

"Sometimes you do the hard work and set the table and somebody else eats the meal."

Brian Burke

The Niagara Sporting Green

The Voice and TheVoiceofPelham.ca | September 18, 2019

Graham and Taylor capture Champions of Champions crowns in Port **23**



New Panthers captain Devin Sanders.

BILL POTREZ PHOTO

Panthers choose new captain

Work ethic earns Sanders the C

BY BILL POTREZ
BPSPORTSNIAGARA.COM

Devin Sanders has come a long way in a short period of time.

Just a couple of years ago, the 17-year-old Niagara Falls native was playing house league and suiting up for the Westlane Spartans high school team.

Fast forward and Sanders has a year of junior B experience under his belt and is the new captain of the Pelham Panthers.

"At first, I was shocked but I was really excited," Sanders said, when asked for his reaction to being named captain.

"I know I can lead this team. We have a great group of guys here. I was excited to be part of the experience."

Pelham coach Mark Barrick gave Sanders the C based on his work ethic.

"Dev is a quiet leader and has got everything that he deserves by hard work and

effort," Barrick said. "No complaints, no nothing. He just shows up to be a hockey player every day. He is respected and looked up to by the younger guys on the team just because of that effort."

Barrick feels Sanders is the perfect role model for the Panthers, who are one of the younger clubs in the Golden Horseshoe this season.

"You want to be a leader and be a hockey player? Follow that example," Barrick said. "You don't have to be a rah-rah guy, you don't have to be Mr. Motivational Speaker. Just work hard and we'll get things done."

Sanders plans to push himself out of his comfort zone a bit now that he is a position of leadership.

"As a C, I feel it's my responsibility to have those

Following are complete results from the 70th Annual Walt McCollum Niagara District Champion of Champions golf tournament played Saturday, Sept. 7, at Port Colborne Country Club:

JUNIOR BOYS DIVISION

Jackson Strecker, Twenty Valley 39-37-76
 Brandon Ruch, Whisky Run 39-40-79
 Isaiah Ellis, Lookout Point 43-38-81
 Brenden Morin, Cardinal Lakes 41-43-84
 Brenden Jarrett, ICC 44-42-86
 Ethan Torkos, Port Colborne 43-45-88
 Adam Scarlett, Bridgewater 46-42-88
 Owen Sartor, Beechwood 48-44-92
 Ben Kelly, Sawmill 53-44-97
 Jakob Dickhout, Rockway 49-52-101
 David Dexter, Niagara-on-the-Lake 52-58-110

MEN'S DIVISION

Matt Graham, Port Colborne 33-37-70 (playoff winner)
 Luke Delgobbo, Lookout Point 35-35-70
 Jack Allan, Sawmill 35-36-71
 Nolan Vonkalebreuth, Bridgewater 38-35-73
 Kham Yong, Rockway Vineyards 37-38-75
 Matt McKelvie, Freedom Oaks 37-38-75
 A.J. Shau, Pen Lakes 39-37-76
 Brad Neudorf, St. Catharines 38-39-77
 Jon Hiller, Cardinal Lakes 38-39-77
 Tony Nocowski, Rolling Meadows 39-38-77
 Marie Brooks, ICC 44-35-79
 Dave Toulouse, Grand Niagara 39-40-79
 Brad Hill, Willdell 40-41-81
 Gerry Sales, Queenston 42-39-81
 Gord Dunn, Twenty Valley 40-41-81
 Jay Hart, Dunnville 44-40-84
 Mark Isherwood, Beechwood 43-42-85
 Joe Doria, Niagara-on-the-Lake 44-45-89
 Troy Fraser, Whisky Run 43-46-89
 Rick Cook, Water Park 47-46-93
 Vito Pennim, Niagara Falls 44-49-93

