

Meet the Ryans: the family that plays together at Central Plains

BY MIKE COURSON
 The goal of any high school athlete is to win a state championship. For the Ryan kids at Central Plains High School, that's almost a reality as much as it is a goal. So far, the four Ryan kids – offspring of Jim and Lisa Ryan – have played a role in bringing seven state championships and a handful of state medals and trophies to the school.

Tennis Coach Gary Bittner went more than 30 years without a state title. Over the last two seasons, the Ryans have delivered him two individual titles, a team title, and a handful of state medals. Bittner has the rare distinction of coaching all four of the Ryans: Michael, Janae, Devin, and Emily.

"They've been tremendous," Bittner said. "Michael was a four-time state qualifier, and Janae was a four-time state qualifier. Devin made a strong impact out of the blocks, and Emily had a fantastic first year. That family has been very good to me."

As a freshman in 2013, Michael finished ninth as a singles player at state. The next year, he teamed up with Layne Bieberle, who had finished fourth as a singles player in 2013. The duo went on to finish third as a doubles team at the 2014 state tournament.

In 2015, Bieberle and Ryan took a perfect record all the way to the state championship match before losing. The duo finished their careers with 133 wins, the most by any Claffin High or Central Plains player at the time.

Bieberle graduated that spring and Michael's practice partner was gone. He started playing more with Devin. "He's pretty good," said Michael. "He beat me some days, honestly, even though he was just a freshman and I was a senior."

For his senior season in 2016, Michael returned to singles where he went on to finish third at state. Devin teamed up with Brady Rugan, a senior, and the duo finished second in the doubles bracket. The result was 41 team points – enough to win a team state championship by 12 points over Class 3A Hesston.

Michael's win record was short-lived when Janae and teammate Keeley Hipp surpassed it with 144 wins after a perfect senior campaign and second-straight doubles state championship this fall. The girls lost just

one match in 2015 and delivered Bittner his first state championship.

Joining the mix this fall was Emily, who went on to place fifth in her freshman campaign.

"They have great support from their family," Bittner said. "They're always at the meet; not only their immediate family, but their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends. That, I think, spurs them on also."

Bittner and area coaches have all observed the Ryans and teammates practicing into the evening. That extra effort has paid its dividends.

"When practice is over, they go home and eat supper, then they're out hitting more balls to prepare them for the matches they have ahead of them," said Bittner. "One can't ask for much more from anyone."

Michael, Freshman at Bethany College

Michael may have set the tone for his siblings, but the oldest of five kids, he had to find ways to motivate himself. "I just really hated losing," he said. "When I was a kid, we'd have competitions in the yard. We played basketball and football and no one wanted to lose. That's probably what drove me."

Michael began playing MAYB basketball in the fourth grade and that's what turned him on to bigger competition. "That just made me realize it was a lot of fun and something I planned on being successful in."

The success came. Central Plains Football Coach Chris Steiner had a bit of a mess in 2012. His Oilers gave him a rare losing season at 4-5. Somewhere in the mix was a small freshman who would do anything to help the team.

"(Michael) was always undersized at everything he did," Steiner said. "Until he got older, he was slow as molasses. Honestly, I don't know how he played corner as a freshman. Devin is slow, but Devin looks fast compared to how Michael looked as a freshman. Michael wasn't much bigger than Devin as a freshman, either. It's just heart. He just wanted to do whatever was going to help the team. Devin is the exact same way."

Michael played virtually every position for the Oilers – tight end, defensive end, linebacker, cornerback, back-up quarterback, wide receiver, offensive line, and defensive line - who soon regained their powerhouse

status. Central Plains went 9-2 in 2013, then defied the odds with a perfect 13-0 season in 2013 to claim a state championship.

Michael, as a four-year starter for the Oilers, helped his teams to a 31-4 record in his final three prep seasons. "What really helped me is I really worked to try and understand what was going on," he said. "I spent a lot of time outside of football practice trying to learn the plays my freshman year because it was all foreign to me."

If Michael was heady on the gridiron, he took it to another level on the basketball court. Again a four-year starter, he helped make Central Plains one of the top teams in Class 2A for three years. In that run, the Oilers played for a state title, ended St. John's record-breaking win streak, and manhandled Hill City for third place in 2016.

"Michael's biggest attribute as a basketball player is his willingness and want to learn," said Oiler Coach Brett Rolfs. "Combine that with his relentless work ethic, and I couldn't have asked for a better young man to become my first point guard and take my scheme and philosophy and put it to work for us on the basketball court."

