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*On the cover: The Muskegon Lumberjacks celebrate a goal against the Des Moines Buccaneers. Photo/Marc Hoeksema*

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# The calendar flipped to January, and the Muskegon Lumberjacks started...

## PLAYING UP TO POTENTIAL



By Steve Gunn and Dave Hart  
LocalSportsJournal.com

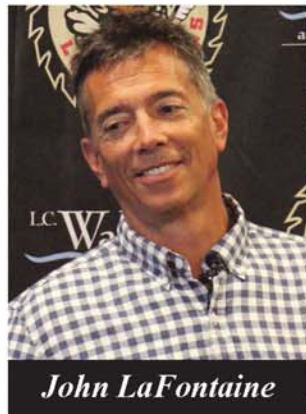
The Muskegon Lumberjacks were a pretty so-so team during the first half of the 2016-17 season.

Three players were producing one-third of the team's points. The Lumberjacks' two goalies were inconsistent. The Jacks struggled on special teams, with their power play and penalty-killing units failing at crucial times.

They finished 2016 with a 16-11-2 record – not bad, but not great – and

nobody was convinced the Jacks could compete for a United States Hockey League championship.

But first-year coach John LaFontaine never seemed overly excited about the good games or upset about the bad ones. He maintained



John LaFontaine

a calm demeanor throughout October, November and December.

LaFontaine obviously knew something that a lot of fans were missing, because the new year has brought new life for the Lumberjacks.

They posted a sterling 7-2 record in January, and are 9-3-1 since Jan. 1. Going into the weekend of Jan. 17, they were 25-14-2 and in fourth place in the USHL's tough Eastern Conference. They were only five points out of first place and had a five-point lead in the race for the final playoff spot.

A lot of the games during the recent hot streak have been pretty exciting.

Perhaps the biggest win of the season so far came on Jan. 17 against the Chicago Steel, a team that started the season with a long hot streak and had the best record in the USHL at the time.

The Jacks came out with a big 3-1



Lumberjacks star forward Andrei Svechnikov, pictured above, has been a leading force in the team's recent hot streak. Photo/Marc Hoeksema

victory at L.C. Walker Arena. They were led by forward Keeghan Howdeshell, who scored two goals in the contest.

Howdeshell had missed several weeks earlier in the season with a high ankle sprain, but finally started finding his game that weekend.

"That was big for their confidence, for sure," LaFontaine said about the Chicago game. "They learned they could shut down a team that was the best offensively in the league, and that they could trust each other, and they built off from that.

"It was a strong team win. They came away thinking that they are better than they thought, and that they can do this."

The Lumberjacks also thrilled their home fans with two consecutive overtime shootout victories in late January.

The first came against Green Bay at home on Jan. 21. The game was scoreless through regulation and a seven-minute overtime period, thanks to a sparkling performance by goalie Keith Petruzzelli.

Forward Will Smith had a chance to win the game with two seconds left in overtime, when he broke in alone on the Green Bay goalie, but failed to convert.

He made up for it in the overtime shootout, scoring the winning goal that ended a long, tense 10-round shootout and sent Walker Arena into a frenzy.

The following weekend, in a home game against Dubuque, the Lumberjacks blew a 3-1 lead in the third period, and again found themselves in a shootout following a scoreless overtime period. Andrei Svechnikov scored the winner during the shootout, giving the Jacks a 4-3 victory and their eighth win in nine games.

"The guys are gelling right now," said Petruzzelli, who again rose to the occasion in goal. "We are definitely on a hot streak, and I think there are greater times to come."

### Keys to the hot streak

So how to do the Lumberjacks explain their sudden turnaround?

LaFontaine noted that his lineup had been frequently disrupted in the first half of the season by injuries, key players leaving to compete in international tournaments, and several long, exhausting road trips.





**Bo Hanson unleashes shot; Keith Petruzzelli makes sprawling save; Collin Adams fights for puck. Photo/Marc Hoeksema**

"We were scratching and clawing and not playing our game, and some fatigue showed as well," the coach said. "I think the rest from the Christmas break did the players some good."

LaFontaine also notes that the Jacks have been getting strong goaltending from Petruzzelli and Adam Brizgala since January, better play from their power play and penalty-killing units, and more scoring from their second and third lines.



**Keith Petruzzelli greets a young fan through the glass at a recent game at L.C. Walker Arena. Photo/Leo Valdez**

In the first half of the season, star forwards Svechnikov and Collin Adams, along with defenseman Bo Hanson, were producing about one-third of the team's points.

Since then a lot of players have been putting the puck in the net. That list includes Howdeshell (5 goals, 4 assists), Casey Gilling (4 goals, 4 assists), Jachym Kondelik (3 goals, 1 assist), Anthony Del Gaizo (3 goals, 2 assists), Matt Steeves (3

goals, 3 assists) and Marc Del Gaizo (2 goals, 10 assists).

The Jacks also benefitted from some good trades in December and January that brought in several players to shore up the roster, including centers Mikael Hakkarainen and Marcus Russell and defenseman Jack McNeely.

Bit by bit, the pieces came together, and the Lumberjacks found their game.

