

# LOCAL SPORTS Journal

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Reeths-Puffer sophomore  
Kaleb Mitchelson

## THE TURNAROUND TEAMS

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# ONE SCARY DAY

**Thanks to the calm actions of his coach and teammates, and the presence of an AED machine, Fruitport Calvary Christian's Luke Anhalt survived sudden cardiac arrest.**

**By Steve Gunn**  
**LocalSportsJournal.com**

Sometimes it's better not to remember.

On Thursday, Dec. 13, Fruitport Calvary Christian basketball player Luke Anhalt had a frighteningly close call with death during practice after school.

He had no history of serious medical problems. He says he was feeling fine all day at school, and before and during practice. His team was in the middle of a free-throw drill that he says is always pretty light and easy.

But in the midst of that drill he collapsed onto the court in full cardiac arrest.

Occurrences like that, in seemingly healthy young athletes, are not unheard of, and frequently do not end well. It's been almost eight years since Fennville basketball standout Wes Leonard collapsed on the court during a district championship game, and died soon after.

In Leonard's case, the school's automated external defibrillator (AED) was useless, because it had dead batteries, so there was little hope of reviving him. Luckily for Anhalt, there was a fully functional AED machine at the Fruitport Calvary gym.

His friend and teammate Zach Zehr ran and grabbed it, and their coach, Dr. Jeff Zehr, applied it and was able to get Anhalt's heart beating again. He suffered a second cardiac arrest somewhere between the gym and Mercy Hospital, and paramedics were able to revive him again.

He was transferred the same night to DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids, where he underwent surgery to have a defibrillator implanted. Four days later he was home - tired and shaken - but happy to be alive.

The media buzzed about the young athlete's close call for weeks. But Anhalt has no memory of a terrifying event that most teenagers would never expect in a million years.

"To me it was just a regular school day," said Anhalt, 17, speaking to Local Sports Journal from his home in Spring Lake. "I remember chapel in the morning, taking my Spanish test, I wasn't thinking anything extraordinary was happening. I felt normal. Getting ready for practice I felt normal.

"From what I've heard, I went down to the end of the floor and collapsed, and my coach immediately got things going. My buddy grabbed the AED machine, and Coach Zehr followed all the instruc-



**Fruitport Calvary's Luke Anhalt boxes out for a rebound in a district tournament game last season. Photo/Michael Banka**

tions with a cool head."

Anhalt does recall short moments of consciousness in the hospital in Grand Rapids, and struggling to comprehend what he was told - that his heart stopped beating during basketball practice.

"I remember just a couple times waking up and suddenly becoming a little more aware of what was happening," he said. "I didn't believe them at first. No way, I have a healthy heart. But it did happen.

"It's definitely something I never would have expected to happen. But at this point I've battled with it already, and come to grips with the fact that it happened, and it's happened to others. It's a good thing I'm still here."

## ***Coach, teammates become heroes***

While Luke has no memory of that frightening practice, his coach vividly recalls every detail.

Zehr recalls taking Anhalt out of a drill during practice, and seeing him lying down on the court - but fully conscious - a few moments later.

"I turned to Luke and half-jokingly said, 'If I had known you were going to do that, I wouldn't have taken you out,'" Zehr said.




"Not long after that we did free throw drills. All he had to do when he missed a free throw was run down the floor and back. And on his way back, he collapsed. It was in my line of sight. When I saw him on the floor the second time, I wondered, what is he doing?"



"I did get one glimpse of my son," the coach said. "He walked about 20 feet away and sat down, and I saw his completely red face with tears coming down, and him holding his head. Two of his friends were beside him. They knew how hard Zach was taking it. I'll



"Afterward, I was thinking constantly, playing it over in my mind, did I do it right?" he said. "But my main focus was getting him to the hospital, and I knew the waiting to find out his status was go-

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**BACK WITH HIS FRIENDS: Luke hangs out in the bleachers with his buddies during a recent Calvary girls basketball game.**

ing to be tough.

"I didn't have any sense that things were going to be okay until the next morning, when Jeff (Luke's dad) texted me and told me he was moving his arms and legs and they were removing the breathing tubes."

### ***'A drum to bang at the moment'***

Anhalt's father, Dr. Jeff Anhalt, was actually driving to the school when he received the shocking phone call, telling him his seemingly healthy son had just come very close to dying.

"I finished work early and our daughter Kate, who is on the girls varsity team, was set to practice after him and needed a jump rope. I had one and was on my way there," Dr. Anhalt said.

