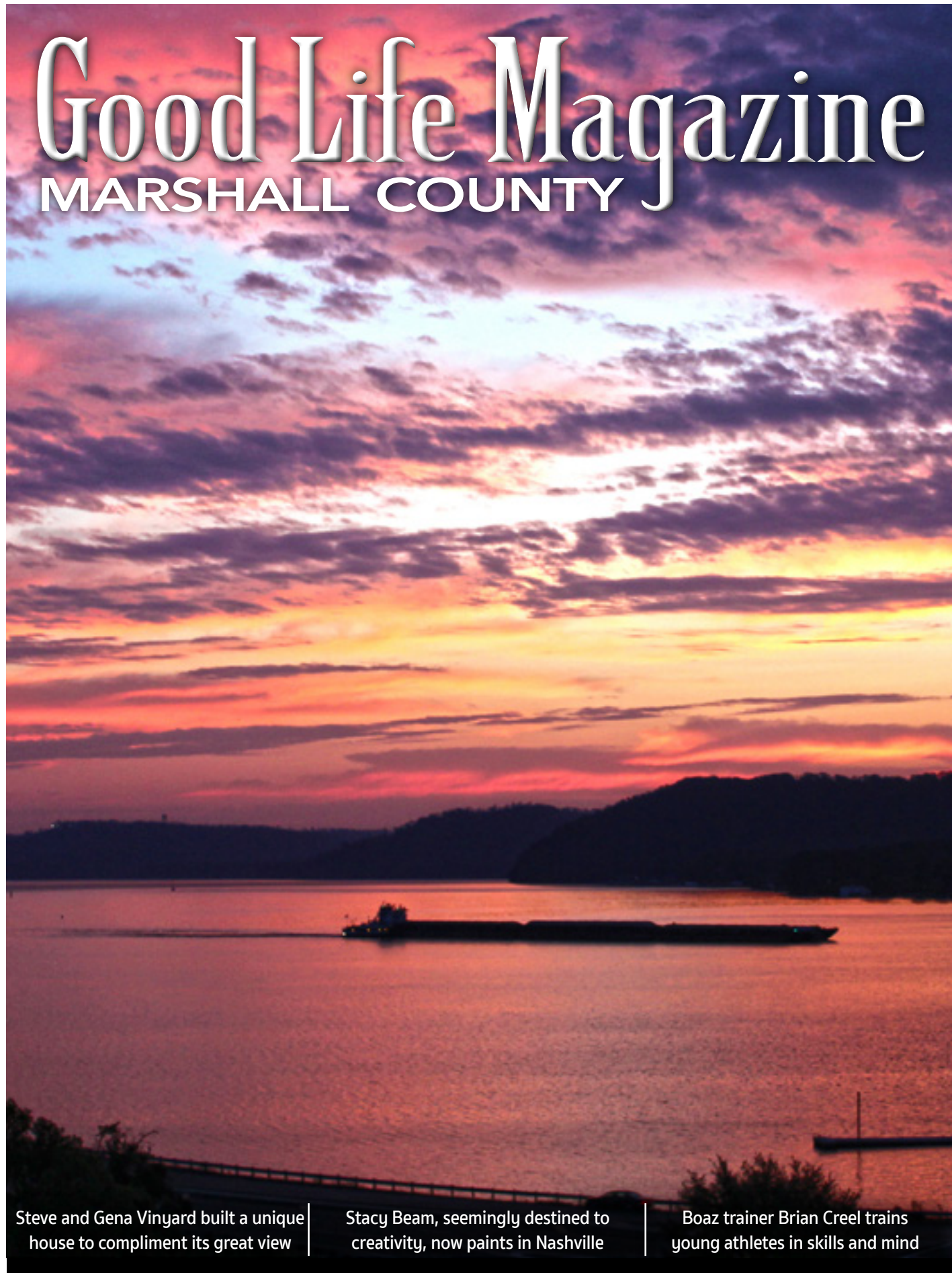


# Good Life Magazine

## MARSHALL COUNTY



Steve and Gena Vinyard built a unique house to compliment its great view

Stacy Beam, seemingly destined to creativity, now paints in Nashville

Boaz trainer Brian Creel trains young athletes in skills and mind



Brian Creel gives training instructions to a young athlete. Fittingly, his favorite poem is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," the message thereof is one he reiterates at almost every session: "If you see an easy path, that's probably not the one you want to be on."

