

Once A Troubled Teen, Calip Now A Top RB At Orange

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After surviving a violence-filled childhood in Cleveland, JJ Calip has thrived on and off the football field after being taken in by his grandmother in the Columbus area. The Olentangy Orange senior and Central Michigan commit is one of the top backs in Ohio.

Lewis Center, OH – Fortunately, Jakivion “JJ” Calip had just enough maturity at age 13 to face down the inevitable before it was too late.

“I was in the streets playing with fire,” he said of his upbringing in two rough neighborhoods in Cleveland. “I was horrible. I was hanging out with the wrong crowd. Friends were getting killed. The bottom line is I

might be in jail or dead right now if I hadn’t moved down here.”

Things got real when

16-year-old

Tanzanian refugee

Bahati Juma, who

had been living with

Calip and his mother

in Cleveland, was

gunned down outside

their apartment

complex in June of

2018. Calip and

Juma had just been

hanging out together 30 minutes earlier. Juma played football and wrestled at John Marshall High School.

"Nobody knows for sure who killed him or why, whether it was revenge for something gang-related or what," Calip said. "I didn't know if maybe I was next. I got off social media and kept a real low profile. Two weeks later, another friend got killed. It was about this time that my mom and me were having issues and she kicked me out. I was sleeping in homeless shelters off and on."

In addition to finding religion – he was taking the train to church every Sunday and finding a new purpose in life there – Calip was saved by his grandmother, Mattie Chawinga, a school bus driver in Worthington who offered to take him in before his freshman year of high school.

"Deep down, JJ was always a good kid, but he was kind of all over the place growing up and he just needed some direction and some focus, and being a people person that he is, I knew he would thrive with better friends and role models in his life," Chawinga said. "JJ experienced so many things in Cleveland, there has been a lot to heal from. But over the past three years, he has settled down so much and

become a responsible young man who has worked very hard to accomplish his goals. I'm so proud of him."

His talents on the football field were never an issue. A hotshot prospect at running back, Calip was slated to attend tradition-rich Cleveland St. Ignatius, but wound up at Worthington Kilbourne after the move. His career really took off in 2021 when he rushed for 1,209 yards, amassed 1,759 all-purpose yards and scored 15 touchdowns for the 4-7 Wolves. Calip made first-team All-Central District and third-team All-Ohio in Division II.

During the offseason, he shined at various college camps and combines, clocked an impressive 4.46 seconds for the 40-yard dash and entertained a handful of scholarship offers. The 5-foot-10, 181-pounder earned a three-star rating from 247Sports.com.

In late May, about six weeks after committing to play at Central Michigan, Calip announced on Twitter that his grandmother had moved to Lewis Center and he was transferring to Olentangy Orange. During his Tweet, he thanked teammates, coaches and others at Kilbourne who had helped him transform his life.

"I got some crap on social media from people who said I got recruited or paid to go to Orange, but that was not the case at all," Calip said. "Grandma moved for our family situation. While I understand why some people at Kilbourne might be sore, coach Eddie (Michael Edwards) has been great and he still interacts with me almost every day. I met some great people over there who will always be my friends."

Calip credited dozens of others who have served as role models and friends both during his transition and transfer, but Duane and Angie Henneman top the list. He refers to them as his aunt and uncle, although they aren't actually related to him.

"We met during football season last year and really hit it off," Angie Henneman said. "JJ stays here a lot and we hang out together. We went with him to Central Michigan for his visit. He gets yelled at a lot, practically every day, by me just for doing dumb things teen-age kids do. I guess you could say Duane is his male role model. We don't want to take too much credit, though. His Grandma is the one who saved him. She's the one who deserves the gold chain."

Chawinga conceded that football played at least some role in the decision to move.

"I wanted to give JJ everything he needed before he goes to college," she said. "This program is a little bigger, and I wanted to give him some challenges, not only on the football field, but in his education as well. I was ready to move, and this happened to be the right place and time."

Orange coach Zebb Schroeder said he was thrilled to learn that one of the top running backs in the state was enrolling at his school. The Pioneers, perennial playoff contenders, suffered an atypical 1-9 season in 2021.

"I think it was the last day of school when my AD sent me a note to tell me that this kid had just enrolled and, of course, I had already heard a little about him through some of the other kids who heard that he might be moving here," Schroeder said.

"My first impression of him was really unique because he called me in person to talk to me. Kids don't usually do that anymore. They typically text. I thought the fact he reached out by phone really impressed me. He was right up front in telling me that even though he had Division I scholarship offers he wasn't going to big-time anybody and he just wanted to put in the work and help us win. He proved that right away with his work ethic and ability to get along with everybody. It was a seamless transition."

The addition of Calip, however, caused a bit of a conundrum – albeit a pleasant one – for the coaching staff, which worked hard over the summer to tweak an offense to feature the skills of incumbent senior tailback Bobby Ogles and Calip. The Pioneers' balanced attack now may feature two-back looks, or perhaps Calip lining up in the slot as a receiving weapon.

"Watch Curtis Samuel highlights and I think you'll get the idea what role we envision for JJ," Schroeder said. "JJ has really embraced it, too. It really helps his college stock to be able to play different positions. It might get him on the field a little earlier in college."

Central Michigan redshirt sophomore Lew Nichols III led all FBS programs with 1,848 yards rushing in 2021. The Chippewas have reached bowl games five of the past seven seasons. Calip already has built a relationship with Nichols.

Calip, who carries a 3.0 GPA, said his goals for the upcoming season are simple ones.

"Like I told coach in our first conversation, I just want to win," he said. "I want to have a memorable senior season, something I can look back at and smile about later."

Leaping Lizards: Darby Long Jumper Chasing More Titles

In addition to being an honor student, Indiana-bound Hilliard Darby senior Alex Smith has been a quick study on the track, emerging as an elite long jumper and sprinter. All that's missing is a state title.

Hilliard, OH – Alex Smith was polite and respectful after taking runner-up in the long jump at the Division I state track and field championships last June, but the body language of the-then Hilliard Darby junior told another story.

"Looking at it now in hindsight, the state meet was a great experience, but I guess you could say at the time it was a bittersweet moment because I didn't go there for a silver medal and I came up just a little short of my (personal record)," he said. "My goal was to jump 24 feet."

For the record, Smith's leap of 23 feet, 7¼ inches was just an inch-and-a-half shy of his season and career best. Luke Laubacher of Massillon Perry was state champion at 24-3½, the eighth-best mark in Ohio history.

This backstory serves simply to emphasize what a perfectionist Smith is.

"Alex is good at everything he does," said Darby head girls coach Devon Staten, who serves as Smith's specialty coach and also works in the offseason with him at Ohio Speed Academy, along with former Ohio State Olympic long jumper Mike Hartfield. "In addition to shining in many events for us on the track, he has a 4.3 grade-point average and is amazing in the symphonic choir.

"The word is thrown around a lot, but Alex is a really special kid. As far as being a perfectionist, yes, he gets mad at himself frequently, but he is able to forget and move on pretty quick."

Smith did finally achieve his goal, jumping 24-5¼ to capture the New Balance National Indoor title on March 13 in New York City.

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"It was such a cool experience," he said. "The whole weekend was amazing. It was my first time in New York City. We got there early and saw Central Park and Times Square and some of the other attractions and did some shopping. At the meet, I was able to push myself against top-level competition and that's something I thrive on. To PR and win a national championship, that's something I'll never forget."

Staten was in church that Sunday, inconspicuously following a website's live results on his I-phone.

"I kept hitting refresh, refresh, refresh ... and then it came up that he won on his final jump," he said. "I was so excited I yelled out, apparently forgetting where I was."

Smith also placed eighth in the triple jump (45-3 $\frac{3}{4}$) in New York and is the Ohio leader outdoors, although the event is not contested in the Ohio High School Athletic Association state meet.

