

Paola AD proposes bill to help classification issue



Last October, Paola activities director Jeff Hines went to a Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) regional meeting to get updates on classification issues.

Six months later, Hines found himself in Topeka, in front of the Kansas Senate Education Committee to talk about a bill that could change the way schools are classified.

On Thursday, Hines sat in front of the committee to discuss Senate Bill 464 – a bill that he proposed with guidance of Sen. Caryn Tyson.

Statute 72-130 establishes specific guidelines pertaining to the organizational structure and functions of KSHSAA. Senate Bill 464 would change one part of the statute and strike the line which allows schools to be classified only by student enrollment.

“The total number of students in schools is a great starting point for classifying them,” Hines said. “It makes sense that the largest schools should play the largest schools and the smallest schools should play the smallest schools, but there are other things that need to be considered.”

For several months, KSHSAA has had a classification committee discuss different ways to have a competitive balance with its member schools. They came up with ideas of reducing the number of classifications or changing the number of schools in a

division.

"There were no other factors being considered and that bothered me," Hines said, "All that would do was reshuffle the schools just a little bit but we would have the same problem."

The problem for the committee was its hands were tied thanks to the wording in Statute 72-130 that specifically states schools can only be classified by enrollment numbers and nothing else.

So Hines went to work and helped create Senate Bill 464, which does not give a specific solution to the problem, but rather would take wording out of the statute to allow KSHSAA to figure out how to classify schools on its own.

Hines gave a 15 minute testimony in front of the committee and then answered questions from the committee members for more than 30 minutes afterward. Before the hearing, Hines received support from every member in the Frontier League, Pioneer League and all but two schools in the Kaw Valley League, as those two didn't respond before the hearing.

Following Hines' testimony, Sen. Vicki Schmidt, R-Topeka, had concerns as to why KSHSAA did not come in front of the committee itself to ask for changes.

Hines informed the committee that it would be redundant for KSHSAA to endorse the plan, because if approved, member schools would still have to vote on it. He believes Bill 464 would let KSHSAA come up with a system and let schools improve it, instead of the legislature.

"KSHSAA wants to be neutral because this proposal would affect different schools in different ways," Hines said. "It could be very beneficial to some schools and others may not like it because they might have to move up a class. So, why should KSHSAA have to pick sides in it and pit member against member? It doesn't have to be that way in my opinion."

“Yes, a school that has to move up a classification might not like it, but is it the best thing overall for the association? They can’t look themselves in the mirror and say ‘No, this isn’t the right thing to do?’

A major problem for some member schools in KSHSAA is they do not believe it is competitively equal the way it is currently structured.

“I am not a believer in participation medals,” Hines said. “If they are kindergartners, sure, but when you start playing, part of being successful later in life is learning how to compete. We all competed for a job when you have gone in for an interview and that is good. You need to have that skillset and I am not saying that we need to give more trophies out and give everyone a shot, but I just want a system in place that is equitable for all so that some don’t have an unfair advantage at the expense of the rest and I think that is what is happening.”

One of the problems is the lack of balance between championships won between public and private high schools. Hines did research and presented numbers at the hearing at the number of state championships won between private and public schools from 2004 to 2014.

Here is what he found.

- Private schools make up slightly less than 8 percent of the KSHSAA membership.
- Private schools have won slightly less than 32 percent of the state championships.
- Based on membership percentage, private schools should only win approximately 8 percent of the titles, not nearly 32 percent.
- Private schools are winning four times more state titles than should be expected based on their memberships.
- Private schools are nine times more likely to win five

or more state titles than their public school peers.

"In that period of time, I looked for who has won five or more state titles," Hines said. "That is a difficult feat. You look at Paola's history and we have won like seven and Louisburg has won three in 100-plus years. During those 10 years, 37 percent of those private schools won five or more during that time and public schools had 4 percent win five or more. Private schools are nine times more likely to become a dynasty or a successful program with strong tradition. You tell me how we are all the same?"

Another problem they are facing is schools with a high percentage of low socioeconomic status (SCS) students, cannot compete against fellow schools in their own classification in many activities, including football.

"There is a whole bunch of schools in the Kansas City, Kansas school district that are 6A or 5A that have no business competing against those really hard schools," Hines said. "They don't have resources, they don't have the students, there is no interest and they have all those things working against them and I feel bad for those kids. Who wants to trot out against some of those bigger schools and know you are going to get your ears boxed in? That is not fun. Moreover, it is not challenging for the kids those schools are playing against."

Hines believes competition is important when it comes to the growth of the student athlete and it is beneficial for the school and its community.

"Not only what it does for grades, but for what it does for the human spirit," Hines said.

"When I was the FFA advisor in Paola, we won 10 state championships in nine years and you could tell the interest by the students and the community went through the roof. You can say the same thing about Louisburg and what Jim Morgan does

with his FFA kids. People flock to success.

“Naturally, when they are there they feel better about themselves, they want to work harder in the classroom to stay eligible and kids that want to stay involved are going to be more successful in life. It is all about having the chance to be successful.”

During Hines’ testimony in front of the Senate Education Committee, not all of the legislatures seemed open to the idea. Molly Baumgardner, R-Louisburg, asked Hines if he would be willing to relinquish state funding if the legislature agrees to release oversight of how KSHSAA classifies schools.

“If we relinquished the funding behind it, (high school activities) would disappear,” Hines said at the hearing.

No action was taken following the hearing, but the committee chairman spent 15 minutes with him and Tyson to help them strategize on what to do next.

One option is to amend the bill to include more specifics that could include a multiplier or a separate division for private schools and a low SCS school de-multiplier.

Another option, Hines said, would be to have the classification committee draft a letter to the Senate Education Committee that states they would like to study these other factors as part of a proposal for revamping the classification system, but not until they feel the legislature is open to changing the law.

Whatever decision comes next, however, Hines wants it to be decided by multiple people within KSHSAA on how to proceed.

“I don’t feel comfortable making that change because I feel a committee needs to do the work,” Hines said. “I shouldn’t be doing it, nor should 11 legislators, you need more. We should let the classification committee work on it and hopefully we

can get some things accomplished.

“The only way to allow this to happen is to remove the barrier in place that exists due to the state statute.”

Vance inks with Pittsburg State football



Louisburg senior Anders Vance signed his letter of intent to play football at Pittsburg State on Wednesday at Louisburg High School. Sitting next to Anders (from left) are his brother Alek Vance, his mother Alicia Vance and sister Ainsley Vance. Standing (from left) is Louisburg assistant Gary Griffin, head coach Kyle Littrell, assistant Robert Ebenstein and wrestling head coach Bobby Bovaird. Not pictured is Anders' father, Rob Vance.

To say this football season has been a whirlwind for Anders Vance might be an understatement.

Vance was one of the leaders on this season's Louisburg High School team that led a turnaround from three wins last year, to seven wins and a spot in the playoffs this past season.

Then came the postseason awards and a selection to play in an all-star game. However, there was one more thing to check off his list – and he did it Wednesday.

In front of his family and coaches, Vance signed his letter of intent to play football at Pittsburg State University this fall, which marked the end of what was a memorable season for Vance.

“I have been wanting to play college football since I started playing when I was a little kid,” Vance said. “I am really looking forward to it. I am excited for everything being faster, getting stronger and a higher level of football will be a new challenge for me.”

Going to Pittsburg State was a relatively easy choice for the Louisburg lineman as it had a definite family connection. Not only did he have a few family members attend the school, but his grandfather, Jim Knox, played for the Gorillas before becoming a long-time superintendent for USD 416.

“It was closer to home, which is nice,” Vance said. “Of course that was a big reason why my mom liked it because it was closer and she didn’t want me going too far away. A lot of my family went there too and my grandpa played football there. So I am pretty familiar with it already. Plus they have great facilities there, which was nice as well.”



Anders Vance (52) hopes to earn a spot on the Pittsburg State defense.

Vance, who stands at 6-feet, 1-inch and weighs 285 pounds, has been a fixture on the Louisburg line since his sophomore year and has grown every season under head coach Kyle Littrell. Now, Littrell believes Vance can grow even more at his next stop.

"I am really happy for Anders and his decision," Littrell said. "Anders is the type of kid who is going to go down to Pitt and impress them by his work ethic, attitude and coachability. Anders knows going in that Pitt typically has a lot of pretty good linemen, so I think he has prepared himself mentally for the tough road ahead.

"I think Anders will be just fine at Pitt. They are getting a great student, a great football player, and a great person to represent their university."

Vance earned a lot of recognition in the offseason as well. In December, he was selected to the Class 4A all-state first team by the Kansas Football Coaches Association, Topeka Capital-Journal and Wichita Eagle.

He was also an honorable mention selection to the all-metro team by the Kansas City Star.

Most recently, Vance was selected to participate in the Kansas Shrine Bowl, an all-star game that benefits Shriners Hospitals for Children. Only 68 seniors from across the state are selected to play in the game.

The Louisburg senior was a starting lineman on both sides of the ball for the Wildcats. Vance was the team's starting center and defensive tackle. He recorded 35 tackles, with six for a loss, a sack, fumble recovery, forced fumble and two batted balls.

