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On the cover: Montague's Jacob Buchberger, playing for the Palm Beach Cardinals in Florida.



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LIVING THE DREAM

Jacob Buchberger could have played one more year of college baseball, but chose to dive in and start a pro career in the St. Louis Cardinals' system.

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

For a kid who always dreamed of playing professional baseball, the moment couldn't have worked out more beautifully.

Montague's Jacob Buchberger had recently finished his COVID-shortened 2020 season of baseball at Davenport University, and the Major League Baseball draft came along in June. He didn't expect to be chosen, because the draft was cut down to five rounds last year, but several teams had expressed interest in perhaps signing him as an undrafted free agent.

Buchberger was not drafted. He heard from a few teams, but none of them made solid, on-the-spot offers. So he and his parents and younger brother were on their way to South Dakota to take Buchberger to the town where he planned to play summer collegiate baseball.

They were just outside of Chicago when the call came from the St. Louis Cardinals with a firm offer, which Buchberger quickly decided to accept. He cancelled his plans to play summer ball, and the family decided to celebrate the moment by diverting its destination to Dyersville, Iowa to visit the farm and famous baseball field where the classic movie "Field of Dreams" was shot.

They were there when the Cardinals sent the contract over, and Buchberger signed it in the parking lot near that magical field that attracts thousands of tourists every year.

"My dad printed the contract off in the hotel room, and I signed it at the Field of Dreams," Buchberger told LocalSportsJournal.com. "It was a lot of fun. To watch the movie and then get there, and realize it's actually the same place. It was early in the



At left, Jacob Buchberger shows off his pro baseball contract at the Field of Dreams in Iowa; At right, Buchberger hitting for the Palm Beach Cardinals, a St. Louis Class A farm club.

year and the corn fields were maybe ankle to knee deep, so it didn't seem quite like the movie, but it was still really cool."

Now almost a year has passed, and Buchberger has embarked on Phase 1 of his dream, playing for the Palm Beach Cardinals in Florida, the St. Louis' Cardinals' lower Class A farm club. While the season has just started and his hits aren't falling very frequently yet, the future looks bright for the

League with the West Michigan Whitecaps, so there's a chance he could play against the Tigers' high-A farm club this summer.

If all goes extremely well, Buchberger could be knocking on the door of the Major Leagues within a few years, and he intends to work hard toward that goal. Whether he ends up making it or not, he is determined to live out his dream and give pro baseball a shot, even though that meant skipping his final season of college eligibility.

"Especially in a COVID year, it would have been very easy to say 'No, not yet' and go back to school, but I'm very serious about this," he said. "I know my heart is in it for sure. Honestly, only time will tell.

"I just take every day at a time, I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I work my butt off every day. I am determined to make it (to the Majors), but at the end of the day, whatever happens, happens."

Focusing exclusively on baseball

Buchberger was a standout running back back with the Montague football team in high school, and made a lot of headlines while helping the Wildcats win a lot of games.

He accepted a football scholarship to play at Davenport in 2017, for a new program that was just getting started. But he didn't want his collegiate experience to be limited to just one sport.

"I went over there to sign for football, and my dad knows Kevin Tidey (the Davenport baseball coach) because they played

STARTING LINEUP:		
3	MASYN WINN	SS
37	JORDAN WALKER	3B
36	L.J. JONES	RF
27	JACOB BUCHBERGER	DH
38	TODD LOTT	1B
5	FRANKLIN SOTO	2B
21	TOMMY JEW	LF
8	MATT KOPERNIAK	CF
29	ROBLIN HEREDIA	C

former All-State baseball and football player from Montague High School.

Buchberger originally had a chance to start the season with Peoria, the Cardinals' high-A farm team, but a spring training back injury sidelined him for a bit, and he was assigned to Palm Beach to get his feet wet.

He's been playing every day and batting cleanup or fifth in the lineup, which means the team definitely likes his bat.

If all goes well, Buchberger could find himself promoted to Peoria later this season, perhaps giving local fans an opportunity to see him play. Peoria is in the Midwest



AROUND THE HORN: Jacob Buchberger pitching for Montague High School; playing summer collegiate baseball for the Muskegon Clippers; and playing for Davenport University.

together at Aquinas, and he reached out to him and told him that I wanted to play baseball, too. So I signed for football, then I had a workout for baseball, and he offered me a scholarship right then.”

Bushberger only played one season of football at Davenport, and saw a little bit of action as a true freshman, on special teams and as a receiver. Then the head coach and offensive coordinator left to take other jobs, and Buchberger decided to put college football behind him, even though it cost him some scholarship money, and increased his parents’ contribution to his costs.

“I knew my heart was with baseball more, so after the coaches left, I decided to focus on baseball, and get better at the sport that my heart was really with,” he said. “I lost out on two semesters worth of scholarship money, but my dad backed me up 100 percent.”

Buchberger saw limited playing time in his freshman year of baseball, because he missed all the fall workouts due to football. Then he hit the weights over the winter to help build up his strength and power. He worked out 2-3 hours every day, and by his sophomore season increased his weight from about 195 to 225, and most of the added bulk was muscle.

He made the starting lineup as a sophomore and finished a very impressive .359 batting average, despite pulling a hamstring that caused him to miss about 18 games, roughly half of the season. In his first game back he went 4-for-5 at the plate with a two-run homer, three doubles and seven RBIs against Saginaw Valley.

His numbers got even better in his junior season, when he hit a whopping .429 with eight homers, 11 doubles and three triples.

By the end of the season, scouts from Major League teams had started to take notice of his offensive potential, and he participated in pre-draft workout camps with the

Cincinnati Reds and Philadelphia Phillies.

He played 15 games for Davenport in the spring of 2020, before the rest of the collegiate season was wiped out by COVID. But the Major League draft was coming up, and the scouts started poking around again.

“I knew I had a chance of being signed as a free agent, but I thought being drafted was a longshot, since I was coming from a Division 2 school (Davenport),” Buchberger said. “I knew they would probably focus more on drafting really good Division 1 players and high school seniors.

"Honestly, only time will tell. I just take every day at a time, I'm grateful for the opportunity, and I work my butt off every day. I am determined to make it (to the Majors), but at the end of the day, whatever happens, happens." - Jacob Buchberger

“I heard from a total of 23 teams that reached out with questionnaires or showed some type of interest. Before the draft it was mainly down to a few teams – the Cardinals, Braves, Brewers and White Sox. They had to wait three days after the draft to contact me.

“I got calls from the Brewers and White Sox. They said they were taking a slow process and said I should relax and not stress about it. I never got a message from the Cardinals, then we were probably 20 minutes outside of Chicago (on the trip out west) when they called me and made the offer.”

His father, who grew up in Green Bay,

Wisconsin, said he would have really loved it if Jacob has signed with his home-state Brewers. But as a former collegiate baseball player himself, who once had the same type of big league dreams, he supported his son’s decision to skip his last year of college baseball and take the opportunity with the Cardinals.

“That’s always a little boy’s dream,” said Kevin Buchberger, the longtime coach of the Montague varsity baseball team. “I was never good enough to get that far. He could have played at Davenport another year or signed to play professionally, and that was the path he chose. We support him. You just don’t get an opportunity like that very often, so live it now.”

‘I just wanted to play’

Buchberger spent last summer working at Duck Lake State Park, then spent part of the winter working for a strength coach at Davenport University who had opened a new gym. He reported to spring training in Palm Beach on April 11, which was a very late starting date due to COVID.