Coming off a 2021 season in which he took placed seventh in the state in the high jump (6-4), Smith has competed only sporadically this spring. The reason? He also has emerged as an accomplished sprinter, having clocked an impressive 21.7 seconds in the 200 meters at the Huber Heights Wayne Invitational recently.

"Unfortunately, the rules say athletes are limited to four events and we have to pick and choose where Alex best benefits the team and projects down the line," Panthers boys coach Matt Fox said. "Believe me, we'd put him in six events if we could. We've got some tough decisions about what direction we want to take going forward."

Smith played a major role in helping Darby capture district and regional crowns last season.

But obviously it's the long jump where Smith shines the brightest.

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He has improved dramatically since taking up track in seventh grade. He jumped 19-11½ as a freshman but was unable to compete in 2020 when the OHSAA canceled sports due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lo and behold, in his first outdoor meet of 2021, he soared a school record 22-5.

"I first saw Alex
when he came to
Darby and he was a
tall, lanky kid with a
lot of bounce and
spring in his legs but
really, really sketchy
technique," Staten
said. "You should
see video of him
then and now.

Although he didn't
get to do much but
work out in the
COVID year, he came
back and I noticed
he had grown a little
bit.

"Even though he's still kind of a big stick (at 6-feet-5, 170 pounds), adding strength has been a big factor in his improvement. The commitment he has made to the sport after giving up football and then basketball is very noticeable."

Not surprisingly, Smith considers himself a student of jumping and has pored over scads of videos from past Olympics to study runway approaches, steps and landings. The event is about much more than sprinting and jumping in a sandbox.

"We all are in search for the perfect jump when everything is in alignment," he said. "Warm weather, maybe just a little tailwind, legal of course, getting your steps right on the runway, getting your foot down right at the mark and just getting that pop in explosion. I've worked even harder on my landings because you don't want to lean back and let your back part touch the sand and lose inches.

"It's more of an art than people probably realize."

Natural athleticism runs in the Smith genes. Both of his parents played multiple sports and a sister, Maddy, plays professional volleyball in Greece after an accomplished career at High Point University.

Because of inclement weather conditions and a minor knee injury, Jones had jumped only once outdoors before unleashing a state-leading 24-6 in the preliminaries of the Ohio Capital Conference Cardinal Division championships Wednesday. He then bettered that with a leap of 24-11 1/2 in the finals.

Smith has lofty goals in mind for the next four weekends, highlighted by a return trip to the state championships June 3 and 4 at Ohio State's Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium.

"Obviously, I'm going for the state title in the long jump, and along the way I'd like to break the OCC record and my own school record," he said. "Also, I want to qualify to state in the 200 and help our 4x100 and 4x200 relay teams get there as well."

Third-place Malachi Collier of Maple Heights (third in 2021, state indoor champ, fifth in the New Balance Nationals) and DJ Fillmore of Licking Heights (sixth in 2021, state indoor runner-up) are potentially among the top returners.

Ultimately, Smith could well crack an all-time state tournament top-10 list headed by record-holder Ra'Mon Johnson of Warrensville Heights (25-9½ in 1996) and including three former Ohio State standouts who jumped in the 24-foot range: NFL receiver Devin Smith of Massillon Washington, former NFL Pro Bowl strong safety Todd Bell of Middletown and the legendary Jesse Owens of Cleveland East Tech, who won an Olympic gold medal in 1936 (three years after his prep title) and held the world record for some 15 years.

Needless to say, this event traditionally is littered with cream-of-the-crop athletes.

The Darby track program has crowned just three state champions, including Chaquerra Allen in 2004.

Smith will take his considerable talents to Indiana University next season, specializing in the long jump and triple jump, but perhaps also contributing in sprints and relays. He plans to major in finance and already has been accepted into the school's renowned Kelley School of Business.

"Getting back and winning the state title this time means a lot to Alex," Staten said. "This is the only high school accomplishment he hasn't done."

Perseverance Pushes Gahanna Distance Ace

Alyssa Shope has battled through a litany of physical ailments to become the premier distance runner in Ohio and earn a track/cross country scholarship to Indiana University.

Gahanna, OH – Alyssa Shope made it look incredibly easy while winning the Division I state championship in the 3,200 meters last June, topping the field by nearly 13 seconds. The same held true in November when she added a state cross country title to her resume.

But in reality, the Gahanna Lincoln senior has dodged more than her share of potholes on the road to becoming the pre-eminent distance runner in Ohio.

"On the outside, most people probably don't realize how profoundly Alyssa has been plagued by health issues throughout her career here," Lions distance coach Ryan Beck said. "What she's been able to achieve the past two seasons is just a testament to her mental toughness and competitive nature. Alyssa's response to training is just off the charts."

The third of five ultra-competitive girls in her family, Shope hit the ground running, so to speak, in the sixth grade. Her two older sisters had run cross country, so she followed their lead. It wasn't long before she was training with the top middle school boys.

It was also the same year that Shope was diagnosed with celiac disease, a chronic digestive and immune disorder attacking the small intestine and triggered by eating foods containing gluten. Symptoms include diarrhea, bloating, gas, anemia and growth plate issues.

Subsequently, she went on to suffer from irritable bowel syndrome, a long-term disorder affecting the large intestine, causing an overly sensitive colon and immune system.

Shope is forbidden from eating any long chain carbohydrates (also referred to as multiple sugars) such as potatoes, rice, noodles, bread, cereal, nuts and dried fruits because they contain molecules that need to be broken down in the digestive system.

"I was placed on a very restrictive diet because my stomach is so sensitive," Shope said. "I also had a reflex that caused me to pass out. All these things definitely set me back, but I wasn't about to let them stop me. It only made me work that much harder and become more disciplined."

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Aided by a growing commitment to running, Shope had a modicum of success during her first two high school seasons, but was unable to advance past the regionals in either sport.

After the 2020 track season was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Shope would reach a watershed moment in her career. Just before her junior cross country season, Shope experienced agonizing pain in her left hip and pelvis caused by apophysitis, an overuse injury typically occurring around the growth plates of adolescents. This possibly was related to her digestive issues.

"I was crushed when the doctors told me I couldn't run for eight weeks," she said. "So, I immersed myself in rehab, physical therapy and cross training. During that time, I got reflective about how much running meant to me and I began to incorporate my faith into everything I did. I became so much less selfish and made things about serving Jesus and everyone around me. I became a much, much mentally stronger person. I'm a firm believer that everything happens for a reason and this injury brought me to the realization that running was a gift and something I was meant to do."

Shope returned for the postseason, winning the Ohio Capital Conference Ohio Division, Central District and regional titles before placing fifth in the state meet in a career-best time of 18 minutes, 10.1 seconds – roughly a minute-and-half faster than she ran as a sophomore.

"That just blew my mind, considering how little training I was able to do," she said. "It made me wonder how much faster I was capable of running."

Her run of success continued through the 2021 track season as she cake-walked to the state 3,200 title in 10:32.42. It was the 11th fastest time in Ohio prep history, just behind former teammate Claire Steigerwald, who clocked 10:29.85 in 2018.

"I definitely thought I had a good chance at it coming in," Shope said. "After my cross country finish, I had complete confidence in myself and the work I had done to get there. Even so, it was surreal coming across that line in first. I was ecstatic. It was a day that I will never forget."

When Shope captured the cross country title in 17:32.1 five months later, she again was overwhelmed.

"The feeling was different because there are so many more competitors in that race," she said. "Ever since I was in junior high, I had visualized over and over again coming across that line first. Coming down the home stretch, I somehow found it in me to start sprinting and the video shows that I was smiling so hard the whole way. That feeling was so special."

When Shope captured the cross country title in 17:32.1 five months later, she again was overwhelmed.

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"It wasn't a big deal but I didn't want to push things, so I just focused on my training," she said.

Understandably, Shope has lofty expectations for her final season in blue and gold.