## Brian Creel

Boaz strongman out to develop skills and minds of young athletes

Story by Seth Terrell  
Photos provided or by David Moore

It was a crisp fall evening in Knoxville and a cool wind blew from the nearby Smoky Mountains. The night sky gave way to stadium lights that beamed smoothly from high atop Neyland Stadium.

The crowd below had worked themselves into a fever pitch as they sang the last words of the trademark fight song, "...Rocky Top, you'll always be home sweet home to me." The stadium vibrated with the song; the words echoed all the way through to the visitors' locker room where Brian Creel stood taping his wrists, buckling his helmet, ready for a first glimpse of that infamous checkerboard endzone.

The Tennessee Vols were a month and a half from winning the national championship. Rocky Top was hopping.

But on this night, the culmination of another story was unfolding deep in the bowels of Neyland where Brian and the UAB Blazers moved to tunnel out to the field.

"We had played [defending national champions] Nebraska the same year," Brian recalls. "Virginia Tech, too, who would go on to play for the national championship the following year."

Brian, an offensive guard, could nearly taste the adrenaline on his tongue. Soon, he and the Blazers would give the Vols one of the most difficult challenges of the season. But for a moment, he stood in the tunnel soaking it all in— the sharp-sweet

scent of fresh grass, the cold night burning in his nostrils, the raw energy of 107,000 screaming fans.

Steam billowed from his head and shoulders as the lights gleamed at the end of the tunnel where the world opened onto a sea of orange.

When Brian tells the story to young athletes gathered around him at his AthElite Nation training facility in Boaz, there is a sense this six-one, 355-pound athlete might very well be about to run through that tunnel once again.

There is a certain inflection in his voice as he recalls getting in his stance on that November night. Brian barks the cadence he remembers his quarterback shouting.

His hands shoot out in perfect blocking





Clockwise from above: Albertville graduate and a trainee of Brian's, Katie Allen finished her senior season at Samford on scholarship; Jake Slaughter, Garner Langlo and Caleb Johnson, respectively going to Florida, Auburn and Notre Dame on football scholarships, traveled from high school in Ocala, Florida, to train in Boaz with Brian for a week or so at a time; junior varsity level athletes Tela Lunsford, Major Kelley, Vayda Whitlock and Guage NeSmith do hip mobility drills; working on top end sprint mechanics are, from left, Christian Morris, Brayde Bannister and Aiden Milligan at the youth level; in the same level, Carson Todd and Noah Ford go through the stance and dive phase of speed drills.

technique. He choreographs and narrates the story while young eyes and ears are all tuned. For maximum effect, he takes his hopeful listeners through finer details—driving back the Tennessee All-American defensive tackle until the player's knees buckle. Swooping past Brian's block on the option play, the Blazer's quarterback runs for a 40-yard touchdown.

There would be other moments, both professional and collegiate, that would shape this Boaz native, but that night on Rocky Top seemed to capture the essence of Brian Creel's inspiration as an athlete.

While his teammates were peering down the field, relishing the touchdown, Brian was scanning the sea of orange,

looking for the small, forest-green-and-gold section of the crowd where his mother, Judy, was cheering him on.

"I look up and there are TV cameras and photographers everywhere," Brian fondly remembers as he scans his 16,000-square-foot AthElite Nation facility in his hometown. "But I was playing in front of my biggest fan – my mom."

AthElite's indoor domain strikes a collegiate profile. On the walls hang flags from the SEC and other universities across the nation where Brian's trainees have gone on to hold prosperous collegiate and professional athletic careers in the NFL, CFL, WNBA and other leagues.

