Jordan Mathews Feature

By Tommy Hicks

Jordan Mathews was *that guy.* Everyone says so, even his mother.

You know the guy — big personality, 5,000-watt smile, always a leader of whatever group or team of which he was a member, the first guy to show up at practice or to take on a task and the last person to leave. He was the guy everyone looked up to in terms of respect and admiration, even though he was small in stature. He was the guy his teammates trusted, his teachers and coaches respected for his dedication and all-out effort and his friends could always count on. He was the guy who led on the field and from the bench, the guy you wanted on your team, the guy you needed on your team.

He was *that guy.* He was always *that guy.*

And far too soon, he was gone.

Severe asthma, which Mathews battled throughout his life, was his only enemy, and it was a fierce one. On Aug. 23, 2019, asthma won out as Mathews, at the age of 21, died following an asthma attack in Jackson, Miss., where the Sylacauga resident was a member of the Tougaloo College baseball team. He suffered a severe attack and tried to drive himself to the hospital, but he could only get as far as the campus guard gate.

His passing came as a shock to those who knew him and especially to those who loved him. So much so that almost a year later, he still remains a strong part of their lives in a variety of ways. He impacted so many with how he lived his life, and even in death he continued to impact others — as an organ donor, Mathews’ remains vital today.

“He was very easy-going, very pleasant to be around and very easy to get along with,’’ said Sheila Kidd, Mathews’ mother. “He enjoyed being around people and he loved life. He was hospitalized each year after he was diagnosed with asthma at the age of 4, but he always got through it and he would smile and tell us everything was going to be OK. … I miss him so much. He would do anything for anybody. He was just an all-around good guy, and I’m not saying that because he was my son, he was just that guy. He was very likable and he was loved by so many people.’’

Through all the stages of his life — from a youngster tossing the baseball in the yard with his dad, Derrick Mathews, to playing at B.B. Comer High School in Sylacauga; from playing on Central Alabama Baseball Academy travel teams to serving as a coach for CABA teams; from traveling to New Rochelle, N.Y., to play at Monroe College, a junior college baseball program, to joining the Tougaloo College baseball program in Jackson, Miss.; and everywhere in between — Mathews left a long trail of smiles and stories still being shared today.

The manner in which he affected the lives of those who loved him or those who found themselves in his circle, is testament to how he carried himself and how he lived his life. It is why his memory is held so closely by those who knew him best.

Mention his name, and like Mathews’ trademark characteristic, a huge smile surfaces. Listen to friends and family members and coaches share their stories about him and it is blatantly obvious why he continues to evoke pleasant memories and thoughts.

It’s why his portrait hangs with others on the Wall of Heroes at University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Miss.; why coach John Torres keeps a photo of Mathews on his office wall; why the Central Alabama Baseball Academy honors Mathews this season by placing his initials along with an American Flag on the back of all their jerseys; it’s why a foundation in his honor, the Forever 24 Jordan Mathews Foundation, has been established by his mother and others to provide scholarship money for those playing college baseball; and why Mathews’ father says, simply, “I am blessed to be his father, truly blessed for being his father.’’

Why is Jordan Mathews *that guy?*

We’ll let others explain.

**Sheila Kidd** left a long-time bank job to join her son in New Rochelle, N.Y., while he attended Monroe College, where he played baseball. His sister, Kiara Kidd, moved there too. It meant a completely different lifestyle in a completely foreign environment, but her son asked her to join him, and so she did.

“He was very active. It was a joy to me to see him on that field because I know how much he loved baseball. He was always researching things about baseball. … I made that sacrifice and I’m glad I did. When we came back (to the south) he only lived one year. I have so many images of him playing and I’m so glad I have them. Some nights it was bone-chilling cold but I would be in the stands, wrapped in a blanket. It meant so much to him.’’

She was proud of her son’s decision to be an organ donor and when the medical center recognized Jordan’s gift of life for others, 26 family members, traveling five hours in eight different vehicles, attended the ceremony, each wearing matching T-shirts designed for the occasion. “It meant a lot because they honored him and we know that through being an organ donor that his spirit will live on. My son is still here, his organs are still here. And others are able to continue with their lives because of him,’’ Sheila Kidd said.

**Derrick Mathews** can’t stop talking about his son, describing him with pride in every word. The two were baseball buddies as well as father and son and it was on the field where they felt most at home together. Or in the yard playing catch. “He was just an unbelievable young man, just wonderful,’’ Derrick Mathews said. “He went through a lot, so much really, but he kept pushing, kept working. … I learned from him. He taught me; he’s still teaching me today.