"Obviously, first and foremost I want to defend my 3,200 title," she said. "Also, I want to break (Steigerwald's) school record, and lower my own 1,600 school record (4:56.1). Ultimately, I'd like to win a double title at the state, but a lot of that depends on the weather conditions that day. That's why I scratched from the 1,600 at state last year. History shows that it's very difficult for distance runners to double at state, at least at full strength, if it's hot and humid. Also, I'm hoping to compete in the Adidas national meet in Raleigh (N.C.)."

Beck has no doubts that Shope can achieve her goals and cement her legacy as one of the all-time great distance runners in central Ohio.

"When she got back from her health issues last season, I began to realize what she was capable of in training," he said. "She achieved what she did on what I would call very cautious training," he said. "She's on the same timeline this spring as she was last year, but depending on her response to training we can tweak that. We've never truly explored any speed stuff with her at all, but we'd like to see what she can do to maybe help our 4x800 relay get to state. I've seen her run some pretty impressive splits."

Shope is expected to provide major punch for a Gahanna team that has placed first, second or third in the state each year since 2014. As usual, the well-balanced Lions are loaded in the relays, sprints and hurdles and with Shope's potential points, could contend for a team title on June 3 and 4 at Ohio State's Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium. Gahanna previously took home the gold trophy in 2015 and 2018.

"Alyssa is such a neat kid, I wish I had more of her around," said 34th-year Gahanna head coach Roger Whittaker. "From her freshman to senior year, she's grown as much as any kid I've ever coached, most notably in her confidence and maturity. She has terrific body control and pace and fully understands what she's capable of. All of the things she's been through health-wise seem to have only made her stronger."

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After making official visits to Notre Dame, Michigan State and Penn State, Shope committed to and ultimately signed to run at Indiana, which has a stellar reputation of recruiting central Ohio's top talent. An honor student, she plans to major in human biology for pre-med.

"It was my last visit, and I was absolutely blown away with the campus, the coaches, the academics ... everything," Shope said. "Every box was checked off my list. One of the more important concerns, since I have to live on campus my first two years, was my food options. The coaching staff will assign someone to manage my diet year-round, so that really put my mind at ease."

Riverside's Jake Elly honors late father with gameday tradition (11-9-22)

Riverside Stadium was buzzing with activity late in the afternoon of Nov. 4, with the Division II, Region 5 quarterfinal between the Beavers and visiting Nordonina just a few short hours away.

Jake Elly had someplace he had to be, though. Continuing a tradition he's honored for more than a year now, the senior receiver/defensive back needed to stop and visit with his best friend and mentor.

It was Oct. 16, 2021, when Jake Elly lost his father, Brian, — the man who taught him everything about sports, life and — well — being a man — to cancer.

The sting and hurt is still there. Probably always will be. But as Elly pulled into Riverside Cemetery to visit his father, like he does prior to every game, he does so with a full heart of gratitude for all his father gave him and for the support network he has in his extended family — his teammates.

"Me and him," Elly said, leaning on a wall in Riverside Stadium after practice this week, "we connected through sports. I go to the grave before games knowing he is watching over me when I'm playing. I know he'd enjoy watching me play.

"It was very hard for me. He was more than a coach and dad. He was truly my best friend. Not having him is in my head constantly. I cherish every moment I had with him and I'm thankful for that."

Brian Elly was a mainstay and rock, not only for his wife Christi and their three sons, Joey, Jake and Jack, but also for countless youths and families across the Riverside school district. As a coach of three youth-level programs — the Lake County Hawks in baseball, Triple Threat in basketball and the River Hawks in football — Brian Elly made his mark on countless lives.

"He meant everything to me," said junior Mikey Maloney. "He was a great coach. Ever since I was like 5 years old I was with him. He was always busting jokes, but he was serious when the time was right. He was an amazing coach."

But in 2017, Elly was diagnosed with kidney cancer. Early test results showed that the cancer had already spread to his spine and lungs.

"When it was diagnosed, it was in Stage 4," wife Christi said. "It was hard for me because I'm a nurse. I know a little too much for my own good and I knew it would be a long journey."

Her husband never wavered in his commitment to his family and his coaching. But come 2019, "he just couldn't do it anymore," Christi Elly said.

Jake knew his father was struggling.

"He would have to go to the Columbus Cancer Center. Those treatments were the worst," Jake said. "They shut him down and made him super sick. There were a lot of good days and bad days. As it continued, you could see him get weaker and weaker."

Which was extraordinarily hard for not only the Elly family, but for all of Jake's friends and teammates.

"I saw him as a father figure growing up," senior Adam Becker said. "It was hard."

On Oct. 16, 2021 — the day after Riverside's game against Kenston — Brian Elly passed away with his family by his side.

"We were in the hospital and he said, 'Momma, I want to go home. I want to see my boys,'" Christi said. "He came home and had six days here to say his goodbyes, and he passed away peacefully at home."

Since that day — and even before so — Jake Elly has done everything to honor the memory of his father. Every catch on the football field, every shot in basketball, every throw in baseball — his father is there with him.

He finished his junior year with 59 tackles, six interceptions, six tackles for loss, 697 receiving yards and seven touchdowns. That productivity made him a first team Division II All-Ohioan.

Heading into Riverside's regional semifinal against Hudson on Nov. 11, Elly has caught 50 passes for 931 yards and 12 touchdowns on offense, while defensively gathering 30 tackles, five interceptions and three pass break-ups.

He has not missed a game since the death of his father

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Riverside's Jake Elly honors late father with gameday tradition (11-9-22)

"I don't enjoy talking about it. That's when I break down," Elly said. "There's always someone who has it worse, so I kept to myself and tried to be me."

His teammates noticed that, and continue to support him in any way possible.

"He continued to be himself," Maloney said. "I kinda expected that because of the person he is. He put it aside to make our team better.

Said Becker, "seeing how he dealt with it and played for his dad, it brought everyone else up around him."

This year's game against Kenston on Oct. 16 was a difficult one because not only was it the one-year anniversary of Brian Elly's death, but it was also Senior Night at Riverside. The void was noticeable to all those whose lives Brian Elly touched.

"He's present. He's with us," Christi Elly said. "I know he's right up the street at Riverside Cemetery watching and protecting us. He's saying, 'Jake, go have fun. Enjoy your senior year. Play hard and give it your all.'"

Jake Elly has done that, every single day since losing his father. And rest assured, before boarding a bus to Maple Heights Stadium on Nov. 11 for his team's game against Hudson, he'll visit his best friend — his father — knowing he and his teammates have an angel looking over them.

"He'd be so thrilled to see what we're doing and how we've done it," Elly said of his father. "I'd say at one point or another, he coached 90 percent of the kids on this team. He would be so thrilled."

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Tiger LaVerde and sons enjoy their only season together (10-26-22)

Young Philip and Jake LaVerde grabbed and tugged at the state championship football trophy the Kirtland football team had just won.

The year was 2011, and the sons of Hornets head football coach Tiger LaVerde were on the sideline as ball boys for the Hornets' 28-7 win over Coldwater in the Division V state championship game at Massillon's Paul Brown Stadium.

"Someday, this is going to be us," the boys thought to themselves, young Jake mean-mugging for a photo with the state championship trophy.

The two sons of Tiger and Mary LaVerde probably didn't do that math at the time, but their age difference meant they would only have one shot do it — play for their dad together in a state championship season — and this is that year.

When Coach LaVerde's Hornets take to the field on Oct. 28 in a Division VI, Region 25 playoff opener against Independence, they will do so with senior Philip and freshman Jake on the same team and playing for their father for the first and only time in any of their lives.

The goal? The same one the boys dreamed of back in 2011 when they held the trophy in the locker room in Massillon — to play for their dad and win a state championship together.

"That's the goal," Philip said. "That'd be special to bring it home with these two. That's what we thought of growing up. This run will be more fun because I'm doing it with them."

Philip is a standout on both sides of the ball for the Hornets, packing a punch in the running game by rushing for more than 400 yards on offense, while leading the team on defense with 104 tackles, 24 tackles for loss and six sacks.