SENIOR MEN'S DIVISION

Bernie Badogh, St. Catharines 34-35-69
 Roger Arseneault, Whisky Run 35-37-72
 Frank Mattei, Cardinal Lakes 38-37-75
 Sandy Bilyard, Port Colborne 36-39-75
 Fred LaSelva, Rolling Meadows 41-36-77
 Stephen Warboys, Niagara-on-the-Lake 39-38-77
 Larry Anderson, Queenston 37-40-77
 Ken Riter, Bridgewater 40-37-77
 Andy Labelle, Willdell 40-38-78
 Ian Penny, Lookout Point 36-42-78
 Chris Dault, Grand Niagara 41-38-79
 Tim Dundas, Rockway 41-39-80
 Ange Bozza, Twenty Valley 40-41-81
 John Stansic, Water Park 42-41-83
 Bill Urquhart, Beechwood 44-41-85
 Tony Ravenda, Riverview 43-42-85
 Luke Sikkens, Pen Lakes 44-42-86
 Rick Kozarichuk, Sawmill 44-42-86
 Mark Fleguel, Freedom Oaks 46-42-88
 Mike Gibson, ICC 47-44-91
 Rick Demoe, Niagara Falls 43-48-91

JUNIOR GIRLS DIVISION

Payton Bennett, Twenty Valley 35-37-72
 Mikayla Lacey, Port Colborne 42-44-86
 Emily White, Beechwood 40-46-86
 Mya Mackey, Sawmill 44-44-88
 LADIES DIVISION
 Alex Taylor, Lookout Point 35-34-69
 Kennedy Bodfield, Rockway 38-35-73
 Chris Critelli, St. Catharines 39-37-76
 Stefi Markovich, Port Colborne 37-42-79
 Courtney White, Beechwood 40-39-79
 Nancy Bridgeman, Pen Lakes 40-41-81
 Karen Vamplex, Twenty Valley 42-40-82
 Ruth McBride, Bridgewater 41-43-84
 Emily Zavier, Cardinal Lakes 43-43-86
 Donna Larson, Sawmill 41-45-86
 Colleen Dunn, ICC 46-44-90
 Brittany Brunton, Willdell 43-48-91
 Michelle Fraser, Whisky Run 48-46-94
 Louise Robitaille, Niagara-on-the-Lake 47-48-95
 Wendy Osog, Rolling Meadows 47-48-95
 Parisa Ricciardelli, Queenston 51-51-102
 Ella Allen, Freedom Oaks 49-54-103
 Marsha Edlington, Niagara Falls 49-59-108

SENIOR LADIES DIVISION

Sandra Bilyard, Port Colborne 38-38-78
 Amanda Garner, Lookout Point 38-40-78
 Robin Wilson, Bridgewater 41-41-82
 Sherry Christie, Twenty Valley 41-41-82
 Janet Tome, Cardinal Lakes 41-42-83
 Sarah-Anne Smurlick, Freedom Oaks 41-42-83
 Anne Moss, Sawmill 42-43-85
 Chris Liszak, Willdell 46-39-85
 Darla Jensen, Queenston 44-44-88
 Denise Weaver, Rockway 46-42-88
 Yolanda Henry, Niagara-on-the-Lake 45-44-89
 Theresa Holmes, ICC 46-44-90
 Sue Labatte, Niagara Falls 42-49-91
 Carol Irwin, Rolling Meadows 47-45-92
 Barb Kidd-Mardell, St. Catharines 50-43-93
 Cyndy Roberts, Pen Lakes 48-46-94
 Kathy Morningstar, Whisky Run 49-47-96
 Karen Rush, Dunnville 46-53-99
 Liz Seeley, Beechwood 51-48-99

DM senior football on hold

Lack of player numbers tackles program

BY BERNIE PUCHALSKI
BPSPORTSNIAGARA.COM

One of the iconic senior football programs in Niagara is taking what the school hopes is a one-year leave of absence.

It's been decided that the Denis Morris Reds senior team would not field a squad this season.

"We are folding for this year," Denis Morris principal Dan DiLorenzo said. "We had 45 juniors strong, but we didn't have the bodies at senior. We are going with a junior team and it is a rebuilding year."

