

## The Washington Post

### Hey! I'm Chris Cooley's Brother: How Tanner Cooley is making a name for himself in the D.C. sports world

By Annys Shin

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It is the day after Halloween, and Tanner Cooley is at a fair for collectors of sports memorabilia in Chantilly

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watching his friend Nationals All-Star third baseman Ryan Zimmerman autograph baseball bats. The offer to go on Air Force One comes from an older guy in a baseball cap named Andrew Lang, who owns a sports marketing firm and has over the past several weeks done Tanner one favor or another. Lang knows Zimmerman, too. He seems to know everyone, including the guy in the trench coat standing next to him who has Secret Service connections. Hence the offer of a tour of Air Force One.

Tanner, 24, doesn't know much about Lang except that he seems to have a lot of money. Lang doesn't know much about Tanner except that he is the younger brother of Redskins All-Pro tight end Chris Cooley.

Tanner came to Washington a little over a year ago, and since then people he barely knows have offered to do all sorts of things -- lend him a different car every few weeks, make him a reality TV star, whiten his teeth. In addition to Zimmerman, he now counts as friends Washington Capitals stars Alex Ovechkin and Mike Green, and Redskins tight end Todd Yoder. He has become so ubiquitous at Caps games and at FedEx Field that fans now occasionally ask for his autograph, which he refuses to give.

In Chantilly, Tanner doesn't doubt Lang's ability to follow through. He just isn't sure whether a tour of Air Force One is a privilege or a pain, a day wasted jumping through security hoops. Lang must sense his hesitation, because he mentions that Zimmerman got a peek inside the president's plane not too long ago while it was parked at Andrews Air Force Base.

"Is it worth it?" Tanner asks Zimmerman.

The ballplayer looks up from signing autographs and nods. He got to see the White House, too, he says, and not just the parts the tourists see. But the idea of getting a closer look at the Nixons' china patterns doesn't appeal to Tanner. He has something else in mind.

"I want to meet Barack," he tells Lang.

"Can you bring Ovechkin and Chris?"

"Yeah," Tanner says. He turns and looks at Zimmerman. "Hey, Zim, would you come meet Barack with Chris? How cool would that be?"

The guy in the trench coat looks exasperated. "Don't tell people that," he implores Lang. "I don't know the guy," referring to the president.

"We're talking the three best athletes in D.C.!" Lang retorts.

And Tanner, of course.

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Who is Tanner Cooley, exactly? What should we think of someone like him? In Washington, people behind the scenes -- the handlers, the pollsters, the speechwriters -- carry their own clout. Some may see Tanner as merely trading on his brother's fame. But he is more Rahm Emanuel than Roger Clinton. Tanner is carrying on the tradition of the Washington insider -- only instead of politics, he operates in the fan-crazed world of Redskins football.

The life Tanner leads now is a world removed from the one he envisioned 18 months ago, when he was in Logan, Utah. He was working at a hospital and studying for his MCATs, the first hurdle to what he hopes will be a long career as an orthopedic surgeon. And unlike many guys his age, he was not interested in chasing girls. Shortly after graduating from Utah State in 2007, he married his girlfriend, Kirsten, 24, a pretty, perky brunette he has known since eighth grade and started dating in high school. Kirsten had just finished a master's degree in accounting. They didn't go out much, the couple says, and ate ramen noodles and baked a lot of chicken to save money.

In his spare time, Tanner worked on [the Cooley Zone](#), a blog about his brother that he and Chris started in March 2008 with a friend from Utah. None of them had blogged before, but they had read other blogs by sports figures and knew what they liked. Colts quarterback and multiple MVP winner Peyton Manning's site? Lame. It wasn't updated regularly and was more of a Web site than a blog. They preferred the videos of Cincinnati Bengals receiver Chad Ochocinco and the blog of Wizards point guard Gilbert Arenas because they are about more than sports. Plus, their star athlete subjects are quirky, like Chris, 27, who was an art major in college and is probably the only NFL player to use his celebrity status to call up a noted Northern Virginia potter for glazing advice.

Chris, who was in Washington, was tasked with writing entries. Their friend and partner Jake Stewart had the apparel industry connections to produce T-shirts to sell. And Tanner's job was to do a little bit of everything: Design T-shirts. Come up with ideas. Write entries. Nag Chris to write entries. And, later on, shoot and edit videos for the site.

Chris paid Tanner based on the blog's ad and merchandise revenue to help him raise money for med school. At first, the response was modest. But then, Tanner says, the blog "just got bigger than we expected."

