

Sports

Bulldog athletes advance their careers

■ Baker seniors Jake Cuzick, Sydney Keller and Mason Van Arsdall recently signed letters of intent to play sports in college

By Corey Kirk

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Over the past month, three Baker High School seniors have taken a momentous step in their athletic careers, signing their national letter of intent to compete on the collegiate level in their respective sports.

Although Jake Cuzick, Sydney Keller and Mason Van Arsdall will enjoy their remaining days as Baker Bulldogs, they're also excited about the next chapter in their lives, both athletically and academically.

Jake Cuzick, cross-country, Mount St. Mary's, Maryland

"It's really been the driving force for me for a long time, it's been my longtime goal since eighth-grade ..."

— **Jake Cuzick, talking about competing in cross-country in college**

Cuzick is ready to be a Mountaineer.

Competing in college has been a dream for this Baker distance runner since he was in junior high.

"It's really been the driving force for me for a long time, it's been my longtime goal since eighth grade, seeing people sign with big schools, it's been a motivator," Cuzick said.

Cuzick has been a fixture in the cross-country and track and field teams at Baker, and Suzy Cole, who coaches both teams, has enjoyed watching him progress.

"Jake is probably one of the most, if not the most focused cross-country runner I've had," Cole said. "In seventh grade we knew Jake loved running, and was very serious about where he wanted to go with his running. Where kids always grew into the love of it, Jake has always had that."

After posting a strong season his junior year in cross country in the fall of 2019, Cuzick faced a series of challenges.

COVID-19 canceled his junior track and field season, and two separate hip injuries complicated the college recruiting process.

"I also haven't ran in over a year now, so it was hard having to explain that at the same time, but the thing with cross-country is that it's not like other sports, if you can run fast, you can run fast — you prove that with your time," Cuzick said. "I had a few times, and I was able to get on the phone with a few coaches. I was able to explain my situation and what my goals were, I was able to get some interest."

Cuzick received scholarship offers from five schools, including the University of South Carolina Upstate, and Jacksonville State in Alabama.

But Cuzick chose Mount St. Mary's, a private liberal arts university in Maryland, because of what the school offered academically as well as the cross-country team.

"They just have a program that's promising into the future," Cuzick said.

When Cuzick signed his letter of intent for a partial scholarship to compete for the Mountaineers, a feeling of relief came over him.

"My spring junior year and even the beginning of my senior year I didn't have one college talking to me, there



Buell Gonzales Jr./Contributed Photo

Flanked by his parents, Roy and Adrian, Jake Cuzick signed a letter of intent to compete in cross-country for Mount St. Mary's, a university in Maryland.

was a while I was worried that I didn't get anybody to respond, so it was a relief to get that stress over. Now I know where I'm going, now I know what I'm working towards," Cuzick said.

Cole couldn't have been more excited for him when he signed.

"He has been so driven by that for so long, and with these injuries there have definitely been some dark days. I was very excited that he's having the opportunity to get both his academic and athletic dream," Cole said.

Cole is excited to see Cuzick grow at Mount St. Mary's as an athlete.

"He's already been through so much, and he still knows he loves it," Cole said. "The advantages of colleges being able to train full year, have the fitness go with the nutrition, and the athletic training and all that a high school doesn't offer."

Cuzick's days of running for the Bulldogs are officially over. After suffering a tear in the labrum of his left hip, he spent most of the fall of 2020 recovering. Then right before the pandemic-abbreviated season began this March, Cuzick had to have surgery due to the same injury on his other hip, thus ending his athletic career at Baker.

"It was difficult for a while, this surgery was a lot harder," Cuzick said. "It's just a lot more painful. Coming out of it now I think I'm in a better place mentally. Physically it was really challenging, it wasn't a lot of fun."

Cole said Cuzick remains a valuable member of the Baker team. Even though he's not competing, he inspires his teammates at practices and meets.

"The kids have been around him enough to know who he is and his passion," Cole said. "It's just always that sad, healthy reminder that you can hit bumps in your life, and how you tackle that bump is huge and they can come in a lot of different forms. Jake has done a great job displaying that dedication and stick-to-itiveness."

Reflecting on his time at BHS, Cuzick is grateful for all the memories and friends he made during these past four years.

"I have met a lot of amazing people through cross-country, some of my friends I'll have regardless where I go," he said. "I don't regret a single injury. It's made me who I am, it's made me work harder. I've enjoyed every second of it."

Cuzick intends to major in chemistry at Mount St. Mary's, with aspirations of becoming an astronaut in his

future. Only six weeks into the recovery from his latest hip surgery, he hopes to be back running by summer, training for the start of his college career.

Sydney Keller, cross-country and track and field, Belmont-Abbey, North Carolina

"I have always loved running, and it's the best shot for me to find success."

— **Sydney Keller**

For Sydney Keller, there's no such thing as an off-season.

During her years at BHS Keller has won an individual state championship in wrestling and was a key member of Baker's 2019 Class 4A state championship basketball team.

But she finds herself most content competing on a cross-country course or on a track.

"There hasn't been a season in cross-country or track where I felt burnt out like basketball or wrestling," Keller said. "There is always a point in time where I can't wait to do cross-country or track. I have always loved running, and it's the best shot for me to find success."

Keller won the district championship in 2019 and finished ninth at the Class 4A state meet that year.

Using websites such as Next College Student Athlete, Keller was able to make contacts with college coaches to see what their programs had to offer.

"The coaches reached out to me, and I reached out to them to try and get a hold of their programs. That was the biggest factor of getting myself out there," Keller said.

Although schools through Oregon expressed interest, when the time came for a decision Keller chose Belmont-Abbey, a private liberal arts college in North Carolina.

She's ready to compete for the Crusaders in cross-country.

"I was really excited to continue my athletic career as I go to the next level. It was such a weight lifted off my shoulders, I didn't have to dwell on it any longer," Keller said.

Cole, her longtime coach, said she's seen Keller's college potential since Keller was in junior high.

"She has always had that intense, don't tell me no (attitude), and she always knew that she wanted to work hard enough to be at that collegiate level," Cole said.

Cole said she was espe-



Hailey Keller/Contributed Photo

Sydney Keller signs a letter of intent to compete in cross-country and track and field at Belmont-Abbey College in North Carolina. Keller sat between her parents, Douglas and Theresa Keller, and she was also joined by her coach in both sports at BHS, Suzy Cole, far left.

cially impressed by how much Keller improved as a runner from her sophomore year to her junior season in 2019, when she won at district.

"A new spark twitched," Cole said. "That summer she worked extremely hard on physical conditioning, strength, nutrition and she came back a fighter."

Cole said that although Keller had college offers in Oregon, she wasn't surprised that Keller chose a school across the country.

"She had some really good offers around here, she was just like 'I want to go somewhere else,'" Cole said. "For

her it really was a combination of where do we find the pros and cons combos of athletics and academics."

Keller is eager to join the Crusaders cross-country and track and field teams.

"I'm just excited for the atmosphere, because you see on the TV and everything, you see the long jumpers and they start getting the clap going before they go," Keller said. "Just the high energy, the buildings and along with being around such a supportive team."

Cole said Keller will have great chances to continue to improve her running in college.

"Finding a college that is still willing to invest in her, in Belmont-Abbey she will be one of their top competitors, and so she will get a lot of experience and attention," Cole said.

She hopes Keller will also find time to just enjoy the experience.

"She's just very, very intense all the time, just kind of getting her to not overanalyze every little thing, just enjoy the moment and reflect on it whether it's a good moment or a bad moment," Cole said.

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