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7 hours ago



Former Wisconsin F Nigel Hayes (right) has never been far from the hearts of Brad Schultz's family. Or them from his.

Courtesy the Schultz Family

## How Wisconsin family's grief — and love — taught ex-Badgers star and NBA hopeful Nigel Hayes 'the power of family'



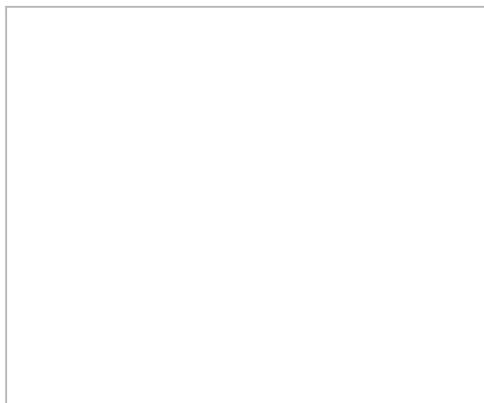
**SEAN KEELER**  
Land Of 10 Writer-Columnist

@SEANKEELER

The coolest part isn't the [tweets](#). Or the 7-foot-3 wingspan. Or the 33-inch vertical leap. Or the guy who put a team on his back for two weeks in March, the 10-wheeler that drove the Wisconsin Badgers from Madison to Madison Square Garden.

With Nigel Hayes, the cool part isn't that some NBA team has a chance to get its mitts on the first player in Big Ten history to pile up at least 1,800 points, 700 rebounds and 300 assists since Michigan State's Steve Smith did it four presidents ago.

The coolest part is that you're getting Jacob Schultz, too.



"I know whatever team [Nigel] is on, he's going to root for them," Marnie Schultz, Jacob's mom, tells Land of 10. "I know that for a fact.

"He's going to be a bandwagon jumper from team to team. Whatever team he's on, yeah."

Some heroes are larger than life, comets that pass into our orbit every so often and light up the room. If we're lucky, they leave us a piece of the vapor trail.

Nigel Hayes leaves his cell phone number.

"I do remember us going back and forth via text about what happened," says Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County. "I know Nigel really cared about the family."

Some six months after they met by chance and four-and-a-half months after her husband passed, Marnie noticed a text waiting on her phone a few weeks back, a note from the open road, thumbed by an old friend.



*Tell the kids I said hi and I miss them.*

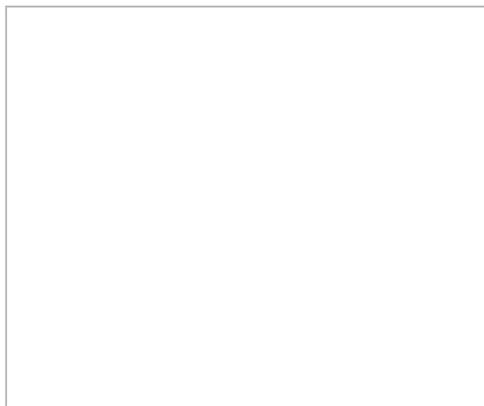
"Just checking up on someone," Hayes says. "We were able to have a little connection. A little time together. We just continued to [have] that and kept that contact with them. I know she's going through a lot for them [all] to deal with. And also dealing with it for her kids."

\* \* \*

The coolest part isn't that Hayes brought a sign to the set of ESPN's College GameDay asking for money, or that he handed the \$10,000 raised over to Johnson and the Boys & Girls Club to do with as they wished.

Or that **some of that money helped make the Christmas wishes of the five Schultz children a reality**, even as Hodgkin lymphoma mercilessly gnawed away at the body of their father, Brad. The coolest part isn't that tragedy and heartbreak brought them together.

The coolest part is that friendship — kinship — kept them there.



"There are always moments in life that make you appreciate things, that make you thankful," Hayes says from California, where he's training for the NBA draft. "There are always moments in life that help you see things with a different perspective and put life into perspective even more. Being around a family with people who have lost [loved ones], little kids who are going to lose their father, it reminds you to be thankful."

Hayes turned up at Brad's bedside for the first time last December. The second time, he brought teammate Ethan Happ with him.

