

SPORTS



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NORTHRIDGE VOLLEYBALL



Avery Warren was pulled up to varsity three weeks into her freshman season. Now, as a sophomore, she is one of Northridge's volleyball's team captains. PROVIDED BY RACHEL WARREN



Chase Goodbread
Columnist
Tuscaloosa News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Film captures Stallings' bond with son

Two nights before the Bryant-Denny Stadium light show lit up the southwest edge of the Alabama campus during the Crimson Tide's 41-34 win over Georgia, the Bama Theatre marquee on Greensboro Avenue lit up downtown Tuscaloosa.

The premiere of a movie roughly eight years in the making — “Do Right: The Stallings Standard” — was at hand, and the buzz around the theatre was palpable. Former Alabama football coach Gene Stallings, now 89, arrived more than an hour before the documentary film about his legacy as a coach and advocacy for children with special needs, and he barely had a moment's peace before the show began.

How could he? The line of moviegoers waiting to shake Stallings' hand in a meet-and-greet photo opportunity stretched so far — from one end of the theatre's red-carpet lobby to the box office foyer — it looked like a Jalen Milroe autograph line on Fan Day. Several of his former Alabama players, including John Copeland, Josh Swords, Kareem McNeal and Griff Redmill, were on hand. The show got started about 10 minutes late because Stallings wasn't about to turn away the last of the movie's supporters who had waited to wish him well.

Stallings has a 1992 national championship to his coaching credit, but it doesn't come up when I ask him about his life's greatest accomplishments.

“Top of the list is my children,” he said. “But right behind that is the RISE program, because it gives youngsters that have Down Syndrome or other learning disabilities an opportunity to live life as fully as they can.”

Stallings, of course, championed the RISE Center in Tuscaloosa, an early childhood education program primarily serving kids with developmental disabilities, because his late son, John Mark Stallings, was born with Down Syndrome.

As the theatre filled, Stallings himself was one of the last to be seated — he hadn't seen the 90-minute film in its entirety before Thursday night — and the documentary kept an appreciative crowd riveted. Produced by Dr. Chandra Clark and Dr. Michael Bruce of the Ala-

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Warren's journey to sophomore captain

Anna Snyder
Tuscaloosa News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Avery Warren was a 14-year-old freshman at Northridge when she got pulled up to play with the varsity volleyball team, just three weeks into the 2023 season.

Warren started the season out on the freshman team, only playing with them for a week before she got pulled up to the junior varsity team. Then, two weeks later, coach Danielle Stephenson needed another setter after a spot opened on the varsity team, turning to Warren to fill the role.

Warren, one of two underclassmen on the team last season alongside sophomore Sage Jackson, did not see the court a ton during her freshman year, but still learned a great amount nonetheless. She was on a team that graduated seven seniors, learning the ropes from them.

“Avery is so coachable and so willing, anytime there was an opportunity for her to go in she performed as a freshman,” Stephenson said. “She was always ready.”

Warren finished last season appearing in 41 sets, tallying 78 assists, 18 digs and four kills. Northridge finished the season 35-10 overall and 9-0 in 6A,

Area 6, making its way to the second round of the 6A South Regional Tournament before falling 3-0 to Bayside Academy.

“(Last season) taught me a lot of leadership and how to be on a team and be a good person on a team,” Warren said.

Now as a sophomore, there is never a moment Warren is not on the court for the Jaguars. A six-rotation player and a setter, Warren was even voted as a team captain by her teammates, the only sophomore to earn the honors alongside seniors Giulianna Hitchner

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Writer reflects on first visit to Bryant-Denny

Sara Tidwell
Athens Banner-Herald
USA TODAY NETWORK

ATHENS, Ga. — I'd only ever been to two college football stadiums in my still very young journalism career.

Both are pretty obvious.