"It was tough, but you could see it was there and things were starting to come together," LaFontaine said. "These guys have worked hard and have come together as a team. All of a sudden they've started to believe in each other. It's been fun to watch."

Lumberjacks General Manager John Vanbiesbrouck, a former All-Star goalie in the National Hockey League, thinks LaFontaine's patience during the first half of the season contributed to the team's development.

"I think his style has been good for the players, in terms of building trust and letting them know he believes in them," Vanbiesbrouck said. "I think his approach really works well with the younger players. They know they have time to improve. Everything doesn't have to happen immediately. We are going to be patient with them."

### *Patient coaching*

LaFontaine admits that patience is a virtue, particularly when you're dealing with very talented but inexperienced players who range in age between 16 and 20 years old.

"So much of it has to do with their confidence," LaFontaine said. "They either see we believe in them and have confidence in them, or we don't trust them. That dictates a lot on how they play on the ice.

"They won't develop without our backing. They have to be allowed to make mistakes. They know we're not going to jump all over them when that happens. We just want them to make up for it, and try not to make the same mistake twice."

LaFontaine, a veteran junior coach

who came to the Lumberjacks last summer, said he wasn't always patient with young players, and didn't do enough in the past to get to know them as people and earn their trust.

He said that all changed about 15 years ago, when he was coaching a North American Hockey League junior team in Bozeman, Montana.

"We had just been beaten at home in the playoffs, and the kids were pretty down," the coach said. "I addressed them pretty quickly after the game then went back to my office.

"A couple of minutes later my captain, Billy Leahy, came in and said 'Coach, I know you believe in me, and you've spent time with me, but I'm not sure the other players know you care about them.'

"That hit me squarely between the eyes. I hadn't been spending enough time getting to know these kids."

These days, LaFontaine said he makes a point of meeting individually with players, to let them know he's interested in them as people, as well.

"It's so easy to skip it and say 'They know I care about them,'" he said. "But every time I call a kid in, I go away saying I should have done that a month ago. You get to know what's bothering them, what's on their minds, what pressures they might have on them.

"They need to know you care about more than their production. They need to know I sincerely and genuinely care what's best for them, and not just about what's on the scoreboard."

While LaFontaine can be patient with players, he's also a stickler for preparation. More than one Lumberjack player has said that practices are tough and exhausting – and worth it in the end.

"A long time ago I had a couple of coaches whose philosophy was, coaches win the practices, players win the games," LaFontaine said. "That's where preparation comes into play.

"You have to demand that they be ready for practice. If teams practice at a high level of intensity and consistency, you will see that during games."



# A different path to success

## Pat LaFontaine made his mark as an NHL star; his brother, Lumberjacks Coach John LaFontaine, develops young stars

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Older hockey fans remember Pat LaFontaine, a prolific goal scorer in the National Hockey League.

It just so happens that John LaFontaine, the first-year coach of the Muskegon Lumberjacks, is Pat's older brother.

Both became successful in the hockey world, but took markedly different paths.

Pat LaFontaine played for the United States in the 1984 Winter Olympics, then went on to a prolific 15-year career in the NHL, playing for the New York Islanders, Buffalo Sabres and New York Rangers between 1984 and 1998.

He finished with 468 career goals and 545 assists. He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2003 and was voted one of the 100 greatest players in NHL history.

John LaFontaine, 53, the older of the brothers, took a quieter route to hockey success.

The brothers grew up in Waterford, Michigan, and played together until John's senior year in high school, when he moved on to play three



Pat LaFontaine

years of junior hockey.

LaFontaine was very successful as a junior player, scoring 51 goals over his last two seasons and earning an invitation to training camp with the Islanders. But the team's brass didn't think he had the skills to go pro, so he hung up his skates.

LaFontaine earned his college degree from Miami of Ohio, then spent several years in management positions with several manufacturing companies in southeast Michigan.

"I was entering my fifth year in a factory when I was asked to be the assistant coach of the Detroit Freeze, a junior team," he said. "A month into the season

the head coach quit, I took over the team, and it became clear in my directions from the Good Lord above, that's where he wanted me."

LaFontaine spent several seasons as an assistant coach at Lake Superior State University, then a few more as an assistant with the Soo Indians, a junior team in the North American Hockey League (NAHL).

He got his first head coaching gig in 2000 with the Bozeman (Montana) Ice Dogs, a junior team that competed in the America West Hockey League and later in the NAHL, when the two leagues merged. When the Bozeman team ceased operations in 2007, he became a coach at Shattuck St. Mary's prep school in Minnesota, a hotbed for young hockey talent.

LaFontaine moved on to coach the Wichita Falls Wildcats of the NAHL in 2014-15 and 2015-16, before joining the Lumberjacks last summer.

He's had more than his share of success as a coach.

His Bozeman squad won the America West Hockey League championship in 2001-02 and was the NAHL's top regular-season team in 2005-06. His Shattuck St. Mary's 14-and-Under team won a national championship in 2014, and his Wichita Falls team advanced to the NAHL finals last season.

LaFontaine has become a specialist in coaching talented teens. He said there was a time when he wanted to coach college hockey again,



LaFontaine on the Lumberjacks bench. Photo/Marc Hoeksema

but that became less important over the years, particularly after living and working in scenic Montana.

