

**Sports**

# Ahmaud Arbery's killing was met with silence. His high school football coach vowed to find justice.

**By Roman Stubbs**

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Jason Vaughn, the football coach at Brunswick (Ga.) High, has been a key figure in the push to investigate the death of Ahmaud Arbery, his former player. (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post)

BRUNSWICK, Ga. — Jason Vaughn stepped out of the locker room, and already his phone was buzzing again, another citizen-turned-activist calling about another young Black man who had died in police custody.

“All of these people are calling about cases,” Vaughn said, and even though he wanted to help bring exposure to all of them, first he needed to deliver a speech to the players on his high school football team.

They had already dedicated their season to the memory of Ahmaud Arbery, who like them had worn the blue and gold of Brunswick High, but that would never be enough. So they waited in the school’s auxiliary gym before practice, as they did every Tuesday, to hear Vaughn speak about the injustices surrounding Arbery’s death. Vaughn arrived and took off his Nikes before walking to the middle of the gym in his socks. Today’s lesson: leadership.

“Who is going to be that lawyer, when somebody is accused of a crime they didn’t do?” Vaughn asked his players. “Who is going to be the next police chief to make sure the police handle business correctly?”

He was now always challenging them with ideas such as this, because over the past six months, Vaughn has become much more than a football coach in his hometown. He has emerged as a leading advocate for justice for Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man — and his former linebacker — who was shot and killed after being chased by armed White men while jogging in a local neighborhood in February.

As some local leaders and institutions fell silent after Arbery’s death — no arrests were made for more than two months — Vaughn, a longtime assistant coach at Brunswick, helped amplify exposure around the case, which led to wider recognition and eventually the arrests of three men on murder charges. Arbery’s case would go on to become one of the focal points of the broader nationwide reckoning on systemic racism and police brutality, which was again reignited in recent days following the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wis.

Vaughn, 39, has been racially profiled himself as a Black man in Brunswick, he said, and now he often wonders about his future in the community as a teacher and coach, because some in this small coastal town have warned him to tone it down. Yet even with outside interest in him — he said schools in Atlanta and Savannah recently have approached him about administrator jobs — he refuses to leave the kids.

“People on the low have told me I could lose my job for this. A lot of people told me not to do it. People told me to stop stirring trouble. I became an agitator in my hometown, for talking about a guy who was murdered in his community,” he said. “But one of the great things about coaching: I got more support from the community than I got threats.”

That support has deepened his resolve as a leading advocate for Arbery and victims of racial violence and as a mentor to teens at his school who represent a chance to change the town’s leadership that he believes failed Arbery.

“What people don’t realize is, I still lost my player,” Vaughn said. “I’m still dealing with grief. I’m doing something a football coach shouldn’t have to do.”

## **‘He latched on and wouldn’t let go’**

The last time Vaughn saw Arbery was on a Friday morning in November. Vaughn was stressed the morning before a big game, so he went for a run in his neighborhood. A few minutes into the workout, he saw Arbery running in the distance. Vaughn called out for him and tried to catch up with his former player, but Arbery was running too fast. He turned the corner of a block and disappeared.

“He moved with great speed,” Vaughn said.

Vaughn knew Arbery loved to run. Arbery lived in the neighborhood of Fancy Bluff, and his route would often take him about two miles across U.S. Route 17 — a bustling four-lane highway connecting Brunswick and the sandy-beach resorts of Jekyll Island on the



TOP: Vaughn coaches offensive linemen on blocking technique during practice last month. “People told me to stop stirring trouble,” Vaughn says. “I became an agitator in my hometown, for talking about a guy who was murdered in his community. But one of the great things about coaching: I got more support from the community than I got threats.” (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post) BOTTOM LEFT: Vaughn explains a scheme to his offensive linemen during a practice last month. “What people don’t realize is, I still lost my player,” Vaughn says of Ahmaud Arbery. “I’m still dealing with grief.” (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post) BOTTOM RIGHT: A mural of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Ga. (Yolanda Richardson for The Washington Post)

Atlantic Ocean. He would cross into Satilla Shores, a small subdivision composed mostly of 20th-century ranch homes nestled beneath towering oak trees cloaked in thick Spanish moss.

That's where Arbery was the afternoon of Feb. 23 when he was shot and killed after being chased through the neighborhood by three White men.

After spotting Arbery from his front yard, Gregory McMichael, 64, alerted his son, Travis McMichael, 34, according to the police report. The men armed themselves with a .357 magnum and a shotgun and hopped into a white truck to give chase. Gregory McMichael told police that a third man from their neighborhood, William "Roddie" Bryan Jr., had also attempted to block Arbery with his vehicle as the men gave chase.

Gregory McMichael, a former investigator in the local district attorney's office, told police that he and his son believed Arbery was a suspected burglar in the neighborhood and that Arbery attacked his son before he was shot and killed. A surveillance video later showed a man believed to be Arbery entering a house under construction in Satilla Shores moments before the shooting, though the property owner said nothing was taken.

The Glynn County district attorney's office did not bring charges against the McMichaels or Bryan.

None of it made sense to Vaughn. As an African American studies teacher, he had long taught his classes that the killings of unarmed Black men rarely resulted in justice. He made up his mind to be a crusader for Arbery.

"This small guy had a huge heart," Vaughn said of his former player. "We had built a bond."

