



## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Ava Landry's Miraculous Return for Her Senior Season

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



Just two points away from her season ending in the 2024 State Semifinal match, Ascension Catholic's Ava Landry went down with an injury that would change her everyday life for the next 11 months. As the Bulldogs trailed Westminster Christian late in the third set, after dropping the first two, Landry landed awkwardly and immediately knew something was wrong.

"When I went down, I knew instantly something wasn't right," said Ava Landry. "Everything got quiet, and the only thing I could think was, 'Please don't let this be the end. Not like this.' It was one of the scariest, most helpless moments I've ever felt."

The environment of the LHSAA State Volleyball Tournament is like none other, especially during the quarterfinals and semifinals. Three courts spread across the Cajundome floor, fans from six different schools filling the arena, all cheering at once. The noise is deafening; the energy unmatched.

But in last year's semifinal, that energy flipped in an instant. A sudden hush rippled through the Cajundome as Ava Landry didn't get up.



As tears rolled down Ava's heartbroken face, the match concluded and the Crusaders advanced to the state finals. Yet in a moment Westminster had dreamt of all year, they didn't take a victory lap or dog pile at center court. Instead, they stopped, made their way to Landry, and acknowledged her. They even went as far as to pray over her as she sat on the bench, unsure of what her future held.

Doctors originally misdiagnosed Landry's injury as a dislocated knee, but an MRI in January revealed even worse news: a torn ACL. She underwent complete ACL reconstruction, leaving five scars and requiring tendons to be relocated from her hamstring to her lower leg.

"Honestly, the beginning (rehabilitation process) was confusing and frustrating," said Landry. I got misdiagnosed at first, so for a while I was stuck in this weird space of knowing something was wrong but not having answers."

Ava spent long hours in physical therapy, pushing through pain with one goal in mind: to return to the state tournament for her senior year. She defied the odds, coming back more than a month early and rejoining Ascension Catholic in September as they aimed to return to State. The Bulldogs completed their mission and made it to the State Tournament as a No. 5-seed.

"The second they confirmed it (a torn ACL), something in me switched," Ava said. "I was devastated, but I also knew I wasn't done. Senior year was my dream, I wanted to finish my high school career on the court, not on the sidelines. I have never worked so hard for something in my life. Every day was rehab, pain, doubt, then more rehab. I just kept telling myself, 'You will come back. You're not letting this take your senior season.'"

Not only did Ava return, she was named team captain and selected as an LHSCA All-Star for the West team.



"Being named an All-Star was honestly unbelievable," Landry said.

"After everything I missed and everything I fought through, it felt like a reminder that the work mattered. But what truly made this year special was my team. They were with me when I couldn't walk, when I cried, when I doubted myself. Getting to step back on the court with them made every moment worth it."



Seeing Landry step back onto the very court that had once set her back was nothing short of inspiring. On Thursday, she helped lead her team to a quarterfinal win over Riverside, a moment that captured exactly what makes high school athletes so special; their resilience, their loyalty, and their determination to stand beside their teammates and proudly represent their school.

“Ascension Catholic isn’t just a school, it’s a family,” the senior said. “Playing here feels like representing something bigger than myself. High school sports have this heart to them that you don’t get anywhere else, you play with people you’ve grown up with, prayed with, laughed with, cried with. You’re playing for your community, your classmates, and every person who’s watched you grow up in that gym. There’s a purity and love for the game that’s so different from club or anything beyond.”

I asked Ava if she could tell herself something a year ago, right after her injury, what would she say to herself? She responded by saying, “I’d tell myself, Breathe. This isn’t the end of your story.”

“I’d remind myself that the fear you feel right now isn’t permanent, and that you’re so much stronger than you think. I’d tell myself that the journey will be hard, but it will also be one of the things you’re most proud of.”

Although the Bulldogs fell 3-0 to the reigning champions on Friday, Ava’s story is a reminder that setbacks can become opportunities for even greater comebacks. After defeating Ascension Catholic, Country Day went on to claim their 10th straight and 19th overall State Championship on Saturday over Central Catholic.

“I hope my story shows others that setbacks don’t get the final say,” said Landry. “That even when something feels like it’s taken everything from you, there is still a way forward. And I hope someone out there dealing with an injury or a hard season can hear my story and think, ‘If she got through it, maybe I can too.’”

High school athletics in Louisiana go beyond the game. Stories like Ava’s show how high school sports shape student-athletes as they prepare for life beyond graduation. Prep sports offer the purest platform for athletics; the school spirit, friendships, and lifelong memories simply can’t be replicated anywhere else.

And there’s something even more special about it here in our great state of Louisiana. The community pride, traditions, and legends that come from this state have shaped high school athletics into what they are today. At the end of the day, these are kids playing sports, but when you look beyond the game, it’s clear their experiences can inspire anyone.

And that is why Ava Landry’s triumphant return was ***The Best Thing I Saw at State.***



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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Tyler Blissett's Greatest Victory Wasn't His Own

By Ethan W. Anderson

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"The team win was a lot sweeter," said Highland Baptist senior Tyler Blissett.

"It wasn't like the individual wins, I've been doing that since freshman year. I never really had a team win. It's not just me, I'm sharing it with my boys, they're like brothers to me. Just sharing with them made it so much more special."

*Photos by Matthew Louviere*



Finishing in first place is nothing new for Highland Baptist senior Tyler Blissett. On Monday at the 2025 LHSAA Cross Country State Meet, Blissett won his fourth individual state championship, clocking the fastest time in the Division V boys race for the fourth year in a row.



But this year's finish wasn't like the others. This time, he wasn't the only champion. For the first time in school history, the Highland Baptist boys won the Division V team title.

Tyler alone has won more than a dozen state championships as a Bear across the cross country, indoor, and outdoor track seasons. He excels in distance events, but he's also proven himself in the 800m run, triple jump, and even the javelin. Athletic success runs deep in the Blissett family, Tyler is coached by his father, Highland Baptist head coach Toby Blissett, but Tyler's rise has been remarkable even by their standards.

His journey goes all the way back to fourth grade. "I just kind of hopped into practice one day," Tyler said. Coach Blissett remembers it clearly, "We didn't even offer track at that age. He just jumped in, and me and the other coach looked at each other and said, 'Let's throw him in a meet and see what happens.'"

From there, the story took off.

Tyler became a force in Division V immediately, winning the 2022 state championship as a freshman in 16:29.30. A title as a ninth grader could have made him comfortable. It didn't.

He cut more than a minute off the next year, winning the 2023 title in 15:27.20, a Division V state meet record on the challenging course at Northwestern State University. Even with Tyler finishing more than a minute ahead of the field, Highland Baptist placed fifth as a team. Their girls, however, delivered the program's first team state championship that day.

Cross country doesn't always look like a team sport. You must have five runners to count scores in order to compete for a team title. You run alone. You can only control yourself. Your job as a teammate is to finish as high as possible. If your fifth runner struggles, your score can collapse.





Last year, the Bears only had three boys in the entire state meet. Coach Blissett knew what that meant, and what it didn't.

"The three boys I brought last year were all top 12. I knew if we could just put a team together, we could do something special. I'd been telling them we were close, but now I could show them."

This year, they finally had the numbers.

Heading into the 2025 State Meet, something felt different. The Bears rolled in with four seniors, a talented sophomore, and a message that had been drilled in since August: Be a champion!

I asked Tyler when he realized they had a chance to win the team title, as he saw his teammates finish not far behind him. He gave me an answer I wasn't expecting. "Before we even got there, I knew we had a chance as a team," he said. He didn't have to see Sophomore David Nowakowski finish second or Richard Nowakowski finish fifth to realize they had a shot. He knew before he pulled into the parking lot. Now that is the mindset of a champion.



But knowing and seeing are two different things. At the finish, Tyler did his job again, first place, then turned to watch his teammates stream in behind him as they did their jobs too. The Bears finished 1-2-5-21-31. The math started adding up.

Then came the wait. The suspense grew as the team waited for the final results.

*Photo by Michael Odendahl/[GeauxPreps.com](https://www.geauxpreps.com)*

I was standing just a few feet from the Highland Baptist huddle as the boys gathered, not so patiently waiting on the scores. Someone said, "Coach, I think we won." Coach Blissett instantly responded, "We don't know yet. It's too early. Hang on."

But he knew. "I already had the results," he admitted, "but I wanted those boys to have that moment. In cross country, you don't get a scoreboard. You wait. I wanted them to feel that championship moment for themselves."

And when the announcer finally announced the runner ups, they knew they had done it. The team didn't just celebrate, they erupted!



“We’d been working toward that all season. It was a crazy feeling!,” Tyler said. “When they announced it, I just felt proud, proud of the work, proud of my teammates. I got to share it.”

For a runner who has traveled the country and won on big stages, the high school team experience still hits differently for the senior.

“These are more special,” Tyler said. “I’m not just racing for myself. I’m racing for them. We trust each other. We built that all year.”

That trust wasn’t accidental. “It was a season of learning how to be champions,” Coach Blissett said. “Anybody can say they want to be a champion. These boys had to learn what that meant, how to act like one, train like one, and come together. It was bumpy at times, but it made them who they were yesterday.”

And who they were yesterday were champions, all of them, for the first time.