He was working out with the high Class A Peoria squad when he tweaked something in his back during an exhibition game, and ended up being inactive for about 10 days. While he rehabbed he learned that he was going to start the season right where he was, playing with low-A Palm Beach, but he wasn’t upset by the news. He knows there will be plenty of time to impress the Cardinals and work his way up through the farm system.

“I just wanted to play,” he said. “I didn’t care who I played for. I just wanted to get on the field as soon as possible.”

Unfortunately the injury cost his parents a chance to see him play right away. They squeezed in a special trip for the team’s first game, which was not easy, because Kevin Buchberger’s Montague baseball team was

just starting its busy season, and the entire family was gearing up for the sport that dominates their spring and summers.

Their youngest son, Aidan, is a junior on the Montague squad, and will play travel baseball this summer.

"We actually went down there for opening day, a quick two-day trip," Kevin Buchberger said. "He didn't get to play, but we had a chance to visit and see the place where he will be playing. We will probably go back at the end of June or early July. Our youngest is playing travel ball and he has two weeks off then."

"My dad just wanted to see some baseball – he didn't care if I played or not," Jacob said with a chuckle.

Buchberger said he's loving the experience of professional baseball so far, even though COVID precautions are still in place. Because of that, the players are being temporarily housed in a hotel and kept away from the community as much as possible.

"Right now it's kind of hard to fathom what's going on, because of COVID precautions," he said. "You can't do things you normally do. We're living in a hotel, and we can't experience being in the community. We're sort of quarantined – we're allowed to leave, but have to wear masks everywhere, with no indoor dining and stuff like that.

"It's not too bad. We have to come up with our own meal money once a day. It's pretty boring (at the hotel), really. I'm sure once COVID is lifted things will be better for us."

Buchberger said he's never been in Florida during the heat of the summer, but he's been warned that extreme heat and through-



Buchberger with his mom Chris Buchberger at Davenport.

the-roof humidity is on its way, which will add a wrinkle to the challenge of adjusting to professional baseball.

"It's very humid right now, and people tell me just wait for the middle of summer," he said. "My body is still trying to get used to the humidity the way it is now. I am sweating every day. We get to the park in the morning and it's already very humid."

He said he hasn't felt overwhelmed by the pitching or the overall level of competition at the professional level.

"The pitchers throw harder, but not by a lot," he said. "I haven't seen a full Division 1 (former college players) lineup or pitching staff yet, but everyone throws at least 90."

On pitcher who definitely throws "at least 90" is New York Mets star Jacob De-

Grom, who was injured this spring and spent some rehab time in the Florida State League. He pitched against Palm Beach in a recent game, and Buchberger batted against him.

He didn't get a hit, but he didn't strike out either, which was an accomplishment in and of itself.

"I fouled a 1-and-1 pitch back, took a ball, then a hit a 93 mph slider to third," said Buchberger, who grounded out. "I'm the only guy who didn't strike out against him."

At the moment Buchberger is mostly focused on seeing more of the balls he hits drop in. He's been making solid contact since returning to the lineup, but doesn't have much to show for it.

His batting average was only .194 at the time of this writing, and Buchberger has been fighting off frustration.

"I've been hitting the ball hard, but right at people," he said. "I've had 42 at-bats with eight hits, and 10 of the non-hits were balls that left my bat at 100 mph-plus, but they were hit right at guys. That's demoralizing.

"I call my parents every day, and they know what to say. Two days ago I hit balls 103 and 104 mph, and they were both outs. That was frustrating. My parents were like, 'Dude, baseball is hard.' I said 'I know, but it's still frustrating.'

Despite the slow start, Buchberger said he's still "loving every minute of it," and is determined to "just keep grinding" until the hits start to come.

"I wouldn't call it pressure, I just call it baseball," he said. "You just have to go have fun and do the best you can. The more pressure you put on yourself, the worse it can get."

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Tyler Trovinger lost more than half of his Oakland University baseball career to a sudden illness, COVID and an injury, but in his last game he got the last laugh.

Save the last win for me

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

Fate finally smiled on Tyler Trovinger on May 22, after several years of dealing him a steady dose of horrible breaks in his college baseball career.



Trovinger, a former All-Stater at Mona Shores, began his career at Oakland University in 2017 with high hopes and promising early results. He became the starting shortstop as a freshman and put up

good numbers, then started hitting the ball hard as a sophomore and seemed primed for a great junior season.

Then everything started to go wrong for Trovinger, in ways that nobody could have ever imagined.

In late 2018, just before Christmas, he was struck with a rare heart condition that forced him to miss the entire 2019 season.

He returned to the field with great excitement in 2020, but only played a handful of games before COVID wiped out the rest of the campaign.

This year he was back on the field and

playing well, until he broke the pinky finger on his left hand sliding into third base in a game in Milwaukee. He had surgery a week later, missed about a month of action, and almost missed the rest of the season.

Almost.

Trovinger has been an infielder throughout college, and had only pitched a few innings here and there this season, before he was sidelined by the hand injury. But May 22 was the last game of the season for the Oakland baseball team. It was also Senior Day and the last game of Trovinger's career with the Grizzlies, and the coaches wanted to give him the chance to see some action one last time.



Tyler Trovinger, holding the framed jersey, poses with his parents, Gregg and Daneen Trovinger (left), along with Oakland U. Coach Jordon Banfield and AD Steve Waterfield.

His injured finger would not allow him to field properly in the infield or outfield, which left only one option. He went in to pitch in the seventh inning of a 9-9 game and ended up doing great, only giving up one run, pitching 1-2-3 innings in the seventh and ninth, and getting his very first career win on the mound.

It was an amazing moment for Trovinger, who overcame repeated disappointment and some very gloomy days as he battled to keep playing the game he loves.

"It was a very emotional moment when I got that last out," Trovinger, 22, told LocalSportsJournal.com. "It was my last time on that field with that team, wearing those colors with the word Oakland across my chest."

'Can I catch a break?'

Trovinger was a three-sport standout at Mona Shores. He made headlines in football by being one of two backup quarterbacks who led the Sailors to a miracle comeback victory in the 2014 state semifinals against Farmington Hills Harrison, and the starting quarterback a year later, when he led Mona Shores to a 9-0 regular season.

But his biggest passion has always

been baseball, and he's always been very good at it. In the summer of 2016, Trovinger was among a select group of high school stars who were chosen to play in the East-West All-Star Baseball Classic at Detroit's Comerica Park. He left his mark by hitting a double and scoring a run in that game.

After that he was off to Oakland University, where he became the starting shortstop immediately in his first year and was named to the Horizon League's All-Freshman team. As a sophomore he started making hard contact at the plate, leading the Grizzlies with 28 RBIs, tying for the team lead with five home runs, and placing second on the squad with 43 hits.

But the smooth ride was over at that point, and a series of horrific challenges started blocking his path.

The first came in December of 2018. He was back home in Muskegon on Christmas break when he was blindsided by a virus that ended up attacking his heart, causing a condition called myocarditis. His heart became inflamed and the amount of blood being pumped away from the organ slowed.

Trovinger learned from doctors that if he had waited much longer to be treated, he could have suffered a heart attack.

The bizarre illness passed quickly, and Trovinger was hoping to still play baseball, but a doctor strongly advised him to sit out the upcoming season as a precaution, so his junior year was wiped out before it started.