Vaughn had little idea of where to start. He had heard about Arbery's death through social media that night. He read the initial story in the local newspaper, the Brunswick News, which cast Arbery as a burglary suspect, and Vaughn cut and pasted the story into his own feed so people could read it. Within an hour, more than 100 of his followers had commented. Vaughn's brother, John Richards, a pastor and lawyer based in Little Rock, called and told him "they were set up to get away with it."

The case, from the beginning, had been plagued by conflicts of interest through multiple district attorney's offices. It had been under the jurisdiction of prosecutor Jackie Johnson, who four days after Arbery's death requested to recuse herself from the case because she had worked with Gregory McMichael.

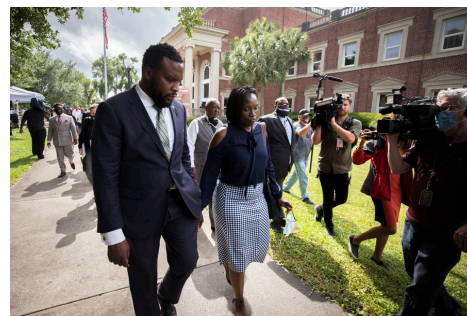
On Feb. 27, the case was passed to Waycross District Attorney George Barnhill. Shortly after being appointed to the case, Barnhill learned his son, an assistant district attorney for Johnson, had worked with Gregory McMichael in the prosecution of Arbery in a previous case. Barnhill remained on the case for several more weeks until early April, when he requested to be recused, citing his son's relationship to McMichael and Arbery.

In the middle of April, the case was moved to a third prosecutor, Atlantic Circuit District Attorney Tom Durden.

The chaos around the case enraged Vaughn, who believed there had been a wall of silence established in his community and worried there would never be a thorough investigation. In early April, Vaughn and his brother held a Facebook Live event for anyone who wanted to learn more about Arbery. Vaughn choked back tears as he told stories about his player's smile and his way of making people laugh.

At the end, Vaughn said, “I run with Maud.”

In the days after, those four words would become the slogan of their campaign to bring awareness to the case. There were others who would help lead; Arbery’s best friend, Akeem Baker, set up the Facebook page, and Arbery’s cousins, Demetrius Frazier and Josiah Watts, recruited local support and media attention, including a pivotal New York Times report in April that renewed national interest.



TOP: Demonstrators gather in Brunswick, Ga., during a march after a court appearance by Gregory and Travis McMichael, two suspects in the fatal shooting of Ahmaud Arbery, on June 4. (Sean Rayford/Getty Images) BOTTOM LEFT: Demonstrators in Washington protesting the death of George Floyd hold up a photo of Ahmaud Arbery. (Michael S. Williamson/The Washington Post) BOTTOM RIGHT: Ahmaud Arbery’s mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones, center, and family attorney S. Lee Merritt, left, leave the Glynn County Courthouse after the preliminary hearing of Travis McMichael, Gregory McMichael and William Bryan on June 4. (Stephen B. Morton/AP)

Vaughn and the group had drawn up a four-point plan for potential supporters, starting with an open-records request for the police report. He asked people to write the Brunswick News for a more complete article about the shooting. He rallied hundreds to inundate the phones of Johnson, Barnhill and Durden to make it difficult for their offices to get any work done until they listened to their pleas.

“He latched on and wouldn’t let go,” Brunswick Mayor Cornell Harvey said of Vaughn. “Some people don’t have the tenacity to hold on and push through things and keep pushing it, keep pushing it. ... I admire him for having the tenacity.”

### **‘Somebody has to lead the charge’**

On May 5, Vaughn was in the high school’s field house putting finishing touches on plans for a protest when he got a call. The video of Arbery being shot, which Vaughn had been hearing for weeks might exist, had been leaked. The footage was filmed by Bryan and later given to local attorney Alan Tucker, who had been in contact with the McMichaels before he sent the video to the local radio station.

The video shows Arbery jogging down a street and approaching a parked white truck in the middle of the road. A White man is standing by the driver’s side of the truck, and another White man is in the bed of the pickup. Both men are armed. Arbery tries to run around the passenger side of the truck, briefly disappearing from view. As he re-emerges into view and toward the front of the truck, Arbery is engaged in a physical altercation with the White man who had been standing by the driver’s side armed with a shotgun. Three gun blasts can be heard. Arbery eventually falls to the ground.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) would later say Travis McMichael shot and killed Arbery during the encounter.



It remains unclear whether the McMichaels or Bryan pushed for Tucker to release the video and, if they did, what their reasoning was for doing so. Tucker told the New York Times, "It got the truth out there as to what you could see." But Vaughn and Watts said they believe the video would not have been released were it not for the pressure their campaign was putting on stakeholders in the case.

"I'm not sure if it would have been an idea for these men, or this attorney who was a friend of these men, to feel it was necessary to put anything out if there was no public pressure there," Watts said.

The video quickly went viral and prompted a national outcry, with prominent politicians, celebrities and activists calling for action. Two days after the video emerged, the McMichaels were arrested and charged with murder and aggravated assault, and the Department of Justice announced it was weighing whether to bring federal hate crime charges against the men. Two weeks later, Bryan was arrested and charged with murder and criminal attempt to commit false imprisonment. Bryan would later tell a GBI agent that Travis McMichael uttered a racial slur as Arbery lay dying in the road after being shot three times.

