

Blake Jenner: From Viper to Titan
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Originally published in The Viper Vibe
Florida Scholastic Press Association Best-of-the-Best Profile 2013

On stage during the *Glee Project* season finale, Blake Jenner “summoned the power of Thor.” That’s how he explains the High School Musical-worthy jump seconds after being declared winner.

Granted, the win was a pretty big deal for him: after eleven episodes’ worth of non-stop acting and singing competition, Jenner’s victory meant a seven episode arc on Fox’s *Glee* and quite a few doors swinging open.

His *Glee* debut as Ryder Lynn this November might be widely attributed to luck, talent and the whims of show creator Ryan Murphy. In truth, it is the biggest stop yet in a dream-driven journey that began in suburban Miami. That journey brought him to Varela before it took him to California.

It began with stories.

“I started getting bitten by the acting bug when I was in fourth grade,” Jenner said. “I’d write little short stories, as part of our morning journals in class and then I’d act them out. I’d make people laugh and that was the hook.”

Once in Hammocks Middle School, Jenner enrolled in their drama program taught by Susan Ryan.

“Blake was always the class clown,” Ryan said. “He enjoyed performing for anyone, anytime. Every acting assignment was met with enthusiasm.”

Even then, Jenner was already using his talent to the fullest. By the end of eighth grade, he’d won a state-level critic’s choice award in the monologue category.

Jenner spent his freshman year of high school at the Academy of Arts and Minds before transferring to Varela as a sophomore. Once here, he found himself a few steps behind his peers.

“Blake had been at another school, an art school, that was giving him nothing,” drama teacher Rey Bode said. “He heard of the things we were doing here, since all his friends were here, and he was like ‘Wow, I need to be there.’ So he came here, but he was behind.”

Jenner’s freshman drama curriculum had left him unprepared compared to the students that had already been at Varela for a year.

“He had stage presence, but he was very hard to direct because he was trained like an incoming freshman even though this was already his freshman year,” Bode said. “The growth was a step behind.”

According to Bode, however, it ultimately did not make a difference.

“Once Blake got it, he got it,” he said. “And he really worked hard at everything. Not just in acting, it’s everywhere— his work ethic is really strong. That’s what I think sets him apart.”

That work ethic extended to making an early graduation possible.

“When I was in my junior year, I really wanted to get to Los Angeles as soon as possible— right when I turned eighteen, and I was seventeen at the time,” he said. “So I’d come here, do school during the day, and then go home and do my senior year coursework through [Florida Virtual School] at night. It became this everyday thing, just go, go, go until I finished.”

By the end of his junior year, Jenner was months away from moving across the country—a long-held ambition made real.

“As early as middle school, I knew I wanted to go there, to pursue my dream by any means,” Jenner said. “I’d tell my parents, hey, I’m not going to go to college. I’m just going to go straight into acting and I’m going to give it all I have. Of course, they were just like, ‘Yeah, Blake, sure, okay.’”

It turned out to be anything but a phase.

“When high school started, I guess they’d thought I’d matured and changed my mind, and they’d ask me what I ‘really’ wanted to do,” he said. “And I was like, uh, no. I want to act. I’m going to act. I had to get out there as soon as possible—there are people who have been doing it since birth. In reality, I was late, and I knew I had to hurry up and go.”

The move would ultimately lead him to Oxygen’s *The Glee Project*.

“When *Glee* came out, I’d watch it with my brother, Ricky,” Jenner said. “It became our Tuesday night thing, and I’d always think about how cool it’d be to be on the show. I mean, I’d take anything, but *Glee* would be out of this world; I thought of it as one of those daydreams. But here I am.”

Jenner was up against 13 other contestants. Right off the bat, he felt weakest vocally. When asked about the singing experience he had before the show, Jenner said most of it involved singing in the shower.

“I was never vocally trained, so whenever I had to sing I’d just be like ‘please don’t crack, please don’t crack,’” he said. “The first day, we were practicing Born This Way and I was listening to everybody else and I was just like, ‘I suck. I really suck and this sucks and I’m probably getting

sent home the moment they hear me. This is going to be terrible.’ It was something I was always very insecure about.”

Struggling to learn the track, Jenner listened to it over and over again, learning the music as best he could. He did not go home that week.

As the show progressed, he benefited from the ‘master class’ format.

“Straight away and throughout my time there, I learned more and more from the contenders and the coaches,” Jenner said. “*The Glee Project* taught me everything that I know in terms of vocals. It opened my eyes, it stretched my range out—I was reaching higher and better notes. It really is a master class. It’s not just a show.”

His strength, on the other hand, was acting. Jenner attributes this largely to his time with Bode and Ozzie Quintana in Varela’s drama program.

“Rey and Ozzie really trained me in improv. They made me love improv,” Jenner said. “That really helped throughout the show, especially in the Actability episode, where we had to act but we didn’t have a script. And I know it’s going to help me on *Glee*, too.”

His improv experience went beyond Varela.

“The summer after he graduated and before he moved to L.A., he worked with us at Improvmedy, our improv troupe at [the Roxy Theater] and we taught him how to do improv,” Bode said. “The thing with Blake was that when you put him on a stage, he was funny. But we had to work with him on the acting part.”

In his week back at Miami this August before his shooting schedule began, Jenner performed with Bode, Quintana, and several Varela alumni. The Improvmedy troupe themed their season finale—dubbed ‘Impromeglee’—around Blake and his recently announced win.

Even before the show began, the night was rife with good-natured humor at Jenner’s expense. One of the cast members—likely Jenner himself—made a point of punching a projected picture of Jenner from behind the screen. Repeatedly.

