

THE LEGEND OF SAM HARTMAN

Talent, tragedy and triumph



FRANKIE MANSFIELD/STAFF

Sam Hartman has taken South Carolina by storm in his first season in the Palmetto State.



Hartman won a state championship his sophomore season at Davidson Day.



Sam Hartman teamed back up with Chad Grier his sophomore season at Davidson Day School.

BY FRANKIE MANSFIELD
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Sam Hartman totes a black sharpie marker with him on Fridays as a sort of pregame routine now.

Seated in the last row at the back of the team bus with Eric Church leaking from his earbuds he scribbles away at the white tape that's bound tightly around both of his wrists. "LLD #10," he traces over and over, darker and bolder until he's satisfied with his work. It's a reminder. As if he could ever forget. Or maybe now it's more of good luck. Either way, it's important minutiae.

Hartman revels in the details. Just check the style. His jet-black hair is sharply groomed and flows much shorter these days than his shoulder-length rock star locks of years past. A black headband rolled above his brow matches the eye black that's smeared down his face. His white leggings end just above his bare ankles to accentuate the snow-white cleats that too have a No. 10 branded into the heel. His mouthpiece is decorated with fangs. And his jersey is typically rolled up to his chest in crop-top fashion. Everything's bold but everything's calculated, everything's precise. Such is life when the spotlight's drawn to you. Or is he drawn to it?

Hartman comes alive under the glow of the Friday night lights. The big games, the lopsided wins, the gaudy stats, the shiny trophies, they all feed into a vibrant on-field persona. The fans, the hecklers, the applause, the haters, recruiters, doubters, Instagram likes and Twitter comments, they too all play a role in creating the high school superstar. This is what the public sees. What the magazines print and what the reality show cameras depict. It's all part of it, but it's far from all of it.

Oceanside Collegiate Academy's new quarterback and Wake Forest's future is just as much a survivor as he is a star. He's been molded by tragedy as well as triumph. The bravado only polishes over life's bruises. This is Sam Hartman, the enigmatic. He arrived in Charleston abruptly and his time here is quickly fleeting. Don't miss him, but don't misunderstand him either.

"Can you believe Sam's coming too?" Nila Grier asked her husband, Chad, last March as he packed his bags for Charleston.



Future NFL Hall of Famer Randy Moss visits Sam Hartman in the hospital.



Joe Hartman (8), Demetri Allison and Sam Hartman.

Please note

Due to early deadlines prior to Hurricane Irma's landfall, our special section "Boomers and Beyond" has been postponed to Sept. 20 so there is still time to get your ad in as long as we have it by Sept. 15 by emailing advertising@moultrienews.com.

In addition, many high school football games have been postponed or canceled, therefore Player of the Week voting has been suspended for one week.

Chad Grier had coached Davidson Day School to four high school state championships the previous six years. He built the program known as D-Day from scratch into a perennial power in North Carolina. Now he was headed south to try to do it again at Oceanside Collegiate Academy, an upstart charter school nestled on Charleston's Lowcountry coast. Grier was to be Oceanside's third head coach since it opened its doors 12 months ago.

And there wasn't yet a single win to show for it. If he was going to accept maybe his toughest challenge yet, he wasn't going at it alone.

"Praise God," he thought as he and his quarterback prepared to meet their new team for the first time. "Praise God."

Before Grier hoisted trophies on the football field he kicked around dust on the

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Talent, tragedy and triumph: The legend of Sam Hartman

LEGEND, from A1

diamond as the manager of the Carolina Copperheads youth baseball team in Charlotte. That’s where he first met Sam, a 6-year-old catcher playing up two years in age with a fiercely competitive spirit that overshadowed his diminutive size.

“He was a little grinder,” Grier remembers. “A little dirt diver with catcher’s gear that was too big for him. He’d come to the park already covered head to toe in dirt. He was that kind of rug-rat grinder.”

Sam became better known as the quarterback of the Big Blue Express, a pee-wee football team coached by North Carolina high school football legend Mark Maye. Maye was regarded as one of the nation’s top quarterbacks his senior season at Independence High School and went on to play three years in college at North Carolina. He spotted Sam’s potential early and spent the next six years grooming his technique. Sam was rare in every way — a kid with a quarterback coach, running an air-raid offense while most of his peers were handing the ball off every play. Rather than build sand castles during family beach vacations, Sam would recruit strangers to run passing drills with he and his father, Mark, on the shoreline.

