

Exclusive: Athletic director set to leave Hayfield, after VHSL alleges 'coverup' and FCPS launches probe



To read the series on the Hayfield football controversy, go to FairfaxTimes.com/Hayfield

Earlier this year, on Feb. 17, an excited Monty Fritts, the young athletic director at Hayfield Secondary School in Alexandria, posted a message on his Facebook page, "Huge week at the Hawks Nest!!! New Head Football Coach announced." Ten days later, he shared a photo of the new coach, Darryl Overton, who had led Freedom High School in Prince William County to two state championships, punctuating his post with "Best in the biz."

Late last month, Fritts, 38, told friends, "One day I will tell the story of the last year and no one will believe it...." Overton, who goes by "Thomas DO Shelby Otf" on Facebook, responded: "Best seller lol one day being next week if they play with our name one more time." A friend asked, "Who's going to play you and DO," Overton's initials, "in the movie."

Now, nine months after his triple-exclamation point post, Fritts is telling colleagues he will be leaving Hayfield for a leave of absence, possibly for two years, according to people familiar with the move. It's the first departure in a series of expected changes that may follow the controversy at Hayfield this year.

The news of the move comes as Superintendent Michelle Reid relents to weeks of criticism over her handling of this football debacle and announces an "external" and "independent" investigation countywide to review recruitment practices. But news of the probe was met with skepticism among parents and coaches.

Fairfax County Public Schools did not respond to questions about Fritts' move before publication.

Hayfield a 'house...in flames'

Derek Radoski, defensive coordinator on the coaching staff of the West Potomac High School football team, said in an interview, "Hayfield Athletics is a house engulfed in flames right now, and Superintendent Michelle Reid setting up an 'independent' counsel to prevent future house fires does not address the billowing smoke that's coming out of the burning house right now, and it ignores the flames and the children trapped inside."

One person seems to be making a move to escape the flames, say observers: Fritts.

What happened? While Fritts cites his wife's new overseas job as the reason for his leave, new details about the past nine months offer a more complex backdrop to his decision.

Court documents obtained by the Fairfax County Times reveal that investigators for the Virginia High School League concluded Fritts was allegedly involved in a "coverup" with the coach, Overton, and the high school principal, Darin Thompson, about the alleged recruitment of a slew of football players from Overton's old Freedom team and other area schools.

According to rules set by the VHSL, which governs high school sports in Virginia, public schools don't allow the "proselytizing," or the recruiting, of student-athletes, like private schools often allow.

This past Friday, as Hayfield parents and players pursued legal action for the right to compete in the playoffs in Courtroom 4G of the Fairfax County Circuit, Judge Manuel A. Capsalis issued a temporary restraining order against the VHSL's two-year playoff ban against Hayfield for recruitment violations.

'...not telling the truth'

But according to court documents and courtroom arguments by the VHSL attorney, the principal, athletic director, and coach answered questions about the influx of 14 athletes with conflicting answers, leading the state agency to conclude, "These conflicting accounts from Hayfield's principal, athletic director, and Coach Overton convinced the VHSL staff that these gentlemen were not telling the truth."

What's more, VHSL said in its court records and courtroom arguments that an investigation it conducted in the summer led to conflicting accounts about the new football athletes by the principal, athletic director, and coach. Thompson "stated during his interview that he was not aware of unusual transfer activity from Freedom until June." Fritts, however, "indicated that he had informed Dr. Thompson of the transfers months before." Finally, Overton testified to VHSL investigators "that he did not know of any former Freedom players' plans to transfer to Hayfield until they arrived in his weight room in May 2024."

VHSL said that a Hayfield parent reported to VHSL that Overton "had told her several months earlier, in February or March, that he knew 'a few' players were likely to join him at Hayfield."

The controversy deepened when nine newly transferred Freedom football players joined Hayfield's outdoor track team in April 2024.

VHSL said in its court filings that "based on these inconsistencies" by Hayfield administrators," its staff "concluded that Hayfield's officials had misled the League."

Alleged 'cover-up'

In strong language, VHSL argued in court filings that its staff concluded that the three Hayfield officials "had done so to cover up" the recruitment of 14 transfers from Freedom. The transfers "were not incidental but motivated by the opportunity to continue playing under Coach Overton," VHSL argued.

In court, Capsalis gave an early sign that he was leery of the VHSL investigation, first peppering the VHSL attorney with questions about

process, procedures, and bylaws. When the VHSL attorney presented his arguments, the judge continued his questions. When the attorney for the families, John Cafferky, from the school district's external law firm, Blankingship & Keith, spoke, the judge gave him wide latitude with courtroom theatrics.