Almost a week after the incident, Dr. Anhalt said he was still not clear on all the details about the heroic efforts to save his son's life.

"The AED machine was used to shock him twice, at least once at the school, then another time," he said. "The second one was after the EMT's got there. It sounds like they left (the AED machine) on him during transport to the hospital. I don't know if the second shock happened during transport.

"They took him to Mercy, got him stabilized, and made the decision to transfer him to DeVos. We kind of alternated who stayed with him. He was in ICU the first night and my wife and daughter stayed, and I took the other ones home. The second night it was just me."

Dr. Anhalt said there was no reason to believe that Luke had any type of heart trouble.

"There were no hints at all," he said. "As of yet we have no underlying cause. They have ruled all the common things out. It was nothing that would have been picked up by a normal heart screening."

The Anhalts are acutely aware of the odds of an athlete surviving cardiac arrest, and are very grateful that Luke was an exception.

They note that the average age for sudden cardiac death is 17 1/2 - Luke's age at the time of the incident.

"Between 3,000 and 7,000 athletes per year have cardiac arrest in the U.S." Dr. Anhalt said. "About 90 percent are male, and about two-thirds of the incidents occur during basketball or football season. The survival rate, from what I can tell, is somewhere in the 12 percent range."

When asked how he and his family had been doing since the incident, Dr. Anhalt said it had been a bit of an emotional roller-coaster ride.

"There have been a lot of ups and downs," he said. "We are exceedingly grateful for that kid who's sitting there looking at me right

now, but we're also mindful of what has happened to other families."

Dr. Anhalt knows that families like the Leonards might have been spared their losses if functional AED machines were in all school gyms, with someone trained to apply them.

He's angered by the fact that many schools still do not have the life-saving machines, and Michigan state law does not require it.

"We have started to make some contacts to look at the reason that previous legislation failed to make it a requirement to have AED machines," he said. "My understanding so far is that there's some concern about liability for the schools. That's ridiculous.

"I had someone say to me today, schools do fire drills, and when is the last time a kid died in a school fire? We're going to keep pushing until we can figure this out. We have a drum to bang at the moment."

### ***'It was good to see everyone'***

Less than a week after the incident, Luke Anhalt was resting comfortably at home, with his relieved family around him.

His only plan was to rest over the holiday break, then return to school in January.

"Today I woke up at noon, I was up four hours, then took a two-hour nap," he said. "I'm tired from time to time, and sore sometimes on my chest and side where the incisions are, but it's not too bad. I was surprised.

"They implanted a defibrillator that will stay to protect me for the rest of my life. I can feel the square edge of it. It's kind of under my arm. I'm getting used to it actually. When it starts to hurt I can get some ice to help with the swelling."

Obviously the basketball season is over for Luke, almost before it got started. The Fruitport Calvary Eagles were only a few games into their season when he collapsed. Their game that was scheduled for the day after his incident was cancelled.

Anhalt's varsity sports career is over as well, because he's a senior who's been on the varsity soccer and basketball teams since he was a freshman, and the boys soccer season is in the fall.

He has a lot of tests and blood work ahead of him, as well as long periods of rest. He won't be able to resume full physical activity for quite some time.

"I was looking forward to it," Anhalt said about the basketball season. "But obviously now plans have changed. I'm more of a soccer guy, but I like basketball. It's fun."

But the disappointment of having his season cut short did not keep Anhalt away from his team for long.

On Dec. 18 Fruitport Calvary hosted Muskegon Catholic Central. Anhalt and his family had no plans to go, but as the evening wore on, they just couldn't help themselves.

"We were just kind of sitting at dinner, and my sister Kate said she kind of wanted to go, and I said I kind of wanted to, too, so we quickly got up and left," Anhalt said. "Nobody was planning on it. It was kind of out of the blue. We got there and there was 1:14 left in the game.

"I was really happy I went. The team and the coaches were really happy to see me. I walked in and heard some murmers - 'Oh he's here.' It was a good time. It was a mixture of emotion. I felt happy and relieved, and it was good to see everyone."

The game did not go well at all for Fruitport Calvary Christian. The Eagles lost to Muskegon Catholic 77-44.

But after the trauma the players and coaches experienced when Luke collapsed, and the joy of seeing him enter the gym near the end of the game, the outcome seemed very irrelevant.

"There are so many things basketball-wise that we could have been upset about, and I could have hollered about," Coach Zehr said. "But God blessed that moment and everything in that moment, so things came out the way they did. It reminds you very quickly about what's important.

