



Bottom (left to right): Chase Colangelo and Nico Moritz-Toledo; top (left to right): Gavin Knox, Teagan Leach, Yogi Colangelo. DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

An Early Start

Five eighth-graders commit to Virginia Tech

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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These days, it's typical to see eighth-graders commit to Division I baseball programs. As of Jan. 30, 28 members of the class of 2027 across the country had already made non-binding, verbal agreements to attend their chosen college.

What is unusual – if not unprecedented – is five 14-year-olds from the same travel team committing to the same college.

But that's exactly what happened over two months in the fall when Prince William County residents Chase Colangelo, Teagan Leach, Yogi Colangelo, Gavin Knox and Nico Moritz-Toledo took this trend to a new level by choosing Virginia Tech before even entering high school.

They did so for many of the same reasons: Academics, coaching staff, facilities, track record, conference membership, player development, style of baseball and in-state location. The fact they are all good friends and play together for the Stars' travel team only cemented their decision to attend the same college. The Stars practice in Prince William and feature players from Northern Virginia.

But as each one concluded Virginia Tech was his "dream school," two central questions remained: Why the rush? And how early is too early?

The five cannot sign letters of intent until November of their senior year at the earliest. In the meantime, a school

can back out of the commitment anytime for any reason. A new coaching staff, for example, can choose to bring in different players. A coach could also withdraw an offer because the player has injury concerns or fails to develop.

A player can also back out at any time as well, but could face limited scholarship offers from other colleges because those schools will pursue other players instead of continuing to recruit committed players.

As they weighed the pros and cons about whether to decide so soon, all five said they understood the risks. Still, one reason more than any other drove their thought process: Why wait if they are ready now? From their standpoint, this was about ability, not age, even if they will not play for the Hokies for another five years at the earliest. They remain confident they will attend Virginia Tech.

"If you know the school you want to go to, it doesn't matter what time you commit," Chase Colangelo said. "I don't get caught up in committing as an eighth- or ninth-grader. I found the right school. They wouldn't commit to us this early if they didn't want us this early."

HOW WE GOT HERE

A number of factors contribute to why Division I college baseball programs recruit at an earlier age. For one, they can. Baseball, football and men's and women's college basketball are the only Division

HEAD OF THE CLASS

Including the five from Virginia, 28 eighth-graders across the country have committed to Division I college baseball programs through Jan. 30, according to Perfect Game. Here are the others:

Name	State	Position	College
Christian Biggs	Texas	Third baseman	Texas
Bryson Casto	West Virginia	Shortstop	West Virginia
Colton Christman	Nevada	Left-handed pitcher	Louisiana State
Holston Dennard	Texas	Catcher	Texas
Devyn Downs	Louisiana	Shortstop	Louisiana State
Chase Fuller	Florida	Shortstop/third baseman	Florida State
Frainy Gonzalez	New York	Shortstop	Air Force
Jordin Griffin	Louisiana	Outfielder	Louisiana State
Max Hemenway	Washington	Shortstop	Tennessee
Ty Hemenway	California	Shortstop	Arizona State
Matthew Kelley	California	Shortstop	Miami
Ricky Lopez	New York	Shortstop	Louisiana State
Griffin McKain	South Carolina	Outfielder	South Carolina
Rylan McMahan	Florida	Left-handed pitcher	Florida
Beau Morio	Iowa	Catcher	Iowa
Mac Morris	South Carolina	Shortstop	South Carolina
Will Nieto	Texas	First baseman	Dallas Baptist
Sean Parrow	California	Right-handed pitcher	Arkansas
Aaden Phanmanee	Georgia	Catcher	Vanderbilt
Bryan Ravelo	Florida	Outfielder	Louisiana State
Grady Sickler	Oregon	Right-handed pitcher	Oregon State
Cullen Weller	Louisiana	Shortstop	Tulane
Sebastian Wilson	Illinois	Outfielder	Tennessee

I sports permitted to offer scholarships before an athlete's junior year.