Jake is the starting quarterback as a freshman, having thrown for 810 yards and 11 touchdowns in Kirtland's run-based offense, adding in his share of rushing yards as well.

And their father — well — he's only one of the most successful coaches in Ohio history. Heading into the playoff opener against Independence, Tiger LaVerde has a 209-18

(.921) as Kirtland's head coach, having led the Hornets to six state titles.

He admitted No. 7 would be something special if it happens this year because it's the only time he and his boys are on the same team together.

"You're always nervous as a coach in the playoffs and in big games," Tiger said. "I'm more nervous now. You're always hoping your kid does well. There's more anxiety to it this year, but we don't talk about it. We just try to enjoy it."

As young kids — back in 2011 when their father helped bring Kirtland its first state title, and even before — Phil and Jake LaVerde were just like any other kids in that they were always playing sports and doing so at a competitive level.

Just like Tiger and his siblings were when they were growing up in Oil City, Pa.

The only difference was they got to hang out with and be ball boys for a Kirtland football program that was at that time building a dynasty that no one — not even Tiger himself — saw coming.

"I remember coming in on Saturdays when I was really young, maybe 5 or 6, to watch film with the team," Philip said.

"And to eat donuts," his father added, which brought a laugh and a nod of affirmation from his eldest son.

A few years later, "Jakey," as his father calls him, joined in — even though he was only in preschool.

"Dad would send a player down to get me from preschool when I was like 4," he said. "It was so much fun."

The LaVerde boys grew up steeped in Kirtland football. The fun and competition was just as prevalent at home, along with sisters Leah and Sophia.

"We always had a game going," Tiger said, "whether it was deck hockey, whiffle ball, badminton, volleyball or pool basketball. We always had some sort of competition. My wife (Mary) probably thinks we're too competitive."

But Tiger, one of eight children, grew up the same way.

Tiger LaVerde and sons enjoy their only season together (10-26-22)

"We're no different than you and Uncle Matt are," Philip said. "They're competitive in whiffle ball to this day."

That competitive nature brought out the best in both the boys — and probably the girls, too. This past summer, when Philip was gearing up for his senior season, he (as always) dragged his little brother along with him, though Jakey is "little brother" in name only since he's already taller than his older sibling.

"All summer we worked hard on running routes," Philip said. "I brought him to every workout and worked with him all summer."

Jake loved it. After all, he grew up playing backyard sports with Philip and his friends.

"It's just fun to get to play with him," Jake said. "All summer the last few years we did that, so it's good."

Jake won a preseason quarterback competition with senior Luke Chuko. Since then, Chuko has moved to defense and has been one of the most integral parts of the proud Kirtland defense that has allowed only 51 points this regular season.

Now that both LaVerde boys are on the varsity unit, they've learned a lot since they were ball boys.

"When you're young, you don't realize how impressive it is," Philip said of Kirtland's run of success under his father.

"When you're young, you just expect to win. You don't know how hard it is to get there, the hard work it takes."

That hard work has paid off across the board, not just for the LaVerde boys.

"We have a lot of great leaders on this team," Tiger said. "This senior class' GPA is the best we've had in a long time. Just great kids."

Tiger said the 2022 season has flown by faster than any he's coached. There's probably many reasons for that, including an earlier-than-ever start to the season and a regular season that ended on Oct. 21. But another big reason is likely because his sons are on the team for the first — and only — time they've played together with him as their head coach.

"I can't believe we're at playoff time already," he said. "This season has just flown. ... As always, whenever this ends, I just hope everybody looks back and said, 'That was a lot of fun. I'm glad we did that.'"

That's the feeling every year, he noted.

But a trophy this year? With the three of them together?

"Yeah," Jake said with a smile. "That would be cool."

North's Kailey Minch mirrors her mother's 1,000-point journey (12-24-22)

As she watched her daughter, Kailey, climb the bleachers at Euclid High School with a basketball in her hands, Theresa Minch couldn't help but to have visions of 1994 flash back into her mind.

Specifically, Jan. 29, 1994.

On that day, Minch — then Theresa Ersek — climbed bleachers to present a basketball to her father, Joe, after she scored her 1,000th career point against Kirtland. And here, nearly 28 years later, she was watching her daughter approach her with the ball used to score HER 1,000 career point as a North Ranger.

"It's amazing how things have come full circle like this," the proud momma said.

But the "history repeating itself" thing has more layers to it than mother and daughter scoring their 1,000th point and presenting the game ball to a proud parent before resuming with the game. The blending of those two generations coincides with two other generations.

Theresa (Ersek) Minch scored her 1,000th point playing for Coach Ray Force's Perry Pirates. Her daughter scored her 1,000th point playing for the North Rangers, coached by Ray Force's son Paul.

"That's pretty cool," Kailey said with a smile. "You don't hear of that happening anywhere else."

"Rare, that's for sure," Paul Force said.

Kailey scored her 1,000th point by swishing a 3-pointer from the right wing as part of the Rangers' 58-28 road victory over the Panthers. Her mother did so as part of a 26-point effort in which Kirtland played a triangle-and-two on the Pirates — with two Hornets defenders hawking Theresa all over the court.

"Both," Ray Force said, "are special players."

Heading into the Christmas holiday weekend, she has 1,066 points and is well on her way to eclipsing the family record of 1,119 points her mother — known as "Tree" back in her Perry days — accumulated during her career.

"Kailey is quicker," Ray Force noted, comparing the mother-daughter combo, "but Tree was SO explosive."

As Ray and Theresa stood together outside North's gymnasium last week, stories rolled off their tongues as if they happened last week. Theresa noted how she went to Garfield Park in Mentor to play "basketball with the guys," which "toughened her up" when she played with the girls at season's start.

"One time I was going for a layup and eased up," she said. "Mel Levett came out of nowhere and pinned it off the backboard. Trust me, there was no love loss or let-up out there because I was a girl."

Said Ray Force, "There was another game when Tree's legs were taken out on the opening drive of the game and she broke her wrist. She finished the game and made 25 of 26 free throws left-handed."

Kailey pushes herself in the same manner. The competitive nature is spot-on identical, even if their games are a little different.

If there is a weakness in her game — good luck finding one — she closes it quickly.

Belly-up on Kailey and she'll drive past you, Paul Force said. Back off of her and the 3-pointers will rain in from the heavens. Double-team her and she's keen enough to know where the help came from and get the abandoned teammate the ball.

"I often hear how similar we are," Kailey said. "Her friends on Facebook comment about it and the similarities between us."

Paul Force has had a front-row seat to watch both mother and daughter, both as a fan for his dad's Perry Pirates and as coach of Kailey's Rangers.

"Tree was more of a slasher type," the North coach said. "Kailey is certainly a better outside shooter. Their tenacity and love for the game is evident."

Kailey laughed when asked if her mom has pulled out VHS tapes of her games, noting, "no, but I've seen some of her film from when she played at West Liberty" for college basketball.

Similarly to her mother, Kailey is also headed to play NCAA Division II college basketball, not at her mom's alma mater

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North's Kailey Minch mirrors her mother's 1,000-point journey (12-24-22)

in West Virginia — which was in the running — but for Ursuline College.

Of course, the question begs — who is better? Can mom still show daughter who's boss?

"Oh, absolutely," Theresa said, prompting a head shake and a quick, "No... No...." from her daughter.

Said Kailey, divulging her game plan, "For a long time, she would just post me up and score. Then I figured out I just have to wear her out. But if she's posting me up, it's tough."

All joking aside, the mother-daughter bond has been special to both the Minch family and Force family. Having both Kailey and her score 1,000 career points and do so being coached by the father-son duo of Ray and Paul Force is a rarity all involved cherish.

"When I got my 1,000th, Ray called timeout and I gave my ball to my dad," Theresa said. "When Kailey got hers, Paul called timeout and she gave the ball to me. It's kind of cool how it's gone full circle like that."