“He was a natural quarterback. All we really had to do as coaches was let him throw it,” Maye said. “By 10 years old, he was extremely accurate. He threw a nice easy ball to catch, good arm. By then we were throwing it probably 20 times a game, seam routes, everything. And he’d go 15 for 20, even with a couple drops. Nobody else his age was doing anything like that.”

Sam had attended Southlake Christian Academy every year since kindergarten. He expected to play his freshman year of high school but a new head coach with a son who too was a freshman quarterback kept Sam mostly relegated to the bench. Burnt out and frustrated, Sam says he “hated football” and tried to convince his mother, Lisa, to let him quit. Lisa’s long been a voice of reason for her son. And when fans, or friends or girls inflate his ego, Lisa’s usually there with a timely quip to humble him.

“Sam’s mindset has always been, he’s going to be on the field,” Lisa said. “He doesn’t want to be second or third or whatever. Never.”

Sam had lost touch with Grier over the years until Southlake Christian met Davidson Day in the state championship game that season. Grier and Davidson, winners of three state titles in four years, were expecting to have a quarterback vacancy next year. Southlake Christian was losing nine players to graduation and at least eight more to transfer. Numbers were dropping so low it wouldn’t be able to field a varsity team any longer and the coach who’d benched Sam most of the season was already moving on.

“I just thought, ‘Why not?’ Sam said. “And it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.”

Sam transferred to Davidson Day and spent the offseason rededicating himself to football with an all-day training regimen that sometimes ran seven days a week. Grier, a former college quarterback at Richmond and East Carolina, picked up where Maye left off. The pair spent most of the summer together, often meeting twice a day.

“He showed up to Davidson Day looking like an Abercrombie and Fitch model, confident and smiling just strutting around,” Grier joked. “I said, ‘What happened to that crew-cut, dirty-faced kid?’”

Sam entered the summer in a three-man battle for the starting quarterback position. But senior receiver Jonathan Jeffries says the team could tell from the start whose job it was.

“He embraced that leadership role from Day 1,” said Jeffries, now a sophomore receiver at East Carolina. “Summer workouts he was calling all the receivers to come put in extra work together. He took that leadership role and ran with it. It’s just his nature.”

Sam passed for 222 yards and three touchdowns in his first varsity start. He went for 312 and two scores the next game and then topped it with 382 and three touchdowns the game after that. Davidson outscored its first five opponents 239-34 with

“He was a little grinder. A little dirt diver...”
Chad Grier

Grier calling the plays and his budding 5-foot-9, 145-pound pupil firing away.

“I knew he was putting in a lot of hard work but that was the first time I really experienced it in person,” said Sam’s brother Joe, two years his elder, who’d returned to football as a senior that season after spending the past few focusing solely on basketball. “It was kind of humbling to watch him that year. It was ‘Oh wow, I guess he’s the best football player in the family now.’”

In its eighth game, Davidson trailed rival Charlotte Latin by a point with the ball on its own 20-yard line and just a minute to play. The uncertainty was palpable. No one said a word, not the captains, not the seniors, not a sound until the sophomore quarterback broke the silence.

“Coach, this is going to be easy,” Sam let out with a smile. “We do this every Thursday in practice with no timeouts. Now we have three.”

Sam drove Davidson straight down the field, picking apart the defense before eventually landing on the opposition’s 7-yard line. A field goal as time expired delivered Davidson a two-point win and confirmed everything Grier thought he already knew about his precocious signal caller.

“He has that ‘it’ factor,” Grier said. “Game on the line, he’s going to find a way to win. Plain and simple.”

Davidson carried an undefeated record into the state championship game. Sam had racked up more than 2,600 yards and 25 touchdowns on the way there. His popularity was skyrocketing. Media, scouts, recruiters, they all wanted a piece of the 16-year-old phenom with the shoulder-length locks and a surgical passing prowess. All that remained was a state championship — what should’ve been the perfect ending to an unforgettable season.

“That was the biggest game of my life,” Sam said. “But everything felt different. I was numb. It was all just kind of like a blur.”

A 10-year-old Demitri Allison arrived at football tryouts on a rickety rusted bicycle with a pocket full of loose change and just a few crumpled dollar bills to offer for registration fees. He’d seen the signs around town for Grier’s pee-wee Giants team and personally requested the coach without ever meeting him. Sports were among the very few things that ever came easy in Demitri’s life.

