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SAMANTHA WELCH LOSES HER BATTLE

■ The 17-year-old who had cancer takes her last breath in her mother's arms, **Story, Page 1B**



Tax refunds may be delayed

■ The start of filing could be pushed back if Congress does not act soon.

By **Jim Abrams**
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Silena Davis had counted on an early tax refund to pay for getting her teeth fixed. Now, because Congress has dawdled all year on a tax bill, she and millions of other early filers could have to wait extra weeks for refunds that last year averaged \$2,291.

The Internal Revenue Service is looking hard at delaying the start of its filing season, set to kick off Jan. 14, if Congress fails to pass legislation in the next two weeks. At issue is how to handle what could be a dramatic increase in the number of people facing a higher alternative minimum tax.

If there is a delay and it extends into mid-February, it would slow nearly 38 million refunds worth a total of about \$87 billion, the IRS Oversight Board predicts.

"It would definitely make a big difference with me," said Davis, a George Washington University Law School administrator. "I'm going to have to get a crown, and it's going to be really expensive."

The board, an independent advisory group, said in a report See **REFUNDS**, Page 6A



C.J. Williams, a standout player for Jack Britt High School, will pursue his dream of playing college basketball at N.C. State next year.

GAME PLAN

FOCUS AND FAMILY KEEP STAR ATHLETE ON THE RIGHT PATH

Story by **Michael N. Graff** ■ Photos by **David Smith**

The janitor shakes the dust from his broom and peers into the weight room window.

"They still in there?" he asks with a hint of dejection, having already cut the lights in the nearby gym in hopes of going home at a decent hour.

It's 10 p.m. on Tuesday, and almost all of Jack Britt High School's students are gone.

All but one. Sitting on a weight bench wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt and a pair of loose jeans, C.J. Williams isn't going anywhere, not until he figures out what happened.

How could Jack Britt lose to cross-county rival Terry Sanford? How could he, already signed to play basketball for N.C. State next year, score just four points, his lowest total in two seasons? What can he do to fix it?

This should have been the start of a big



Williams laughs with teammates before a game against Terry Sanford High. After scoring just four points in the loss, he spent extra time training in the gym.

week for C.J., the brightest basketball star this county has seen in nearly a decade. He was coming off an injury and a Thanksgiving break, with two county rivals

on the schedule.

But his performance against Terry Sanford wasn't the start of a breakout. It was a breakdown. He was flat, his shot was off, and he was out of shape, thanks in part to a sweet potato pie he'd baked for himself over the weekend.

"It's my fault we lost," says C.J., the first Cumberland County public school player since 1999 to sign with an ACC team. "Coach will say it's his fault. Other players will say it's their fault. But this was my fault."

Bunkered in the weight room, he's surrounded himself only with those closest to him — his current coach, Ike Walker; his former coach, Terrence McAllister; and his ultimate coach, his father, Wendell Williams.

They won't leave for another half-hour, not until they have a plan.

See **C.J. WILLIAMS**, Page 4A

Council to decide fate of neighborhood dams

■ In many communities, homeowners can't afford to make needed repairs to the structures.

By **Andrew Barksdale**
Staff writer

Twice a year, Pitt Watts walks the sloping hill that forms the Loch Lomond Dam, looking for sinkholes, erosion or anything else that threatens the chocolate-colored lake

alongside his home of 30 years.

Watts volunteers to inspect the earthen dam as the treasurer of a lakefront homeowners association, which owns the dam. When heavy rains pose a flood risk, neighbors go out in a boat and crank a lever that lowers the

lake's water level.

But volunteers can do only so much. The structural problems that arise with Cumberland County's dozens of aging earthen dams are often too vast and expensive for small neighborhood groups to repair.

The City Council is poised to decide this month who should fix small neighborhood dams in Fayetteville — homeowners or taxpayers

— and under what circumstances the city should just breach faulty dams and drain lakes. The loss of lakes, some worry, could reduce property values.

The precedent-setting policy could affect thousands of people across Fayetteville who live in neighborhoods with lakes, such as Loch Lomond off Reilly Road. Many of those communities have dams more than 40 years old that could

require costly repairs one day.

Loch Lomond's dam is one of five in Cumberland County that the state says are deficient, meaning the dam needs thousands of dollars in repairs, according to state records. Four of the deficient dams are in Fayetteville. Dozens of other small neighborhood dams, records show, have been deficient in the

See **DAMS**, Page 8A

INSIDE

■ See what dams in Cumberland County are considered 'high hazard,' **Page 8A**

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TOMORROW

■ **Artifact:** D. William Morris believes a branding iron he owns belonged to George Washington.
■ **Life:** We'll give you some tips for setting an elegant holiday table.

WEATHER



■ Mostly cloudy; high around 59, **8B**

C.J. Williams: Sports standout excels at studies, too

From Page 1A

In the hallway outside this sweaty thinking space, though, there's another interesting scene. It's his mother, Delores, waiting, pacing and peeking through the window, trying to get her son's attention so he can take his allergy medicine.

"He'll stay in there all night," she says anxiously. "I'm pretty certain what happened tonight won't happen again."