That could change in the future, NCAA spokesperson Meghan Durham said in an email to InsideNoVa. "The Student Ath-

lete Experience Committee is currently reviewing recruiting rules in baseball and expects to bring a proposal to the Divi-

COMMIT » PAGE 16



CHASE COLANGELO

Resides: Haymarket

Current school: Home schooled

College position: Recruited as a shortstop

Committed to Virginia Tech: Oct. 25

Hits/throws: Left-handed/right-handed

Size: 5-9½, 160 pounds

Perfect Game ranking for class of 2027:

No. 5 overall in Virginia



YOGI COLANGELO

Resides: Haymarket

Current school: Home schooled

College position: Recruited as a middle infielder

Hits/throws: Left-handed/right-handed

Committed to Virginia Tech: Nov. 22

Size: 5-10, 165

Perfect Game ranking for class of 2027:

No. 4 overall in Virginia



GAVIN KNOX

Resides: Manassas

Current school: Benton Middle

College position: Recruited as a right-handed pitcher

Committed to Virginia Tech: Nov. 23

Size: 5-10, 170

Perfect Game ranking for class of 2027:

No. 11 overall and No. 2 right-handed pitcher nationally; No. 1 overall in Virginia



TEAGAN LEACH

Resides: Haymarket

Current school: Ronald Reagan Middle

College position: Recruited as a left-handed pitcher/first baseman

Hits/throws: Left-handed

Committed to Virginia Tech: Nov. 9

Size: 6-2, 205

Perfect Game ranking for class of 2027:

No. 6 left-handed pitcher and No. 50 overall nationally; No. 2 overall in Virginia



NICO MORITZ-TOLEDO

Resides: Haymarket

Current school: Bull Run Middle

College position: Recruited as an outfielder

Hits/throws: Left-handed

Committed to Virginia Tech: Dec. 26

Size: 5-8½, 150 pounds

Perfect Game ranking for class of 2027:

No. 67 overall and No. 13 outfielder nationally; No. 3 overall in Virginia

sion I Council this spring,” she wrote.

But for now, it’s permitted as college coaches try to remain competitive with their peers even while disliking what that involves.

Until about 12 years ago, high school baseball players usually committed to a college no earlier than their junior year. The process has sped up since then. In 2016, at least one eighth-grader committed to a Division I baseball team: Blaze Jordan (Mississippi State).

The local level reflects the shift. In 2011, Alec Bettinger (2013 Hylton High School graduate) committed to Virginia going into his junior year of high school. By October 2014, Tyler Solomon (2017 Battlefield graduate) committed to Vanderbilt as a sophomore. Then in November 2018, Mason Balsis (2023 Patriot graduate) committed to Virginia as a freshman. Only Balsis ended up at a different school (Longwood).

“It’s gotten faster,” said University of Virginia pitching coach Drew Dickinson. “It’s a slippery slope.”

Another reason for the early push stems from the youth baseball industry’s sudden growth. Aided by the rise of youth baseball market leader Perfect Game, colleges can see more players at nationwide showcase tournaments. This allows schools to save money on travel, time and expenses and gives players increased exposure at a young age.

The limited number of college scholarships plays a role as well.

Unlike basketball and football, where top recruits usually receive full scholarships, Division I baseball programs receive a total of 11.7 scholarships they can distribute among up to 27 players on their annual roster. If a school offers an athletic scholarship to a baseball player, the player must receive at least a 25% scholarship, which is unique to baseball. The only exception to the 25% rule is that a student who was previously not on scholarship can receive less than 25% in his last year of eligibility. Colangelo said each player is receiving a scholarship. But out of fairness to each of the players, he declined to say how much scholarship money they are getting since the amounts, in general, can vary from player to player.

In addition, analytics helps predict a player’s development.

“You can project better in baseball at a young age than most other sports,” Colangelo said. “They have a skillset that is special.”

TRACKING TECH’S INTEREST

Virginia Tech’s interest in the five local players typified how recruiting unfolds at this early stage.

Kurt Elbin, the Hokies’ baseball recruiting coordinator, saw the boys in a PBR Tournament the Stars won in Georgia at the end of July. Elbin talked to the team’s coach and owner, Mike Colangelo, afterward. With his years of experience, Colangelo wanted to make sure Virginia Tech and other colleges were tracking these kids he believed were already Division I recruits.

During a weekend in September, Colangelo paid for his 14U and 15U Stars’ teams to attend a camp at Virginia Tech. No other

travel teams were there. Afterward, the Virginia Tech coaches gave Colangelo a list of players they wanted to follow – among them, the five who ended up committing to the Hokies.

From that point, it was up to the boys and their parents if they wanted to talk with Virginia Tech because NCAA rules prohibit the school’s coaches from reaching out first until Sept. 1 of the athlete’s junior year.

In thinking about his son, Chase, Colangelo began the process with one question: “Is this the right thing to do?”

Virginia Tech helped by making it clear to all five from the start that there was no rush to make a decision. If they waited, the Hokies’ coaches would not pressure any of them.

“That’s not normal,” said Colangelo, a former baseball standout at Hylton High School and George Mason University who played for three different teams in the majors. “Typically colleges put you on a timetable.”

To get a feel for where Chase stood, Colangelo asked him about Virginia Tech. Chase said that’s where wanted to go. Chase’s uncle, Sal, played football and baseball at Virginia Tech, and Sal’s daughter attends the Blacksburg school now.

