

Best friends and football: The story of Dubinsky, Schmauch and the Jordans

As a late-August night sky draped its darkness over Ravenna, a light billowed out from the barn of Jake Schmauch's house.

The laughter and chatter of voices danced out the raised door like it always has.

For decades.

Football is the spotlight topic and four forever friends are holding court once again.

Brett Dubinsky, Ed Jordan, Lee Jordan and Schmauch are in storytelling mode.

Memories of games, players and unusual circumstances.

Emotions of wins, losses and everything in between, including the 1994 Ravenna Rams national championship.

And a little razzing of each other. There is always room for that.

But regardless of age, that is what good friends do.

Football helped forge a friendship between the four that will never fade.

Countless hours together night after night sharing in the love of the game, community and players created a bond so strong that not even verbal fights or threats to quit were powerful enough to break up the group.

In fact, one close call led Lee Jordan to sit outside Schmauch's house in a lawn chair, with a case of beer, waiting for the stubborn Schmauch to come outside and make amends.

It worked and all was soon forgotten.

The power of friendships and football.

The group, all Ravenna High School graduates, coached together from 1985 through 2021. Twenty-six years all together, beginning with the Ravenna Rams, remaining when the youth football namesake changed to Ravens (don't get Dubinsky started on that) and then onto Jim Lunardi's high school staff in 2004.

"Some guys hunt, some guys play golf. We coach football," Ed Jordan said.

THE BEGINNING

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Ed Jordan was the first to get into coaching youth football, joining the staff of Bill Thompson's Rootstown Wrens back in 1973.

Thompson is a football legend in Portage County. Dubinsky calls him a "giant."

Thompson first established the Ravenna Rams, alongside Joe Meduri and Bob Nader Sr., and worked to provide the Rams all of the best, including uniforms (brown, orange and white at the time to mimic the Cleveland Browns), equipment and even would charter buses for road games.

Ed Jordan jumped over to coach the Rams alongside Brett's older brother Dave Dubinsky, who would later go on to coach the Southeast High School program throughout the 1990's and early 2000's.

Brett Dubinsky joined the Rams' coaching staff in 1975, then coached the varsity group from 1978 to 2003.

Lee Jordan, Dubinsky's lifelong friend, began coaching in 1976.

Schmauch, the self-proclaimed "new guy" joined the Rams in 1990.

"I never had any intention of being a coach," Schmauch said. "When my boys played, I would just hang around practices, pacing up and down the end zone. Eventually, I just got latched in with these guys. I am so glad that I did, though, because it gave me a lifelong connection and I feel really lucky for that."

Their passion was imminent from the start as all four worked full-time jobs before spending every night at practice. Ed Jordan worked as a welder for Buckeye Pipeline. Lee Jordan worked for Davey Tree. Dubinsky worked for Duracote and Schmauch worked for H&M Metal Processing.



The 1979 Ravenna Rams youth football team.

Each eventually found their own voice and coaching style, but early on, at least for Dubinsky, it was as simple as trying to follow the blueprint of the mentors he idolized so much.

"For me, all I was trying to do was emulate the coaches that came before me like Bill Thompson," Brett Dubinsky said. "They were the example that had already been set and laid the amazing groundwork for what Ravenna Rams football was all about. They had set the standard, and I did not want to let them down."

Thompson was a visionary in all aspects. Uniforms, scheduling, equipment, community outreach and even 8-millimeter reel film sessions at his West Main Street home just beyond Brown Middle School.

Those film sessions eventually shifted to the second floor of Schmauch's barn. Every Sunday night at 6 p.m.

A time to review, prepare and be friends.

A SECOND LIFE

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The group credits Lunardi with giving them the boost of energy they needed.

A "second life," according to Schmauch.

While they all still loved coaching kids, loved coaching football and loved doing it together, the opportunity to join Lunardi's high-school staff in 2004 presented a challenge for them to try to prove themselves all over again.

"I think some of us heard the rumblings," Dubinsky said. "The questions on why Lunardi would want youth coaches on his staff. Maybe there was a stigma that a youth coach couldn't do the job at the high-school level. We were determined to the best we could for Jimmy and show that we belonged."

And they did.

Lunardi knew they did and Ravenna High School began celebrating league championships together.

It extended the group's opportunity to connect with kids and let football be a vehicle to teach them about life.

New memories to join the old ones and the names of players jump in and out of stories.

Marcus Sanders, Damien Fortson, Eric Horner, Bobby Yates, Henry Henderson, Brian Coman, Carl Dorris, Sonny Ray Jones.

Or Willie Ross, who name brings laughter from the group, as he is remembered not only for being a great player, but also for the time that Schmauch got too close and too involved in an Oklahoma drill and Ross landed on his leg and broke it.

The names seem to begin to drift off into the air. Not because any one of them lack importance, but the group can seemingly keep naming them off effortlessly.

That is the way it goes, though, when players become an extension of family.

"When we coach a kid, it is like they become part of our families. They become our sons," said Dubinsky, who is the only one of the group still coaching as the running backs coach for first-year head coach Joe Callihan's staff.

"We see them later in life, they are probably in their 30's or 40's, but I see them as the kid that I coached. They are still a kid to me. And they are still our boys," Lee Jordan said.

"We took pride in teaching them football, but also watching out for them," Dubinsky said.

THE BEST FRIENDS

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The group grew up playing in backyards or wherever else they could get free space and enough friends together.

Even the parking lot of the old Acme building was a football haven for them as kids.

"Ravenna football was it. It was everywhere. On Friday night for games, everyone was there. We grew up with that. It just became part of everything we did."

Football was the constant through their youth, high school and then adult lives.

"We are friends outside of football. Our families are friends. We have fun together. When we coach together, it doesn't feel like work, because we are basically just hanging out with our friends. And we are excited to do it all year because football never stops," Ed Jordan said.

But not everything was perfect all the time.

"There were times we would fight like brothers, but you know what, we would always come back together like brothers, too," Ed Jordan said.

Before caller ID was common, there were times they would disguise their voice when calling each other after a disagreement or blowup in attempt to allow the conversation to even get started on smoothing things over.

"That would lead to quite a bit of laughter," Lee Jordan said.

The perfect icebreaker to bounce back from an argument.

In the end, though, it was like they all knew football would pull them back together regardless of how big the argument was.

It was easy, according to Lee Jordan, because "we all had the same common goals."

"We all just have the mentality of getting the job done," Schmauch said. "We all attached the same challenges with the same hard work."

The results and the relationships took care of themselves from there.

"We met a lot of good people," Ed Jordan said.

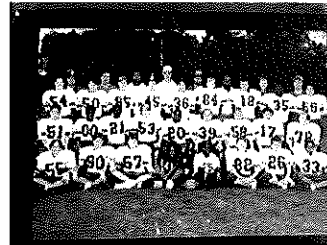
"Coached a lot of great kids and met a lot of great families," Dubinsky said.

"It is special, when you are out at a place and a former player runs up to you and says, 'Hey coach.' That is our pay."

And no money could match that feeling or replace all of the memories created along the way.

"Who knows what I would have missed out on if we had not kept coaching. A lot of special times, I am sure of that, and a lot of opportunities to make a difference in a kid's life," Dubinsky said. "I am proud of what we did together."

There would not have been any other way.



The 1994 Ravenna Ravens youth football team that went undefeated and won the national championship in Florida.

The story of how Larry Bailey became Coach Bailey

God's plan for Larry Bailey was to fish and play baseball.

Or, at least, that is what he once thought.

Turns out he has always loved those things, but Bailey's impact has extended far beyond those two hobbies.

He has reached thousands of students and athletes in a 40-year career that has seen him enter as the rookie coach and ascended to one of the most iconic running coaches in Ohio high school history.

And that is if you only want to look at numbers like Bailey's 100 state qualifiers, 33 All-Ohioans, four state champions, eight state runners-up, 210 boys track dual-meet wins, 478 dual-meet cross country wins.

Those all have their place in the spotlight, but when you coach for as long as Bailey has, the numbers are not what the career was ever about.

"It's always about the kids," Bailey says with sincerity.

And you know he means it.

It is why he was strongly against the school's new all-weather track being named in his honor.

But make no mistake, Rootstown is as much Larry Bailey as Larry Bailey is Rootstown.

At 66 years old, he is still a machine.

He is approaching 53,000 career miles run and adds to the total almost daily as he still runs with his cross country team just like he did when he was hired in 1982.

He enjoys the competition, the coaching and the kids just as much now as he ever has.

Coaching is where he likes to be, but he admits to a simple thought.

"If it wasn't for my mother, who knows where I would be."

CHILDHOOD AND ROOTSTOWN

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Bailey was born in 1956 in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

He spent his formative years living in Harrisville, West Virginia.

It is a small town and during his youth, it had one main dirt road that lead in and out of town.

Cars were around, but not in abundance and it was a four-mile walk into town and a four-mile walk back out.

A trek Bailey made frequently with his family as a 4-year-old.

"It is just the way it was. I didn't know any different," he said.

Bailey moved with his family to Rootstown when he was 5. His mother, Evelyn Jean Bailey, raised him and his two siblings by herself while also working 12 to 14 hour days at her beauty shop called Valley Beauty.

She eventually became a real-estate agent and became one of the top sellers in Ohio multiple times.

"I have an incredible mom. She did everything for us, and I owe everything to her. She loved us and worked hard to give us what we needed," said Bailey. "I remember she would go to work all day, stop working to come watch us play sports, then go back to work. She always made time for us."

Bailey's childhood is when he, unknowingly at the time, began his love for Rootstown.

Like many children his age, playing outside was the place to be and Bailey would spend his doing a little bit of everything, but usually gravitating back to baseball and basketball.

The basketball hoop in his home's large driveway attracted other kids and games would go on for hours. The driveway became such a social connection that it became the bus stop because all the kids would congregate there.

The neighboring families all looked after the children.