"My family and I loved it there," he said. "By the third or fourth year there, I learned to just focus on what's in front of me and quit worrying about climbing the coaching ladder.

"I've really enjoyed coaching this age group. These guys really work hard to reach the next level, and I love to see them reach their goals. There are a lot of rewards in it."

LaFontaine said he closely followed his brother's prolific NHL career, and enjoyed as much of it as he could.

"I really enjoyed his first year with the Islanders, when they were coming off four straight Stanley Cup championships and were making another run," LaFontaine said. "They lost in the finals to Edmonton that season, which ended their run, but I have a lot of fun memories of following them that year."

LaFontaine said he never felt any jealousy toward Pat.

"It wasn't in God's plan for me to play at the NHL level," he said. "There was never any jealousy at all. I wanted to see (Pat) win a Stanley Cup, and I really loved following his career. It was very exciting."

The two brothers went face-to-face a few years ago, when John coached at Shattuck St. Mary's and Pat was the coach of an elite junior squad based in Long Island, New York.

Pat has since left coaching and works in the NHL's front office, but John still seeks his input when they talk by phone.

"He was a very good coach," LaFontaine said about his brother. "He's a great resource for me."

The family hockey legacy is continuing with John's son, Jean-Paul LaFontaine, 25, who plays professionally in the East Coast Hockey League (ECHL).

Last season Jean-Paul played for the Allen Americans, a Texas team that won the ECHL championship. John was coaching in nearby Wichita Falls, so he got to see his son play quite a bit.

This season, when John and his wife moved to Muskegon, they assumed they were moving further away from Jean-Paul, but closer to their daughter, Monique, a graduate student at Minnesota State University.

But the entire family got closer again earlier this season when Jean-Paul was traded to the Toledo Walleye of the ECHL, and plays within driving distance of Muskegon.

"He's having a great experience," LaFontaine said about his son. "He's a really smart player who sees the ice really well. It's awesome watching him and following him.

"He's the only other family member, besides my brother, to play in the pros."



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# UNFINISHED BUSINESS

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Errol Palmer has his life just the way he wants it.

He's always been an athlete, and has kept that going by playing recreational sports and faithfully lifting weights.

In the past he liked to go out and have a good time, but put his party days behind him when he learned he was going to be a father for the first time.

These days he has a good, steady job, a strong relationship with his girlfriend, and a three-year-old daughter to care for.

So Palmer had no obvious motivation to climb back into the boxing ring - nearly 20 years after he last laced up the gloves - when the opportunity popped up this winter.

At 40, he was far beyond any hope of advancing in the sport. At best, he could have the professional boxing experience that eluded him decades ago, and perhaps even win. At worst, he could have set himself up for a beating.

But Palmer had some unfinished business in boxing, regardless of the potential risks or rewards.

Years ago he was a successful amateur boxer, finishing with a seven-match winning streak. He turned pro when he was a student at Michigan State University, and had three fights scheduled, but all were cancelled for reasons beyond his control.

He never had the chance to fight again, and that nagged at him over the years. So he agreed to a four-round, light-heavyweight fight as part of a pro boxing card at the Lansing Center on Jan. 28.

He was not familiar with his scheduled opponent, Jose Godines Jr., a Lansing-area boxing instructor. The promising news was that Godines is only two years younger than Palmer. On the other hand, Godines had real pro boxing experience, with a 4-2 career record.

But none of that mattered too much to Palmer. He spent several weeks conditioning and training at home, while consulting on a daily basis with a noted boxing trainer.

"I stay in pretty good shape," said Palmer, a Roosevelt Park resident, the week before his fight. "I play all kinds of sports. But we won't find out until Saturday what kind of boxing shape I'm in."



**Errol Palmer, 40, got back in the ring for a pro fight - after nearly two decades away from boxing.**

## *A career that never quite ended*

There was a time when Palmer dreamed about making it in the boxing world.

He was an All-State wrestler at Reeths-Puffer High School in the mid-1990s, but that wasn't his main sport. He said he only wrestled to stay in shape for boxing.



*Palmer trains in his basement days before his fight. Photo/Marc Hoeksema*

The sport runs in his family. His grandfather, Harold Palmer, was a pro boxer who competed on the east side of the state, and his father was a big fan who passed a love of the game on to Errol.

"Dad taught karate for years in Lansing," Palmer said. "He never got in the ring, but he was a big boxing fan. Wide World of Sports (on ABC television) had good fights on Sunday afternoons,

and we'd always watch those."

Palmer loved boxing so much that he sought out the late Kenny Lane - the greatest boxer in Muskegon history - for training. Lane fought in several championship fights in his career and finished with a pro record of 79-15-2.

Palmer was only a teenager, without a license or a car, but he wanted a chance to train with someone who knew the sport inside and out.

"I looked his number up in the phone book and called him and he answered," Palmer said about Lane. "I was so young I had to have my mom drop me off (at Lane's house), then he drove us to Grand Rapids to train because Muskegon didn't have a gym at the

time.

"(Lane) would not only tell you what to do, but would get in the ring and show you. Even into his 60s he was still sparring and still beating down younger fighters. He was pretty impressive."

