

recommendation | Ben Adams

February 13, 2024

To the selection committee, Texas High School Journalist of the Year:

I'm delighted to submit this letter on behalf of Ben Adams for consideration in the Texas High School Journalist of the Year program. Rarely in my 28 years of advising student publications have I found a young person so completely natural in his writing ability and so sure of his future as a journalist. Admittedly, I have a strong bias in favor of this talented student journalist — but, I think you'll see, that bias is justified.

Ben came on my radar as a sixth grader, when he and his middle school humanities class members came for a tour of the Publications Suite. Even before that visit, I'd heard about this "journalism junkie" — who in the fourth grade started a middle school newspaper, whose PDFs appeared on the school website. After that initial introduction, I made sure to keep in contact with Ben; I was, of course, delighted when I saw his name on the roster for beginning journalism as he began his ninth grade year. It was easy to detect at that young age the natural passion he had for writing — which coupled with his knowledge of the sports world, impressed even the most skeptical of upperclassmen editors.

After a highly successful year in beginning journalism, Ben rose through the ranks to a senior leadership position in publications this year and, in so doing, has made history for the publications program at St. Mark's. After Jenny Creech was hired to take over the publications program in 2022, she quickly moved to develop an online version of *The ReMarker* — the first in school history. Because she was so impressed with the work Ben had done as sports editor his junior year, she readily tapped him to be the first online editor in publication history.

That decision proved very smart, as Ben embraced the challenge of learning a whole new platform for story-telling. The finished product (smremarker.com) is professional in appearance, easy to navigate and is chock full of content — both original to the web and shared content from the print newspaper. This was a bold move on Mrs. Creech's part, and she only felt comfortable in pushing her students to make this leap knowing she had someone like Ben, who could adapt easily and learn quickly, to master this new media opportunity.

As Ben's adviser his first two years in high school, I knew early on, that with Ben you just turn him loose — he will come up with coverage ideas, story topics, and exhaustively cover the entire spectrum of programs. His list of stories is most impressive; here are a few highlights:

- Kit Colson breaks school record — This was his first ever story for *The ReMarker*, and it was written as a freshman, leading off the sports section of that issue, a feat which rarely happens to a "rookie" writer.
- Dan Hunt brings World Cup to Dallas and FC Dallas impact on the World Cup team (Tops in Texas, ILPC) — He talked to several people across multiple weeks just to get the interview. This story was written in his junior year.
- Paul Wylie ice skating feature — This story gave him the opportunity to interview the Olympic silver medalist in ice skating, a school alum. Showing his resourcefulness, Ben conducted the phone interview while Wylie was grocery shopping due to scheduling considerations.
- Sports column (UIL conference 4A winner) — As an avid soccer athlete, Ben was riddled with a season-compromising injury. This was a tough time for Ben, forcing him to decide his future in the sport, so he did what all good writers do — he started writing. It was the first time he inserted his personal life into an opinion piece for the newspaper, which ultimately won first place in division 4A at ILPC.

Equally impressive is the independence with which he tackles any and all assignments. In working as both sports editor and online editor, he takes care of his business: he helps reporters with their stories, very efficiently arranges interviews and follow-up research for his stories, and partners with photographers and artists to make sure visual needs are fully understood. He approaches his work with a natural fluidity — he's in his element, and the confidence and joy that is inherent in his work is infectious. Staff members respond to him and have learned to trust his judgment and heed his guidance.

Good writers always hone their craft and that is one of the things I most admire in Ben. He wants to better himself and works earnestly to improve as a story-teller. He has attended every writing and training session we held on campus for all four years, attended the University of Texas sports journalism camp, and has attended two scholastic journalism national conventions (San Francisco and Boston). He's already been accepted into the Medill School at Northwestern University, where he will double major in digital journalism and economics.

Sometimes, you just *know* — you just know when a kid is going to make it. That's the feeling I get from Ben Adams. He has the fortitude, the passion, and, most importantly, the drive to be the best he can be. It's that drive, along with his polished writing voice and solid work ethic, that I know will provide him a secure path on the road to becoming a professional journalist. The Ben Adams I know and respect is a remarkable student journalist — and I feel he would be an excellent Texas High School Journalist of the Year award recipient.

Sincerely,

Ray Westbrook
Director of Communications
Formerly, Oltrogge Master Teaching Chair,
journalism, student publications