Vaughn watched the video over and over, feeling the need to be an expert on the footage to talk with his supporters and the media. The night after it was released, he paced back and forth in his living room until the sun came up, unable to get the images of Arbery's death out of his mind.

"There are leaders in this community who should be fighting for justice," Vaughn said. "I am completely out of my element. I shouldn't have to do an open-records request, a letter to the police. I shouldn't have to rally people to vouch that Ahmaud was a runner. There are people we vote for to do these things."

In May, the GBI announced it would investigate possible prosecutorial misconduct in the offices of Johnson and Barnhill. After receiving Johnson's letter requesting recusal, the state attorney general's office learned Johnson had contacted Barnhill and he agreed to accept the case, the GBI said. Along with holding on to the case for several more weeks after he and Johnson had learned of Barnhill's son's ties to McMichael and Arbery, the GBI also said that, days before his appointment to the case, Barnhill had provided an opinion to the Glynn County Police Department "that he did not see grounds for the arrest of any of the individuals involved" in Arbery's death. Barnhill did not disclose that he had provided the opinion when he requested to be recused from the case.

Later that month, the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked a nationwide reckoning on police brutality and racial injustice, casting an even brighter spotlight on Arbery's case. Thousands of videos poured in of people completing a jog of 2.23 miles, which the group started to signify the date Arbery was killed. The I Run With Maud movement had become an international effort.

"Somebody has to be out front, and somebody has to lead the charge," Brunswick City Commissioner Vincent Williams said. "And [Vaughn] was one of the ones ... that was divinely chosen to be in the position that he is in."

### **'Let's get our community right'**

As Vaughn took a leading role in bringing attention to Arbery's death, he received plenty of anonymous calls and messages urging him to stop speaking out. "The silent want me silent," he said.

"Sometimes people don't want to confront that thing that is right there in your face," said Harvey, the mayor. "This community sometimes did not want to hear all he had to say, but he said it very professional, very eloquently."



TOP: Coach Jason Vaughn has football player Anthony Elvine try on a pair of cleats at a local discount store. Vaughn spends his personal time and money to ensure his players have the right equipment. (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post) BOTTOM LEFT: Brunswick High Coach Sean Pender speaks to his players after practice Tuesday. (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post) BOTTOM RIGHT: Vaughn on Arbery, his former player: “This small guy had a huge heart. We had built a bond.” (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post)

Vaughn said he is the only Black male instructor to teach a core class at the school, where the student body is 43 percent White, 38 percent Black and 12 percent Hispanic, according to 2019 figures. He criticized the school district for not putting out a statement on Arbery’s death, even though other schools from across the country had sent condolences to the family. He wondered whether he would be allowed to teach his class about Arbery during his African American studies course.

“We’ve talked to our principals and our teachers and just said: ‘Let the kids talk and listen to them,’ ” Glynn County Schools Superintendent Scott Spence said. “ ‘It’s not the time for you to voice your opinion; it’s time for you to listen to the kids ... and try to be understanding.’ That’s most of what our message is.”

Arbery’s No. 21 jersey, which he wore during his senior season of 2011, is in a shadow box near the office of the team’s current coach, Sean Pender, who took over in 2016. He is the first White head coach at the school since 1979, he said, and the gravity of that distinction has hit him in the months since Arbery’s death. He oversees a team with several players who have told Vaughn they have been racially profiled by police and several players with family members who work in law enforcement.

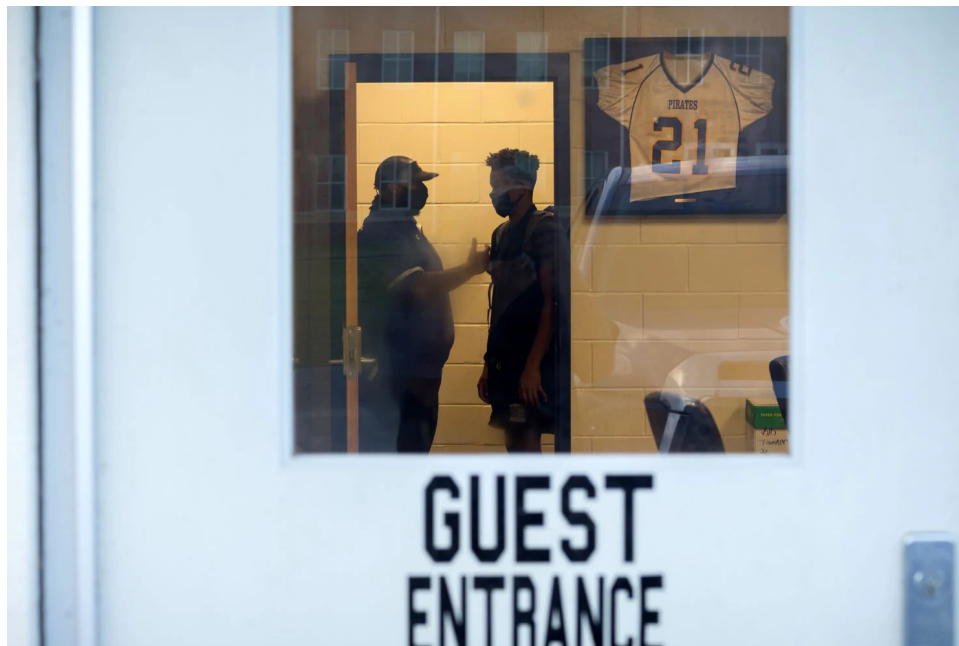
“We have to get this right,” Pender said. “I knew if we took it on a national level, that couldn’t be our focus. Our focus had to be on our community. Let’s get our community right.”

