

HIGH SCHOOL

Sports runs deep in Horseheads High family: How they balance pandemic and training

Longtime Blue Raiders coach Andy Scott and his children stay optimistic as pandemic keeps them sidelined.

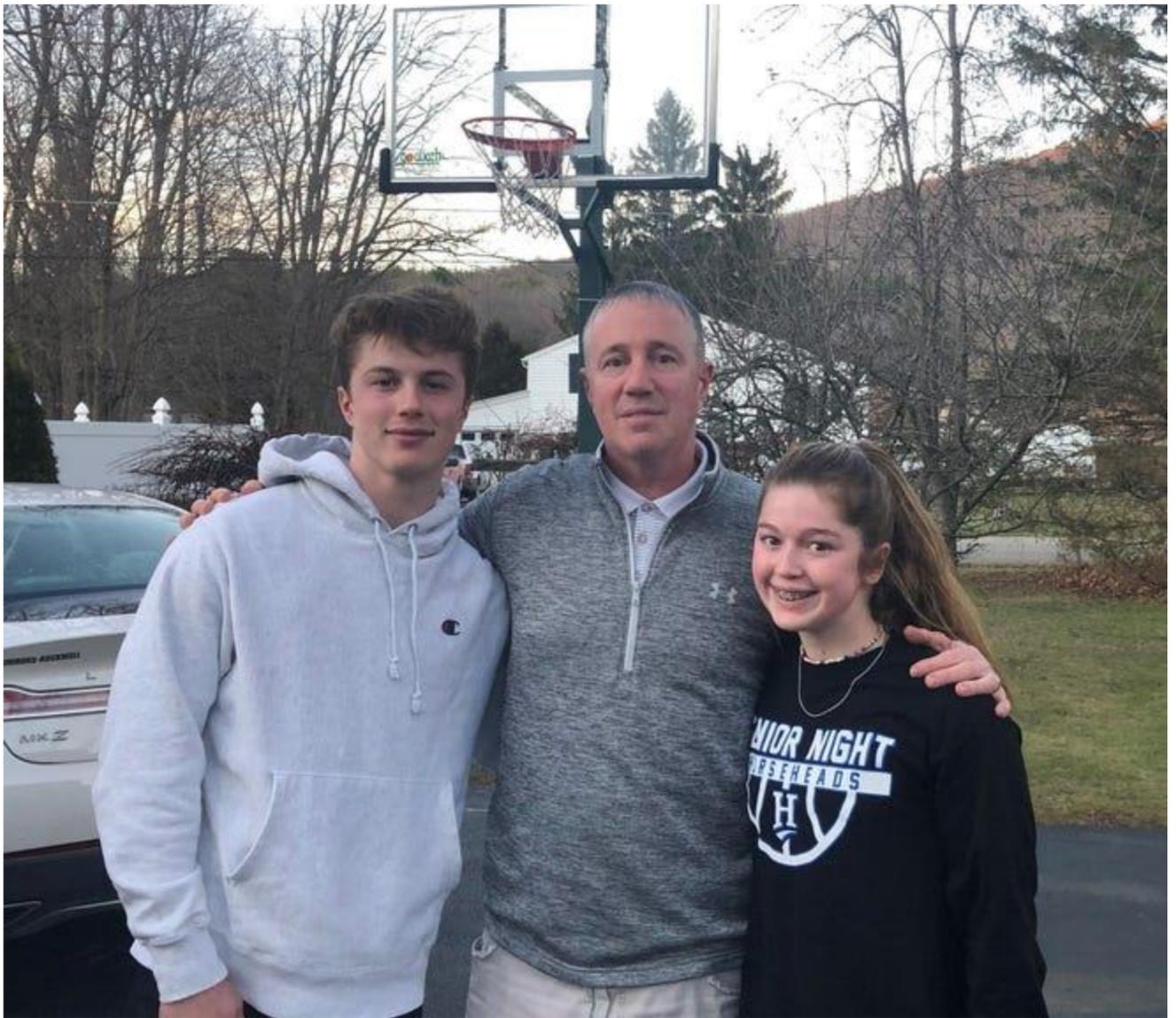
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Andy Scott can be found on the couch of his West Elmira home watching "Jeopardy" most evenings. Carly Scott's travel bag is spending a lot of time on her bedroom floor going nowhere. Ryan Scott sometimes has to dig deep to find motivation for his workouts.

Athletics are a way of life for the Scotts, who have joined hundreds of families across the Southern Tier in hoping for a return to the high school sports that had been a significant source of happiness and unity until the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March.

Before last week they eyed Jan. 4 for a return to basketball. The New York State Public High School Athletic Association has delayed the Scotts' winter sport of choice indefinitely as it waits on the state Department of Health to OK basketball and other sports considered high risk.



Coach Andy Scott, 49, who has guided the Horseheads girls basketball team to 325 wins and nine Section 4 titles in 21 seasons, misses coaching, and his players, a great deal.