"One day I woke up with a sore throat, it was very sensitive to the touch, and I was sweating and having hot flashes, just feeling under the weather," Trovinger said. "Once the upper respiratory infection went away, I felt fine for a day, then I started getting chest pains. When they got too bad I went to the hospital and stayed there for two nights."

"It was really scary. The first thing that came to my mind was baseball season, and possibly not being able to play due to recovery time. I was freaking out about that."

After a miserable 2019 with no baseball at all, Trovinger finally returned to action in early 2020, and was looking forward to having a great comeback season. Unfortunately the season only lasted about 12 games when COVID brought the entire sports world to a screeching halt.

Suddenly he was faced with the painful reality of missing most of two straight seasons of college baseball, a circumstance that might have driven others away from the sport.

"I had never went that long without playing baseball, and it took a toll on me," Trovinger said. "I was very excited to get out there again, but (the season) turned out to be kind of a tease. We were just getting

ready to go to Chicago for our first conference game, then a text came saying that everything was off. We were just getting ready to get on the bus, and we never did."

"I know that COVID affected everybody, but it was depressing. But I knew one day I would have another opportunity to step on the field again."

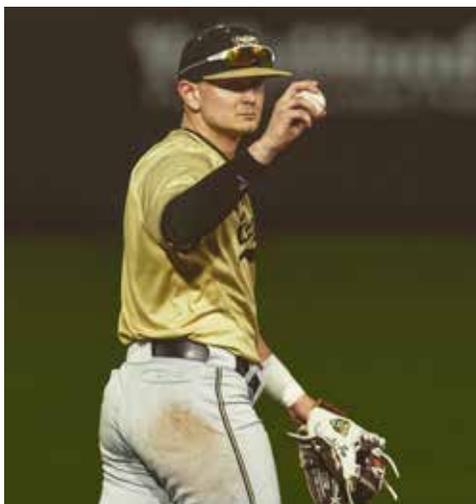
That opportunity came last summer, when he received an invitation to play summer collegiate baseball for a

team in Texarkana, Texas. The league was one of a very few in the nation that decided to play, so Trovinger jumped at the opportunity and performed well, hitting .370 over the month-long season.

He carried that success into the 2021 college season, when he returned to the Oakland lineup and continued to hit well,



Tyler Trovinger on the mound in his last game.



Trovinger playing infield for Oakland University.

posting a .340 average in about 30 games. But miserable luck was not done with Trovinger, and it struck again during a road game on April 30 against the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

"I was going from first to second on a single to left, and I was waiting to see the throw from the outfielder," Trovinger said. "The throw was mishandled by the relay man and the catcher, so I broke for third. There ended up being a play and I was safe, but my hand got caught on the bag, and I ended up breaking my pinky finger."

Trovinger had surgery a week later, and had a plate and five screws inserted into his hand. Obviously he couldn't play for some time, and there was a good chance that his college career was over at that point, because he thought he had exhausted his NCAA eligibility.

"It was kind of like, can I catch a break and play a full season?" he said. "It was tough for sure. At the time I thought it was my last year of playing baseball, and that would be the end of my career. It was a very tough thing to wrap my head around, for sure."

Trovinger spent the next month quietly healing while he watched his team play. His finger was still too damaged to allow him to field or bat as the season wound down, but he and his coaches formulated a plan that they hoped would allow him to get on the field one more time, in the last game of the season.

He said he wasn't nervous when he took the mound in the seventh inning on Senior Day. As a control pitcher with limited velocity, he knew he had to just throw strikes and allow his fielders to do the rest.

"On Thursday (before the game) I got the stitches out, and I had a little range of motion, so the best option on Senior Day was to get on the mound, so there would be as little stress on the hand as possible," said Trovinger, who had never pitched in college before this season, and had only logged about 12 innings before that final game.

"I'm not the type of pitcher to blow it

by guys. I knew the hitters were going to make contact, and that's what they did, but I got a lot of ground balls and fly outs."

While Trovinger performed well on the mound, his teammates rose up at the plate, scoring a bunch of runs in the seventh and eighth innings to give the Grizzlies a 17-10 victory and Trovinger his first and only win as an Oakland pitcher.

His parents, Gregg and Danee Trovinger, flew up from their home in Florida to see the game, not even knowing for sure whether he would get the chance to play. So they were there, along with family and friends, to witness their son's amazing return and memorable exit from his challenging career at Oakland U.

"It's been a struggle for him," Gregg Trovinger said. "The broken finger, COVID, all of it, so it was finally nice to see our kid play some ball and finish out his career at Oakland University with a memory like that game. It was exciting for us to see him finish on a positive note. We couldn't have asked for a better experience."



Trovinger pitching for Mona Shores at Marsh Field.

New opportunities ahead

On April 24, Trovinger jumped in his car and returned to Texas for a brand new experience. He's been hired as the hitting coach and director of operations for the Amarillo Sod Poodles in the same league that he played in last summer.

"I made some connections when I played in the league last summer, and one of the coaches at Oakland is part of the board for the league, and he helped me get the job," said Trovinger, who recently graduated from Oakland with a bachelor's degree in exercise science. "I should get there just in time for the first practice."

That doesn't mean Trovinger has put his playing days behind him.

About a week before that final game at



Oakland, Trovinger was thrilled to learn that he had been granted another year of NCAA eligibility, and might qualify for two.

That will give him the chance to make up for lost time, work on his game and see where the future takes him.

He won't be playing at Oakland University when he suits up next year. He recently entered the NCAA transfer portal, and will be waiting to listen to offers from other schools as he ponders his next destination.

"I was just looking for a different opportunity," Trovinger said about his decision to transfer. "I have been there for five years, played under a number of coaches, and I just feel like I need a change. I think that will be the best thing for me going forward.

"When I went into the portal, my name was sent out and I had schools reach out to me. There is a barrier for schools right now, a Division 1 dead period where they can't recruit, so I'm kind of taking it slow, waiting for them to be done with their seasons so they can get on with the recruiting process. I plan

on listening to everybody."

Trovinger is not continuing his college career just for the love of the game. He has always dreamed of playing professional baseball, and he hopes another successful (and healthy) season or two might attract the interest of pro scouts.

He said he was already getting some interest from scouts last summer when he played so well with the Texarkana team.

"That's another reason for playing another year, so I have another chance to put my name out there however I can," he said.

"Pro ball has always been a dream, and I am going to pursue whatever I can, whether it's the minor leagues, independent leagues or playing overseas. I know that if next season goes well, I could put myself in a good spot."

Trovinger even has some hope that his name might pop up in the upcoming Major League Baseball draft in June, which would present him with a welcome choice between playing at another college or getting started at a higher level, where players are actually paid for their services.

"I'm not expecting it, but it would be nice," he said.

Trovinger after hitting a homer for the Muskegon Clippers.

