

The best Christmas gift isn't under the tree

By the time you are reading this, Christmas day has come and gone. I hope you had a restful holiday filled with joy (and Christmas cookies).

My holiday is often spent the same way each year. Wake up earlier than I'd like, open gifts, eat a small lunch before heading off to the movie theater for our annual movie watching, come home, eat a hearty meal and relax until bed.

I have boycotted the movie tradition in recent years as movie theaters leave me with the worst headache. So instead, I plop down on the couch with a plate of cookies and watch five straight NBA games from noon to midnight. I have hours of entertainment in the comfort of my own home, and I can yell at the TV without getting shushed.

Watching basketball on Christmas has become one of my favorite parts of the holiday. When I first took an interest in professional basketball, I was glued to the TV on Dec. 25. I'd only take a break to eat dinner as a family before it was back to hoops. Now, I try my best to catch every game, but I certainly never miss when Dallas plays.

Of course, Christmas is about more than a couple of basketball games and whether or not we all watch Frozen in theaters as a family. One of the biggest parts of the day, as we all know, is the gifts. While presents are not the main reason



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for the season, it seems that gift-giving is highly important and we put so much pressure on ourselves to find the perfect present.

I am horrible at buying the right gifts for my family and friends. I can search for hours at multiple stores and still have no idea what to get. While I struggle to find gifts, buying for me is a walk in the park. Just find something related to sports and I'm a happy camper.

Over the years, I have received an assortment of sports-related gifts on Christmas morning. After all, I spent nearly every day practicing or watching a sport of some kind.

When I was in middle school, I got my first volleyball. I had just started playing and I was eager to practice day and night outside my house. By now, that ball has been beaten and torn apart from years of hitting it into the fence and rolling into the bushes and under the cars in our driveway.

Of course, any athlete knows athletic apparel is a guaranteed present under the tree. I've opened Nike socks, new shoes, sweatpants, T-shirts, hoodies, etc. for years, but sometimes the team on those items varies.

Last year, my dad gave me a Houston Rockets hoodie from his trip to Texas to see my sister. As a Dallas Mavericks fan through and through, my friends questioned how I could wear another team across my chest. I can make a few exceptions when the people I love gift me another team's apparel, but my loyalty remains to Dallas.

My relentless love for the Mavs makes gift-giving easy for my family, but the passion extends into other areas of the holiday on occasion.

I had the privilege of meeting Mark Cuban at a Pacers game years ago. Like every year, we sent out a Christmas card to our extended family with photos from activities throughout the past 12 months. Being the basketball fanatic I am, I forced my mom to put my picture with Mark Cuban on the collage. Did Mark Cuban ever see the Christmas card? No. Did I feel cool showing off for my relatives? Yes. Did they have any idea who the man was next to me? Questionable. But I knew, and my dad knew, and that was all that mattered.

While I enjoy opening a new Dallas shirt or running shoes, my

favorite gifts are never physical items. Often, I receive basketball tickets as my main gift on Christmas. The game is usually the same: the Indiana Pacers vs. Dallas Mavericks. Indiana is the closest arena at a reasonable price and Dallas only visits once a year.

Each time, my dad accompanies me to the game. He's the most willing to sit and watch 12 hours straight of hoops on Christmas, so it makes sense that he joins me for the games. We always come home with far too many stories of taking the wrong exit to the arena or hearing a conversation that made us chuckle a little too hard in our seats.

As time goes on, it becomes harder to remember every gift I've given or received. I forget the scores for each game I watch on Christmas day and which player had the most points. I can't easily recall the different movies we've gone to see and how many made my head pound for hours.

My memory fails me on the materialistic parts of Christmas, but I will never forget the people who made each moment special.

In a way, gift-giving isn't so stressful after all. It doesn't matter what's under the tree; it's who is sitting around it that brings the holiday spirit to life.

Perhaps, good company is the greatest gift of all.

March Madness: It's in my DNA

BY ABBY HOOVEN

March Madness is in my blood. On the day I was born, my dad had March Madness playing on the hospital room TV. When I say I was born a basketball fan, this is what I mean.

Each year, I count down the days until my birthday and it just so happens the countdown coincides with the beginning of the NCAA tournament.

While my heart belongs to professional basketball, March Madness is one of my favorite times to be a sports fan.