New Knoxville: A Team, A Town, A Coach, A Memory

Bruce Hooley Division I Feature

Having been through so much already, a special team of special athletes, with a special coach, seeks one more win to script a fitting finish to a story that captures the full spectrum of emotions.

Dayton, OH – It's a quality that's as intangible as it is invaluable, and it can't be manufactured as much as it's earned.

Experience is that elusive X factor, something every player and team covets and strives to acquire until it arrives in a fashion that's never worth the benefit.

New Knoxville's state title-game bound girls basketball team has such experience...the good kind in 19-year coach Tim Hegemier, who's retiring after his team seeks the Division IV championship at 5:15 p.m. Saturday.

The Rangers also have it, the experience of five seniors who've played the sport together since elementary school, built a rapport and a trust and a love for each other that seems to happen most often in a small community like the one they represent.

Those same girls, and all but one of the backups on their bench, also have the big-game experience that delivers teams from pressure-cookers like the fourth quarter of a 39-28 semi-final victory over Cincinnati Country Day.

When the hatchets came out on defense and the officials sucked silently on their whistles so as not to "impact the game," – which is exactly what happens when obvious contact is ignored – the Rangers never panicked and plowed through the adversity to rise to 27-2.

The backbone they gained last November, winning the Division IV state volleyball championship, allows the Rangers to sneer at stuff that unnerves less battle-tested teams.

But kevlar as New Knoxville appears, its emotions remain raw over the story behind the T-shirts every player wears as they warm up or watch from the bench.

"Live Like Ryan," the message reads on the back, which shows how much the tragic death of Ryan Lageman, the husband of volleyball coach Meg Lageman, still resonates.

That lesson in life-is-bigger-than-sports, some-things-matter-more-than-winning, didn't ask politely to wash over the Rangers or arrive progressively as they grew from girls into young ladies.

It hit them, and their community, right in the face without permission or sensitivity just before the volleyball regionals.

A trucker ran a stop sign and ended Ryan Lageman's life at age 25.

Carsyn Henschen, the top weapon on the Rangers state volleyball champions, couldn't speak long about the pain she still feels.

"Ryan was a big fan of us girls," said Henschen, who had 10 points, eight rebounds, four assists, three steals and two blocks in the semifinal win. "He came to everything he could. Um..."

"Let me help you," teammate Ellie Gabel gently offered as her teammate hesitated to compose herself. "We no longer play to win a state championship. We play to bring joy to our community and to our team. There's more to the game. That's what we play for."

It's a team impossible not to root for, a town impossible not to root for, watching how New Knoxville and its surrounding area turned out to encourage the Rangers on Friday.

"We have, what, 900 people in the community," Hegemier said. "There's probably 12-hundred to 14-hundred out there (in UD Arena)."

It's best not to question Hegemier on New Knoxville nuances, seeing as how he operated a dairy farm for 30 years before giving that up, "when the last cow left."

More like, when his kids moved on to college – the ones he'd coached for years in youth basketball.

"I had people knocking on my door right away, wondering if I would coach," he said.

You bet, they did.

The miles between New Knoxville and Fort Loramie aren't so vast that awareness of the two state championships Hegemier's brother, Dan, won with the Redskins eluded the recognition of Ranger fans.

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Maybe, they figured, basketball brilliance runs in the blood.

When Hegemier's second New Knoxville girls team reached the state finals in 2007, the hire looked pretty prescient, and now the Rangers have the chance to send him out with the Hollywood ending of a state championship in his final game.

Before the season began, the futures market would have bet on Fort Loramie or Tri-Village to take the D-IV title, with Russia on the fringes of that conversation.

But when New Knoxville lost to Loramie in mid-season by five points, Hegemier realized something.

"I thought, 'If we could just shoot it a little better...we could play with just about anybody,'" he said. "Once we got past Marion Local in the district final, where we played really well, I thought, 'Hey, we're pretty good.' "

He leaves his own role in that maturation out of the assessment, but his players do not, nor does anyone who watched New Knoxville contend with the pressure Country Day applied to take down Russia, Fort Loramie and Tri-Village en route to the final four.

"It was hard to get them off track," CCD coach John Snell said. "I know I saw some games where I thought, 'OK, this is where we could exploit them or take advantage of it.' But today, not so much.

"They were right on key on a few things we like to do, and they did a great job of rotating out of stuff and getting into certain things that we were a little slow at. A lot of our pressure is point guard pressure. I think that's what caused Russia and Fort Loramie and maybe Tri-Village some problems, but you could tell these guys were senior-loaded and super geared up for this."

The reason is the guy who's retiring in more ways than one. Retiring, as in about to coach his last game, and retiring, as in, not one to scream, yell or even raise his voice from the bench during games to unnerve his players.

It seems the old dairy farmer takes the approach that, once the ball tips off, the hay's in the barn.

"Tim always pushes us to be our best, even in practice," Henschen said. "He gives us scouting reports. He goes over the offense and defense. He really prepares us well for this."

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Now he has just the better part of one day to get his players ready one final time, for Waterford, the team standing in the way of New Knoxville giving Hegemier his first state championship and a pretty cool story to tell his grandchildren when he transitions to the next chapter, watching them chase the dream he and his team will Saturday afternoon.

"My grandchildren are starting to get involved in sports and I don't want to miss that," Hegemier said. "It's not worth that. Will I miss it? Well, I love the game of basketball and I love to coach.

"I watched Dan's teams play all the time when he was at Loramie. Watched how he had those kids play defense and I just tried to replicate that. I think it's paying off."

Otten Recovered, Revitalized After Surprise Surgery

An unexpected heart episode caught Chip Otten by surprise, but he's bounced back and preparing for yet another run at yet another state championship.

Coldwater, OH — It figures that a Hall-of-Fame coach known for his expert offensive planning would have an extremely-detailed strategy in place for what he hopes will be a sixth state championship season.

That's why Chip Otten checked and re-checked every pertinent state regulation and counted off the days on the calendar several times just to make sure his retirement as a classroom teacher wouldn't interfere with his upcoming 13th season as the head football coach Coldwater.

He had to be meticulous because the State of Ohio stipulates a lengthy mandatory waiting period before a retiring teacher can resume any duties back on a district's payroll.

That's why Otten bid goodbye to his students on Monday, March 28, then had right knee replacement surgery the following day...leaving ample time to rehabilitate, take a summer vacation and be back to welcome the 78 high school and 75 junior high football campers that showed up at Cavalier Stadium early last week.

The plan was flawless.

But if there's one thing Otten has learned continuing the dominance of Coldwater football that he inherited from John Reed, it's that an effective audible often trumps an original play call.

This latest on-the-fly adjustment won't get the Cavs any points, but it sure might prove consequential to their quest for a Midwest Athletic Conference title or what lies beyond, given that it allowed Otten to be back on the field for the start of two-a-days on Monday.

That was no certainty when Otten fell ill on a family vacation in South Carolina in mid-June, wound up in a Charleston hospital and expected to hear something quite different when the emergency room attendant took a simple blood sample.

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"I figured they'd be right back and tell me there's nothing wrong with me and that I could go home," Otten said. "Instead, they came back and said, 'Sorry, dude, you're not leaving. You're going to have open-heart surgery.'"

Blame a cardiac issue-laden family history or the meat and potatoes diet that Otten admits he favors a bit too much, but his heart enzyme results explained the two bouts of nausea and episodes of sudden sweats that had struck twice over the previous three days.

A lot of patients ignore those warning signs, and Otten might have, too, if not for the fact that one of his three sons is a doctor and – in tandem with Otten's daughter – wouldn't hear of dismissing his symptoms when he returned from a Sunday morning walk.

"My daughter said, 'Dad, you don't look so good,' " Otten said. "And when I told them what had been going on, my son said, 'We're going to the hospital.' "

Fast forward to Monday and the start of Coldwater practice.

