

# GRIDIRON LEGACIES TO BE REMEMBERED

Black QBs for Monroe and East made the record books and propelled teams with grit, heart

**Marquel Slaughter** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

A freezing cold November night in Cicero was where the illustrious varsity careers ended for two of the best quarterbacks Section V has ever seen — Monroe’s Khaya Moses and East High’s Zymier Jackson. • As they guided their programs to heights rarely reached by Rochester City School District football teams, Khaya and Zymier chased coveted section records. Zymier was named All-Greater Rochester Large School Player of the Year while Khaya shared AGR Small School Player of the Year with a teammate. • The record book seasons and long postseason runs the duo manifested during the 2023 season may have given proper recognition to what Rochester City School District children can do at the position. • It was a seminal moment. Both are Black athletes at a position in American youth sports often reserved for white players, due to racism. Inside the city’s public schools, it is rare for Black players to get this level of opportunity, although Rochester has always had great quarterbacks. • The two are city products who began their high school football careers in the suburbs before returning to their Rochester roots. Monroe and East High were each one win away from their respective state championship games behind the arms of their record-setting signal callers. • Monroe assistant coach and offensive coordinator Jason Muhammad has heard all of the Black quarterback criticisms. • He’s had many city-born AGR quarterbacks when he was head coach at Marshall — the first city school to run a spread offense nearly 20 years ago, he said. In 2006, Marshall was the last RCSD team to advance to the state semifinals before Monroe and East’s run behind signal caller Jeremiah Crumity. • “The fact they were two kids in the city, it truly shows the student athletes’ abilities, and the coaches who saw something and gave them the opportunity to express it,” Muhammad said.



Top: Monroe’s Khaya Moses is the AGR Co-Player of the Year for small school teams. Bottom: East High School football standout Zymier Jackson. PHOTOS BY JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

## Long journey for Khaya Moses

Monroe Spanish teacher Joan Mazur was amazed by Khaya Moses’ collection.

Khaya was a first grader at World of Inquiry School when his class was introduced to Mazur and her daughters, Meri and Tiki, through Skype while on sabbatical in Peru.

Khaya remembered Mazur when they reconnected at Monroe. He brought her beaded jewelry from a recent trip to his home country of Zimbabwe. Khaya speaks Spanish fluently and will graduate with a seal of biliteracy on his way to Allegheny College.

“He’s really kindhearted, very optimistic and very focused on his work. He really is that guy,” Mazur said.

Khaya welcomed new students with campus tours when he wasn’t applying for scholarships and searching for college. He helped lead 30 students during a five-day HBCU trip. Monroe guidance counselor Rachel Wilson said Khaya emphasizes the “student in” student athlete.

“The more you put out, the more you get back. ... He has done everything that he can to pursue his goals. He really puts himself out there just to get any information that he can,” Wilson said.

Wilson met Khaya via the Sports Majors, Athletics, and Regents Track Program when he arrived to Monroe from Fairport in the summer of 2022. Wilson said SMART has reeled many students into the program. Muhammad’s brainchild helps children achieve an NYS Regents diploma and meet NCAA guidelines in preparation for college athletics and other sports opportunities.

“Khaya is a supremely diverse and adaptable young man,” Monroe teacher Ray Smith said. “He blends into a multitude of environments easily and can effortlessly make friends with others from a wide range of backgrounds. Truly unique!”

## Connections in the community

Judge Van White has known Khaya since his Pop Warner days.

White admired Khaya’s parents, Phumelelo and George, connecting their children into the community. Khaya used to volunteer at Freedom School in the summers reading to children.

When Khaya is not training or working at Wegmans, he’s spending his Sundays as the videographer at



East/WOIS team captains Zymier Jackson, Anthony Diaz and Ervin Wiggins celebrate with their teammates and the Section V Class A championship trophy. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

## From Fairport to Monroe

Provision Full Gospel Church. Pastor Johnny Harris said Khaya does it for “God and his church.” With the recent imprisonment of Khaya’s father, Harris applauded the Moses family for staying strong through their faith.

“He is currently dealing with the unfortunate incident of his dad, who is incarcerated,” Harris said. “While the devastation of this could have really broken him for life, his enormous faith in God has strengthened him. On many occasions, I’ve heard from one of his parents how Sunday sermons have been such an inspiration to him.”

## From Fairport to Monroe

If Khaya didn’t have faith in his ability, he would have never been a varsity quarterback.

Khaya began at World of Inquiry before attending Fairport in middle school through the Urban Suburban Program. He debuted on Fairport’s junior varsity team in 2021 as a sophomore, battling for the starting quarterback spot while playing safety and some receiver. The following summer, a coach asked if he wanted to play receiver instead of quarterback.

That same night, Khaya told his parents he wanted to transfer.

“Leaving Fairport, it was fate,” George Moses said. “He was supposed to be at Monroe for this historic run.”