First is Spartan Stadium, which I attended both as a fan and working media while in my years as a student at Michigan State. I wrote about it in my introductory article when I started my job with the Athens (Georgia) Banner-Herald, how my parents took me to a game when I was small and influenced my blood to turn green early.

Second, of course, is Sanford Stadium, which I entered for the first time at the end of last summer following a 14-hour move from the mitten state. Truthfully, I still get lost in that labyrinth of a stadium, and they just *had* to go and change up the routes I memorized — how to get from the parking lot to the press box to the postgame presser and back — last year by giving us a new press box this year.

On Saturday night, I scratched a third stadium of my bucket list: Bryant-Denny.

(It's here that you might be surprised that I've never been to the Big House in Ann Arbor.)

I remember the Microsoft Teams message I sent to my boss' boss, Tommy Deas. The big kahuna, the one who has believed in me and allowed me opportunities to get where I am today. It started with a “what if,” and ended with my signature, “You can say no lol!” I sent it as I sat in my brand-new seat overlooking Dooley Field, waiting for Georgia to kick off its home opener on Sept. 7 against Tennessee Tech.

There was an underlying ask to the question at hand: a want to meet Anna Snyder.

You all may know her very well as the resident high school and Alabama recruiting reporter for The Tuscaloosa News. We've been friends since we started in the Gannett system at the same time last summer, introduced by none other than Deas. We've been trying to make it work for a while, since she

wasn't able to come to the SEC Championship Game in Atlanta last December.

Surprisingly, he didn't shoot me down. Unsurprisingly, because the universe seriously doesn't want our schedules to line up, Snyder wasn't going to be covering the game. Her family met her on the Quad to tailgate instead, but we texted the whole time.

She'd told me she had a friend who was covering the game, and to introduce ourselves to each other. “He's tall, has brown hair, wearing a Final Four quarter-zip.” The man himself joined the group in front of me as we waited in line for credentials just a few minutes later. He was exasperated as ever, rightfully so as I heard him huff about how the Secret Service on hand for Donald Trump's visit made him stuff his tripod in a bush. Apparently, he couldn't bring it inside the stadium, “per policy” — that is not a policy for working media, mind you.

Snyder got a text from me with several laughing-crying emojis at that, and I just want to say, Jack, I *really* hope no

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Athens Banner-Herald sports writer Sara Tidwell on Saban Field at Bryant-Denny Stadium after Alabama beat Georgia, 41-34 last Sunday.

SARA TIDWELL

ON THE AIR

TELEVISION

(Subject to change)

AUTO RACING

1 p.m. — NASCAR Cup Series: Yella-Wood 500, NBC

COLLEGE MEN'S SOCCER

6 p.m. — Cal Poly-UC Santa Barbara, ESPN

COLLEGE VOLLEYBALL

Noon — Texas-Florida, ESPN
Noon — Missouri-Kentucky, SECN
12:30 p.m. — Georgia Tech-Louisville, ACCN2 p.m. — Baylor-TCU, ESPN
2 p.m. — Georgia-Alabama, SECN
3 p.m. — Pepperdine-Washington St., ESPN

GOLF

5:30 a.m. — DP World Tour: Alfred Dunhill Links Championship, GOLF
11:30 a.m. — Korn Ferry Tour Championship, GOLF
2:30 p.m. — PGA: Sanderson Farms Championship, GOLF
6 p.m. — Champions Tour: Constellation FURYK & FRIENDS, GOLF

PICKLEBALL

Noon — PPA Tour: Virginia Beach Championship Sunday, TENNIS

PRO BASKETBALL

7 p.m. — MLB: Padres-Dodgers, FS1

PRO BASKETBALL

2 p.m. — WNBA Playoffs, ABC
4 p.m. — WNBA Playoffs, ESPN
7 p.m. — NBA Preseason: Bucks-Pistons, ESPN