The young athletes who train here under

Brian's tutelage range in age and size and ability. From elementary school kids to adults wanting to get in shape.

"It's my ministry," he says, thinking of a handful of athletes who went from obscurity to collegiate and professional ranks. Perhaps even in his smallest and youngest athletes, Brian sees traces of his own story.

In some ways, Brian's story, and the story

of AthElite Nation, begins with Judy Creel's belief in her son.

"She would travel to every game she could," he smiles, thinking of her and her one-woman tailgates, that night in Knoxville.

Before the age of 5, Brian had already undergone four different surgeries. Foremost among them, he had a large tumor removed from his leg, forcing doctors and surgeons alike to prepare Judy and Dr. Mike Creel for a complicated childhood.

"Doctors told my parents that, even with the surgery, I would not be like other kids. That the ordeal would be crippling and I'd never be able to run."

They were wrong, but such adversity at a young age became fuel for Brian's success.

As a collegiate athlete, he was renowned for playing through injury. In fact, he played with a torn ACL his entire junior year at UAB, inspiring the Birmingham Post Herald to dub him, "Superman."

Brian went on to become an NSCA All-American, a two-sport Division 1 athlete in football and the hammer throw for UAB track and field. And all the while, Brian has remained a lifetime, drug-free athlete, a key part of the training foundation that he endows to his trainees.

One of the top guard prospects in the nation, Brian was a projected NFL draft pick while at UAB, before an injury derailed that status. Never one slowed by obstacles, he went on to get an offer from the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League (CFL) and even signed with the XFL before playing four seasons in the Arena Football League (AFL) in both Indianapolis and Denver.

"I got a great sense of accomplishment from whom I was playing with," Brian says, remembering the countless NFL players he had the opportunity of playing against and besting. "I enjoyed the camaraderie as well as seeing new cities and even new countries."

In Toronto, Brian sustained an injury that would serve as a catalyst for a new chapter in his story. Eager to overcome the injury, he rushed the rehab. Returning to the field, perhaps too soon, as he sees it now.

"I remember being on the field at the Pepsi Center in Denver preparing for a playoff game with the uncertainty of whether or not this would be the last time I would strap on the pads."

There were emotions beyond words.





Brian lifts a Toyota – five times – during a demonstration a few years ago at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes event at Grace Fellowship Sports Camp in Albertville. Considered to be one of the strongest men in the world, Brian has a multifaceted training philosophy: there must be a merger of both knowledge of the tasks a person is trying to accomplish, and the hands-on, lived experience of applying the science behind the success. “It’s so true,” Brian says, “there’s no better person to get you where you want to go than someone who has already been there.”

Conversations with trainers and doctors about his unlikely return. Somewhere in that adversity, however, Brian found a continuation of his grit and original dream.

Truthfully, this new chapter would perhaps involve even more determination. While football was his first love, Brian was fascinated by Strongman shows from the first time he saw one on ESPN.

“I always knew I wanted to be involved [in Strongman]. There’s something about those competitions that gives a visual demonstration of what strength really is.”

At his first big show, pitted against some of the strongest deadlifters in the world, by several reps, Brian won the Europa Strongman car-lift event going away.

“There is definitely a difference in just having barbell strength and being a strongman,” says Brian, who has one-rep maxes of over 1,000 pounds raw in the squat and deadlift.

“Strongman is like no other strength sport. There are so many disciplines where you have to push the human body to its limits.”

Brian’s physical strength was first put to the test on his family’s farm, working the ground, toting feed sacks, hauling hay. But he learned how to harness that strength through life experience. While physical strength



Annah Kate Waldrep goes through jump rope progressions during a training session for junior varsity level athletes.

can certainly be measured – Brian’s is often measured in hundreds and even thousands of pounds – there is another understanding of strength that goes much deeper.

When Judy passed away in 2006, Brian found himself back on the family farm, this time training for other

Strongman shows, but also soul-searching for the strength to get through the difficult season of life.

“It might sound crazy because training is so intense, but that was a time when I was most at peace,” he says. “Just total mental clarity.”