The affiliation with Lane led to a series of amateur bouts for Palmer, and he did quite well. He lost his first two fights, then won seven in a row, before ending his amateur career when he moved to Lansing for college.

His last amateur fight was in 1998.

"In my first fight, the guy was quite a bit heavier, a few weight classes above me," Palmer said. "I lost a close decision. The second fight was against a Golden Gloves state champion. He won the decision, but it was a real good fight. Everybody else I fought was not on that level, and I kept getting bigger and stronger."

As a student at Michigan State University, Palmer started working out at several Lansing gyms, and came into contact with a local promoter, Ron Deleon, who was impressed enough with his background to sign him up for a series of pro fights.

Unfortunately none of those bouts ever occurred, and Palmer's pro record remained 0-0.

"I had three fights scheduled and they all got cancelled for whatever reason," Palmer said. "None of it was my fault. One guy failed a drug test, one guy was disqualified for using someone else's ID, and I never found out why the other guy couldn't fight."

"I got a little depressed about all of it. I took a lot of time off to train, and got paid nothing. About that time I started to notice my memory wasn't



so good – due to genetics or other things, I don't know – and I decided that pro boxing was probably not meant to be. I was still in college, trying to do my thing.”

### *The call of the ring*

Palmer graduated from MSU with a degree in psychology. He lived out of state for a time, then moved back to the Muskegon area in 2006.

For a long time he clung to his youthful ways, which included a lot of drinking and partying, well into his 30s.

But his life has changed for the better over the past few years.

In 2010 he landed a job at Preferred Chrysler, a Muskegon car dealership, and still works there today as the new car manager.

He met his girlfriend, former Fremont High School and Calvin College athlete Missy Schuiteman, in 2011. Not long after they learned they were expecting a baby, and that realization shook him out of his partying lifestyle.

Their daughter, Bradley, is now three-years-old and the love of their lives.

“I wasn't a raging alcoholic, but I was no sort of athlete,” Palmer said. “(Drinking) was my first priority. I wasn't getting into any sort of trouble, but I wanted to have fun. I was 35-year-old and thinking like an 18-year-old.

“But I haven't had anything to drink for four years. When I found out I was going to have my first kid I gave it up. Now I have a daughter and I never want her to see that side of me.”

Palmer never completely walked away from boxing.

From 2006 to 2010 he served as a boxing commissioner for the Little River Casino in Manistee, which hosts professional fight cards.

As a Native American, Palmer worked for the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, and his job took him to boxing matches at Casinos around the country.



*Palmer during his Jan. 28th bout in Lansing. Photos/Jason Goorman*

how much buzz there would be out there for an up-and-coming 40-year-old,” Palmer said. “He said he could actually make that happen if I was serious.”

DeLeon had Palmer send him a photo, which soon appeared on a poster promoting the nine-fight event.

“He put me on the poster before I ever agreed to do it,” Palmer said a few days before the fight. “I first agreed to do it six weeks ago, but I really made up my mind about three weeks ago.

“At first I would go downstairs, watch some film, hit the bags for a while and tell myself ‘This is really dumb.’ But then I would hit the bags on other days and realize that I have a shot, that I am not going to embarrass myself.”

Palmer never mentioned the idea to his girlfriend when he was thinking about the fight. In the meantime, she had made reservations for them at the Great Wolf Lodge in Traverse City, on the same weekend as the fight.

Those plans had to be cancelled when he broke the news about boxing in Lansing.

“I didn't even know what to say,” Schuiteman said. “It was just kind of all of the sudden, nothing I really expected.

“I don't mind it. I'm an athlete myself – I played basketball and soccer in college, and we met playing at Softball World – so I understand. I

just know he really wants to do it, so I'm going to support him. He supports me in my goals and my dreams, too.”

Schuiteman said Palmer went out of his way to explain to their little daughter that boxing is a sport, and not just two men beating the heck out of each other.

“She said she didn't want him to fight, but he explained the difference to her, that he was not fighting in a bad way,” Schuiteman said. “She actually understands. She's pretty smart.”

### *A unanimous decision*

Palmer got serious about training in the last few weeks before the fight.

He ran back and forth between work and home. He worked out on his punching bags in the mornings and evenings. He watched videos and consulted with a noted Bay City trainer, Cory Peterson, who advised him on training and strategy.

“I wouldn't be doing this to go in and lose,” said Palmer, who had to drop about 10-15 pounds for the fight. “I'm obviously going there to win.”

The more he worked himself back into fighting shape, the more confident Palmer became. He even expressed regret about how he would have



*Errol Palmer, Missy Schuiteman and their daughter Bradley.*

His role as a commissioner allowed Palmer to stay in touch with a lot of people from the boxing world, including DeLeon, the promoter who arranged his professional bouts that never happened. They were talking in December when the subject of a comeback fight came up.

“I was joking around with him, and asked

*Continued on next page ...*



to hit his opponent in the manner he felt would be necessary.

"He is apparently a nice guy," Palmer said. "He coaches kids in Lansing. Part of me feels bad that I got to hurt him, but he could be in big trouble.

"He hasn't had a pro fight in eight or nine years. I think it's going to be a pretty good matchup. He has more pro experience, I have the better amateur record.