"Having success in basketball starts with an excellent point guard or floor general. He learned how to become an extension of myself and made my job a lot easier in the process. Over the course of four years, he grew into that role more than even I could have imagined. He learned early on that he wasn't going to beat you with his athleticism or speed, but with his intelligence and heart."

"I always tell my players that you must learn how to use your head before your bodies to get to that highest level of success in basketball. He embodied that belief in every aspect, and man was it entertaining to watch that play out on the basketball court."

"It's also been a pleasure to watch Michael take those same attributes off the court and into his personal life. He was a pleasure to coach and no doubt will be a great ambassador for anything does in the future."

For Michael, being a coach on the court just came naturally. "That has a lot to do with my dad, probably," he said. "When we were young at high school games, we didn't have a choice. We had to sit by my mom and



Michael Ryan



Janae Ryan



Devin Ryan



Emily Ryan

dad and watch the game so we wouldn't be running around. I had an understanding of the game from a young age."

Michael is currently attending Bethany College in Lindsborg. He sees some varsity minutes for the Swede basketball team, and follows the Oilers whenever he can. The skills he developed in Claffin are helping him succeed at the next level.

"The biggest thing is work ethic," he said. "Back at Central Plains, you were going to go hard or you weren't going to play. They drove that ever since we

were young. That's just the way it was. You had to work hard."

Janae, Senior at CPHS

The Lady Oiler basketball team has been the team to beat for three years. With a perfect season in 2014, Central Plains had won 44-straight games heading into a marquee match-up with one-loss Ellinwood on Feb. 24, 2015.

Janae, a sophomore at the time, was sick that evening. Normally a great perimeter team, the Lady Oilers finished the night 3-of-25 from the outside in the 66-58 loss. The Lady

Oilers have not lost since. They downed Ellinwood 72-54 less than two weeks later and went on to win a second-straight state title. Last year, the Lady Oilers completed another perfect 26-0 season for a third-straight Class 2A title.

Janae has started every game in that 77-1 stretch. "Janae has been a rock for us the last three years," said Lady Oiler Coach Pat Stiles. "I call her Steady Eddie. She's always so solid offensively and defensively. She has a great work ethic and makes everyone around her better. She has a great feel for the game and makes great decisions. She's the true definition of a team player who always tries to fill the role that will make the team better."

Janae did have some help around her in Taylor Rolfs, who now plays at Fort Hays State, and Reagan Phelan, who was named Miss Kansas Basketball last year and now plays at Washburn. With those players gone, Ryan returns as a leader for the 2016-17 campaign.

"Everyone thinks she only a spot-up shooter, but she has a well-rounded game that she will show the state this year," Stiles said. "She always comes up clutch in the big games."

Ryan hit six 3-pointers in last year's state championship against Olpe. On the season, she shot 59 percent from inside the arc and 44 percent from the outside. She averaged 12.6 points and five rebounds a game. She is looking forward to

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They do have a trio of shooters returning, topped off by senior Spencer VanMeter, a 6-1 guard/forward who averaged 17.33 points per game, 5.4 rebounds per game and 2.4 steals; junior Caleb Karst, a 6-0 guard/forward (8.76 ppg., 4 rpg., 9 spg.); and Kade Scott, a 6-1 sophomore guard/forward (9.94 ppg., 9.24 rpg., 1 steal and one block per game). Top newcomers include freshman Harrison Van Meter, sophomore Trace Baker and junior Gabe Otto.

The Tigers aren't overly long (their tallest player is sophomore Logan Williams at 6-3) but they are pretty consistent over the 6-0 mark across the board. They do have speed (thanks to spring track) and they are in shape (thanks to football), Flores said. "We're hoping

that our physicality from the football field will translate into moving up and down the floor," Flores said. "We may not match up across the front but we're going to make up for that in the half-court."

"We're not really focused on wins and losses this year," said Flores. "We are learning that we can compete on the field of play; we still have some people who haven't had much experience on the playing field."

"We are all working as a team to change the losing mentality in this school," Flores continued. "Working and pushing ourselves to become better every day. We are not chasing records or wins. We just want to go out and compete with sportsmanship."

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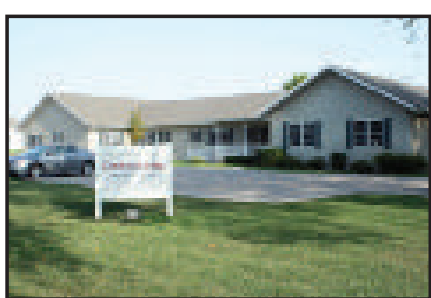
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