Such strength and toughness, inspired and demonstrated by his parents, is what fostered Brian’s success as a pro athlete and one of the country’s top strength and speed coaches.

The AthElite Nation facility was completed nearly a decade ago with the hope that his travels and first-class experiences would translate to young athletes. “I knew that I wanted to give back and impact lives through faith and training,” he says.

On the back wall of AthElite headquarters, is a quote from Hall of Fame receiver Jerry Rice, outlined in bright, hard-to-miss green, “Today I will do what others won’t, so tomorrow I can accomplish what others can’t.” Brian looks up at it, across 40 yards of green turf spanning his facility.

“I was blessed with a career that gave me a lot of knowledge and expertise in the field of strength and speed development. And I knew at some point I wanted to pour back into the next generations of athletes so they could accomplish their goals,” Brian says.

Of all the big cities and other states

Brian could have built his training headquarters, he at last chose his hometown of Boaz where he and his wife, Alyssa reside.

“I made sure before I opened that I had invested in my education. I want to give my athletes world-class programming so they can reach their potentials.”

Though headquartered in Boaz, Brian draws athletes from across the country.

Some of his trainees have signed scholarships to play sports at places like Notre Dame, Auburn, Houston, Duke and Florida. Last year, AthElite helped produce 22 scholarship athletes, and this year looks even more promising, with at least 10 trainees headed to play Division 1, including Power Five schools in the SEC and Atlantic Coast Conference.

Although AthElite Nation has made a name for itself with the number of high school athletes it has turned into scholarship winners and professionals, it is the connection with the local community that makes his ministry and work transcend the allure of competition. After all, these are not merely athletes, they are young men and women with families who love them.

As this story was written, Brian – or ‘Coach,’ as his athletes call him – was mourning the sudden loss of Keejay Blount, a junior from Albertville who always felt “at home” training with him.

“He was one of those athletes who was definitely a light to the people around him,” Brian says. “He will be missed.”

It was that word, “home,” that drew Brian back to the Marshall County community. Home is a place where he can reinvest his talents and energies, plus continue to provide a positive presence in the area. Where he can see the legacy of hard work continue on through generations.

“I believe sports can teach a person perseverance, how to be unselfish, and how to work with others ... Character traits that can go with [these young trainees] for a lifetime and make them better people,” he says.

Ultimately, Brian is most thankful for those relationships he’s built and continues to build, the networks and communities that produce greatness, the parents for whom Brian is deeply grateful as they entrust him to train their athletic sons and daughters.

Brian Creel may not be running through a tunnel onto football fields anymore, but he continues to train as a Strongman competitor. For fun, he still deadlifts cars or pulls fire trucks from time to time.

Soon he and his wife Alyssa will bring a new baby girl into the world. For their gender reveal party, he could think of no better way to celebrate than by lifting a car.

Standing at the full windows at AthElite Nation, sun streaming at his back, Brian seems to return to the source of inspiration that sustains his success.

“I tell my athletes all the time,” he says, “greatness starts with someone believing in you.”

*Good Life Magazine*



Brian orchestrated a surprise engagement for Alyssa – with French-speaking locals, back – in front of Montreal’s Notre-Dame Basilica.

## *Strongman Brian makes a strong impression*

Brian and Alyssa Creel were married in February 2020. A year prior, taking a walk down his memory lanes, they went on a road trip, catching football games in the U.S. and Canada with teams Brian had been affiliated with.

The crescendo of the trip was two-fold: first there was the marriage proposal in front of the Notre-Dame Basilica in Montreal, followed by another surprise in which he took Alyssa to a Strongman show in Warwick, Canada

Oblivious to his second plan, Alyssa followed Brian to the ticket booth where, to her surprise, he asked for the cost of a single ticket “for the guest of a competitor.”

“He blew my mind!” Alyssa says. “I know my jaw dropped and my eyes got big. It was so fun getting to see him compete in the Strongman show. He was in his element.”

– Seth Terrell