"That is why I love Rootstown so much. My mom is special, that will never change, but Rootstown raised me too. My teachers, my coaches, they all helped make me who I am."

HIGH SCHOOL

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As a kid, baseball was Bailey's favorite sport. He bat lead-off and played middle infield.

He fell in love with basketball when he walked into a friend's house and the Philadelphia 76ers were playing the Boston Celtics on television.

Wilt Chamberlain vs. Bill Russell.

That was his introduction to the sport and it made an impact on him. He never stopped playing baseball, but it now had a competitor in basketball.

He became his team's captain in eighth grade as a "5-foot-7 skinny guard."

"Beetle" as his friends would call him, a nickname inspired by the Beetle Bailey comic strip, attended basketball open gyms during the summer heading into his freshman year. He was constantly overlooked and picked over by the coaching staff and it eventually led him to move on from basketball.

Bailey stopped playing baseball just before high school when he showed up for a practice and the coach was an hour-and-a-half late.

He decided to focus on track and cross country.

Bailey was not particularly fast and not strong enough for field events so the coach tried to convince him to run distance.

"I will never run distance," Bailey remembers saying.

That changed during gym classes his freshman year when the class was asked to run for time and Bailey's time consistently was the best in the class.

He soon became one of the better runners in the county with the fastest times before graduating from Rootstown in 1974 alongside 128 classmates.

He started school in 1st grade since it was not a requirement to attend Kindergarten at the time, so he spent four years in each of the buildings on the Rootstown campus. First through fifth grade in the elementary building, sixth through ninth in the middle school building and sophomore through senior years at the high school building.

Bailey remembers being an elementary student when the district was building on the wing of the building that would become the field house.

COLLEGE

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Bailey was the first in his family to go to college, and he attended Malone University and ran cross country for legendary coach Jack Hazen, who coached two Olympians and served on the track and field competition management team for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

When Bailey arrived, the team was ranked third in the nation and had five All-Americans.

His times were competitive with his teammates and he placed well, but Bailey eventually transferred to Hiram and lettered in cross country.

He took out a \$2,000 loan to enroll in classes.

"That was a mistake, because I couldn't afford it at the time," Bailey said. "I realized I couldn't stay at Hiram, because I ran out of money. But that is where I learned to work hard and it is where I learned that you treat all kids the same no matter what their talent level is or what their situation is."

Bailey's third college stop was at the University of Akron, where he pursued an accounting degree.

"I realized, though, that the idea of spending my career in a cubicle and counting numbers was not going to be a good fit for me," Bailey said.

And his career path to become an educator began.

WELCOME BACK HOME

Once he graduated, he admits that the plan was not necessarily to return to Rootstown.

Circumstances, though, seemed to have him aligned with his hometown.

He married his wife of 42 years, Debbie, in June and then was hired by Storybook Daycare in Ravenna in 1980.

"I was the first male hire they ever made. I loved it there and the kids loved me," said Bailey, who remembers that it paid \$2.30 per hour and that his wife's income was less than that.

Two months later, in August, Bailey was still without a teaching job until Rootstown called him to offer him an opportunity to join the staff as a part-time tutor. Soon after, they needed him to be a full-day tutor and he was hired for an annual contract of \$8,000.

"There were nights I would go fishing for our dinner," Bailey said, admitting it was a struggle. "I remember collecting \$2 by picking up change off the sidewalk to fix a flat tire on my car, so I rode my bike to school while I waited for that."

Bailey spent three years as a tutor at Rootstown and was hired by Superintendent Don Crewse in 1984 to become a fifth grade teacher. His salary jumped to \$17,000 a year.

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"I thought I had hit the lottery. It helped us buy our first house," Bailey said.

Bailey spent 25 years as a fifth-grade teacher. First, he taught all subjects, but eventually was assigned science.

Life inside Bailey's classroom was always full of excitement and an enthusiasm for learning.

Teachers would confide in Bailey that it was tough for them to keep their students focused in their classroom because they would talk about how excited they were to get to Bailey's next science project.

Hands-on projects that included props, messes, loud noises, laughter.

They would throw things around the room to show inertia, build things to show mechanical advantages.

It is not what textbooks said learning should look like, but Bailey knew what he was doing.

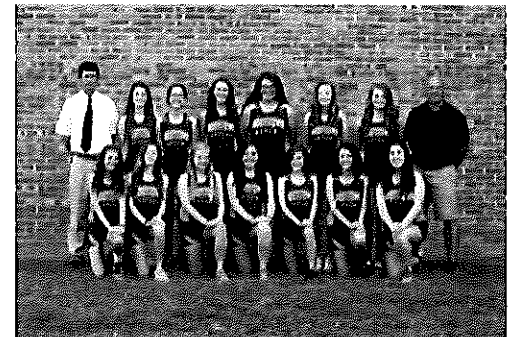
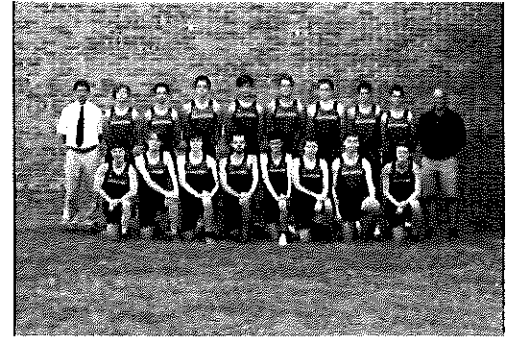
He was determined to make learning fun.

"I would have them from the get go," said Bailey, whose last few years before retirement were as an elementary Physical Education teacher. "They would enter the classroom every day so excited to learn something new. They were excited to see what was next. They absolutely loved it. Here is the thing, though, so did I."

That fun, unplanned by Bailey, was also destined for the basketball gym.

"When Don Crewse hired me, he said, 'Oh yea, by the way, you're also the freshman boys basketball coach'," Bailey said with a laugh. "I told him I would do whatever he said. If he wanted me to drive the bus, be the janitor, didn't matter."

His coaching career had officially begun.



The Rootstown High School boys and girls cross country teams from the fall 2017 season, which was Bailey's 35th at the school.

COACH BAILEY

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Bailey's career as a basketball coach at Rootstown would span 35 years and include multiple age groups, as well as coaching boys and girls.

His career as a cross country and track coach officially began as a volunteer assistant and helped introduce ideas that pushed the program to successes they had never experienced before.

The head coach at the time witnessed Bailey's ability to inspire the runners and implement plans to maximize their potential and recommended he become the new head coach.

By 1985, Bailey helped guide the Rovers to their first trip to the state championship.

"I think it was the first time that anyone had believed in them to do something like that," Bailey said.

It was not long after that Rootstown had its first state champion in Ronnie Nipuelio in 1990 in the 400 meters. Josh Morgan was the next state champion in 1996 in the 3,200 meters, then David Paliscak joined the group in 2013 in the shot put.

Bailey has coached eight state runners-up, including 1992's 4x400 relay team of Lewis Gibson, Bruce Rowe, Evan Waligura and Eric Ferren, that lost by a hundredth of a second. The group still holds the school record at 3:22.25.

In cross country, Bailey's 1985 Rovers became the first school in Ohio history to have both the boys and girls teams qualify for the state championships in the same season. A feat they repeated again in 1987, then followed by the boys qualifying in 1995 after Josh Morgan and Bob Elder took first and second place, respectively, at the regional-qualifying race.

Naturally, all the heights of success have led to job offers from elsewhere for Bailey, but time and time again he has politely declined them because Rootstown is where his heart is.

STILL RUNNING AND FARMING

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Bailey's age is the only thing that has changed.

In many ways, he is still the same kid that filled his summer days with sports and fishing.

He still runs and trains with the teams that he coaches just as he did the year he was hired, and his groups revel in the idea that he still does it.

When he was younger, his runners loved the challenge of trying to beat their coach. Now, some of that competition still exists, but Bailey admits he is not as fast as he once was.

Regardless, his continued training goes beyond the competition. It is a mindset and a lifestyle.

"I believe that as long as I am alive, I want to be the best version of me I can be," said Bailey, who still holds one of his career achievements as being chosen, at age 46, by Antonio Gates to play on his team in a pick-up basketball game at Kent State. "I just love to run. I love the workouts. I enjoy them. I hate recovery days. I understand why they are important and why we do them, but I look forward to the workouts.

"So many teams and runners have said that they think the best thing I do is run with them. They love that. If it is pouring rain, I am running with them. If it is cold and snowing, I am running with them. If it is 90 degrees, I am running with them."

And he is still a farmer.

As a child in West Virginia, both his grandfather Bailey and Walton owned 160-acre farms filled with cattle, sheep, chickens and more.

"We lived off the land, and I remember there was a rule that you don't come home until your buckets were full, so we had to walk the hills and pick the berries.

"Growing up as a kid, I just thought everybody had a smoke house in their back yard or that they had to pump to get their water. I didn't know anything else."

Bailey owns 5 acres in Rootstown on Tallmadge Road and has long filled it with cows, pigs and chickens.

They harvest hickory nuts, walnuts, pears, apples, peaches and berries.

They have approximately 500,000 bees.

"I was mowing the other day and when I mowed around the hives, you could smell the honey. Some people bowl, some people golf or whatever their hobby is. My hobby is farming."

Just another part of his plan that thousands of Rovers can feel blessed has forever included Rootstown.

TN D2 F02 Streetsboro sophomore Makayla Claflin's inspirational fight to defeat leukemia

Time flies they say.

Stacy Claflin knows that is not always true.

Sometimes, time can trudge along.

Painstakingly slow.

"Two and a half years is a hell of a long time," she said.

Stacy and her husband Rod, Streetsboro residents, spent 845 days filled with grief, stress, hope and love as their 9-year-old daughter Makayla began the fight for her life after she was diagnosed with leukemia.

They watched the blood-cell cancer weaken their once energetic and active daughter.