In practices leading to the start of the season,

See DM REDS Page 22



Denis Morris Reds in action last season.

BERNIE PUCHALSKI PHOTO

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UNILOCK

Annual stomp set for Saturday

Junkin in for cancer fundraiser's 46th year

BY VOICE STAFF

Niagara's mayors are once again coming together to raise funds for cancer care and research at the 46th Annual Mayor's Invitational Grape Stomp.

On Saturday, Sept. 21 at 12 noon, mayors and community leaders from across Niagara will gather at Montebello Park for the traditional grape stomp. Partnering with the Niagara Grape and Wine Festival, Grape Growers of Ontario, JCI St. Catharines, Skycomp Solutions, and hosted by St. Catharines Mayor Walter Sendzik, the 2019 stomp will support the Walker Family Cancer Centre, Niagara's regional cancer care centre. This year's grape stomping mayors include Mayor Jim Diodati (Niagara Falls), who is also a cancer survivor, Mayor Bill Steele (Port Colborne), Mayor Marvin Junkin (Pelham), Deputy Lord Mayor Clare

Cameron (Niagara-on-the-Lake) and Councillor Ken Sentence (Thorold).

The public is invited to support their mayor in the competition by making a donation to the Walker Family Cancer Centre. Donations made between Sept. 11 and Sept. 19 will go towards the local mayors in the competition. Then on Saturday, Sept. 21 starting at noon, the mayors will compete for a chance at the prized Mayor's Grape Stomp trophy. The volume of stomped grape juice plus the total volume of donations will determine the winner of this year's competition.

As the four-time champion of the Grape Stomp, Sendzik has retired from competition and will be serving as this year's emcee at the event.

"The Mayor's Grape Stomp is always a fun competition to kick off the Niagara Grape and Wine Festival. While

I won't be stomping this year, I look forward to watching and cheering from the sidelines and watching some of Niagara's new mayors and community leaders turn their feet purple," said Sendzik.

Pelham's Mayor Marvin Junkin is ready to jump in.

"Since becoming Mayor, I have been searching for some avenue by which I can benefit a charitable organization," said Junkin.

"The former mayor had his Mayor's Gala, which raised an impressive amount each year for various charities. I don't know if this is the 'event' I have been searching for, but if I can raise some money for such a worthy cause, and support the grape and wine festival, I am more than willing to get purple feet."

The public may make donations at Town Hall.

In a statement, organizers suggest that anyone planning to attend the stomp "Dress for the grape juice that will fly."

DM Reds on hold this season

continued from Page 15

there were never more than 20 players at senior practices, and most days there were only 14 or 15 players out. Those numbers aren't even close to being able to field a competitive senior squad.

Given the school's long history of football success and the number of graduating players who have gone on to excel at higher levels, it was a painful and agonizing decision for the school to make.

"It was very hard, and that's why it took us from our first practice last Tuesday until today to make the decision," DiLorenzo said. "We gave them every opportunity, we had meetings and we were looking for boys who would play but it wasn't there. You can't force a sport like football."

Denis Morris could have combined the juniors and senior to field a varsity squad, but that wasn't a choice that was even contemplated.

"We didn't feel it was prudent to bring up 40 juniors to play when you are playing kids who are 12B, 18 years old and fully grown against 100-pound Grade 9 players," DiLorenzo said. "We felt it was in everybody's best interest, looking at the safety factor, to play at the junior level and rebuild into the future. We have a strong base for that right now."

DiLorenzo is hoping it will only be a one-year absence.

"It was a one-year blip because we didn't have the players and many of our players are going to play at Holy Cross, so they will be joining the Raiders."

We felt it was in everyone's best interest, looking at the safety factor, to play at the junior level

As of this writing, DiLorenzo said four players have decided to join the Holy Cross team.

"We made sure that that avenue was available for them and that also went into the decision making that those who were serious about the game could have somewhere to go play."

Last season, Holy Cross folded its senior team for one year and its players went and played at St. Francis. The willingness of schools to welcome players from another school shows the brotherhood of the Niagara Catholic Athletic Association.