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WED 6/9	JET BOX - 7PM
THU 6/10	@ ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM
FRI 6/11	MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
SAT 6/12	@ JET BOX - 5:35PM
SUN 6/13	@ GALION GRADERS - 4PM
TUE 6/15	LIMA LOCOS - 6PM
WED 6/16	ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM
THU 6/17	GRAND LAKE MARINERS - 6PM
FRI 6/18	@ MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
SAT 6/19	JET BOX - 7PM
TUE 6/22	GALION GRADERS - 7PM
WED 6/23	@ ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM
THU 6/24	MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
FRI 6/25	@ LIMA LOCOS - 7PM
SAT 6/26	@ JET BOX - 5:35PM
SUN 6/27	GRAND LAKE MARINERS - 4PM
TUE 6/29	@ GALION GRADERS - 7PM
WED 6/30	@ ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM

JULY	
THU 7/1	@ MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
FRI 7/2	JET BOX - 7PM
SAT 7/3	ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM
TUE 7/6	LIMA LOCOS - 6PM
WED 7/7	MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
THU 7/8	@ JET BOX - 5:35PM
FRI 7/9	ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM
SAT 7/10	@ MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
SUN 7/11	SANDUSKY ICE HAULERS - 3PM
SUN 7/11	SANDUSKY ICE HAULERS - 6PM
TUE 7/13	@ GRAND LAKE MARINERS - 6PM
WED 7/14	JET BOX - 7PM
THU 7/15	@ ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM
FRI 7/16	MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
SAT 7/17	@ JET BOX - 5:35PM
SUN 7/18	@ LIMA LOCOS - 4PM
TUE 7/20	***ALL-STAR GAME***
THU 7/22	GALION GRADERS - 7PM
FRI 7/23	@ MICHIGAN MONARCHS - 7PM
SAT 7/24	ROYAL OAK LEPRECHAUNS - 7PM

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&

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Financial Advisor

DIVISION 1-2 GIRLS



Kailyn Nash
MUSKEGON SR

20.5 points, 12.4 rebounds,
2.5 assists, 2.9 blocks, 2.5
steals per game.



Braquelle Osborne
MONTAGUE SR.

11.2 points, 4.4 rebounds,
5.1 assists, 4.2 steals
per game.



Riley Rosenthal
Mona Shores SR.

11.5 points, 5.9 rebounds,
1.6 steals, 40.7 FG%
per game.



Sophia Hekkema
REETHS-PUFFER SR

12 points, 8 rebounds,
3 assists per game



Allison Hall
Montague SR

11.2 points, 8.9 rebounds,
2.1 blocks per game.



Jennifer Judge
SPRING LAKE SR.

12 points, 5 rebounds,
2 steals, 1 assist per game.



RyAnn Rohrer
LUDINGTON JR.

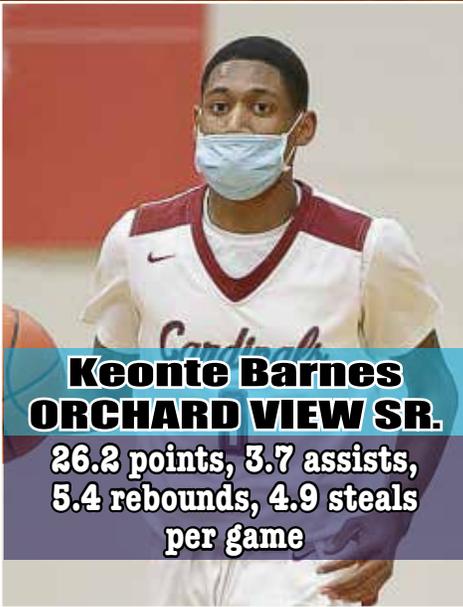
12.4 points, 7.8 rebounds,
1.7 assists, 1.9 steals,
1 block per game.



Calla Miller
FREMONT SR

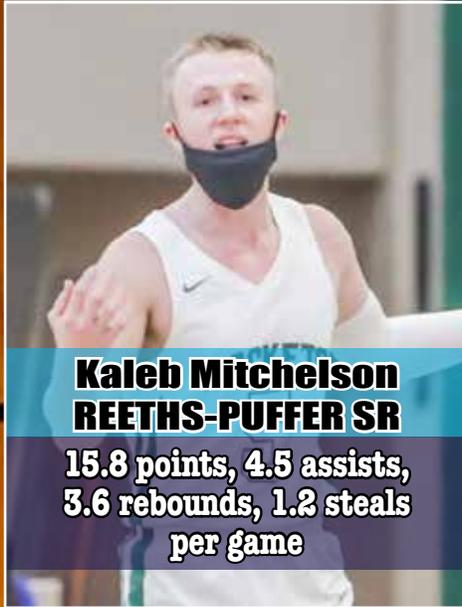
12.1 points, 5.6 rebounds,
3.2 assists, 2.9 steals
per game.

DIVISION 1-2 BOYS



Keonte Barnes
ORCHARD VIEW SR.

26.2 points, 3.7 assists,
5.4 rebounds, 4.9 steals
per game



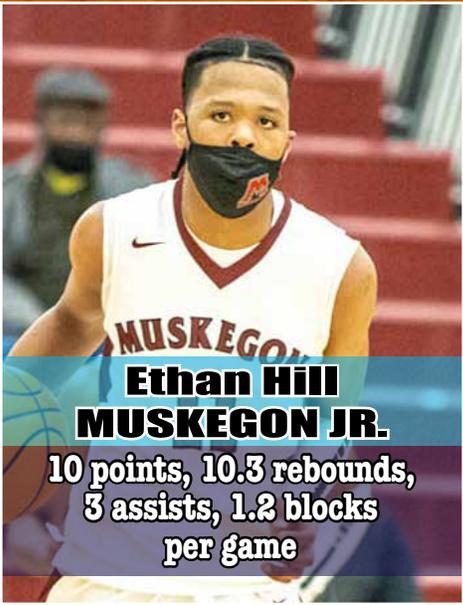
Kaleb Mitchelson
REETHS-PUFFER SR

15.8 points, 4.5 assists,
3.6 rebounds, 1.2 steals
per game



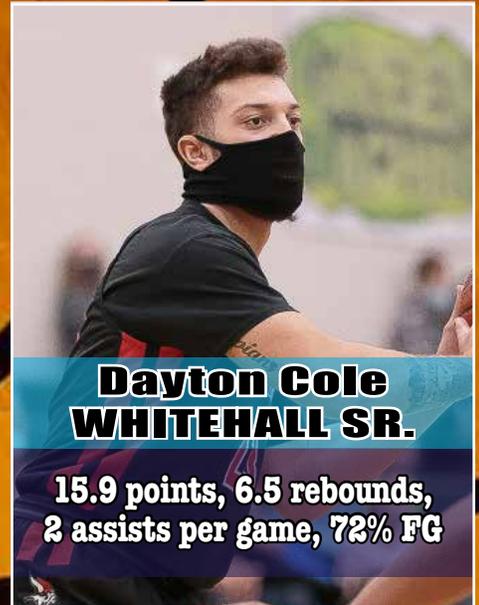
Jordan Briggs
MUSKEGON SO.

14.7 points, 4.2 assists,
2 rebounds, 1.2 steals
per game



Ethan Hill
MUSKEGON JR.

10 points, 10.3 rebounds,
3 assists, 1.2 blocks
per game



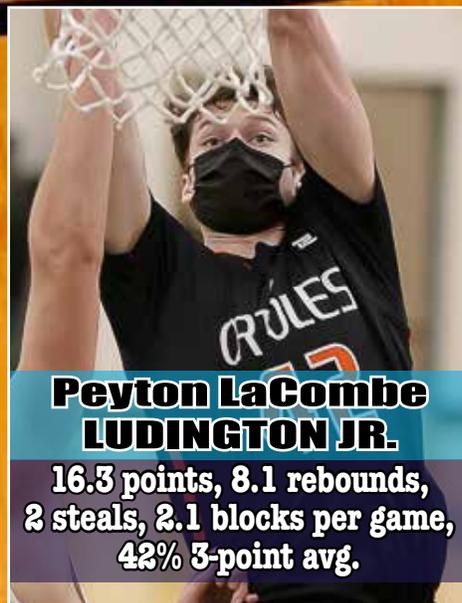
Dayton Cole
WHITEHALL SR.