The opening skit involved Improvmedy members taking turns impersonating Jenner in an effort to distract the packed house—full of both fans and friends—from the guest of honor’s feigned lateness.

It was a night that evidenced the long-established relationships between Jenner and his hometown friends and how not even imminent fame could shake that.

“Performing with Blake is a lot of fun,” Bode said. “He always throws a lot of curveballs at you and he’s willing to accept your curveballs. So when he came back and did Impromeglee, he was a great team player. We kind of geared the show around him, making it a bit musical and stuff.”

The other feature of the night was Jenner's gratitude. Between countless thanks to all involved and some self-deprecating humor, actions spoke loud, too. After the show—which ended around 11pm—Jenner made a point of taking pictures with every fan who wanted one. And there were many.

“He is probably the most grateful person,” Bode said. “In rehearsal, he says, ‘Man, I owe it all to you guys,’ and he meant Ozzie and I. He really did say that. It was really cool.”

That gratitude was evident throughout Jenner's week in Miami.

“I think this is the best part, getting to come back here,” Jenner said, gesturing at the covered courtyard he remembered well. “I love being here, just sitting here, because I remember sitting over there at that lunch table and eating with my friends. It's crazy. And everybody's been so supportive.”

From Jenner's big move in 2010 through his big win this summer, many Vipers maintained support. He cites this as a vital factor in his success.

“It was amazing having all of my friends and family and everybody at school be so supportive,” he said. “I'd come back and visit all my teachers back here and just everybody, they'd be like ‘You're gonna do it, you're gonna do it.’ I think that was really important, everybody back home that's been a part of my life, that's what was keeping me going. I feel like without those people, without that love and support, I wouldn't have gotten anywhere.”

The Varela community followed his journey on varying levels. Even when the biggest news was about a small appearance on ABC Family's *Melissa and Joey*, the excitement was palpable.

As the 2012-2013 school year began and the *Glee Project* finale approached, nerves ran high.

“It's almost unreal, when you see Blake on TV and you're rooting for him so much, Quintana said. “But at the same time, you're almost like a dad and you're like ‘I know he can do it.’”

The support only grows stronger.

Perhaps most notably, this support helped Jenner through his struggles.

At barely eighteen years of age, a cross-country move all on his own proved difficult.

“I was terrified,” Jenner said. “The first day I was moving, I cried. I was really sad; it really hit me. I was trying so hard to stay strong, but I cried. It's hard; hard being on your own, hard being so far from your family and everything you know and everybody that cares about you. You're on your own and you're so alone.”

After getting as settled in L.A. as he'd ever be, Jenner began auditioning. When asked about the frequency of this, he estimated he'd been to roughly “a freaking bunch.” The rejections were just as abundant.

While his graduating class, in the thick of their senior year, joked about the college years of ramen diets ahead of them, there were nights where Jenner would skip meals to save money. While his graduating class worried about college, Jenner worried about supporting himself while dozens of states away from home and mostly rejection to run on.

“I was said no to so many times,” he said. “It was awful. It’s the worst feeling. You have to keep your chin up, and sometimes that’s impossible. It was a series of no’s, and the *Glee Project* gave me my first big yes.”

Minutes before summoning the power of Thor, Jenner was ready to lose.

“I did not think I was going to win,” he said. “I was hoping so much and I wanted it like nothing else, but I did not think I was going to win. I was ready to be happy for whoever won, to hug them and support them. I wasn’t going to be jealous, I wasn’t going to resent them, I was just going to be so happy. Like a parent.”

But, after deliberation from *Glee* writers, he was declared the winner.

“When they said my name, I was like ‘woah, dude,’ and I run to the platform and I jump off if,” Jenner said. “It was like *Super Mario 64*. I was Mario. I couldn’t even explain the feelings I went through in that moment.”

In light of that success, Jenner thinks fondly of his struggles.

“I’m thankful for my success, but I’m thankful for the struggling,” he said. “I’m glad I know what rejection is like, because I get to value my success that much more. I know failure. So I’m thankful for the packs of ramen, for all the times I went to bed without eating dinner because I needed to save money. I’m thankful for all of that because it showed me how much you have to appreciate what you do get, and how quickly it can vanish.”

As part of his week back in Miami, Jenner made sure to talk to the students of his alma maters about his experiences. He visited Varela drama classes and went back to his Hammocks roots.

“The kids couldn’t wait to meet him, and they were very impressed by Blake,” Ryan, who invited Jenner to talk to her advanced students, said. “Several of his former teachers stopped by to shake his hand and give him a hug.”

“I think it’s such a blessing to get where you hope to be and I’m so happy to come and share my knowledge,” Jenner said. “I wish somebody had done it for me. I went out to L.A. not knowing anything. There are so many people out in L.A. that will try and change you, try to make you somebody that they want you to be or try to take away your beliefs and you’ve always got to be like, clear of drugs, clear of alcohol, clear of everything. So I would have loved for someone to let me know what I was about to get into, to let me know how much I was going to have to reject people for my own good.”

At the end of the day, it seems the hard work, dedication and character have paid off. Weeks away from his *Glee* debut, Jenner has already gotten a taste of fame and will only encounter more.

Those who know him, however, are confident that he deserves every bit of his success and that it will not change him.

“With Blake, he’s not famous by accident,” Quintana said. “He worked really hard. He’s incredibly talented and he just dives into it. He’s not afraid to take risks. He’ll put himself out there, but at the same time he’ll ask for criticism after. I think what [Bode and I] were happiest about was that he still maintains contact with us and he’s still very humble.”