***"You find out that the people who it actually happens to are stronger than those who are trying to do the consoling."***

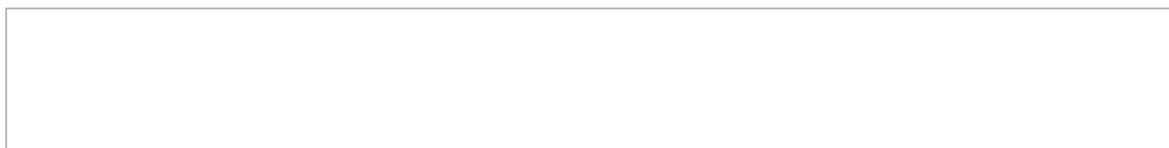
***— Former Wisconsin Badgers F Nigel Hayes***

“That’s one thing that Ethan and I talked about — it almost made us uncomfortable how comfortable they were with the inevitable,” Hayes recalls.

“I know, at the time, the family was preparing for it, but the fact they have gone through it together ... [Brad] was talking about himself, what he wanted to do when he was buried, just to see how comfortable he was ... it shows how strong they were. But again, it’s one thing to go and talk about it. But when it actually happens, that’s a different story.”

The doctors had told Brad the first week of December that the lymphoma was spreading exponentially. That he’d have two weeks, tops. That Christmas and Jacob’s ninth birthday, on Dec. 27, were long shots.

Brad drained them.



Then another.

Then another.

Two weeks.

Four. Six.

“He fought like crazy,” Marnie says.

He died on Jan. 16, early on a Monday, in her loving arms.

“It shows the power of family,” Hayes said. “Good people around you. Positive energy, positive support, that you can turn something like that, a diagnosis of two weeks [to live] and you wanted to get to Christmas and his son’s birthday. And he was able to do them both and get into the next year.

“You find out that the people who it actually happens to are stronger than those who are trying to do the consoling.”

\* \* \*

The coolest part of the postscript isn’t an NFL Montague marrying an NFL Capulet, that Marnie grew up a Chicago Bears fan who moved to Wisconsin and fell in love with a Cheesehead.

“It was OK, because all my family are Bears fans and his family is all Packers fans, so it kind of evened out,” she says. “Even though I must say my team has sucked lately.”

The coolest part isn’t that Brad was laid to rest wearing a pajama suit, [the sort Barney flashed in the television series How I Met Your Mother](#). Or that he was buried in his beloved Packers slippers. Packers slippers and beer.

“Bud Light,” Marnie laughs. “Only Bud Light. Never anything else.”

The coolest part is that Brad had recorded individual messages within a set of Build-A-Bears for each of their kids in early December, once they knew the clock was ticking.

*I used to use you as a pillow and sleep with you all night long.*

*I wish I was able to watch you grow up some more.*

*I love you.*

“At first, it was hard hearing it,” Marnie says. “But now that I’ve heard them over and over again, I don’t start crying.”

They've soldiered on for months now, one day at a time, one hug at a time, buoyed by hearts seen and unseen. Badgers basketball coach Greg Gard and wife Michelle donated \$200 to Brad's GoFundMe.com page. Hayes left tickets for Schultz and her family to the Badgers' Jan. 24 contest with Penn State.

Greg & Michelle Gard  
5 months ago

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Wisconsin men's basketball coach Greg Gard was among those touched by what Brad and Marnie Schultz went through this past winter. (GoFundMe.com)

"It's definitely touching," Hayes says. "You see what we did in basketball and [how] it can impact a family like that."

Practice conflicts kept Hayes from the memorial in the winter, but when Marnie had texted him to tell him the good fight was over, he wrote back: *Give the kids hugs from me*. He told her to let them know he'd be thinking of them.

All of them.

Brad, especially.

"Just how optimistic he was," Hayes explains. "From the time he knew what was going [on], obviously, the fate he was handed, and just how positive he was at trying to be strong for his kids and family."

Hayes had signed a basketball for Brad before Christmas, a gift and a reminder. Jacob had wanted that little piece of Nigel buried with his father, forever.

Dad had other ideas.

The ball remains at home, under Mom's watch. Mom's protection.

"It's not being touched," Marnie says.

Every now and again, she'll look over at the inscription.

**KEEP FIGHTING**

**NIGEL HAYES**

"Nigel," Jacob said once, "is my best friend."

Because here's the other thing, Mr. NBA General Manager: You're not just getting Jacob Schultz.