"I'm still the fastest player on the basketball court. I've been blessed with speed, and I was always stronger than anybody in my weight class. If it's close I don't think I will have a chance. I will have to knock him out or at least dominate the fight."

As it turned out, Palmer did not knock Godines out or dominate the fight.

The bout went all four rounds, and in the end Godines won by unanimous decision.

"I love this sport," Palmer said just minutes after the fight. "I've always been in shape, I'm 40 but I was ready. He came in with a good game plan, my game plan went out the window, and that was the difference in the fight."

Palmer said he made a big mistake by not sparring as part of his training. He learned that conditioning and punching a bag were not enough to properly prepare for a pro bout.

"I didn't spar at all, so my timing was off," Palmer said. "That was my biggest mistake. I figured I had done enough. But he was a good pro. He came in and stuck to his game plan better than I did.

"He wasn't getting himself in harm's way. He would jab and get out of the way. I had to chase him down the whole time, and I was probably not in the best of shape to do so.



*Palmer gets advice between rounds from his trainer Cory "Mad Bomber" Peterson during his Jan. 28 fight. Photo/Jason Goorman*

"It was a lot of fun. I may have been more aggressive, and he may have been more accurate and elusive. Some people thought I won and some people thought I lost. I don't really care."

DeLeon, the fight promoter, has mentioned that he will be hosting another fight card in April, and told Palmer he is welcome to compete again, if he chooses.

A rematch with Godines was even mentioned.

Palmer is undecided at the moment, but said he's glad he went back into the ring at least one more time.

"It was definitely unfinished business," he said. "Getting out of the sport when I was young was a big regret of mine. I stayed around it as a boxing commissioner, but I never really got the itch to try it again until recently.

"Doing it was very, very important for me. I've been around the sport my whole life and never really took it to completion and saw what I could do.

"This was kind of a last-minute thing. I feel like I could have had a far better result. But for what I did, I was real happy."

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# Fire & Ice

## State-ranked Mona Shores girls team powered by two great guards



By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

They're a lot alike. But they're also different. That's why they call them "Fire" and "Ice."

The "Fire" nickname is attached to Mona Shores sophomore guard Alyza Winston, one of the best young girls basketball players in the state.



Alyza Winston

She can do it all on offense – hit from the outside, drive the lane, and distribute the ball with skill. And she does it with the type of blazing speed that special athletes can only be born with.

Winston would have been very good at any school, under any circumstances. But she's had an extra advantage that has given her development a very big boost.

She's been playing for nearly two seasons with one of the best all-around players in the state, Mona Shores senior guard Jordan Walker, a strong candidate for the Michigan Miss Basketball Award this season.

Walker is the "Ice" of the dynamic backcourt duo, and her numbers speak for themselves. The four-year starter recently broke the Mona

Shores career records for scor-

ing and assists, and is arguably one of the best defensive players in the state, as well.

Together Walker and Winston make Mona Shores one of the most feared girls basketball teams in Michigan. At best their opponents can only hope to contain one of the guards, which leaves the other open to do a lot of damage.

Quiet frequently they are hot at the same time, and when that happens, there's no stopping the Sailors.

A good example came on Feb. 7, which was Walker's 18th birthday. Walker and Winston combined for an incredible 54 points (27 points apiece), leading the Sailors to a 66-57 victory over Jenison.

"I think when we get together and play our best game, we're really hard to beat," Walker said.

Walker and Winston helped the Sailors, who are ranked No. 8 in the state in Class A, post a 14-3 record as of Feb. 17. They will give Mona Shores a distinct edge in the upcoming state tournament, which begins the last week of February.

"Alyza is like a ball of fire, exciting and explosive," said Mona Shores Coach Brad Kerth. "In all the basketball I've ever watched, I've never seen a faster player than Alyza.

"Jordan is an ice-cold assassin. She can take you apart any way she wants. Her basketball IQ, plus her talent and competitiveness, are a brutal combination. She's our best defensive player and our best offensive player."

### Super senior

Walker joined the Mona Shores varsity as a freshman in the fall of 2013 and was an instant success.

She averaged double-figure scoring in her freshman and sophomore seasons, and was preparing for her junior year when she tore the ACL in her left knee during a June, 2015 workout.

Following surgery, her prognosis was a six-month layoff, which would have meant missing the start of the 2015-16 season. But Walker rejected that plan, rehabbed hard, and was back in the lineup on time for the season opener, when she rolled up 19 points, nine rebounds, six assists and four steals.

Walker went on to have a tremendous junior season, averaging 20 points, 8.9 rebounds, 4.6 assists and 3.7 steals per game. She was named a first-team Class A All-Stater by the Basketball Coaches Association of Michigan, as well as the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press.

Her performance helped the Sailors capture an O-K Black Conference championship and Class A district title.

Ironically, Walker's injury led to her decision to commit to Western Michigan University.

"I had been talking to a lot of Big 10 schools," Walker said last season. "As soon as I told some of the coaches about the ACL, they



Jordan Walker



said 'Good luck.' Not to knock any of those colleges, but Western was around for a long time, and even through (the injury) they stayed around."

This season Walker has picked up her game even more, averaging 22.6 points, 8.7 rebounds, 5.6 steals and 4.3 assists through 17 games.