15.9 points, 6.5 rebounds,
2 assists per game, 72% FG



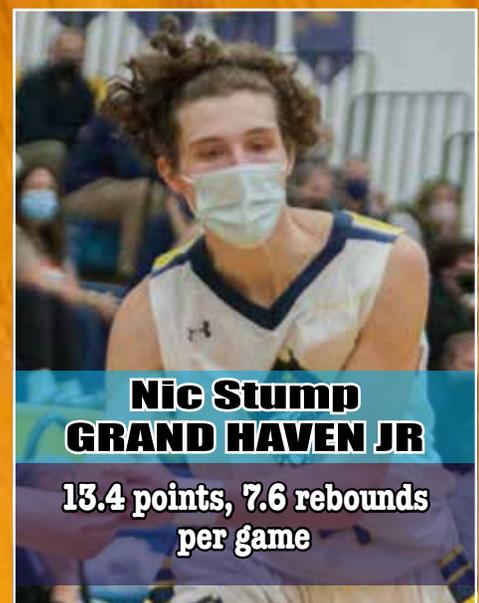
Braiden McDonal
FREMONT SR

1,000 career points,
21.3 points, 8.1 rebounds, 2.3
assists, 1.9 steals per game.



Peyton LaCombe
LUDINGTON JR.

16.3 points, 8.1 rebounds,
2 steals, 2.1 blocks per game,
42% 3-point avg.



Nic Stump
GRAND HAVEN JR

13.4 points, 7.6 rebounds
per game

DIVISION 3-4 GIRLS



Kenzie Bowers
KENT CITY SR
20 points, 7 rebounds,
5 steals, 5 assists
per game.



Taylor Folkema
WM CHRISTIAN SR
19.4 points, 5.1 rebounds,
4.8 steals, 3.8 assists,
2 blks per game.



Jenna Harrison
KENT CITY SR
11 points, 3.5 assists,
2.4 steals per game. Made
56 3-pointers in 2021



Emily Bayle
HESPERIA SR
18 points, 10 rebounds,
4 steals, 3 assists per game.



Kyla Wiersema
WM CHRISTIAN JR
16.3 points, 7.1 rebounds,
2.2 steals, 1.8 blocks
per game. 62% shooting



Jade Hovey
HART JR
15 points, 6 rebounds,
4 steals, 3.5 assists
per game.

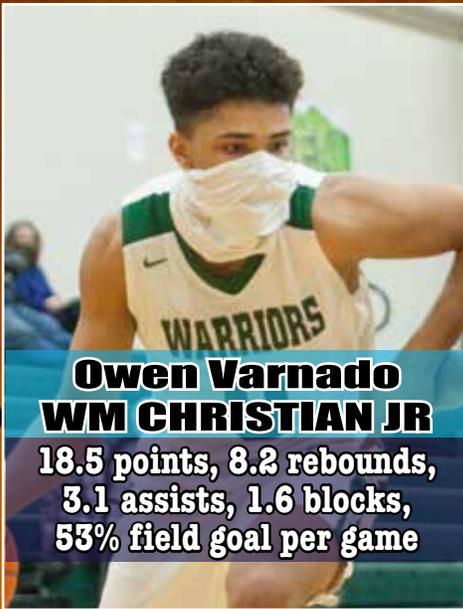


Kendall Zoulek
SHELBY JR
13 points, 8 rebounds,
3 assists, 2 steals per game.

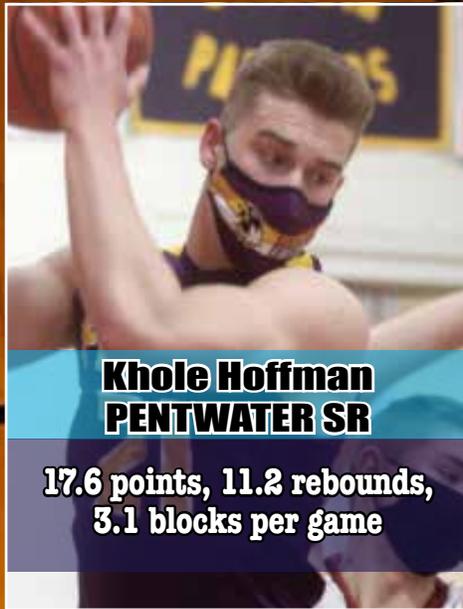


Syann Fairfield
NORTH MUSKEGON SR
11 points, 8.5 rebounds
per game.

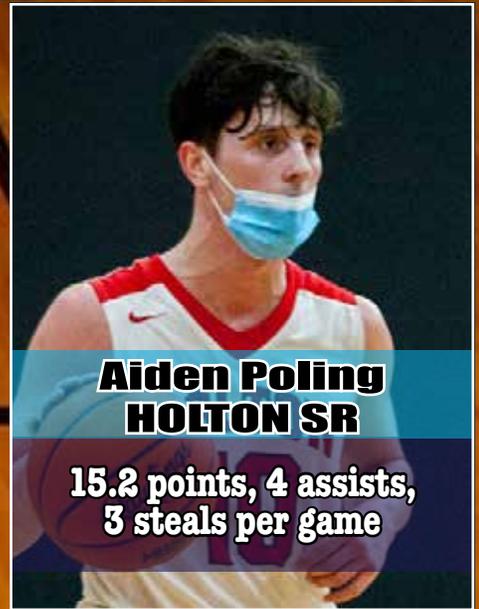
DIVISION 3-4 BOYS



Owen Varnado
WM CHRISTIAN JR
18.5 points, 8.2 rebounds,
3.1 assists, 1.6 blocks,
53% field goal per game



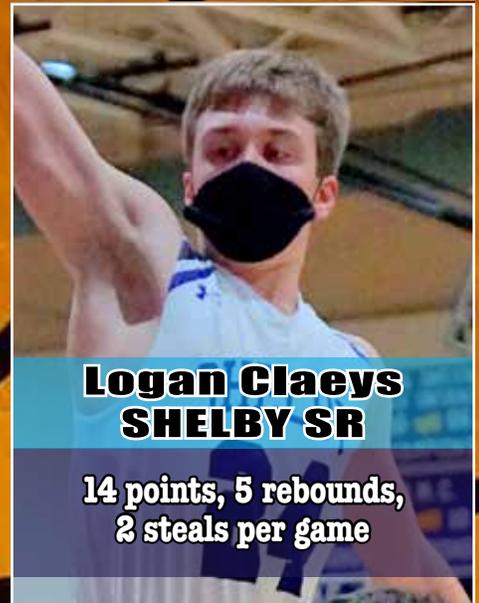
Khole Hoffman
PENTWATER SR
17.6 points, 11.2 rebounds,
3.1 blocks per game