As Colgan High School’s head baseball coach, Colangelo already had a strong relationship with the Hokies. Four of his players are either freshmen at Virginia Tech (Ryan Kennedy and Carter Newman) or will join the program next season (Brett Renfrow and Matthew Westley).

But as a father, Colangelo needed to do his due diligence to help Chase decide the best route. To do that, Colangelo created a spreadsheet to break down what the baseball program offered.

The Hokies play in the ACC, one of the best college baseball conferences. Virginia Tech’s staff, led by John Szefc, the 2022 ACC coach of the year, is another positive. Since his first season at the helm in 2018, Szefc has gone 130-104, highlighted by the school’s first Super Regional appearance in 2022. The Hokies finished last season 45-14 and produced the program’s highest draft pick ever in Gavin Cross (No. 9 overall). The Hokies enter this season ranked No. 15 in Baseball America’s preseason poll.

The Hokies play the way Colangelo teaches his players: Be aggressive at the plate and on the base paths and emphasize defense and pitching.

Colangelo also asked pro scouts he knew for their opinion of Virginia Tech. All spoke highly of the program.

“It checked the boxes,” Colangelo said.

Chase first spoke to Elbin and then with Szefc via Zoom. During that conversation, Szefc offered a scholarship. On Oct. 25, Chase committed to the Hokies.

The other four players did their due diligence as well.

They relied on Colangelo for their input. Gavin Knox said the recruiting experience of his older brother, Connor, influenced him. Connor, a 2023 Colgan graduate, did not commit to a college (George Mason) until the summer before his senior season after COVID kept colleges from recruiting the previous year. To avoid any undue pres-

sure, Gavin wanted to make his decision sooner.

Nico Moritz-Toledo, who said the experience was nerve-wracking, was the last of the five to commit, doing so Dec. 26. All five are good students who carry a combined 3.7 grade-point average.

Overall, Colangelo emphasized to the families the need to ask questions and treat the meetings as they were interviewing the coaches for a job.

Olivia Brennan, Teagan Leach’s mother, was fine with her son’s early decision. They visited about 17 colleges, but Virginia Tech was one place that excited Teagan the most. The clincher? It was the only school he bought a sweatshirt and a hat from. Teagan committed Nov. 9.

“Coach Mike did his homework on the program, interviewed them, watched their practices, talked to their coaches and gave it his blessing as well,” Brennan said. “That is huge in my book as I know he would not steer Teagan in a direction that was not a right fit. We trust his judgment 100 percent.”

ONE AND THE SAME

When the five start debating each other on any subject, it’s never a dull moment. Or a silent one.

Who’s the best ping-pong player? Is Derek Jeter overrated? The arguing can last for hours.

The back-and-forth ribbing comes naturally given their bond. Chase, Teagan, Nico and Yogi live in Haymarket, while Gavin lives in Manassas. The first four live in Battlefield High School’s zone, while Gavin is slated to attend Colgan.

Gavin, Nico and Chase have played together for Colangelo since they were 7. Yogi, who is Chase’s cousin, joined the Stars for the 9-and-under age group. Teagan joined later after he and his mom moved from Florida in January 2021. The team has gone 279-18-2 since their 8U year.

Colangelo and Teagan initially crossed paths at a 10U travel-team tournament when they faced each other. Teagan impressed Colangelo with his play. With Colangelo’s team moving on to the World Series, he asked Teagan to join them.

Believing he could benefit from Colangelo’s coaching and the Stars’ talented team, Teagan and Olivia came to Virginia and lived with Colangelo and his family in Haymarket for three months before finding their own place.

“These boys are his family,” Olivia said.

Colangelo compares Teagan, who is 6-foot-2, 205 pounds, to Gar-Field graduate and former major leaguer Jeff Baker in terms of size, power and reserved personality.

Gavin, the only one of the five to receive offers from schools other than Virginia Tech (University of Virginia and George Mason), throws between 85 and 88 mph already as a right-hander. A shortstop, Chase controls the infield with an experienced eye. Nico combines speed and power. So does Yogi, along with versatility.

But for all their success so far, there’s no room for complacency.

“It’s an awesome feat,” Mike Colangelo said. “But that doesn’t mean you stop working.”

BACK ON THE DIAMOND



Freedom head coach Alex Trevino exhorts his team prior to its season opener against Gar-Field. **BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA**

Freedom-Woodbridge fields its first team since 2020

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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During his first official pre-game speech as Freedom-Woodbridge's head baseball coach, Alex Trevino did not concentrate on hitting or pitching strategy with his players. He focused on calming them down.