She's had several special moments already this season, on an individual level.

On Jan. 27 she became Mona Shores' all-time career scoring leader, breaking the previous record of 1,339 points held by Jamie Ahlgren, a star guard from a previous decade.

Walker also broke the school's career assist record of 308, which was held by Sailor legend Stacy Piasecki. Walker currently ranks third in school history in both rebounding and steals.

Walker hit a career-high scoring mark with 39 points in a recent game against a good Muskegon squad, with the O-K Black Conference lead on the line. And she did it on a night when she and several teammates were dragging a bit with winter ailments.

"I think more this year than any other, (opponents) have thrown everything they can at her, and she has an answer for it," Kerth said. "I can't imagine trying to guard her. You can't do it alone, and if there are too many people on her, she will punish them with her passing."

### *Explosive sophomore*

Most coaches would feel extremely lucky to have one super-talented guard in their lineup.

But Kerth was blessed with two when Winston showed up at Mona Shores for the 2015-16 school year as a freshman who was obviously ready for varsity competition.

Winston grew up in North Muskegon, attended Reeths-Puffer as an eighth-grader, then transferred to Mona Shores as a school-of-choice student.

"My dad really liked the education I could get at Mona Shores, and he liked the coaching staff," said Winston, 15, who is the daughter of former Orchard View basketball standout Ric Winston.

"He really thought that Shores would be the best fit."

Kerth was aware of Winston, because he scouted an eighth-grade game when she played for Reeths-Puffer, but said he never dreamed she would end up in his lineup.

"You could certainly tell that she was special," the coach said.

Winston immediately combined with Walker to give the Sailors a backcourt punch that few schools can hope to match.

As a ninth-grader she averaged a pretty amazing 17.4 points per game, along with 2.5 assists, 2.3 steals and 2.5 rebounds.

This season, with opponents guarding her a lot closer, she's averaging 16.6 points per game.

The scary part, at least for opponents, is that Winston still has a lot of growth potential.

"Alyza has an explosiveness to her game that nobody in the state of Michigan has," Kerth said. "But she is not a finished product. I want her to be able to carry a defense the way Jordan does. I want her to be like a coach on the floor by the time she's a senior."

Kerth said he has no doubt that Winston will continue to get even

better, because she has the right attitude about learning.

"She came to me as a freshman regarding issues she had with her shot," Kerth said. "We immediately looked at that, made some adjustments and she had tremendous results. She is a very coachable player."

### *Pushing each other to improve*

Sometimes having two talented scorers in the lineup can cause problems for a team, because both want to be the go-to player.

There are no such issues with Walker and Winston, according to Kerth. Both are unselfish players who are focused on team goals, he said.

"If they weren't we wouldn't win as much as we do," the coach said. "We would have a heck of a lot more losses and we wouldn't be living up to our potential. Our kids know that losing is the worst thing, and they are winners."

That doesn't mean there is no competition between Walker and Winston.

"In practice I don't let them play on the same team, because it would be so one-sided," Kerth said. "They go at each other a lot. They know each other's games like the back of their hands. They push

each other to be better. Jordan will hold Alyza accountable for playing hard and doing the right things, the way a senior should."

Walker has been a team captain since her sophomore year, and says she feels a personal responsibility to help younger players improve. She said that's particularly true with Winston, because she has so much obvious talent.

"I had an older sister on the team who pushed me, and now it's my job to push her," Walker said about Winston. "When I guard her in practice I go as hard as I can. I try to instill things in her – and she pushes me, too."

"In practice we will be going back and forth until sometimes the coach says 'That's enough.' We're both really

competitive, so we definitely make each other better.

Winston agrees that it's easier to improve with a player like Walker on the team.

"She plays really good defense," Winston. "I want to get my defense like that. And she plays with a lot of heart. I really like her aggressiveness. She never goes to the basket weak. She is going to either draw the foul or make the basket."

Walker and Winston say they and their teammates are laser-focused on winning the O-K Black conference championship (the Sailors were tied with Reeths-Puffer at publication time) and making a long run in the state tournament.

Neither of them are shy about using the term "state championship."

"I would definitely love to go out with a state championship," Walker said. "That's always been a goal of mine, even before high school. Being on a team that could go to the Breslin Center is so amazing."

"We could end up there. We could win it."



*Walker, left, is averaging 22.6 points per game while Winston is averaging 16.6. Photo/Jason Goorman*



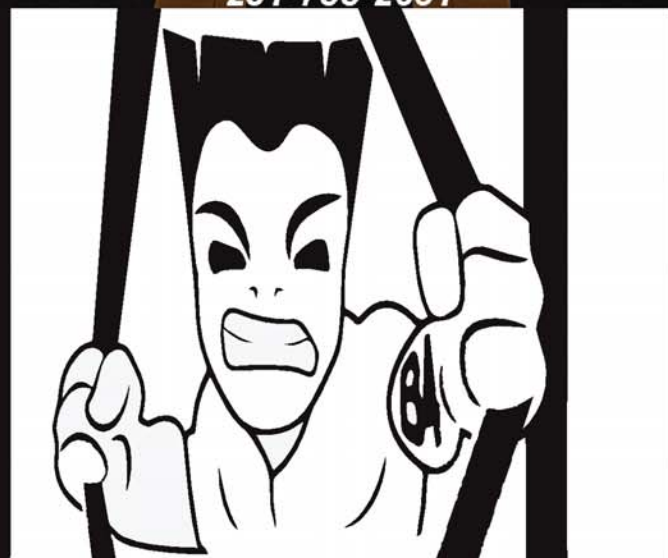
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**By Steve Gunn**  
**LocalSportsJournal.com**

Often the best coaches were not the greatest athletes. Whitehall Coach Cliff Sandee is a perfect example – at least when it comes to wrestling.