“Playing baseball with asthma, it was a risk. Some days you could tell he wasn’t feeling it and his teammates knew he wasn’t feeling it, but they wanted to win, they wanted to play hard for him. He was a coach on the field. He was a good young fellow. Even if he wasn’t mine, I’d say he was a good young man. … It made me proud that I could give my son his flowers while he lived. … He made it so much easier for me to be a parent. He was a sure-enough good one. When you have people in other communities and other states say what a great young man he was, that was special. …

“If his job was in the dugout, he was the cheerleader. He never let anything get him down. Even though he had his problem, he didn’t let it be a crutch. Even when he was down, he wouldn’t let it bother him. … He would check out of school because he had to get a breathing treatment, but then he would want to go back to school when he was done. You know, some kids would get a headache and want to go home for the rest of the day and here is my son, after a breathing treatment, saying he was fine and there was still two more hours of school left and he wanted to go back. …

“I admire that young man, I really do. I still admire him. I’m still learning from what he did and how he touched people. He touched lives at the nursing homes he visited. When you see a child smile, that’s just special. He gave back with his time. They say the good ones go early. He was quite a good man. He was a great one. … For so long he had been so strong. … That young man was strong. He was a great loss. He made an impact. … Just to sit at a ball game with him, it was nice. … Sometimes I’d get off work and he would say, ‘Dad, you look tired today.’ I’d say, ‘I’m all right,’ and I’d throw the ball with him for as long as he wanted, hit him some grounders and pop-ups. He’d say, ‘Dad, you work hard.’ I told him, ‘I work hard for you,’ and he said, ‘That’s where I get it from. I see you when you get home and you’re tired and you keep going.’ He gave me the reason to keep going to my job every day. … I am blessed to be his father, truly blessed for being his father.’’

**Kennon McArthur** was one of Mathews’ travel ball coaches via Central Alabama Baseball Academy. Mathews, as was his way, not only impressed McArthur with his playing ability and his passion for the game, but also with his leadership, his ability to reach players and teammates and his humanity. “He found me. He wanted to play college baseball and he knew that I had some connections with some coaches and I could get him in front of some coaches. His dad called me up and they came to my house. I had never seen him play or anything and I figured if the kid wanted it that bad to come and find me that I would put him on a team, and I did. He was with a group of really good players, some of them are Division I (college) players right now.

“Jordan was just a scrappy player and he fit well in our lineup. Anytime I needed him to go to a game he was there and if he couldn’t get there I’d pick him up or he’d get a ride with one of our other coaches. He was just a great kid, a great little teammate, who loved to play, He was a solid player. He didn’t have many options as far as being a college player and he found this junior college up in New York and he convinced his mom to move up there with him. He played there for two years and then he found Tougaloo, a four-year college. He was just super determined to play baseball in college.

“He coached for me during the summers and he worked on the tournament staff. A lot of the younger guys got to know him like that. … He was a special kid for sure. He was always happy and appreciative and he was a different kind of kid. … His passion and his determination to accomplish his goal of playing baseball in college was not that common. That’s what more people need, especially today. I think it’s important that kids today are exposed to that kind of attitude, that they know what they want to do and they set goals and go after them as hard as they can while they can. Jordan was a perfect example of that. He had some things in mind he wanted to do and he made them come true for himself.

“I’ll always remember his appreciation for the moment. He was always happy to be there and he was going to give it his best and he was going to compete and make the most of his minutes wherever he was and whatever he was doing.’’

**John Torres** loves baseball and he developed a strong attachment to Mathews, who he nicknamed “Bama’’ during his time at Monroe College. “That nickname was given by me, and it was Bama because it was odd that a young man would come up from Alabama and play with us in New York,’’ Torres said. … For him, It was a chance to play and develop and get better. … It was tough for them (Mathews, his mother and sister). That had to be a tough move. … I asked him, ‘Do you mind if I call you Bama?’ He said, ‘No, coach, that’s fine.’ Everybody knew who he was. I never saw him frown, I never heard him say anything negative. … If I was to give him a second nickname it would be Flash. He wasn’t necessarily the fastest guy, but he was just graceful. He just loved running the bases, he was enthusiastic and he had so much energy. He just pumped guys up. Even from the bench when he wasn’t playing he was the first one to give handshakes and high-fives.

“One weekend his dad came up, so his mom and dad and sister were all there together. When the father came, I think we were playing a doubleheader; I wasn’t (planning on) playing him the first game, but when I saw the dad there I said, I’ve got to put him in. I spoke to the guy (who was originally slated to start) and I told him, ‘His dad is all the way here from Alabama, I’m scratching you.’ And the kid was OK with it. You know why he was OK with it? Because everyone loved Jordan. They all loved him.