"Take a deep breath and relax," Trevino intoned as the boys stood in front of the visiting dugout before the Eagles' season-opener March 21 at Gar-Field. "Are you nervous? OK. It means you care."

The players had every reason to feel anxious.

Freedom last played a baseball game three years ago when it hosted James Monroe in a scrimmage. At the time, the Eagles fielded only a junior varsity team in an effort to rebuild the program after the varsity team was constantly blown out the season before.

The day after that game, however, Prince William County Public Schools canceled everything due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools didn't reopen for the rest of the academic year. Baseball season was over.

Freedom tried to revive its program in 2021 and 2022, but had no coach. In the meantime, interest waned, players moved on and its field sat empty, overgrown and barren.

Then last fall, Freedom received interest from one person to coach the team: Trevino.

Trevino understood what this job entailed. It would not lead to immediate titles or an infusion of talent from inside the school or out. It would require infinite patience teaching the fundamentals to kids who for the most part had never played the game. Opportunity, not outcomes or skill level, took priority.

So on this blustery, sunny evening where he once played as a high schooler, the 2001 Gar-Field graduate remained the ever-calm instructor before his eager charges.

"If something bad happens, you need to have a 12-second memory," Trevino told them.

Freshman Christian Legree took Trevino's words to heart.

Legree had never played baseball, but he embraced challenges. In the fall, Freedom revived its golf program with Legree's father serving as coach. The Eagles' lone participant, Legree finished only four strokes off qualifying for regionals.

He also played football and basketball at Freedom. Looking for something to do in the spring, he decided to give baseball a try.

But as the reality of what lay ahead this day dawned on him, Legree felt the nerves wash over him. This was a big moment and the last thing he wanted to do was mess up.

"I'm playing first base," Legree said. "Everything is coming to me."



Freedom's John Galeano scored his team's lone run.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

DO OVER

It's an understatement to say Freedom has struggled in baseball.

In 15 varsity seasons since the Woodbridge school opened in 2004, it has won only one district/conference game, no more than 10 games in total and posted nine winless records, including a 0-17 mark in 2019. When the Eagles beat Park View-Sterling 14-8 on April 13, 2018, it snapped a 59-game losing streak over four seasons.

The losing bottomed out in 2019 when Cardinal District opponents outscored

Freedom 304-4 in 13 games, including the postseason. Games, typically seven innings, were so lopsided they never went beyond the fifth inning because of the 10-run slaughter rule.

To avoid a repeat for upcoming seasons, Steve Bryson, then Freedom's activities director, asked the district's other activities directors to allow the Eagles to drop down to a junior varsity level for the next two seasons so the program had time to build itself back up.

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The other schools agreed. The Eagles would have a junior varsity team – only this time with seniors. The move made sense. Neither Freedom nor its opponents got anything out of those blowouts.

A number of factors explained Freedom's challenges.

The school's makeup plays a part. For financial reasons, a number of students have no time for after-school activities because they have to work to help support their family. In addition, single-family parents have a tough time getting their kid to practice if the parent works.

Experience is another factor.

Freedom had produced some noteworthy players over the years, including Reese Hall (a 2018 graduate), Jacob Horner (2015) and Ifraim Figueroa (2018). Hall and Horner played in college at Division III Virginia Wesleyan and Carroll University, respectively, and Figueroa played with the Dominican Republic National Team.

But they were the exception. Few students who tried out had played much, if any, baseball.

Students going to other schools hurt as well. Incoming freshmen who lived in Freedom's zone enrolled at other high schools through their specialty programs.

There was also the challenge of keeping a coach. Freedom cycled through 11 of them in 16 seasons, and seven of them coached only one season. One season, two men ran the team. In 2018, Freedom almost didn't have a team until Rich Davila agreed to take over.

Baseball was not the only Freedom athletic program struggling. For example, the Eagles did not field a varsity wrestling team from 2018-19 to 2021-22 because they didn't have a coach. Outside of football, which won the 2022 Class 6 state title, boys basketball and boys soccer, Freedom has experienced minimal athletic success in its other sports.

Thomas Annunziata wanted to change that when he took over for Bryson as activities director in August. Annunziata made it a priority to find head coaches for dormant sports.

He had no takers for baseball until Trevino walked into his office one day last fall. A professional fundraiser, Trevino initially came to talk to Annunziata about any business opportunities when the subject of baseball came up.

Trevino mentioned he worked at Competitive Edge, an indoor baseball facility in Woodbridge. Seizing an opportunity, Annunziata asked Trevino whether he would be interested in coaching Freedom baseball.