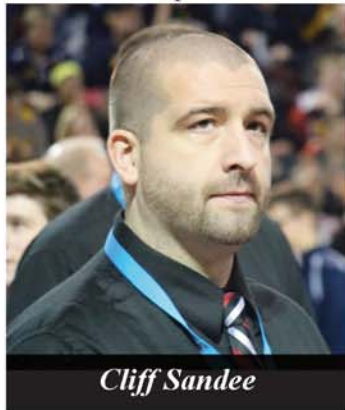
Sandee wrestled at Grand Rapids Union High School, where he graduated in 2000. He was pretty good, winning a few conference titles and qualifying for the state finals once, but was never an elite performer on the mat.

But as a coach, he has turned out dozens of elite wrestlers, and one great team after another.

His Whitehall squads have won six West Michigan Conference championships in his 10 years at the school, including the last five in a row. The Vikings have also won six district championships and three regional championships in team competition, and have advanced to the state team semifinals three different years – 2012, 2013 and 2016.

Sandee has a career dual match record of 229-36.

In individual competition, Whitehall has had 59 wrestlers qualify for the state finals under Sandee. Twenty-nine have won medals, eight have advanced to the state finals in their weight classes, and six have been state champions.



*Cliff Sandee*

“These guys are way better than I was,” said Sandee, 34, who went to college on a football scholarship, and came to Whitehall 10 years ago to coach both varsity football and wrestling, before stepping aside as the football coach after two seasons.

The 2015-16 season was particularly special for Sandee’s Vikings.

They won district and regional team championships and advanced to the state quarterfinals against defending state champion Dundee. The Vikings trailed by 20 points more

than halfway through the quarterfinal match, but roared back to win 37-29. Their season finally ended in the semifinals.

But in high school wrestling there are two chances at state glory. The Vikings fell short in the team tournament, but made up for it by crowning two state champs at the individual state finals at the Palace of Auburn Hills.

Reilly Brown captured his second straight 135-pound state title by winning in the finals in four overtimes, while Jwan Britton won the 140-pound title by scoring two points to break a tie in the closing seconds of his championship match.

Competing with the best wrestlers in Michigan, year in and year out, is certainly impressive, but perhaps the Vikings’ dominance can best be measured at the local level, where they dominate neighboring schools.

Whitehall has won 11 consecutive championships in the Greater Muskegon Athletic Association City Wrestling Tournament, including 10 straight under Sandee. The Vikings continued their dominance on Jan. 21, finishing with 207.5 points, easily outdistancing second-place Reeths-Puffer, which had 155 points.

Winning individual city titles for Whitehall were Trenton Blanchard (130), Dominick Haynes (140), Josh Thommen (145) and

Jojo Dowdell (160). Runners-up for the Vikings were Sam Baustert (103), Hunter Bower (112), Haddan Young (119), Mitchell White (125), Allen Powers (152) and Kayleb Venema (171).

“It’s cool for our kids,” Sandee said about his team’s annual domination of the local event.

Every year, in the days before the city tournament, Sandee lines up all the trophies from the previous years under a white board in the wrestling room, and lists the names of the departed seniors from each city title team.

# WHITEHALL'S WRESTLING DYNASTY

He tells his wrestlers about their predecessors who helped create Whitehall’s legend of success.

This year he reminded them of former stand-out Dakota Hoffman, who was in a car accident the day before the city meet in 2013, and was thrown out of the vehicle’s windshield. He somehow gained clearance from his doctor to wrestle the next day. He won a city championship in his weight class by beating a former state runner-up.

“Wrestlers are nuts,” Sandee said about Hoffman’s determination to wrestle. “They are tough kids.”

Sandee also reminded his wrestlers about Reilly Brown’s success at the city meet, where he pinned every opponent he faced for four straight years – all in the first period.

“The kids eat that stuff up,” the coach said.

One advantage for Whitehall is consistently fielding a full lineup of wrestlers, with kids in every weight class, year after year.

At a lot of schools that never happens, because it’s hard to recruit kids to fill 14 weight classes, ranging from 103 to 285 pounds.

Whitehall can do it because other coaches at the school support wrestling and direct their athletes to the sport in the winter, according to Sandee.

Sandee gets a lot of wrestlers from the successful Whitehall football team. But many also come from a more surprising source – the boys cross country team.

“Our 103 through 130 wrestlers are all cross country runners,” Sandee said. “It might surprise some, but there is such a co-relation between the two sports. In cross country you’re on your own for that third mile, and in wrestling you’re out on the mat, all on your own, as well.”