"Ultimately he's alive, and that makes all those other things moot points."



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# The Turnaround Teams

## *providing a breath of fresh air in high school basketball*

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

If there is one downside to high school sports, it's the relative predictability from one season to another.

The great teams tend to stay great, while the lesser squads tend to stay at the bottom.

But that's starting to change a little bit, at least in varsity boys basketball in the Muskegon/lakeshore area.

Perhaps the most telling example came at the Muskegon Area Sports Hall of Fame Holiday Basketball Classic in late December.

The Reeths-Puffer boys team shined, downing powerful Holland West Ottawa, a Class A state finalist in 2018, 49-43.

That victory, and two others in early January over Grand Rapids Union and Mona Shores, gave the Rockets a 9-1 record to start the season. That's amazing, considering how bad the team was not so long ago.

In 2015-16, Coach Lance Johnson's first season, Reeths-Puffer finished with a dismal 0-20 mark. The Rockets' opponents collectively averaged almost 30 more points per game.

But the Rockets, with a bunch of developing underclassmen in the lineup, rolled up their sleeves and kept working. In 2016-17 they won three games, and last season increased that total to nine.

Now all bets are off, and the sky seems like the limit for Reeths-Puffer, which also posted an impressive win over traditionally strong Grand Haven earlier this season.

The Rockets feature a very young, balanced lineup, and everyone contributes. Six different players are averaging five or more points per game, five different players have led the team in scoring in a game, and five have scored at least 16 points in a game.

Junior Emcee Williams is the leading scorer at 13.1 points per game. Junior Josh Jordan is next at 9.7 points, sophomore Kaleb Mitchelson is averaging 9.5 points and senior Carter Fulton is at 8.6 points.

"My very first game at Reeths-Puffer, we played West Ottawa

and we lost by 40 or 50," Coach Johnson said after the Holiday Basketball Classic victory. "We've made some big strides since then."

While the Reeths-Puffer boys are the most notable turnaround team in the area, and perhaps in the state, the Rockets are not alone.

Boys teams from Orchard View, Ravenna and Hart, which have all struggled badly in recent seasons, all had winning records at the holiday break this season, and are no longer considered pushovers by any opponents.

### ***Orchard View starts out 7-0!***

When Russ Doane took over as the Orchard View boys basketball coach five years ago - with his son-in-law Nick Bronsema coaching the JV squad - the program was not in very good shape.

It took some time, and a lot of hard work, to right the ship.

In two years under Doane, the Cardinals totaled five wins. In the third year, when Doane stepped aside to become an assistant and Bronsema took over the varsity squad, OV posted six victories.

Last year the Cardinals started turning the corner, collecting 10 wins and coming close to finishing at .500.

This season OV has clearly gotten over the hump, and figures to win quite a few more than 10 games.

The Cardinals started the season with a sizzling 7-0 record, including a 2-0 mark in the Lakes 8 Conference. They suffered their first loss on Jan. 4 to Western Michigan Christian in a conference game, and were 8-2 as of this writing.

Two of their more exciting wins were a 58-56 victory over neighboring rival Oakridge, and a 53-47 win over conference rival Muskegon Catholic.

So how does a team that's been losing for so long finally turn the corner?

Part of it may be Bronsema's pure enthusiasm for the game, as well as his determination and drive. Those traits have apparently rubbed off on the players, giving them the confidence to overcome the losing legacy they inherited.

Bronsema said his passion for basketball is an inherited trait,



**R-P's Kaleb Mitchelson**

REETHS-PUFFER	
2014-15:	6-15
2015-16:	0-20
2016-17:	3-18
2017-18:	9-12
2018-19:	9-1



**OV's Edmari Mitchell**

ORCHARD VIEW	
2014-15:	2-18
2015-16:	3-17
2016-17:	6-16
2017-18:	10-11
2018-19:	7-2





### THE TURNAROUND COACHES: R-P's Lance Johnson, OV's Nick Bronsema, Ravenna's Justin Johnson, Hart's Adam Jerry.

from his father, Jim Bronsema, and grandfather, John Bronsema, who were both outstanding athletes.

"The game of basketball has always been gospel in my family," Bronsema said. "The greatest times I had as a kid were going to open gym with the old guys.

"My dad never let me feel sorry for myself when things did not go well. He always said 'Nick, don't ever give up.' Now when I address each player individually, it's basically the same thing. I don't talk to them about where we're at, but where we're going.

"We were very happy to start out 7-0, but we realize it's a process. At any time you can experience adversity, and you have to overcome it. We've already had a lot, but it's made us stronger."