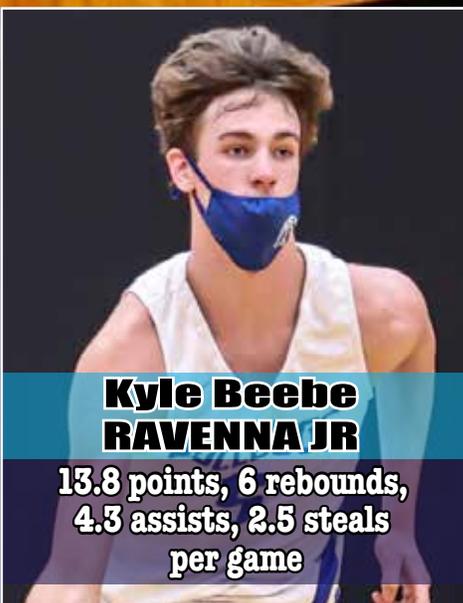
Aiden Poling
HOLTON SR
15.2 points, 4 assists,
3 steals per game



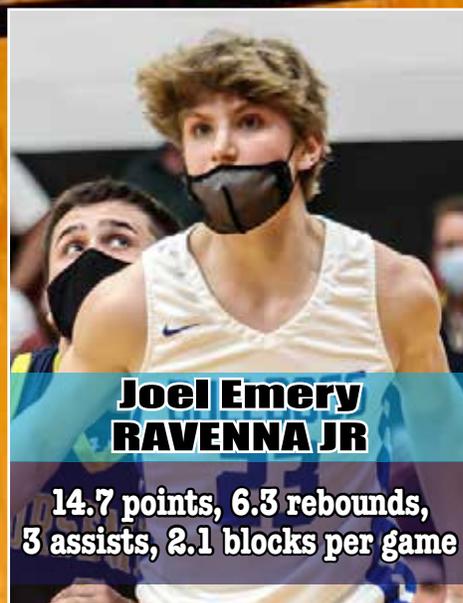
Brennen McManus
NORTH MUSKEGON SR
13.8 points, 1.5 assists,
40.3% 3-point per game



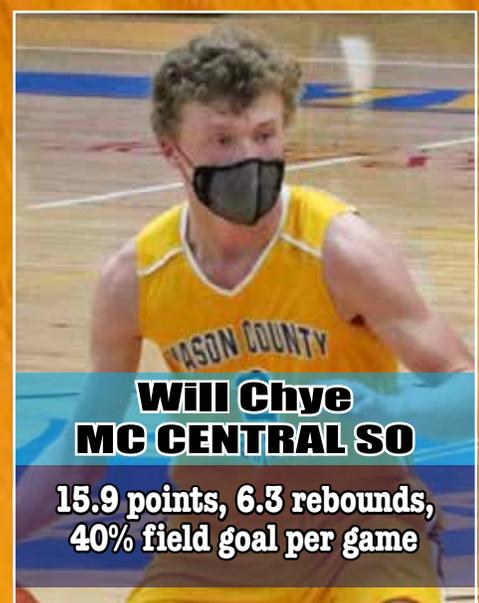
Logan Claeys
SHELBY SR
14 points, 5 rebounds,
2 steals per game



Kyle Beebe
RAVENNA JR
13.8 points, 6 rebounds,
4.3 assists, 2.5 steals
per game



Joel Emery
RAVENNA JR
14.7 points, 6.3 rebounds,
3 assists, 2.1 blocks per game



Will Chye
MC CENTRAL SO
15.9 points, 6.3 rebounds,
40% field goal per game

THAT WAS FUN!

The Muskegon Lumberjacks didn't quite reach their goals, but provided fans with lots of wins and entertainment in 2020-21

By Steve Gunn
LocalSportsJournal.com

So the Muskegon Lumberjacks did not win their conference championship or their first Clark Cup, despite taking a spirited stab at both of those goals.



They finished in second place in the USHL Eastern Conference in the regular season, nine points behind the powerful Chicago Steel, after making a late-season push for first that fell short down the stretch.

In the playoffs the Jacks swept their first series in dramatic fashion over Green Bay, then fell in two exciting one-goal games against Chicago.

But the season was unusual, fun and exciting, with the never-say-die Lumberjacks providing drama and entertainment every step of the way.

What started out as a season with so-so success on the ice, and virtually no fans in the seats due to the state crowd ban, turned into a successful campaign, with the Jacks posting one of their best records in team history, and big crowds cheering loudly during three exciting home playoff games.

The season started a month late due to COVID, which was frustrating for Muskegon, which returned a roster full of experienced, talented players. The Lumberjacks' original home-opening games, on Nov. 27-28, were postponed because the visiting Youngstown Phantoms had COVID cases, and the Jacks went three weeks without playing at all. They finally opened at home on Dec. 18 and lost to Chicago 6-5.

The Jacks were a very lukewarm 8-5-0 at the end of the calendar year, and did not seem on track to fulfill early expectations.

January was a much different story, with the Jacks winning 8 of 11 games, starting with a 5-4 victory in Green Bay on Jan. 8, which they won after trailing by three goals. A 7-2 victory in Chicago on Jan. 30 left the Jacks with a 16-7-2 record and in a tie for first place with Chicago.



Coach Mike Hamilton became the all-time wins leader and received a new 4-year contract. Photo/ Jason Goorman

That successful stretch of the schedule was interesting in other ways, as well.

On Jan. 18, star forward Rhett Pitlick, who started the season on the injured list but was beginning to heat up, was traded to the Tri-City Storm on Jan. 18 for forward Nick Portz. The Lumberjacks were not actively marketing Pitlick, but felt obliged when he requested a trade, even though they doubted they could get a player of equal value.

As it turned out, the swap worked out just fine. Portz finished with a very respectable 15 goals and 22 assists on the season, and the Jacks remained a high-powered offensive team without the highly-skilled Pitlick.

On Jan. 31, another talented forward, Russian native Danil Gushchin, became the Lumberjacks' all-time point producer by scoring two goals in a 7-4 loss to Chicago. Gushchin notched his 120th point, which surpassed former Lumberjacks great Matej Paulovic. He finished the season fifth in the league scoring race with 32 goals and 32 assists.



Danil Gushchin finished fifth in the league in scoring and became the Jacks' all-time points leader. Photo/Leo Valdez

A near tragedy wakes up the team

February brought the low point of the season for the Jacks, who lost their first five games of the month and fell into third place in the conference standings. That ugly streak included a 5-3 loss at home to Green Bay on Feb. 13, after the Jacks led by three. It also included a 4-0 loss to Green Bay, the team's first shutout defeat in more than a year.

Oddly enough, it was a near tragedy that snapped the Lumberjacks out of their funk and led to their hottest stretch of the season.

It occurred on Feb. 18 in a home game against Youngstown. Jacks defenseman John Druskinis was sitting on the bench watching the action in the second period, with Muskegon trailing 1-0. He was leaning over the boards watching the action when he was struck near his eye by a flying puck.

He collapsed and convulsed on the floor of the team bench, and was down for about 20 minutes. The referees sent both teams to their locker rooms while trainers and medical personnel attended to Druskinis.



John Druskinis is wheeled off the ice after being knocked unconscious on the bench by a flying puck. Photo/Jason Goorman

“It sent him into a little bit of shock, he went into convulsions, and he had blood coming out,” Lumberjacks Coach Mike Hamilton said after the game. “It was a scary, scary scene.”

There was a big roar from the crowd when Druskinis emerged conscious and sitting up as he was wheeled away on a stretcher and taken by ambulance to a local hospital, before being released later that night.