“Who knows what would have happened (had his life continued)? It was hard to believe how a young man’s life is taken. But he touched a lot of people. His picture is still up in my office. Everyone comes by and asks me, ‘Hey, coach, who is that?’ I say, ‘If you really want to know it’s going to take me about 10 or 15 minutes, because it’s a long story. If you don’t have time, go to class and come back because you want to hear this story.’ … His story will go on forever as long as I’m at Monroe or for as long as I’m coaching baseball. He just lifted the game of baseball. He’s one of the reasons I coach. I’m in my 18th year and I told him this, I said ‘Bama, you’re one of the reasons why I coach baseball; you make it fun.’ And he always said, ‘Thank you, sir.’ … I don’t have captains, but he was an unofficial captain for me.

“I can’t forget, a player called me up crying at 3 o’clock in the morning and I said, ‘What’s wrong? He said, ‘I think Bama passed away.’ I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ … I called his mom and it was one of the most devastating nights I’ve ever known. Hopefully, I’ll never know what it’s like to lose a child — I have two boys of my own. … I think of good things. He’ll always stay in my memory as a great human being and a damn good baseball player. … (His mother is) still hurting and she will always hurt, but she loves the memories, and this kid had the heart to come up here and play. … Sometimes you need good people to slow the big city down, and that’s what he did. He put smiles on people’s faces — man, the coaching staff loved him; my athletic director absolutely adored him. I love that guy and I’ll love him forever.

“Here’s one for you. We lost three games in a row and we were at a hitting session and he said, ‘Coach, are you OK?’ I said, ‘Yeah, we’ve lost three in a row and I’m hearing about it.’ Bama said, ‘Coach, put it on my shoulders. We’re going to get one for you today.’ It was a doubleheader and we lost the first game. He came up to me after that first game and said, ‘Coach, I said we were going to get one for you today, but I didn’t say it was going to be the first one.’ (Torres laughs at the memory.) We won the second game and he said, ‘Coach, see? I told you we were going to get one for you.’’’

**Earl Sanders** likes to talk about the “unique recruiting system’’ that exists at Tougaloo College. Because the school doesn’t have a recruiting budget per sae, it takes advantage of its Instagram page and other social media outlets to make recruits aware of the program. Jordan Mathews noticed the page and he was interested. “Jordan established a relationship with our recruiting coordinator and when he came for a visit, his personality stood out right away. He had great parents, but his personality just stood out. We want players who will fit and he fit perfectly. He was a smart kid, very respectful, clean-cut, the mold of the perfect baseball player. … He was just a fighter. That’s the great thing about baseball — size doesn’t matter. He was very competitive and had a lot of grit, a lot of fire, and he just wanted to win. He was just that guy.

“When he got here we had an all-conference second baseman and so he was going to have to compete. He didn’t pout or put his head down, When he had an opportunity to get his reps in, he got it done, he got it done. Athletically, he ran well and was consistent as a hitter, he didn’t strike out a lot. At second base, I don’t think Jordan ever made an error. He was a competitor. You know, sometimes, if guys aren’t guaranteed a job or if they have to compete, some guys will shut down. He was just the opposite, and he always did it with a smile. I’m old school, and I yell and scream and I would sometimes get on him, and all he would do was just smile and say, ‘Yes sir, yes sir.’’’

Sanders said Mathews’ death hit his teammates and coaches, as well as others at the school very deeply. “It was terrible. He was a leader. He was the guy who rallied the guys in the residence hall. He was just a natural at bonding. He would get the guys together to get to know each other off the field. And when he didn’t play, he was one of the main kids that was a student of the game and he was observant. So when a situation arose and you’re looking down your bench, you ask yourself, ‘Who can I put in that can make a play?’ It was him. There were some guys who were more talented than Jordan, but he was the one that was always ready to go, and that’s a big difference. When you’re dealing with some adversity, that’s the guy you want.

“He was a guy who took full advantage of his opportunities. He didn’t take anything for granted. Every opportunity that was presented to him, he made the most out of it. And again, that smile. I never saw him depressed — the long practices, whatever it was, he always was happy.’’

**Carson Grier** was one of Mathews’ first coaches. As the kindergarten through sixth grade P.E. teacher at B.B. Comer in Sylacauga, he had a unique perspective on Mathews’ athletic life, watching him develop from a funny-loving youngster to a fun-loving teen, all the while watching his love for baseball and people grow with each passing day. “Jordan was small and struggled with his breathing when he was young, but all the time I knew him he was always telling me, ‘coach, I’m going to be a player; I’m going to play football and basketball and baseball.’ This is a kid who almost passed away a few times when he was younger because of severe asthma attacks. But the fight that he had was beyond all belief. … He was never the biggest kid and early on, he wasn’t the most athletic kid, but he had the biggest heart of any kid.