Bronsema said there have been other important factors, as well.

He keeps an unusually large group of five assistant coaches - Doane, who has some great years as the head coach at Saugatuck High School before coming to OV, as well as Bill Bowen, Lotrel Watkins, former Orchard View standout Brandon Keur, and Fletcher Payne-King.

Bronsema also said it's a matter of developing very young talent, even if that means struggling for awhile. Two years ago he called up two freshmen - Edmari Mitchell and Dayton Rose - to build toward the future.

Those two are now juniors who have a lot of varsity experience and provide leadership for the team.

He's continued that trend by calling up other talented freshmen, like Keontae Barnes last year and Darius Williams this season, as well as several sophomores. Barnes is currently averaging about 18 points per game, and Williams leads the team in offensive rebounding, despite being only 5-feet-4.

Besides Barnes and Williams, the other starters are senior Davion Lane, who averages double figures in scoring and rebounding; senior Dietrich Thornton, who runs the offense as the point guard; and senior Brady Bowen, a skilled shooter.

The key to it all has been a lot of hard work on the part of the players, according to Bronsema.

He had a group he called the "fantastic five" who showed up for every team work out over the summer of 2018. Their work ethic has spread to the rest of the team, and all the effort is paying off in wins.

"The more you invest in something, the more it means to you," Bronsema said. "These guys have put the time in, and when they go

out there, they want to get something out of their investment. I really think that has been the difference."

### *Ravenna isn't just about football anymore*

Ravenna has always been, first and foremost, a football school.

With legendary teams over the years, and numerous state championship trophies in the case, thousands of fans turn out every Friday night for home games.

Boys basketball has traditionally played second fiddle at the school, as the fan support - or lack thereof - demonstrated over past years.

For years the Bulldogs would play in front of half-filled gyms, because few people were very excited about a team that usually went nowhere.

But that's starting to change at Ravenna, because the boys basketball team has turned into a contender over the past two seasons, and the community is responding.

"That's something that us coaches talked about when I first started," said Ravenna coach Justin Johnson, who's in his fifth year with the team. "We said that someday we would like to see the kind of crowds we get for football. In the past there was pretty small attendance.

"Now we're definitely starting to see the crowds showing up, and even the last few road games this season we had tons of fans there. It was great. The kids are starting to hear (the support) and feel the atmosphere. To have them experience that is awesome."

Johnson inherited a program with a losing mentality, and it took some time to chase that away. In his first season, 2014-15, the Bulldogs finished 4-16. Over the next two years they went 6-14 and 6-16.

But last season Ravenna started turning the corner, finishing with an 11-9 record. While that would be considered mediocre at many schools, it was a big accomplishment for a program that last won a district title in 2002, and last won a share of the West Michigan Conference title sometime back in the 1970s.

This season the turnaround seems complete. Ravenna entered the 2019 portion of its schedule with a very hopeful 7-1 record and tons of confidence.

The Bulldogs' only loss came in late December to powerful conference rival North Muskegon, the unanimous pick to win the league crown this season.

While the wins took time to start coming, Johnson said the change in culture actually began under his predecessor, Mark Vanderwall.

"We were definitely moving in the right direction," Johnson said about the former coach. "He was here two years before I was, and he did a good job of trying to get the kids excited about basketball again and jump-starting the program.

"After two years he stepped away, I took over the varsity, and continued the work he did. I think we've done a good job of getting kids excited and wanting to play. Every year the kids have worked hard and played hard. Some of them maybe haven't had as much bas-



**Ravenna's Josh VanderWoude**

### RAVENNA

**2014-15: 4-16**

**2015-16: 6-14**

**2016-17: 6-15**

**2017-18: 11-9**

**2018-19: 7-1**

ketball experience and got a late jump, but every year we've gotten a little bit better."

Johnson said he and his assistants started rebuilding by stressing what the players could control - playing hard all the time, and playing tough, stingy defense.

"The biggest thing coming in was just trying to make basketball fun, and get kids playing more and more," he said. "From there, it was about getting them to play hard defensively. No matter what your skill level is on offense, you can always control your hustle."

"The more the guys played over the last few years, the better they got, and now they are hitting their stride. Their skill level is starting to catch up with their hustle and effort."

One highlight of last year's turnaround season came against defending West Michigan Conference champion Whitehall, when sophomore Josh Cox scored 35 points to lead Ravenna to a 54-49 upset victory.