Grier drove Demtiri home that first day of practice. He lived across from a cemetery at the back of a dark dead-end road with no streetlights on an impoverished side of town. A mixed breed dog chained to a log patrolled the pitch-black front yard.

“The light kind of came on for me,” Grier said. “This kid needed us. My wife and I considered adopting him. But in hindsight, God had a great plan.”

Grier introduced Demitri to the Hartmans when he was 14. They’d help drive him to and from practices, take him school shopping, to tutoring, everything he wasn’t receiving at home with a mother who was in and out of his life. “The team just sort of took him in,” Lisa said.

Demitri was three years older than Joe and five years older than Sam but the three instantly latched onto each other. They’d do homework together after school and fish off the Hartman’s private dock on Lake Norman. When the fish weren’t biting, they’d run receiver routes in the backyard; Sam would often play quarterback and Joe would defend. Demtiri began sleeping over on weekends and the Hartmans even hosted his 15th birthday party.

“You’d never know what he dealt with at home because he always came around with a big smile,” Sam said. “I had to act mature to even hang with him. He didn’t let us get away with acting like little brats.”

The Hartmans eventually gained unofficial custody of Demitri from his grandmother, his main caregiver who at the time was struggling with kidney failure. He thrived in his new affluent setting, attending private school, making new friends, bet-

ter grades and eventually earning a football scholarship to Elon University.

“He became part of our family,” Lisa said. “Demitri, Sam and Joe, they were very, very close. They had such a bond. It just felt like he belonged here. They were brothers.”

“Make no mistake,” Grier added. “That was their third son.”

Demitri became unusually distant during the fall of his junior year of college. Few heard more than a word or two. Text messages often went unreturned. His cell phone was usually turned off anyway. Then on November 11, 2015 — two days before Sam and undefeated Davidson were to play in the state championship game — Demitri was found dead in Chapel Hill. He’d committed suicide, jumping off a tenth-story balcony of a UNC residence hall. Demitri was just 21 years old.

“You can’t describe that feeling, the pain,” Lisa said. “None

of us had any idea he felt such despair. His girlfriend, his teammates, none of us, which is just so scary.”

Sam and Joe received the news midway through football practice that day. Grier broke down in tears. Joe did too. Sam had to carry him to the car after practice. That night, Sam sat alone at the end of his dock for hours. He’d met Demitri there seven years ago. Demitri caught a catfish that day that he took home for his grandmother to fry. His face lit up with pride. Now Sam sat lifeless. He just watched as a fish snagged his line and emptied out his reel.

“Look, nobody expects you to play on Fri-,” Grier tried to tell Sam that night. Sam cut him off before he could finish.

“I’m playing,” he fired back with an earnest look that sliced straight through his coach’s uncertainty. “I’m definitely playing.”

Lisa stood on the sideline

before the state championship game, waving to each Davidson player as they filed onto the field. She smiled wistfully as No. 10 approached, stirring up memories of Demitri and his old jersey number. “Ohh, Demitri,” she let out with a mournful whisper before realizing Davidson didn’t have a No. 10 on its team. She peered through the facemask of the unknown player as he jogged closer. The locks of hair flowing from his helmet eventually gave it away. Lisa had to fight back the tears. Sam had switched jerseys unannounced. His wrist tape read “REST IN PEACE.” His towel had “R.I.P. Demitri Allison #10” written down the front. Sam would never again wear a number other than 10.

“It was like an uplift for us,” said Jeffries, whose sister dated Demitri. “Sam was really strong that whole week. It was like ‘if he can do it, then we can do it.’ And we just kind of rallied around him.”

Sam would throw two touchdowns that night as Davidson won handily in what Grier describes as “the best game I think he’s ever played.”

“It was different like an angel was on his shoulders all the way through,” Jeffries said. “You can’t even repeat that. The whole night, the atmosphere. He was making every type of throw you could imagine.”

Sam wasn’t sure how to celebrate after. He moved about emotionless in the hours that followed. Even now, years later, he remains somewhat guarded when discussing that week. He’s stowed those memories far away, hesitant to relish such painful emotions.

“I was devastated but football was the escape,” he said. “Really, for a long time, it was just something fun to do. But after that it was my escape. I was just kind of living in the moment. Everything was out when I stepped on the field.”

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