Trevino initially declined, saying he didn't have time. But two weeks later, Trevino called Annunziata back. He had been unable to sleep and said if Freedom still needed a coach, he would do it.

From the start, Annunziata thought Trevino was the perfect choice to run a fledgling program like Freedom. In addition to his work at Competitive Edge, Trevino had also coached in Dale City Little League.

"He's patient and knowledgeable and



Senior John Galeano offers some footwork advice to outfield freshman Arturo Castillo during the team's road game against Gar-Field March 21. **BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA**

sets expectations at a realistic place," Annunziata said.

Trevino had no illusions about what he was taking on.

"I knew what I was walking into," Trevino said. "I've mostly developed young kids so it fits my wheelhouse."

ONE STEP AT A TIME

Between innings against Gar-Field, John Galeano took freshman Arturo Castillo to the side of the field for a teaching moment.

By far the team's most experienced player and the only one signed to play in college (Penn State New Kensington), Galeano explained to Castillo in Spanish how to properly angle his body and feet to back up and catch a fly ball in the outfield. The young player had misjudged a fly ball the previous inning.

As much as he loves playing, Galeano loves this type of interaction. No one wants to see Freedom baseball thrive more than him.

"I'm looking to be a better person by giving back," Galeano said. "I had a coach once tell me, 'Don't look at the scoreboard. Look at the example.'"

Galeano is one of five players on the 13-man roster with some baseball background – he began playing the sport at age 6. With no high school team in 2022, Galeano played for a home-school team. He enjoyed the experience, but wanted to finish his prep career at Freedom.

Providing that opportunity was the primary reason Annunziata decided to play a varsity schedule, but only against Cardinal District opponents. The 12-game season without any scrimmages gives Freedom more time to practice and develop. And it also gives the seniors a chance to compete one more time and do so on a varsity level.

Galeano led the charge against Gar-Field. After Freedom's first two batters struck out, Galeano lined a hit into right field. With Trevino guiding him from the third base coach's box, Galeano ran as fast

as he could to end up at third.

As he stood up, he yelled to his teammates, "Vamos," Spanish for "Let's go." The next batter, Tyson Wade, doubled to score Galeano from third. Suddenly, Freedom led 1-0, and some buzz started circulating.

When the inning ended, Galeano grabbed his glove and headed to the field before turning back. He was so juiced he forgot his cap.

Galeano usually plays shortstop, but against Gar-Field he was the starting pitcher. Trevino needed someone on the mound who could throw with command. And Galeano delivered, striking out two and allowing just one run in two innings.

Trevino, meanwhile, never stopped instructing. He chastised himself for forgetting to tell Legree to take a ball to first base to throw to the infield while the pitcher warmed up.

"It's been a long time since I had to tell someone that," Trevino said.

He then had to tell the shortstop to cover second when the catcher threw the ball before Gar-Field hit. Between all this, Trevino helped the two managers set up the scoreboard.

It kept coming, one reminder after another, but Trevino stayed upbeat. This is what he signed up for.

Annunziata is encouraged to see baseball back at Freedom. He bought new uniforms for the team to replace old ones stained from previous use. He mowed the grass from 2½ feet on a field that boasts the deepest outfield (390 feet at center) of any Prince William high school baseball field.

And he believes he has the right coach.

"When this thing turns around, he's the one who built it," Annunziata said. "I give him all the credit."

The players love learning from Trevino. Freshman Casey Figueroa is a first-time baseball player who tried out at the urging of Wade.

Figueroa has learned a number of lessons. But one stands out in particular: He can personally attest to the phrase attributed to Ted Williams that "hitting a baseball is the hardest thing to do in sports."

Trevino's even-handed approach, though, helps quell nerves.

"He makes you feel welcome here," Figueroa said. "You just focus on the process and keep things realistic."

Freedom ended up losing 11-1 after the Red Wolves scored six runs in the bottom of the third off a Freedom reliever. Another varsity game ends in the fifth inning.

There is room for improvement. The Eagles need to work on holding runners on base to prevent steals. Their defense led to some misplayed balls.

And yet, through it all, there is plenty to like.

Trevino said his team exceeded his expectations. Take out the one inning and it's a closer game.

"There were kids who were still upset after the game," Trevino said. "You have to deal with adversity, and they will be better people and players because of it."



Freedom freshman first baseman Christian Legree flashed plenty of athleticism, including this throw-over attempt. **BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA**

NEW NAME, SAME GAME

Freedom QB Evans-Trujillo at full strength for his final season

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Here's a scary thought. As good as Tristan Evans-Trujillo was last season in helping Freedom-Woodbridge go 15-0, win the Class 6 state football title and set a state record for most points in a season (952), the senior quarterback is in position to excel even more this season.