"I snuck out of my office because I wanted to get a look at how things were going," said Coldwater principal Jason Hemmelgarn, a long-time assistant under Reed and Otten until last season. "If I didn't know, I would not have known, because Chip had his clipboard; he wasn't short of breath and he wasn't coughing. He was communicating with the kids and they were responding like always. It really was awesome to see."

What Hemmelgarn knows that's no longer apparent to unwitting bystanders is that Otten spent nearly a week in a Charleston hospital waiting for his bypass surgery, then had to pillow-clutch his way through several weeks of painful coughing episodes.

You see, Otten's wasn't one of those minimally-invasive, where's-your-incision miracle surgeries of modern robotics. His was the full-on, rib-spreader, zipper-scar endeavor that made coughing more painful than a last-second loss.

"Oh, man, I hugged that pillow they gave me pretty tight," Otten said. "That was no picnic. Otherwise, it wasn't so bad. But the problem was, every time I tried to talk, I coughed."

Coaching the Cavs via sign language wasn't really an option. And the other allowance Otten considered is now no longer necessary.

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"It was never in my mind not to come back, but it did cross my mind a little to maybe coach from the press box," he said. "I don't think I'm going to need to do that now."

The Cavs open at Kenton on Aug. 19, hoping to improve slightly on their 13-3 finish from last season that ended with a 26-14 loss to Carey for the Division VI championship in Coldwater's bid to defend its 2020 title.

"I never really feared that he wouldn't be back this year, because I know Chip well enough to know that coaching is in his soul," Hemmelgarn said. "He's so good at it, and we're so blessed to have him.

"There's a lot of really good quality guys out there, but Chip is right at the top of the list, not only as a football coach, but as a human being. He still has the passion and the drive and we still need him."

Maybe that's why Otten's coaches have been a little edgy the past few weeks as the Cavaliers' summer camp sessions unfolded.

Most of his assistants have been with him for a decade or more, and they've become pretty attached to the former Bowling Green running back who Hemmelgarn says, "still looks like you could throw him out there and he'd rush for 100 yards."

"My guys were after our kids pretty good sometimes when I'd get a little too frisky," Otten said. "They'd be like, 'Hey, get back! You ain't supposed to be that close. Don't let him pick anything up. Make sure you know where he is all the time.' "

In time, the mother-henning of Otten's staff will cease and everyone will settle into what's become a normal pursuit of the top prize for Coldwater, albeit this year in Division V instead of the Cavs' most recent home in Division VI.

"I definitely keep an eye on those things," Otten said. "The first thing that jumped out to me is that Kirtland went down to six. Versailles went down to six. Marion moved up to six and Carey is still at six. Versailles beat Kirtland in the (Division V) finals. Marion won it (in Division VII) and Carey won it (in Division VI).

"They're all in (Division) VI together now, so maybe we're not in such a bad spot."

With Otten on the sidelines, that's always true at Coldwater.

The Struggle Makes It Special For Marion Machine

Canton, OH – The official attendance for Marion Local vs. Kirtland in the Division VI state championship Saturday numbered 3,960.

That's how many saw the game play out.

But that's only a fraction of the number who saw it coming.

Though it wasn't contested until the first Saturday in December, the heavyweight slugfest between Ohio's two most-recently dominant small-ish school programs has been on fans' mental calendars for seven months.

Credit that to the dominance of Marion, the OHSAA state record-holder with now 13 state titles after its 14-6 survival of Kirtland, which was chasing its seventh championship since 2011 in its sixth straight appearance in a title game.

"I think in May, when they put out the divisions this year, and we went from Seven to Six and they went from Five to Six, I think (we) took notice of that and said, 'Well, if we want to win a gold trophy this year, we're going to have to beat Kirtland in the end,' " Marion Local coach Tim Goodwin said.

That's interesting, because elsewhere in Division VI this season also loomed Carey, the undefeated defending champion from last season, and Coldwater, the reigning Division VI runner-up.

Who would it ultimately be, standing on the Pro Football Hall of Fame logo at Tom Benson Stadium, hoisting the title trophy?

Despite Division VI's top two teams returning plenty of talent, the smart money fell on Marion and Kirtland, and sure enough that's how it worked out after Carey suffered an early-Playoff upset and Coldwater lost dynamic dual-threat QB Marcel Blasingame to a broken leg that, even though he came back to play on it, limited him severely.

But make no mistake, Marion Local and Kirtland earned their way to the final Saturday of the season, with the Flyers pitching an incredible (and record-setting) 11 shutouts and the Hornets blasting

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through another unbeaten season with six shutouts.

"We knew they were on the other side of the bracket, so we had to take care of our business," Kirtland coach Tiger LaVerde said. "We knew if we did that, we'd probably have a shot at them."

Kirtland scored fewer than 30 points only once all season, and Marion fell shy of putting at least 27 on the board only once itself.

But Saturday, as morning turned to afternoon, this epic showdown became all about field position, wind and who would make a break, or break from the challenge the other inflicted.

As it played out in front of him, Goodwin was an interesting case study, walking the Marion sideline.

Always prone to mild-mannered in-game stewardship of his team, his demeanor never changed amid the toughest matchup of this season or last.

Marion has now won 32 straight games, twice going 16-0 to win back-to-back state titles in Division VII in 2021 and now Division VI this year, without really being challenged much in the process.

All that changed with Kirtland on the other sideline, which figured to be the case given the Hornets' two victories over Marion in their three previous championship games.

But as Marion committed uncharacteristic errors – going scoreless on an early possession that commenced at the Kirtland 30, later fumbling away any chance to convert a fourth-and-goal at the five-yard line, repeated illegal procedure penalties that aborted offensive possessions, throwing two interceptions, losing a fumble at its 22, punting once for just eight yards, and torching a put-the-game-away scoring chance with an intentional grounding infraction – Goodwin took it all in as if he were watching a Hallmark Christmas movie in front of a fire with a warm mug of cocoa in his hands.

That is to say, he enjoyed every minute, even if at first he wouldn't admit it.

"I don't know why that is exactly," he said of Marion's repeated mistakes. "But part of it is that we were being challenged to the hilt. Their defense is just flying (and causing) our (illegal) procedures. We were just being challenged to the Nth degree. (I) still didn't like it, though.

"We got a defensive touchdown and their one touchdown came on a short field after a fumble recovery, so it was a tough battle," Goodwin continued, pausing to look down at the final statistics. "I

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didn't think it was this tough, but we had 142 yards? Holy cow! I didn't think it was that bad. I thought we could have been bumping 200."

Not even close, nor did Kirtland, which finished with 161 yards and was forced into trying to be something no other opponent stressed the Hornets to attempt.

"We threw 18 passes tonight, which is more than we've thrown all year," LaVerde said. "We got ourselves behind the sticks. We couldn't get four (yards), four (yards) and four (yards). They're too good. They're fast and physical and well-coached."

And, he left out, very experienced, particularly at linebacker, where Drew Seitz is a four-year starter and Darren Meier and Aidan Eifert are three-year starters.

"Some years you have the bullets to fire," Goodwin said. "Some years, you kinda have to dance around some issues that you have."

This Marion squad didn't excel – or didn't have to excel – throwing the ball offensively. Neither did last season's edition, until it had to do so in the state title game, and did so with aplomb to rout Newark Catholic.

The wind simply would not allow that Saturday, so Goodwin stayed patient, waiting for his offense to capitalize on its numerous opportunities, all the while trusting his defense to tighten its season-long vice on LaVerde's freshman son, Jake, quarterbacking the Hornets.

He got his team into the end zone late in the third quarter, making Kirtland the first team to score a touchdown against Marion in 11 weeks, dating to a Sept. 23 win over Versailles.

Read that again...the first team to score a touchdown against Marion...*in 11 weeks!*

Once that occurred, Marion never allowed Kirtland an advance past midfield, putting another trophy in the case in a fashion Goodwin will cherish, if not more, than certainly differently than the dozen that came before.