The father-son journey added another layer of meaning. Coach Blissett explained how they learned early to separate roles. “At practice, he calls me coach. At home, I’m dad. Sometimes I’ll say, ‘Coach needs to talk to you,’ or ‘Dad needs to talk to you.’ Being able to separate the two has helped him be successful, and it’s helped our relationship.”

All of it built to this moment.

When I asked Tyler for one more thought on hearing their team announced as champions, he kept it simple, “I was just happy we finally did it. We’ve been talking about it all year. Finally getting it... that was awesome.”

After all those individual titles, Tyler finally got to share a championship trophy, and that meant more to him than any other win.

And that’s what makes high school sports special. A student-athlete who has accomplished so much on his own found more joy in the success of his teammates. A runner celebrated for individual greatness finally got to see his school, teammates, and community share the spotlight. Highland Baptist is now etched into state history because of the culture built by Toby and Tyler Blissett. Not just in victories, but in belief that they can be champions.

Watching a young man celebrate his team’s first-ever state championship with more emotion than his fourth straight individual title, that was it. **That was The Best Thing I Saw at State.**





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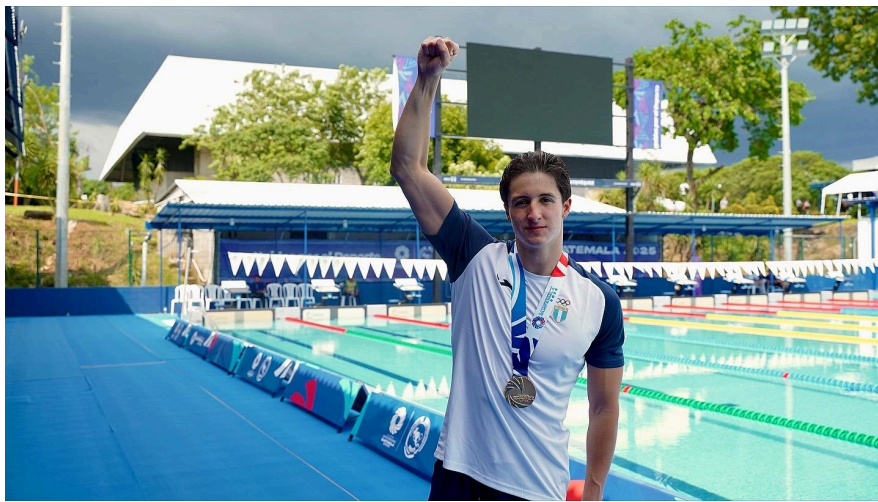
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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: A Warrior in the Pool and a Leader Who Inspires - The Story of Coach Miguel Vasquez

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



Hours before the first finals session of the Olympic trials in Guatemala, Miguel Vasquez's kidneys began to fail. Unknowingly, he somehow finished his race, but that effort sent him downhill fast. He was rushed to the hospital in severe condition, white blood cell counts three times over the limit, and creatinine levels double the normal. Miguel's body began a multi-system shutdown. Doctors told him that if treatment had been delayed until morning, he would have died.

"I took a nap before finals, woke up, and immediately felt horrible... I vomited multiple times before the race... but I didn't want them to pull me from the lineup. The competition meant everything to me," Miguel said.

Vasquez had arrived in Guatemala City a week early to prepare. He acclimated to the altitude and familiarized himself with the environment before one of the biggest meets of his life. Heading into prelims, he felt invincible.

"So, race day comes, and I'm feeling ready," said Vasquez. "I really didn't have nerves, I felt that I had prepped my body to its capacity. I never felt more in shape and mentally primed to do what I knew I could do."



After his first race, the 100-meter freestyle, something felt off. He didn't perform badly but didn't feel normal. "I swam, and it just didn't feel great. I didn't think I necessarily did anything wrong," Miguel said.

After prelims, the team went back to rest. On the bus ride back after a midday nap, Miguel could not keep anything down and grew increasingly sick. He had a limited warm-up with medical staff watching his every move.

Vasquez fought through the pain and swam in the finals of the 100-meter freestyle, or at least that's what he was told. He has no memory of it. Things worsened immediately after his performance, which still earned him seventh place.

"Everything was blurry. Things were black. And I couldn't really walk."

Medical professionals soon took Miguel to the hospital, where he spent three days recovering from a far more serious condition than he realized. His kidneys had started to fail as far as nine hours before his arrival. His body went into shutdown mode as white blood cell counts tripled and creatinine doubled. It took a full 24 hours for doctors to restore his kidney function.

"Lying in that hospital bed, it felt like all of that work disappeared. All I wanted was to swim," Miguel recalled. A few days later, he was stable enough to be released under extreme monitoring.



Even from a hospital bed, swimming was all he could think about, both for his team in Guatemala and the swimmers he coached back home at ESA.

"My one request, as crazy as it sounds, was to swim the last relay I was entered in... It represented putting my body on the line for something bigger than me," he said.

Miguel was cleared to return to the pool under close supervision. His request to swim in the final team relay was granted, and he led his team to gold, but at a cost.



“It was the most painful race of my life, without a doubt,” he added. “Every amount of pain you can prepare for as a swimmer just went through my body at once, but it was the most special moment of my swimming career. It was so much more than material things.”

The relay was a symbol of his duty to his country and how nothing would stop him from honoring the flag on the side of his cap that he worked so hard to earn.

A month later, Coach Miguel was back on the pool deck preparing for the LHSAA State Swim Meet. One look at him, and you would never guess he had been so sick. Within 24 hours of returning to the U.S., he was back coaching the ESA Falcons.

Under his leadership, ESA's girls team won the 2025 Division IV State Swim Championship, and the boys team finished as Division IV runner-ups. Both teams improved from last year, and the Falcons earned 27 podium finishes over two days.

“Both sides crushed it,” he said, giving credit to the athletes' effort and determination. Vasquez praised the ESA administration and community for stepping in during his unique situation. Miguel has loved every second of being the boys and girls head coach since September of last year.

“Coaching wasn't on my radar.” Vasquez hadn't planned to coach swimming. In his first year, he led the girls to a runner-up finish and the boys to sixth place. “They helped keep me become grounded... I've always told them not to fear success, to grab it when the moment comes,” he said. They did just that in Sulphur.

Reflecting on the State meet, Miguel was most pleased with the mental toughness his swimmers displayed. The small victories, the grit, and the focus throughout the meet were what made him happiest.

Vasquez holds a unique perspective as both a professional swimmer and a high school coach. “I see it from both sides of the water,” he said. He emphasizes readiness: everyone wants the moment, but few are prepared to seize it. He often tells his swimmers, “It's better to be a warrior in a garden than a gardener in a war.” When his own health crisis came, he followed the very same advice he gave his swimmers.







Miguel swims for Guatemala's national team, representing his father's homeland. With dual citizenship in Guatemala and the U.S., he balances his Louisiana roots with immense pride for his heritage. He coaches at ESA alongside his father, Axel Vasquez, who has been poolside at Miguel's races since he was young.

Even after his ordeal, Miguel could have focused solely on his health. Instead, he thought about his swimmers. "When I first came to coach ESA, I was in a weird place... I needed to be rooted in something. They helped me rediscover my spark," he said.

Vasquez describes high school sports as a time when everyone feels "suspended in time." It's a unique part of an athlete's life where they are able to live in the moment. Which is something people constantly attempt after leaving high school but is never the same.

When asked what he wants people to learn from his story, he said, "Whenever things don't go the way we planned, we have to revert to what we know and what we know comes from what we feed our minds and feed our body day in and day out. You can't second guess that in the moment when it matters."

Coach Vasquez could have put himself first but chose the harder path, showing unwavering commitment to his swimmers. "Then after Guatemala, even though my body wanted rest, the kids deserved my best. So I came back," he said. That dedication helped ESA bring home two trophies from Sulphur.

Thank you to Coach Vasquez for allowing me to tell this story, and congratulations to the ESA Falcons on their girls' championship and boys' runner-up finishes.





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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: From Heartbreak to Hero – Redemption for St. Charles Kicker Tyler Milioto

By Ethan W. Anderson

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Photo by Dennis Duval/GeauxPreps.com



**NEW ORLEANS, LA** — After missing an extra point that would have tied the Division II Select State Championship Game with just 35 seconds remaining, St. Charles Catholic senior kicker Tyler Milioto thought it was over.

He was wrong.

Archbishop Shaw recovered the ensuing onside kick and appeared just 35 seconds away from claiming its second straight state championship. After a kneel-down, a Shaw Eagle removed his helmet and tossed it into the air in celebration, believing the game had ended. The unsportsmanlike conduct penalty pushed the Eagles back to their own 34-yard line, and with St. Charles holding two timeouts, the door cracked open.

Photos by Dennis Duval & Cory Naquin





Two more kneel-downs later, Shaw was forced to punt. The kick traveled just eight yards before going out of bounds. Suddenly, there was a chance.

St. Charles took over at the Shaw 32-yard line with 17 seconds remaining. A quick completion moved the Comets to the 27 with 10 seconds left, and Milioto was sent back onto the field for a second chance.

After nearly four minutes of icing the kicker, jersey No. 27 lined up for the biggest kick of his life.

The snap was high. The holder got it down just in time.

Milioto drilled the 44-yard field goal, sealing the Division II Select State Championship for St. Charles Catholic, an astonishing story of redemption written in the final seconds.