"That is what it's about," DiLorenzo said.

Last season, the Reds went 2-4 in the regular season and tied for fifth place with St. Francis.

SANDERS

continued from Page 15

one-on-one conversations with players and talk to Mark," he said. "It's not my nature to be the loudest guy on the team but I'm definitely going to step up and be louder than I have in the past."

Sanders will be assisted by assistant captains Dylan Biggar, Noah Caperchione, Brodie Thoms, and Mike Butterfield.

"I have an open-door policy with all players," Barrick said. "From the captain and the assistants we have this year, they are the catalyst between this office and the room. They've earned the right to have a bigger piece of my ear than the rest."

Sanders, who collected four goals and 15 points in his rookie season before hitting his stride in the playoffs with three goals and three assists in six games, admits his route to junior hockey was anything but conventional.

"I was just playing house league in high school. I thought it was going to be my last year of hockey and then I somehow got in contact with this team and went out for skate. Then rookie camp came around and I made the team. It's pretty exciting."

He credits those closest to him for his tireless work ethic.

"My dad, my brother and my coaches definitely put that in my mind and set a

great example for me growing up. They were always the ones showing me if you work hard you get something out of it," he said.

They were always the ones showing me if you work hard you get something out of it

"I'm really excited to get into it," Sanders said. "I think we get a few practices under our belts and play a few games in our own division I think we're going to get a good start."

Barrick is well aware that with inexperience comes mistakes.

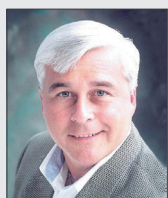
"I think we're working on our identity. We're a very young hockey club, probably the youngest team in our loop. With that comes some bumps along the road," he said. "We're going to be quick. We have to move pucks quick and be a good transition team because of the nature of our hockey club. It's a process right now. It's growth but we've got some great young hockey players here. It's just a learning process."

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Graham and Taylor capture championship crowns

One Lookout Point golfer wins, another loses, in playoff

BY BERNIE PUCHALSKI
BPSPORTSNIAGARA.COM

The men's division of the 70th Annual Walt McColm Champions of Champions golf tournament came down to an all-Golf Town playoff Saturday, September 7, at the Port Colborne Country Club.

In the end, Port Colborne's Matt Graham, the 32-year-old manager of Golf Town in St. Catharines, sank a 15-foot birdie putt on the first playoff hole to defeat Lookout Point's Luke DelGobbo, a 16-year-old employee at Golf Town and the reigning Canadian juvenile (under-17) champion.

Graham (33-37-70) and DelGobbo (35-35-70) finished one shot ahead of Sawmill's Jack Allan (35-36-71) after regulation play. "I know Luke well," said Graham, a former Ontario junior boys champion. "I follow his game...and I knew that he would be good. We have definitely become friends and this was pretty cool."

Graham is a huge fan of DelGobbo, who placed seventh overall among junior-aged golfers at the Canadian championships.

"I probably see a little bit of a younger version of me in him," Graham said.

Graham made a bogey on

the 14th hole during regulation play by hitting an iron off the tee, so he changed up to a hybrid and hit it 76 yards from the green in the playoff. He hit a 60 degree wedge to about 15 feet. After DelGobbo knocked his birdie putt six or seven feet past the hole, Graham drained the winner.

"Even if I missed, the pressure was on him to still make that putt, but that wasn't what I was thinking," Graham said. "I wanted to make that putt."

It was big win for Graham, who only plays twice a week and doesn't practise much at all.

"I pay attention every time I play and I try every time I play," he said. "I try to make sure I'm not just out there whacking the ball around and I am trying to shoot a good score every time I play out here. That keeps me sharp."

It was the fourth men's Champion of Champions title in his career, with previous victories coming in 2010, 2012 and 2013.

"It's very special to win, especially here on my home course," Graham said. "Our new owners have done so many good things here and I know they wanted to host



From left, Luke DelGobbo, Matt Graham, and Alex Taylor.