“We had to understand his situation. You had to be careful and watch him, if that makes sense, because he would push himself as hard as he could go. He didn’t want to feel like he was getting out of anything (because of his asthma). Once, he was in the hospital after a bad attack and he was worried about whether he was going to have a place on the team. I told him, ‘Jordan, you’re always going to have a place.’ He had the ability to see past things; he could see future success. And he had that ability to battle through things. … He was probably one of the best success stories you’ll ever see, and maybe one of the most tragic the way he died and how young he was. He was on his way up and he was about to get a degree and you could see he was going to do amazing things in his life.’’

Grier had a quick description of Mathews. “He was a difference-maker, no matter what we were doing. I mean, you go into a hospital room and someone has had a terrible, terrible asthma attack and they are on oxygen and struggling to breathe and the first thing he does is smile. That’s a different brand of kid, that’s a different brand of person; he’s going through something life-threatening and he’s smiling. He just had that bubbly personality and everything he did, he drew people to him. People wanted to be around Jordan, people respected Jordan. No matter how he felt that day, he always smiled. He was just that guy. … You had to watch him because he was going to push himself. … During a basketball game he was struggling to breathe and I took him out of the game. He went down to the end of the bench and rested. But a couple of minutes later he was pulling on my sleeve, telling me he was ready to go back in. He was just that guy. That was him.

“When he died, it hit me like a ton of bricks, because you knew that when he got his degree, when he hit the real world he was going to be a magnet for everyone who knew him. I spoke at his funeral and one of the things I mentioned was that the impact he made with other people in his short time was probably greater than the impact a lot of people have that live 70 or 80 years. His impact was amazing and it will be felt forever. He was just that guy. He went to New York to play junior college baseball and they talk about the way he was there, someone who always overcame things. He made everybody else want to work harder and play harder and try harder. He was an amazing kid. Guys like him, the memories never cease.’’

**Jaylun Thomas** was boyhood friends with Mathews, the two playing sports together and hanging out as kids in small towns often do. “We go way back. We became friends around the eighth grade and we were together ever since. I ended up transferring in high school but we stayed in contact with each other. I knew it was true back then, you can’t find anybody better than him. I could go to him about anything I needed to talk about and whatever advice I needed he was always there for me. … We played baseball together until about the 11th grade. He was quite a character. He loved the game and had a big heart for it. Nothing slowed him down, even with the asthma that he had. He would have stood out regardless of who he played with. Everybody knew who Jordan was, who he was (as a person), how good a baseball player he was. Everybody wanted to be on his team.

“We were playing football and we were playing against Leeds and they had the No. 1 running back at the time and he had the ball. Jordan was playing safety and it was do or die, and he was maybe 5-5 or so and (the running back) was 6-1. It was a cool moment with someone like that to just go in there and make the play. It was cool to see someone with that much heart. … He was my best friend, my brother. Whenever we had free time we were always together. The only thing that I have now is memories. It’s almost been a year now (since he died) and everybody still tells me to stay strong. What gets me through things is thinking of all those good memories.’’

**Ian Holley** was another of Mathews’ close friends. “Jordan was always smiling, just a great guy who was always willing to help whoever was around. There was never a dull moment when Jordan was around. He was truly my best friend and somebody that I really looked up to because he was doing things in life. He played college baseball; that was our dream, to play together. He was just a great guy to be around. He was a great family man — he loved to be around his family — and he loved sports.

“That was all the way from grade school, that smile; it didn’t just come up recently. The guy would light up the room with that smile. It might be a dark situation and we was going to try to make things light and make people happy. … I was in the 10th grade when he was a senior and he would always take care of me. If he got a new glove or something like that he would always give me his hand-me-downs. He and his dad, they were so dedicated to the game. I always admired that, that he worked so hard in the game he loved. I don’t know if he knew it, but I definitely looked up to him. … I just remember what a great friend and family person he was. Anything he could do to help you, whether it was a life situation or whatever, he was going to be there. I always remember how much he was loved. I don’t think anyone ever wished anything bad on him. He was an amazing guy and I know right now he’s an amazing angel.’’

Jordan Mathews was *that guy.*

He’ll forever be *that guy.*

**Those wishing to make a donation to Forever 24, The Jordan Mathews Foundation, may do so by simply mailing a check to the foundation at P.O. Box 2404, Sylacauga, Ala., 35150.**

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