So far this season, the most impressive win came in December, when the Bulldogs trailed Montague by 18 points in the third quarter, then roared back to win 66-61.

Josh VanderWoude helped seal the deal by scoring all 14 of his points in the fourth quarter.

Even the 61-51 loss earlier this season to powerful North Muskegon, Ravenna's only defeat so far, did not derail the Bulldogs' confidence, according to Johnson.

"I think the guys realized they can not only play with them, but that we made some mistakes that we can correct and give them a good run next time," Johnson said.

Ravenna has a very balanced attack. In their first eight games, the Bulldogs had five different leading scorers.

At the top of the list is Cox at 12.8 points per game. Calvin Schullo is averaging 11.6 while Jacob May is at 11.1. VanderWoude and Jack Emery are averaging 7.5 and 7.4 points, respectively.

## ***Hart finally tasting victory***

In the 2016-17 season, Hart boys basketball coach Adam Jerry included three sophomores on the varsity roster - Alec Kempker, Dustin Klotz and Simon Herrera.

They were very young and green, but the talent on the roster was thin, and they were three of the better players at the school. Kempker started right away, while Klotz and Herrera were the first two players off the bench.

The young trio and their teammates predictably struggled, posting an 8-12 season record. But there were hopeful moments that year.

The Pirates won their first West Michigan Conference game in five seasons, a 42-38 victory over Ravenna, and beat neighboring rival and traditional power Shelby twice in the same season.

But learning to win on a consistent basis took some time. Last season the Pirates regressed a bit, winning only six games.

But this season the experience gained over the past two years is really paying off. Hart entered the 2019 portion of its schedule with a 5-2 record, and seems primed to leave last season's six-victory mark in the dust.

"This year we have a lot of senior leadership," said Jerry, who grew up and played basketball in St. Louis, Michigan. "They started as little kids, and they've been in the program forever. Now they are starting to understand my philosophy and what I expect, and they are a great, hard-working group."



**Hart's Simon Herrera**

The three kids who were called up as sophomores have been a big part of the turnaround.

Kempker and Klotz are averaging 14 and 13.3 points per game, respectively. Herrera is a defensive specialist and a sparkplug for the team.

Point guard Hunter Tubbs, a junior, has also played a big role, averaging 11.6 points per game, while the fifth starter, O'rian Torres, has been the type of player that does everything well and contributes in a lot of different ways.

But developing that lineup took patience and persistence while the Pirates suffered through a lot of losses.

"To say we struggled through the hard times would be an understatement," Jerry said. "It's been hard. But that makes it even more exciting to see the guys have some success and earn some victories. It's been a blast, to put it simply."

Having a winning boys basketball team is a very new thing for Hart.

"It's been over 12 years since we had a winning season," Jerry said. "To us that would be a success. That's what we're shooting for."

"I truly believe it's a mentality thing. I saw that when I started. But we just started to implement a lot of competitive stuff in practice, and our confidence started to build."

"Then two years ago we got our first conference win in five-plus years, we beat Shelby twice and Ravenna twice. It was just a matter of getting those little victories to turn into big victories and even bigger victories, and it's kind of carried over."

In prior seasons, the Hart players would go into a game against a good team and fear the competition. That sort of mentality is in the past, Jerry said.

The Pirates may or may not win, but they finally realize they will be competitive and have a chance to prevail.

"We're going to play our game, and we don't care who you are," Jerry said.

<b>HART</b>
<b>2014-15: 2-19</b>
<b>2015-16: 5-16</b>
<b>2016-17: 8-12</b>
<b>2017-18: 6-15</b>
<b>2018-19: 5-3</b>

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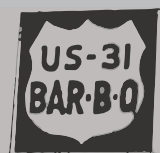
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# The Power of Persistence

## The incredible story of athlete Brandon Bucek

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

They say persistence can take a person a long way in life.

Brandon Bucek is living proof of that, in a million different ways. When he wants something, he goes for it and never gives up, as the Local Sports Journal staff has definitely learned.

A few years back, Dave Hart, an LSJ writer who also works with Brandon at Orchard Market in Spring Lake, asked him if he would like to be the topic of a story for this magazine.

Hart was impressed with the way Brandon led such a busy, independent life, and competed in organized sports year-round, despite his developmental disability.

Brandon eagerly agreed to the story, but sports seasons came and went, the LSJ schedule always seemed to be full, and the story was never written.

But Brandon did not forget.

Nearly every day at work, Brandon would seek out Hart and politely but firmly ask how his story was coming along.