In June, the staff decided to empower the players and planned a march around the school. The city didn’t initially give the team a permit, Vaughn said, and players were worried they wouldn’t be supported by the community. Vaughn mobilized support through the I Run With Maud effort, and hundreds showed up to rally behind the team.

“Last year, we were kind of divided,” senior Amarion Whitfield said. “After the Ahmaud situation, we got closer. After our little walk, things started changing.”

In Brunswick, where a mural of Arbery is painted on a downtown building, the case has brought renewed criticism of a police department that reportedly has had a history of troubling responses to cases — and prompted many to call for action that will take the lesson of Arbery’s death and create lasting change.

“It’s making sure that we honor his memory as in a line of people that became victims to this racial violence,” Watts said. “This racial injustice in a country, in a local community, too, that has been willfully ignoring what is sitting right in front of them. ... The climate that murdered Ahmaud Arbery, it was always there. It did not pop up in the few weeks before his death.”



Vaughn speaks with 17-year-old Anthony Elvine at the Brunswick High football facility, where the jersey of former player Ahmaud Arbery hangs. (Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post)

## **‘Create real change’**

The tension of the past few months has reminded Vaughn of the profiling he endured in Brunswick. A white van had followed him while he was on a run. A woman had approached him and his daughter at a neighborhood pool and asked him repeatedly whether he was a homeowner. He and his wife were pulled over by police for driving too slow on a dark road with no streetlights, and three or four police cars surrounded him. One of the officers recognized him.

“Oh, that’s Coach Vaughn,” he remembers an officer saying. After they were let go, he turned to his wife and said, “What if I wasn’t Coach Vaughn?”

But he is still Coach Vaughn, even though his role now extends far beyond the football field and the classroom. Gregory and Travis McMichael have requested bond hearings, and Vaughn said his group will continue to fight against their release. They have been contacted by other families who are hoping they can help push for exposure in cases of racial violence, and Vaughn plans to rally more support against certain laws in Georgia — including the citizen’s arrest law — and inundate political offices with phone calls.

“We have got to figure out a way for people to take that energy, that extreme intense energy, and use it to create real change, which in America doesn’t happen,” Vaughn said. “Ahmaud Arbery is a unique case because actual change occurred.”

When he’s on the field, Vaughn doesn’t miss chances to remind his players of what they’re fighting for. After a recent practice, the players took a knee and didn’t head for the locker room until Pender spoke to them about their lackluster effort. Standing on a swampy field in 90-degree heat, sweat sticking to his neck, Vaughn related the practice back to the bigger picture.

“We’re trying to raise you up as the new leaders of Brunswick,” he said, and after leaving the field, he eventually returned to his classroom and called his brother. He wanted to talk about their campaign and see what they could do next.

**By Roman Stubbs**

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## A hidden crisis

As teen suicides rock local sports communities, concerns grow over athletes' mental health

John Bruns and Heather Wendling pose beside a fountain that will be the future memorial for their daughter, London, in their backyard in Ridgefield, Wash. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)

The sounds in her home can become unbearable some days. Heather Wendling will sometimes hear the footsteps of her sons walking in the dining room and think it's her daughter. She will hear the front door creak when her husband comes home after work and wonder whether it's her daughter. She will hear the phone ring and know it's not her daughter, but perhaps another friend or volleyball parent calling to offer condolences or help.

When it all becomes too much, Wendling will sometimes head out to the backyard and sit on the swing set her daughter, London Bruns, used to play on as a little girl. “You can feel her energy there,” Wendling said, and when she is rocking back and forth, she wrestles with the questions of how London could have taken her own life at her home in Ridgefield, Wash., in the early morning hours of Sept. 21. She was 13 years old.

London had shown no signs of depression or suicidal thoughts in the weeks leading up to her death, Wendling said, but like so many teens during the coronavirus pandemic, her life had radically changed in the previous six months. She had shifted to online learning when her school district shut down in-person classes, and her social life had faded even more when her volleyball club canceled the season because of the pandemic.

“We’re living in unprecedented times. I never thought this would happen to my daughter. We fought so hard to give her a good life. We tried to do everything right,” Wendling said. “Their world has come to a screeching halt, a lot of them. They’re not in sports. They’re not going to school. They’re not hanging out with the friends. ... We found out too late, and I don’t want other parents to find out too late.”

Youth suicide was already at a record high before the pandemic — with increases among teens every year from 2007 to 2017, it is the second-leading cause of death among high-school-aged students — and some researchers fear the mental health consequences of coronavirus restrictions on not only schools but also sports could help elevate those numbers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a survey recently asking young adults whether they had thought about killing themselves in the past 30 days; 1 of 4 said they had.





London Bruns (family photo)

For many teens who have been restricted from playing sports, the pandemic not only has stripped away the opportunity for exercise, competition and potential college scholarships but also has deprived those young athletes of the identity and social circles provided by sports. The mental health benefits that athletics can give students have been a driving force for thousands of parents who have protested the shutdown of sports in their communities across the country, with many often fearing the worst if their kids aren't able to play.

Suicides among teen athletes have rocked several youth programs since the pandemic began in March, leaving parents and coaches scrambling — often from a distance — to help grieving kids in hopes of preventing more tragedies.