On Selection Sunday, I race to print off two brackets. One I fill out like normal, hoping I finally curate the right upsets to achieve the perfect bracket we all strive for but never obtain. The second stays blank, and as the tournament unfolds, I fill in each winner so I technically have a perfect bracket.

I know it doesn't count, but after seeing my picks this year, I need some hope.

Just as the NCAA tournament is part of my DNA, a good Cinderella story always pulls on the journalist in me. While my bracket dislikes the underdog making a lengthy run, I can't help but sit in awe as a team so unexpectedly reaches the basketball mecca.

It's like David and Goliath. No one imagines the little guy taking down the powerhouse.

We've all seen our fair share of Cinderella stories. We've all watched a team that had every obstacle imaginable thrown their way eventually cut down the nets and hoist the championship trophy in the air among a sea of confetti.

The story gets even better when the title is won on a buzzer-beater. The late-game heroics draw out all the dramatics and emotions we love and hate about sports, and trust me, you feel everything in the last five to 10 seconds of a close game.



Abby Hooven

When you get a chance to witness a historic moment in person, it's one of those times where you freeze and soak in every detail so you can share it for years to come.

Luckily, all of my favorite parts of March Madness came to fruition a few years ago and it's one of the best sports moments I've seen with my own eyes to date.

Back in 2018, my dad and I made a decision on a whim to drive to Columbus for the women's NCAA title game. We've never gone to the men's tournament simply because tickets are a bit pricey, but we've been to some of the women's first round matchups before in Lexington.

We bought our tickets on the day of the game in the early afternoon with the game scheduled for early in the evening. The drive was about 3.5 hours, and we had maybe four to 4.5 hours to get there.

Don't worry, we made it to the arena with at least 20 minutes to spare, but you wouldn't have known the way we were rushing around to find parking and get inside.

This trip wasn't just for the right to say we'd

been to a title game. That year, Notre Dame was on the cusp of its first title since 2001, and my family had grown to root for the Fighting Irish while my sister attended the university.

If you know women's basketball, the Fighting Irish aren't exactly an underdog. They've made the championship game numerous times but fell at the hands of UConn or Baylor, two perennial superpowers.

Yet, 2018 was different. Notre Dame lost four players to torn ACLs, including their best player, and had seven scholarship players available.

No one expected the Fighting Irish to make it as far as they did, and it wasn't a smooth ride to the championship by any means.

Without the heroics of Arike Ogunbowale in the Final Four, Notre Dame wouldn't have even made the championship. After drawing the unbeaten UConn Huskies, the Fighting Irish prevailed over its rival in overtime to set up a date with Mississippi State for the title.

During the championship, there were

doubts the team could pull off what had been impossible for years.

Notre Dame overcame a double-digit deficit, avoided what should've been a foul call against the Irish in the final minute of play and drew a timely foul to set up a potential game-winning shot.

In a déjà vu moment from two days earlier, Ogunbowale needed just two dribbles and the Luck of the Irish to put Notre Dame in the history books.

The final three seconds were like poetry. On the inbound, Ogunbowale turned, took two dribbles to the right corner, tossed up a Hail Mary three and it swished through the net.

The arena turned to pandemonium. I started jumping up and down, screaming in the stands. My dad pulled out a team poster, one of many he collected, and held it up with the biggest smile on his face.

We stayed in the arena for nearly an hour after the game for the on-court celebration, soaking in every second because, well, it had been a long time coming and who knew when that moment would come again.

We left that night knowing we witnessed history. The up and down storybook ending capped off an indescribable journey for Notre Dame that was 17 years in the making.

It's moments like those that make March Madness worth it. The Cinderella stories, the tragedy to triumph tales, the teams that towed the line of success for years only to finally cross the threshold.

My dad and I talk about that night in Columbus all the time. It's a core memory in my brain and forever attaches me to the NCAA tournament in a way I'd never pictured.

It also confirms what I received at birth but didn't realize until later: March Madness is in my blood, and it's not going away anytime soon.

Year one is in the books

Two weeks ago, I celebrated my one year anniversary with the Henry County Local.

The past year has been nothing short of remarkable. I have thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the rich athletic history at both Eminence and Henry County High School. It is a privilege to document and share the accomplishments of each team and the incredible athletes, coaches and staff that make it happen.

