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Thanks for a decade of memories

I walked into the Daily News office on Feb. 2, 2009 — starting my first full-time job out of college. I had spent the previous year working as a part-time sports reporter for its sister paper, the Waukesha Freeman.

In mid-February of last year, I moved back into the Freeman office, but I was still part of the Daily News family — still representing the sports department.

Now, Friday will mark my final day representing the Daily News.

I'm on the move to the Madison area as I have accepted a position as a news reporter/assistant editor for the DeForest and Lodi-Poynette newspapers — both weekly publications.

Looking back on that early-February day 11 years ago, I walked into that West Bend office eager to get to know the eight county high school athletic programs and all the other sporting events the county had to offer.

At first, I'm sure I was known as "that tall guy on the sidelines," but it wasn't long before you got to know me and vice versa.

When I got here, I never thought about how long I'd stay. It turned into 11 years — ones I will never forget. Every high school senior student-athlete I've ever talked to has said that the four years of high school fly by. Well, these past 11 years seemed to have gone by in a blink, too.

I don't know if I can do Washington County justice in this piece, but there are many things that I'm going miss after spending 11 years watching and reporting on the county's sports scene.

From February 2009 to February 2020, I was there for the best of times, as well as the heart-breaking moments. In each of those moments, I felt what you all were going through and I hope my stories over the past 11 years reflected that.

There are many people to thank, and I'm sure I'm going to forget someone, so please don't be offended if you're not mentioned. Over more than a decade, I've gotten to know hundreds of coaches, thousands of athletes and many, many more not directly associated with the high school athletic programs. It was truly a joy talking to all of you.

When I started, I was assigned the Hartford and Slinger beats, which continued for about seven years. It's led me to have stronger relationships within those high schools and communities. I could walk into many events at those schools and the person at the door would wave me right in — most notably Mrs. Paternoster at Hartford events.

Many of my favorite coaches and people to talk to were within those schools. Slinger's Darren Sievers (district administrator), Bill Jacklin (football coach) and many others always welcomed me whenever they saw me walk into events.

There were the HS coaches who called or emailed results after every game or match. Some of the coaches are no longer at their position. Whether it was a win by one or a loss by many — Chris Shelsta (Hartford girls basketball), Todd Jahns (KML boys basketball), Darrell Washburn (KML baseball), Steve Anderson (Slinger tennis), Andy Andress (Hartford tennis), Al Schieve (Slinger boys basketball), Matt Moeller (KML soccer) were ones who made that call, or sent that email informing the paper of that night's contest.

University of Wisconsin at Washington County Athletic Director Debbie Butschlick also made sure that the college student-athletes got their recognition for all the accomplishments as well with countless emails. I was appreciative of that as well.

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I enjoyed talking to Andy Address for a half-hour or more after a dual meet during the week, or an invitational on a Saturday afternoon. Any time I could speak “off the record” to coaches and administrators was enjoyable, chatting about all the things not directly related to their team.

I'd also like to extend my best wishes to the Shelsta family (Chris and Paul, and daughters Alaina and Alexis) as they continue to find answers and ultimately a solution to Alaina's GLUT1 deficiency syndrome. I hope they continue to stay strong and positive, knowing how much the Hartford community, and many more, are behind them, constantly showing support. I'll continue to wear my “Hugs 4 Alaina” T-shirt proudly.

I'd like to thank all those coaches who were consistent in reporting because they cared so much about getting their kids the recognition they deserved. I tried my very best over the last 11 years to make sure I could get as many kids' names in the paper as I could each night.

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There are far too many favorite moments or events of mine to list them all. Really, any time I was on the sidelines at a sporting event was my favorite time on the job, which was a lot of the times.

I've attended state tournaments/meets for 13 sports — boys and girls basketball, baseball (spring and summer — both in Stevens Point and Mequon), boys and girls swimming, cross-country, girls volleyball, boys and girls golf, girls and boys soccer, softball and wrestling. Each moment was enjoyable and memorable in its own right.

Some of the best fun I had was

at the three-day WIAA state wrestling tournament in Madison. Those days were filled with non-stop action, watching some of the county athletes vying to be the best wrestler in the state.

I saw eight county wrestlers win 11 individual titles, including the last two of Jesse Thielke's impressive run of four, in which he lost just one high school match.

I saw many of the 205 matches of Beau Breske's career at Hartford in which he went 202-3, with two of those losses coming his freshman year, falling to a pair of Minnesota state champs in their senior campaign. I witnessed the upset of the 2015 state tournament, when Merrill's Mason Reinhardt edged Breske in the 170-pound title match. I saw Breske's two state titles before that and when he earned redemption as a senior, winning the 182-pound title and becoming a three-time state champ.

I was there for the exhilarating wins that put wrestlers on the podium and for the moments of sadness and frustration, either falling short of a championship or missing out on a top-six placement.