Hart would hear the same questions, over and over - "Hey man, what's the update?" or a simple "Status report?"

When nothing happened for about three years, Brandon took matters a step further, leaving a message on LSJ's voicemail, asking when he would write his story.

So this is Brandon's amazing story, or at least a little part of it.

It's about the incredible power of self-confidence and determination, and the true value of sports for young people, regardless of the level they play at.

### *Living and breathing it*

Brandon, 29, of Grand Haven, was born with Down Syndrome. It occurs when there are three rather than two number 21 chromosomes,



**Brand Bucek, 29, of Grand Haven, has the type of year-round sports schedule that would exhaust most athletes.**

mosomes, according to his mother, who is a registered nurse.

A lot of people with similar disabilities end up shortchanged in life, because they lack the confidence to fully participate in what can seem like a very frightening world.

Sometimes their well-meaning families also hold them back, for fear they might fail, or get hurt in some activity.

But that was never the case for Brandon. He fell in love with sports at a very young age, was determined to play no matter what, and had parents who gave him the opportunity and support to pursue his activities.

"Brandon never played with cars or trucks when he was little - it was always about sports - there was always a ball of some sort," said his mother, Michelle Cassens, who lives near Eastmanville.

"He was hitting off a tee when he was really little. I remember shagging a lot of balls in the basement. He started playing soccer when he was four. Then came tee-ball

in the Tri-Cities Little League. At age 11 he started competing in Special Olympics sports, and since then it's been a year-round thing.

"We always thought it was important for Brandon to be physically active, and we never held him back. If he wanted to try something, we would practice and practice and let him go. It's the whole social part of sports, being part of a team, learning that you don't let your team down. There are a lot of life lessons in sports.

"And Brandon has always tried really hard, no matter what he has done."

That means Brandon tries hard a lot, because he has an annual sports schedule that would exhaust a lot of typical athletes.

He plays soccer in the early fall, floor hockey in the late fall, basketball in the winter, volleyball in the spring and softball in the summer. He takes a little bit of a breather around the holidays, but not much of one.

Most of his games are played locally or regionally, through Special Olympics Area 12, but he also competes in the state games on a regular basis, and a few of his teams have qualified for the national games, which has allowed him to travel to various spots around the nation.

"You can see my medals here," Brandon said, proudly pointing to a nearby display of dozens of athletic medals and trophies.

"Of course!" Brandon said, when asked if he is typically among the best players on his teams.

Brandon says basketball and softball are his favorite sports, but he has a special passion for hoops, because he happens to own a basketball, and has a hoop and rim in the parking lot of his home.

"I'm always living and breathing it," he said about basketball.

While he likes to win, Brandon has come to understand the true value of athletic competition. For him it's mostly about the people he meets and the friends he makes - and he makes a lot of them.

"I just love the respect and the heart of the game," he said. "I am always competitive. I like to win, but losing doesn't really matter. It's all about having fun and being with friends and having opportunities you never thought possible. Just knowing we have a reason to be here."

### *Becoming independent*

The confidence that Brandon gained over years of competition has had a huge





## Bucek shows off some of his many medals displayed in his apartment.

impact on his life in many other ways.

He has maintained his job at Orchard Market, performing a variety of duties, since 2010.

He decided he wanted to go to college after gaining his certificate of completion from Grand Haven High School, so he enrolled in Northhoek Academy in Grand Rapids, which serves special needs students.

Brandon has always loved music - particularly country music - but he finally got tired of just being a listener. So a little over a year ago he started taking ukelele lessons, and recently had his own recital, with just



him and his instructor on stage.

He currently has his sights set on getting tested at Mary Free Bed Hospital in Grand Rapids, to determine if he might qualify for a driver's license.

But his biggest step forward came about a year and a half ago, when he took the plunge and moved away from home, into his own apartment at Gracious Grounds Living Center in Grand Haven.

The move was difficult, for mother and son, but there was never any real question about doing it. He said the idea was more his mother's - "about 40 percent me, 60 percent her" - but he understood the necessity of taking the next step in life.

"Brandon was nervous," his mom said. "He asked me why I wanted him to do this. I told him that, since he was young, I had several important goals for him. Learn to read, to do at least simple math, and function socially with a lot of people. And I told him now that he had kept a job for some time, the next step in adulthood was to get your own place."

Brandon lives in a special eight-unit building with seven other young tenants with developmental disabilities, plus a professional who is on hand to assist when needed.

His independent living experience has been a rousing success. He is friends with all of his neighbors, and has a best friend and a girlfriend who both live in the building. He functions much better than most young people when it comes to the daily necessities, like cooking for himself and doing his own housework.