When I started at the Local, I was 12 days removed from my college graduation. I had no idea what to expect in a town I had only passed through one or two times prior to my first day on the job.

My first day quickly welcomed me to the reality of covering outdoor sports in the spring. Nothing gets you into the job faster than a game in the pouring rain with a weather delay!

Since that day, I have probably attended over 100 sporting events across both schools. One thing I love about what I do is that every day is different. It's exciting to go from a close soccer game and five-set volleyball thriller one night to a nail-biting football game the next evening. In the spring, it's both a blessing and a curse to be at the mercy of Mother Nature, but it has taught me to prepare for any kind of weather at any moment- and always have a raincoat or sweatshirt in the car.

Over the past year, I have been able to cover some of this county's best athletic seasons in recent history. I've been on the sidelines for Henry County football's undefeated start to the season, Henry County boys' soccer's dominant run through the regular season and district tournament, Eminence volleyball's successful quest for a third straight district title, the first postseason win and overall winning season for Eminence baseball in nearly 30 years and so much more.

My first year stretched me in new ways,



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not only as a writer but as a person. I was quite naïve to believe I wouldn't grow to enjoy Henry County and

become immersed in the community as quickly as I have. Being new to a county, let alone starting my first job in the "real world", was daunting at first, but the people around me have made me feel at home. I can honestly say the

people of Henry County are some of the most genuine and supportive individuals I've ever met.

Of course, I couldn't have made the transition as easily without the help of wonderful coworkers. To Robb

Hoff, Barbara Didier and Jane Ashley Pace, thank you for sharing your wisdom and encouraging me to pursue what I love.

Thank you to the athletes and coaches for taking time to speak with me after games and answer all my questions. I couldn't

do my job without you all. Thank you to Derek Tingle and Jason Tillett for ensuring I have anything I need to best cover each team.

I also want to give a special thank you to Todd Thompson, Mike Roberts, Susan Kurtz and Jennifer Mayse for sharing photos when I can't be in two places at once. Your talents are greatly appreciated.

An important lesson I learned in college,

and have continually reminded myself of this year, is my job is not about me. It's about the people and their stories I have the opportunity to share. I am thankful for the chance to serve the community by telling stories about the amazing people and teams that make Henry County one of a kind.

Here's to another year of thrilling games, unexpected weather and countless memories!

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What was my dad thinking?

By Abby Hooven
Sports Editor

Father's Day has come and gone, but I would be remiss if I did not share an anecdote or two about my dad.

Before I was born, my dad began a collection of basketball figurines. He expanded out into hockey players as well, but the majority were hoops stars. He would search the aisles each time he went to the store to see if new toys came out. He would take trips to specific stores he knew sold them and ask the workers when the next shipment would arrive. Over the years, he filled large storage containers with the figurines. He thought this was the next big thing to invest in, like baseball cards, and he wasn't going to miss out.

Since he had so many, he decided to put some on display around our house. We have a ledge near the front door and one over our fireplace where we now store family photos. I can recall sitting in our family room, watching a cartoon on TV and looking over to see 20 tiny bas-

ketball players perfectly lined up over me.

I am the youngest of my family, with my older sisters being at least five years older than me. My dad, to this day, swears to my mom that those basketball figurines were going to put me and my sisters through college. He had hundreds, so surely, they would earn him enough money to pay for three college tuitions.

Unfortunately, the value of his half-foot-tall friends went down when he took them out of the original packaging. He still has some in the original packaging, but most are not. What he once paid \$6 or more for one player, he would get nowhere near that much in return. His master plan did not follow through, despite his years of effort and persuasion that it would work.

Luckily, my sisters and I did well academically, so we did not have to rely on Mike Bibby or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar mini statues to make it through college.

His stash did help me in school, though. In fifth grade, my class

participated in a Wax Museum presentation and each of us acted as a famous individual for the day. This was around the time when I was beginning to dive into my love for professional basketball, so I took a trip to the infamous bin of figurines for inspiration. With the help of my dad's collection (and some purple duct tape on an old jersey), I successfully re-told the life of Wilt Chamberlain to over a hundred elementary school students. The figurine rested on the desk next to the button that students would press to prompt me to start my speech.

My dad has some out-of-the-ordinary ideas, but his persistence and determination never fail to amaze me.

