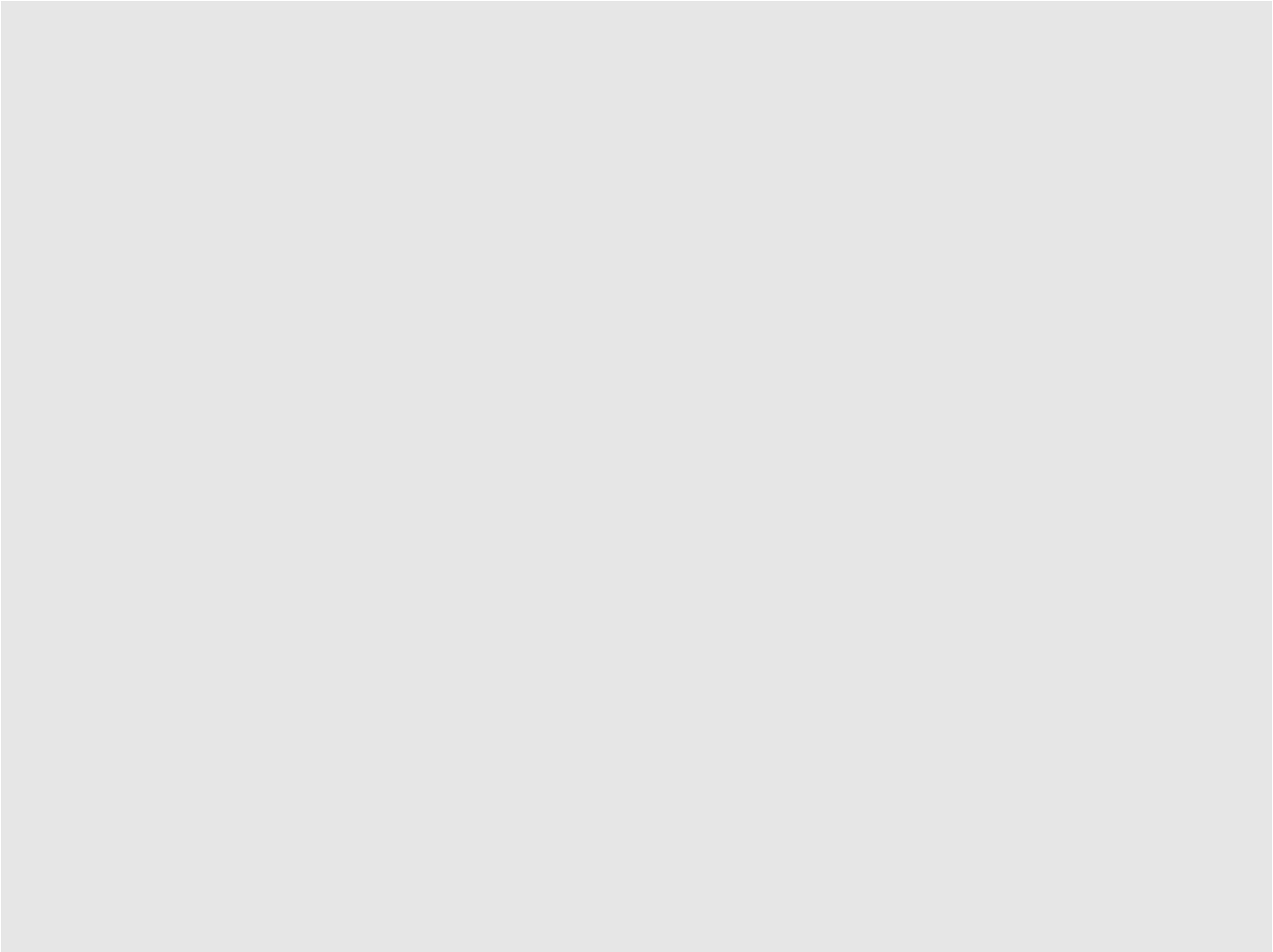
But on a Friday night in September, maybe none of that mattered. Maybe what mattered was that Smith's group get a glimpse of determination, of what faith looks like, of what it truly means to battle against the odds. Abby and Smith stood in front of them, two shining examples.

