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For Jalen Benjamin, baseball was ‘in him’

By **Jordan Stutts** | October 16, 2024



Jalen Benjamin served as the head baseball coach at Legion Collegiate Academy in Rock Hill. (Photo: Alex Stratton)

Jalen Benjamin never stopped loving baseball.

As a Little League player, he sat in a hospital with a bloody knee and cared only about the outcome of the game.

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At Olympic High School, he was the quiet “bulldog” on third base.

At West Virginia State University, he was the steady teammate who turned up the energy at just the right time during games.

After an injury ended his playing career, Jalen turned to coaching.

“He wanted to play ball, and he was going to take it as far as he could,” recalled his father, Willie Benjamin Jr.

Jalen began by coaching summer league teams around Charlotte. He then was hired as an assistant coach at Legion Collegiate Academy, a Rock Hill charter school serving grades 9-12. He later spent a year as an assistant at Norfolk State University.

Last year, Jalen returned to Rock Hill, this time as Legion’s head baseball coach. On Aug. 10, heading into his second season, he died in a car wreck on the way to a summer league game. He was 29 years old.

‘The sport was in him’

“Baseball is just ... it’s in you,” Jalen’s father said of his son. “The sport was in him.”

Jalen met David Booth, a former minor-league baseball player and athletic trainer, as a teenager.

He was “quick-thinking” and had a feel for the positions, Booth recalled. After school and over summers, they worked on his hitting, speed and agility.

The player and trainer were a “perfect fit,” Booth said. “Everything I was telling him to do he was doing. He was responding to it and getting better.”

As a high school player at Olympic, Jalen was “steady” and “observant,” said John Culp, his coach for four seasons.

Culp says he tried to “pull out the more vocal side” of Jalen in practice sessions and remembers how he responded in a big game.



Jalen Benjamin. left, played third base at Olympic High School in Charlotte and later coached at Legion Collegiate Academy in Rock Hill. (Photo: Alex Stratton)

In the bottom of the fifth inning during a late-season matchup against South Mecklenburg High, that season’s state champion, Jalen slapped a line drive to give Olympic a commanding 4-0 lead, Culp recalled. The hit sent Jalen “hooping and hollering” as his teammates shot imaginary arrows in the air.

“I knew that he was going to be able to do the job the team needed him to do,” Culp said.

In 2016, Jalen brought “instincts,” “intuition” and unshakeable support to West Virginia State University, said Sean Loyd, the school’s head baseball coach.

He would shout “free gas!” when a pitcher threw a heater, Loyd said. And once, with Jalen up to bat, Loyd got himself ejected for arguing balls and strikes.

“Jay looks at me, laughing, and goes, ‘You know I can’t hit a ball that high,’” Loyd recalled. “It never looked like he was stressed about the situation or what he had to do.”

Quiet momentum

Jalen was subtly outgoing and a “connector” among teammates and friends, said Darrell Render, a former West Virginia State pitcher and Jalen’s college roommate.

“When it was time to have fun, he would call the teammates to the house,” Render said, recalling how, at a Wiz Khalifa and Snoop Dogg concert, Jalen sang along to almost every song.

On or off the field, Jalen “tried to build on momentum,” Render said. “When there’s a really good play or a really good hit, you’ll hear Jalen before anybody.”



Jalen Benjamin, right, began as an assistant baseball coach at Legion Collegiate Academy and later served as head coach. (Photo: Alex Stratton)

Alexandria Stratton, Jalen's longtime girlfriend, described him as "reserved and reflective," a good listener who was "always talking about baseball" at the end of the day.

The two met in college when Stratton played softball at the University of Charleston in West Virginia and studied physical therapy. When she moved to North Carolina, she and Jalen began dating.

Stratton said Jalen pursued coaching as a "quiet leader" who had a knack for finding common ground with kids.

"He would have been a great dad because he's so calm," she said.

Big brother, little brother

After college, as Jalen prepared to play in an independent league, he began practicing and working out with Devon Lowery, a retired pitcher for the Kansas City Royals who had moved to Charlotte and was then the head baseball coach at Legion.

If things didn't work out, Lowery told Jalen, he could always return to Rock Hill and help him coach.

It was a promise that proved prophetic. After a hand injury ended Jalen's dream of playing professional ball, he returned home and asked Lowery for an assistant coaching job.

"It was like little brother-big brother from there," Lowery said. "He always wanted to learn about the game, but also how to start to cultivate a relationship with kids to motivate them to play."



*As a baseball coach at Legion Collegiate Academy, Jalen Benjamin, right, was able to mentor young athletes about baseball and life beyond the game.
(Photo: Alex Stratton)*

Jalen followed in Lowery's footsteps, even adopting the phrase "don't waste your presence," a lesson Lowery coached after his uncle died during Legion's 2021 state championship season.

"I never thought that the things you say would stick to other coaches," Lowery said. "You never know who you're mentoring at the time."

In the weeks following Jalen's death, former teammates and school officials at Legion established the [Jalen Benjamin Memorial Scholarship](#) for high school seniors going to college, especially baseball players.

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