Some of that is due to another year of experience and who returns around him. But he's also at full strength after regaining the 30-plus pounds he lost in 2022 due to a series of injuries incurred during the season, along with an enlarged spleen suffered before the season.

A thicker build. A stron-

ger arm. Even a new last name, something Evans-Trujillo legally changed in July to honor his maternal great-grandfather, Paul Trujillo. Because Trujillo had only daughters, Evans-Trujillo wanted to keep his last name alive for another generation.

It's all part of the package now. Something new. Something old. And the same laser-like focus from someone who set a single-season state record of 61 touchdown passes, completed nearly 70% of his passes, threw for 3,563 passing yards and totaled 74 touchdowns passing and rushing.

"He will be a better quarterback," said Freedom-Woodbridge head coach Darryl Overton. "It's hard to ignore that. His decision-making. His ability to read defenses."

And although it's difficult to gauge production until the games are played, Evans-Trujillo could surpass his 2022 totals as well.

"The potential is definitely there," Overton said.

Scary indeed.

PLAYING THROUGH PAIN

Mention Evans-Trujillo's name and it's easy to focus on the gaudy statistics.

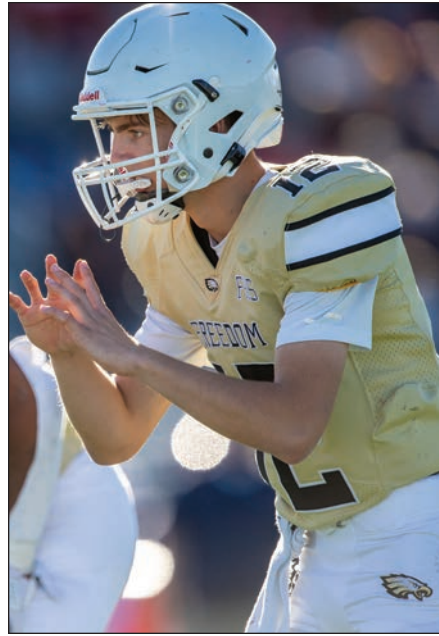
But to truly understand the all-state performer's value on a team full of playmakers,

focus instead on two routine plays during the third quarter of the championship game against Madison. Both distill Evans-Trujillo to his essence.

On a first-and-10 at the Madison 15-yard line, Evans-Trujillo suffered three broken ribs when a defensive end drilled him in his left side on a run-pass option play. The hit almost resulted in a turnover after Evans-Trujillo fumbled. But center Walter Hughes recovered the ball at the Madison 6-yard line.

Evans-Trujillo didn't know the severity of the injury at the time. But knew he was hurt. So did the Madison defender who administered the hit.

But instead of coming off the field, Evans-Trujillo



Tristan Evans-Trujillo led Freedom to the Class 6 state championship last season.

DOUG STROUD | FOR INSIDENOVA

stayed put. He had played through other injuries and got the job done. Why stop now?

Without hesitation, Evans-Trujillo ran the same play on the next down and gained 5 yards. Running back Jeffrey Overton Jr. took it from there, scoring from 1 yard to put Freedom up by two touchdowns in the eventual 48-14 victory.

So go ahead and point to Evans-Trujillo's quick decision-making and his pinpoint accuracy. But most of all, consider his mental toughness. Without that, nothing else matters.

"That's one of his best qualities," Overton said. "He's hard to shake. And that's why he's such a great leader and why people play so hard for him."

A MILITARY BACKGROUND

Think first. Act second. It's a lesson Evans-Trujillo learned at a young age growing up in a military family.

Terry Evans, a 27-year Air Force veteran, and his wife, Lisa, emphasized to Tristan and his two older siblings the importance of practicing self-control. Keep your emotions in check and you will react appropriately no matter the circumstance.

Evans-Trujillo takes that advice to heart on and off the field. His even-keeled personality is always on display in measured tones. He's careful what he says and how he says it. Nothing is ever done impulsively.

Take, for example, when he took over as Freedom's starter last season. When asked for an interview about the upcoming season and his role, Evans-Trujillo preferred that his parents be in on the interview as well. He wanted to make sure he expressed himself correctly.

But after a year in the spotlight in which he became accustomed to answering media questions, Evans-Trujillo is

MAKING HIS MARK

Tristan Evans-Trujillo entered the Virginia High School League record book in five categories in the 2022 season. (All totals were accomplished in 15 games).