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**In the spring**, Doug Smith was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma, a form of skin cancer. Over time, tests revealed cancer had spread into his jaw and into a lymph node in his neck. The developments occurred after the 60-year-old coach found out in the fall of 2020 that he had multiple myeloma, another cancer for which there is no cure.

He underwent surgeries aimed at removing cancer from his jaw and from the lymph node. Doctors took out his salivary glands, resulting in weeks on end of dry mouth. He endured radiation and six weeks of chemotherapy, which ended three weeks ago. At Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, Smith rang a bell, a formality to show he had completed the treatments.

It was a trying time. Smith wanted to be teaching at Appomattox County High, wanted to be with his football players every day as they prepared for the upcoming season, wanted to be involved in teaching a young group how to conduct themselves or how to work together.



Appomattox coach Doug Smith congratulates his players after the Raiders defeated Glenvar in the Region 2C championship game at Glenvar High School in Salem on Nov. 26, 2021.

Scott P. Yates, The Roanoke Times

Instead, large chunks of his days were spent in a chamber, receiving hyperbaric oxygen therapy, long sessions spent breathing pure oxygen in a pressurized environment. He underwent nearly 30 treatments of pinpoint radiation, wearing a specially designed mask that can be unsettling, especially if the patient is claustrophobic, as Smith is. He lost some of his hair. Lost his sense of taste. And he speaks in gravely tones as a result of oral treatments.

But by the time Smith finished his treatments last month, doctors were amazed, he said. Many of the symptoms typically associated with carcinoma patients — drastic weight loss from loss of appetite, nausea, pain and fatigue — were mostly absent in Smith's case. That gave Smith, an outspoken person of faith, a chance to share his beliefs with doctors and hospital staff.

"I said I come from a place that prays for you," he said, "and for whatever reason, God has chosen to honor their prayers."

While at Duke, Smith focused on reading the Bible and praying. He began memorizing Bible passages, praying for "God to put more scripture in me than medicine."

When doctors first placed that radiation mask over his face, his heart rate spiked at 200 beats per minute. He began thinking about those verses, particularly a passage from the New Testament, in Ephesians, about putting on the armor of God. "The helmet of salvation," Smith said with a smile in a recent interview. So he used that imagery for his own situation. Then, with the mask on, his heart rate sat at a cool 60 beats per minute.

Later, he spoke with doctors about his experiences. Some listened, others didn't. Regardless, Smith talked and remained friendly, and built relationships.

"To be able to share why I felt like this had happened to me with everybody there," Smith said. "You could tell the ones who believe with you and the ones who were like, 'I'm not hearing that.' As soon as you mention something about the Lord they tune you out, which is fine. It's still our job to give God the glory."