Delores has always been a little protective of her only son.

On Feb. 6, 1990, she held C.J. for the first time. She had her 5-year-old daughter, Tierra, and husband of seven years, Wendell, in the room with her. It was a complete family, Delores thought.

Then, C.J.'s eyes rolled back and he started shaking. He was having a seizure.

She called for the doctors. They ripped the boy from his mother and stuffed him in the back of an ambulance, bound for Chapel Hill. Before the ambulance left, they told Delores to take a picture with her son — just in case.

Delores was helpless. She had to stay at Womack Army Medical Center on Fort Bragg and recover from the induced labor, while her son was headed north. She didn't know it would be eight days until she saw the newborn again.

She had nightmarish flashbacks. Her older sister, an epileptic, died when Delores was 13.

"They snatched my baby away," she snatched early last week, tears dropping off her cheek. "You don't know what that's like."

Halfway up the road that day 17 years ago, the ambulance pulled over. A medic in the passenger's seat jumped out and ran to the back. He closed the door, and the driver turned on the lights and sped up. C.J. was having another seizure.

Wendell was following the ambulance in his car. He watched, his hands and face frozen.

"You start having the worst thoughts possible," Wendell said. "I just started crying, not knowing whether my son was going to be OK or not."

When C.J. arrived at the neonatal care facility in Chapel Hill, doctors immediately put him on medication. They worried about brain damage. They worried about meningitis.

But nearly 18 years later, C.J. has not had another

seizure. Now a high school senior, he has a weighted grade-point average of 4.0, ranking him in the top 20 percent of his class.

His only medical problems now are his annoying eye allergies, unrelated to the post-birth seizures.

Still, Delores doesn't take chances. Standing in that hallway Tuesday, she goes unnoticed only for a few minutes, before bursting into the weight room to make sure C.J. takes his medicine.

Is she a little protective of her son?

You bet.

"I've hovered a little bit," she says. "Subconsciously, I was like, 'I'm not going to be in that position again.'"

Whenever Delores worries now, C.J. walks close to her and presses his hand softly against her cheek.

Instantly, Delores says, she feels calm.

By Wednesday morning, C.J. hasn't forgotten the Terry Sanford game. But he must move forward.

He has a test today on Act III of Shakespeare's "Macbeth."

School has been most important to the Williams family.

Wendell, C.J.'s father, was a scholar athlete in high school in Philadelphia. He graduated first in his class of nearly 500 and was all-conference in football and baseball. He earned a scholarship to Penn. (He didn't finish there, but later received his degree from Southern Illinois).

Tierra, C.J.'s older sister, graduated from Terry Sanford High School in 2003. A basketball player, she went to Winston-Salem State on academic and athletic scholarships. She completed internships at three Fortune 500 companies and took a job in the IT department at Pepsi Bottling Group after graduating in May.

If following the family lead wasn't motivation enough for C.J., Delores works in the main office at Jack Britt. She drives him to school each day.

There's no way to escape. "If I get a bad grade, teachers will go and tell my mom," C.J. says. "But I'll have already told her about it."

Not that there are many bad grades. Teachers and coaches alike sing C.J.'s praises.

"He's one of those rare kids who's a superstar, and a superstar in all areas of life," Jack Britt Athletic Director

Ron Bean said. "You want your son to be like him."

Each day after his last class, C.J. has the same routine. He strolls into the atrium of the school, and a crowd forms around him. Girls seemingly half his height — he's actually 6-foot-6 — hug him just above the waist.

He slaps hands with his male friends, most of them athletes.

"He's a celebrity," said Xavier Nixon, a close friend who plays football and basketball.

About a year ago, C.J. wasn't so popular, particularly around the football program.

He quit on them. Or, more exactly, his dad made him quit on them.

The summer between his sophomore and junior years, C.J. was projected to be starting quarterback for the Buccaneers football team.

But he shined in summer basketball that year — both at individual camps and on the AAU circuit — and became a top prep recruit in the

'He's one of those rare kids who's a superstar, and a superstar in all areas of life. You want your son to be like him.'

Ron Bean, Jack Britt athletic director

Southeast. Virginia Tech, N.C. State, Clemson and Miami offered him scholarships.

When the college basketball coaches learned C.J. played quarterback, they were concerned. And they called Wendell.

C.J. wanted to stay with football. His dad didn't give him a choice.

"I had to decide as a parent what was best for him," says Wendell, the chief of the environmental office at Pope Air Force Base. "I just kept going back to the question: What is his ultimate dream? His ultimate dream was to be a star basketball player in the ACC. It was my responsibility as a parent. I told C.J., 'I'm not going to allow you to make that decision.'"

Jack Britt football coach Richard Bailey says he didn't have a problem with the decision. But he was upset at the timing; he learned about it the first day of practice.

C.J. WILLIAMS

- **School:** Jack Britt High School
- **Year:** Senior
- **Height:** 6 feet, 5½ inches
- **Weight:** 217 pounds
- **Weighted GPA:** 4.0
- **Class rank:** 77 out of 430
- **College choice:** Signed with N.C. State University

"It's just the way it was handled," Bailey said. "It took a while for the team and for me to adjust. I think it's worked out great for C.J. I'm happy for him. I don't have anything against C.J. We talked today. ... I just wish I could've seen what he could've done (as a football player)."