BERNIE PUCHALSKI PHOTOS

this tournament, but they just wanted to wait until everything was done and ready to go.

This year was the perfect year for it and you saw that with the amazing attendance today with how many members came out and supported us. It was fantastic."

Graham's day included six birdies and four bogeys.

"I putted well today," he said. "Two of the birdies were two putts on par fives, but the other four were 15 to 20 feet."

Completing the top five in the men's division were: Bridgewater's Nolan Vonkalelreuth (38-35-73); Rockway Vineyard's Kham Vong (37-38-75) and Freedom Oaks' Matt McKelvie (37-38-75).

ALEX THE GREAT

Lookout Point's Alex Taylor made a triumphant return the Champion of Champions tournament, firing a 35-34-69 to win the women's division.

It was the third Champions title of the 24-year-old's career. She was the junior girls winner in 2010 and 2012.

"It was cool to win because I haven't played it since then, and I had gone two-of-two in the ones that I had played in," she said. "Anything can happen and it was nice to get redemption since I fell short at the club championship."

Taylor finished second to Stef Markovich at the Lookout Point club championships, but Markovich also won Port Colborne's title and chose to represent

the host club.

"I was glad today that I could finally get under par," Taylor said. "I had been kicking it in the mid-70s and I was frustrated the other day because I was three under on the front nine and then I lost it, making three doubles to shoot 75."

There was no repeat of that Friday, thanks to starting her round with a pair of birdies.

"To hold on to it after being three under par after nine today, was really good."

This summer, she competed at the Women's Porter Cup and the Ontario Women's Championship and placed in the top 40 at both events. The former scholar-

ship golfer has found it tough to keep her competitive edge going after graduating from Grand Valley State in 2017.

"That's why I play in these tournaments, so I can keep that competitive edge," she said. "You can play several times a week, but unless you play in an actual tournament, it is a totally different mindset. You play different golf and it was a lot of fun today."

Rounding out the top five in the women's division were: Rockway Vineyard's Kennedy Bodfield (38-35-73); St. Catharines Golf and Country Club's Chris Critelli (39-37-76); Beechwood's Courtney White (40-39-79); and Markovich (37-42-79).

FAITH LIFT

continued from Page 21

dies on the operating table.

In his moving eulogy, Edward shares that the last three months of his life have been his best. He crosses off another item that had been on the list — "helping a complete stranger for a common good." He then takes the initiative to reconcile with his daughter. This time he succeeds and he gets to hold his granddaughter for the first time. He crosses off another item — "kiss the most beautiful girl in the world."

At the movie's end, Edward dies, at age 81, and his servant takes his ashes (as well as Carter's) to the top of the Himalayas. He places both cans together and crosses off the last item on the list — "witness something truly majestic." What a great storyline!

Now, even though I've spoiled the movie for you, I hope you'll still see it. But there is one item which is sadly missing. It's some-

This is the item that has eternal consequences

thing everyone needs to have on their "bucket list." For me, it's the most important.

I would describe it this way: "Make your peace with God through faith in His Son." This is the item which has eternal consequences. I hope it's on your bucket list. And I hope it's already been checked off. If not, bow your head and do it today. It's the one item you simply don't want to leave this life without. ♦

Rob Weatherby is a retired Baptist pastor, likes good movies, and has his own "bucket list."



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"I know I am getting better at golf because I'm hitting fewer spectators."

Gerald Ford

The Niagara Sporting Green

The Voice and TheVoiceofPelham.ca | September 4, 2019

Canadian champion's tough choice **15**
Pelham swimmers and their trophy **16**



BERNIE PUCHALSKI PHOTO

Hot Hand Luke tops field

DelGobbo captures Canadian golf championship

BY BERNIE PUCHALSKI
BPSPORTSNIAGARA.COM

Just advancing to the final two rounds of the Canadian Junior Boys Golf Championship wasn't going to cut it for Luke DelGobbo. "I had intentions to win the under-17 [juvenile] division and then top 10 in the under-19s," the 16-year-old Fonthill resident said.