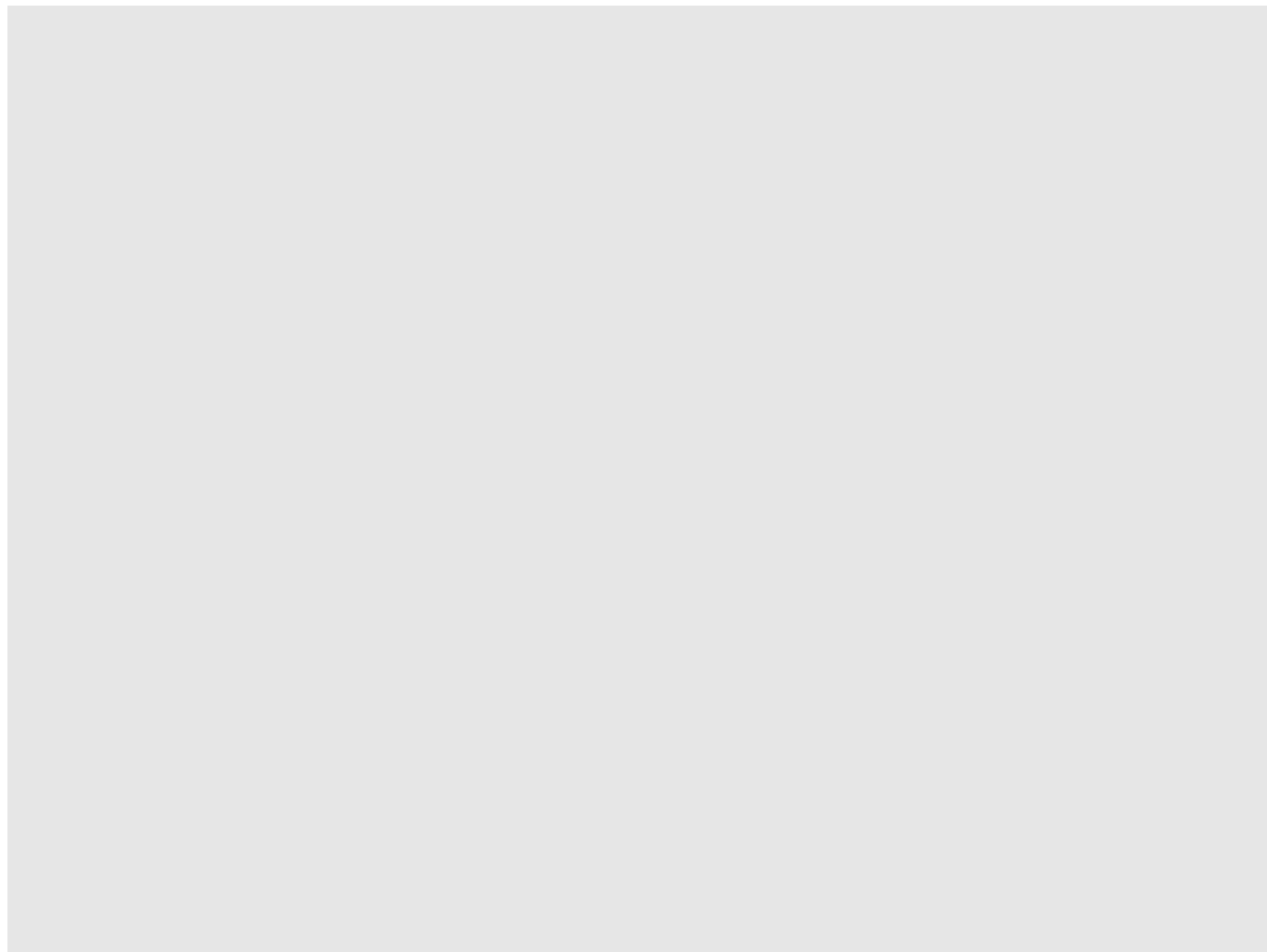
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**He's back home now**, the chemo sessions complete. He's also recently returned to teach full-time and to the team he's coached since 2012.

But the team is in the midst of its worst season since he took over. Appomattox is 1-5. Until last week's 40-point loss to Altavista, it wasn't giving up a huge amount of points per game, but the team wasn't scoring much either.

After eight seasons of success in Raider Country, the season is a shock to many fans. They still turn out in droves to Bragg Stadium, but there hasn't been much to cheer about yet at home (Appomattox's only win came on the road against rival

Buckingham County).



Appomattox coach Doug Smith reacts during a Class 2 state semifinal game against Graham on Dec. 4, 2021, at Mitchell Stadium in Bluefield, West Virginia.

Bristol Herald Courier

So instead of near-constant cheers and tense moments when the crowd used to sit on pins and needles in anticipation, there is now exasperation. The Raiders, for instance, committed six turnovers at home last week, fumbling and losing the ball five times and also tossing an interception. They miss blocking assignments, have trouble tackling and watch as ball carriers streak away into the open field.