As for where Vance fits on the Pitt State team this coming fall, that has yet to be decided, but he is ready for whatever challenge comes his way.

“The coaches said I could start out wherever I please and go from there,” Vance said. “I will probably start out on defense, and if that doesn’t work, then they can move me wherever they see fit. I just want to be able to play and do what I can do to help the team.”

McLellan signs to play football at Hutchinson



Mitchell McLellan signed his letter of intent to play football at Hutchinson Community College on Wednesday at Louisburg High School. Sitting next to Mitchell (from left) are his brother Kyle McLellan, mother Angi McLellan and father Wade McLellan. Standing (from left) is Louisburg head football coach Kyle Littrell and assistant Robert Ebenstein.

Mitchell McLellan, like many others, had dreams of eventually playing college football one day.

For McLellan, it was a game he has loved since he was little. Now, McLellan's dream is on the verge of becoming a reality.

Alongside his family, McLellan made it official Wednesday as he signed his letter of intent to play football at Hutchinson Community College. Although he took a few other trips, he couldn't imagine playing anywhere else than in Hutchinson.

"They are just a winning program," McLellan said. "They have won six bowl games in the past seven years and they produce athletes. If I want to continue playing football after Hutch, then this is the school that will help me get to that bigger program."

McLellan took visits to other area schools like Coffeyville and Fort Scott, but he liked where he fit with the Blue Dragon program.

The Louisburg senior was a starting wide receiver and cornerback for the Wildcats this past season, but the Blue Dragon coaches see him as a wide receiver at the college level.

"Hutch just felt like the right fit for me," McLellan said. "The coaches were awesome and their program stood out. Their weight program was great, the school was great and their team – they win. I want to be on a team that wins.

"It all comes down to who are the best athletes and who really wants to be on the field. I feel like I can compete with those guys and there is no doubt in my mind that I can."



Mitchell McLellan hauls in a catch during a game earlier this season. McLellan will play football at Hutchinson Community College beginning this fall.

McLellan had a lot of success for the Wildcats this past season at wide receiver. He was an honorable mention all-Frontier League selection with 29 catches for 537 yards and five touchdowns.

He also played well on the defensive side. McLellan was a first-team all-league player at cornerback with 54 tackles, including 35 solo stops. He also had two tackles for a loss, a forced fumble, a fumble recovery and an interception.

"I'm very proud of Mitchell," Louisburg coach Kyle Littrell said. "I'm not sure that going into the season that Mitchell thought he could play at the next level. I watched him run routes in the summer and hone his craft as a wide receiver.

"The thing that I like about Mitchell is he has the frame to easily put on 25-30 pounds of muscle. As long as Mitchell takes to Hutch that same love of the game and dedication to

get better every day, he will work himself into a quality receiver for the Blue Dragons.”

Although he is done putting on a Wildcat uniform, McLellan will never forget his time playing for Louisburg High School and the memories he took away from it.

“It has been an unbelievable four years for me,” McLellan said. “The chemistry has been great and the environment you get around the coaches and the players is that everyone is family. That is going to be the hardest part is leaving my family. I love those boys and not being out on the field on Friday nights anymore – I am going to miss it. I can’t explain it. When you are out there on the field, doing work, it is just the greatest feeling you could ever have.”

Vance selected to play in Shrine Bowl



Louisburg High School senior Anders Vance (52) was recently selected to participate in the Kansas Shrine Bowl on July 30 at Emporia State University. Vance was one of 68 seniors from across the state chosen to play in the all-star game.

Anders Vance has seen honor after honor roll in after he helped lead the Louisburg High School football team back to the playoffs this past season.

Vance received his latest recognition over the weekend and it might turn out to be the most impressive. The LHS senior received notification that he was selected to participate in the Kansas Shrine Bowl later this year.

Only 68 seniors from across the state are selected to participate in the charity all-star football game and Vance was named to the list by different sports media in Kansas, along with the Kansas Shrine Bowl coaching staff.

“It is a great honor for me,” Vance said. “This has always been a goal for me in the back of my mind, but I wasn’t sure that I would get selected or even nominated. So for this to happen is pretty exciting and I am really looking forward to the experience.”



Anders Vance

The Shrine Bowl game and events surrounding the game will benefit Shriners Hospitals for Children, which is a health care system of 22 hospitals dedicated to improving the lives of children.

It has been five years since Louisburg has had a player selected to the game. Tyler Ewy, who was the last Wildcat named, participated in the 2011 Shrine Bowl before moving on to the Washburn football team.

Vance will compete for the East team during the July 30 contest, which will be held at Emporia State University. He will head out early before the game to practice and then will travel to a Shriners hospital to visit patients.

"Anders deserves this honor," Louisburg coach Kyle Littrell said. "He belongs with the best of the best. I know college coaches, wherever he may go, are going to love this kid. You always hear coaches preach getting better every day and doing it with the right attitude and effort. Anders embodies all of the qualities that college coaches are looking for in a player.

"I hope that whatever college he chooses to play at will allow him to take part in the Shrine Bowl game. There are some college staffs out there who would frown upon an incoming player risking injury by playing in the Shrine Bowl game, but hopefully they will allow him to participate. Louisburg has had a few players in the past that have been selected to play and all of them have said that it was an amazing experience."

It has already been a great year for Vance as he has been recognized across the state. Last month, he was selected to the Class 4A all-state first team by the Kansas Football Coaches Association, Topeka Capital-Journal and Wichita Eagle.

He was also an honorable mention selection to the all-metro team by the Kansas City Star.

Vance was a starting lineman on both sides of the ball as he was the Wildcats' starting center and defensive tackle. He recorded 35 tackles, with six for a loss, a sack, fumble recovery, forced fumble and two batted balls.

"I think I had a pretty good year, but I think a lot of it was because the team did so well," Vance said. "We had a good year and a lot of guys were honored with different things. To be selected to the Shrine Bowl is pretty awesome."

As far as which of the side of the ball he will play on, that has yet to be determined.

"I don't really care where I play, I will do whatever the coaches need me to," Vance said. "I don't really have a favorite, I just want to go out there and play. I will be happy with whatever."

2015 Shrine Bowl Roster

East: Cole Baird, Silver Lake; Mason Barta, Holton; Orion Battaglia, Pittsburg Colgan; Carson Becker, Rock Creek; Alex Blake, BV North; Anthony Brown, Mill Valley; Connor Byers, Bonner Springs; Austin Cook, Fort Scott; Dawson Downing, Miege; Grant Elston, Eudora; Riley England, Osawatomie; Wykeen Gill, Atchison; Jared Green, SM West; Jeff Gurley, Blue Valley; Paul Holt, Burlingame; Tucker Horak, Rossville; Teven Jenkins, Topeka; Will Jones, Washburn Rural; Tom Killilea, St. Thomas Aquinas; Nick Kirmer, Emporia; Jace McDown, Columbus; Will Mengarelli, Pittsburg; Ryan Menghini, Frontenac; Winston Meyer, Nemaha Central; Jordan Newby, Topeka West; Brooks Peavler, Topeka Hayden; Zach Schwalm, Uniontown; Patrick Shuler, Mission Valley; Isaiah Simmons, Olathe North; Brady Snider, Cherryvale; Bryce Tornadoen, Lawrence Free State; Anders Vance, Louisburg; Chris Winkel, Troy; JD Woods, Lawrence.

Head Coach: Blake Pierce, Topeka Seaman. **Assistant coaches:** Max Cordova, Free State; Travis Thurston, Aquinas; Dan Grundy, Columbus; Derick Hammes, Rossville; Derek Jasper, Troy.

West: Jaden Abernathy, Buhler; Jeff Ast, Andale; Nathan

Burgoyne, Collegiate; Chase Crawford, Valley Center; Alex Deist, Great Bend; Cortland Enriquez, Salina Central; Austin Fletcher, Hutchinson; Cooper Griffith, Scott City; Harley Hazlett, Abilene; Brett Huelsmann, Eisenhower; Colter Hulling, Kapaun; Noah Johnson, Bishop Carroll; Kash Larrabee, Meade; Gavin Lively, Norton; Isaiahh Loudermilk, West Elk; Jeremy Luck, Maize South; Donovan Lumpkin, Phillipsburg; Eli McKee, Halstead; Rodney Murphy, Wichita Heights; Jonah Nowak, Garden Plain; Darraja Parnell, Andover Central; Konnor Penning, Washington County; Nalen Rincones, Garden City; Garrett Roth, Hesston; Ian Rudzik, Ulysses; Brady Rust, Derby; Noah Schomacker, Cheney; Trey Teeter, Holcomb; Jake Tiernan, Solomon; Duall Watson, Wichita Northwest; Logan Weakley, Augusta; Blake Wilson, Mulvane; Raye Wilson, Junction City; Jason Zook, Chapman.

Head Coach: Randall Zimmerman, Junction City. **Assistant coaches:** Doug Davis, Junction City; Marc Marinelli, Eisenhower; Kent Teeter, Holcomb; Jason Grider, Halstead; J.B. Covington, Phillipsburg.