He proudly displays a book with the title "Brandon's Cleaning Guide," and apparently follows the guidelines religiously.

"Of course," he said, when asked if he was responsible for his apartment being so spotless during his magazine interview.

"I just cleaned his sink a little bit, but he is very neat," his mother said.

## Amazing things can happen

Maybe the coolest thing about Brandon is his concern for other people, particularly those who face the same type of challenges he deals with every day.

He is very outgoing, makes friends very easily, and extends love very freely.

"Very special to my heart, more than you ever thought," Brandon said, when asked how he feels about his friends. "I mostly love telling what we are, and who we are, to others."

He serves on the board of an organization at Grand Valley State University called "Students for Special Olympics Advocates."

"That group is very inspirational," he

said.

Brandon says he loves speaking in public whenever he gets the chance, and tries to convey a very important message.

"It's mostly about telling people don't call us the 'r word' - we should be using another r word - respect," he said.

A few years ago, at a Special Olympics event, Brandon noticed a little boy, who was maybe eight or nine, struggling as he tried to compete for the first time.

He sat down with the boy, gave him a pat on the back, and encouraged him to keep pushing and improving.



"Don't ever give up, you can do it, I believe in you, too," Brandon remembers telling the kid.

For his mother, Brandon is a walking, breathing example of the need to embrace life as much as possible.

Her son has taught her how remarkably resilient people can be, when they have the necessary confidence and support to move ahead and tackle challenges.

"Brandon, I felt, needed an opportunity to swing the bat and go for it, and Special Olympics provided that," she said. "We should never lower our expectations for people with developmental disabilities, because amazing things can happen."

By veering away from a traditional college experience, and mastering a brutal, unfamiliar sport like rugby, North Muskegon's Erick Bleakley proved he is really

# 'ALL ABOUT NEW THINGS'

By Dave Tomczak  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Erick Bleakley knew when he graduated from North Muskegon High School that he was going to continue to further his education, and hopefully continue his athletic career as well.



As a five-sport star for the Norse, it was only a question of which college, and what sport.

As an All-State first baseman his senior year, Bleakley drew interest from Hope College to play baseball, but said he never seriously considered going there.

He really hoped to attend the University of Michigan or Grand Valley State University, two schools he had always thought of playing for. With high school experience in football, basketball, baseball, swimming and golf, he figured he could find a spot on a team at one of those schools.

Nowhere in his wildest dreams did the sport of rugby factor into the equation.

"All I ever knew about rugby was watching the 7-on-7 tournament on TV when I was in middle school and high school," said Bleakley, 21, a 2016 graduate of North Muskegon High School. "And I kept thinking, 'These guys are freaks.' Now here I am playing it and loving it."

Not only did Bleakley end up playing college rugby, but he's doing it somewhere he never guessed he might go – the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

"The opportunity presented itself, and I thought that it would be the best for me," Bleakley said about committing to Navy. "I thought I was immature at the time, and that this is what I needed to do."

Once accepted into Navy, however, Bleakley still had his mind set on playing one of the sports he was familiar with. When he reached Annapolis, he decided to try out for the Midshipmen's sprint football team.

But before long he realized that would not work out.

Sprint football follows traditional football rules, except it emphasizes speed and agility over size and strength, with a player having to maintain a maximum weight of 178 pounds. Bleakley was 6-foot-3 and 185 pounds when he reached college, and was not getting any smaller.

"I had to drop weight at the same time I was still growing," he said. "It wasn't a good time, and I finally decided I was over it."

While his initial foray into collegiate sports didn't go as planned, the friends he made during his first year at Annapolis offered him another solution for his sophomore year.

"They said I had good size and that rugby was a growing sport," Bleakley said. "They told me I could come out for a week or two and see how I liked it. And I'm all for new things, so I started playing that fall."

## *A brand new challenge*

Bleakley attended a rugby informational meeting and liked what he heard. He soon joined other students vying to fill 150 spots on three of the Navy rugby teams – the "A" team, "B" team or developmental team.

Bleakley made the development team, but didn't stay there long. He was quickly promoted to the "B" team in the fall of 2017, where his size and speed, honed after years of playing multiple sports as a youngster, got him a shot as the team's outside center – basically the quarterback position in rugby.

His promotion to the B team sparked the interest of his parents, Fred and Ann Bleakley of North Muskegon. They were curious about their son's new sport, and wanted to see him in action.