Bailey says he still receives recruiting letters from major-college football coaches asking about C.J.

Westover football coach Milton Butts lives in the same neighborhood as the Williams family. Driving by the house one day, he saw C.J. in the yard and stopped to ask how football practice was going.

When C.J. told Butts his father wouldn't let him play, Butts quipped, "Tell your dad I said thank you."

Around Jack Britt, Wendell and Delores heard some criticism. But they never wavered.

"C.J.'s a priority for them," says Walker, the Jack Britt basketball coach. "And in today's age, that comes across as overbearing because of all the pressure for kids to be adult-like, even though they're children."

"But when he's at N.C. State, I know when he's in certain situations, he'll hear his mom or dad's voice, telling him what to do."

The sound of former N.C. State basketball coach Jim Valvano's voice is unmistakable, coming from an upstairs room in the Williams house off Hampton Oaks Drive.

It's 6:30 p.m. Wednesday evening.

C.J., flanked by a few visitors, leans over his high-sitting knees to pet his orange-striped cat, Simba, while watching the replay of Valvano's speech at the 1993 ESPY awards.

Before Valvano arrives at his famous "Never give up"

line, C.J. leans back and finishes the last problem on his advanced placement calculus homework.

"Hard to believe, but I'm done," he says, wearing glowing yellow warm-up pants to match his white and yellow shoes.

C.J. is a self-proclaimed loner. He says this room — which was his bedroom before he swiped his sister's old room when she left for college — is his place of escape each night. It's still decorated for a kid, with a sports trim around the top of the dark blue walls, but it has all the trappings of young adulthood, with a flat-screen television, a computer and a futon.

He's on the verge of 18, on the verge of being an adult, on the verge of leaving the Williams' nest empty.

"It's bringing back those same feelings for me," Delores says, referring to their separation at birth.

When she lets C.J. go to N.C. State, Delores said she's confident he'll be in good hands. Her husband has made sure of it.

Wendell said he stopped by the Wolfpack basketball offices earlier this year to talk with coach Sidney Lowe.

"You've got to make sure you turn him over to someone who's going to take care of him, who sees him as more of a person than just a basketball player," Wendell said.

The family is convinced N.C. State is the right choice. C.J. signed his letter of commitment Nov. 14 with about 75 friends, teachers and family members watching.

That day, he said, he realized a lifelong dream — one etched in print on a piece of paper still taped to his bedroom closet, titled "A list of things I need to do to accomplish my dream of playing Division I college basketball."

He developed the list with his father. He signed it Jan. 31, 2005, about six months before he was truly on the radar as a top college basketball prospect.

When he leaves for college next year, he'll develop another list.

He'll just change his aim to the NBA.

A decade ago, C.J. was 7 years old and just acting his age, goofing off in church and paying no mind to the service, when his pastor's wife grabbed him.

She didn't yell. She didn't condemn.

She just told him, "It's OK to be different."

The boy cried. But he listened. He now lives by that code.

It's OK, he says, to stand out.

It's OK to stay 90 minutes after a game, or to come in an hour early to take extra free-throw practice, or to stay home on weekends and study, even when your buddies are overloading your cell phone, wanting you to come out.

It's OK to quit one sport to follow your dream in another and to listen to your parents' advice above anybody else's.

"I didn't have to try to be anybody else," he says. "I needed to be a leader. It taught me that leaders don't care what everybody else thinks. They know they're doing the right thing."

At 7:20 p.m. Thursday, C.J. has leadership on his mind. Only 10 minutes remain before Jack Britt's game against South View.

C.J. stands in the hallway with his teammates, waiting for their entrance. He hears the cheerleaders in the gym and acts out the cheer, giving his teammates a good, loose laugh on an important night.

"Y'all, we have a student section tonight," he says to his teammates. "We've got to give them something to see."

Tonight, there will be no need for a long self-evaluation. He's ready.

In the first minute, he swats a South View layup attempt into that student section.

He makes his first 3-pointer. He scores 10 points in the second quarter alone, including a gliding baseline drive and reverse layup that few besides him could complete.

Delores's eyes rarely leave her son, even when he's nowhere near the ball.

Then comes the true test of her nerves. And his, too.

With Jack Britt clinging to a small lead late, her son takes two trips to the free-throw line, where he's been off all season, missing his first five attempts.

But he makes four straight in the final minute as Jack Britt earns a 53-44 victory and a long, deep breath.

Tonight, he scores 23 points and grabs eight rebounds.

Tonight, C.J. Williams is back.

Tonight, the boy who's always dared to be different is the difference.

Staff writer Michael N. Graff can be reached at graffm@fayobserver.com or 486-3591.



Staff photo by David Smith

With ESPN playing in the background, C.J. Williams works on advanced placement calculus homework at home in the room he says is his place to escape. It used to be his bedroom before he claimed his sister's room when she went off to college.