In the days after London's death, volleyball teams from around the country rallied in support — youth players in states that were allowed to play inked her initials and her No. 15 on their hands during games. A coach from Michigan reached out to London's coaches to say he had gone through a similar tragedy. A team from Oregon sent volleyballs signed with inspirational messages and slogans, including, "Stop the Stigma" and "Talk About it."

"It's important for us as adults, when working with these kids, to really be asking them questions and see what kind of support they need," said Hillary DeVore, one of London's coaches with Excel Northwest volleyball. "London's story isn't the first story that this has happened."



Heather Wendling holds her daughter's remains. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)

## **'The world was taken away from her'**

A survey of high school athletes conducted by the University of Wisconsin this summer found that approximately 68 percent of the 3,243 teens polled have reported feelings of anxiety and depression at levels that typically require medical intervention — nearly 40 percent higher than past studies. The study, which also found that physical activity levels were 50 percent lower for kids than before the pandemic, was labeled “striking and concerning” by one researcher.

The lead researcher of the study at Wisconsin, Tim McGuine, said in an interview in August that “the greatest risk [to student-athletes] is not covid-19. It's suicide and drug use.” The study caught the eye of the organization overseeing high school sports, the National Federation of State High School Associations, which already was dealing with an uptick in reports from state athletic

directors about mental health concerns for teen athletes whose seasons were in flux.



The backyard playground of John Bruns and Heather Wendling at their home in Ridgefield, Wash. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)

“We already knew going into this that we had increasing levels of depression and anxiety among young people ... but now we have kids that don’t have school. They don’t have sports,” said Michael Koester, who leads the medical advisory committee for the NFHS. “Many of us are concerned with that. Obviously, there’s concerns about the virus, contracting it and passing it on to others. But this isn’t a zero-sum game.”

Across the country, suicides of teen athletes have been reported since the pandemic started. In Stockton, Calif., 15-year-old Jo’Vianni Smith, a budding track and softball prospect, took her own life in April. Her mother, Danielle Hunt, told local media that the state’s shutdown had been difficult on her daughter. “The world was taken away from her when she couldn’t do sports,” Hunt said. In Bruns-

wick, Maine, the parents of a high school football player who took his own life this month cited the pandemic as a factor affecting their son's mental health.



London Bruns attended View Ridge Middle School, which has held virtual classes during the pandemic. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)

Concerns over mental health have driven protests over the shutdown of sports throughout the country since the beginning of the pandemic. In New Mexico, after the state government canceled fall sports in October, a protester picketing at a local library held up a sign that read: “Stop Suicide and Depression In Teens. Allow Sports.”

In North Dakota, as parents and athletes protested the postponement of the winter high school sports season in November, Grand Forks-based sports psychologist Erin Haugen continued to see a flood of referrals for teen athletes across the state who were struggling with mental health because of restrictions on sports.

“It’s certainly complicated in both directions because not playing can have mental health implications,” Haugen said. “But then also playing with that uncertainty or having one of their teammates get ill — or they’re getting ill — certainly has mental health implications as well. ... It might be hard to find the best option from a mental health perspective.”

Teens who tie their identity and social circle to sports have been disrupted, which causes “higher risk of challenging psychological and emotional functions,” Haugen said, adding that the uncertainty around when sports will be played has functioned almost like an injury. But unlike a traditional injury that keeps an athlete from the field, a course for rehabilitation cannot be charted to navigate the pandemic.



The cancellation of the club volleyball season heightened London Bruns’s feelings of isolation. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)

“I would characterize this as a crisis,” said Adela Roxas, a sports psychologist in Virginia Beach who works with middle school and high school athletes. “Not having the athletic participation is a loss. These losses have to be grieved. Grief is also a part of coping through the pandemic, grieving what we lost and what we’re not able to do in this situation. ... There’s definitely been an increase in symptoms.”

A growing number of youth coaches are also seeking help to better understand how to detect signs of depression and anxiety in their athletes, according to David Martin, a Hall of Fame high school coach from Tennessee who works with the Jason Foundation, one of the country’s largest suicide prevention organizations. It is named after Jason Flatt, a former player under Martin who died by suicide in 1997.

“This pandemic has created an isolation. It decreased connection with those athletes, which obviously ... is creating more mental health issues,” Martin said. “That decreased connection has placed an emphasis with coaches [and] administrators to more closely monitor the mental health of these young people. That’s what we’re trying to do.”



London Bruns, left, poses with her brothers Anthony, center, and Vince. (family photo)

## **‘She had been struggling’**

Even after she suffered a season-ending ankle injury last year, London still attended every practice and game with her club volleyball team. She yearned to be around her teammates. With her foot in a protective boot, she brought a cushy camping chair and helped the coaches keep stats and retrieve balls.

“She had a great time with her volleyball team, and she loved her coach,” said her father, John Bruns, who practiced with London in

the backyard near the swing set. “She seemed to really get into it. I’m 6-foot-6, so she got all of my height. She was tall and slender and would have made a heck of a good volleyball player over time.”

Her final day began with a request: London had asked her mother to prepare her favorite meal, fettuccine Alfredo.

They went shopping for the ingredients, first stopping at a Starbucks to get London’s favorite drink, an iced chai tea, and before they checked out at the grocery store, Wendling knew London needed to grab a gallon-size box of Goldfish crackers, like she always did. When London instead grabbed a little bag of the snack, telling her mom she didn’t need that many this time, Wendling thought nothing of it.