While his million-dollar plan did not pan out, he has taken the leap a few times to give me lasting memories that I would have never even imagined if it weren't for him.

In sixth grade, my dad took me to Indianapolis to see a Pacers game. The Dallas Mavericks were in town, my favor-

ite team, and I was stoked to get to see my idols in person. In true dad fashion, we arrived to the game right when the doors opened and we spent 90 minutes wandering the arena. He took me into the lower bowl, walked me right down a set of stairs and directed me near the court where the Mavericks were warming up. At that time, security wasn't as strict about being close to the court, especially an hour or more before tipoff.

I glanced to my right, and I see Mark Cuban, the owner of the Mavericks, sitting on the bench talking to another man. I immediately turned to my dad to tell him, and as soon as I do, Cuban turns our way. My dad holds up his hands and makes a camera clicking motion, to which Cuban nods his head "yes." He walks over to us, and I hand the phone off to the nearest police officer to take the photo. One of the highlights of my life will always be Cuban standing next to me for the photo, turning and saying, "I like your

jersey." It was a blue Dirk Nowitzki jersey my neighbor bought me, and I could barely spit out thank you to Cuban because I was so happy and shocked that he even came over to us.

At that time, the iPhone cameras were less than ideal, and we had the lens zoomed in almost all the way to get closer shots of the players. This meant the police officer had to zoom out for our photo with Cuban, and by the time he did and took the photo, my dad had stopped smiling. If you look at the photo, my dad looks displeased with the entire encounter, but I can assure you, he was smiling beforehand. My tech-savvy sister cropped my dad out of the photo so I could have a version without my dad's frown. The original still exists, and every time we go to a game now, I make sure the camera is zoomed out and my dad smiles for the entire time someone is taking our photo.

Without my dad, meeting Mark Cuban would have never been possible. Without my dad, I wouldn't have



made the best Wilt Chamberlain the fifth grade has ever seen.

Without my dad, I wouldn't be half the person I am today. He has passed on his persistence, determination and love of sports to me, and he is one of the main reasons I even pursued this career. I know that he will always have my back and support any crazy idea that comes my way, even if it seems too far-fetched to accomplish.

Local teams channel inner Jim Valvano



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Sports Editor

Many of you are probably familiar with Jim Valvano's speech at the 1993 ESPY's. If not, I will provide a short synopsis.

Valvano was most notably known for his talents as a basketball coach at NC State. He received the Arthur Ashe Courage and Humanitarian award at the inaugural ESPY's, which recognizes team and individual athletic achievements. At the time, Valvano was battling bone cancer and the odds were stacked against him in terms of recovery. In his speech, Valvano encouraged everyone to enjoy the time they've been given and work toward whatever goals they've set with enthusiasm. Near the end of the speech, he announced the creation of the Jimmy V Foundation for Cancer Research. The motto for the organization is the famous words that echo throughout everyone's minds when they hear Valvano's name: "Don't give up. Don't ever give up."

Valvano's inspiring words immediately came to mind when thinking about the current fall sports season. Through the highs and lows, and unexpected twists and turns, the resilience of every team has been extraordinary.

No team has faced greater challenges than the Lady Cats soccer squad. The team took the field for its first game of the year with only 10 players available and held tough the entire night against a skilled Walton-Verona team. Five games into the season, Jim Hook took over as head coach as Ashley Cook-Cox stepped away due to a family emergency.

The Lady Cats have battled injuries all season, leaving the team with 10

players at times to hold down the efforts on the field. New players have come into the goalkeeper position and performed well, including Gracie Buckley. Every girl has stepped up and responded to each change.

Last week, the tumultuous beginnings and constant adversity were an afterthought as the Lady Cats earned their first win of the season against Owen County 8-2. Jaycee Fischer, quite possibly the fastest girl I've ever seen on the field, had five goals in the outing. But the number of goals didn't stick out most in the victory. Watching McKay Spears run into Ella Royalty's arms, grinning ear to ear, after scoring her first goal was just one joyful moment between teammates that evening that made the day even more special.

With every punch thrown their way, the Lady Cats have gotten back up, brushed things off and kept going. Quite literally, nothing can knock them down and keep them down.

The Lady Cats still have half the season to go, and the odds may continue to stack up against them, but one thing is certain- they will never quit.