"We flew out to Annapolis to watch when he got moved up," Fred Bleakley said.

"It was new to us, and we had to learn about it, but it was like 'Wow, this is a different sport.' We were hooked."

Bleakley continued his rapid development in the sport, and earned a promotion to the Naval Academy "A" team later in



that first season, getting the call just in time for the NCAA tournament in April.

The 16-team field pitted Navy against Big Ten Champion Indiana in the opening round. The Midshipmen sent the Hoosiers sailing, 47-0.

Advancing to the national quarterfinals, Navy faced No. 3 California, and Bleakley made his debut.

"He had a real nice run and took a lateral for a score and we were jumping around, high-fiving each other," Fred Bleakley said.



The Midshipmen kept the game close, but their season ended at the hands of Cal, 33-27.

But the end of that season did not mean there would be rest for Bleakley, because rugby is pretty much a year-round sport. As soon as the 15-on-15 team lost to Cal in the national tournament, the 7-on-7 season started.



**Bleakley during his prep days at North Muskegon as a multi-sport standout.**

While a regular rugby game is played for 80 minutes, the 7's only play for two seven minute halves, with the season running from late April into June.

Navy's team kicked off its season by capturing the Inaugural Service Academy 7's tournament on April 28th, defeating VMI, Coast Guard and Air Force, before downing Army in the championship game. Bleakley scored three times in the tournament.

The 7's team continued playing well, even into the postseason.

"We reached the College Rugby Championships in Philadelphia," Bleakley said. "The first day we went 3-0 in pool play. Then we ran into the No. 1 team, Lindenwood University, and they beat us before going on to win the National Championship."

The 7-on-7 season quickly ended with

Navy ranked 10th in the nation, then Bleakley enjoyed a short summer break before getting ready to take a more active roll on the 15 squad in the fall of 2018, when he started his junior year.

### *'I've found my home'*

The 15's play a season that runs from August to November, then picks back up in March and concludes with the national tournament in April.

Bleakley's return to the field this fall brought more opportunities to score, moving from the center position to wing.

The move paid off. Bleakley finished the first half of the season averaging 21.3 meters per carry and one try (touchdown) per game. He also averaged just over three tackles a game for a Navy team that was ranked eighth in the nation.

But the highlight of his fall season may have come in a 38-22 victory over Air Force in October.

Bleakley was named "Man of the Match," as chosen by the coach and the captain from Air Force.

"They announced that after the game and we wondered what does it mean?" Fred Bleakley said. "That was a special moment."

But with the highs come the lows. And unfortunately for Erick, his low point came in front of a lot of family and friends right here in West Michigan a month later.

On Nov. 3, Navy traveled to Grand Rapids to face Davenport University. The Midshipmen came away with the victory, 45-15, but Bleakley wasn't there to see the end of the match.

"It was a homecoming for me, with everyone there, and I got knocked out 10 minutes into the second half," he said. "It was the first time that's ever happened, my first concussion."

Other than that small setback, the fall season allowed Bleakley to show off his athletic abilities and his growth in a game he has quickly come to love.



**Bleakley with his team, competing against Davenport in November in Grand Rapids. Photo/Tim Reilly**

"The sport itself is intense, but I get to take parts of nearly every other sport I've grown up playing and put them into one," Bleakley said. "

"I love the foreign aspect of it and how free I can be on the field. With no set plays, the sport is all about making plays on the fly. That's very appealing to me."

One of his former coaches at North Muskegon is not surprised to hear that he is tackling a new sport at the collegiate level, and doing so well.

"He's a great athlete," said Chuck Rypstra, who coached Bleakley in varsity basketball. "I know he went to the Naval Academy for the education, not to play sports - but he just couldn't get away from it."

Bleakley and his teammates will open the spring season against Arkansas State on March 2.

And there will be no slowing down for Bleakley, a cyber operations major.

"Playing year-round takes a toll not only physically but mentally as well," Bleakley added. "We stay busy in the offseason as well, but I'm fortunate to have a team that pushes me and makes working in the off-season beneficial and enjoyable."

"My senior year I'll still be playing, because I fell in love with the culture," Bleakley said. "I've found my home."

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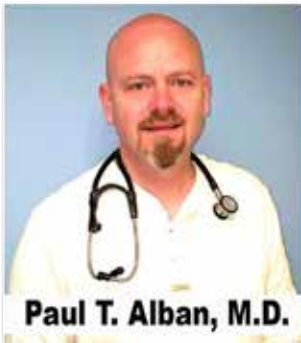
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