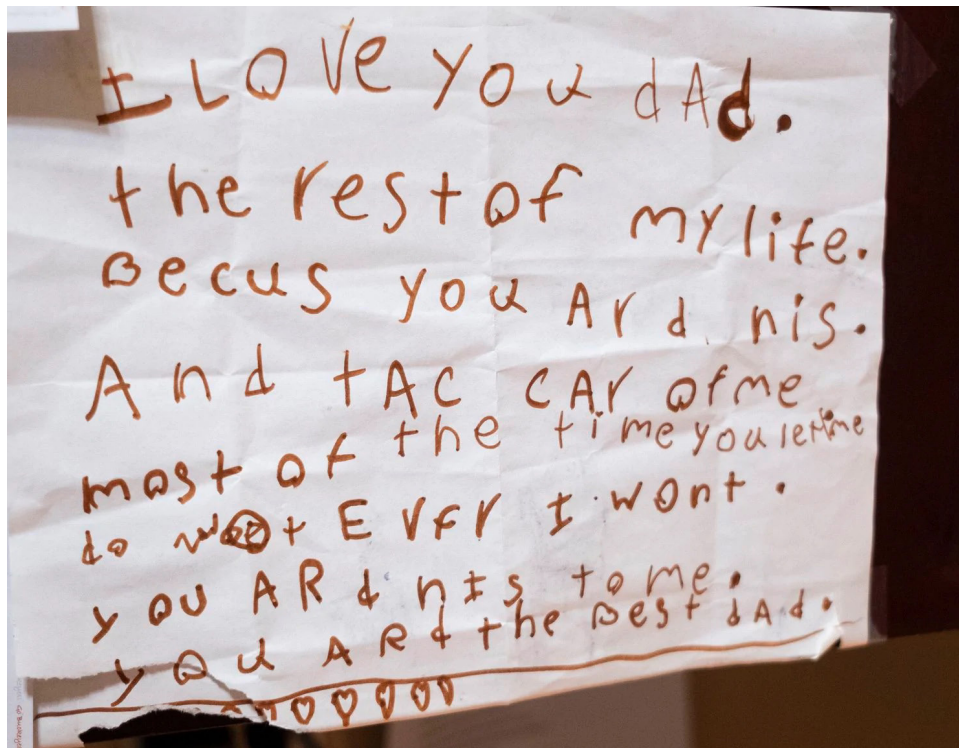
Before the drive home, London mentioned how she loved Halloween — “As if she was going to miss it,” Wendling said, and she continued to replay their conversations in her head in the days and weeks after London’s death, searching for clues that might help explain her daughter’s death.

“She just left that she was struggling. That’s all she left in her note,” Wendling said. “She just let us know that she loved us and that we didn’t do anything wrong. But she had been struggling and felt like it was her time.”

A week before London’s death, Wendling had asked London whether she had kept in touch with her volleyball teammates since the pandemic started; London had told her that they “had drifted apart,” Wendling said, adding that London had not told her best friend about her plan. Wendling believes isolation may have taken a mental toll on her daughter, just as it has on teens across the country over the past nine months as schools and sports have been leveled by shutdowns and uncertainty.

The Excel Northwest coaches reached out to their players in the days after London's death, even though they had not been together in months. They worked to openly talk about feelings and helped them talk to other friends and family, and they held open gyms when restrictions were eased to get the girls out of the house. That wasn't an option after shutdowns of indoor sports in Washington were imposed again last month.

"It is going to be really challenging for kids to work through this. ... These kids just got thrown into it," DeVore said. "Volleyball was the one thing that they had control over, and they got to go and make their own decisions on the court. We hope we can have some sort of safe season where the girls are practicing at least. But we also want to make sure that our communities stay safe."



A note from London Bruns, 13, is seen in her dad's home office in Ridgefield, Washington. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)



## ‘She was just a beautiful little light’

A few weeks after her daughter’s death, Wendling had heard one of London’s friends was suicidal. She had the girl and her parent over to the house. She told the girl how much pain she was in, that the teen needed to consider the agony in her voice. A couple of days later, Wendling spent more time with the girl so she wouldn’t feel so isolated.

“I’ve talked to other parents who have lost kids to suicide as well,” she said. “We’re part of a club nobody wants to be a part of.”

She is reminded daily of the lives her daughter touched, and she smiles about some of the last memories they shared together, including on a volleyball trip to Seattle when London was still



LEFT: A pair of sneakers and baby slippers that belonged to London Bruns. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post) RIGHT: London Bruns’s volleyball jersey is displayed with her My Little Pony toys at her parents’ home. (Liz Moughon for The Washington Post)

injured but attended to support her teammates anyway. They went shopping and ate at restaurants together that weekend. Her volleyball club has started a scholarship and has talked about getting together to honor her memory when it is safe to do so, DeVore said.

“I remember at the beginning of [last] season, her dad pulling us aside and just expressing how thankful he was that we were working with her. ... You could tell how much she enjoyed being around this group of people,” DeVore said. “It was a beautiful thing to see.”

Bruns’s job as a manufacturing representative in the utility industry can be relentless — but every fall Saturday he would take London to a sports bar down the road in Ridgefield so they could spend father-daughter time together watching college football.