The same attitude applies to the boys soccer team. Led by nine seniors who have been playing together for years, the level of trust and chemistry has strengthened as of late and has the team on the right path. Injuries took a toll early in the season and slowed several guys down, but the team is nearly at full strength with a few weeks remaining in the season.

Coach Justin Toole called goalkeeper Andy Johnson one of the best in the region, and he's not wrong. Nothing phases the seasoned veteran. Whether it's a flying shot from midfield or a header inches from the goal, you can bet Johnson will be right there to scoop the ball up.

Each player seems to zip around the field with ease, especially Jorge Ordonez. Trying to outrun him on a loose ball is a lost cause. Coupled with Finn Hopner, a foreign exchange student from Germany, the

front line for the Wildcats is hard to stop and one of the reasons the team has rattled off five wins in a row as of Sept. 13.

The Eminence volleyball team is another example of righting the ship after a rocky start. Not counting the two losses in the Tournament for Heroes on Sept. 10, the Warriors have not lost in a regular season game since Aug. 23. A team that embodies the never-quit spirit, the Warriors lost their first four games of the season, two of which went to a deciding fifth set. Many sets, in the beginning, went beyond the standard 25-point threshold.

If you haven't stopped by Eminence to watch a game, mark the next home game on your schedule. The senior class- Megan Sweeney, Julia Dentinger, Jenna Carter and Sara Welch- is one that will be remembered for a long time. Sweeney's precision and strength at the net have landed her within the top 50 players in the state for kills. Her success wouldn't be possible without Carter's superb setting and decision-making. Dentinger anchors the back row in the libero position and refuses to let a ball drop, often putting her body on the line to extend a play.

The Warriors, led by coach Eddie Sweeney, have a knack for staying composed when teams go on runs and countering with impressive service runs of their own. This team will be dangerous come post-season time.

Just five miles down the road from Eminence, the Henry County volleyball team is making strides. A team with just two seniors and mostly underclassmen on the court, the win-loss record doesn't reflect the efforts the Lady Cats are putting up each night.

The intangibles stick out most when watching the Lady Cats. An extra effort on defense or a smart shot by a hitter keeps many plays going long after they would've ended for most teams. The match vs. Shelby County put the team to the test, and the Lady Cats nearly made the comeback from a 2-1 deficit in a nail-biting fifth set. It was those

same effort plays and quick thinking that kept the Lady Cats in the game until the end.

Any young team will face growing pains but the way the Lady Cats are responding to the challenges and molding into the team coach Shelley Sims envisions helps separate them from the pack.

Youth is also a big part of the Eminence football team's story this year. The Warriors graduated the bulk of its offensive firepower, but several young guys have stepped up to fill their shoes.

Coach Ryan Jones has this team heading in the right direction. Each week, more and more aspects of the game start to click for the underclassmen. It also doesn't hurt to have one of the best quarterbacks in Class 1A in Blaze Berry. The sophomore is second in passing and has the Warriors in second for team passing among 1A teams. Berry has completed 62 of 111 passes for 818 yards, or 273 yards per game.

Berry is exceptional at finding guys down the field and taking risks on fourth downs to extend drives. Most of all, he is a calm leader. With a young team, learning routes and executing plays doesn't happen overnight. I've watched Berry spend time on the sidelines helping his receivers understand where to go on certain plays and lift their heads with words of encouragement after making a mis-

take. His prowess on the field will earn him recognition as the season moves forwards, but his leadership off the field will be a difference maker for the progress of the team.

One of three seniors, Vince Dentinger is a popular target for Berry. He's third in Class 1A in receptions, averaging 89 yards receiving a game. His teammate, Dalton Gambrel, is first with 15 receptions for 270 yards for an average of 90 yards a game.

The statistics gathered by KHSAA as of Sept. 14 did not include the stats from the Warriors' matchup with Metcalfe County on Sept. 9.

Eminence also made history earlier this year as Emory Lombino became the first female in Eminence history to score in a game. She nailed two extra point attempts against Fort Knox on Sept. 2. Her presence on the team will serve as inspiration to other girls who may want to participate in football.

Henry County's football team is also making history. The Wildcats are 4-0, the best start since 2015, heading into a district matchup with DeSales.