You're getting Marnie, too, riding shotgun. Jumping on your bandwagon with both feet.

"I would," she says. "I can't make fun of Jacob. Because I *totally* would."

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To contribute to Brad Schultz's Celebration of Life, please visit <https://www.gofundme.com/brad-schultzs-celebration-of-life>

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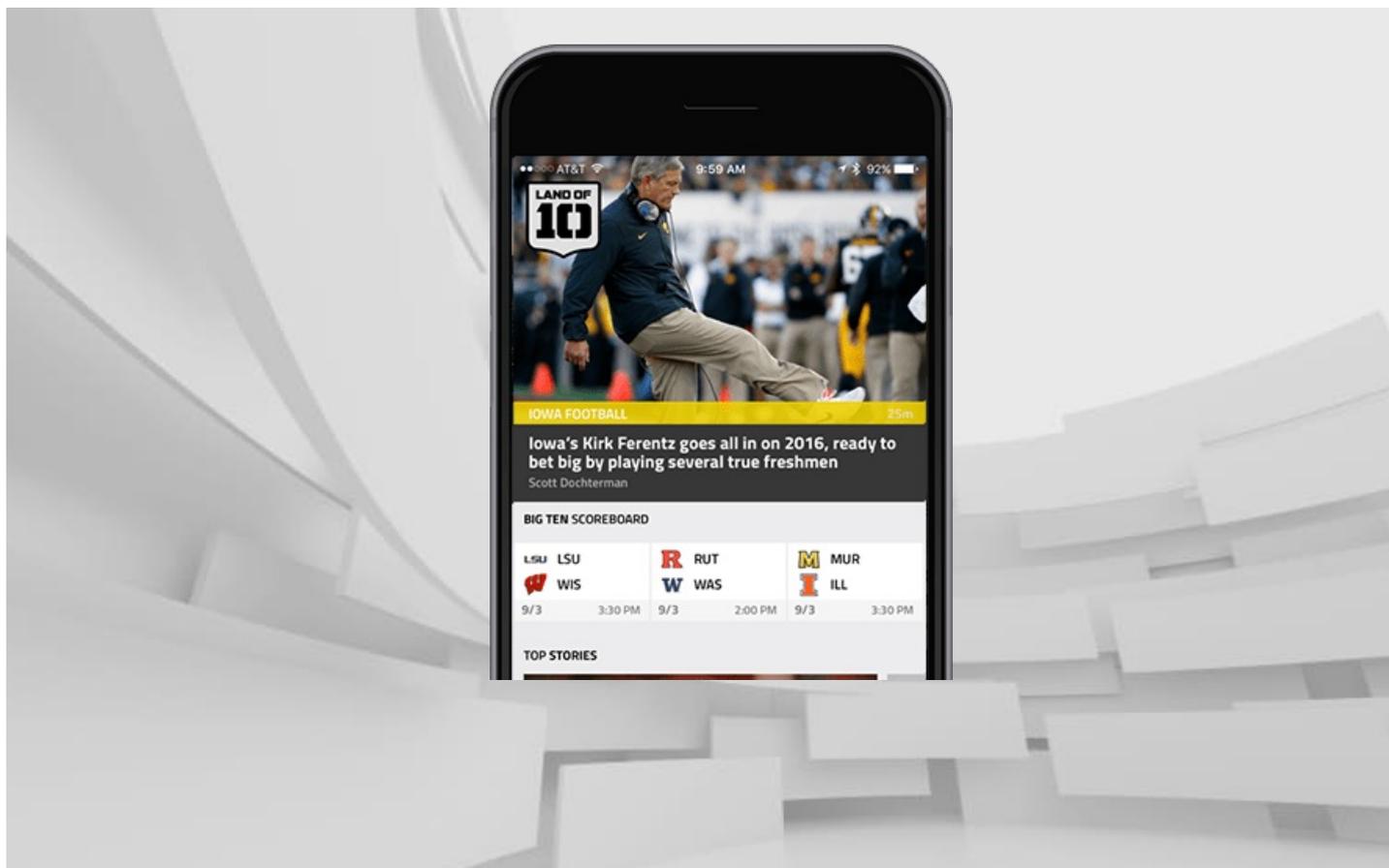
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RB

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