It stole part of her childhood, produced many sleepless nights and introduced an avalanche of frightened anxiety.

The story of Makayla's devastating diagnosis, courageous battle and survivorship began in the summer of 2016 when a series of symptoms began to surface that changed the family's life forever.

AUGUST 17, 2016

TN

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Makayla's official diagnosis day, but everything began in the early summer months of 2016 when she began to experience symptoms largely underlined by fatigue.

From the time she was 3 years old, Makayla had played soccer and was active, busy and involved.

Suddenly, she was so tired that she was in bed by 8 o'clock.

Then she began to have pains in her back, which initially were thought to be the cause of an increased number of soccer games played.

Then her leg began to hurt, which was originally thought to be growing pains.

Then the orbit of her eye began to swell, which was first diagnosed as a sinus infection.

Then she began to run a high fever.

"As a parent, you know when something is wrong, and I knew it," Stacy said.

A series of tests confirmed that Stacy was right.

Something was wrong and the whirlwind had begun once the words were delivered by the doctor.

"I remember asking the doctor, how do you tell your child that they have cancer?" Stacy said. "As a mom, you do everything in your power to protect your children, then you are sitting at a desk signing stacks of consent papers to sign off that everything from that point forward could potentially be life threatening."

Rod and Stacy told Makayla of her diagnosis the following day -- Aug. 18, 2016.

"She took the news about as well as you could expect from someone 9 years old," Stacy said.

Makayla knew she was sick, but admits that she did not understand the severity.

"I was so sick that I don't really remember much about those couple of days," she recalled. "I don't really remember the car ride to the hospital. I remember not being able to read the road signs very well because they were so blurry. After a little while, I realized that this was something pretty serious. I was staying at the hospital night after night. I was missing school. I wasn't playing sports anymore. I started to realize that this was something different."

After diagnosis, Makayla's near non-existent immune system forced her to spend the next 35 days in the hospital.

Her fight had begun.

LIVING WITH CANCER

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D2 F02

Just like that, there was no school, no friends, no soccer.

Radiation treatments ravished Makayla's body.

She lost her hair four different times.

She repeatedly had to work through colitis, clostridioides difficile (C. diff) and a multitude of infections.

But there were also some angels along the way.

Teachers volunteered time to tutor Makayla while she was in the hospital.

Mrs. Ondash, Mrs. Rimmel, Mr. Skeels, among others, all became an extended part of the Claflin family.

"They were all so special," Makayla said. "We definitely formed strong bonds and looking back, I can't believe how much they did. They were there for me when I needed it."

So was Makayla's soccer team.

One day while she was at the hospital, the team organized a window visit complete with signs and well wishes, while other days, in Makayla's solitude, she turned to music as her outlet. In fact, one day she accidentally pulled out her port because of her dancing.

And, of course, mom.

"She was always there. Always there for me," Makayla said.

Once doctors identified remission for Makayla, she was cleared to go home. A small victory, but certainly not removed from the struggle.

Every time she had a fever over 100.4 degrees, she had to be taken to the hospital for evaluation.

"We were constantly monitoring her health. It was overwhelming. It took over our lives, but it is what we had to do," Stacy said.

And the hurt found new ways to penetrate.

During Makayla's treatments, the Claflins had become very close with two families, who also had very young girls bravely fighting against leukemia. Makayla had become close friends with the girls, who both, sadly, lost their battle.

"We were completely devastated," Stacy said. "You don't recover from that, and we never did. We never will."

Makayla said she thinks of her friends often.



Makayla sits in her hospital room with Streetsboro teachers Mrs. Ondash (left) and Mrs. Rimmel (right).



Makayla looks down from her hospital window to see her team with signs and well wishes during a window visit.

Makayla said she thinks of her friends often.

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"To this day, it still hurts. It still stings," she said. "Every birthday that passes, it stings more. I think about them a lot, and I battle against the survivor's guilt that I feel. They should still be here."

Everything about the fight was blurring days together.

Finish lines seemed so distant that they appeared unattainable.

Each day was another eternity.

And then eternity happened to exist in the middle of December.

DECEMBER 10, 2018

The day Makayla, then a sixth-grader, got to ring the bell as a celebration for her final day of chemotherapy treatment.

Streetsboro Mayor Glenn Broska declared the day Makayla Claflin Day throughout the city.

The school held a huge pep rally complete with celebratory speeches, inflatable slides, balloons and more.

Makayla had won.

It was a moment of happiness, without question, but also a reminder that her journey was still not over.

"I thought that when I finished my treatment, that my life would go back to normal," Makayla said. "That is not how it was and it is not how it has been. My body may have won, but it has not recovered yet. I am still constantly tired. I am more prone to injury. I get sick easy. My health is still being monitored. There is still a lot of damage that the chemo treatments have left on me."

But she is alive.

And smiling.

Her eyes beam with enthusiasm when she talks about her achievements, with each one holding a big status in her heart because of what it has taken her to get there.

She made a successful return to soccer, ran cross country and celebrated survivorship in 2022.

Unexpectedly, another milestone night awaited her this soccer season.



Makayla shows off the cupcakes her family got to celebrate the anniversary of her ringing the bell and the end of her chemotherapy treatments.

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OCTOBER 6, 2022

The night Makayla, now a sophomore, started her first high school soccer game.

It came as a surprise.

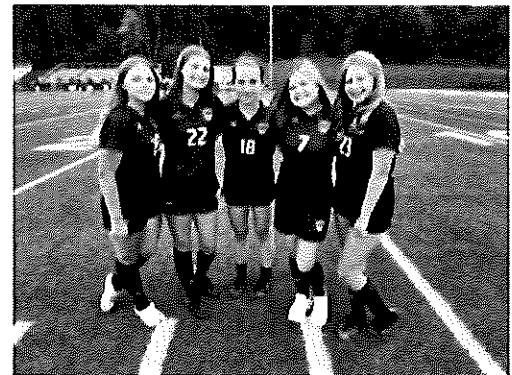
Nobody had told her ahead of the game and she found out by hearing her name being called by the public-address announcer.

"No. 7, Makayla Claflin" poured out of the speakers as she jumped forward and sprinted out of the team tunnel.

It was her moment.

"That was a big milestone for me," said Makayla, who also said some of her best friends, Madelyn Genovese, Lydia Schofield and Grace Thompson, were just as excited for her.. "Six years later, it has been a long journey, but it feels good to be in the place I am in now. Any chance I get to play sports is a happy moment for me. I have been given the opportunity to live life to the fullest, which is not something I was able to do six years ago. All of that was taken away, and I will never taken anything for granted."

Makayla's mother, her best friend, simply loves seeing her daughter return to the life she once had.



"It makes me happy to see her happy. It brings me nothing but joy to see her succeed and be able to do what she loves. For her to get back to the things she missed out on. To see her now makes me the happiest and it makes me proud to know that she still wants to do so much."

Makayla (7) stands with friends and teammates.

The journey has inspired Makayla's desire to pursue a medical career.

Before that, though, she is inspiring her coaches and teammates.

"One of the things I love about Man is that there are no excuses," Streetsboro girls soccer coach Ryan Willard said. "She wants to be on the field so badly. She plays through pain to be out there sometimes, but she never complains. How can you not admire that, whether you are a coach or her teammate?"

Admiration is never going to be short with Makayla.

Only part of her story has been told to this point.

There is still so much still waiting for her to tell.

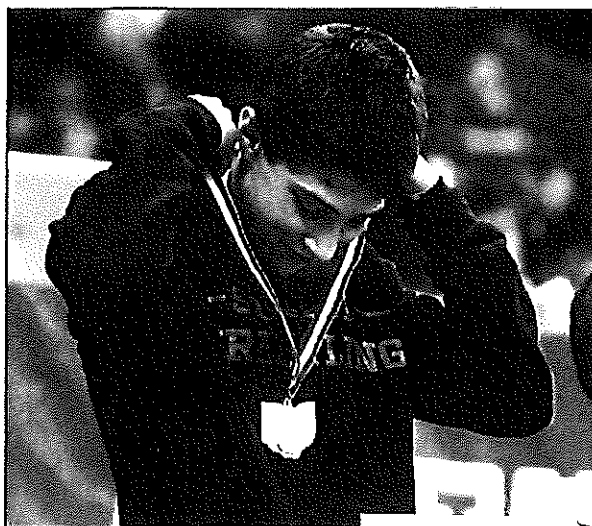
The time will fly, they say.

Mark Hazelwood

Division II
Feature

D2 F03

Family bond led Caizzo to history



St. Paul's Casper Calizzo puts his first-place medal around his neck after winning a state championship at 106 pounds in Division III on Sunday, March 13 in Columbus.

The path to history started and ended in the most unique ways.

A radio booming a familiar voice, and a pair of \$40 snakeskin suit coats. On the surface, neither item are remotely connected.

Yet both played critical roles in a defining moment in the city of Norwalk.

"My family would always listen when St. Paul had a wrestler at state," said sophomore standout Casper Calizzo. "We always kept up with those guys on the radio."

Seven years ago, Casper and Cam Calizzo listened as WLKR radio's Mark Lane called the action as Derek Gross competed and lost in a Division III state championship match at 145 pounds.

Cam, a 2020 St. Paul graduate with 12 varsity letters, was a state placer in 2019 at 182 pounds, and a qualifier in 2020.

This past weekend, Casper took the raised mat stage in a championship final, and seated in his corner was head coach Jesse Gross, one of Derek's older brothers.

And he and assistant coach Don Shantz were in black and gold snakeskin suits that certainly drew attention.

Which is just what Casper needed before his 106-pound title match.

"The most fun part about the weekend in Columbus was going shopping to pass the time and picking out the snakeskin suits," Calizzo said. "It eased off the stress of the situation and put my nerves away. It helped get me ready."

Staying Dublin, the two coaches and Casper went to The Mall at Tuttle Crossing and started at Macy's in search of a fresh suit for his finals match against Delta's Adam Mattin.