» **Category:** Touchdown responsibility in a season (rushing-receiving-runbacks)
» **Record:** 74 (61 passing, 13 rushing)
» **Place in the record book:** Second

» **Category:** Touchdown responsibility in a game
» **Record:** 9 against John Champe Nov. 18 (seven passing, two rushing)
» **Place in the record book:** Tied for first

» **Category:** Passing touchdowns in a season
» **Record:** 61 in 15 games
» **Place in the record book:** First

» **Category:** Passing touchdowns in a game
» **Record:** 7 accomplished twice – Oct. 14 against Woodbridge and Nov. 18 against John Champe
» **Place in the record book:** Tied for third

» **Category:** Passing yardage in a season
» **Record:** 3,653 yards
» **Place in the record book:** Fifth

comfortable speaking for himself. He understands it's part of the growth process.

"He's very coachable," Overton said. "He sets the tone. When I'm on him, his teammates know no one is safe. There's no whining from him. He stays the same and gets it done."

His teammates trust him implicitly, especially those who are on the receiving end of his ability to run the offense. Kam Courtney, Jeffrey Overton Jr., Juju Preston and EJ Reid have all played with Evans-Trujillo since they were 10 and participated in Overton's Playmakers youth football organization.

All have flourished into Division I prospects who are integral to Freedom's high-flying offense. Reid (Wake Forest commitment), Courtney (Indiana) and Preston (over 10 scholarship offers, including Michigan, Maryland, Wisconsin, U.Va. and Penn State) combined for 159 receptions, 2,778 yards and 49 touchdowns in 2022. Overton Jr., the Class 6

TRISTAN » PAGE 16



Tristan Evans-Trujillo was a first-team, all-state selection in 2022.
BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

offensive player of the year, ran for 2,613 yards and 35 touchdowns. Senior Aaron Duncan (five Division I offers, second-team, all-state) is back as well at tight end.

The key, though, is Evans-Trujillo.

“He knows all the right reads and also understands the timing of our routes,” Courtney said. “I’ll see something pre-snap, and I already know he sees it, too, and he’ll know exactly when to get me the ball.”

STARTING AT AGE 4

Although Evans-Trujillo will switch positions, if necessary, to play in college, he’d prefer to stick with quarterback. The rationale makes sense.

For one thing, it’s in his lineage. His great uncle, John Easterbrook, was a standout quarterback at Illinois. The 5-foot-8 Easterbrook enjoyed his best season in 1960 when he ran for 352 yards and threw for 538.

For another, it’s a position in which he feels most comfortable. Evans-Trujillo started as a running back and linebacker when he began playing football at age 4, but by the next year, he was under center because, he said, “I could remember the plays.”

Evans-Trujillo also loved figuring things out and displayed even then the level-headedness needed to run an offense. The key was finding someone to develop him. His father had heard good things about Overton and liked what he saw as well, especially the way Overton connected with the players.

At age 8, Evans-Trujillo joined the Playmakers with the “concentrated effort to be a quarterback,” Terry said. It worked.

Over the years, Evans-Trujillo thrived under Overton’s tutelage. He always asked questions and wanted to know how something worked. He also had thick enough skin to withstand Overton’s calculated criticisms.

Terry recalled one youth game where his son ran the wrong play. Evans-Trujillo still ended up scoring, but Overton loudly expressed his displeasure with his decision. Other parents were shocked that Overton spoke to Evans-Trujillo that way. But Terry was fine with it. So was Evans-Trujillo.

“Darryl wants it done the right way, and he holds them accountable,” Terry said.

Evans-Trujillo played quarterback in seventh and eighth grades at Post Oak Middle School in Spotsylvania Courthouse (the school did not allow sixth-graders to play football) before he and his family moved to an apartment in Manassas for his dad’s job with a government contractor.

Although Evans-Trujillo lives outside of Freedom’s school zone, he can attend the Woodbridge school because 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. Evans-Trujillo is in Freedom’s Center for Environmental and Natural Sciences program.

Typically, quarterbacks under Overton at Freedom do a two-year apprenticeship before becoming the starter.

But Evans-Trujillo was the exception when he started Freedom’s final three games his freshman season after regular starter Davis Bryson got injured. Evans-Trujillo had to adapt quickly and struggled at times. But he used the opportunity as a learning experience in preparation for when he became the full-time starter.

A sponge when it comes to absorbing concepts, Evans-Trujillo became adept at running Freedom’s offense, especially run-pass options. Standing in the shotgun formation, the quarterback takes the snap and places the football near the running back’s stomach. Keeping an eye on the defense, the quarterback has the option of handing the ball off or throwing it.

“He maximizes opportunities that are presented by the defense,” said Hylton head football coach Nate Murphy. “It’s very difficult for the defense to confuse him or to be right against him. He seems to always find the hole in the defense.”