"I felt like I had lost us the game, and the next thing I know, I'm back out there kicking the game-winning field goal," Milioto said afterward.



It was the wildest finish to a high school football game I have ever witnessed, and quite possibly the best ending in LHSAA Prep Classic history.

From my vantage point, it was even more remarkable.

As St. Charles mounted its late fourth-quarter drive before the missed extra point, I shifted into postgame preparation mode; staging trophies, medals, and championship shirts, ready to move to midfield the moment the game ended. I walked to the 50-yard line on the home side and told another staff member, "If he misses this extra point, the game is over and we need to be ready."

I was right... kind of.

Milioto missed the kick, but the game was far from finished.

As he walked to the sideline, Milioto sat alone on the bench with his head in his hands, trying to process the moment.

"After I missed it, I went and sat down. I honestly thought the game was over because I saw there were only two timeouts left. I'm sitting there, and everyone starts yelling at me to get up. I'm thinking, 'Why are they yelling?' Then I look up and realize there's still time and it's third down. I was confused. Something happened over there, so I started kicking into the net," Milioto said.





I was about five yards behind Tyler on the bench when I noticed members of the St. Charles staff prematurely packing up the kicking net. Everyone, including Tyler, thought it was over.

But as the chaos unfolded, his teammates rallied around him, lifting his spirits and reminding him there was still hope.

After the shanked punt, Milioto was told to warm up. A field goal was imminent. He walked toward the kicking net, only to find it zipped inside a bag. The staff quickly reopened it and literally held the net upright so he could loosen up. That's what I call taking one for the team.

"I didn't really feel anything emotionally. I was just thinking, 'It can't get much worse than what just happened,'" Milioto said. "When I kicked it, I saw it go in, but I don't even remember what happened after that. I just jogged out to kick off."

On his mindset before the kick, Milioto added, "I didn't really think about it. I knew it was a 40-something yarder, but I wasn't thinking about whether it was going in or not. I was just going to kick the ball and try to make it."



Head coach Wayne Stein praised Milioto's poise under pressure:

"One thing about Tyler, he loves the right hash. That was big. I told the staff we needed five more yards, and that's why we sprinted to the boundary. I trusted that it was his range and his hash. He's a kid we have a lot of confidence in. He's kicked in a dome before and missed kicks before, and I actually like that. Our kids are resilient."

Moments later, it paid off.



Milioto's kick sailed through the uprights, and the same player who moments earlier sat alone in disbelief now stood with his arms raised, celebrating the defining moment of his career.

Jeff Palermo said it best on the LHSAA Network broadcast:

**“From Heartbreak to Hero.”**

By Friday night, the game's wild ending was already circulating across social media and digital platforms. By Saturday morning, the story had been picked up by national outlets including ESPN, SportsCenter, CBS Sports, Bleacher Report, and many others. With widespread sharing and national coverage, it's safe to say the Comets' unforgettable finish has now been seen by millions.

This is an outstanding story that deserves to be told. It is yet another reminder of what makes high school sports so special; passion, chaos, and the completely unexpected. Moments like these happen at every level, but they feel more powerful in high school, made unforgettable by the young student-athletes who live them in real time.

This is what high school sports is all about: making memories through competition with your closest friends, all driven by pride in your school, your community, your city, and your state.

That's why Tyler Milioto's 35-second redemption story was **The Best Thing I Saw at State.**





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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Fourth Time's A Charm

### *Three Silver Medals, One Golden Finish for Jesuit's Michael Barnett*

By Ethan W. Anderson

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*Photos by Logan Clark, Jesuit High School*

**Bossier City, LA** — After reaching the state championship match in each of his first three seasons, Jesuit senior Michael Barnett finally stood atop the podium when it mattered most, winning gold in the final match of his high school career at the 2026 LHSAA State Wrestling Championships at Brookshire Grocery Arena.

Moments after securing the state title, Barnett said in an interview with VSN, “Words can’t even begin to describe...this still doesn’t feel real!”

Barnett entered Saturday with a familiar resume: three state finals appearances and three silver medals.



As a freshman in 2023, he finished runner-up at 106 pounds after falling by pinfall in his first state championship match. One year later, he returned to the finals at the same weight class and came up just short again, losing a hard-fought 9–6 decision. As a junior, Barnett moved up to 113 pounds and once again wrestled his way back to the championship mat. Once again, the result was heartbreak. Facing a freshman opponent from the Catholic League, Barnett dropped a narrow 6–4 decision, marking his third straight second-place finish.

Three trips to the finals. Three times falling just short.



*Photos by Logan Clark, Jesuit High School*

“I felt like there was pressure involved with my performance at state,” Barnett said. “But I’d say towards the end of my career the focus became more about performing my best and wrestling every match the best that I can.”

For many athletes, three straight runner-up finishes might have been enough to define a career. For Barnett, they became fuel to just want to go out and perform his best. And he came back one more time.

For his senior season, Barnett moved up again, this time competing at 120 pounds. Entering the tournament as the No. 2 seed behind top-seeded Zane Blanchard of Southside, he methodically worked his way through the bracket. He opened with back-to-back 3–0 victories, added a 6–1 quarterfinal win, and edged the No. 3 seed in the semifinals by a 6–4 decision to earn yet another shot at a state title.

Waiting in the finals was Blanchard. The matchup felt inevitable.

Blanchard had dominated his side of the bracket, winning every match by decision with no margin smaller than six points. Already a defending state champion after claiming the 106-pound title in 2025, he entered Saturday evening looking every bit the favorite.



Blanchard struck first, scoring a takedown in the opening period to take a 3–0 lead. Barnett answered with an escape before the period ended, cutting the deficit to 3–1. The second period saw both wrestlers record reversals, and Blanchard carried a 5–3 advantage into the third.

Barnett escaped 41 seconds into the final period, trimming the deficit to a single point. With time winding down, the two battled for position, Blanchard protecting his lead and Barnett knowing one final score would change everything.



With just 12 seconds remaining, Barnett delivered the moment he had been chasing for four years. He was awarded a takedown, earning the three points he needed to take the lead. As time expired, he held control and watched the clock tick down, this time knowing he was about to be a state champion.

Four years. Twelve seconds. One finish.

Barnett jumped in celebration and fell to his back on the mat with his fist raised high, taking in a moment he had watched others experience on that same stage three years in a row.

This time, it was his.

“I was extremely focused up until the last six seconds of the match,” the senior said. “When it set in that I was going to win, my first feeling was relief, then joy when I stood up, and finally satisfaction when I sat back down.”

Barnett’s performance earned him Division I Most Outstanding Wrestler honors, recognizing the top performance across the division. As his name was announced, his Jesuit teammates erupted, and Barnett sprinted forward to accept the award with a smile that said everything. After finally capturing a state championship, the honor served as the perfect finishing touch.

*Photos by Logan Clark, Jesuit High School*

Jesuit entered the tournament as the three-time defending Division I team champion, having claimed titles in 2023, 2024, and 2025. While the Blue Jays were unable to fend off cross-town rival Holy Cross for the team championship this season, the program, now a 26-time state champion, still produced two individual champions.

Barnett was joined atop the podium by heavyweight Will Berry, who captured the 285-pound title with a dominant 19–3 victory in the finals.





“I’m going to miss all of the teammates, friends, and coaches in the wrestling community that made me the man and wrestler that I am today,” said Barnett, reflecting on his high school career. “High school wrestling is different from all other levels because every state and region has a local community that gives the sport a personality at the high school level and provides support to its wrestlers.”

For this Blue Jay, it isn’t the wins, medals, or accolades he will miss most. It is the people and the community that high school sports create. That sense of community is the true essence of high school athletics.

For Barnett, it was never just about numbers, seeds, or streaks. It was about resilience. About refusing to let three near-misses define his career. And about finally earning the ending he had chased for four years.

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: The Loneliest 24 Feet in Sports

***Pope John Paul II Goalkeeper Lillian Juneau makes the game winning save in sudden death PKs to win State Championship***

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**Hammond, LA** — Inside Strawberry Stadium, with a championship hanging in the balance and an entire season reduced to a single kick, Pope John Paul II goalkeeper Lillian Juneau stood alone in the loneliest 24 feet in sports, a 24-foot line stretched between two posts and beneath a crossbar.



With the fate of Pope John Paul's season in her hands, Juneau came up clutch when it mattered most, using those same hands to secure the game-winning save that sent the Jaguars into celebration and delivered the Division IV LHSAA Girls Soccer State Championship on Wednesday night.

But nothing about this championship came easily.



The Division IV title stretched beyond regulation. Beyond overtime. Beyond the first five rounds of penalty kicks. What began as a match became an emotional test of endurance, the kind that mirrors an entire season.

Newman forced overtime with a stoppage-time goal that silenced one sideline and ignited the other. Momentum flipped in an instant. Overtime passed without resolution. The initial five rounds of penalties solved nothing. Each attempt tightened the pressure. Each strike carried the weight of months of preparation.

State championships are rarely decided by sudden-death penalty kicks. Seasons are not typically distilled to a single guess, a single reaction, a single dive.

But this one was.

Before my time working beyond the game, I spent ten years playing soccer in Louisiana as a goalkeeper. The pressure Juneau experienced is something I understand intimately.