Playing at the Covered Bridge course in Hartland, N.B., DelGobbo did exactly that. He fired rounds of 71, 70, 69 and 70 and his eight under par score was good enough to tie him for first place in the juvenile division, where he won in a playoff. In the under-19 division, his score was good enough to tie him for seventh place.

"I set those goals at the beginning of the season and I worked hard to get there," the Lookout Point member said. "I checked [those goals] off the list when I was there and it was nice to do it."

DelGobbo captured the juvenile crown when he sunk a six-foot par putt on the second playoff hole. Both golfers parred the first playoff hole to set the stage for DelGobbo's winning putt.

"It was kind of like 'Wow. I did it.' I was very happy to do it and I had my friends and family there to see it."

Getting to share the moments with his parents, Mike and Lucia, and friends was priceless.

"I couldn't have done it with anyone else," he said. "It was awesome."

The Grade 11 student at E. L. Crossley has been playing well for a couple months now, ever since an impressive performance at the prestigious International Junior Masters tournament in East Aurora, N.Y., in late June. DelGobbo shot 75 and 76 in stroke play to advance to the match play portion of the tournament as the 13th seed. He made it all the way to the finals before losing 2&1 to Jackson Chandler. Chandler will be playing scholarship golf at Ohio State this fall.

Along the way, DelGobbo had a second-round victory over a golfer ranked in the top 20 in the United States. That golfer has signed with the University of Virginia.

"I just finished writing exams. I played well there and I have been playing well ever since," he said.

Before the nationals, DelGobbo made the quarterfinals of the Ontario Junior Boys Match Play Championship. He was four down with five holes to play in his quarterfinal match, but gutted it out before losing on the 18th hole.

The talented teen is in the process of figuring out his schedule for 2020.

"I haven't decided what tournaments I am going to play next year and I haven't see my goals, but obviously I want to win them all," he said. "We will see."

DelGobbo's goal is to garner a golf scholarship in the United States. In about three weeks, U.S. schools will be able to contact him and express their interest.

"If they come, they come and if not, whatever."

He's obviously not worried about the process yet.

"It's no big deal," he said. "I have two years until I have to commit. As long as I can get it done in two years, I will be happy."

DelGobbo started golfing when he was 11 or 12 when a friend, Jake DiBellonia, took him out to play a round at Eagle Valley.

See HOT HAND next page

ATHLETICS AT BROCK

Sunday, Sept. 1

HOME GAMES
(Brock Alumni Field)
Women's Soccer vs. Windsor,
Noon

Men's Soccer vs. Windsor,
2:15 p.m.

Monday, Sept. 2

HOME GAMES
(Brock Alumni Field)
Exhibition: Men's Rugby vs.
McMaster, 11 a.m.

Saturday, Sept. 7

Softball vs. York, 2 p.m. & 4
p.m. (Lancaster Park)

Exhibition: Men's Lacrosse
vs. Western, 4 p.m. (Brock
Alumni Field)

Sunday, Sept. 8

Softball vs. Queen's 11 a.m.
& 1 p.m. (Lancaster Park)

Men's Rugby vs. Western, 1
p.m. (Brock Alumni Field)



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HOT HAND

continued from previous page

"I went once and I have loved it ever since," he said.

He won the under-15 division of the Niagara Junior Golf Tour in 2017 and added the junior boys title at the Niagara Champion of Champions golf tournament.

*I went once
and I have
loved it ever since*

"I had a good year that year."

In 2018, he placed fifth at the National Drive, Chip and Putt Championship held at Augusta National.

The only other Lookout Point golfer in the field at the Canadian Junior/Juvenile championships was Freddy D'Angelo (70-68-71-78) who tied for 28th in the junior division.

At the Ontario Juvenile championships DelGobbo opened with a 81 but rebounded with a pair of 72s to tie for 13th.