People were drawn to Chris's lack of pretension and willingness to do things at odds with his super macho vocation, such as building a gingerbread house. That attempt ended with him flinging frosting and gingerbread all over his kitchen. "I guess it works different in Gingerbread Land, but in the real world there is no way to establish any kind of a solid foundation with freaking frosting," he wrote in the blog.

The Cooley Zone followers also bought the T-shirts, including one labeled "Chris Cooley is my life coach." It was inspired by a comment Redskins reserve quarterback Colt Brennan made to a reporter about a rumor that Colt was dating singer Jessica Simpson. Anyone who bought the shirt was in on the joke and thus a part of Cooleydom, an experience that couldn't be replicated with a standard-issue, NFL-sanctioned, burgundy-and-gold jersey with Chris's number on it.

Soon Tanner and Chris were getting e-mails and orders from fans across the country, fans who rooted for other teams but made confessions like: "I hate the Redskins. I'm a Cowboys fan, but I find your blog entertaining."

"We slowly learned we were building Chris's brand," Tanner says. "Not Chris the football player, but Chris."

By the time football season began gearing up that August, Tanner was earning enough money from managing the blog to make it his full-time job. He and Kirsten had also decided to relocate to Northern Virginia. Kirsten had job offers there, and there were plenty of med schools to which Tanner could apply.

Once they got there, they quickly learned they had set up camp in Chris's shadow.

"When I lived in Logan, I loved my last name being Cooley because I was Tanner's wife," Kirsten says. "In Virginia, my name is Cooley, but I'm Chris's sister-in-law. People see my last name and ask, 'Are you related to the football player?' It's like, 'Oh, crap, why did I change my last name?' Because, of course, I love Chris, but I don't want that to be the first thing when people meet me."

Tanner had an easier time adjusting. He began popping up on sports radio and TV. Earlier this year, he appeared as a guest analyst on Comcast SportsNet's post-game show, and was identified as "Tanner Cooley, Chris's brother."

As the popularity of the blog has grown, so has Tanner's brand of clout. In September, filming began for his own reality show. And other pro athletes who followed the success of Chris's site and wanted the same kind of vehicle for themselves tapped Tanner to develop content for them. At a Caps game in November, his credentials as a blogger got him into the press box. Once there, his Cooley credentials got him into a radio broadcast booth, where he ended up watching part of the game with Green and Ovechkin, who were injured at the time. A couple of weeks later, before the Skins-Broncos game, Tanner tailgated with hip-hop artist Wale, then sneaked the rapper onto the field. After the game, Tanner rushed onto the gridiron with the players to give Yoder a victory chest bump.

Chris, who was nursing a broken ankle, hadn't even played that day.

But Tanner understands that the perks he enjoys can have little or nothing to do with him and everything to do with getting access to his famous brother. Last year, Tanner mentioned to Chris Kinard, the program director at WJFK 106.7 FM, that he was interested in having his own show on the sports-talk station. He soon got his wish. According to Tanner and others familiar with the situation (Kinard declined to comment for this article), the station was also pursuing Chris as a regular call-in guest for other shows. WJFK thought it had a verbal agreement to have Chris sign with WJFK, and it sold ads based on that agreement. Tanner says he and Chris never made such a promise. Chris later chose to renew a contract with DC101 FM. When WJFK officials found out, they canned Tanner's show.

"I guess they were using me to get to Chris," Tanner says.

Which raises several questions: How far can you go on sharing a famous last name? And how long can that run last?

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Being Chris Cooley's brother would mean a lot less if Tanner and Chris didn't get along so well. Case in point: When was the last time you saw two grown male siblings make vases together?

Chris, out of commission because of surgery on his ankle, has decided he is going to convalesce behind a pottery wheel. He and Tanner head to Manassas in early November to buy massive bags of glaze. They bring them back to Chris's house, a secluded MTV "Cribs"-ready manse outside downtown Leesburg that he shares with his second wife, Christy. Christy, 25, was fired as a Redskins cheerleader for dating Chris. Inside the house, pictures of the couple are everywhere -- their wedding, their vacations, with their dogs -- the kind of stuff you would see in almost any home. The portrait in their bedroom of them naked and lip-locked is the first clue they are not an ordinary couple. Chris has also lined his poker room with photos of Christy in different bikinis

in an homage to her hotness.

The pottery studio, by contrast, is spartan. It's basically an unfinished storage area that Chris has filled with a wheel, a couch, a table and shelves to dry pots on. There's a kiln in the garage.

Chris is getting ready for a charity art show to raise money for scholarships for public school kids. He is on a mission to crank out as many pots as possible. Tanner sits on the couch facing him, as Chris starts cupping a mound of wet clay. A cylinder gradually appears. And it's lopsided.