Overton has had more athletically talented quarter-



Tristan Evans-Trujillo completed nearly 70 percent of his passes last season. **BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA**

ATHLETIC FAMILY

Tristan Evans-Trujillo has an athletic background. Here are some of the familial ties:

- » His father, Terry, is Freedom-Woodbridge’s head wrestling coach. Terry helped start the program last season after a seven-year hiatus
- » His great uncle, John Easterbrook, was a standout quarterback at Illinois. Also undersized at 5-foot-8, Easterbrook enjoyed his best season in 1960 when he ran for 352 yards and threw for 538
- » His great grandfather, Paul Trujillo, is a member of the Ohio Handball Hall of Fame

backs at Freedom than Evans-Trujillo. Bryson, a 5-9 sophomore in line to start at quarterback for Kennesaw State (Ga.), was faster. As was A.J. Felton, also 5-9 and now a defensive back at Southern Utah.

Quest Powell, a 6-2 backup quarterback at North Carolina Central, was bigger. All three enjoyed successful careers at Freedom in earning all-district, district player or district offensive player of the year honors.

But Overton considers the 5-10 Evans-Trujillo the best quarterback he’s had primarily because of how invested he is in understanding the game within the game.

“I try to see what [Overton] sees from the sidelines,” Evans-Trujillo said.

PREPPING FOR THE SEASON

Evans-Trujillo could always throw a great deep ball. But the first one he threw to Courtney this preseason caught the receiver off guard.

“I had to run faster than I usually do to go and catch it,” Courtney said.

The improved distance served as a reminder how hard Evans-Trujillo worked in the offseason after taking a pounding in 2022. Things got off to a rough start in July of that year when he suffered an enlarged spleen caused by a parasite he picked up at a camp.

Then, during Freedom’s regular-season finale against Hylton, he broke the right index finger of his throwing hand. It was discovered after the state final that the fracture actually went all the way down to his wrist.

In the region final against Patriot, he suffered bruised

College interest slow so far for Evans-Trujillo

» BY DAVID FAWCETT
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Tristan Evans-Trujillo’s business-like approach has helped him during a challenging college recruiting process.

In the offseason, Evans-Trujillo visited eight Division I colleges (Tulane, St. Thomas, Columbia, Princeton, Wake Forest, Harvard, Brown and VMI) and two Division II schools (Valdosta State and UNC-Pembroke). He didn’t get a scholarship offer, but he did secure a roster spot.

Some schools invited him to their camps. Others he wanted to check out himself. But in each case, the reaction was the same. Evans-Trujillo said the college coaches were friendly, wishing him good luck for the upcoming season, but were non-committal in saying anything more.

With a 4.15 grade-point average, Evans-Trujillo is set academically. He said the main reason for the lack of follow-up interest is his height. He’s 5-10, which these colleges believe isn’t tall enough to play at their respective level.

Evans-Trujillo said ideally he wants to play Division I, but he’s willing to go anywhere. He has received offers so far from two Division II schools – Fairmont State (W.Va.) and Coker (S.C.) – as well as from Division III Stevenson (Md.).

“It’s a mixture of emotions,” Evans-Trujillo said. “I’m angry, but if the [colleges] don’t want me, that’s fine. There’s nothing I can do about that.”

Evans-Trujillo credits his Christian faith with keeping him grounded. He prays for wisdom and favor and most of all faith to push through. Ultimately, he knows God is in control and there’s no need to worry about anything.

That’s why his favorite Bible verse is Matthew 19:26: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

“Something great in the end will come,” Evans-Trujillo said.

ribs. In the state semifinals against Western Branch, he popped a blood vessel on the top of his right index finger. Then came the three broken ribs in the state final.

The combination dropped his weight 34 pounds down to 130. After taking a break to let his body recover, Evans-Trujillo worked out with his mother. That, combined with eating a minimum of 3,000 calories a day, allowed Evans-Trujillo to boost his weight back up 177 pounds.

As he enters his final season of high school football with Freedom in great position to defend its state title, Evans-Trujillo stays focused on the task at hand. Yes, he’s bigger. Yes, he has a new last name. But at his core, he’s still the same tireless worker always asking questions and always up for a challenge.

At a recent practice, Overton took him out after he threw an interception to a junior varsity safety. Evans-Trujillo protested the move. Overton explained his reasoning. End of discussion.

But instead of pouting, Evans-Trujillo took a different tack. With Overton’s blessing, Evans-Trujillo ran the scout-team offense against the first-team defense and led it to a touchdown. Evans-Trujillo had the final say. And Overton just smiled.

“It was his Kirk Cousins’ ‘How do you like that’ moment,” Overton said.