The trio ended up at a nearby JCPenney, where the last two suits on clearance rack were easy purchases for \$40.

"I thought they looked cool," Casper said. "Good price, too."

And while listening on the radio and picking out fun suits for his coaches may have been the start and finishing points of winning a state championship — which Calizzo did on Sunday with an 8-1 win over Mattin — it was also everything in-between that led to the moment.

Though it often serves as a popular line to describe the sport of wrestling, the inside of the St. Paul wrestling room can be summarized in one word: Family.

Ties run deep

Will Stieber cannot remember a time when he wasn't wrestling a family member.

Whether it was the Meyer cousins — Ben was a state qualifier with him last season — or current teammates Harley Stoll and Alden Naseman — family has been all around his football and wrestling career.

"My uncle Dan Stoll, especially those biddy years, he'd have a mat and he'd go down and wrestle with us and teach us moves with Myron, Harley and Alden," Stieber said. "I grew up wrestling with them, and he'd even take us up here and go through some workouts. That's where I got my basic skills from."

On Sunday, Stieber finished arguably one of the greatest careers ever at St. Paul. Among his many football accolades was being one of just three players out of 74 to earn All-Ohio first, second or third team in three different seasons.

He ended his wrestling career Sunday with a fourth-place finish at 150 pounds, making him an All-Ohioan in two sports. He won a 142 matches and set the program record for most pins in a career.

Though he spoke of hard work and determination while representing his school community as a driving force, Stieber was also quick to point to Casper.

"As a whole, it really is a family and it's really special being a part of it here," Stieber said. "These aren't just guys you go to school with and maybe see a few times as you get

older. This is your family.

"Everyone comes in, works hard and wants the same goal that you have, which is obviously being a state champion — and Cappy achieved that goal," he added. "It was great to watch. You could tell it was in him and that he had the ability to do it. It was one of the most fun things I've ever been a part of."

As the head coach of his alma mater, Jesse Gross felt marked by coming up short. He had qualified for state three times, but had lost by scores of 5-4, 4-3 and 5-3 in matches that would have sent him to placement rounds.

Oldest brother Mitchell (2011 graduate) had placed twice. Derek followed Jesse and was second, third and fourth twice in four years. Jesse was able to coach younger brother Ryan in recent years, and the youngest of the family, Rafael, is in seventh grade and will be in the program soon.

By his estimation, Jesse Gross has seen every St. Paul state qualifier compete at the championships since 2005. When he took over from Hall of Fame coach Pat Welfle — who received his HOF recognition just before Calizzo's win — Gross vowed to everything he could to prevent the new generation of wrestlers from coming up short at state.

"I would always find a way to lose," Jesse said. "It was always an awful feeling at the end of the year. Same thing at Mount Union. Fourth at regionals, and top three go to

NCAAs ... short again.

"So dealing with all those failures really drives me to push those kids so they don't feel the same way I did," he added. "I've come up in this room since I was five, and everyone wants to be on the finals stage after watching it. It didn't happen for me. To be a part of St. Paul wrestling and see Casper end up with the title is not the way I imagined being on the stage as a little boy. But for it to end up like this is very rewarding in its own way."

Gross was in the school van with Shantz driving as the Calizzo, Stieber and teammates were in the back. Emergency vehicles from Norwalk police department and the Highway Patrol along with a Norwalk fire truck brought them back to the school at about 10:30 p.m. Sunday night.

Early Monday morning, he was back in class at Terra State Community College for physical therapy. During the season, Gross ran lifting sessions in the morning, attended class three days each week, then returned to St. Paul for practice and did his homework afterwards. Then there was biddy wrestling on Monday and Wednesday nights.

Yet Gross didn't hesitate to say it was worth every minute.

"Because you see a lot of the same family names," he said. "Everyone talks about their wrestling family and how you make a community there, but at St. Paul it truly is a wrestling family. It means a lot to a lot of people."

"Being close to the kids and seeing them grow up — these kids I'm coaching now are cousins or even brothers to guys I went to school or grew up with," Gross added. "It means a lot giving back to them and helping them achieve their goals. To be standing here with a state champion in our program is truly a full circle moment."

Brotherly love

Cam Calizzo is quick to point out his younger brother didn't get to watch him compete much when he was in high school.

"Because he was wrestling at his own vents," Cam said. "I'm around Cappy so much and I see what he gives up with his time. To see it all pay off was amazing."

Like Gross, Cam Calizzo found himself up at 6 a.m. Monday en route to Alliance, returning to Mount Union University for economics and entrepreneurship courses.

But none of that mattered Sunday when he greeted Casper with a big hug as he came off the mat. Or when he stood off to the side late at night as several of his friends put them on

his shoulders back at the school.

"That meant a lot to see him there and get a big hug from him and my dad (Jay) right away," Casper said. "Cam and I don't really fight at all. We're pretty much on the same page in everything we do."

Cam said after he watched Casper defeat previously unbeaten and favorite Cole Schultke (Columbia) in the semifinals by a 5-1 score on Saturday, he knew.

"He was going to be state champion regardless of who he faced," Cam said. "Cappy looked like a tank, man. He went out there strong and confident. He doesn't gloat, but he had a smile and swagger about him that just felt different."

"Out of the whole family, he's really the most mature and responsible. Very level-headed. That's just how he is. I told him after that semifinal match I was proud of him, and I knew I'd see him the next night after winning a state title."

Casper was in eighth grade when the 2020 tournament was canceled just before it started because of the pandemic. It cost Cam the chance to join 10 others in St. Paul history as a multi-time state placer.

"I think that crushed everyone," Casper said. "You knew what was lost."

But on Monday, Cam wasn't interested in hearing that.

"My time came and went, I'm just a proud brother today," he said. "Cappy has an outreach of support, as does the program, from St. Paul alumni. It's a tight-knit community, and I know we appreciate the support."

Looking back, the excitement level and emotion of Calizzo's win in the semifinal round far exceeded that of his championship win. It's when everyone in the program knew his path to history was clear and concise.

And now, like when he was a kid listening on the radio, Casper Calizzo has achieved something more than just becoming the first individual state champion in the city of Norwalk in 25 years. It's more than being one of 11 individual state champions from either Norwalk or St. Paul high schools.

Now, he has shown it can be done. Even with coaches dressed in snakeskin suits found on clearance.

"It was amazing to be greeted that way coming home, and a bit of a crazy feeling being the center of everything," Casper said. "It does make you appreciate things. It makes you feel special."

"It is like a big family, even if we're all not 100 percent related," he added. "Drilling can get intense, but at the end of the day, we're all going to be family and want the best for each other."

No track, no problem

GREENWICH

The sounds are different.

The set-up seems like a safety hazard. And the feeling is painful.

When a South Central track and field athlete settles into the starting block, the distinct crackle of gravel between shoe and metal can be heard. The familiar step-by-step sound of a sprint on an all-weather asphalt track comes out louder on a cracked parking lot — and is definitely more excruciating.

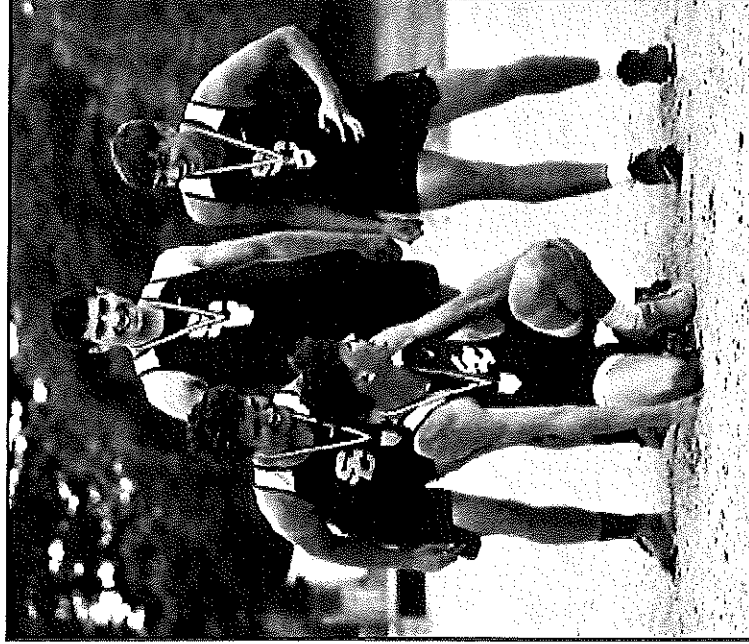
"It hurts, every time," senior Carson Music said. "We don't all go out there and say, 'let's practice, this is fun.'"

Here's the irony: a team without a traditional all-weather track brought four athletes home with state gold medals around their necks on Saturday.

South Central is not known for regularly producing state-champion athletes, and especially not in a sport with a facility that's an injury risk every day.

"It's not as nice as a regular track, but it's what we got and we just make do," senior Trey Beverly said. "This was big for our small town. Odds are already stacked against you as it is, but we just go out and do our best and perform."

And perform, they did. The team of Music, Parker Gray, Isaac Blair and Beverly won



the 4x400-meter relay Division III state championship on Saturday with a time of 3:23.15.

Just two weeks earlier on May 20 at district competition, the team ran 3:32.92. In just 14 days, the quartet cut almost 10 full seconds off their time.

In the process, they became South Central's first state champions who aren't a single individual.

"You always think you can do it, maybe in

the back of your head," said Gray, a senior. "But then you always wait for the reality that it won't happen. But (Saturday), it did. Just disbelief. Especially for us."

MAKESHIFT CONDITIONS

The process never gets easier.

Every time South Central track head coach Brian Kiesel walks the parking lot at his alma mater, the angst is heavy.

"When you see them walking gingerly because they are sore after practice, it's hard to give up on those kids," Kiesel said. "When you see them in that pain just because of practice — it's hard to take."