The spooky incident seemed to motivate the Lumberjacks, who trailed 2-1 after two periods, then scored three unanswered goals in the third and won 4-2, breaking the five-game slump.

Forward Cameron Berg, who scored the winning goal, said the whole team was shaken by the scary scene, and wanted to do what they could for Druskinis.

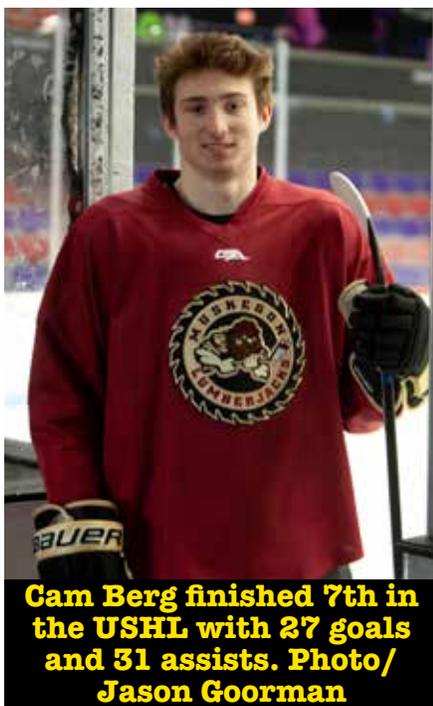
“We know how hard he works in practice and in every game, so we had a little chip on our shoulder,” said Berg, who finished seventh in the USHL scoring race with 27 goals and 31 assists. this season “We wanted to win it for him.”

After that it was off to the races for Muskegon, which completed a three-game sweep that weekend, then went on to win 16 of their next 19 games, between Feb.18 and April 12. After a win on April 8, they pulled within two points (one win) of first-place Chicago.

The long winning streak had some impressive highlights.

Gushchin got a three-goal hat track, including two goals in an exciting third period, to lead the Jacks to a come-from-behind 7-5 victory over Chicago on March 6. Gushchin also scored an overtime goal to give Muskegon a 3-2 victory over Green Bay on March 19.

The Lumberjacks ended up winning three straight games against the elite Team USA Under-18 squad on April 1-3, which is almost unheard of in the league. The Under-18 squad is the U.S. Olympic development team, only plays part of its schedule against USHL teams, and rarely loses those matchups.



Cam Berg finished 7th in the USHL with 27 goals and 31 assists. Photo/Jason Goorman

The day after the third straight win, the Lumberjacks announced that Hamilton had signed a four-year contract extension, which will make him the longest tenured coach in team history. On April 9, when the Jacks beat Dubuque, Hamilton became the winningest coach in franchise history with 93 wins over three seasons.

Exciting but disappointing end

The late surge hit a dead spot in the final stretch of the season. They lost four of their final seven regular season games, Chicago kept winning, and Muskegon finished in second place with a 34-16-4 record and 72 points in the standings, while Chicago finished with 81.

Despite the late mini-slump, the Jacks were still confident heading into the playoffs.

The first-round series was a short 2-of-3 game affair against Green Bay, and all the games were at home, because the Jacks took second in the standings while Green Bay was third.

Game 1 was a 3-2 thriller that went right down to the wire. The score was knotted 2-2 in the final minute, and it looked like the game was headed to overtime, when a faceoff came in the Green Bay zone.

Lumberjack defenseman Hank Kempf got the puck after the faceoff and launched a shot from the point. The puck hit forward Brad Marek on his butt and bounced into the goal with 38 seconds left, giving the Jacks the win.

“The puck was out to the point and I put myself in front of it,” Marek said. “I tried to tip it off my stick, but it just hit my butt. I may need to get a massage. They don’t ask how (you score), right? I don’t really care.”

Game 2 was similar, and the Lumberjacks clinched the series with a tense 3-1 victory. The game was tied 1-1 heading into the final five minutes. The winning goal was scored by forward Cristophe Tellier (ninth in the league in scoring with 22 goals and 32 assists) with 4:55 left, then Berg added an empty-net goal with 45 seconds left.

Next came the final showdown with Chicago, which had the top four scorers in the league, in the Eastern Conference finals. Muskegon fell in two straight heartbreaking games.

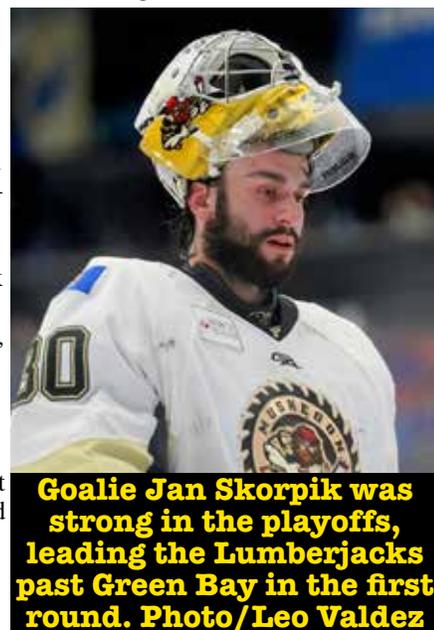
In Game 1 in Chicago, the Jacks led 1-0 and 2-1 before the Steel scored to force overtime. Matt Coronato netted the game winner for Chicago at the 7:09 mark of the first OT period.

Game 2, back in Muskegon, was an intense, emotional, back-and-forth contest. Muskegon gave it a valiant effort, battling back from two different deficits and taking two short leads, but in the end it came down to the third period, when Chicago scored the only goal.

Adam Fantilli put a backhand shot past Jacks goalie Jan Skorpik at the 8:34 mark of the third, and the Steel skated away with a 5-4 victory and a berth in the Clark Cup finals.

“It was great hockey and that is a great hockey team,” Hamilton said about Chicago just minutes after Game 2. “We were going to have to get a couple of bounces for us to beat them in a series. We proved that we were right there, but we made a couple of mistakes where we weren’t great defensively. We had two chances when we were up, but we let them score right back.”

“It’s hard. This team truly wanted to win, and they sacrificed ice time and minutes because it was important to them. I am going to miss them. We had some really good men. This didn’t feel like a job to me.”



Goalie Jan Skorpik was strong in the playoffs, leading the Lumberjacks past Green Bay in the first round. Photo/Leo Valdez

A 'SURREAL EXPERIENCE'

The captain, Grand Haven's Dylan Wendt, bids a fond farewell to Lumberjacks

When he got the chance to meet a big star like Kid Rock, his hockey team came to mind.

That's how much Grand Haven's Dylan Wendt loved playing for and leading the Muskegon Lumberjacks.

Just by chance, Wendt's parents live within walking distance of the new Jack Nicklaus-designed American Dunes Golf Club in Ottawa County, and Kid Rock was there a few weeks ago to play in a fundraising tournament.

Wendt and his father, Tom Wendt, who had been a friend of Kid Rock back in their high school days in the Clarkston area, approached the celebrity. Kid Rock was very friendly and receptive, and before he knew it, Wendt was asking him to record a video sending a shout-out to the Lumberjacks, who were about to begin their USHL Eastern Conference championship series against the Chicago Steel.

Kid Rock enthusiastically obliged, and Wendt quickly posted the very cool video on social media, with the pop star saying "Go Lumberjacks! Win the Clark Cup!"