Top 10 stories of 2015



Here are the Louisburg Sports Zone Top 10 Stories of the Year. In each brief explanation of the story, there will be a link

to the full story of when the event actually happened. Thanks again for a successful 2015 and I am already looking forward to 2016.



Hogan Welch (left) and Wyatt Reece each qualified for state in their respective sports.

10. Welch and Reece qualify for state

LHS students Hogan Welch and Wyatt Reece each put together strong seasons in their respective sports.

In May, Welch qualified for the Class 4A state golf tournament after he shot an 85 at the Osawatomie Golf Course to become one of five individual qualifiers for state. It was the first time Welch had qualified for the state tournament and would shoot a 79 a week later in McPherson to finish 40th overall.

As for Reece, he qualified for the state cross country meet for the first time in his career in October. The Louisburg sophomore came in 13th overall and was also one of five individual qualifiers. A week later Reece traveled to Wamego to compete at the state meet and ran a 18:43 to come in 71st.



Louisburg's Jimmy Dolan (left) and Mya Diacono each suffered major head injuries from an accident just days apart. The Louisburg community rallied together to help the two families.

9. Accidents bring Louisburg community together

Jimmy Dolan and Mya Diacono live in the same community but were worlds apart from each other.

Jimmy, a junior at Louisburg High School, loves to wrestle, hang out with friends and live the life of a teenager.

It was a far cry from 9-year-old Mya who loves soccer, horses and spending time with her fourth-grade friends at Broadmoor Elementary. In a town of less than 5,000 people, the two had never met.

Two tragic accidents changed all of that.

On Jan. 12, Jimmy lost control of his vehicle while driving to school and suffered a major brain injury. Just 42 days later,

Mya was involved in an automobile accident just outside the Louisburg city limits that left her with the same severe brain trauma.

That was when the Louisburg community came together to help the two families cope with a burden no family should have to bear. Since then, both Jimmy and Mya are on the road to recovery thanks to the help of a lot of people.



Louisburg Soccer Club president Karin Olson (second from left), Louisburg High School junior Maddie McDaniel (middle) and fundraising organizer DIana Moore (right) receive the WIN for KC Sprint Teamwork Award on Feb. 13 in Kansas City, Mo.

8. Girls soccer raises funds to start program, wins award

A fundraising committee made a big push to make sure there was a girls soccer program at Louisburg High School.

The committee raised \$39,000 in almost a year's time to fund the program for three years. Thanks to all the hard work, the group was also recognized by the WIN for KC organization. The

Lady Cats' soccer season will kickoff in late March.



Louisburg graduates Kody Cook (left) and Garrett Griffin are each winding down their careers with their respective Division I football programs.

7. Griffin, Cook wrap up college careers

Louisburg High School graduates Kody Cook and Garrett Griffin have lived the lives a lot of football fans could only hope for.

Both are wrapping up their Division I collegiate football careers and are doing it with a lot of success. Cook is living his dream with the Kansas State football team as he has made contributions at both the wide receiver and quarterback positions to help the Wildcats to the Liberty Bowl.

Griffin, on the other hand, battled through an injury-plagued senior season to help Air Force reach the Armed Forces Bowl and made several big plays at the tight end spot.



Louisburg quarterback Austin Terry was one of several players responsible for the Wildcats' turnaround this season.

6. Wildcat football has big turnaround

After finishing with just three wins a year ago, the Louisburg High School football team put together a strong season in 2015 as they finished with seven wins.

Those seven victories put the Wildcats within a game of Paola for the Frontier League title and Louisburg also earned a spot in the regional playoffs before falling to Basehor-Linwood in a tight contest.



The Louisburg High School soccer team captured its first regional crown since 2010 after a 2-0 win over Coffeyville.

5. Louisburg soccer wins regional crown

Through much of the regular season, the Louisburg High School soccer team didn't have much to cheer about.

The Wildcats had just four wins during the regular season, but they seemed to find the right chemistry in the postseason. Louisburg rattled off three consecutive wins in the postseason, including a 2-0 victory over Coffeyville-Field Kindley in the regional championship.

It was the Wildcats' first regional title since 2010 and their sixth in the last 10 years.



Anders Vance won a regional title in the 285-pound weight class last February as he was one of five Wildcats to earn state bids.

4. Louisburg wrestling qualifies five for state

The Louisburg wrestling team hadn't been a part of the state tournament since 2012 – that is before last season.

The Wildcats put together a breakout season as they qualified five for the state tournament, while Anders Vance won the regional crown at 285 pounds. Brenton Wrigley (195 pounds), Mason Koechner (220), Nathan Keegan (113) and Ryan Adams (138) all made the trip to Salina for the Class 4A state tourney.



Jeff Lohse (left) and Ben York each stepped away from their head coaching posts in 2015.

3. Long-time coaches resign from post

Jeff Lohse and Ben York had been fixtures in their respective sports for Louisburg High School, but both decided to call it quits this year.

Lohse, who spent the last 17 years as the head coach for the LHS baseball team, stepped down from his spot in May, citing personal reasons. Lohse led the Wildcats to two state tournament appearances.

York, who was the head coach when the boys soccer program started, also cited personal reasons for leaving the Wildcat soccer program after 13 years. York helped the Wildcats to six regional titles in the last 10 years.



Connor McMullen won the state title in the discus back in May and became Louisburg's first track state champion since 2011.

2. McMullen wins state title in discus, Dennis medals in hurdles

Louisburg High School senior Connor McMullen finally got the state title in the discus he had been searching for.

McMullen recorded a throw of 173 feet, 1 inch on his final attempt to win the Class 4A state discus title in Wichita back in May. He would also medal eighth in the javelin with a toss of 164-02.

Fellow senior Sean Dennis also garnered a state medal as he took fourth in the 110-meter hurdles. The boys and girls team combined sent a total of 11 athletes to the state meet.



The Louisburg High School volleyball team finished third overall in 2015 after making it to state for the fifth time in the last six seasons.

1. Lady Cat volleyball takes third at state

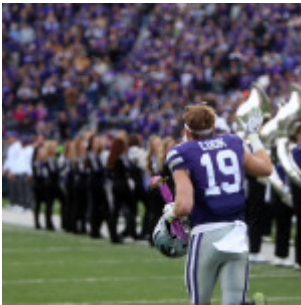
The Louisburg High School volleyball team has made a habit of making the trip to Salina in recent years and this season was no exception.

This time, however, the Lady Cats finished with a victory.

After ending their season with a runner-up performance and two fourth-place finishes at state the last three years, Louisburg won its final match of the season in 2015 as it defeated Tonganoxie in the third-place match.

The Lady Cats qualified for the state tournament for the fifth time in the last six years.

Cook lives the dream at K-State



K-State senior, and Louisburg High School graduate, Kody Cook waves to the fans at Bill Snyder Family Stadium as he was introduced during the senior day ceremony on Dec. 5, prior to the Wildcats final home game against West Virginia.

MANHATTAN, Kan. – As Kody Cook gazed out into the sea of purple and white at Bill Snyder Family Stadium for the final time, little pieces of him still wondered if this was a dream.

You see, Kody had been planning this moment for most of his young life. Whether it was practicing in the front yard when he was little, or working hard in high school and junior college – playing football for Kansas State wasn't just a fantasy like it is for most children around the state – it was a goal.

So as he made his way down the line of seniors before the Dec. 5 home contest against West Virginia, Kody waited patiently to greet the coach he had always wanted to play for. Yes, for the last two years he has been living his dream of playing K-State football and now it was all coming to an end.

"It hasn't quite sunk in yet that it is almost over," Kody said. "It is weird, especially with everything that has happened to me along the way, that there are times where I still can't believe it. One thing I can say is that it is a blessing from God that I am here. I have prayed and thought about this opportunity my whole life and all I can say is that I am blessed. I couldn't have written a better end to the story."

Kody's story is one of faith. It is one of hard work, dedication and sacrificing himself for the betterment of the team.

After all that, he turned into a starting wide receiver for the school he has loved since he was a little boy, then was thrown into a little quarterback duty, back to receiver and then quarterback again.

It was a whirlwind of a final year for Kody, but he couldn't have asked for a more memorable one. It was one filled with moments he and his family will treasure for the rest of their lives.

The story isn't quite over yet, but Kody has made sure his chapter in Manhattan has a happy ending.

FANTASY FOOTBALL

As a young father, Jim Cook loved watching Kansas State football with his son Kody. Their passion for Wildcat football was one of a kind.

So as the game would be about ready kickoff on the television, Kody would sit next to his dad in utter excitement. However, like with every game, the excitement became too much for Kody.

"I don't think he ever watched a football game from start to finish," Jim said. "About midway through the first quarter, he

would get so excited about the game that he would gear up and go out in the yard and start playing. He would come in and check the score, and if they were ahead, he would watch a little then go back out and play. If they were losing then he would just go right back outside because he hated to see them lose. He hated to lose."