On Saturday, Kiesel pointed to the striped vertical lines in the school parking lot that serve as running lanes. Horizontal gold lines serve as hurdle markers.

"There are times I have to question when to push," he said. "Or when to back off, how and when to train, and when to do things in the grass on softer ground. We have to be creative in how we train."

When Blair, a junior, was talked into coming out for track this spring, he was aware of the sentiments toward the practice setup.

"You hear a lot of complaining," he said. "But we just run. Yeah, we're not as fortunate. But as you can see, it doesn't matter."

TRACK

■ FROM PAGE A1

On a gravel track around the football field, the team uses light poles as guides for a starting line and measuring proper distances. A grassy hill behind the end zone and close to the visitors' bleachers is also used for training.

"Shin-splints every day," Music said about practice. "Ice every time. It hurts. But definitely going through it with your team helped. We go out there knowing it's going to hurt, then we all go to ice together."

"There is team bonding for sure with it, and it gets us ready for a meet with an actual track," he added. "I will say the pain did pay off. I never thought it would, but it did."

Kiesel noted one "benefit" of the practice situation. Each day, the athletes tend to be efficient with their time — especially rainy days.

"When you get on a wet gravel track, it tends to make you faster if you don't want to get muddy," the coach said.

DREAM BECOMES REALITY

The state track meet wasn't the initial goal.

On April 19 at New London, the group turned in a time of 3:50. At that point, Music said he figured the team would be lucky to get out of the district meet a month later.

"After that race, we all said 'we were tired,'" Music said. "I thought 'wow, this is going to be tough.'"

But the boys continued to train and tweak their race. And not coincidentally, Kiesel said, when the weather finally broke, times for the 4x400 relay started coming down.

On a nice, warm night at the Firelands Conference championships on May 13 at New London, the quartet broke the meet record with a 3:29.51 finish — more than 20

seconds off their time on the same track just three weeks earlier.

"The 3:29 was kind of an eye-opening moment," Blair said. "For me, that was at least when I thought maybe we can get to state and do something."

At the May 20 district meet at Colonel Crawford, the time increased to 3:32.92, still a comfortable margin for the regional meet. But another drop, to 3:27.16, came on May 27 in Chillicothe — two seconds off the program record time from two weeks earlier.

But the reality is that everybody who gets to the state championships is fast.

"We got second at the regional," Beverly said. "So I figured we had a shot to get on the podium and All-Ohio at state. But I can't say I was expecting more than that going in."

And then came Friday's preliminary race for the Division III championships at Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium in Columbus. For the qualifying race, the Trojans were tied for the No. 8 seed — definitely borderline for advancing to Saturday's championship.

But after flawless hand-offs and dominant runs by each of the four, the Trojans had not only the top time but also the fastest time they'd ever run: 3:25.30. With another two seconds off their own record, they suddenly realized what was at stake.

"We knew right there, 'we can win it all,'" Beverly said. Music — who also played baseball as a key contributor this season — had similar sentiments.

"We would get a PR every time, and we got more excited each time," he said. "We knew that we would perform at state, but I can't say I thought No. 1 was on my mind. But (Friday's) prelin is what really got us turned on that we can



South Central's Carson Music runs the final steps of the first leg of the 4x400-meter relay before handing off to Parker Gray on June 4 at the Division III state championship meet at Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium in Columbus.

do this," Music added. "We knew Bluffton was the only team to race after that."

With a prelims time of 3:25.60, Bluffton was right behind South Central. Both teams were a full three seconds ahead of the third-fastest team.

The championship run again proved to be a two-team race.

Music and Gray kept the Trojans within a couple steps of Bluffton during their laps. After the first 100 of Blair's 400 meters, he took the lead. But when he handed off to Beverly for the final leg, the race was again nearly dead-end.

state championship.

From district to Ohio State, the Trojans had cut 9.77 seconds in two weeks.

"The time was insane to us," Music said. "We didn't peak midseason. We peaked when it mattered most — at the end."

For his part as the rookie, Blair said his time drop was because of the atmosphere.

"It was adrenaline and nerves more than anything," he said. "I couldn't even feel my body while we were running. And coming down that last stretch, you see all the people and hear them, it helps a lot."

"These guys promised me we'd get to state if I came out," Blair added. "They fulfilled that — and then some."

The boys tweaked their baton handoffs during the tournament, Kiesel noted.

"That — and the weather — played a big role. That was a simple fix because we knew if we could do something, maybe they'd get to state and place," he said. "But we had talked about how there was no limit to where they could go."

"Did we even think or dream of 3:23? No. But, how high we could get on the podium — there was no limit to that."

SMALL TOWN VIBES

For Beverly, the moment sank in when the group received their gold medals.

"That moment was all the hard work and time paying off," he said. "I came out for track to get better for football, and now I'm part of a state title. You always want to end all this hard work on the highest note you can, and we did that."

Blair absorbed the entire experience, but riding back into Greenwich with a police and fire escort was a key moment.

"It's small-town motivation," Blair said. "The

ability to show you can do something. We don't have many numbers. Our girls won the conference with seven scoring. It just shows you can do it."

Music wasn't expecting the reception the team received.

"The community turnout has been amazing," Music said. "I would never expect so many people to come out here, especially after a full day."

For Gray, the heritage of leaving a mark for years to come is important.

"You always want to break records and do something no one else has," he said. "We definitely did that."

Coach Kiesel had been seeking Saturday's moment for two decades. The Trojans have had many great athletes and teams over his 20 years' tenure, but never enough to get a full relay to state.

"We don't have a chip on our shoulders, we have grit," Kiesel said. "We're not afraid. We're an ankle sprain away from knowing our alternate, Gage Launderman, may have to run. We know he can't run the times those four do. But they don't care. If he would have had to run, he would have stepped right in and given it everything he had."

The coach looked toward the gravel track and makeshift lanes in the parking lot, then turned his eyes to the crowd who had welcomed the champions back home. He paused to collect himself.

"It's a close-knit thing," he said. "It's a trust that we have to rely on each other. We don't have anyone else to rely on. It brings you up and gets you ready. If you don't step up, there is no one else to do this."

"Every kid is important and has to be relied on to step up. They take that to heart and trust each other. It's why those four young men came home state champions."

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D2 F03

Norwalk's Demuth took cancer head on D2 F63

NORWALK

Everything felt normal. As the final seconds ticked away in the first quarter, the Norwalk High School boys basketball team was scrambling and out of sorts in its Jan. 21 game vs. Perkins. The ball finally landed in the hands of junior Braedyn Demuth, who was several feet behind the three-point line.

Hearing sounds of angst from the crowd, Braedyn quickly set his feet and launched a deep shot at the quarter buzzer. The ball swished through the net for three points and Braedyn was mobbed by teammates congratulating him as he tried to show no emotion in walking back to the bench.

For anyone else, that would have been simply a good shot in any game. For Braedyn, this year's sports seasons have been anything but normal.

On an ordinary July day, Braedyn spent some time with his friend Bryan Sommers, hanging out, playing ping-pong and shooting hoops at Bryan's house. Soccer practice was still several weeks away for goalie Bryan and mid-fielder Braedyn.

Nothing was notable, just the way the quiet and reserved Braedyn expected the day to be.

But, driving home, when he glanced in the rearview mirror, everything changed.

"I looked up and casually put my hand on my neck with my left hand, and felt a bump," he said.

Immediately recalling how his knee would swell occasionally, his thoughts turned toward a possible swollen gland or an abscessed tooth.

"But when I pushed on it, the mass was very hard. I kind of had an idea something was up and that it wasn't normal," Braedyn noted. "Normal" almost instantly disappeared from daily life for him and his family. Less than two weeks after he noticed the lump, the word "cancer" hung in the air in a room at Akron Children's Hospital.

Braedyn, who will turn 17 next month, a multi-sport athlete with no serious prior health history, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma — a cancer of the body's immune system — that is most common in people ages 20 to 40 and those over 55.

"My family and I were shocked and didn't really know what to say or how to react," he said. "We were sad, obviously, and when those words came out... everything just kind of stopped for a few seconds."

At the outset, he and his parents, Jason and Leah, were told that Hodgkin's lymphoma is very treatable and has a good cure rate. The waning days of summer and early weeks of fall quickly became a new routine of doctor's visits, chemotherapy and radiation, with many trips to Akron.

That process, predicted to last four-plus months, made soccer season appear doomed and put basketball season in doubt.

"It was quite a shock," Braedyn noted. "But it all happened so fast at the same time. I just had to push forward."

The process

In coincidental, kindred fashion, Steve Gray had been there too.

The longtime Norwalk boys basketball coach has been through the cancer process twice with his wife, Sue. When they heard about Braedyn's diagnosis, it hurt.

"When I first got the phone call, I think everyone has the same reaction when you hear a young kid has cancer — you expect the worst," Gray said. "It's enough to bring you to tears. These kids are like your family, especially during a season when you see each other every day."

"So in that moment, your heart just aches for him and his parents," he added. "But the class and toughness that he showed during this, I wish I was as tough as him."

Braedyn underwent four rounds of chemotherapy and 20 radiation treatments. Both Gray and NHS head soccer coach Wes Sellers — also an assistant on the basketball staff — marveled as the athlete went to Akron for treatment, yet still attended school and every practice drill when he was allowed.

Sellers said he probably shouldn't have been as shocked as he was when he received a message from Braedyn's mother, Leah, in mid-September.