Growing up in that position, you learn quickly that people remember one thing about a soccer match: the goals. Your job is to prevent them. It is a responsibility that carries isolation. When a striker misses, they get another chance. When a defender slips, there is help behind them. When a goalkeeper guesses wrong, it is final.





In a shootout, goalkeepers are expected to fail. The shooter stands twelve yards away with a wide net in front of them. The advantage is mathematical. Success is often described as guessing correctly. Failure is assumed.

And yet, they stand there anyway.

Juneau did so while playing through pain. The match had taken a physical toll. Diving saves earlier in the game left her sore. Her legs were heavy from repeated extensions. Every push-off sent a reminder through her body. In moments like that, there is only one choice, fight through the pain and find a way.

Still, the responsibility did not shift.

The Jaguars' season had been a rollercoaster long before that final kick. Their head coach had given birth just days earlier, balancing new motherhood with the pursuit of a championship. The emotional weight of loss lingered as well, with the passing of her father, a legendary soccer coach whose impact on the sport shaped countless lives. Championship week carried layers of meaning that extended far beyond tactics.

This team had navigated joy, grief, exhaustion, and expectation. The final reflected it perfectly.

When the decisive kick in sudden death left the shooter's foot, Strawberry Stadium fell silent. Pope John Paul II had converted its attempt moments earlier, meaning a save would end it.

Juneau dove right, hands reaching, body fully extended in complete commitment. In that instant, there was only instinct meeting preparation.

The ball met her hands.

And just like that, the season was secured.

The countless hours in training, diving, getting up, and doing it again, all of it led to that moment. Goalkeeper training is relentless and often thankless. But on Wednesday night, Lillian Juneau saw exactly how that work pays off.

The Jaguars erupted from midfield. Teammates flooded the penalty area. The loneliness of the position dissolved into collective joy. The same 24 feet that moments earlier felt isolating became the center of a celebration that will be remembered for years.

Juneau was later named the match's Most Outstanding Player. The award recognized her performance. The trophy validated the journey.

But the best thing I saw at state was not the hardware.

It was the understanding of what it means to play the loneliest position on the field and embrace it anyway. To accept that you may be blamed more than celebrated. To prepare for mind games, to stare down pressure, to train yourself to react when the odds suggest you should not succeed.



To stand separated from the action for most of the night, only to have everything depend on you in the final seconds, and to welcome that responsibility.

High school sports are different. The emotions are raw. The friendships are genuine. The passion is pure. Moments that feel impossible become unforgettable. There is nothing quite like it.

This story was different for me because I could relate. I never reached that stage or that moment, but I understood the weight Juneau carried between those posts. I could feel what she was experiencing, and that connection made it special.

That is what made Lillian Juneau's championship-winning save The Best Thing I Saw at State.

In the loneliest 24 feet in sports, one save held it all.



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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Ava Raymond's Full Court Finish

### ***Ava Raymond Delivers Game-Winning Shot to Lead Zachary to Back-to-Back State Championships***

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**Hammond, LA** — After six days and 29 straight basketball games at the 2026 LHSAA Girls' Marsh Madness Tournament at the University Center in Hammond, I started to get a little nervous.

Championship week is full of unforgettable moments, the kind that stay with you long after the trophies are handed out. But as the final game of the week approached, I found myself still

*Images taken by Russell Palmer & Michael Odendahl*





wondering what the best thing I had seen at state would be. There had been great performances, incredible effort, and more than a few close finishes, but nothing had quite separated itself from the rest.

Then the final game tipped off.

Within minutes, it was clear this one felt different. From the opening possessions, the Division I Non-Select championship between Zachary and Slidell carried a level of intensity that filled the University Center with anticipation. Every possession felt important. Every defensive stop was met with a roar from one side of the arena or the other. Both teams played with the kind of passion that reminds you these games mean something far beyond a final score.

You could feel that something special was building.

For most of the night, though, it didn't look like the ending Zachary had hoped for. The Broncos struggled to find rhythm offensively, turning the ball over 24 times and shooting just 39 percent from the floor while missing 11 free throws. Slidell capitalized on the mistakes and controlled the tempo for much of the game, building a double-digit lead in the second quarter and forcing Zachary to spend nearly the entire night chasing.

In fact, the Broncos led for just four minutes and sixteen seconds all evening.

But championship games have a way of reminding everyone that the only seconds that truly matter are the final ones.

With just over a minute left in the game, Slidell had the ball with a three-point lead and looked to cross midcourt before being met by a Bronco double team that led to an Ava Raymond steal and one-hand finish at the basket to make it a one-point game.

With under 30 seconds to play, Zachary freshman Marcia Robinson went to the line to shoot two. The Broncos struggled from the free-throw line all night, and these were the two that mattered most. The young guard went 1-for-2 from the charity stripe and knotted things up at 51. Johnson's made free throw put Zachary's total to 9-of-20 on the night.

The clock stopped at 16.5 seconds when Slidell's Cianni Williams was fouled. She was sent to the line for the first time of the night. Williams was coming off an incredible performance in the semifinals, where she scored 23 points to lead her squad to a win over Prairieville. After scoring 19 points through three quarters on Thursday night, the junior went 1-for-1 from the line to make it 52-51, Slidell.

With those 16.5 seconds remaining, Zachary trailed Slidell by one point and was set to inbound the ball. Head coach Tami McClure called a timeout and gathered her team for one final play. When the huddle broke, everyone in the arena knew who was getting the ball.

Ava Raymond.



“This woman was the only one who was going to get that ball at the end,” McClure said. “I told her, ‘Go get it.’”

Raymond did exactly that.



The senior forward took the inbound and pushed the ball up the floor, attacking quickly before Slidell’s defense could fully settle. She beat her defender at the left side of the perimeter, drove into the lane, stepped right into the paint, and shot a floater over her defender.

For a brief moment, the entire University Center held its breath.

Then the ball dropped through the net. Just like that, Zachary had the lead.

Eight seconds later, the Broncos had something even bigger: another state championship.

Raymond finished her senior night with a performance worthy of the moment, scoring 27 points on 13-of-22 shooting while adding nine rebounds and five steals to lead Zachary

to a dramatic 53–52 victory. The McNeese basketball commit was later named the game’s Most Outstanding Player for the second consecutive year, a fitting recognition for a player who delivered when her team needed her most.

“It’s my senior year, so of course I’m going to go out with a bang,” Raymond said afterward. “I just had confidence.”

That confidence defined the entire night for Zachary.





Despite the early mistakes and turnovers, the Broncos never panicked. McClure made a key adjustment in the third quarter, switching to a half-court trapping defense that began to swing the momentum. Zachary's athleticism started to show as the pressure forced turnovers and created transition opportunities, and Raymond took control offensively during the stretch, scoring 10 points in the third quarter alone to pull the Broncos back into the game.

Still, Slidell refused to go away. Every time Zachary made a push, the Tigers answered. With two minutes remaining, the Broncos were still chasing the lead before a series of plays suddenly changed everything. Kennedy Whitfield banked in a putback layup to cut the deficit. Raymond followed with a steal and a layup in transition. Moments later, Ava Bell stepped to the free-throw line and converted one of two attempts to tie the game.

A season that had stretched across months had suddenly come down to a matter of seconds, a matter of seconds where Ava Raymond was the last one with the ball in her hands.

For most of the night, the Broncos had struggled. The statistics were far from perfect. Turnovers piled up, shots missed their mark, and for nearly the entire game, Zachary played from behind.

None of that mattered in the end.







Because when the championship hung in the balance, the Broncos trusted their senior leader, and Raymond delivered the only basket that truly mattered. Her floater gave Zachary its only lead of the fourth quarter and secured back-to-back Division I Non-Select state championships.

“These girls just never give up,” McClure said. “They fought to the bitter end.”

Moments like that are what make high school sports special. In an era where the professional and college games can sometimes feel distant, high school athletics remain one of the truest forms of sport. The emotions are real, the stakes feel enormous to the athletes competing, and entire communities rally behind the teams that represent them.

Few places embody that spirit quite like Zachary.

Over the past several years, the Broncos’ athletic programs have steadily become one of the most consistent forces in Louisiana high school sports. From football to track to basketball, Zachary athletes continue to compete for championships and push the standard higher across multiple sports within the LHSAA. Just last season, the boys basketball team stood on this same stage, lifting a trophy, and as basketball season comes to a close this year, the Broncos’ boys program is currently preparing for the boys state tournament as the No. 1 seed heading into the semifinal game on Thursday night.

Success like that rarely happens by accident. It reflects a culture of belief within a school and a community that shows up, supports its teams, and celebrates moments like the one Raymond delivered.

But the best thing I saw at state wasn’t the stat line, the trophy presentation, or even the shot that ended the game. It was the moment when a championship slowed down, the ball found the right player, and a senior delivered for the team and community that believed in her.

For nearly six days and 29 games, I had been searching for that moment.

It turns out it was waiting for me in the final seconds of the final game.

And it belonged to Ava Raymond.

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: From Six to Forty-Eight

### *De'Avery Durham's Historic 48-Point State Title Performance*

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**Lake Charles, LA** — The Class C State Championship game delivered something special.

Game number twenty-two of the weekend delivered one of the most complete and compelling contests of the entire week. It was the only title game that required overtime, and despite being the smallest classification, it produced one of the biggest stages.