Other Lookout Point members in the Ontario field included: Isaiah Ellis (74-79-75), tied for 19th; Matthew Martel (74-77-77), tied for 19th; and, Cameron Kiemele (73-76-80), tied for 22nd.

Thomas named Niagara's top Dog

Forward easy choice for IceDogs' captainship

BY BILL POTRE CZ
BPSPORTSNIAGARA.COM

The Niagara IceDogs wasted little time naming their new captain.

Before the IceDogs even hit the ice for the start of training camp last Tuesday, the club had already announced veteran centre Akil Thomas as their captain for the 2019/20 Ontario Hockey League season.

"I'm very excited," Thomas said Tuesday before hitting the ice for a series of inter-squad games.

"Coming into my first year, I had Ryan Mantha as my captain and he was a really good guy to me. He really showed me the ropes. Then I had Johnny [Corneil] and Ben Jones. Just to learn off them was really cool."

IceDogs head coach Billy Burke said Thomas was a natural choice given his play on the ice and the way he conducts himself away from the rink.

"It really was a bit of a no-brainer with Akil this year," Burke said. "He's a special case. He was a guy who came in at 16 and was good enough to make a major impact right away."

"It feels like he's been

here for so long. His play on the ice speaks for itself. He's a warrior and a competitor on the ice but it's the behind the scenes stuff that's most impressive. He really is a team-first guy with no ego and very inclusive."

Thomas, who was drafted in the first round of the 2016 OHL Priority Selection (12th overall), has accumulated 231 points (81-150) in 192 games with the IceDogs. He set a record for most points by an IceDogs rookie in the 2016-17 season (48), and was one of three Niagara players to surpass the 100-point mark in the 2018-19 season.

Thomas said having a strong leader in the room is vital.

"It's huge. All three captains I've had here have been amazing. It helps the mojo in the locker room so it all starts with them and creates a team atmosphere," he said.

Thomas, who was named an alternate captain in the 2017-18 season as a sophomore player, isn't a huge rah-rah type of player, but also isn't afraid to speak up



New IceDogs captain Akil Thomas.

OHL IMAGES PHOTO

when necessary.

"I think he's a bit of a hybrid," Burke said. "He's not the loudest guy in the room — a Ben Jones may have been a little more vocal — where Akil will speak up but he'll pick and choose his spots. He likes to take guys aside and communicate that way as opposed to speaking in front of everybody."

"He wants to be the best player in the league and use that as leadership as well."

Thomas said he under-

stands his role as a veteran on a team that is suddenly filled with younger players after having a locker room full of veteran stars last season

"For sure, [I'll] definitely have to be more patient," he said. "I like the opportunity. It gives me the chance to take over games and win games for my team."

"I'm excited for the role and to show the younger guys the way and to help them. Hopefully I can be

someone they mention in an interview one day that helped them out."

Thomas, a second-round pick of the Los Angeles Kings in the 2018 NHL Draft (51st overall), skated and worked out with some of the Kings during the summer and will be attending Kings training camp.

"I've been talking to them a lot. I played a little bit with them this summer and looking forward to it to see what happens there."

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Canadian champ's career in jeopardy

Wrestler Jevon Balfour facing difficult result off the mat

BY BERNIE PUCHALSKI
BPSPORTSNIAGARA.COM

One of Canada's top male wrestlers is contending with the heart-breaking, paradoxical choice of hoping that his promising athletic career is over.

Five-time defending senior champion Jevon Balfour has a detached retina in his left eye and is faced with two possibilities. If doctors are able to reattach his retina, it will be too risky for him to continue wrestling. If the retina can't be repaired, he can continue wrestling, but he will be facing a lifetime of severely restricted vision.

"It is frightening, for sure, but at the end of the day I can't do anything about it," the Brock Wrestling Club member said. "If I can pick one, it is obviously to see out of this eye, but I don't know which one is going to happen right now."

Balfour had an appointment with an eye surgeon Monday and is now waiting for an appointment with a retina specialist.

"I can see a lot of light, but I can't make out details."