PRO FOOTBALL

8:30 a.m. — NFL: Jets-Vikings, NFLN
Noon — NFL: Ravens-Bengals, CBS
3:25 p.m. — NFL: Packers-Rams, CBS
3:25 p.m. — NFL: Cardinals-49ers, FOX
7:20 p.m. — NFL: Cowboys-Steelers, NBC, Peacock

SOCCER

8 a.m. — Premier League: Manchester United-Aston Villa, USA
10:30 a.m. — Premier League: Tottenham Hotspur-Bright & Hove Albion, USA
4 p.m. — NWSL: Washington Spirit-Orlando Pride, ESPN2

TENNIS

7:30 a.m. — WTA: China Open, Final; ATP: Shanghai Masters, Early Rounds, TENNIS
10 p.m. — Shanghai-ATP & Wuhan-WTA Early Rounds, TENNIS

VOLLEYBALL

8:30 p.m. — Athletes Unlimited, ESPN

Warren

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and Cathleen Vail.

Captain duties range from handling coin flips before matches to being the go-to person for her teammates to perhaps the most important role: being a leader. Warren's leadership can be seen all over the court, nearly always being the first to her teammates after a point whether it goes in the Jaguars favor or not.

"Avery has the best attitude of any athlete that I know," Hitchner said. "She just is very calm and collected. exactly

what you want in a captain. It's not just her attitude, she's also a great player on the court and a leader. I'm really proud of her. Last year being a freshman on varsity, she has grown so much from that and she has just stepped into her leadership role."

Stephenson is in her sixth season at Northridge, having been the head volleyball coach for two years now. During her tenure with the Jaguars, she has graduated three setters, all of whom have gone to play collegiately: Mary Morgan Formby, Ella Heifner and Megan Fairburn. Between those three, none had set for the varsity team in their freshman year as Warren did.

"Avery Warren is doing more as a

sophomore than the three best setters that I have had come out of this program," Stephenson said.

On top of being a leader, Stephenson said that Warren is one of the team's top hitters as well. On the season, Warren has 225 assists, 162 kills, 153 digs and 46 aces.

"She is the definition of what you want in an athlete," Stephenson said. "I can tell she loves the game, she wants to be here. I have never not seen her give it her all."

Despite only being a sophomore, Warren has the potential to be one of the top players that has come through the Northridge volleyball program. One thing is for sure, though, and that is that

Warren is helping to continue the legacy of Northridge volleyball.

"The great part with having Avery come up is that she continues a legacy that Northridge volleyball has," Stephenson said. "It doesn't just stop with the girls that we graduated last year, the girls we graduate this year that are outstanding... Middle schoolers can look to her and be like 'I can do this, I can work this hard.'"

Anna Snyder covers high school sports and University of Alabama softball and football recruiting for The Tuscaloosa News. Reach her at asnyder@gannett.com. Follow her on X @annaesnyder2.

Goodbread

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bama Journalism department, the film recounted Stallings' coaching career as an Alabama assistant under legendary coach Paul W. "Bear" Bryant from 1958-64, to his eventual head coaching jobs at Texas A&M, the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals, and finally back at Alabama.

Throughout, however, the documentary continually weaves in anecdotal and testimonial substantiation of Stallings' advocacy for the RISE Center, and his special relationship with his son. John Mark Stallings not only had Down Syndrome, but was born with a heart defect as well. At the time of John Mark's birth (1962), mainstreaming the education of children with developmental disabilities was unheard of, and doctors recommended full-time institutionalization. The coach and his wife, Ruth Ann, refused. Largely through Ruth Ann's tireless efforts, John Mark developed into a level of independence never thought possible. Doctors had predicted, according to the film, he might never walk or talk.

Eventually, he did both, and much more.

John Mark Stallings worked at the Bryant Museum, and as an assistant to former Alabama athletic trainer Bill McDonald during his father's tenure as head coach from 1990-1996. He attended every Crimson Tide practice, knew every player by name, and built relationships with many of them. He died in 2008 at 42 years old. Gene Stallings, with help from a pledge of \$1 million from Alabama steel magnate Pete Hanna, had a new RISE Center facility built in Tuscaloosa in 1994, and successfully worked to expand the program around the country. Today, the vast majority of RISE students are mainstreamed into kindergarten.