At the center of it all was Gibsland-Coleman senior De'Avery Durham, who finished with 48 points in a performance that will be remembered for a lifetime. What made the night even more remarkable was how it unfolded. Durham had just six points at halftime, as Pleasant Hill's defense limited his opportunities and kept him from finding a rhythm early in the game.

That quickly changed.

Durham erupted for 42 points in the second half and overtime, completely taking control of the game when his team needed him most. Possession after possession, he found ways to score, whether attacking the basket, creating his own shot, or finishing through contact. His performance shifted the momentum and ultimately carried the Bulldogs to a championship.



When asked about what coach said to him at halftime, Durham jokingly said, “I don’t think y’all want to know that motivation... Coach got on me and pretty much told me I ain’t playing like myself. Normally I don’t ever have six points. I always go at it like I want it, I had to put my heart into it.”

That message from head coach Roger Jones proved to be the turning point. Jones has built a program that demands accountability and resilience, and his confidence in Durham never wavered.

“I told him never give up. Keep fighting to the end,” Jones said.

As Durham continued to score, another storyline quietly developed. Jones, who played at Pine View High School, once scored 50 points in a playoff game, a mark he has referenced often with his players.

“Now in high school, I played at Pineview,” Jones said. “I scored 50 in a playoff game one night, and I’ve been telling the guys all season I want to see if anybody can break my record of scoring 50.”

For a moment, it appeared that record might fall.

“Coach tells us that every day in practice,” Durham said. “I tried my hardest to beat coach’s 50. I missed that free throw and thought, ‘Dang, I could have really got it.’”

Jones kept the tone consistent, even in the middle of a historic performance.

The determination shown during that game reflected the culture of the program, where high expectations and belief go hand in hand. Durham finished just two points shy of tying his coach’s mark, but the impact of his performance extended far beyond the number itself.

“First, I’d like to thank God,” Durham said. “I’m tired. I played hard. I wanted it bad. We went through so much stuff last year and the years before that, and finally we got a chance to pull it off. I’ve got to thank my coach for pushing me. He stayed on me every second. He told me I’m the controller of the team, so I had to put the team in place to get this victory.”

The game itself required that level of leadership. Pleasant Hill responded throughout the night, matching runs and forcing the Bulldogs to earn every possession. Led by Javonte Ford and Kzirion Holmes, and guided by longtime head coach Randy Carlisle, the Eagles once again showed why they are consistently one of the top programs in Class C.

Gibbsland-Coleman, however, proved equally prepared. Entering the championship as the No. 1 seed with a 28-3 record, the Bulldogs had dominated throughout the postseason. Their path to the finals included decisive wins, but the championship tested them in a different way. They were forced to respond under pressure, and they did so with composure.





To fully understand the significance of the moment, it helps to understand the community behind the team. Gibsland is a small town in Bienville Parish with a population of fewer than 800 people. It is a place with deep historical roots, including its connection to early railroad development and Coleman College, one of the first educational institutions for African Americans in North Louisiana. It is also famously known as the site where Bonnie and Clyde were killed in 1934.



For this week, however, it was known for basketball.

“I’m from a small town, Gibsland, Louisiana,” Durham said. “That’s just a little thing on the map. We want to be seen. It started today, and we made sure everybody knew we were coming.”

That sense of pride extends throughout the program and the community. Gibsland-Coleman is a small K-12 school with a roster that includes players across multiple grade levels, but it continues to compete at the highest level because of its culture and unity.

“I want to tell the kids to just keep grinding and never give up,” said senior forward DeMarquis Durham. “I see a lot of kids that look up to me. Stuff like that means everything. Just keep working hard. It’s going to come.”

That message reflects what makes high school sports unique. When a team is aligned with a common goal and guided by

strong leadership, it can achieve at a level that goes beyond expectations tied to size or resources. Yet another reason high school sports go beyond the game.

Roger Jones has built that standard at Gibsland-Coleman. From leading the Bulldogs to a state championship in 2022 to returning again with another title run, his program continues to reflect discipline, belief, and resilience.



Durham's 48-point performance will be remembered, but what stood out most was the way it happened. A quiet first half turned into a dominant finish. A coach's long standing scoring mark became part of the moment. A small town found itself at the center of the biggest stage.

Those are the moments that define championship week, and those moments are the reason this column exists.



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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: The Strongest Student in the State

### *Dylan Rockett's Record-Breaking Finish Built on Years of Growth*

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**Kenner, LA** — On Saturday, Live Oak senior Dylan Rockett delivered one of the most dominant performances in Louisiana high school powerlifting history. Competing in the 181.8-pound weight class, he broke three state records and finished with a staggering 1,820-pound total, the highest of any lifter in the entire meet and across all four days of competition, spanning five classifications.

His lifts told part of the story: 675-pound squat, 480-pound bench press, and a 665-pound deadlift.





Numbers that earned him the meet's Most Outstanding Lifter Award and cemented his place among the best pound-for-pound lifters the state has ever seen. But those numbers didn't start here.

"I was very excited when I won Most Outstanding Lifter," Rockett said. "It's something I've wanted all four years of high school. I knew I had a good chance this year, so I was really looking forward to it."

Four years ago, Rockett stood on this same stage as a freshman and finished eighth. He wasn't the strongest lifter in the state then. He wasn't even close. He was, however, the only freshman in his division to even qualify for state.

"Dylan and I came into Live Oak the same year," head coach Cash Littlefield said. "My first year taking over the program was his freshman year."

There was something there, even early on.

"During his freshman year, he managed to be the only freshman in Division I to qualify for state. I knew he was going to be very good and a possible future state champ," Littlefield said. "I never anticipated how much he would grow in the sport."

That word, grow, is where this story really lives. Because powerlifting doesn't reward shortcuts. It demands discipline, consistency, and patience. Progress is slow, measurable, and, at times, unforgiving. And Rockett embraced all of it.

"My mindset going into this meet was the same as always. I try to treat every meet the same," Rockett said. "But it being my last LHSPLA meet made it different. I just wanted to soak it in and enjoy the moment."

From eighth place as a freshman to third as a sophomore. From third to first as a junior. And from champion to record-breaker as a senior. Each year stronger than the last. Each year more complete than the last.

"From freshman year to now, I've grown a lot," Rockett said. "I've learned so much more about powerlifting, I've gotten a lot stronger, and I've added 860 pounds to my total. I've also gotten a lot better at helping other people with powerlifting."

"Dylan is the special combination of extremely talented, but also the hardest worker in the room," Littlefield said. "The work ethic is what has really driven him forward."

But strength, in high school sports, isn't just measured in pounds. It's measured in who you become along the way.

"None of that compares to how wonderful of a kid he is," Littlefield said. "He is an absolute joy to coach. Seeing how he handles being a student, friend, and teammate has been the most rewarding part."



That growth showed up in the people around him.

“The characteristic that truly separates Dylan is his care for his teammates,” Littlefield said. “He’s someone who could focus entirely on his own success, but instead, he’s made it a mission to help others develop.”

This year alone, Rockett worked with multiple first-year lifters, guiding them through a sport that once felt just as new to him.

“What pushes me is my own growth and just the desire to get stronger,” Rockett said. “I’ve always loved the idea of being strong. I’ve never really been worried about recognition. My coach, my team, my family, and my community support me with constant encouragement, and in powerlifting we all look out for each other.”



“I’ve told Dylan many times that he has had as much or more impact on this program as I have as a coach,” Littlefield said. “That’s selfless servanthood.”

That’s what high school sports are supposed to do. Yes, they build athletes. Yes, they build competitors. But more than anything, they build people. And sometimes, if you’re lucky, you get to watch all of that happen in real time. You see it in the freshman who just hopes to belong. You see it in the junior who starts to believe. And if the journey is right, you see it in the senior who finishes not just physically stronger, but stronger as a person.



“When people say I’m one of the greatest, it’s an amazing feeling,” Rockett said. “That’s something I’ve wanted since my freshman year, and it’s always been one of my biggest motivations.”

Rockett’s final numbers will be remembered. A 1,820-pound total. Three state records. The highest total in the meet.

But what he’ll remember most has nothing to do with numbers, awards, or attention.

“What I’ll miss most is my team,” Rockett said. “My favorite part has been helping my teammates get better. Just being able to lift with my teammates and my coach every day made school more fun. That’s what makes high school sports special, building something together and working toward something as a group.”

But the best thing I saw at state wasn’t the weight on the bar.

It was the four years behind it. A reflection of steady growth, adding weight little by little while becoming better each day as an athlete, as a student, and as a person. All of it a product of a team, a school, a community, and a state that rallied behind him.

By the time Dylan Rockett became the strongest student in the state, that wasn’t the most impressive thing about him anymore. It was who he had become through the process, a reminder that high school sports go **Beyond the Game**. At their best, they do not just build champions. They build people.

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Two Days, Two Titles

### *Beckham Lieu's Unforgettable State Run for Patrick Taylor*

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**GONZALES & BATON ROUGE, La.** — The best thing I saw at state last week wasn't just a championship performance. It was composure. It was leadership. And it was a senior delivering in the smallest of margins and the biggest of moments.

Patrick F. Taylor Science & Technology Academy's Beckham Lieu didn't just win at state, he owned it.

In a span of two days, Lieu led the Tigers to the program's first-ever bowling state championship, then returned a day later to claim the Division II singles title.



But the story doesn't start with a trophy. It starts with two pins.