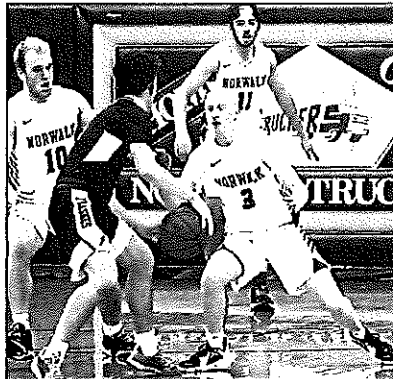
"We were initially told it would be fortunate if he made it back for any of our basketball season," Sellers said. "As a first-year coach with a young team, Braedyn was one of the few returners we



Norwalk junior Braedyn Demuth listens to head boys basketball coach Steve Gray give a speech prior to pushing the scoreboard buzzer in place of the traditional "bell-ringing" to mark the end of cancer chemotherapy and radiation treatments prior to a basketball game vs. Willard on Dec. 14, 2021. Diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma in the summer, Demuth's final radiation treatment was on Dec. 13, 2021 at Akron Children's Hospital.



LEFT: Norwalk junior Braedyn Demuth with the ball at his feet during a non-league home match vs. Edison on Oct. 16, 2021 at Contractors Stadium at the Warren C. Whitkey in Norwalk. CENTER: Demuth plays defense at the top of the key during a Dec. 14, 2021 game vs. Willard at Norwalk High School. The game was one day after his final treatment for Hodgkin's Lymphoma. RIGHT: Demuth takes a baseline jumper vs. Willard.



were planning to lean on and who had been there all summer as one of our better players. Then you get that news that he's not going to be able to play — and it was a big hit to the team from an on-the-field aspect as an anchor in the middle.

"But at that point you're really not thinking about that side of it," he added. "It's about wanting him to be healthy and what we can do for him. So when his mom contacted me and said there was a break coming up in his treatment and he may be able to play in a few games — we were so excited. I knew he would be a good leader for us, even if he was only on the field for small stretches."

Getting back on the field was largely about getting back in shape, Braedyn said. During chemo treatments, he felt little white toxic fluids flow through intravenous lines in his arms.

"I had to eat something cold, otherwise it would give me mouth sores," he said. "It didn't feel like anything was happening to my body. The radiation was way easier. Tired from the treatments, he just rested without much thought about what the future held."

"I actually didn't get any side effects at all," he said. "I only vomited once from the medicine from chemo, but everything else was pretty normal."

What wasn't normal about the Sept. 27 SEC Lake Division soccer match at Clyde was how he felt on the field. While being in the game with team mates was great, he was mistaken about his physical ability.

"When I started running, I could tell real quick I wasn't close to being in shape," Braedyn said. "I got tired faster. It was harder to breathe and I was pretty much out of gas after two minutes of sprinting. He felt he hadn't contributed much — but he was wrong."

"The kids really rallied around him," Sellers said. "And I cannot give him enough credit for how much he showed up to things. For what he was going through, he very rarely missed practices or games. He was always there."

Distance in his treatment timeline became key. Playing soccer soon after a treatment

cycle felt like going back to the beginning.

"But I was able to be out there with my friends, so I was really excited to play," he added. "I didn't think I would be allowed to play at all, so every minute on the soccer field was a bonus."

He continued to play more minutes in more games through the end of the season.

Buzz the horn

Checking the game schedule in early December, Gray saw the perfect opportunity.

Basketball season was a few weeks old when Braedyn and his family drove to Akron for his final treatment on Dec. 13.

The very next night, the Truicks were scheduled to host Willard in not only a solid matchup on paper, but also a game between two longtime opponents sure to draw a large crowd.

"When I heard he was going to play in that soccer match at Clyde, I was shocked," Gray said. "(Assistant) Coach (Nick) Lee and I went to the game and he looked great running around out there in the first couple of minutes."

Gray also noticed how exhausted Braedyn looked — and why he was driven to arrange some recognition for him.

"The thing I'm in awe of the most is he missed one basketball practice because of a doctor's appointment," Gray said. "He's here every day. He runs every sprint and does every drill. This is where he can be normal and not think about the troubles he was going through. I just admire him so much."

Special t-shirts for players and coaches from both teams were made. Students and all in attendance were encouraged to wear purple in honor of the purple ribbon representing Hodgkin's lymphoma. Some players and coaches still had purple shoe laces, which started in the fall with Demuth's soccer teammates.

And Braedyn, a swing player between the junior varsity and varsity teams, would start in the varsity game. The best part of the plans for December 14 was that

the Truicks' athletic knew nothing about it.

"I came in here not knowing anything, then I saw my brother (Garrett) wearing a different shirt from everyone else," he said. "Then I saw my teammates and I read the shirt, and realized they all had them on, too."

With five minutes left in the JV game, Braedyn was called to the locker room.

"So I knew something was going on at that point," he said. "When (Coach Gray) told me I was starting the varsity game, that really threw me off. I got very nervous."

Braedyn also didn't know Gray would speak to the crowd before the varsity game — or that his coach had one more surprise for him.

The day before, Braedyn "rang the bell" at Akron Children's Hospital. The tradition of ringing a bell to mark the end of treatment has been done at most cancer facilities nationwide for 25 years.

At the end of his speech — during which Braedyn had to wipe away tears at three points — Gray put a basketball twist on the occasion.

"There is a tradition at hospitals around the country that when a patient gets to leave for the last time, everyone in the arena stands and claps as the patient rings the bell," Gray told the crowd. "We don't have a bell, but we do have a horn."

Gray and Braedyn walked to the scorer's table, and he then buzzed the stop-play horn three times.

"Twice more he wiped away tears during the standing ovation."

"At Akron, it was just my family there to see me ring the bell," he said. "So to do that in front of everyone that night was just a really special moment."

Gray knew it was a big "gotcha" moment for Braedyn.

"It was like he took a deep breath and realized this is maybe behind me and I get to start all over again," Gray said. "We got more comments about ringing the horn than anything else — because I think it really hit home what this meant to him and his family and friends."

"I thought our fans and student

body and Willard fans were truly touched by what he went through and what he's accomplished."

A time to reflect

The Truicks stand at 8-8 on the season entering tonight's home game with Sandusky.

Three losses by a single basket have been tough. And so was a loss by almost 40 points two weeks ago. But when senior "big man" and leading scorer Ian Minor feels down, all he has to do is look at his teammate or, even, his younger brother. Evan Minor, now a freshman, went through a tough fight with cancer when he was in elementary school.

"It was quite shocking to find out, and the whole thing is quite incredible," Minor said of Braedyn's journey. "Our moms connected, and if he ever needed to talk since I had that similar feeling, he knew I'd be able to talk to and support him."

"When you lose, it's obviously disappointing right after the game. But then you see Braedyn and you just tell yourself to refocus and come back harder and better the next day."

The same is true for Braedyn himself. He was able to return to sports during treatments.

He has a clean bill of health. And he also saw firsthand how fortunate he is.

"The hospital gave me a bad vibe being in there — knowing everything that's happened in there," he said. "I saw some kids there who had it a lot tougher than I did, and I was grateful to go home every time. Ringing the bell was a joyful moment to know I was done with treatment and I could get back to normal and do the things I always did."

He's truly grateful, because, like most teens, he never envisioned facing a health challenge.

"You realize how fragile your own life is," he said.

And although many have commented on how much they like Braedyn's bald look from chemotherapy, that won't be part of returning to normal.

"No, not keeping it," he said of his hair loss. "People say it looks better on me, but I'm not sold. The hair is coming back."

Norwalk's Demuth took cancer head on

MH

D2 F 03

NORWALK — Everything felt normal.

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"Normal" almost instantly disappeared from daily life for him and his family. Less than two weeks after he noticed the lump, the word "cancer" hung in the air in a room at Akron Children's Hospital.

Braedyn, who will turn 17 next month, a multi-sport athlete with no serious prior health history, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma — a cancer of the body's immune system — that is most common in people ages 20-to-40 and those over 55.

"My family and I were shocked and didn't really know what to say or how to react," he said. "We were sad, obviously, and when those words came out ... everything just kind of stopped for a few seconds."

At the outset, he and his parents, Jason and Leah, were told that Hodgkin's lymphoma is very treatable and has a good cure rate. The waning days of summer and early weeks of fall quickly became a new routine of doctor's visits, chemotherapy and radiation, with many trips to Akron.

That process, predicted to last four-plus months, made soccer season appear doomed and put basketball season in doubt.

"It was quite a shock," Braedyn noted. "But it all happened so fast at the same time. I just had to push forward."

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The process

In coincidental, kindred fashion, Steve Gray had been there too.

The longtime Norwalk boys basketball coach has been through the cancer process twice with his wife, Sue. When Gray heard about Braedyn's diagnosis, it hurt.

"When I first got the phone call, I think everyone has the same reaction when you hear a young kid has cancer — you expect the worst," Gray said. "It's enough to bring you to tears. These kids are like your family, especially during a season when you see each other every day.

"So in that moment, your heart just aches for him and his parents," he added.

"But the class and toughness that he showed during this. I wish I was as tough as him."

Braedyn underwent four rounds of chemotherapy and 20 radiation treatments. Both Gray and NHS head soccer coach Wes Sellers — also an assistant on the basketball staff — marveled as the athlete went to Akron for treatment, yet still attended school and every practice drill when he was allowed.

Sellers said he probably shouldn't have been as shocked as he was when he received a message from Braedyn's mother, Leah, in mid-September.

"We were initially told it would be fortunate if he made it back for any of our basketball season," Sellers said. "As a first-year (soccer) coach with a young team, Braedyn was one of the few returners we were planning to lean on and who had been there all summer as one of our better players. Then you get that news that he's not going to be able to play — and it was a big hit to the team from an on-the-field aspect as an anchor in the middle.

"But at that point you're really not thinking about that side of it," he added. "It's about wanting him to be healthy and what we can do for him. So when his mom contacted me and said there was a break coming up in his treatment and he may be able to play in a few games — we were so excited. I knew he would be a good leader for us, even if he was only on the field for small stretches."

Getting back on the field was largely about getting back in shape, Braedyn said. During chemo treatments, he felt little while toxic fluids flowed through intravenous lines in his arms.