I remember covering my first cross-country state championship meet, not knowing what to expect with six races in one afternoon. I was amazed at how smoothly things ran and how every spectator — family, friends and schoolmates — were glued to every second of the races, showing support for every runner, whether they knew them or not.

Another set of moments that stand out far and above the rest was the magical postseason run of KML boys basketball team during the 2017-18 season, which led to the program's first appearance at the state tournament. It also turned out to be Todd Jahns' last season with the Chargers after a two-decade long tenure. The Chargers were able to put a season's worth of excitement in

just a handful of playoff games, constantly playing as the underdogs, even when being the higher-ranked team.

They were a team on a mission that refused to lose. Unfortunately, KML fell short in a state semifinal game, falling to Valders on a buzzer beater in overtime.

Watching the Germantown boys basketball team win three straight state titles (2012-14) and ultimately fall short of a fourth consecutive title in 2015 was also a highlight of the past 11 years.

I've been around for so many history making moments — from someone breaking a schools all-time scoring record or a first team becoming the first to advance to state within a given program. There's just too many special moments to mention.

I enjoyed the late nights and often times weekend afternoons at the baseball diamond, watching a Land O' Lakes or Rock River League game featuring the West Bend 7 UP, Kewaskum A's or Hartford Hawks. Baseball is my favorite sport and I usually was the first to volunteer to go watch some amateur baseball during the “slow” summer months for the Daily News sports department.

I enjoyed cracking jokes with Willie Mueller and Craig Larsen at West Bend 7 UP games. And I enjoyed watching the pride shown by Larsen when he and Jim Ziegler brought the Wisconsin Amateur Baseball Classic to life in 2013. The tournament continued to expand over the years as Larsen and Ziegler wanted amateur baseball to continue to thrive across the state. The tournament will enter its eighth year with a pair of events in June and July.

I'd also like to thank a trio of athletic trainers — Kewaskum's Emily Anderson and West Bend's Wendy Reitz and Kyle Butters — for allowing me to shed some light on your profession in a two-

part series a few years ago. I enjoyed every part of working on that story. Also, thank you to Wendy and Kyle for all the conversations during various sporting events.

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I always think back to my first day, heck, my first year on the job here, and for the longest time, the lone constant had been the Stephens family in Hartford. My first full athletic season was spring of 2009 and Jordan Stephens, the eldest of Paul of Janel's five children, was playing his senior season of baseball for the Orioles. Then I saw younger brother Aaron play for Hartford. Then came the three daughters with Maria first, playing basketball and soccer. She was followed by Monica and Julia in both sports. Julia graduated in 2019, 10 years after Jordan. It was something I joked about with Paul a lot — whenever I came to watch Hartford, there always seemed to be a Stephens around somewhere. I almost felt lost on those rare times I was in Hartford with a Stephens not in sight.

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There's a couple of sports fans, like me, that I'd like to call out and thank for always making the experience more enjoyable by sharing some laughs with — Dave Maeder (I apologize if I spelled the last name wrong, but you know who you are) and Jingles (Jim Volesky). I know Dave always looked forward to my stories the next day. Thanks to you two for always being that friendly face in the crowd.

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Thank you to the current ADs — Sara Unertl (Germantown), Scott Helms (Hartford), Joe Greefkes (KML), Jason Piittmann (Kewaskum), Tim Gast (Living Word), Mike Daniels (Slinger), Kevin Bryant (East) and Erin Felber (West) for making me feel a part of your schools, especially the athletic programs. A quick shout out to

past West ADs Brian Heimark (now the AD at Menomonee Falls) and Scott Stier (now the principal at Kewaskum), and former Slinger AD Dan Karius for always taking the time to say hello and stop to chat for a while during games.

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With my last day falling on the eve of wrestling regionals and boys swimming sectionals, I wish all the county wrestlers the best of luck as they look to embark on their state tournament aspirations. I especially wish Jalen Spuhler luck in trying to repeat as a state champion.

I'll miss being at the state tournament this year, but will be cheering everybody on.

That goes for all the eight high school athletic programs — I may be moving out to the Madison area, but I'll always hold the programs of Germantown, Hartford Union, KML, Kewaskum, Living Word Lutheran, Slinger, West Bend East and West Bend West close to me. I still wish the best for those programs.

Again, I can't mention everybody I've ever been in contact with in the county, but just know that I had a blast covering the sports scene and talking to you all.

Over the past decade, I saw co-workers come and go. I saw coaches come and go. I saw athletes come and go. Things have changed over the past decade — across the county and in my life — and I feel that now is the right time to write a new chapter in my story.

My fandom for the eight Washington County high schools doesn't stop here, though. If I see that a team is traveling to the Madison area and I have the availability to attend a game or match, keep your eyes open if you're there, too — you might see that “tall guy” again, but this time in the stands rather than on the sidelines.