Little Kody Cook would dress up in full gear to play outside in the front yard as a Kansas State football player. Photo courtesy of the Cook family

That gear featured a purple K-State jersey and a vintage gray helmet with 'Cats' written on the sides. It was all business

for Kody.

As he walked out into the front yard, Kody gathered himself into the imaginary huddle for the play, broke the huddle and took the imaginary snap from center. He dropped back to pass, read the defense, threw it and then ran under the ball to score the touchdown.

"He would even do the crowd noise," Jim said.

Why stop there?

"He was everything," his mother Anita said. "He was the crowd and even pretended he was in the band – everything."

As much fun as being in the crowd and band were, Kody's dream was to be on the field in Manhattan and play for his favorite coach – Bill Snyder.

Those dreams took a hit in 2005 when Snyder announced his retirement from coaching. As a 13-year old die-hard Wildcat fan, he was crushed.

"I took Kody to a book signing after coach Snyder retired the first time and he was a little less excited than I thought he would be," Jim said "When we left I asked what was wrong and he told me now that he would never be able to play for coach Snyder."

It was disheartening for Kody, but a coaching change didn't stop him playing in those pretend games in the front yard. It didn't stop him from throwing touchdowns, or catching them.

Nope, his true love was for the game of football and that continued as he got older.

HIGH SCHOOL CHAMPION

The pressure was always on Kody from the day he stepped into

the halls of Louisburg High School.

Considered one of the school's next best athletes, Kody had a lot to live up to and he certainly did his part to meet those expectations.

As a sophomore, he was named the starting quarterback on the varsity football team and guided the Wildcats to the playoffs that season. Later in the year, Kody was Louisburg's top starting pitcher on the Wildcat baseball team.

He pitched a complete game in the regional championship game and helped the program reach the state tournament for just the second time in school history.

His junior season wasn't quite as memorable as he tore his ACL before the start of football season and was out of sports for an entire year.

Kody more than made up for it his senior year, as he, and the rest of his Wildcat teammates put themselves in the school history books. Kody led Louisburg to the school's first football state championship in 2010 as the Wildcats defeated Holton 24-16.

It was Kody who threw two touchdown passes in the game and also had an interception return for a touchdown to seal the undefeated season. For a player who was responsible for all three touchdowns in the school's biggest game ever, Kody didn't let his excitement get in the way of the game

"I always told him no showboating," Jim said. "I always told him no showboating until you win the state championship. If he was high-stepping in the front yard all by himself in his imaginary game, I would go out and scold him."

It was the perfect end to his high school career and now he was ready for that next step – college football.

He had opportunities to go play smaller Division I football

out of high school, but Kody wanted to make himself better to have that opportunity to keep his dream alive.

A BOWL MIRACLE

Kody was offered a scholarship on the Hutchinson Community College football team and got the opportunity to earn a shot at playing the position he loves – quarterback.

He quickly found out college football is a lot different than high school. Kody was no longer one of the best athletes in school and the Hutch coaches scoured the country to find their next quarterback.

The competition was fierce and Kody soon realized that his shot to see the field wasn't going to be as a signal caller. Frustrated, he called home to his parents Jim and Anita, in hopes of getting a little advice.

He got it.

"There were times at Hutch when I thought I was getting worked over a little bit because I wasn't from a certain school or because I was from a small town and I didn't feel like they gave me a chance to do what I wanted to do," Kody said. "So I would call home for support and they (his parents) were always there. Whenever I doubted myself or when I think I couldn't do something, they always told me I could do it."

Kody cared more about seeing the field than playing the quarterback spot. So he told his coaches he was willing to do anything to see the field.

As a freshman, Kody served as one of the team's long snappers before eventually getting moved to wide receiver. It would be his permanent spot at Hutch, and although he saw some playing time, he didn't get a lot of balls thrown his way.

Even then, Kody knew he was destined for greater things – maybe he was a little psychic.

Jim took his son into a Hutchinson sporting goods store to buy receivers' gloves before the start of his sophomore season.

"I was frustrated that I had to buy them because they supplied him gloves, but they weren't good enough for him and he needed another kind," Jim said as he shook his head.

So as they walked up to the counter to pay, Kody saw a stack of K-State football schedules. With his grandmother by his side, he tapped on the stack of schedules and made a bold prediction.

"Grandma, I am going to play there one day," Kody said.

Jim, on the other hand, turned around with a puzzled look on his face.

"At the time, I was thinking in my mind, 'Yeah I hope so, but I am not seeing it,'" Jim said. "At the time he wasn't gathering many stats. He was doing his job, but didn't have a lot of results. If you want to play college ball you have to have the stats for colleges to look at you and he had none of them."

Those stats would come – and at the most crucial time.

Hutchinson qualified for the Salt City Bowl and faced off with Iowa Central, but the Blue Dragons were faced with some adversity early as starting quarterback Luke Barnes had to leave in the first half with a hand injury.

Instead of going to their backup quarterback, coach Rion Rhodes decided on a gut feeling to go with Kody. He had not taken any snaps at practice and hadn't thrown a ball in several games.

It didn't seem to matter.

Kody led the Blue Dragons to a win as he passed for 272 yards and had five touchdown passes to go along with another rushing score. Cook was named the Salt City Bowl MVP and broke four bowl records and tied another.

It was like he had never stopped playing quarterback.

"After it was over his mom and I just sat there and bawled," Jim said. "He just came out and played like he had been doing it all year. We were just so happy for him."

That one game opened several doors for Kody, including one he had been waiting for his entire life.

LIVING THE DREAM

As he was thinking what to do after Hutch, the offer to walk-on at Kansas State presented itself to Kody and he really didn't take a lot of time to think about it.

He accepted the offer and actually began to work out with the quarterbacks when he first arrived there. It didn't last long as soon-to-be quarterback Jake Waters stepped on campus as he would go on to have a good career with the Wildcats for the next two years.



Kody Cook was thrust into several different roles for the K-State football team this year.

Kody would go on to redshirt his first season as the coaches tried to find a spot for him on the field. He spent a brief time with the running backs before they finally moved him over to receiver.

"I have been a huge K-State fan since I was a kid, so to be able to come here and play is obviously a dream come true," Kody said. "I am just willing to do whatever for the team. If I can help them at receiver, I am going to do that."

It didn't take long for Kody to make a name for himself. During last year's season opener against Stephen F. Austin, he caught his first touchdown pass as a Wildcat from Waters late in the contest.

"I jumped about four feet in the air and I about killed myself

on the bleachers,” Jim said. “It was cool because that was another level for him. He fulfilled another goal and it was the next step on the stair step. I was probably glowing when I walked out of there. I know he was.”

During the 2014 season, Kody caught 20 passes for 251 yards and was ready to take that next step as a senior.

“He did what he had to do to play and that is the same thing he did at Hutch,” Anita said. “He is a good boy and he has worked really hard. It prepares you for life. He has overcome the challenges that he has been dealt and he knows how to work through him. “

During the offseason, Kody was listed as a starting receiver for the 2015 season while the Wildcats tried to figure out their quarterback situation as it was a fluid one.

Starting quarterback Jesse Ertz was injured early in the team’s season opener, while incoming quarterbacks Alex Delton and Jonathan Banks were deemed unfit to play.

The job then fell to fourth-string quarterback Joe Hubener, a small-town Kansas player himself from Cheney. Hubener took the job and ran with it, but it changed when the Wildcats played in their Big 12 opener in Stillwater, Okla.

Kody’s number was going to be called once again.

RALLY TIME

Jeff and Connie Ewy have always been big Oklahoma State fans. They attend several games a year and they also live in Louisburg.

The Ewys are close friends with the Cooks and their son Tyler, who played at Washburn himself, was on the state championship team with Kody out of high school and have been friends since

they were little.

Kody always told the Ewys that one day they were going to have to root against him.

"I am going to play at Oklahoma State's field one day," Kody told Connie when he was a young boy. "And I am not going to be wearing orange."

Connie, of course, played along.

"Well, I will tell you what," she said. "If you do, I am going to wear your jersey."

So when the Wildcats made the trip to Stillwater, Connie kept her word and wore Kody's No. 19 jersey in a crowd full of Oklahoma State fans. Needless to say she encountered a lot questions.

"You have the sea of orange and then Connie with this purple jersey on," Anita laughed. "They were asking her if she knew No. 19 and she told them that she was like a second mom to Kody."

Well Kody's second mom and his actual parents were about to become prouder by the minute.

Hubener had to leave the contest two minutes in with an injury, and just like the Salt City Bowl three years earlier, Kody was going to get another chance to play quarterback.

He led the Wildcats to a touchdown on the opening drive when he scored on a 3-yard run to put K-State on top.



Kody Cook has sparked the Wildcats this year from the quarterback spot against Oklahoma State and West Virginia.

After the touchdown, the Oklahoma State fans started to congratulate Connie as they acted like it was Kody's only time he was going to play quarterback.

"Oh no," Connie said. "I know Kody and he is not done."

Kody sparked the Wildcats in the first half and helped the offense to 28 points and couldn't be stopped. Kody rushed for 87 yards and a touchdown, and also completed 10 of 16 passes for 122 yards and two more scores.