Since London’s death, Wendling and their sons have gone to watch several games with him instead, and at the first one, everyone in the bar raised a glass in London’s memory. As a family, they often share memories of London. They tell stories about her catching frogs on their five acres, about how talented of an artist she was, about how much she loved volleyball. In the living room of their home, they keep a trunk full of keepsakes — London’s favorite stuffed animal, a sweatshirt that still carries her scent, her volleyball uniform and knee pads.

“She was just a beautiful little light. ... We loved each other. She loved everybody,” said Wendling, who has committed herself to making sure that love endures.

In the backyard, near the swing set and near where London practiced volleyball, Wendling plans to build a memorial flower garden with 13 white hydrangeas — one for each year her daughter was alive.

**Sports**

# As transgender rights debate spills into sports, one runner finds herself at the center of a pivotal case

**By Roman Stubbs**

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Runner Lindsay Hecox. (Angie Smith/For The Washington Post)

When she arrived at Boise State's campus this past fall, Lindsay Hecox finally felt like herself. She had come out as a trans woman a few months earlier and was excited to begin her new life as a college freshman. She quickly made friends, formed a club and started earning the best grades of her academic career.

Yet she missed the competitive running of her high school days, and so as her second semester started in the spring, Hecox thought

about trying out for the university's cross-country team. The 19-year-old asked an assistant coach for the typical training plan for team members, and after running the recommended mileage most days along the Boise River, Hecox worked up the courage to tell the coaches she planned to join the team once her sophomore year began.

But Hecox was also unsure if she would get that chance. In March, Idaho became the first state in the country to bar transgender girls such as Hecox from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity. House Bill 500, known as the Fairness in Women's Sports Act, states "athletic teams or sports designated for females, women, or girls shall not be open to students of the male sex," and also requires that girls and women have genital and hormonal testing if their biological sex is challenged.

Idaho's new law, coupled with another recently passed state law banning transgender people from changing their birth certificates to match their gender identity, is emblematic of the legislation challenging transgender rights across the country over the past year. Republican lawmakers, bolstered by the Trump administration, have specifically homed in on transgender youth issues, proposing bills in several states to restrict medical treatments for transgender youths.

That push has also been concentrated in the sports landscape: More than a dozen states have recently introduced legislation to ban transgender athletes from competition, including in Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Ohio and Tennessee, where lawmakers have argued that transgender athletes are gaining an unfair advantage in sports at all levels at the expense of cisgender girls and women.

"It's reflective of the fact that we have an election coming up; it's

reflective of our country's leadership right now," said Chris Mosier, a transgender advocate and triathlete. "It is intended to drive a wedge in the issues and debates of the Equality Act."

In Connecticut, which is one of only a handful of states that allow students to participate in sports based on their gender identity, three cisgender female high school athletes are suing the state's interscholastic sports governing body. In May, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights threatened to withhold federal funding to Connecticut after ruling the state's inclusion of transgender athletes violated Title IX laws.

The Trump administration has also sided with Idaho's new law. Two civil rights groups, the American Civil Liberties Union and Legal Voice, along with a private law firm, have filed a federal lawsuit against the state on behalf of Hecox and another student-athlete, who is not transgender, arguing that HB 500 violates the constitution and Title IX. While the court battle over the new law promises to be lengthy, Hecox's representatives proposed in a hearing last week a preliminary injunction to block Idaho's law and allow her to try out for the team this season. A U.S. District judge, who also heard arguments by the state to dismiss the lawsuit, is expected to decide on the matters of injunction and dismissal by Aug. 10.

"I just want the chance to run," Hecox said. "I don't want to be taking titles or spots away from cis girls. So this lawsuit, if we win, it will just be saying: I am a girl, I get to compete on these teams, and it shows that trans individuals get equal opportunities of the cis people."

The new Idaho law is at odds with NCAA policy, which requires one year of hormone treatment to compete on a female team. Advocates as well as prominent athletes, including Billie Jean King and Megan Rapinoe, have called for the NCAA to move men's basketball tourna-

ment games scheduled to be played in the state next March — the way the NCAA banned events in North Carolina in 2016 over the state’s since-repealed law that required transgender people to use public bathrooms based on the gender on their birth certificates.

Some advocates say the Idaho lawsuit could be a flash point in the fight for transgender rights.

“It’s a really important case, because it’s going to set a precedent for other states as well. I think the next generation of these bathroom bills are these sports bills,” said Susan K. Cahn, a history professor at the University of Buffalo who specializes in gender and sexuality in sports. “It’s sort of the latest wave in [the] traditionalist defense of sports as they are in the male imagination, the idea ... that men are fundamentally, biologically superior to women, and therefore someone that was assigned male at birth should never compete in women’s competition.”



Lindsay Hecox on a recent run in Boise. (Angie Smith for The Washington Post)

## **‘I never got to be myself’**

When she chose to attend Boise State last year, Hecox didn't envision herself in this position. Her first year of college has been typical in many ways, balancing school with a busy social life and a job at a sandwich shop. But she is now recognized all over Boise. She never expected to become an activist, let alone a leading voice in a potentially groundbreaking case.

Hecox grew up in Moorpark, Calif., about 45 miles outside Los Angeles, and "had a fairly normal childhood." She was drawn to running at an early age, and by the time she was in high school she was competing year-round on the cross-country and track teams. It gave her structure during a confusing time. Hecox struggled in the classroom because of her attention-deficit disorder, and making friends was always difficult as she endured gender dysphoria.