"You are not my friend, clay," he says. "I can tell you that right now."

Chris and Tanner have not spent this much time together since they were kids in Utah, where they were raised by their mom after their parents divorced. Their relationship now isn't much different than the one they had then. Chris was extremely shy as a child, while Tanner was more outgoing. "That's why [Chris] would send him out to do his deeds," says their mother, Nancy Cooley. "If something needed to be done, Chris would say, 'Tanner, you do it.' "

For his part, Tanner said in a teaser for a reality show about Chris that he is often "trying to get Chris to do something and ... pushing him to the limit."

In the pottery studio, Chris is sitting on a stool, surrounded by buckets of unmixed glaze. He leans down and starts to push the glaze through a sieve and yell profanities when it won't go through. Tanner gets to work on a vase he is sculpting.

"Have you been able to save money?" Chris asks.

Tanner looks up, mildly exasperated. "Do you see me doing anything that costs money?" he asks.

Between the blog and appearance fees for Chris, which Tanner earns a small percentage of, he says he grossed \$65,000 last year. Kirsten, who works at a major accounting firm, makes sure he squirrels away a certain percentage into savings. Chris owns their Brambleton townhouse, having plunked down \$300,000 for it. Tanner and Kirsten pay him rent. It's furnished with hand-me-downs. Kirsten drives a 10-year-old Honda Civic, and Tanner doesn't own a car, although he drives a different one nearly every month, courtesy of Easterns Automotive Group. He does an occasional blog for them called "[My Blog's My Credit.](#)"

There are friends and acquaintances who are skeptical that Tanner will be able to give up the cars, free Caps tickets and field passes in favor of anatomy lessons and study groups. And Tanner's habit of dissecting business models and calculating profit margins makes those close to him, including his brother, wonder whether medicine is the right fit. Tanner doesn't see it that way. He says he can start a business anytime, but "my window to get into school and get my degree is short."

He leans forward to peer into the vase to see how thick the bottom is.

"It's good, dude," Chris assures him. "It's symmetrical."

"It's too thick," Tanner says and begins smashing the clay into a ball.

Behind him, Chris starts to belch loudly. After about the fourth belch, Tanner shoots him a look.

"That's gross," he says.

Chris says one reason they get along is that neither has any qualms about telling the other one what he really thinks.

The worst spat Tanner and Chris say they've had since starting the blog was in September 2008, when Chris

posted a picture of his penis on the blog. The intended subject of the photo was a page in a playbook that just happened to be resting in Chris's naked lap. In a rush to get to a game, he shot the photo and posted it. He didn't find out until later how he had trained his camera. The NFL looked into the matter, and Chris had to explain that it was an accident. But he reasoned that if a picture of his penis was going to be on the World Wide Web, the image might as well be more flattering. He wanted to post another one.

Tanner vetoed it. They went at it. Tanner threatened to quit. Chris backed down.

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A few days after his Air Force One offer, Andrew Lang invites Tanner out for lunch at Tysons Galleria. They are sitting in Corner Bakery when Lang's cellphone rings. It is a club promoter who wants Chris to appear at one of his nightspots later that week. Tanner has been trying to arrange more club appearances for Chris, but his brother is already booked that night to guest bartend at the Skye Lounge in downtown Washington. The promoter is hoping Chris can still stop by.

"You can have Tanner Cooley and a couple of Redskins," Lang offers. "That's pretty good."

The promoter doesn't bite and hangs up.

Lang then says he has an idea for a reality show starring Chris. He pictures eight high school athletes competing for the opportunity to have Chris as their mentor for three months.

A reality show has increasingly become de rigueur for pro athletes looking for a second act, which is key when the average length of an NFL career is 3? years. Former Redskins defensive lineman Jason Taylor appeared on "Dancing with the Stars." Wide receiver Terrell Owens, who now plays for the Buffalo Bills, has a reality show on VH1.

The reality show Chris shot a teaser for has not been picked up.

Lang calls his reality TV contact, a guy in Greenwich, Conn., whose name is Raffaele Faugno, or Raffi, for short. Raffi is developing a show about horse racing with his cousin, who has worked on several major reality shows.

"I got Chris's brother right here," Lang says. Raffi keeps talking. "They love this idea," Lang tells Tanner, pointing to his phone.

Two days later, Raffi e-mails Tanner a detailed pitch. The format has changed somewhat. There are still eight high school football players, but instead of a mentorship, they are competing for a \$500,000 college scholarship. They live with Chris in tents on his property and engage in different charity-related challenges each week. They are eliminated after a scrimmage at the end of every show.