Unfortunately, Kody had to leave the game with an injury in the second half and the Wildcats fell 36-34 in what would be their first of six straight losses in Big 12 play.

Kody and the Wildcats entered their senior day matchup with

West Virginia one win shy of becoming bowl eligible.

It was a game he and his family will never forget.

SENIOR DAY

After all the games in the front yard, hard work and obstacles he has overcome, Kody was realizing that his dream was almost over.

Kody suited up for the final time on Dec. 5 at Bill Snyder Family Stadium with all sorts of emotions going through him.

"I am just not ready for this to end yet," Kody said. "I love this place, I love coach Snyder, the fans and everything that has to do with K-State football."

It set in a little bit as Kody and the rest of the 18 Wildcat seniors waited in line to say thank you to the man who brought them this far – Bill Snyder.

Soon it would be Kody's turn. Ten years ago, Kody met Snyder for the first time at the book signing in Kansas City after he retired the first time.

Thirteen-year old Kody was upset and disappointed. Ironically, the two converged once again 10 years later.



Kody Cook gives K-State coach Bill Snyder a hug before going out onto the field for the final time in Manhattan.

"He told me he loved me and thanked me for everything I had done for the program and to keep it going," Kody said.

Then the public address announcer introduced Kody to the crowd.

"A wide receiver, from Louisburg, Kansas...No. 19...Kody Cook," he shouted.

It was then Kody pointed up to the sky and ran onto the field as he waved to the crowd. With a pink flower in hand, he found his parents Jim and Anita, along with his brother Konnor and girlfriend Diann.

Tears became almost impossible for any member of the Cook family to hide.



Members of the Cook family pose for a picture during senior day ceremonies at Bill Snyder Family Stadium. Pictured (from left) are Konnor Cook, Kody's girlfriend Diann Edelen, Kody, father Jim Cook and mother Anita Cook.

"It has been surreal at times, but other times it is like it is according to plan," Jim said. "Kody was adamant about his plan his whole life that he is going to pull this off. It has

been a great experience for him and he has grown up a lot. I think his football career has been tougher than a lot of things he will experience the rest of his life and has prepared him for that. We are really proud of him.”

Kody and the Wildcats had another obstacle in front of them that night as they trailed West Virginia 13-3 and the K-State offense was sputtering. Then in the third quarter, Hubener had to leave the game with an injury, leaving Kody as the next man up – again. The crowd let out a big cheer when he was announced at quarterback.

“It was a great moment for me and I appreciate the fans,” Kody said. “I took maybe a second to really let it soak in, but then you have to focus on what is going on.”

And just like at Hutch, and at Oklahoma State, Kody once again proved he was ready for the challenge. He completed 4 of 12 passes for 121 yards, including a 77-yard touchdown strike and also rushed for 37 yards and a touchdown.



Kody Cook gets some warm up throws in early in the second half before coming in at quarterback against West Virginia.

Kody's play lifted K-State to a thrilling 24-23 win on senior day as they earned a spot in the Liberty Bowl, a Jan. 2 game in Memphis.

It was a performance coaches on both sidelines had to recognize.

"When we knocked their quarterback out, I thought we were in pretty good shape," West Virginia coach Dana Holgorsen said. "That kid (Kody) comes in and plays a thousand times better than the other one. I shook No. 19's [Cook] hand out there and told him he is a gutsy kid. He was hurt too but battled through it and threw the ball a lot better than we thought he could."

Kody's coach couldn't have agreed more.

"You know, I admire Kody so much," Snyder said. "He is a tough young guy – tough-minded young guy. He is competitive as of anybody, I think. Our players recognize that and that is uplifting to them as well."

As much success as Kody has had at K-State, he realizes he couldn't have done any of it without the support of his hometown of Louisburg.

"It adds significance because it just shows that no matter where you live that you can go out and be successful in whatever you want to do," Kody said of his hometown. "The town breeds a never-give-up, hard-working attitude. You have that engrained in you from day one, and to continue to build off that and to have that in your arsenal when things get tough has been big for me.

"There is not enough that I can say about how that town developed me and made me who I am today. It is a great feeling to be one of the few that has made it this far and made a name for himself."

It became obvious how important Kody was to the K-State offense as he was named Co-Offensive Player of the Year a week later during the team's award ceremony. Kody finished with 27 catches for 417 yards and three touchdowns as a receiver. At quarterback, he accounted two scores on the ground and three more through the air.

"When he was a little kid that is all he talked about," Jim said. "He would go out front and go up and down the yard and throw himself passes. He has made it all come true and we are all extremely proud of him. I almost can't talk about it without crying."

Following the senior day contest, Kody worked his way around Bill Snyder Family Stadium high-fiving fans and trying to soak everything in.

"I just didn't want it to end," Kody said. "I have been dreaming about this since I was a little kid and I have been a K-State football fan my entire life. It was just an unbelievable experience."



Kody Cook gives the fans at Bill Snyder Family Stadium high-five, including Louisburg resident Mark Hildreth, his daughter Liz and sons A.J. and Zach, following the

Wildcats come from behind win over West Virginia on senior day.

Chants of “MVP” rained down on Kody as he took one more lap around the stadium. The band played “Wabash Cannonball” and the crowd went crazy for No. 19.

It was just like Kody drew up in the front yard all those years ago.

Make sure to check out a full photo gallery from Kody Cook's senior day here. You can click the download link under the photo to download a high-resolution version of the photo for free. Unfortunately you can not do it from mobile devices.

Three Wildcats earn all-state honors



Louisburg High School senior Anders Vance (left), senior Austin Terry (middle) and junior Dustyn Rizzo each earned all-state football honors. Vance was named to the first team by the KFCA, Topeka Capital-Journal and Wichita Eagle, while Terry and Rizzo garnered honorable mention honors by the

Eagle.

The season has been over for a few weeks, but postseason honors continue to come in for a handful of Louisburg High School football players.

All-state football teams were released by three different organizations and the Wildcats were represented on all three lists.

Senior lineman Anders Vance, senior quarterback Austin Terry and junior lineman Dustyn Rizzo were all recognized for their seasons by the Topeka Capital-Journal, Wichita Eagle and the Kansas Football Coaches Association (KFCA).

Vance earned first team honors by all three organizations. He was selected as a first-team offensive lineman by the KFCA and the Topeka Capital-Journal. He was named as a first-team defensive lineman by the Wichita Eagle.

The Eagle also selected Terry and Rizzo to their team as well. Terry was named as an honorable mention quarterback, while Rizzo was an honorable mention defensive lineman.

"I am really happy for Anders, Dustyn and Austin for the recognition," Louisburg coach Kyle Littrell said. "These guys are the foundation of what we are trying to build here. It's great to see that people outside our community see what types of players these kids are and recognize them for their efforts. All of three of these guys are great kids who have a bright future and I am proud that their hard work paid off."

Vance, the Wildcats' center, anchored the offensive line. On defense, Vance recorded 35 tackles from the defensive tackle spot, with six for a loss, a sack, a fumble recovery, forced fumble and two batted balls.

At quarterback, Terry completed 80 of 155 passes for 1,358 yards to go along with 13 touchdowns. As for Rizzo, he led the Wildcat defensive line with 49 tackles, 18 of which were solo and added eight for a loss. He also added five sacks, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery.

Wildcats earn 17 spots on all-league team



Louisburg senior Anders Vance puts a big hit on an Ottawa player earlier this season. Vance earned first team all-Frontier League honors on both sides of the ball for his work on the offensive and defensive line.

Before the All-Frontier League Football teams were released, it was expected that Louisburg was going to have its fair share of representation.

The Wildcats finished second in the league and rebounded from a three-win season a year ago to tally a 7-3 record this past season. As it turned out, Louisburg tallied the second most selections in the league to match its finish.

Louisburg was awarded 17 all-league spots, which included five spots on the first team. The Wildcats had four second team selections and eight honorable mentions.

“The great thing about our team is they really didn’t care about personal honors too much, they wanted the team to succeed,” Louisburg coach Kyle Littrell said. “They knew those honors would come if they did well as a team and they did.”

Senior Anders Vance was well thought of by the league coaches as he garnered first team honors on both the offensive and defensive line.

Senior quarterback Austin Terry was named first-team quarterback on offense, while junior Dustyn Rizzo was awarded with a first-team defensive line selection and senior Mitchell McLellan was first-team defensive back.

Vance, who played center, anchored the Wildcat offensive line that moved up and down the field. On defense, Vance recorded 35 tackles from the defensive tackle spot, with six for a loss, a sack, a fumble recovery, forced fumble and two batted balls.

“I love Anders to death for the simple fact is that he is 100 percent coachable and he has goals set for himself, and no matter what he is not going to let anyone or anything stand in the way of his goals,” Littrell said. “In order for Anders to be a top level talent in the state of Kansas he constantly evaluated his play all season.