Dad Andy Scott is overcome with emotion when asked about what his children are missing out on because of COVID-19.

"I know it's selfish because I know there's bigger concerns out there in the world," he said. "But it's really selfish from my standpoint because we've been doing this our whole lives. My family is the most important

thing in my life and the fact these kids don't have the opportunity to experience the things that come with high school, it's pretty frustrating."

As sports families go, the Scotts are as busy as they come.

Andy is an assistant varsity football coach and the JV baseball coach at Horseheads in addition to his basketball responsibilities. Ryan, a senior, plays football, baseball and basketball. Carly, a junior, is a sharpshooting basketball player who also competes in softball. Leah, the youngest in the family at 13, is an eighth-grader who plays AAU basketball and is set to follow in her older siblings' footsteps at Horseheads High.

Ryan, 18, and Carly, 16, were among the last Section 4 athletes to compete, having helped their respective Blue Raiders basketball teams to sectional finals in March. They have not worn Horseheads royal blue and white in a scholastic practice or game since. Shortened winter seasons were followed by canceled spring seasons in New York state. Scheduled fall sports in Section 4 were shifted to a March 1 start next year, though football joins basketball in the state's high-risk category.

"It's been tough. It's tough going through each day," Ryan said.

"Previous years we'd be into the season right now with basketball, just finishing up football about a month ago. It was tough getting through those seasons."

The number of lost games and moments is impossible to count at this point.

"It's frustrating hearing basketball is going to start at this time and then hearing (Gov. Andrew Cuomo) change his mind and push it back," Carly said before the Jan. 4 date was nixed. "It's really sad because we are all looking forward to it."

Ryan was primed to quarterback the Blue Raiders this fall against rivals Elmira and Corning. In a non-COVID world, he would be getting ready to join his sister and their hoops teammates for the Josh Palmer Fund Elmira Holiday Inn Classic just after Christmas.

Carly couldn't help but think about the traditional season-opening trip to Oneonta for a tournament that never happened.

"It's just weird," she said. "Right now we'd be a few weeks into our basketball season and we didn't get any open gyms throughout the fall, which was really disappointing. We didn't get to build that bond that we would have in preseason and during the summer. ... We'd be getting prepped for the Christmas tournament coming up soon and it's sad to see that's not going to happen."

Susan Scott, Andy's wife, has been a regular presence at her family's sporting events over the years and is looking forward to the day she can be again.

"I would normally say sports are way too much, but I miss it so much," she said. "With all the coaching he does, he's gone a lot. And these guys are so busy, with Ryan playing three sports and Carly two, with all of the travel sports."

Taking advantage of opportunities



The Scott siblings have been more fortunate than many of their high school counterparts from Section 4.

Ryan competed in six travel baseball tournaments and three practices a week over the summer with Brian Jones' Seneca All-Stars. He has joined some Horseheads teammates (End Zone Mafia, they call themselves) in competing in flag football games against players from Vestal, Susquehanna Valley and Maine-Endwell this fall.

The girls participated in AAU basketball this summer and fall for Elmira Fusion after Carly's BNY Select team shut down for pandemic-related reasons. Carly and her Fusion teammates were playing hoops as late as October. She also played in softball tournaments this summer and fall with the Lady Rebels and Fury.

Andy Scott said it was good physically and mentally for his children to have the opportunities they did have this year. He points out there were no COVID cases from any of the summer and fall sports within the teams.

Restrictions in New York meant trips to Pennsylvania for tournaments. The family traveled as a unit to maintain social distancing, meals on the road came from either drive-through or delivery, and venues limited spectators as needed.

For basketball competition, there were four visits to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for Spooky Nook tournaments, where there were temperature checks and games spread out on multiple courts, with one spectator allowed per player.

"If we felt Pennsylvania wasn't safe, I'm not going to risk my family's life, so obviously we felt it was safe, so we did it," Andy said.

Experiences on those teams were highly valuable, but they're a different world than high school sports. Playing a homecoming game against a rival like Elmira or Corning in front of 3,000 fans is a rare and special opportunity.

"A few months ago, before quarantine started, preseason schedule came out for football and I'm already marking the calendar," Ryan said.

"Elmira date going on it and marked Corning. Those are big rivalries we want to win. We lost to both last year, but I think this year would have been a big turnaround."

Keeping hope alive for prep season



Because of a rise in COVID-19 cases in Chemung County this fall, Horseheads has spent much of the school year in remote learning. Even the limited open gyms that are available as close as Corning have been off the table at Horseheads and Chemung County neighbor Elmira.

"It's frustrating because you go 20 minutes down the road to Corning and you see that they're having open gyms and stuff," Carly said. "Us over here, we can't even go into the school right now. That is particularly frustrating, seeing that they get to be with each other and start to form those bonds and we can't even see each other because of school being shut down."

A recent decline in COVID numbers in the county and some looser testing restrictions for school districts have given reason to think high school students at Horseheads will be back in classrooms in the near future on at least a partial basis.