"This was a blast today, because they competed," he said of Kirtland. "This was way more fun than going out here, drilling somebody and putting a running clock on. Now, that's easy for me to say because we had the 14 and they had the six. I realize that. But that's what we live for...the competition."

Headline: Appreciated Brush mainstay Joe Repice marks 2,500 events as Arcs' videographer

Date: Oct. 24, 2022

There are certain aspects of Brush with which you can always be sure.

There will be that Arc mascot.

There will be some incarnation of brown and gold colors donned by its student-athletes.

And for a generation, there has seemingly always been Joe Repice.

This fall, Repice marked 2,500 events recorded as Brush videographer across seven sports for his alma mater, an appreciated and constant component of Arcs' athletic life in all seasons.

The 2,500th event was slated to be an Oct. 10 soccer doubleheader as Brush welcomed Euclid to Korb Field in Lyndhurst. But showing his versatile value, the milestone arrived earlier, because he was asked this fall to capture six road matches for the Arcs' volleyball team as well.

Either way, Repice was honored Oct. 10 in a brief prematch ceremony.

"This accomplishment," an announcement read in part, "is truly remarkable and something that will never be eclipsed in the history of our school."

That accomplishment began in earnest during Repice's freshman year in 1998.

"I really couldn't play youth sports," Repice said. "My mom worked two jobs, so I could never have transportation to the games or the practices. So once I got a little older and got into high school, I could bike ride here to school and bike ride to practice. I signed up for soccer, just wanted to be part of a team. I didn't really care. I was actually a team manager.

"About six or seven games into my freshman year, they said, 'Hey, you want to try filming and run the camera?' I said, 'Sure.' It was a hobby of mine. My grandfather taught me how to run a camera when I was 5 years old with VHS ones, and I could program a VCR at 5 or 6 years old, stuff like that. Basically, I just started filming."

From there and that request from former longtime Arcs boys soccer coach John Scramling, on went a commendable journey that continues to this day.

After graduating from Brush in 2002, Repice went to Tri-C, but noted "life took over." He returned to Brush after graduating to watch his former teammates in soccer and was asked again to run the camera.

First it was soccer. Then came boys basketball in 2003, and girls basketball and football in 2004.

"So every year, I just kind of pick something up," Repice said. "And honestly, it gives me something to do. And it's become second nature."

Repice works on the grounds crew at Beechmont Country Club in Beachwood, with his work day ending around 3 p.m.

That allows Repice the flexibility to record not just varsity events at Brush, but the underclassmen, too.

"I count freshmen, and I count JV," Repice said. "That's time that I have to sit there and run the camera, which I don't mind doing. I figured, if the younger kids can see it early in their career, they're better off and know how to position themselves when they get to varsity."

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Repice's approach, while refined through two-plus decades of experience, goes back to Scramling's original request for soccer matches.

"All he said was, 'Keep the ball in the center of the screen,'" Repice said. "That has been my mantra, and it has worked in basically everything we need. We get a solid group so they can see their positioning. Football, I have to make adjustments, with all 22 in the shot.

"Honestly, I get into it. I take losses hard. I take wins. I celebrate with them. All the teams love me, I feel. I feel like I'm a positive influence on them."

Repice's duties aren't just limited to being a videographer. He also warms up and critiques the soccer goalkeepers and shags shots during pregame warmups for boys and girls basketball.

Brush boys soccer coach Michael DiMatteo has seen the reaction when continual improvement from goalkeepers draws Repice's approval.

"The goalkeepers always take this praise with a smile on their face, showing us why we choose to do this profession, for the joy and excitement of the student-athletes here at Brush," DiMatteo said. "Joe is the epitome of joy and excitement for all our sports' programs here at Brush — never see him get down about anything, even when our sports' teams lose."

For Arcs girls soccer coach Tim Foerg, the association dates to his days as a Scramling assistant and Repice as a student-athlete.

"It has been great to have Joe a part of our programs over the years," Foerg said. "Joe was a hard worker back then and still is today. His enthusiasm for our soccer programs and his support in general of Brush has rubbed off on us all.

"He is a true Brush alum. His videoing of our games and uploading to HUDL has been a huge help to me in terms of helping my team tactically and scouting opponents. We have been very lucky to have him be part of our programs."

Repice has also in recent years picked up track and field, stating he would have added the sport years ago if he knew how fun it would be.

Boys track and field coach Cecil Shorts has witnessed that dedication since moving to the school district in 2007 and lauds Repice's value.

"I've witnessed his incredible commitment to Brush athletics as the school's sports videographer ever since," Shorts said. "As a longtime coach over the years, many volunteers have helped me in my efforts to educate athletes through sports, but no one compares to Joe.

"To have a person committed to filming our sporting events enables colleges all over the country to scout our athletes, provides our coaches with quality footage to study for evaluation and improvement, and preserves countless historical sports moments created by our great athletes."

Repice's favorite event among the 2,500-plus was Brush's 2010 Division I girls basketball regional semifinal against Twinsburg and Malina Howard, who went on to win Ms. Basketball as a senior in 2011 and play at Maryland. The Arcs fell at Canton Civic Center, 53-51, in a heartbreaker — "We almost upset them," Repice said.

That tone in making that statement — and the dedication Repice has shown for his craft since Day 1 in 1998 — is a testament to why Repice is regarded as a Brush constant.

Seemingly as sure as the Arc and the brown and gold.

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"It started as a hobby, and it just became second nature," Repice said. "Like, 'OK, what game do I have at Brush today?'"

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Headline: University diver Cameron Bizjak appreciative for state debut he should have had in 2021

Date: Feb. 21, 2022

When the Division II state boys diving competition commenced last February, as usual there was supposed to be a field of 24 divers.

Unfortunately, the final tally was 23 from around Ohio — with one qualifier from district the prior week rendered a bystander.

That "one" was University's Cameron Bizjak.

So when this year's D-II state event takes place Feb. 23 at Canton McKinley's Branin Natatorium, it's easy to understand why Bizjak might appreciate this opportunity just a little bit more than his counterparts.

The fact the US junior laudably has a sense of humor about the whole matter year-over-year says a great deal about his broader perspective as well.

Bizjak earned a state berth Feb. 16 out of the D-II Cleveland State District, taking runner-up honors with a score of 361.40 to fellow [REDACTED] coverage area staple Clay Foster of Kenston.

Technically, it was his second state berth, because he had also earned a trip to Canton in 2021 by placing eighth with a 314.85 as a sophomore when district was held at Massillon Perry.

But then ...

"OK, so about two days after district, I went camping and suffered a concussion," Bizjak said. "I went running and slipping on ice. I wasn't able to compete at state.

"This year, I'm hoping I don't hurt myself."

The incident, and cognizant of the reverberation, left Bizjak stunned.

"It was really disappointing, and I think it motivated me to do better this season and try a lot harder, because I wanted to make it to state," Bizjak said. "It paid off."

Bizjak has steadily improved in district competition throughout his career, from a 287.40 as a freshman that got him 12th to the aforementioned 314.85 as a sophomore, then his district runner-up performance with a 361.40 as a junior at CSU.

Given the general lack of 11-dive meet opportunity this winter for many Northeast Ohio divers, Bizjak included, a nearly 47-point district improvement from one year to the next was encouraging.

Bizjak was 11th at the Northeast Classic, one of the few 11-dive chances of the season, with a 297.40, so district was a 64-point ascension over that as well.

"I think during this season, I've put a lot of effort into my dives," Bizjak said. "And I was very consistent in practice. I would just keep trying and trying again. If I smacked, I would get back up and do it again until I was comfortable with them.

"I think (the key to getting deeper into the 300s at state is) just this week of practice and working with my coaches and working on those dives I had trouble with, you know? Muscle memory is the key."

He delivered a steady performance at CSU, with three dives in the mid-to-high 30s and a pair of 40-plus dives.

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Those 40-plus scores came in Rounds 4 and 5, his final two dives of the preliminary round, with a 40.70 and then his best of the meet, a 41.25 on a back 1 1/2 somersault 1 1/2 twist free.