“At times in practice I would run a play to try and trap Anders, and when it didn’t work he would just look at me and give me this look like ‘C’mon coach you got me with that stuff as a sophomore and junior, but you can’t get me anymore.’ I have college coaches come to my office all the time and I tell them that there would not be another kid that you enjoy coaching more than Anders.”

Terry guided the Wildcats to their seven wins and put together some big stats in the process. The Louisburg quarterback completed 80 of 155 passes for 1,358 yards to go along with 13 touchdowns.



Senior Austin Terry was named as an all-league first team quarterback.

“Austin knew early he wasn’t going to be as big or as strong as some of the quarterbacks we have had in the past, however he has that chip on his shoulder that he is going to prove you wrong,” Littrell said. “Austin wanted to go through the season and not throw an interception, and he didn’t until week five. He ended up the season throwing just five interceptions out of 115 attempts. Never once in his three years of playing quarterback for us did I ever wonder if he was ready to play. His quiet demeanor and competitiveness were qualities that probably helped calm us down in certain situations throughout the year.”

On the defensive side, Rizzo made life difficult on a lot of opposing offensive lines. Rizzo led the Wildcat defensive line with 49 tackles, 18 of which were solo and added eight for a loss. He also added five sacks, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery.

“Dustyn has a motor that doesn’t stop,” Littrell said. “One of

the many qualities that I love about Dustyn is there is only one speed on the football field and that is full speed. Dustyn has the opportunity to be an all-state football player next year. His work ethic and commitment to the weight room is undeniable. When he speaks, which is far and few between, everybody listens.

“The coaches at the all-league meeting were impressed with him as multiple coaches made the comment, ‘We had to game plan for that kid,’ which means they were running away from his side. That is probably about as big as a compliment as you can give a football player. I remember watching him play little league football down in Drexel and thinking to myself this kid is going be a darn good football player. Luckily it’s here at Louisburg.”



Louisburg junior Dustyn Rizzo records one of his five sacks on the season and was named to the all-league first team defense.

As for McLellan, he led the defensive backfield in tackles from his cornerback spot as he finished with 54, including 35

solo stops. He also had two tackles for a loss, one forced fumble, one fumble recovery and one interception.

"I always knew Mitchell had the ability to play defense for us, little did I know that he was going to basically shut down most all of the receivers he faced," Littrell said. "He led our defensive backs in tackles this year and was the fifth leading tackler on the team. His competitiveness and desire to win helped fuel our team at times.

"I am just so proud of the kid Mitchell is today. There were times when he could have given up or made excuses, but that is not the Mitchell I know. At the end of the day I think Mitchell learned that he didn't need to prove anything to anybody else, he just needed to prove it to himself and I think he did that with his play on both sides of the ball this year."

On the second team, Rizzo was named offensive line, while junior Thomas San Agustin was awarded with a second-team running back honor. San Agustin led the team in rushing with 991 yards on 191 carries, which averaged to more than five yards per carry, and finished with 15 touchdowns.

On defense, Terry was named to the all-league defense second team as he finished with 39 tackles from the safety spot. He also finished with 39 tackles, 18 of which were solo stops, two interceptions, two batted balls, a forced fumble and fumble recovery.



Senior Mitchell McLellan earned first team all-league defensive honors for his play at cornerback.

Senior Alex Dunn also garnered second team honors at the linebacker position. Dunn finished with 39 tackles, 12 solo stops, two fumble recoveries and two batted balls.

Junior linemen T.J. Dover and Mason Koechner each earned honorable mention honors on both the offensive and defensive lines.

Dover ended his season with 42 tackles, 17 solo, five tackles for a loss, four sacks, four fumble recoveries, two forced fumbles and one batted ball. As for Koechner, he finished with 41 tackles, 14 solo, four tackles for a loss and one forced fumble.

Senior Cole Kramer also had honorable mention honors on both sides of the ball. At receiver, Kramer had 22 catches for 471 yards and four touchdowns. At defensive back, he had 28 tackles, 17 solo, three tackles for loss, one interception and fumble recovery.

McLellan was also named as an honorable mention receiver as he

caught 29 passes for 537 yards and five touchdowns. Dunn was also selected as an honorable mention kicker as he was 1 for 2 on field goal attempts and 34 for 42 on point after attempts.

Paola led the way with 21 all-league spots, followed by Louisburg's 17 and De Soto with 15.

ALL-FRONTIER LEAGUE FOOTBALL

OFFENSE

FIRST TEAM

BACKS/RECEIVERS: Austin Terry, Louisburg, senior; Grant Elston, Eudora, senior; Nathan Staats, Paola, senior; Joel Katzer, Baldwin, senior; Nate Thompson, De Soto, senior; Ryan Gleghorn, Paola, senior

OFFENSIVE LINE: Anders Vance, Louisburg, senior; T.J. Boatwright, De Soto, senior; Zane Clark, Paola, senior; Drew Bones, Ottawa, junior; Dunkan Watrous, Paola, senior

KICKER: Grant Elston, Eudora, senior

SECOND TEAM

BACKS/ RECEIVERS: Thomas San Agustin, Louisburg, junior; Jake Katzer, Baldwin, senior; Cooper Lee, De Soto, senior; Brock Reed, Ottawa, junior; Ty Straw, Spring Hill, junior; Nathan Ewing, Spring Hill, sophomore

OFFENSIVE LINE: Dustyn Rizzo, Louisburg, junior; Jacob Pearson, Eudora, senior; Sam Arnold, Spring Hill, junior; Beau Lynch, Ottawa, senior; Tanner Beebe, Eudora, senior

KICKER: Cooper Lee, De Soto, senior

HONORABLE MENTION

BACKS/RECEIVERS: Cole Kramer, Louisburg, senior; Mitchell McLellan, Louisburg, senior; Austin Downing, Eudora, senior; Dalton Rankin, Paola, junior; Garrett Burkhart, Baldwin, senior; Mason Clark, De Soto, junior; Luke Snider, Ottawa, junior; Magnus Van Hoecke, Paola, junior

OFFENSIVE LINE: Mason Koechner, Louisburg, junior; T.J. Dover, Louisburg, junior; Michael Colwell, De Soto, senior; Alex Cigard, Baldwin, senior; Caleb McQuality, De Soto, junior; Cameron Christopher, De Soto, senior; Cam Seck, Paola, junior; Nick Sprague, Spring Hill, junior; Tanner Schneider, Baldwin, senior; Aaron Neal, De Soto, senior; Ryan Verbanic, Eudora, junior; Brock Huddlestun, Ottawa, junior; PJ Capettini, Paola, senior; Joel Auten, Paola, senior

KICKER: Alex Dunn, Louisburg, senior; Kyle Wokutch, Paola, senior; Carver Gerstberger, Spring Hill, senior

DEFENSE

FIRST TEAM

DEFENSIVE LINE: Dustyn Rizzo, Louisburg, junior; Anders Vance, Louisburg, senior; Zane Clark, Paola, senior; Jordan Vaughn, Eudora, senior

LINEBACKER: Jake Katzer, Baldwin, senior; Duncan Watrous, Paola, senior; Ryan Gleghorn, Paola, senior; Tanner Beebe, Eudora, senior

DEFENSIVE BACKS: Mitchell McLellan, Louisburg, senior; Grant Elston, Eudora, senior; Blain Ohlmeier, Paola, senior

PUNTER: Cooper Lee, De Soto, senior

SECOND TEAM

DEFENSIVE LINE: Drew Bones, Ottawa, junior; Nick Nolte, Spring Hill, senior; Alex Wilson, Paola, senior; Beau Lynch, Ottawa, senior

LINEBACKER: Alex Dunn, Louisburg, senior; Joel Katzer, Baldwin, senior; Brock Reed, Ottawa, junior; Wyatt Stewart, De Soto, senior

DEFENSIVE BACKS: Austin Terry, Louisburg, senior; Cameron Mills, Spring Hill, senior; Andrew Phillips, Paola, junior

PUNTER: Grant Elston, Eudora, senior

HONORABLE MENTION

DEFENSIVE LINE: T.J. Dover, Louisburg, junior; Mason Koechner, Louisburg, senior; Justin Howard, Baldwin, junior; Blayne Rios, Paola, junior; Reid Kelly, De Soto, senior; Noah Kennedy, Eudora, senior; Garrett Borth, Baldwin, sophomore; Austin Ormsby, Eudora, sophomore; Tanner Moala, Paola, junior; Joel Auten, Paola, senior

LINEBACKER: Ryan Verbanic, Eudora, junior; Magnus Van Hoecke, Paola, junior; Cooper Diel, Ottawa, junior; Van Putnam, Spring Hill, senior; Kyle Carnes, De Soto, senior; Jack Barger, De Soto, sophomore; Dalton Rankin, Paola, junior

DEFENSIVE BACKS: Cole Kramer, Louisburg, senior; Max Barger, De Soto, junior; Nathan Staats, Paola, senior; Auggie Lange, Baldwin, junior; Spencer Howe, Eudora, senior; Austin Downing, Eudora, senior

PUNTER: Jacob Letellier, Spring Hill, junior

Griffin overcomes obstacles to shine at Air Force



Air Force Academy senior, and Louisburg High School graduate, Garrett Griffin is all smiles now and for good reason. Griffin and the Falcons are 8-3 on the season and will soon play for the Mountain West Conference title. Griffin faced a lot of obstacles during his time at the Academy on and off the field, but he is now ready to use those to his advantage.