East High assistant coach Bruce Johnson also welcomed Khaya Moses, but his relationship with Red Jackets assistant Greg Hopkins led Khaya to Monroe. Hopkins is a close family friend who has mentored Khaya and runs the nonprofit Changing The Community program, in which Khaya participated.

The number of elite quarterbacks at CTC gave Khaya a “sink or swim” mentality.

Khaya arrived to Monroe in the summer of 2022 without a “true” off-season, having missed many summer workouts. He still won the starting job, threw 18 touchdown passes and guided the Red Jackets to the Section V Class B final.

They were six seconds away from winning the championship until Batavia’s Hail Mary marked a heartbreaking ending to Monroe’s long playoff hopes.

Entering the 2023 season was much different for Khaya and Monroe. He learned fundamentals from former Aquinas and Penn State quarterback Jake Zemiec, and participated in 7-on-7s with his core of receivers, the likes of Messiah Hampton, Landon McKnight and Anari Colon and Styles McKenzie-Baker. (Hampton, who recently picked up an offer from the University of Michigan, will be a junior this fall and has been receiving Division I offers since his freshman season.)

“We don’t talk about it, but to truly have Division I prospects to throw to ... it’s a blessing to know them,” Khaya said.

Khaya worked closely with Muhammad, who praised his senior’s intellect and preparation.

Muhammad put too much on Khaya’s plate and took blame for his ups and downs early in the season. Muhammad once looked ahead and gave Khaya two teams to study in one week. There were even questions about benching the young athlete. But after Khaya entered the state record books with his seven-touchdown performance in a win at Wayne, all mes-

tions were over.

None of Monroe’s Section V games were close. The Red Jackets’ high-powered offense coupled with one of New York state’s stingiest defenses in recent memory outscored teams by 472 points via eight shutouts, two 70-point games and a forfeit. Monroe ran through the likes of perennial champions Batavia and Honeoye Falls-Lima, defeating HF-L in the Class B final to capture Monroe’s first title since 1979. Although on pace to break the Section V single season touchdowns record, Khaya’s coaches said, he was often overlooked.

Moses was not honored at the Section V championship game nor the regular season banquet. Robert Arnold earned Class B’s Defensive Player of the Year award. Hampton shared Section V Co-Player of the Year honors.

“Some of these guys, before this year, nobody knew who they were,” Monroe coach Terrell Cunningham said after falling to Maine-Endwell in the NYS Class B semifinals in November. “After this year, guys are seeing that with hard work, development and nonstop year-round coaching, guys can improve and they can play at a very high level. I think that’s a perfect depiction of what Khaya was able to do over these last few years. He was able to develop, kept his head down, kept doing the work, and he was relentless.”

Khaya entered the state semifinals two touchdowns shy of tying the mark. He threw three, all in the first half to Colon (2) and Landon McKnight. Khaya’s Section V record 38 touchdowns came in just 11 games. Monroe won one game by forfeit and couldn’t schedule a game on opening week. According to Muhammad, most, if not all, of Monroe’s regular season games had running clocks, which was unconventional, to say the least.

His record-breaking score was a beauty, heaving a 58-yard fourth-down touchdown pass to Colon to take an 18-14 lead in the second quarter. Khaya was hit hard and watched on his back while Colon ran into the end zone for the record-breaking score.

“He surpassed what we could’ve imagined,” Phumelelo Moses said.

## Zymier Jackson: From Greece to East

Growing up, Zymier Jackson wanted to be a basketball player like his father, Kenny.

Kenny was a beloved Edison Tech basketball legend who died suddenly in December. When his son was younger, he swore Zymier would make

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# Football

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it to the NBA. A few days before his death, Kenny and his wife, Shanika, attended East High's basketball team's home opener. Zymier was nursing an sprained ankle as he reflected on his storybook football career.

"I just want to give everything to the man above," Zymier said then. "Nothing is possible without him. All the offseason work, the coaches, the players, everybody pushing each other to the max. We just worked real hard in the offseason."

Zymier began his basketball career at Greece Olympia. As a football player, Zymier played skill positions growing up. He played receiver and defensive back before switching to quarterback midway through his sophomore season for Greece Olympia/Odyssey in the fall 2021 season.

In a battle of winless teams Oct. 1, 2021, Zymier threw two touchdowns in a 49-36 loss to Eastridge at Olympia. One of those passes went to future Monroe star Colon-Brown.

Although Greece Olympia/Odyssey won one game and opted out of the postseason, Zymier and Kenny saw a future on the gridiron. It was the right move, as it ultimately leading to his commitment to Pennsylvania Western University Clarion, where he'll study sports medicine.

Zymier improved his skills with CTC that summer and transferred to East High. His cousin, Keyon Concepcion, convinced Zymier to take his spot after transferring out of state.

"We threw him right into the fire at West-side camp," East High co-coach Steve Flagler said. "It wasn't pretty. But he's a competitor. Anytime he gets into a competitive situation he's just (got) ice water in his veins. He's got that rare ability — when the moment gets big, he can perform. He's special like that."