The Vikings have continued their dominant performance since January’s city meet, clinching another West Michigan Conference championship and Division 3 district championship. They had a sparkling 20-3 record at publication time, and were ranked fourth in the state headed into regionals.

They hope to get back to the state Final Four, and advance beyond the semifinals, which they have failed to do in three previous tries.

“We want to win the state title real bad,” Sandee said.



*Josh Thommen reacts after getting a pin in state quarterfinals last year.*

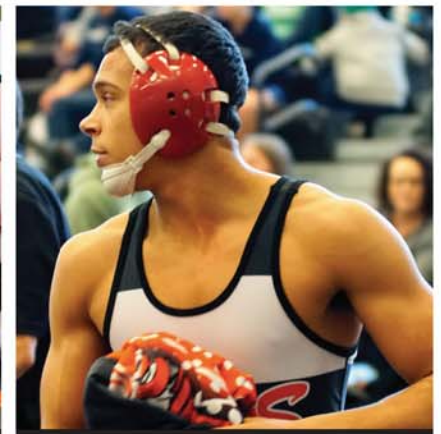




*Hunter Bower celebrates with Coach Sandee after quarterfinal win*



*Kayleb Venema*



*JoJo Dowdell*



*Allen Powers falls during state quarterfinals*



*Trenton Blanchard claims city title*



*Tom Balaskovitz prepares to grapple*



*Sam Baustert gets ready for a takedown*



*Reilly Brown during his state title match*



*Jwan Britton battles during last year's individual state finals*



*Mitchell White goes in for a move during a match at this season's individual district tournament*



*Jordin Patterson battles in the 285-pound class*



# NATIONAL SIGNING DAY

## A scholarship for a kid who wasn't recruited

By Steve Gunn and Jason Goorman  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Not long ago, JaJuan' Trotter had little hope of extending his athletic career beyond high school.

The Muskegon Heights Academy senior had just completed his third year of varsity football, and was in the middle of his final varsity basketball season, with graduation looming a few months away.

He had been a solid high school athlete, but no colleges had shown any interest in recruiting him.

One of Trotter's friends, Mona Shores athlete Tariq Moffett, had higher hopes. He was invited to work out at a camp at William Penn University in Oskaloosa, Iowa on Jan. 21, and hoped to impress the football coaches and perhaps receive a scholarship.

Trotter went along for the trip, just to keep Moffett company.

By the time he left Iowa, Trotter had been offered a football scholarship to William Penn, a private NAIA school.

Suddenly a world of possibilities opened up for a kid who thought he might have played his last down of organized football a few months earlier.



*JaJuan' Trotter with Heights basketball coach Dale Stewart. Photo/Jason Goorman*

"The coach was watching us as we worked out. They tested me on the 40-yard dash and said I was fast. The coach called me later and asked how I would feel about playing football there. I laughed and said 'you can't be serious.' We didn't go there for me. But I took full advantage of it."

Glen Metcalf, the athletic director at Muskegon Heights Academy, was thrilled when he learned about Trotter's good fortune.

"He came back and told me what happened," Metcalf said. "So I called down there and talked to the head coach and receivers coach, and they said they did make the offer, because he had a great workout.

"So we filled out the paperwork and emailed it back, then went from there."

Trotter's scholarship became official on Feb. 1 – National Signing Day – when he put his signature on a letter of intent in front of his family, friends, school employees and coaches.

"Coming out of Muskegon Heights, this feels like a big accomplishment," Trotter said, moments after signing his letter of intent. "Willie Snead (a former Heights Tiger who now plays for the New

"(Moffett) was going to travel over there for a visit, and he called me and asked me if I wanted to go there with him," Trotter said. "When we were there, he asked me to go there with him and work out. I told him I didn't have any cleats with me, no anything, but his brother had some cleats I could use.



*Trotter signs his national letter of intent. Photo/Jason Goorman*

Orleans Saints) was the last one I know of, but he really wasn't from Muskegon. He was a transfer student."

The scholarship was a happy turn of events for a kid who had experienced some discipline problems a few years ago, due to curfew violations. He has worked hard over the past few years to improve as an athlete and stay out of trouble, and suddenly it all paid off.

"I was by myself, but then people started encouraging me, people from the Muskegon Big Reds football team like Kalil Pimpleton, Jacorey Sullivan and Andrew Ward," Trotter said. "No matter where you come from, you have to keep working."

"He's a young man who wants to do the right things," Metcalf said. "It hasn't been easy for him growing up, but he wants to make something out of his life."

The scholarship was also fortunate for Trotter, considering he didn't have much of a chance last season to demonstrate his abilities at his natural football positions – running back and wide receiver.

Muskegon Heights was in sudden need of a quarterback last fall, due to transfers and then injuries during the first few games.

Trotter answered the call, despite having limited experience at the position.

He put up some pretty good numbers over half of a season playing quarterback, completing 32 of 50 passes for 533 yards and eight touchdowns, but that wasn't enough to draw the attention of colleges.

"He was thrown into the fire and handled the job well," Metcalf said. "But no colleges were offering anything.

"But sometimes it pays to be in the right place at the right time and take advantage of the situation, and that's what he did when he went to Iowa."







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