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – On a warm Saturday afternoon, Garrett Griffin was introduced to the Falcon Stadium crowd as he ran through a tunnel of teammates to celebrate senior day at the Air Force Academy.

The nerves were eating him up inside.

Garrett and the Falcons were about ready to go up against a Utah State team on Nov. 14 that had beaten them his previous two years. A win would put Air Force on top of the Mountain Division of the Mountain West Conference.

Needless to say those nerves have always been there for Garrett, whether it was senior day, the first day of practice,

the first moment he stepped on campus for basic training or his first collegiate football game.

Life in the Air Force isn't for everyone. Adjusting to military life, along with the tough curriculum and being a Division I football player, is demanding.



Garrett Griffin (80) runs through a tunnel of players as he was honored before Air Force's final home game on Nov. 14.

There were thoughts of taking the easier route. Thoughts of going to school closer to home, being with friends and family and living the "normal life." They were all tempting at one time or another.

Easy isn't in Garrett's vocabulary.

It is that perseverance that has now put Garrett in a position to play on one of the best teams in the Mountain West and in a bowl game, on pace to graduate from one of the top colleges in the country and possibly have a chance to get on a National Football League roster next year.

“It hasn’t sunk in yet,” Garrett said. “The academy is kind of bittersweet your senior year because you want it to go by quick so you are done with school, but at the same time it is the end of your football career. It won’t really set in until after the bowl game when it is your last time strapping it up. Right now I am just trying to enjoy it and not really thinking too far ahead.”

That Saturday against Utah State was the time for Garrett to live in the now and think back on his journey – one filled with ups, downs and everything in-between.

HUMBLE BEGINNING

At Louisburg High School, Garrett was the total package when it came to athletics and academics.

He was a two-time all-state football player for the Wildcats, helped them to their first state championship in 2010 and became an unstoppable force in the backfield as he topped the 2,000 yard mark his senior season at running back in 2011.

In track, he was the state champion in the javelin in 2011 and also helped the Wildcats to a state title just months after winning one in football. He won numerous regional titles and also qualified for state in the 110-meter high hurdles.

He won three regional championships his senior year, but was unable to attend the state meet after he suffered a ruptured appendix.

Garrett was also a fixture on the Wildcat basketball team as

he was named as an all-Frontier League selection in three of his four years.

Academically, he was just as dominant as he held a 4.0 grade point average throughout his four years of high school and was a member of the National Honor Society.

It would be enough to make any high school coach gush over that type of player – unless that coach was his father. Former Louisburg head coach Gary Griffin didn't want to give his son too big of a head as he racked up several postseason honors throughout his high school career.

"He was humble and I think people appreciated that," Gary said. "He never acted like he was good and he loved interacting with little kids. He hated being the center of attention. He always wanted to be known as someone who was a team player who never put themselves first.

"That is one of the prouder things of his high school career for me. Every coach that went up against him would mention what a good kid he was and that is pretty cool. It is important that kids are humble."

It would have been easy to get a little cocky as he had programs like Kansas State and Air Force recruiting him, along with several Division II schools. It was a difficult choice when it came down to make his decision, but he eventually chose Air Force.

It had been several years since Louisburg had a football player go to a Division I program out of high school and the community quickly became Falcon followers.

High school life for Garrett couldn't have gone much smoother.

It was his college life that he would test him – sometimes to the limits.

MILITARY LIFE

Garrett entered the Air Force as a two-sport athlete as he was offered spots on both the football and track and field teams.

In some colleges, they would treat their athletes like kings, but at Air Force, and any other military institution, it is a different story. They are treated like normal cadets and go through a rigorous schedule.

As soon as he arrived at his new home, which is nestled next to the Rocky Mountains, Garrett traded in his street clothes for a military uniform. Then came basic cadet training, which is a six-week program that tested him in every facet possible – emotionally, physically and mentally.

The time was also tough on his parents who didn't get a chance to talk their son much. If In fact, he could not have visitors or receive phone calls for five weeks.

"They basically had them on lock down," Gary said.

It became a little more open as he was able to call on the weekends following basic training, but contact was still limited and so were his trips home. He got a chance to come home for two weeks over Christmas and then a week during the spring.

He also had the opportunity to come home during the summer, but he spent his first two summers at the academy doing academic work.

"One of the things that makes me the most mad is I talk to other moms who have kids who come home from college and they can't wait for them to go back," Garrett's mother, Lori, said. "I would give anything for my kid to come home and call me whenever he wanted to."

The first two years were especially stressful for Garrett as he quickly found out academia at the Air Force is nothing like

high school. He started seeing grades next to his name he wasn't used to seeing -letters further down the line in the alphabet.

"I put this school's difficulty up against anyone in the world," Garrett said. "I have struggled academically quite a bit which was something I never thought I would do. I was a pretty good student in high school, but my first two years here, especially, were really hard."

In his freshman year, Garrett was enrolled in 18 hours of classes, which after football, left him zero free time. With courses like calculus, chemistry and physics on his list, along with all his football duties, the pressure to do well started to mount.

The Air Force experience wasn't what Garrett had thought it would be. He started to wonder if this was for him.

"Everyone knows the character he has, we just took for granted that he can handle anything," Gary said. "He has never not been able to handle anything in his life, but the Academy is tough. I couldn't have done it as his age."

"His buddies were texting him on a Saturday night and they were out partying and he was in his room writing a paper and I think that frustrated him a little bit. I told him you are going to do stuff that they are never going to get to do."

The temptation of attending of an "easier" school and hanging out with his friends and family weighed heavily on Garrett at times, especially when school work continued to be a bear.

But when those ideas crept into his head, he would remember all those people in Louisburg who looked at him with pride as he headed off to college.

"At one point he was thinking that it wasn't for him," Lori said. "But at the same time he would say that he didn't want

to let the whole town of Louisburg down. He didn't want to let us down. I just told him that he needs to do what is best for him."

In the end, Garrett stuck it out and now he's starting to see the fruits of his labor – especially on the football field.

LIFE ON THE GRIDIRON

As overwhelming as the Air Force can be to a normal first-year cadet, throw in the life of a college football player and one can imagine the stress it brings.

Garrett wasn't worried when he started. He imagined using his freshman year to get acclimated and use it as a learning experience.

Instead, he impressed the Falcon coaches enough and made the traveling squad. He suited up in 12 games, and was mainly on special teams and slowly worked his way into more playing time.

His sophomore season, his role on the team grew even more as he was one of team's top tight ends. That year he had 13 catches for 163 yards and a touchdown

Those numbers more than doubled in his junior campaign as he finished with 16 receptions for 307 yards and four touchdowns in a run-first option offense that isn't known for throwing the ball much.

Garrett became an easy target however thanks to his 6-foot, 4-inch and 240-pound frame on a Falcon team that finished with a 10-3 record and defeated Western Michigan 38-24 in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl to end their season.



Garrett Griffin looks for a block while quarterback Karson Roberts runs outside on Nov. 14 at Falcon Stadium.

The Falcons did all this after finishing the previous season with a 2-10 record. Air Force also relied on Griffin for his blocking as he is a main cog in the offense to help seal off the end of the line.

Life on the football field was good, but even with all the touchdowns and bright moments, life in the Academy was still difficult and his parents knew it. Even his tough love father became a little concerned.

“My relationship with Garrett is to be a tough kid and you can get through anything,” Gary said. “I knew he was depressed and stressed. He was getting bad grades on tests and you know he was stressed. I worry about his mental state sometimes, so I

text him every day. I always start out texting him and asking him about practice and I can tell right away whether he has had a good day or not.”

Still, with all the ups and downs, Garrett realizes this experience has only made him stronger and he is better off for it.

“Military wise it is a tradition to beat you down so they can build you back up,” Garrett said. “They have definitely done a good job of beating me down and now they are starting to build me back. I really appreciate the opportunities that this place opened and it is starting to pay off and I am glad I came here.”

Following his junior campaign, Garrett knew he was going to have an opportunity for a big senior season. The Falcons returned several playmakers on offense and they had a chance to build on their 10-win season from a year ago.

Then came one more test – and it didn’t come in the classroom.

SENIOR SEASON

The season opener came quickly as the Falcons took the field on Sept. 5 against Morgan State. Air Force picked up right where it left off as it rolled to a 63-7 victory.

Unfortunately for Garrett, he had to watch the rout from the sidelines.

During pregame warmups, a player was thrown into the side of Garrett’s knee and he immediately knew it wasn’t good.

“I heard it pop,” Garrett said. “Right when that happened I thought my season was done. It is weird trying to get ready for your first game of your senior year and then find yourself in the training room thinking that your season and career

might be over.”

The official diagnosis was an MCL sprain and Garrett was going to be out of action for six weeks. During that time, the Falcons went 3-3 before he could get back on the field fully healthy.