In Friday's singles qualifying round, 81 bowlers competed across four games, with only six advancing. Lieu entered as the No. 8 seed, averaging 216, and delivered scores of 227, 213, 235, and 235 for a total of 910. It was just enough.

Barely. Lieu made the cut by just two pins.

"I'm just grateful that I even made the cut," Lieu said. "Initially I thought I didn't bowl good enough to make it. Hearing that I only made it by two pins, I was just proud of myself for being here."

That mindset never left him.

"I said that no matter what happens I'll be proud of myself. I'm not going to get down if I mess up," he said. "I made some mistakes—I missed a single pin in the championship match—but I just kept pushing through... just happy to be here."

That calm showed.



After advancing through the second round with a 244 game that included eight strikes, Lieu set up a championship showdown with Carson Childers of French Settlement who bowled an impressive 993 in the first round of that day. In a tightly contested final, Lieu delivered once again, winning 215-186 to secure the singles title.

"Honestly, frame by frame," head coach Brittany Walls said. "One bad ball isn't going to determine the match. He's so good at just staying in the zone. He was smiling out there whether he was winning or not."

That performance came one day after Lieu helped deliver something even bigger: a team championship that had been years in the making.

Patrick Taylor, the No. 5 seed entering the bracket, put together a dominant postseason run. The Tigers defeated Belle Chasse in regionals, then rolled past No. 4 Vanderbilt Catholic (21-6), upset top-seeded Episcopal in the semifinals, and closed with a commanding 22-5 victory over No. 3 Archbishop Shaw in the Division II final.





For Walls, the moment was years in the making.

"It was incredible," she said. "To watch the kids, the hard work they've put in... they've really worked for it the last three years. It was really rewarding to see that work pay off."

And at the center of it all was Lieu. Not just as a bowler, but as a leader.

"He's been with us from team manager in eighth grade all the way to senior year," Walls said. "It's incredible to see how much he's grown. He really stepped into that leadership role and owned it this year."



Lieu was quick to turn the spotlight to his teammates. The mark of a true leader.

"I've got a lot of impressive bowlers on my team," he said. "A lot of young people—especially Xander and Logan. Middle schoolers starting for a varsity team... you don't see that very often. I'm kind of here as a mentor to help them on the mental side, but they're very talented."

You could see it begin to sink in that this was Lieu's last high school bowling match.

"I'm really excited to see what this team is going to do in the future when I'm not there. I think they're going to do just fine without me."





That future feels bright. But this moment belongs to Lieu.

A senior, a National Merit finalist, and a future student at Duke, Lieu isn't planning to bowl collegiately, but in a fitting extension of his leadership, he's already thinking about building something new.

He hopes to start a bowling team at Duke.

It's an ambitious idea. Then again, so is winning two championships in two days.

The best thing I saw at state wasn't perfection. It was perspective.

It was a bowler who nearly didn't make the finals, who missed shots, and who smiled anyway. From team manager to team leader, Beckham walked away with two titles because he never let a single moment define him.

Sometimes, the difference between going home and making history is just two pins.

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Pineville Parties Like it's 1998!

### *Pineville Softball Ends a 28-year Championship Drought*

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**SULPHUR** — There are moments at state championships that stay with you long after the final out is recorded. Not just because of who won, but because of how it happened, and what it meant to everyone watching. This year at the LHSAA State Softball Tournament, that moment belonged to Pineville.

It wasn't just that the Lady Rebels won a state championship for the first time since 1998. It was how they did it, with an offense that felt inevitable, overwhelming, and at times completely unstoppable. By the time it was over, Pineville had left no doubt about who the best team in Division I Select really was.





The numbers only tell part of the story. Four playoff games. Four run-rule victories. Fifty-two runs scored in just 21 innings of postseason play. The Rebels outscored their opponents 52–5. Captain Shreve, Tioga, Archbishop Chapelle, and finally John Curtis, each one met the same fate.

Game after game, Pineville took control almost immediately, building early leads that dictated everything that followed. It wasn't just power at the plate, although there was plenty of that. There was confidence throughout the lineup, a belief that if one hitter didn't deliver, the next one would.

That kind of trust is hard to build. Once it's there, it becomes even harder to break.

Along the way, a simple message started to define the group: #PinevilleProud. It showed up in the dugout, in conversations, and in the way this team carried itself throughout the postseason, not as a slogan, but as an identity. A reminder of who they were playing for and what it meant to wear that jersey.



For head coach Allison Frye, that identity carried even deeper meaning.

A former Pineville standout and three-time All-State player, Frye returned home in 2018 with a vision of restoring the program to prominence. She had already experienced championship success at Menard in 2015, but Pineville was different.





“This is bigger than us,” Frye said. “I played for Pineville in the early 2000s and I never got this feeling. There are so many girls that paved the way for them. They don't realize how big of a deal this is to our community, to past players, and to everyone who loves this program.”

From the moment she took over, the goal never changed, bring Pineville softball back to where it once was. A program that had celebrated a three-peat from 1996 to 1998 had gone nearly three decades without another title.

Eight years later, Frye delivered.

“I can't tell you how many times this season I told them, ‘We're right where we need to be,’” Frye said. “And I think today, if not a little before today, they believed me.”

That belief showed up when it mattered most.

Holding a comfortable lead late in the championship game, Pineville still had one more moment left to deliver. With the bases loaded, senior Ava Moore stepped to the plate, a player who had been at the center of the Lady Rebels' offensive surge all postseason.

On a 3-1 count, Moore didn't hesitate. She loaded, turned on the pitch, and sent it deep to right field. The ball carried toward the fence as the right fielder tracked it back, reaching up near the wall in an attempt to bring it back. But the ball clipped off the glove and cleared the fence, turning a near-miss into a walk-off grand slam.

Just like that, it was over.

Moore's swing sealed a 12-1 win over John Curtis and sent her teammates pouring onto the field. It was the kind of finish you imagine when you think about championship softball, a single moment that somehow captures everything a team has been building toward.

“I just can't believe it,” Moore said. “We've worked so hard. I mean from the very beginning of the season we've had many ups and many downs. I think going into it today we all were very confident. We knew that every person on this team, we all have each other's back and we know if we make a mistake then the other 21 are there to back us up.”





But as unforgettable as that swing was, it wasn't the only reason this run stood out. To understand it fully, you had to look to the other side of the fence. Because this wasn't just a team winning a championship. This was a program built on history finally getting its moment again. On the other side of the fence were Pineville fans celebrating the biggest moment for Rebel softball in 28 years.

And in communities like Pineville, that matters more than the scoreboard.

A state championship isn't just a trophy. It's a shared experience. It belongs to former players who helped build the foundation, to families who have followed the program for decades, and to a town that takes pride in seeing its school succeed.

You could feel that throughout the tournament.

Every hit, every run, every inning added to something bigger than a box score. It became a reflection of the community behind them, one that showed up, supported, and believed in what this group could accomplish.

And when it finally happened, it wasn't just a celebration for the players. It was a celebration for the entire community of Pineville.







That's what stands out the most at events like this. In the middle of a busy tournament schedule, with games happening all around you, it's easy for everything around the field to blur together. The noise, the logistics, the outside conversations that surround high school athletics can sometimes overshadow the heart of it all.

But then a moment like this happens, and everything comes back into focus.

For a few hours, none of that matters. The distractions fade. What's left is a group of student-athletes competing for something bigger than themselves, representing their school, playing for each other, and giving everything they have to bring something home to the people who supported them along the way.

That's what high school athletics is at its best.

It's not just about dominance, although Pineville certainly had that. It's about connection. It's about pride. It's about a community rallying around its team and sharing in something meaningful, something you only truly get in high school sports.

That's what makes it special.

Pineville's run to the championship was as impressive as any you'll see. The offense, the confidence, the consistency, it all came together at exactly the right time.

But the best thing I saw at state wasn't how they won. It was what it meant when they did. After 28 years, Pineville is back on top. And this time, an entire community gets to celebrate it together.

It's time to party like it's 1998.

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Writing History for Southside

### ***Southside Girls' Golf Captures First Team State Championship in School History.***

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**LAFAYETTE** — The LHSAA State Golf Championships stretch across Acadiana in a way few other state events can match. Six divisions. Four courses. Hundreds of golfers. From Carencro to New Iberia, Broussard to Lafayette, the championship spreads across an entire region instead of fitting neatly inside one stadium or arena.

In my first year serving as Director of Golf for the LHSAA, I quickly learned that golf may be one of the most challenging championships to coordinate, but it also may be one of the clearest examples of what makes high school sports special. Not because of the logistics, the scoreboards, or the trophies. Because of the people.

That's why I'm so thankful for the opportunity to help put this event together. To watch so many people come together with one goal in mind: creating a memorable experience for student-athletes. And in the end, that's always the best part.



Watching golfers fight through first-tee jitters as their names are announced like a professional tournament. Watching fist pumps after a darted approach shot. Watching teammates gather greenside on the final hole cheering each other on. Watching student-athletes smile during the trophy presentation, thankful simply for the opportunity to compete on that stage.

The many groups deserving thanks include the Lafayette host committee, the golf courses that open their doors during peak season, the volunteers stationed across every course for two long days, and the Louisiana Golf Association and Kelly Gibson Foundation, two organizations that dedicated their staffs to helping create a first-class championship experience for Louisiana's student-athletes. It takes all of them working together to make this event possible.