In the spring of 1993, as an Alabama senior, my then girlfriend and now wife prodded me to take an undergraduate course in Human Environmental Sciences titled Marriage and Family. Gene Stallings came to speak to the class one day, fresh off the 1992 national championship, and the lecture hall filled with students expecting insight from an undefeated 13-0 season. Instead, the coach told a very different story about John Mark, and a golf cart that he had accidentally wrecked by steering it into a tree behind the Stallings home. John Mark had spent the rest of the day in his



Gene Stallings appears at the Bama Theatre for the premiere of the documentary film, *Do Right: The Stallings Standard*, on Sept. 26. Stallings has photos taken with RISE Center's REACH employee Ian Terry and Big Al. GARY COSBY JR.-TUSCALOOSA NEWS

bedroom, distraught over the accident and worried his father would be angry about the damage to the cart.

To anyone's knowledge, however, Stallings never angered a moment in his life where John Mark was concerned. And when he came home and saw how upset his son was, the coach came up with the perfect way to express that the golf cart damage was of no conse-

quence.

"I asked John Mark if the tree was OK," Stallings, to my best recollection, told our class. "I knew that old tree was just fine, but that was my way of telling Johnny the golf cart wasn't important to me."

What was important was his family, even over football.

And "Do Right: The Stallings Stan-

dard" drives that point home better than any other.

"Do Right: The Stallings Standard" will next be shown at 2 p.m. on Nov. 3 at the Love Civic Center in Stallings' hometown of Paris, Texas. Reach Tuscaloosa News columnist Chase Goodbread at cgoodbread@gannett.com. Follow on X @chasegoodbread.

Writer

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one stole your tripod — those are expensive.

The plan was to come cover this game with the Athens Banner-Herald, helping our resident Georgia Bulldogs writer Marc Weiszer the same way I do during home games by picking up the live blog in the second half and writing a sidebar. I got to write about what people are calling "Good Carson, Bad Carson," and I got to walk (also see: sprint) across the turf after the game to catch Kirby Smart's

press conference — and duh, I took a selfie after the work was done.

Boy, was that the game of the season. The weak first start for Georgia had several people mumbling next to me. I had written up what I needed by halftime, fully anticipating the Bulldogs to lose by 26 points. There was no way they could come back from a deficit that big.

Right?

Wrong! I should've known to never doubt Smart. Rookie mistake.

The fourth quarter was, singlehandedly, the wildest 15 minutes of football I have ever witnessed live. That turnover on downs added fuel into a dying Bulldog fire.

I hate to admit I'd been in the bathroom during the Dillon Bell 67-yarder, but I hurried back to my seat in time to see 17-year-old Ryan Williams reclaim the crown with that crazy 75-yarder — side note: him being younger than my youngest sibling is making me feel really old, and I'm only 24 y'all.

Bryant-Denny Stadium and Alabama football did indeed live up to the hype I've been hearing about for years.

The Million Dollar Band was stellar. I love the formations they do, the ones where they spelled out "Bama" or "Roll Tide." The in-game playlist was top-notch with Chappell Roan and Sabrina Carpenter queued. The food in the be-

low-freezing press box (seriously, why was the AC cranked *that* high?) was better than anticipated; that mac-and-cheese was a gooey delight. And yes, the sheer number of times the crowd chanted "Roll Tide" is exactly what I expected.

All this to say that, even though I was there covering the Bulldogs, I left knowing what makes Alabama such a special place. I'd told a high school friend who attended Alabama and travels from Michigan every Saturday to her alma mater, that I was in attendance, and she told me straight up: "I'm excited for you to experience it." I see why, Avery.

Until next time, T-Town.