He played some in Air Force’s loss to Colorado State on Oct. 17, but watching from the sidelines was hard to handle for Garrett who had to deal with his first long-term injury.

“Once you have played a lot, and then you find yourself watching from the sidelines, you know you can’t do anything and it is hard,” Garrett said. “We had a couple weeks where we struggled against teams like Navy and it is tough. Our quarterback from last year tore his ACL and he really helped me to get through it. I had another buddy who had the same injury I did and he got back faster than I did. Having that support system and knowing I could come back was a huge thing.”

Garrett was finally healthy on Oct. 24 when Air Force traveled to Fresno State, and since then, he and the rest of his Falcon team have taken flight.



Garrett Griffin lets out a scream following Air Force's victory over Utah State on Nov. 14.

The Falcons have won five straight games, including a 35-28 win over Utah State and a 37-30 victory over Boise State. Griffin caught two touchdown passes in Air Force's win over Army to become bowl eligible and then had his best game of the season last Saturday against Boise.

Griffin finished with three catches for 107 yards, including a 51-yard touchdown reception and the Falcons clinched the Mountain Division title and will play San Diego State for the Mountain West Championship on Dec. 5, despite dealing with several injuries on the team.

"It seems like someone has gone down every week and we have just battled through it and that has been our thing," Garrett

said. "We just try to get better each week and Utah St. was a huge win for us. They have beat us pretty good the last couple of years and it is a big time win."

NATIVE SON

Garrett has been a part of several big wins during his time at Air Force and Louisburg has been right there with him.

According to the Griffin family, several members of the Louisburg community have made the 9-plus hour drive to Colorado Springs to attend every one of Garrett's home games the last two years. Whether it is former coaches, teachers or friends, there have been familiar faces there each time.

"I am really grateful for that," Garrett said. "It just shows how great the people of Louisburg are to their athletes and their community. It really puts it in perspective for me that some guys here will only have one or two people come down to watch them and it seems like every week I am trying to get 20 tickets, which is awesome. It just shows the support system that I have personally and how good the people of Louisburg are."

Following each home game, family will make their way down onto the field for a quick visit, and the following for Garrett is obvious.

"Even other Air Force families will comment, 'Oh there is Garrett and his entourage,'" Lori said.



Garrett poses for a picture with his parents, Gary and Lori Griffin, during the Falcons' senior day presentation.

It is that support system that has kept Garrett going through some difficult times. Gary, who teaches at LHS, said Garrett is still a popular topic at the school.

"He is gone so much, that he mentioned to me that they probably don't remember who he is anymore," Gary said. "That is certainly not the case. I can't go anywhere without someone asking me about Garrett. All the teachers on Monday morning after a game are talking about Garrett. The seniors this year were in eighth-grade Garrett's senior year and a lot of those kids are asking me how he did.

"He really appreciates it too. He always asks how many tickets that he needs to get for a game. It is pretty neat. We have a

lot of people go to games up there.”

Lori, who is the school nurse at Rockville Elementary, said Garrett even has fans of the small variety. Lori mentions she has students who wander into her office to look at the photo montage she has of her son.

“I ask them if they know who that is and they say, ‘That is Garrett Griffin.’” Lori said. “Then I tell them I am his mom and they are like ‘No, you aren’t.’ And I am like ‘Yes I am.’

“It is crazy. It is not even just the people that come to watch him play every home game, but just people I run into at the store – people I had no idea even watched sports. He has a lot of fans.”

SENIOR DAY

Air Force’s matchup with Utah State on Nov. 14 was not just another game for Garrett, it was something a lot bigger.

Garrett ran out of the Falcon Stadium tunnel for his final regular season game full of nerves. Those nerves brought back memories of his first collegiate game, his first day on the Air Force campus and many of the other obstacles he has had to face the last three years.

He had another challenge to face as he was set to go up against Utah State’s Kyler Fackrell. The Utah State linebacker is considered an NFL prospect and it would be Garrett’s biggest test of the season.

It was all he could think about.

“I was pretty nervous,” Garrett said. “This was a big time game and I was going up against their outside linebacker, who is probably going to be a second or third round draft pick. He is a stud and I was pretty nervous about going against him.”

As he made his way out of the tunnel for the final time, he looked around on the field for the two people who have always been there for him – his parents.

“I didn’t really know what to say to them,” Garrett said. “I am not really good in those moments, and neither is my dad, obviously. I saw them and it just calmed me down. It put things in perspective that I don’t have many times left to strap it up so I just need to go out and enjoy it. It was a pretty awesome moment.”



Gary Griffin gives his son, Garrett, a quick pat on the stomach before his game against Utah State.

It was an emotional moment for both Gary and Lori as well.

Both have spent the last four years either traveling to

Colorado Springs for games, or most of his away contests.

"It was bittersweet," Gary said. "It was bitter because he has been playing since the fifth grade and now it is coming close to the end. I have only missed a few of his college games when he was a freshman, but a big part of our lives has been watching him play football.

"The sweet part is I know how hard it is in that place and he is just about done. He can see the light at the end of the tunnel. He knows what job he is going to have and he is excited to move on to the next phase of his life. It brought a tear to my eye to be honest with you."

For Lori, she couldn't be more proud of her son and what he has accomplished already despite all the tribulations he has had to face.

"It is amazing to see how far he has gotten," Lori said. "I knew he loved football, but who would have thought he would be where he is and has the opportunity that he has. He has worked so hard.

"People will come up to him sometimes and thank him for his service and he gets embarrassed because he says he hasn't done anything, but he has. He has given up a lot. His other college friends can go out and party whenever they want and he has to be in his room every night by 11. They are his...and it is a different life."

It is a life, however, that Garrett would never give up.

"It has been hard, but I have a lot of opportunities now that I would have never had if I didn't come here," Garrett said. "Overall, it has been a great experience and I am glad that I came here. I just want to enjoy everything I can before it is over."

For a photo gallery of Garrett's senior day game make sure to [click here](#). Then click the download icon underneath the photo to get your free digital copy.

Opinion: Wildcats' season bigger than one loss



The Louisburg High School football team made a lot of strides this season as the Wildcats finished with a 7-3 record after tallying just three wins a season ago. The Wildcat seniors gave the program the jump start it needed and turned it into a successful year.

Losing stinks. Let's just get that out of the way right now.

There is nothing worse than seeing your season, which you have spent months preparing for, only to watch it end prematurely. If you are a senior, it makes it even worse. The thought of not playing another game for your school hits a lot of athletes hard.

As much as students say they can't wait to graduate, there is a part of them that loves the opportunity to play in front of

their community with some of their best friends – friendships that were in some cases forged as early as preschool or kindergarten.

This brings us to what happened on a cool Friday evening in Basehor.

The Louisburg football team came up short in the hopes of advancing into the state playoffs after losing to Basehor-Linwood 41-34 in what was a back-and-forth affair. The emotional heart strings tugged hard after this one and for good reason.

For one, the Wildcats said goodbye to 12 seniors who suited up for the final time that night, but more importantly that senior class put a lot into helping the program bounce back from what was a frustrating season a year ago after tallying just three wins.

Last season, the Wildcats finished the year with just three wins and ended up missing the playoffs – a rarity when it comes to Louisburg football. However, a group of seniors wanted to make sure that didn't repeat itself.

Kyle Haith, Austin Terry, John Hastings, Mitchell McLellan, Alex Dunn, Cole Kramer, Dillin Roberts, Chris Turner, Anders Vance, Tristen Shrock, Jarod Woodward and Jaret Gilliland all led the charge in starting that work over the summer and it carried over into the season.

Along with a talented group of underclassmen, these seniors were able to complete what has been a big turnaround. It has been less than a week since the loss, so the disappointment still hasn't left some of the players or coaches, but the season was far from a failure.

In fact, I would consider it a big success.

Sure, losing in the first round of the playoffs doesn't always

equal progress, but this Wildcat group took a giant step forward.

There were times where quarterback Austin Terry put the team on his back and led the team for a go-ahead touchdown or a come-from-behind win. Fellow senior receivers Mitchell McLellan and Cole Kramer each had big catches for touchdowns that provided some highlight reel moments.

The offensive line, led by Anders Vance, gave the Wildcats a nice push up front, while senior linebacker Alex Dunn was a leader on the Wildcat defense.

Coach Kyle Littrell did a great job over the summer of regrouping his team and getting them focused on the upcoming season. Despite a couple hiccups along the way, Littrell and those seniors paved the way for even more success in the coming years.

Just like in many of the other fall sports, the future is bright for Wildcat football. Louisburg has a good group of underclassmen returning and are ready to make another run in the playoffs next season.

However, the turnaround happened thanks to a lot hard work in the summer, a lot of rigorous practices and the leadership from a group of seniors that were poised to return Louisburg football to the playoffs.

Sure losing stinks and it always will. But the team has to take satisfaction on what it accomplished – trophies or not.

Sometimes it isn't all about the hardware. Sometimes it is about the blood and sweat paving the road for those to come after you.

And Louisburg football is in a better place because of it.