East High became a contender immediately with Zymier at the helm, sweeping through the regular season before falling to five-time champion Canandaigua in the 2022 Section V Class A final. Zymier played well but knew he had to get better, linking up with Zembiec in the offseason to improve his mechanics.

East High co-coach James Vann liked Zymier's work ethic and study habits, but he also knew with players like Anthony Diaz



**Monroe quarterback Khaya Moses winds up to throw a 58-yard touchdown pass during a playoff game last season.** TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

and Ervin Wiggins to lean on, all the Eagles needed was a quarterback to capture a long-awaited Section V title.

"When he came from Olympia he was real hungry and eager. That kid in the classroom just wanted to learn everything. He's a sponge. The atmosphere made him want to be here and he fit right in from the jump," Vann said.

A full offseason in 2023 paid dividends.

The Eagles played elite teams in 7-on-7 tournaments, playing against teams in West Virginia and winning a tournament at Cortland. Every Sunday night during the varsity season, Zymier and offensive coordinator James Flagler exchanged notes. James Flagler was most impressed at the growth Zymier showed in pass protection.

"That's why we threw the ball so much. That was a testament to his ability to move the ball through the air," James Flagler said.

Zymier's senior season would be best one yet. He'd go from winning one game as a sophomore to a 22-2 record in two years at East. Zymier engineered East's run through Section V and into the state semifinals for the first time since 1996. Zymier was so close to the Section V single season passing yards mark. He finished with 3,011 yards, falling

just 19 yards shy of Zembiec's 3,030 yards.

## Getting to know Zymier

Zymier is all business.

Shanika said Kenny did not want his son to work during high school. Zymier's jobs were to study, train and go home. The day after Kenny's death, Zymier was scheduled to shoot his AGR Player of the Year portraits. Understandably, Zymier did not make the photo op.

Kenny and Zymier are the only first father-son duo to earn AGR Player of the Year honors. Kenny won the award as a basketball player. He guided the Inventors to back-to-back basketball titles in 1998 and 1999.

The news of Kenny's death ripped through Rochester.

Hundreds showed up for the East-Edison basketball game memorializing Kenny. Zymier was visibly emotional during warmups. As Zymier broke down in tears, his teammates hugged him as applause erupted.

"He was so humble. He never talked about how great of a player he was. He was a great family man. He was an entrepreneur. Great athlete," East High coach Darrell Barley said about Kenny following a Dec. 15 game at Edison. Barley coached two of Kenny's sons.

Zymier's family supported him at all of his games. Shanika and Kenny rolled up with the yellow No. 5 on their purple hoodies to represent their son from Rochester to Buffalo and Syracuse, no matter the weather.

Zembiec, who played at Penn State, has trained many of Section V's best quarterbacks. He said Khaya was always a good athlete with a strong arm who was level-headed and gained confidence with more reps. He helped Zymier maximize his throwing and "take it to the next level".

Zembiec has noticed the game shifting to pass heavy offense the last 15 years or so. He praised Monroe and East High's coaching staffs to get their players to buy in to their programs.

The numbers Khaya and Zymier put up is a testament to how strong their teams are. Zembiec never met the men whose records he broke, but was "pumped" for Khaya and Zymier chasing after his marks.

"It's definitely cool. It's nice having records, but if anyone breaks them, I'm happy it's someone who trains with me," Zembiec said.

## Finally, graduation

On high school graduation day, Khaya Moses' sister, Thandi, showered her brother with money.

His mother, Phumelelo, shared a long hug, repeating "I'm so proud of you," while patting her son's back.

Khaya received his diploma from his coach and school principal Jason Muhammad, pointing to the crowd as he crossed the stage. His graduation cap bore South Africa's flag and Allegheny College emblems. Khaya hopes to become a surgeon.

Khaya's gown was royal blue. His dreads draped below his bright white shades.

East High and James Monroe hosted their graduations on the football field. Khaya was one of 97 students to graduate from Monroe as part of the school's 100th class. Two days later, Zymier Jackson was one of 156 East graduates. Khaya and Zymier both graduated as Urban League of Rochester Black Scholars.

Jackson got some attention during East High's 121st commencement ceremony June 27. Upon walking off the stage, he threw a touchdown to his teammate Ervin Wiggins Jr. The Democrat and Chronicle video of it racked up over 10 million views across multiple platforms.

Jackson graduated in a bright white gown and white Air Force 1 sneakers. Everyone who approached him after graduation talked about his surprise touchdown pass. Only a few people who knew it was coming shot video. "We have to make this go viral!" someone said.

Shanika paraded the field with blown-up photos of her son. She had headshots of Zymier as a baby and present days with his dreads, which he cut off a week later. Shanika could barely speak as she looked up to the sky and said she felt her late husband, Kenny, with them, watching Zymier graduate and enter adulthood.

"I'm extremely proud of him. Especially after the year we had. He didn't quit. If anything he was more motivated. He stuck to the plan and finished the mission. I'm super, super proud of him," Jackson said.

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