"I would literally come home from a stressful day at school and dress up in the few female clothes that I had," she said. "I never got to be myself a single day of high school. It was all related. I didn't feel good because I didn't have any friends. I didn't have any friends because I had gender dysphoria and I wasn't being the trans girl that I am now."

Hecox began her transition the summer after she graduated high school, and Boise State proved to be a perfect place to start her new life. She didn't know anyone, and the scenery was the perfect backdrop for long runs. She made new girlfriends at orientation and went bowling with a few of them later.

"I was just starry-eyed the whole time that I wasn't getting harassed or yelled at," she said.

She began her hormone replacement therapy and made up her mind that she wanted to pursue a career as a psychologist, specifically helping the LGBTQ community. Trans youth are far more likely to experience depression and suicidal thoughts than cisgender youth, according to studies.

Hecox was earning A's and B's in her classes and hung out at the campus's Gender Equity Center, often putting stickers with trans-rights slogans on the windows. She kept an eye on the anti-trans legislation spreading across the country, and by the time HB 500 was introduced in February, Hecox felt she needed to act.

By early March, the bill went before the Senate State Affairs Committee, and she walked to the Capitol building in downtown Boise to deliver a speech against it. A month later, as the bill passed, Hecox had made the decision to try out for the team and was a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

The NCAA said in a statement that it plans to discuss the law and its impact on student-athletes during a board of governors meeting in August. A Boise State spokesman referred questions to the state's attorney general's office.

"The trans community has to fight for almost every single thing to be the gender that they are," Hecox said. "It was the same thing with bathrooms a couple years ago. Anything that is gendered, we have to fight for it."

## **'It's about opportunities'**

In Connecticut, the debate over transgender athletes has been at the forefront for two years. Three cisgender female athletes have filed a federal lawsuit seeking to change the state rule that allows



high school athletes to compete in sports corresponding with their gender identity, largely in response to the success of transgender female track runners Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller, who have combined to win 15 state titles.

The cisgender girls argued that the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference policy violates Title IX, in addition to creating competitive disadvantages and hurting scholarship opportunities for cisgender athletes. “Inescapable biological facts of the human species [are] not stereotypes, ‘social constructs,’ or relics of past discrimination,” reads the lawsuit, which was filed by the Alliance Defending Freedom, a religious conservative legal group.



Andraya Yearwood, center, with teammates after the girls' 4x400-meter relay at the Connecticut Winter Indoor Track Championships at the Floyd Little Athletic Center. (Stan Godlewski/For the Washington Post)

That group also has played a role in shaping Idaho's policy. Barbara Ehardt, a Idaho Republican legislator and former NCAA women's basketball player and coach who authored HB 500, worked with the

ADF to craft the language of the law, she said in an interview. She said her own experience in sports, coupled with her dismay over the case in Connecticut, led her to pursue the bill.

“No matter how you look at it, we cannot compete against the inherent physiological advantages those biological males possess,” she said, later adding: “This has been 100 percent because of my personal experiences and the blessings I received from having had the opportunity to compete and play in not just high school but collegiate sports. I want to protect those opportunities ... for girls and women who will follow after me. This for me is not political but personal. It’s about opportunities.”

The science over who is viewed as a woman in athletic competition remains inconclusive and contentious. It is reflected in the inconsistency of rules across different levels of competition; while the NCAA allows women to compete after a year of hormone therapy, it doesn’t regulate a transgender athlete’s testosterone levels. The International Olympic Committee allows transgender women to compete so long as they maintain certain blood testosterone levels for at least a year.

Researchers are searching for more data and more answers. One of those scientists, Joanna Harper, said no data on trans athletes existed in 2004; that year, she was a well-known distance runner who was beginning hormone therapy in transitioning to female. Her research, part of which was published in 2015, found that a small group of transgender women runners were no more competitive after hormone therapy in the female division than they had been in the male division and were running at least 10 percent slower after treatment.

But the study was small in scope, said Harper, a former adviser to the IOC who has continued her research at Loughborough University in the United Kingdom.



Terry Miller, right, and Chelsea Mitchell in the final of the 55 meter dash at the Connecticut Winter Indoor Track Championships at the Floyd Little Athletic Center. (Stan Godlewski/For the Washington Post)

“How all of these things play out is certainly complicated, and of course we know very, very little about it yet,” Harper said. “But the assumption that trans women will have an unassailable, overall advantage over cisgender women hasn’t proven to be true.”

The fight over who can compete will continue to be waged in court-houses across the country, and how the cases in Idaho and Connecticut are resolved carry significant implications, according to Erin Buzuvis, a Western New England Law School professor who researches and writes about gender and discrimination in education and athletics.

“So far, this fight for inclusion in high school sports, it has been conducted in the political arena on a state-by-state basis. So if there is a victory in [the Hecox case], that will help ensure that the negative political efforts are curtailed,” Buzuvis said. “If there’s not a victory, the status quo remains and what we’ve been doing all along,

which is to convince states one by one to adopt more inclusive policies, that would still be allowed to continue.”

Hecox and her legal team are first aiming to win an injunction by August so she can try out for the school’s team. She continues to train every day, running trails in Boise, often imagining herself wearing the school’s blue and orange colors.

“I definitely feel honored to be a potential trailblazer for my community. If I win the case, it legitimizes the ultimate fact that I’m no different than a cisgender girl,” she said. “I should still be able to compete on the team. It would make me feel that society is valuing me as a member.”