"I had to eat something cold, otherwise it would give me mouth sores," he said. "It didn't feel like anything was happening to my body. The radiation was way easier." Tired from the treatments, he just rested without much thought about what the future held.

"I actually didn't get any side effects at all," he said. "I only vomited once from the medicine from chemo, but everything else was pretty normal."

What wasn't normal about the Sept. 27 SBC Lake Division soccer match at Clyde was how he felt on the field. While being in the game with teammates was great, he was mistaken about his physical ability.

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"When I started running, I could tell real quick I wasn't close to being in shape," Braedyn said. "I got tired faster. It was harder to breathe and I was pretty much out of gas after two minutes of sprinting." He felt he hadn't contributed much — but he was wrong.

"The kids really rallied around him," Sellers said. "And I cannot give him enough credit for how much he showed up to things. For what he was going through, he very rarely missed practices or games. He was always there."

Distance in his treatment timeline became key. Playing soccer soon after a treatment cycle felt like going back to the beginning.

"But I was able to be out there with my friends, so I was really excited to play," he added. "I didn't think I would be allowed to play at all, so every minute on the soccer field was a bonus."

He continued to play more minutes in more games through the end of the season.

Buzz the horn

Checking the game schedule in early December, Gray saw the perfect opportunity.

Basketball season was a few weeks old when Braedyn and his family drove to Akron for his final treatment on Dec. 13.

The very next night, the Truckers were scheduled to host Willard in not only a solid matchup on paper, but also a game between two longtime opponents sure to draw a large crowd.

"When I heard he was going to play in that soccer match at Clyde, I was shocked," Gray said. "(Assistant) Coach (Nick) Lee and I went to the game and he looked great running around out there in the first couple of minutes."

Gray also noticed how exhausted Braedyn looked — and why he was driven to arrange some recognition for him.

"The thing I'm in awe of the most is he missed one basketball practice because of a doctor's appointment," Gray said. "He's here every day. He runs every sprint and does every drill. This is where he can be normal and not think about the troubles he was going through. I just admire him so much."

Special t-shirts for players and coaches from both teams were made. Students and all in attendance were encouraged to wear purple in honor of the purple ribbon representing Hodgkin's lymphoma. Some players and coaches still had purple shoe laces, which started in the fall with Demuth's soccer teammates. And Braedyn, a swing player between the junior varsity and varsity teams, would start in the varsity game. The best part of the plans for December 14 was that the Truckers' athlete knew nothing about it.

"I came in here not knowing anything, then I saw my brother (Garrett) wearing a different shirt from everyone else," he said. "Then I saw my teammates and I read the shirt, and realized they all had them on, too."

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With five minutes left in the JV game, Braedyn was called to the locker room. "So I knew something was going on at that point," he said. "When (Coach Gray) told me I was starting the varsity game, that really threw me off. I got very nervous."

Braedyn also didn't know Gray would speak to the crowd before the varsity game — or that his coach had one more surprise for him.

The day before, Braedyn "rang the bell" at Akron Children's Hospital. The tradition of ringing a bell to mark the end of treatment has been done at most cancer facilities nationwide for 25 years.

At the end of his speech — during which Braedyn had to wipe away tears at three points — Gray put a basketball twist on the occasion.

"There is a tradition at hospitals around the country that when a patient gets to leave for the last time, everyone in the area stands and claps as the patient rings the bell," Gray told the crowd. "We don't have a bell, but we do have a horn."

Gray and Braedyn walked to the scorer's table, and he then buzzed the stop-play horn three times.

Twice more he wiped away tears during the standing ovation.

"At Akron, it was just my family there to see me ring the bell," he said. "So to do that in front of everyone that night was just a really special moment."

Gray knew it was a big "gotcha" moment for Braedyn.

"It was like he took a deep breath and realized this is maybe behind me and I get to start all over again," Gray said. "We got more comments about ringing the horn than anything else — because I think that really hit home what this meant to him and his family and friends."

"I thought our fans and student body and Willard fans were truly touched by what he went through and what he's accomplished."

A time to reflect

The Truckers stand at 8-8 on the season entering tonight's home game with Sandusky.

Three losses by a single basket have been tough. And so was a loss by almost 40 points two weeks ago.

But when senior "big man" and leading scorer Ian Minor feels down, all he has to do is look at his teammate or, even, his younger brother. Evan Minor, now a freshman, went through a tough fight with cancer when he was in elementary school.

"It was quite shocking to find out, and the whole thing is quite incredible," Minor said of Braedyn's journey. "Our moms connected, and if he ever needed to talk since I had that similar feeling, he knew I'd be able to talk to and support him."

"When you lose, it's obviously disappointing right after the game. But then you see Braedyn and you just tell yourself to refocus and come back harder and better the next day."

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The same is true for Braedyn himself. He was able to return to sports during treatments.

He has a clean bill of health. And he also saw firsthand how fortunate he is.

"The hospital gave me a bad vibe being in there — knowing everything that's happened in there," he said. "I saw some kids there who had it a lot rougher than I did, and I was grateful to go home every time. Ringing the bell was a joyful moment to know I was done with treatments and I could get back to normal and do the things I always did."

He's truly grateful, because, like most teens, he never envisioned facing a health challenge.

"You realize how fragile your own life is," he said.

And although many have commented on how much they like Braedyn's bald look from chemotherapy, that won't be part of returning to normal.

"No, not keeping it," he said of his hair loss. "People say it looks better on me, but I'm not sold. The hair is coming back."

Bees' Schmeller overcomes arm with legs

Ruth Schmeller had some logical, if not obvious, choices for heroes. Onetime New York Yankees pitcher Jim Abbott, Def Leppard drummer Rick Allen and pianist Leon Fleisher come to mind. Schmeller, though, is more likely to lean toward Luke Skywalker, Peter Pettigrew or Dr. Curt Connors.

All in both those trios had to overcome a missing hand. And while Abbott, Allen and Fleisher became living examples of the kind of perseverance Schmeller has shown, the Medina junior cross country standout likes her heroes to come from the fictional world.

And she likes them to have two hands.

"Spiderman, Captain America, I love them all," Schmeller said. "I always read the Spiderman comics growing up and watched the cartoons. I really liked the character. He's always trying to do good in what he's around with his circumstances."

So in other words, cross Connors off the list, too. The Lizard from "The Amazing Spiderman" and "Spiderman: No Way Home," the scientist was among Spiderman's adversaries, so Schmeller has no use for him.

Comics and movie blockbusters aside, Schmeller is a bit of a superhero in her own right, though she'd be the first to dismiss that notion. She'd rather be known as nobody special.

Schmeller, for reasons nobody could ever pinpoint, was born without a left hand. Her mom Rebecca said one theory was Ruth was a victim of amniotic band syndrome, which sometimes can cause limb deficiency. The cause quickly became irrelevant.

"There's so many reactions," Ruth Schmeller said. "Our first was, 'How can this be?' I had already had three healthy babies. How could this be different? Then I thought, 'Oh, I did something wrong.' But no, it's something that happens to all kinds of mothers. You sometimes don't make a perfect baby."

If you don't look too closely, you might think that's exactly what the Schmellers made on their fourth try. It's hard to label Ruth Schmeller disabled because her lack of a South paw has never stopped her from doing much.

"When she was born, we just forgot about it," Rebecca Schmeller said. "Now we know none of us needs two hands."

Ruth took piano lessons through eighth grade before giving it up to concentrate on other things. Doesn't mean she's finished with keyboards, though.

"Everybody always says she types faster than anybody else in the room," Rebecca Schmeller said. "It's remarkable how she adapts. You just figure it out."

When Ruth drifted toward pursuing cross country and track, it wasn't due to any physical limitations. She was following in the footsteps of her three older siblings.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that running is a hands-free activity and a sport where the best performers are propelled by work ethic and drive, both of which Schmeller oozes.

"Really my siblings did it and that definitely got me started, but also it was something I could definitely get myself into because I could use my legs and not my arms," she said. "Honestly, I would say part of it's genetics. That's a small part of it. That and working hard every day, showing up for practice, being with my team."

It's not a bad team to be with, either. Heading into the week the Bees were ranked No. 10 in the Division I state coaches poll.

(more)

Medina has finished in the top four in every meet thus far, including winning the Mentor Cardinal Classic and placing second – tops among Ohio teams – last weekend at the Spartan Invitational at Boardman.

Schmeller has finished as high as ninth place overall, which she did in the GlenOak Golden Eagle Invitational. At Boardman she finished 49th out of more than 300 runners in the Division I girls race.

With Schmeller as part of the lineup, Medina placed 11th in the state last year, a performance she and her teammates are looking to top this time out.

"I definitely want to make it to states again," Schmeller said. "We all want to get there."

"All" includes some combination of seniors Cara Razavi, Janelle Gehman, Lindsay Jones, Abby Acierto, Aubree Neura, Carly Ramunni, and Julia Smith; juniors Mia Heine, Ashley Kollar and Schmeller; sophomores Haley Black and Abby Paetz; and freshmen Alexis Warnement, Avery Henry and Campbell Burns. That entire group has appeared in varsity results to this point.

Bees coach Scott Van Fleet is happy to have Schmeller among that talent-laden roster. He points at her as a prime example of what athletes can do when they set their minds on things.

"She has really taken to this sport," Van Fleet said. "It's very important to her and she works very hard at it. She even pins her own (race) bib on her shirt. The only thing she asks is she has one of the other kids tie her shoes."

Schmeller has set a goal of running a sub-20-minute time this season. Van Fleet said that is well within her reach, as is just about anything else.

"Sometimes you can tell with kids there's a certain ceiling they're going to hit," the coach said. "I don't think she has that. She's really progressed every year pretty substantially. She broke in to the varsity last year and she's been there this year. Her training has gotten more significant in terms of mileage."

Schmeller also excels in the classroom, with a grade-point average hovering near 4.0. She doesn't know what she wants to do academically and for now is just trying to enjoy her life as a high school student and athlete, hoping nobody notices that she's anything other than that.