But in the middle of all the moving parts, all the radios, scorecards, and tee times, there was one story that stood above the rest.

The Southside High School girls golf team walked onto the grounds at Le Triomphe Golf & Country Club chasing more than a state title. They were chasing history. And by the time the final putt dropped Tuesday afternoon, history belonged to them.

This year marked the first time the LHSAA held a state golf championship at the prestigious Le Triomphe Golf & Country Club, and the course more than lived up to its reputation. The Broussard layout has long earned praise for its tour-level feel, and throughout the week the conditions matched it. The fairways were pristine, the greens rolled true, and a comfortable south Louisiana breeze moved across the property for much of the championship. For two days, Louisiana's best high school golfers received a championship experience that felt every bit worthy of the stage.

Southside captured the school's first-ever team state championship, winning the Girls Division I title behind a trio of golfers who will forever hold a unique place in the school's history. Not the greatest yet. Not the most decorated. Simply the first. That matters.

Most athletic programs across Louisiana are built on generations of tradition. Championship banners hang in old gymnasiums. Alumni tell stories from decades ago. Records have stood for years. The LHSAA itself dates back more than 100 years.

But Southside is different.

The school is still young. Its athletic identity is still being written in real time. Every playoff run. Every district title. Every championship appearance becomes part of the program's foundation. There are no century-old stories to lean on yet. The students competing today are the ones creating them. Programs like Southside do not inherit tradition overnight. They build it slowly, one moment at a time. That's what made this championship feel bigger than golf.

Junior Rhyen Marcelissen led the Sharks with rounds of 75 and 77 to finish fourth individually at 6-over par. Caroline Endsley battled through injury concerns from earlier this season to post scores of 89 and 79 at the state tournament, while Avery Lusk rounded out the trio that delivered the title.



Just three golfers. That was the entire team.

In girls golf, each team currently fields three golfers, with the lowest two scores each day counting toward the team total. With such a small lineup, there is almost no margin for error. One bad hole can swing an entire championship. Every shot matters because every player matters. Beginning next season, after a proposal passed by LHSAA principals at last year's annual convention, teams will be allowed to bring four golfers while still counting the lowest two scores.

Southside entered the final round trailing Barbe by two strokes before slowly chipping away at the lead throughout the day. By the turn, the gap was down to one. Then came the back nine, where Southside stayed steady and the Bucs began to slip.

Even with the lead growing late in the round, the reality of a state championship never fully settles in until the scorecards are signed and the final putt drops. Standing along the cart path beside the 18th green, I watched Marcelissen walk toward the final hole knowing Southside was on the verge of history. The atmosphere felt different. Not loud or overwhelming, but tense in the quiet way only golf can create. Parents and coaches watched every shot closely as the championship slowly came into focus.

Marcelissen knew they were close walking up 18.

"It means a lot because this is one of the first state championships we've brought home for Southside," Marcelissen said. "So it's just very exciting to be one of those people to do it."

Then came the putt that made it feel real.

"I knew we had a pretty good lead coming into 18, but I missed the green and had a pretty decent long putt for par," Marcelissen said. "If I make the putt then it's definitely verified that we take it, so making that putt was extra special."

The Sharks' season had not been perfect. Marcelissen described it as "up and down," especially as Endsley battled injuries that at one point created uncertainty about whether she would even be able to compete in the championship. But somehow, everything came together at the right time. And perhaps the scariest part for the rest of Division I is this: Southside returns everybody next season.

"All three of us are returning next year," Marcelissen said. "Me and Caroline's senior year, so we want to try and win it our last year."

Maybe that will happen. Maybe it won't. Sports rarely follow scripts. But no matter what comes next, nobody can ever take this one away from them.

Years from now, when Southside adds more trophies, more banners, and more championship teams, people will still look back at this group differently because they were the first ones to do it. The first team to bring home a state championship. The first group to carve their names permanently into the foundation of a growing athletic program.





State championships are supposed to celebrate winners, but sometimes the best stories are about beginnings. Southside didn't just leave Broussard with a trophy. The Sharks left with a permanent place in school history.

That was the best thing I saw at state.



# THE BEST THING I SAW AT STATE

## *Writing History for Southside*

*Southside Girls' Golf Captures First Team  
State Championship in School History.*



**SOUTHSIDE GIRLS GOLF**  
DIVISION I STATE CHAMPIONS

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Rain Delays & Broken Records

***Brother Martin's Easton Royal broke a 46-year-old state record after storms nearly derailed State Track Meet.***

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**BATON ROUGE** — At times on both Friday and Saturday, the Bernie Moore Track Complex looked more like a retention pond than the site of the 2026 LHSAA State Outdoor Track and Field Championships.

Heavy rain soaked Baton Rouge on multiple occasions over the weekend, leaving standing water across parts of the track and debris scattered throughout the facility. Mulch floated onto the competition surface. The skies stayed gray. Lightning lingered nearby. And for a moment, the focus was no longer on medals, records, or championships.

*Images taken by GeauxPreps & Michael Johnson*





It was simply about finding a way to compete.

The LHSAA Outdoor State Meet is one of the most demanding championships conducted all year. Over three days, the event hosts 14 meets across seven divisions, boys and girls combined, with hundreds of races, relays, and field events packed into a tight schedule at LSU's Bernie Moore Stadium. There are no extra weekends available. No backup facility capable of hosting an event of this size. The meet has to happen within the window available.

And then Louisiana weather enters the equation.

As rain continued to impact the schedule Friday and Saturday, championship staff had to adjust in real time. Field events that could be moved indoors were relocated to LSU's state-of-the-art indoor facility. Running events were pushed back until the evening while officials monitored lightning around the area. Distance races and select field events were combined by division in an effort to save time and keep the championships moving.

What spectators saw were delays. What many probably did not see were the people behind the scenes fighting to save the meet.

LHSAA staff members, LSU personnel, volunteers, officials, and workers spent hours cleaning the facility and reorganizing schedules. At one point Friday, parts of the track had nearly six inches of water covering them. Once the rain slowed, crews moved into action, sweeping mulch, dirt, and debris from the surface so competition could resume safely.

Everyone had a job. Everyone adjusted. Everyone worked together.







LHSAA Assistant Executive Director Adam MacDowell, who serves as State Meet Director, led the effort throughout the weekend as conditions continuously changed. Decisions were made collectively between LHSAA staff and LSU personnel to ensure student-athletes could still experience a state championship despite the circumstances.

And in the middle of all that chaos came one of the greatest performances Louisiana high school track and field has ever seen.

Brother Martin junior Easton Royal entered Saturday as one of the most anticipated athletes at the meet. Many fans know Royal for what he does on the football field as a Division I receiver committed to the University of Texas, but his speed on the track somehow feels even more impressive when there is nothing in front of him except open track.

Leading into the Class 5A 100-meter final, there was already buzz around the stadium about the possibility of history. Royal entered with a regional time of 10.47, but he had consistently flirted with the state record all season with times of 10.26, 10.24, 10.20, and 10.18.

The pursuit was never accidental. Royal later said breaking the record had been a goal from the beginning of the season. After finishing second in the event at state a year ago, he approached this season with what he repeatedly described as a “redemption” mindset.

“This year I really focused more on track, getting speed training and block-work training,” Royal said. “Last year I came out here, I had it to the end of the race and I lost. And it left a bad taste in my mouth, so I had hunger.”

Then came the final.

Royal didn’t explode out of the blocks like you might think, and for a split second, it looked like the 46-year-old record might survive another year.

It didn’t.

Almost immediately, Royal separated himself from the field, gliding down the straightaway as the crowd inside Bernie Moore Stadium rose to its feet. When he crossed the line, all eyes turned to the scoreboard. After a few quiet seconds, it flashed: 10.17.

A collective reaction swept through the stadium. The record was gone.

Royal had broken the Louisiana state composite record of 10.20 set in 1980 by Fair Park legend Rod Richardson, known across the state simply as “Rocket” Richardson. For nearly half a century, Richardson’s mark stood untouched through generations of Louisiana sprinters.

“Coming out here, I knew the record was mine,” Royal said afterward. “This year has been all about redemption, so I had it on my mind today.”

Yet even after becoming the fastest high school sprinter in Louisiana history, Royal still believed there was more in the tank.



“It’s expected,” Royal said. “It obviously means a lot, but I wanted to run 10.00 or closer to the 9 range. But God blessed me to be able to run a 10.17, which I’m grateful for.”

The performance became even more impressive considering the conditions. The track had spent much of the previous day underwater. Even Richardson himself acknowledged the difficulty of what Royal accomplished.

“To run that time in those conditions, a wet track, that’s tough,” Richardson said. “I wish nothing but the best for him.”

Royal was not finished.

Later in the meet, he captured another gold medal in the 200 meters with a time of 20.84 before delivering perhaps the most electric moment of the weekend in the 4x100 relay. Brother Martin entered the final exchange trailing the field before Royal received the baton on the anchor leg.

The stadium immediately came alive.

Within seconds, Royal erased the gap, flying past team after team down the final stretch to bring the Crusaders from behind to another state title. It was the kind of performance that forces an entire stadium onto its feet before the race is even over.

Royal almost seemed to expect that moment too.