"In warmup, I did a really nice inward double," Bizjak said. "In the competition, I went a little bit over. But I always like that dive. It was my last dive, so I had fun doing it."

Fun that quickly turns to appreciation, knowing the journey on which he's been.

"Oh yeah, definitely," Bizjak said. "The effort really paid off. I got second place (at district), which is always great.

"And so basically, all I need to do is not hurt myself again, and I'll be good (this) week."

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Headline: Mayfield hockey: Jordan Pride conveys mental wellness message after string of major injuries

Date: Jan. 17, 2022

After three major injuries in five years, Jordan Pride can be excused for wondering exactly what a full high school season resembles.

The Mayfield junior eyed being a two-sport student-athlete for the Wildcats in hockey and football.

Now? Pride openly ponders whether he will continue in high school sports at all.

Regardless of where that internal debate leads, however, Pride wants to convey a message beyond sports about mental wellbeing after facing a sports injury — unfortunately in his case, time and again.

Mayfield's Jordan Pride is shown on the Wildcats' bench during a game against Gilmour. (Courtesy Jordan Pride)

Pride's proverbial winding road began as a seventh-grade football player one day at practice.

"Literally, it was one of those things where I went to go plant, and it totally snapped out on me," Pride said.

"It" was a torn anterior cruciate ligament.

An MRI made doctors wonder if Pride had suffered prior damage to the ACL while playing football because of how easily one ill-timed planting of a leg could lead to a tear.

Pride and his family visited a few doctors for opinions on the injury before zeroing in on Dr. Paul Saluan, an orthopedic surgeon based out of the Cleveland Clinic's Sports Health Center in Garfield Heights.

"He's been good for me," Pride said.

"The other doctors, they're good with the injuries and stuff, but they don't do the surgeries as much or as often as Dr. Saluan does. He does surgeries on everything, but his major focus is on knees and shoulders, actually."

Saluan conducted ACL replacement surgery on Pride, and the healing process subsequently consisted of physical therapy for a year.

"That year was rough, because since it was back when I was younger, there were a lot of precautions they wanted to take with the growth plate," Pride said. "So they really wanted to make sure — the surgeon, he's one of the top and the best and does it amazingly. But he wants to make sure it's done right. Even if it takes an extra month, he wants to make sure it heals perfectly."

After light work on his own and being cleared to run, Pride was able to get involved with a sports physical therapy group twice a week. That group involved 90-minute sessions with fellow athletes who have suffered the same or similar injuries.

"That helps me, because I'm so competitive," Pride said. "It was part of my motivation to get back, because the thing with injuries is, a lot of people see it as, it's a big physical recovery to do, to physically get back and get all of that strength. But I don't think a lot of people realize the mental aspect of it and having that drive and motivation to be on crutches for so long and have that motivation to get back to your sport and actually put in the physical therapy."

Pride said he also worked with a sports psychologist following the ACL tear to return to sports with the proper mindset.

That return culminated with his freshman campaign of football for Mayfield.

Everything was going along just fine for Pride ... until the penultimate game of the season on a play near the goal line.

"I got my other knee taken out," Pride said. "It was one of those things I couldn't avoid.

"You could have legs like Saquon (Barkley), but if you have a lineman that takes your leg out and has almost 300 pounds of force to the side of your leg, there is nothing you can do to avoid it."

Pride was helped off the field with assistance from a trainer. He said when he got home, his knee had swollen and, in his words, bruised like "it was hit by a baseball bat."

Another trip to Saluan for consultation yielded an initial diagnosis of a torn medial collateral ligament.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, "MCL tears are a common injury for athletes, especially those who play sports like football, rugby, basketball and skiing," with 40% of knee injuries involving the MCL. Most MCL ailments can be treated through a variety of non-surgical means.

"That was a long process where they had me doing physical therapy for a month or two," Pride said. "I did that, and I was feeling good."

Pride said Saluan was pleased with the progress of the MCL healing, urging Pride to continue his physical therapy.

Barring any setbacks, Saluan was hopeful Pride would not have to return for further evaluation.

Perhaps in an instance of intuition, though, Pride's mother requested a follow-up appointment two months later to ensure the healing was proceeding at the rate it should be.

"A couple of months, after doing the physical therapy, I couldn't really tell, because I wasn't really feeling that much pain," Pride said. "I did feel that it wasn't as stable as it should have been."

Pride explained the follow-up appointment didn't have the good news all parties involved were hoping. Saluan told Pride and his family not only was the MCL not healing at the proper rate, but the injury was doing worse than expected.

"It was one of those unfortunate things where he was like, 'Unfortunately, the physical therapy didn't work. I think we're going to have to go in and do this surgery' " Pride said.

Pride was then scheduled to undergo MCL surgery.

Unfortunately, the timing couldn't have been less ideal, because it came in the first half of 2020 as the novel coronavirus pandemic ran rampant. Pride's surgery was postponed until further notice because it was deemed non-essential.

Once Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine approved non-essential surgeries to be performed again, Pride was able to get his surgery done.

He had to test negative for COVID and then arrive at the hospital for an early-morning surgery window in May 2020.

Amid the pandemic, Pride wasn't allowed to have visitors with him, family included, so he said he sat in a waiting room for hours for his turn.

"That was a tough recovery — I'm not going to lie," Pride said. "That was a very painful recovery, that compared to the ACL.

"When everyone thinks of bad injuries, they think of ACLs. But that MCL was definitely not fun to recover from pain-wise. It wasn't as long because I was more grown-up and my growth plate was fully grown, so they didn't have to worry about that."

Pride estimates the recovery from that MCL surgery took around a year as well.

He had planned for football to be his primary sport. But after two knee injuries in three years, Pride wondered if the physical toll was worth it.

"I want to be able to walk when I'm 50," Pride said. "It was one of those things where really I had to look out for my own health. It was obviously a tough decision, but I talked to my coaches and my parents and family, and it was a tough decision giving up football.

"But I didn't get the reaction I expected. I thought people were going to be upset. But they all realized I'm looking out for my body, and people were proud of me for making that decision."

He was eventually cleared to return in time for this junior hockey season this winter, projected as a forward for the Wildcats.

"I was cleared to play, but my trainer had me limited me obviously during the games," Pride said. "Because you don't want to go from not playing at all to go all-out. So I was limited on the ice, on a certain amount of ice minutes per period and stuff, to make sure I can ease my way back into the game and get another injury."

Pride had played hockey throughout his childhood, including a stint in Gilmour's youth system.

Due to the knee injuries and lengthy recovery, though, hockey wasn't in the cards until this season.

"Obviously, it takes a toll when you have to go through almost three years of physical therapy," Pride said. "You just want to play a sport you love."

Pride got on the ice for a few games, with the aforementioned limitations.

And then ...

He hurt his shoulder playing hockey and was diagnosed with a torn labrum, which ended his season before it really even started.

Pride is scheduled to have labrum surgery Jan. 28 — once again with Saluan, who sought to reassure Pride in part by telling him he does around 100 shoulder surgeries per year.

"From the lower body to the upper body, I guess I'm moving on," Pride said.

Pride will endure another round of surgery — and another round of recovery.

He admits Round 3 has him contemplating if he wants to come back for a senior season of hockey at all.

"To be honest, I'm not 100% sure yet on that decision," Pride said. "Honestly, the way I'm looking at it right now, I think that was kind of my mistake. I was looking at it as I need to get back. This whole recovery was I need to get back to my sport. I need to get back and play with my friends and get that release back and go back to hockey.

"But this recovery, I need to get back to normal."

An ACL. An MCL. And now a labrum.

Pride can be excused for wondering exactly what a full high school season resembles.

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But his wherewithal is beyond reproach, a message about finding mental solace amid injury he hopes fellow high school student-athletes hear.

"The physical part, you have to be physically ready for that full recovery and realize the long road ahead," Pride said.

"But you definitely cannot ignore the mental aspect of it."