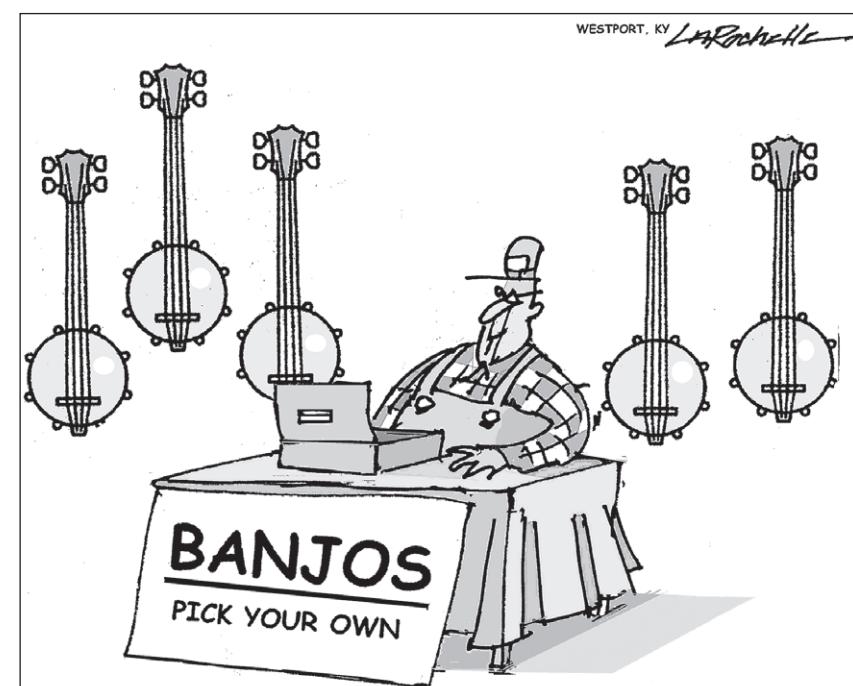
The Wildcats have faced challenges just like every other team, but one challenge in particular has been a positive puzzle to solve for coach Matt Wright. Henry County has four to five running backs that can carry the load offensively with no drop off between guys. The "big

four", Trenton Hardy, Blaik Nation, Ray Matthews and Dallon Fitzgerald, have split the snaps through the first four games. Hardy and Nation rank in the top 50 in Class 3A for rushing. Hardy is averaging 95 yards rushing per game and has four rushing touchdowns on the season. Nation, a threat on the run and catching passes from Jordan King, has six rushing touchdowns and four touchdowns receiving. He sits at 27th in Class 3A with 42 yards receiving per game.

The Wildcats hold several places on the KHSAA Class 3A stat leader list on both sides of the ball. The running game could not be as unstoppable without a firm offensive line holding off opposing defenses. The offense for Henry County ranks fifth in Class 3A, averaging 40 points per game. The Wildcat defense is sharp as well and ranks second in Class 3A overall for allowing just 26 points in four games. Christian Academy of Louisville holds the No. 1 ranking in both categories, an opponent waiting for the Wildcats on Sept. 30.

The highlight of every game isn't the flashy touchdown runs or one-handed catches by Luke Lyons, but instead is McKinley Paynter's touchdown run after every game. Watching the team rally around Paynter in the end zone reminds

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everyone that football, and sports in general, is more than a game.

I can't leave out the Henry County and Eminence cross country teams or the Henry County golf teams. The runners for the Wildcats, coached by Shawn Golden, and Warriors, led by Jason Reed, continue to shave time off their race times as each week passes. The elementary teams for both schools have some speedy runners to watch, and I know they will be names we will hear over

and over as they get older.

The golf teams recently competed in the NCKC tournament. The girls team, helmed by Russ Hosey, finished second and the boys, coached by Vincent Woods, took fifth place. The course was tough, but each golfer put up a great effort at Cardinal Hills Golf Course in Trimble County. Logan Woods and Emily Herbert were named to the all-conference team, tying for the fifth-best score in their respective sections. Both teams have a bright future with young golfers showing promise of performing well in the coming years.

Despite the varying records, obstacles and successes of each fall sports team, one thing every group has in common is unwavering determination and grit. Each athlete and coach have shown that quitting is not an option, even when times get tough.

I think we can follow the example set by each team and embody Valvano's message in some part of our lives. Whatever life may throw your way, just as Henry County and Eminence have bravely done, don't give up. Don't ever give up.