“Usually, throughout the race, I can tell how it’s gonna go,” Royal said. “So before I even got the baton, I said to myself, ‘I know how this race is about to go.’”

It would have been easy for the best thing I saw at state to simply be Easton Royal breaking one of Louisiana’s longest-standing records. Watching someone run 10.17 seconds in person is something I will probably never forget.

But the more I thought about it, the more I kept going back to the people holding brooms in the rain.

Before records could be broken, before medals could be handed out, and before crowds could celebrate moments like Royal’s historic sprint, there were people fighting the weather to make sure the state meet survived at all.

They swept water off the track. They reorganized schedules. They moved events indoors. They adapted constantly so student-athletes across Louisiana could still have their moment on the biggest stage.

Easton Royal may have been the fastest person at the state meet.

But the heart of the weekend belonged to everyone who refused to let the storm win.

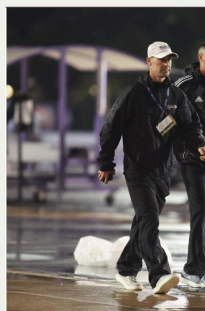
**Editor’s Note:** Historical information and quotes from Rod Richardson and Easton Royal were sourced from reporting by Jerry Byrd of [MileSplit Louisiana](#) and Jerit Roser of [Louisiana vs. All Y’all](#).



# THE BEST THING I SAW AT STATE

## **Rain Delays & Broken Records**

Brother Martin's Easton Royal broke a 46-year-old state record after storms nearly derailed the LHSAA State Track Meet.



**CHAMPIONSHIP  
STAFF**



**EASTON ROYAL**  
BROTHER MARTIN HIGH SCHOOL

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## The Best Thing I Saw at State: Celebration, Confusion, and 15 Innings of Chaos

***A walk-off celebration in the ninth inning turned into the longest state championship baseball game in LHSAA history.***

By Ethan W. Anderson

The *Best Thing I Saw at State* is a new column that brings to life the moments that make high school sports so meaningful. Through the stories, emotions, and details that often go unseen at the state championships, it captures what the box score can't.



**SULPHUR** — For a few seconds Friday night, after nine innings on Field 41 at McMurry Park, the Division I Select State Championship appeared to be over. Or at least everyone inside the stadium thought it was.

Catholic had the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth inning with a full count and the Bears one pitch away from a third straight state championship. Brother Martin pitcher Drake Amedee missed high for ball four, forcing home what appeared to be the winning run.

The reaction was instant.

*Photos by Jackson Reyes / The Advocate*



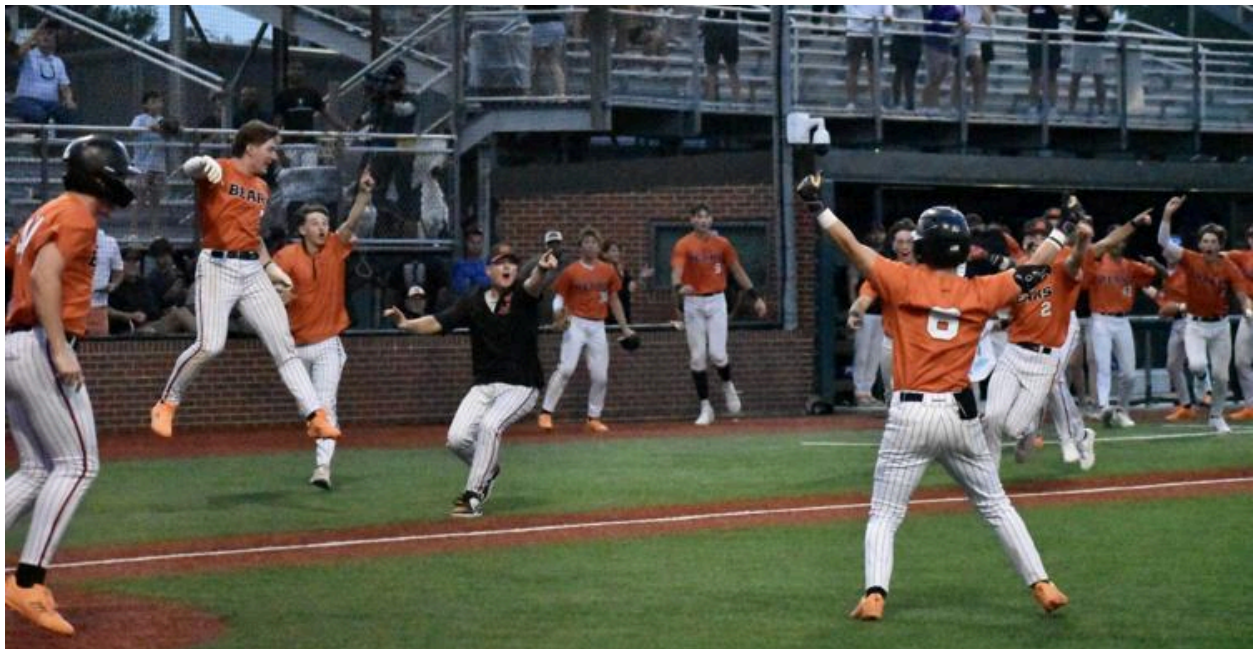
Players sprinted out of the Catholic dugout. Gloves flew into the air. Fans rose to their feet. A dogpile started forming near the mound as the Bears celebrated what looked like a walk-off championship victory. Then suddenly, everything stopped.

At first, nobody understood what was happening. Coaches began yelling from both dugouts. Players pointed toward first base. Umpires gathered as confusion spread section by section throughout McMurry Park. Then the realization hit.

Catholic batter Jude Schneider had never touched first base after drawing the bases-loaded walk. Instead of running through the bag, Schneider turned toward the mound and joined the celebration. Brother Martin catcher Tyler Durand still held the baseball and fired it to first base for the appeal out. The game was not over.

In a matter of seconds, Brother Martin went from believing its season had ended to realizing it had been given the one thing it wanted the most... another chance. Catholic, meanwhile, had to walk back to the dugout after celebrating a state championship that suddenly no longer existed.

It felt like the entire stadium experienced emotional whiplash at the exact same moment.



The scene became even more unforgettable through the lens of Advocate writer/photographer Jackson Reyes, whose perfect angle from the first-base line captured the chaos in a single frame. In the photo, Schneider is already celebrating with his arms raised as the Catholic dugout empties onto the field behind him. At the same time, a Catholic coach can be seen yelling and pointing toward first base after realizing the mistake before almost anyone else in the stadium understood what had happened. The image somehow freezes both emotions at once: celebration and panic in the exact same second.



And somehow, after all of that chaos, both teams still had to keep playing baseball.

That was the moment the game transformed from an incredible state championship into something people will probably talk about for decades. The game moved into the 10th inning. Then the 11th. Then the 12th.

By that point, everyone inside the stadium realized they were witnessing something unusual. Even in the press box, people started researching LHSAA history between innings to see where the game ranked among the longest championship games ever played.

Then another inning passed.

And another.



At some point, the game stopped feeling normal altogether. It became survival.

Pitch counts climbed. Players kept digging deeper between innings. Fans grew restless. Every baserunner felt like the one who would finally end the madness, yet somehow nobody could deliver the final blow.

Catholic had already celebrated a championship once. Brother Martin had already believed its season was over once. Yet both teams somehow kept responding inning after inning as if the emotional roller coaster had never happened.

Catholic starter Mills Richardson settled in after a rough first inning and delivered nine innings. Tanner Forbes followed with six more innings in relief, throwing more pitches than he had all season.

Brother Martin answered every challenge.

Every time exhaustion felt like it might finally decide the game, somebody made another play. Another strikeout. Another diving stop. Another inning survived.





That's the beauty and cruelty of baseball. There is no clock to save you. No overtime designed to force an ending. You just keep playing until somebody earns it.

Friday night, neither team wanted to lose. Nearly five hours after the first pitch, the breakthrough finally came in the bottom of the 15th inning.

Myles Auxt led off with a single before Jude Schneider, the same player at the center of the ninth-inning chaos, dropped down a sacrifice bunt to move the winning run into scoring position.

Then Harrison Kidder stepped in and ripped a line drive into center field. Auxt raced home from second base, and for just a split second, there was hesitation before the celebration began again, almost like everyone inside McMurry Park needed to make sure the game was truly over this time.

Then came the release.

The dugout emptied. Another dogpile formed. Fans erupted. Only this time, there was no confusion waiting around the corner. Catholic had finally secured a 2-0 victory in the longest baseball state championship game in LHSAA history.

The box score will always show 15 innings, but it will never fully explain what the game actually felt like. It will never explain the shock of watching a championship celebration disappear in real time or the disbelief that slowly spread through the stadium as inning after inning passed without an ending.

And maybe that's why this was the best thing I saw at state. Not because it became the longest baseball state championship game in LHSAA history. Not because of the chaos in the ninth inning or the walk-off celebration in the 15th. It was because, somewhere deep into the night, the game stopped being just about baseball.

One team celebrated too early. The other thought its season was over. Yet both kept responding to every moment anyway, and that's what made Friday night unforgettable.

The box score will forever read that Catholic defeated Brother Martin in 15 innings.

But anyone inside McMurry Park knows that's only part of the story. What they really witnessed was something bigger, a game that refused to end quietly, and a night no one there will forget.

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