Smith says his absence has had an effect on this team. In 2020, after his multiple myeloma diagnosis, an experienced group of players banded together and vowed to win for their coach, who wasn't able to attend games while undergoing treatments. They won their fifth state title since 2015 that year, with defensive coordinator Stephen Castello at the helm.



But this current crop of players is young and inexperienced. This week, Smith tried to teach them about how to celebrate when something positive happens on the field. He's never had to teach that before.

"This group really knows nothing about 2015 or '16 (the first two years of Appomattox's three straight state championships) or any of that stuff," Smith said. "They're young. And we haven't done what we need to do as coaches, and that's my fault, since 2020 with COVID."

Appomattox's state championship teams — and even ones that went deep into the playoffs and didn't win it all — have all been marked by community involvement, by deep personal bonds, by a certain chemistry that only develops over time.

"We used to take kids out and we'd go to service events, nursing homes, here and there to help this person," Smith said, "which gave us chemistry, gave us that team bonding. Serving — not just everybody doing stuff for us all the time. Not us getting to go to the pool or bowling or whatever.

"No, we need to go do for others. Where we can pick character traits out and we can address how these guys can work together. That's what we haven't had. We're trying to plan that now. ... I don't want to give any excuses, but I know we have a chemistry problem right now. And I've seen it for a while. We're trying to fix it this week, but you can't fix it in a day and can't fix it in a week. It comes over time."

He paused. "It's a time of humility," he continued, "which is good for all of us."

A couple years ago, the team developed a theme for the season: Joy Through the Struggle. The struggle, from a football standpoint, is real this year. Coaches and players alike are trying to figure out how to reverse the season's trajectory.

That's why bringing Abby into the locker room was important. It let young football players see a light gleaming in the face of someone who has really struggled.

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**At first, Abby** didn't want to walk into the locker room at halftime, Smith said, and who could blame her? Teenagers can be intimidating, and these smelled like sweat and body odor.

But the 8-year-old's visit probably meant more than she realized. Abby, the coach said, has had the same form of cancer he was diagnosed with this year. When she was introduced and stood on the field prior to the game, the PA announcer at Bragg said, "No matter what, she will be the toughest person on this field tonight."

While at Duke, Smith and his wife, Susan, watched kids with cancer walk the halls.

"I've been so fortunate all my life to be healthy," Smith said. "I've got great kids and I've got grandkids, and they're all healthy, and I see these kids and they're going through the same treatments I am, and they've lost all their hair. And that's when you go, 'OK, I'm 60 and I've never had anything [bad happen].' It puts things in perspective."

So he shined the light on Abby and her ability to fight through treatments and surgeries.

"We just told her she was what toughness was all about," Smith said. "This is about more than football here, buddy. Sometimes we think we've got it bad, but we don't have it bad at all. She was an encouragement to us."

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**For a while**, everything tasted like burnt flesh. Not as much now, but Smith still has no real sense of taste. He tires more easily than he used to. And he coughs when speaking too much from radiation treatments. But he also looks stronger than he should considering the treatments he's endured.

The other day he drank lemonade, and got a faint taste of it. Popped in a Sour Patch Kid and could barely taste it. Maybe it's all coming back slowly.

He returns to Duke for scans in early November, hoping to hear good news.

For now, he's getting through each day by being the same person he always has been: the coach who walks by faith. He believes, because of all he's been through the last three-plus years, that he can be a blessing to others.

And he doesn't worry. Ever.

"I used to, but no, not anymore," he said. "You get to the point where it's all in God's hands, and the last thing he wants you to do is worry about it. For whatever reason, he can use every single situation, good and bad."

He reads the Bible and he thinks about the apostle Paul, who prayed that an affliction would be taken away.

"God says, 'My grace is sufficient,'" Smith said. "Sometimes he says, 'I'm not gonna take it away. I'm gonna keep you right where you are because I can use you.' And what can be better than to be used by God? Not much."

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**By Ben Cates**

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