"He talked to us for like 15 minutes, and that's when I got the idea for the video," said Wendt, 20. "He was all over it. He let me take the video, and it was a super cool moment. He was a really nice guy."

As it turned out, the Lumberjacks lost two straight very close games and the series to Chicago – despite Kid Rock's encouragement – and Wendt's hockey career in Muskegon was over.

While he's excited about moving up and playing hockey at Western Michigan University next season, Wendt is very sad that his Lumberjacks experience is over, because he had the time of his life with the team.

"It was such a surreal experience," he said. "I wouldn't change anything."

Playing in Muskegon was actually a homecoming for Wendt in more ways than one.

He left home after the eighth grade to play elite midget hockey for several seasons in the Detroit area, and lived with relatives. A few years later he was drafted into the USHL by the Green Bay Gamblers, and spent the 2018-19 season playing for the Gamblers and living with a host family (known as a billet family) in Wisconsin.

He was unexpectedly traded to the Lumberjacks early in the 2019-20 season, and suddenly had the opportunity to come home and live with his parents again in the Grand Haven area. While most young people in that age group are trying to break away from home, Wendt was more than happy to return and make up for lost time.



Wendt had 17 goals and 28 assists this season.



Kid Rock with Wendt.

"I was surprised for sure (about the trade)," Wendt said. "But at the end of the day I was super thankful to be traded to Muskegon. They gave me a choice between staying with a billet family or at home, and to me it was a no-brainer. It was nice to get that time back with my family."

Even better, Wendt's parents, other family members and friends were suddenly close enough to see him play on a regular basis, something that was not possible when he played in the Detroit area and Green Bay.

"Every home game my parents were there, with a bunch of friends and family," he said. "It was definitely a packed house with people I know. It was a super awesome, cool experience."

Wendt steadily developed his skills during his three years in the USHL. In 2018-19 he had 3 goals and 15 assists with Green Bay. In 2019-20 he had 8 goals and 26 assists with the Gamblers and Lumberjacks, and this season he broke out with a 17 goal, 28 assist campaign.

He also grew as a leader. Wendt had never been a team captain before coming to Muskegon, then he became a co-captain with the Jacks about midway through 2019-20, and was elected by his teammates to be the sole captain this season.

"It was a great experience and I learned a lot," he said. "It changes your perspective a little bit and you become more team-oriented. It was a big test and I loved every minute of it."

Wendt also loved every bit of the winning this season, and there was a lot of it. He said that the players on the team were very close, which helped them get through several hot-and-cold patches throughout the season, and go on a late hot streak when they won 16 of 19 games as the playoffs approached.

The disappointment came in the playoffs, when the Jacks swept Green Bay in the first round, then were swept by Chicago in two very close, intense games in the Eastern Conference finals. Despite the outcome, Wendt said that was his favorite part of the season.

"We were jumping in and going for the goal that we had been dreaming about since the beginning of the year," said Wendt, who was hit in the face by a puck in the Green Bay series and has a nasty scar to show for it. "It was obviously not the outcome we wanted, but it was a really fun few weeks. It's all still in the back of my mind, going through the what-ifs."

"It was hard saying goodbye to everyone. It sunk in that I won't be playing with a lot of those guys again. It's not the way we wanted to end it, but you have to keep going."

GMAA CITY

MEET STARS



Blakeman, Grant show-stoppers at the city tournaments

Fruitport's Alison Blakeman was definitely not the favorite to win the elite No. 1 singles championship at the May 1 Greater Muskegon Athletic Association City Tennis Tournament.

She was seeded fourth, which was not surprising, because this is Blakeman's first season playing singles. Two years ago, as a sophomore, she was part of Fruitport's No. 1 doubles team, and the season was cancelled last spring.



But Blakeman definitely did not play like a fourth-seed at the GMAA tournament.

In the quarterfinals she rallied beat Mona Shores' Riley Trygstad in a very long three-set match, 4-6, 6-1, 13-11. In the semifinals she stunned top-seeded Alicia Hall of North Muskegon 6-2, 0-6, 10-5 in another long match.

After six sets of tennis, it's a wonder that Blakeman had any energy left for the championship match, but she rose to the occasion, sweeping Whitehall's Lily Groessler, the third seed, 6-4, 6-1 to capture the No. 1 singles championship at Whitehall High School.

North Muskegon successfully defended its team championship.

"I don't know if I dreamed about winning the city tournament, but I dreamed about being a No. 1 singles player and doing big things," said Blakeman, who was a city tournament runner-up two years ago at No. 1 doubles "I put a lot of time into it and it really means a lot to me."

Blakeman's upset title was even more impressive because she had to play in extremely windy, unfavorable conditions – but she managed to use the weather to her advantage.

"When we first came out it was not too windy, it was a nice morning, then we got rain and wind, and we had to deal with a ton of adverse conditions," Blakeman said. "You can complain about them or use them to your advantage. Today I decided to use them to my advantage."

"It's just strategy, it comes from repetition and just learning how to play in the wind, which is not easy. You can use the different angles that the wind is giving you."

After the COVID cancellation of the Greater Muskegon Athletic Association City Track meet last season, it was only fitting that it returned with a bang in 2021.

That bang was Reeths-Puffer winning its first boys city meet championship in 15 years behind a "never-happened-before" performance from runner Klay Grant.



Grant won all four distance running events at the April 30 event - three as an individual and one as a member of a relay team – something that had never been accomplished at the GMAA track meet, which

dates back many decades.

"It honestly feels amazing," said Grant about winning the 4x800 meter relay, the 800-meter run, the 1,600-meter run and the 3,200-meter run on his home track at Reeths-Puffer High School. "I'm super excited. I was in a lot of pain in the moment, but it's really exciting."

Reeths-Puffer Coach Donald Ketner wasn't aware that Grant became the first individual to win all four distance events until he was told.

"I didn't know it had never been done before in the history of this meet, which goes back like 65 years," Ketner said. "To just hear that is enough said. He's amazing and one of the hardest working kids I've ever seen. He's fun to watch work and compete."

In Grant's last event of the night, he won the 3,200 meter race with a time of 10:29.69, while teammate Brett Schlaff finished second, which all but clinched the team championship for the Rockets.

"Brett and I have been training together since middle school," said Grant about Schlaff. "He's such a good friend of mine, and to see him run such a good race was awesome. It was really fun to finish together like that."

The Rockets won eight of the 17 events while racking up 132 total points to outpace second-place Fruitport, which had 113 points. The Trojans had won the previous six boys city championships.



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Downtown

481 Shoreline Drive
Muskegon, MI 49440
231-672-6000

Lakes Village

6401 Prairie Street
Suite 1800
Norton Shores, MI 49444
231-672-7960

**Lakeshore Medical
Whitehall**

905 E Colby Street
Suite 140
Whitehall, MI 49461
231-672-8010

Ludington

5656 W. US 10
Ludington, MI 49431
231-316-1014

**Mercy Rehab Center
and Sports Medicine**

1400 Mercy Drive
Suite 50
Muskegon, MI 49444
231-672-6940

Norton Shores

3570 Henry Street
Suite 200
Norton Shores, MI 49444
231-672-2836

**West Shore Professional
Building**

1560 E Sherman
Boulevard
Muskegon, MI 49444

Wound Clinic

Suite 125
231-672-3905

**Lymphedema Clinic and
Hyperbaric Medicine**

Suite 135
231-672-4973