The room was packed with about 100 players, families, coaches, and staff, some in Hayfield orange. Cafferky turned to them often, breaking a figurative fourth wall, waving to the families and players and referring to them as "folks" with college futures hurt by the VHSL ban. At one point, Cafferky said, "We" investigated the allegations and corrected himself. He said he is not representing FCPS but rather the parents. He pointed regularly to Fritts, who was with the parents and players.

After both sides finished their arguments, Capsalis issued a quick ruling.

A few Hayfield families burst into cheers.

"No!" the judge barked, admonishing the emotional expression to maintain decorum in the courtroom.

When the team took their celebration outside, Fritts stood with them, as Overton led the team in a huddle and one mother tried to take the camera of a Fairfax County Times journalist, videotaping the scene.

The ruling has sparked significant debate within the community and among parents, student-athletes, and school officials. Many question the implications of fair play in high school sports. The City of Fairfax, six football coaches, and a Mount Vernon High School parents' group have sent letters of no-confidence in Reid.

Board member sends scathing message

Early Thursday morning, board member Ryan McElveen posted a scathing message against FCPS leadership's failure. Some weeks ago, he voted for a resolution by board member Mateo Dunne seeking an independent investigation, but the majority of the board voted it down.

"I am appalled by the situation that continues to plague Fairfax County's high school football program. It has tarnished the reputation of our county beyond the sports field," McElveen wrote.

"As children, we are taught the words of sportswriter Grantland Rice: 'It's not about winning or losing; it's how you play the game.' We've completely lost sight of this in Fairfax County," he continued.

McElveen added, "Those of us in the education profession have the sacred obligation of teaching our students the difference between right and wrong. Not only have we failed at that basic task, but we have lost our moral compass in the process, actively supporting and promoting a flawed system and subsequently harming those who have played by the rules."

In a strong indictment of Reid, he wrote, "I have lost confidence in system leadership to handle this situation appropriately. The adults have completely failed our students morally, ethically, and legally. Those adults need to be held accountable, starting with the administrators.

"The School Board had an opportunity to vote for a full external investigation of this situation on August 29. I supported that proposal along with two other School Board members, but it failed to pass."

He added, "Subsequent opportunities for the School Board to discuss and take action to address the situation have been passed over. This ongoing failure of the School Board to fully investigate the situation and provide proper oversight of school system leadership is an abdication of its responsibility to protect and support all of our students."

He concluded, "As one Fairfax County School Board member, I commit to doing everything in my power to ensure that a thorough investigation is finally undertaken, that those who have tarnished Fairfax County's reputation are held accountable for their actions, and that this never happens again. The culture of fear, dishonesty, censorship, and division that has overtaken Fairfax County Public Schools must end now. We need to stop focusing on winning and losing; we need to relearn how to play the game."

As Hayfield's football team continues its playoff run, starting tonight, the shadow of the controversy looms large. For many, the case highlights the challenges of enforcing fair play rules in high school athletics, where the stakes for success can lead to questionable decisions, corruption, and far-reaching consequences.

The impact remains close to home, a new rental listing going up six days ago on the Woodbridge home of a person who has emerged as a key figure in the local scandal: Hayfield athletic director Fritts.

Timeline of a Football Scandal

- Feb. 16, 2024: Hayfield hires Darryl Overton, former Freedom High School football coach, as its new head coach.
- February/March 2024: Parent says Overton anticipated player

transfers.

- March – April 2024: Athletic Director Monty Fritts says he informs Principal Darin Thompson of transfers; Thompson claims awareness in June.
- Early April 2024: VHSL receives complaints from parents regarding football player transfers.
- Later in April 2024: Hayfield added nine transferred Freedom football players to its outdoor track team.
- May 1, 2024: Athletes compete in a track meet without eligibility verification.
- June 2024: Principal Thompson states he became aware of football transfer activity.
- September 2024: Hayfield reports ineligible track athletes; VHSL investigation finds inconsistencies and potential coverup.
- Oct. 29 2024: VHSL issues two-year playoff ban on Hayfield for recruiting violations.
- Nov. 4, 2024: Sportsmanship Subcommittee upholds VHSL's ruling against Hayfield.
- Nov. 8, 2024: Executive Committee subcommittee unanimously upholds ruling.
- Nov. 15, 2024: Fairfax County Circuit Court judge issues temporary restraining order on VHSL ban, allowing Hayfield to compete in playoffs.