The 24-year-old Brampton native can't even pinpoint when he suffered the injury. Getting poked in the eye is a common occurrence in practice and in competition, and it was one of the pokes that did the

damage.

Like every high-performance athlete in the Brock wrestling room, Balfour has put his life on hold and has been training like a fiend to chase his Olympic and world championship aspirations.

He gets closer every day to reaching his dreams and is surprisingly philosophical about the major curve ball he has been thrown.

"It is the same thing as wrestling," the recent graduate said. "It teaches you a lot and you have got to be level-headed."

"This sport was going to end for me sooner or later — obviously it sucks that it could be sooner than it could have been or sooner that I wanted it to — but what can I do?"

He prefers not to moan about his bad fortune.

"Everyone keeps asking me how I am reacting this way, but I don't know," he said. "I can't explain it, but in my mind it is already one or the other."

"Whatever happens, I am going to go with that route."

His chosen route is obviously having the retina reattached.

"If not, I am going to work my ass off to become that Olympic champion that I want to become."



Champion wrestler Jevon Balfour.

BERNIE PUCHALSKI PHOTO

If his wrestling career his over, the social science graduate is not sure what he would do next.

"I will figure it out step by step."

Balfour competed at the recent Pan Am Games and was still able to bring home a bronze medal in the 74-kilogram division despite the injury.

"It didn't feel like my eyesight was terrible, until I close my right eye," he said. "It must have been a competitive disadvantage, but I don't like to think that it was. I don't want to use it as an excuse."

Balfour lost to Puerto Rico's Franklin Gomez Matos in the semifinals before beating Argentina's Jorge Llano by technical superiority (11-0) in the first round of the bronze-medal match.

"It was very nice to win, but I knew I could beat this guy," he said. "If it was a harder match, it would have been a lot more satis-

fying.

"But it was still very, very sweet to know that I am making progress."

Balfour's 74-kilogram weight class at the Pan Ams was loaded with top wrestlers, including Olympic champion Jordan Burroughs from the United States, and Matos, a former world medalist.

Balfour fell behind early to Matos and had to take chances to try and get back in the match, losing 11-0 was a tough pill to swallow because he had lost 3-2 the last time the two had squared off.

"I got out of position and I was not as focused in the beginning," he said. "I was down by too many points and I had to do something."

But with every tough loss comes a lesson learned.

"I know I have to be more patient when I wrestle and I know that these guys are world cham-

pions," Balfour said. "I can't go out there and pretend these guys aren't world champions and that I am way better than them."

"This guy is good, I am good and it's going to be a battle."

In 2015, he placed fifth at the Pan Am Games.

"This was my second Pan Am Games — the other one was in Toronto — and I am not trying to be biased but Toronto was a better Games."

He enjoyed the entire experience.

"The stadium was really nice, the fans loved us as Canadians and it was pretty good."

Pan Am head coach Tonya Verbeek said Balfour had a tough road in Peru.

"I would say that he had the toughest weight class at the Pan Ams on the men's side," she said. "He wrestled well, but when he wrestled Gomez, he got caught right at the beginning and he had a hard time getting back on track."

Balfour and the Canadian coaches have high expectations for him.

"He is starting to prove that he is there with the top guys," Verbeek said. "He is super eager to put it all together and he's doing what he needs to do to do that."

The Commonwealth Games silver and bronze medalist has not been practising while he waits for news about his eye. If his wrestling career is meant to continue, he will need to start preparing for the senior world wrestling championships September 14-22 in Kazakhstan.

A top-six result would guarantee a spot for Canada in his 74-kilogram weight class at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. Canada's Olympic trials will be held December 6-8 in Niagara.

"I want to find out what is going on right now," he said. "They are in there training and I wish it was me."

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The Town of Pelham gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Niagara Community Foundation, which is a public foundation serving the people of Niagara. The Foundation builds permanently endowed charitable funds for the changing need and opportunities of the community and provides grants to eligible charitable organizations in culture, health, education, environment, recreation and social service sectors.