That's something her parents sought for her as well, choosing to avoid things like support groups and other avenues that would have singled Ruth out as different, when her reality is she's not different at all.

"We didn't want it to define her," Rebecca Schmeller said.

And it hasn't. She's a regular-old kid, just well-versed, if not multi-versed.

And what of that? You can't just say Spiderman is your hero without saying which one.

Or can you?

"I love them all," Schmeller said of the trio of Spideys portrayed in "No Way Home's" Multiverse.

"I just love them in general, their morality, how they're always for good. They're just good role models."

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Medina's Stoddard keeping it real

Feature

Danny Stoddard is realistic about a lot of things. He knows whatever he does this year won't be enough in a lot of eyes. Certainly it won't be as much.

Comparisons will be unfair but they will be constant and come from every direction.

Stoddard, a junior at Medina, has the unenviable task of replacing Drew Allar as the Bees starting quarterback.

Allar was in most eyes the top quarterback prospect in the country in the Class of 2022. He was labeled a five-star product only because you can't have six or seven stars.

In his career Allar threw for more than 9,100 yards and 98 touchdowns. Those numbers likely would have surpassed 10,000 and 100 if not for a Covid-shortened 2020 season.

Allar led Medina to its best postseasons in program history over the past two years. That included a state semifinal berth a year ago and a spot in the Division I quarterfinals in 2020 amid the pandemic.

The Bees' 13-1 record last year, which included a perfect regular season, was best in school history and ended with Allar being named Ohio's Mr. Football, honoring the best player in the state. Some places had him as the best player in the nation and he currently is competing for a spot in the lineup at Penn State.

Medina didn't win a state title but did win a Greater Cleveland Conference championship. Given that it had been nearly half-a-century since the Bees won any kind of crown, Allar's significance cannot be understated.

Now Stoddard takes the reins with everyone in the world expecting him to come up short.

Almost everyone.

"I feel like Drew Allar will always be 'Medina,'" senior wide receiver Brennen Schramm said.

"Stoddard, if he does really well and excels in what he does, he will be known as the kid who stepped up and was just as good as Drew Allar because he was able to step in and fill in and become that next kid.

"That's something really tough to do for a lot of kids, to come in after a five-star quarterback and just excel. If he's able to do that, people will view Danny as very, very good."

Stoddard was good enough to be Medina's backup last year as a sophomore. On a team loaded with seniors, there was none worthy of the QB2 role.

As Bees coach Larry Laird said, had the circumstances called for it – and all back-up quarterbacks are always one play away from being starters – Stoddard's would have been the number called. Not Laird's preference obviously, but the coach didn't seem like he'd have been uncomfortable.

"He is very talented and understands what we are trying to do from an offensive standpoint," the coach said of Stoddard, who as a 10th-grader was athletic enough to be the starting center fielder on Medina's baseball team. "He's very good at reading coverage and his legs are phenomenal." Once upon a time, throwing for 800 yards in a high school football season would have been a decent output for an entire season.

With offenses spreading fields from sideline to sideline and getting more and more pass-happy, 800 is now just a decent month. For Allar it was a couple of weeks.

Still, Stoddard managed to put up some numbers and did so in mop-up duty a year ago when Medina wasn't exactly looking to pass. So while he's not a seasoned veteran, he's also not a rookie and he's not a scrub and he's anxious to prove it.

"I feel really good about this season," said the lanky 6-foot-1, 175-pounder who may make up what he lacks in arm strength with footspeed. "I'm a lot more prepared coming into this season. The coaches have been helping out a lot. I feel pretty good."

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Stoddard isn't the only one with something to prove. Schramm caught 82 passes a year ago, totaling 1,333 yards and 14 touchdowns. What did he get for his effort?

"I have zero stars," the senior wideout mused, recognizing that nobody is giving him much credit for his numbers. All of that instead goes to Allar. Which is why Schramm may have as much riding on Stoddard's arm as anyone.

It might seem like 82 receptions would catch someone's eye. You still have to get open 82 times and you still have to catch the ball 82 times. Schramm, like probably a lot of folks roster-wide, is itching to prove he had something to do with that output.

So as much as Allar propelled the Bees the last few seasons, he may continue doing so in absentia. Throughout Medina's lineup will be people looking to make a case that the rest of the guys on the team are pretty good, too.

Many of them were bottled behind a splendid senior class. Now it's next-men-up, only with football fans casting doubting stares from every direction. That adds to Medina's motivation and in football a little motivation usually goes a long way.

"They're all like, 'Oh, you lost a lot of guys,'" Schramm said. "But a lot of guys are stepping up. A lot of guys were able to watch those starters last year. Everybody is stepping up and ready to go."

Most of Medina's lineup this year will be players getting their first chances. They include the entire backfield and defense, where seniors manned every spot a year ago. An impressive 37 players on the Bees 2021 roster have graduated.

All these underclassmen have had to do for the past nine months is lift weights and listen. The season hasn't started yet and Medina's current group has had nearly a year to listen to the prevailing opinion that insists the Bees are going to fall back to the pack.

"Our kids have a little bit of a chip on their shoulders," Laird said. "Our seniors are eager to show that maybe they had a little something to do with our success the last two years also. It wasn't just one senior last year. We had 37 seniors. It wasn't just Drew."

Nobody will be the target off those doubts any more than Stoddard. The Bees' new starter is well aware of that and understands it. And that it's probably fair.

In the history of high school football, there have been a zillion quarterbacks. Of those, a microscopic handful followed a five-star player. Ever fewer took the reins from the best player in their state, if not the entire country.

That puts Stoddard in a unique position and one he seems to be embracing. He's definitely not backing down from it.

"I think a lot of people after seeing Drew don't expect much now with me coming in," Stoddard said. "But I think I'll be ready. I'll show 'em."

R.J. Walgate was bumping around on YouTube one day last year, not unlike he does most days, checking out the videos of the day. He had no idea his life was about to change, thanks to an obsession he had no prior knowledge of.

Thanks to an algorithm that occurred because – well, Walgate really has no idea why – a video popped up of people playing Wiffle Ball.

“I was just watching a video and under that video, in recommendations, there was this Wiffle Ball video,” Walgate said. “I always loved playing wiffleball in the back yard. So I clicked on it.”

Prior to that, Walgate had played the kind of Wiffle Ball most of us play in our yards or on playgrounds with our friends. This video was something different. This was serious.

This was *real* Wiffle Ball.

Walgate was transfixed. Then he was hooked.

He started talking about it with friends and eventually put together a Facetime call with three of them, which led to starting their own league in Medina. Fast forward one year and Walgate, along with friends Frankie Garritano, Cooper Schoch and Jake Weber, have competed in two out-of-state tournaments as Ohio Elite Wiffleball, finishing second in the first and winning the second – the United Wiffle Ball National Championship in York, Pennsylvania earlier this month.

“I never anticipated when I started the league on that Facetime call, a year later, I’d be a national champion,” Walgate said.

So what happened? What turned four kids Walgate described as “decent” baseball players into a national force with plastic bats and balls?

Obsession. That’s what happened.

Once Walgate picked it up he couldn’t put it down. With the help of his dad, Walgate constructed a strike zone target, probably the most essential thing needed to play tournament-style Wiffle Ball at the big-time level.

“We built a strike zone in my driveway,” Rob Walgate said. “Then he just kept watching it.” And then R.J. Walgate practiced and practiced and practiced some more. He worked on his pitches, learning to steer the classic Wiffle ball in countless ways to the strike zone target (or SZT in Wiffle Ball parlance).

Walgate can throw a bunch of different pitches, but mostly sticks to three: with a screwball and screw drop being his out pitches.

“The hardest pitch to hit is my screwball,” said Walgate, who also throws a slider, but went away from that after giving up a home run on it during his team’s first game in a tournament in Brighton, Michigan.

Much like real baseball, if you can pitch, you can win. And the art of pitching Wiffle Balls goes far beyond throwing them and spinning them. There’s also cutting them, scuffing them and doctoring them in all kinds of ways within tournament rules.

“As you talk to guys in tournaments, there are different patterns for different people,” Walgate said of how balls are cut and scuffed. “This one guy online, I used some of his pitches and followed his patterns and that worked for me. Other guys use the concrete (to scuff the ball). Some even use a cheese grater.”

It also helps to have some depth. One devastating pitcher can’t win you a tournament. Games are four innings and a single pitcher can only work three of those.

(more)

In a tournament game in Pennsylvania, Ohio Elite Wiffleball was in a scoreless game through six innings, meaning teams had to move to their third pitchers. The Elite kept its shutout going and won 1-0.

While some pitchers can bring the heat – videos online show some throwing the Wiffle Balls close to 100 mph (rotator cuff surgery sold separately) – control and movement are more of what the sport is about. Make the ball go up and down, in and out and still hit the target and you're going to win.

"I'm not one known for my speed," said Walgate, who along with Schoch attends Medina Christian Academy; Weber attends Highland while Garritano is a student at St. Francis Xavier.

"I'm more known for my movement."

Much like backyard Wiffle Ball games around the country, the big-time tournament games aren't necessarily filled with muscle-bound studs. In fact, Walgate said it's quite the opposite, which helps explain why his team, with two 14-year-olds and two 13-year-olds, was able to win the 17-and-under national tournament.

"It's just average guys playing in the league," he said. "From a player's perspective, it's a much more structured, intense, competitive, men's softball league. It's just guys with regular jobs; they're just coming to play Wiffle Ball."

There is no more average American kid than Walgate, who was doing the most average of average-kid things when he was sitting around bouncing through YouTube videos with no inkling that Wiffle Ball videos existed, let alone would pop up on his screen.

But then one did, and since then Walgate's life has taken on new meaning.

"To be quite honest, I have no idea why it showed up," Walgate said. "I had never looked up Wiffle Ball before. It just randomly popped up."

"I'm really happy it did."