The thoroughness of the proposal impresses Tanner enough that he sets up a meeting a week later.

Lang and Raffi meet Chris and Tanner at Chris's house. Raffi, a short man with receding dark hair and a British accent, does most of the talking, frequently referring to his horse racing show and other reality TV series. Lang sees his role as conjuring scenes where the kids fight or are surprised in some way. Every example ends with: "And the kid goes, 'What the f?'"

Raffi envisions guest appearances by famous athletes, corporate sponsorships, multimillion-dollar revenue streams.

"This is not going to be a brainless, slapstick -- 'Yeah, Chris is a great character, and his wife is a good-looking woman.' The underlying tone is these challenges are for charity and a kid gets a scholarship," he says.

"This is going to take off like nothing you've ever seen," Lang says.

Chris raises an unexpected concern: If the show makes him more famous than he already is, if it takes away more of his privacy, it has to be worth it financially.

"My biggest concern is I don't like going everywhere and people knowing me," Chris says. "That's the one thing. I love the job I have. I do not like any part of the fame that is part of it."

Lang and Raffi don't quite know what to make of this. They insist the show would be lucrative, saying that if it gets picked up for a second year, Chris could easily earn millions.

It all sounds good to Chris, until Raffi says Chris will need to put up \$100,000 to get the pitch ready for networks and advertisers.

"I'm not going to put up money to do it if I'm going to be in it," Chris says. He wants to talk things over with his agent and his lawyer.

"You look at the 'Contender,' 'Deadliest Catch,' " Lang says. "They appeal to a narrow demographic, but a popular show like this? With cheerleaders? And a campground? You bring [the kids] into Dulles Airport. They see the big house. They're smiling. Then they see the tents with the flagpole that says 'Camp Cooley,' and it's like, 'What the f?' "

Chris tells the two men he'll get back to them on Monday. (A few weeks later, he will agree to do the show.) After they leave, Chris turns to Tanner, grinning, and says, "Your friend said some stupid stuff!"

Even so, his interest is piqued. He likes the idea of having a show focus more on the kids than on him and Christy. And if it's done right and gets picked up by a big enough network, it could make Chris something he isn't right now -- a household name. He looks over at his brother, who is mulling the same idea.

"It would raise your fan base to another level," Tanner says. "A whole new level."

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If you ask Tanner whether he ever gets tired of being known as Chris Cooley's brother, he will say that he doesn't think of himself that way. "I don't think that I'm famous," he says. "I'm not trying to be famous. I'm trying to help Chris be more famous." He could see growing weary of the role he has carved out for himself if he were still doing this 10 years from now. Except that he won't be: He'll be a physician. Everything he's doing now is just killing time until he starts med school.

Now, he just has to get accepted somewhere.

One day in early November, Tanner decides to accompany Chris to pick up a new Porsche at Easterns in Leesburg. He wants to film it for the blog, but he scraps those plans when he gets a call from an academic adviser at Howard University Hospital. Lang called the adviser to see if he could help Tanner with his application to medical school. The adviser wants Tanner to come in to talk.

Tanner arrives in the waiting room at the hospital a half-hour early, dressed in a pressed white shirt with missing cufflinks and a pair of dress pants. His hair is wet, his face freshly shaven. While sitting on a chair, he runs through his repertoire of nervous ticks. He bounces his knees, cracks his knuckles and chews on a finger or two.

The source of his anxiety is in his hands: a manila folder with two sheets of paper stapled together. It is a copy of his application essay. As personal essays go, it's a fairly routine explanation of why he wants to become a doctor. It has no mention of Chris or the C-list celebrity life Tanner leads, the independent horror movie he and Chris are producing, or the blogs he is working on for Redskins defensive end Brian Orakpo, New York Ranger

Donald Brashear and Mike Green. He left all that out because he didn't want to appear as if he was too busy for school. Instead, he focused on his encounters with doctors and surgeons and experiences with his sports injuries, and he wrote about his mother's recent bout with breast cancer and how it helped inspire him to pursue a career in medicine.

The meeting takes place in a windowless office with a desk and a computer. It stretches into two hours. Tanner says afterward that it was intense. He steps outside for air and starts walking to Ben's Chili Bowl to get a half-smoke and fries.

In the coming days, he will rewrite his essay. His reasons for wanting to become a physician? Medical school application boilerplate, apparently. To get in, the adviser told Tanner, he needs to stand out. And to emphasize what makes him different from everyone else: He's Chris Cooley's brother.

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