Ryan is optimistic he will get to play all three sports this academic year. In the meantime he is doing workouts for each because it's hard to gauge which will come first. With basketball on hold and football still not cleared in New York despite a March 1 target date, there's a possibility he won't compete for Horseheads again until baseball's scheduled start April 19.

Roughly a dozen instructors and coaches at the high school and travel levels have helped the Scott children. For instance, Ryan has sent videos of his swing to Horseheads varsity baseball coach Jeff Limoncelli, who has provided weekly workout plans for his players. Blue Raiders football coach Kevin Hillman has put together quarterback drills for Ryan. BNY Select coach Rob Baxter, owner of BX Player Development Group in Binghamton, has provided weight-training workouts for Carly.

Mark Romanski, who coaches Leah in modified basketball, surprised the players in May, showing up at homes to hand out certificates, give them motivational quotes and provide an overall boost to their spirits.

The athletes have in turn responded by completing the workouts, easier said than done when you don't know when your next game will take place.

Keeping score at home

There is a basketball hoop in the Scott driveway and a recently purchased set of weights is available in the basement.

More significant is having workout partners and a coach at the ready. Andy Scott, an English teacher at Horseheads Middle School, will come home from work to find his kids helping each other, stopwatch in hand for one as the other works out while music blares away.

"It's sort of nice they've been working together and we've got a third one in there who likes to jump in when she feels like it," Andy said.

Andy still has a solid jump shot but admits he's no longer able to effectively square off with Ryan and Carly in one-on-one competition. He plays up on Carly so she doesn't rain jumpers down and tries to pick his poison against Ryan, who is too quick for his dad to guard up close.

"I play up on him and he blows by me," Andy said. "It's brutal. It's sort of embarrassing, so I just have to play dirty now."

Sibling competition is productively fierce. Ryan's ballhandling and ability to get to the hoop have helped Carly gain on the defensive end. Ryan tries to keep pace with his sister's 3-point shooting and said workouts with her have helped make him a better player. Each will take 100 to 200 midrange shots and another 100 to 200 from 3-point range as a daily champion is determined.

"We count out loud so no one can cheat," said Carly, whose 82 3-pointers last season shattered the program record.

Having a dad who is a coach has been particularly beneficial in this scenario.

"He's experienced in all the sports we play," Carly said. "It's just really great to have him here to help us through it and to keep us positive and better for when we do get to go back."

A recent payoff came for Johnson, who has committed to play collegiately at Division III Nazareth College in the Rochester area.



Andy returns home at 3:30 each afternoon, heads to the basement for a workout, then sits on the couch for much of the rest of the evening. He also has started taking walks, something he said he hadn't done in 20 years.

For someone who is used to either coaching or watching his kids compete for all but two weeks of the year, this is uncharted territory within uncharted territory.

"I look forward to 'Jeopardy' now," Andy said. "I don't even know what to do. It's obnoxious."

There are positives. The Scotts are having dinners together on a regular basis and they added another member to the family. Ollie is a 1-year-old

pit-bull mix who was adopted from the Animal Care Sanctuary in East Smithfield, Pennsylvania, in May.

Victories have come outside of sports. Susan Scott, a Spanish teacher, was named National Honor Society Teacher of the Year for 2020 at Horseheads. Ryan Scott was recently selected as Homecoming King and crowned at a small ceremony at the house.

Andy and Susan have been able to travel with Ryan for college visits, meeting some college baseball coaches along the way.

"Seeing my teammates every day, you kind of create a bond with them that you never forget," Ryan said. "They become your best friends. With the football team, I've got 30 or 40 brothers on my team. I love them. Basketball, it's a great time. You get to see everybody every day. Same with baseball. I definitely miss that, bonding with them and making memories."

Said Carly: "It just stinks not being able to see everybody every day after school and going to practices and having those team dinners with each other and making those really strong friendships that last a really long time."

Uncertainty remains

Andy is optimistic for some sort of basketball and football seasons, even with concerns people have about the impact holiday gatherings will have on COVID numbers. Carly said she will be grateful for whatever sports come her way her junior year.

"We'll just appreciate it and not take it for granted," she said.

Andy said he is confident his basketball players they will be prepared when it's time to play and said it's possible a scenario could exist where his team has six days of practices before starting games.

His hope is whatever window exists for basketball and other sports to be played will be opened for student-athletes across Section 4 rather than slammed shut.

"I know there's bigger problems. I'm not downplaying that people are in hospitals and people are losing jobs because I understand that, but from a high school teacher's perspective and a coach's perspective, it's a little difficult," Andy said.

"But we're resilient and we're ready. We're battle tested now. If we can handle this, we can handle anything. A last-second shot, we'll take it. ... Locker-room talks we always talk about there could be no tomorrow. You never know, you could get injured or something could happen. You'd never imagine a pandemic like this because it literally punched us in the mouth and it hurt us, but we're still standing."

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