

## BASKETBALL

2022-23 REWIND / UNTOLD STORIES FROM THE PAST YEAR: PART 2

# FRIEND IN KNEE-D

## Royall's Brady Uppena draws ACL recovery inspiration from Wisconsin's Josh Gasser

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Like any Wisconsin Badgers fan, the men's basketball teams that made it to back-to-back Final Fours in 2014 and 2015 hold a special place in Brady Uppena's heart.

Naturally, Brady greatly admired Frank Kaminsky and Sam Dekker — the top stars from those prolific teams — but his favorite player from that era of Badgers basketball was a guy who wasn't as heralded nationally and someone who Brady modeled some of his own game after: Josh Gasser.

Brady comes from an Uppena family that's rich in basketball tradition. Brady's grandpa, Dennis Uppena, spent 29 years as head coach at Cassville and won three state championships during a Hall of Fame career. All four of his sons played under him for the Comets and have since gone on to pursue their own high school coaching careers.

Brady's dad, Scott, is both the principal and head varsity boys' basketball coach at Royall High School. Each winter growing up, Brady would attend the high school state tournament at the Kohl Center with his dad and younger brother Carter, dreaming of some day playing on that same floor at state while representing the Royall Panthers.

Basketball is in Brady's blood, and he's had no shortage of individuals to look to for inspiration throughout his career. But few people served as bigger inspirations in helping him mold his game than Gasser. Brady had the chance to attend a Wisconsin basketball practice during Gasser's time as a Badger, where Gasser's work ethic and competitive drive left a major impression on Brady.

During his time with Royall, Brady's playstyle mirrored Gasser's in many ways: someone willing to do anything and everything to help his team win, whether it be scoring, diving for loose balls, setting good screens, taking charges or playing tenacious defense.

Unfortunately for Brady, his parallels with Josh went one step further when Brady lost out on his junior season after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in September 2021.

Back in October 2012, just before the start of a 2012-13 season where he was to be Wisconsin's starting point guard, Gasser suffered a gruesome injury to his left knee, tearing his ACL while also damaging his medial collateral ligament (MCL), lateral collateral ligament (LCL), meniscus, tendon and dislocating part of his knee.

Brady's injury robbed him of the chance to share the court with Carter during the latter's freshman season. He was sidelined from the sport he loved, and the recovery was taxing on him both mentally and physically.

"Honestly, it was one of the worst things I ever had to go through," Brady said. "I wish it upon no one. There were hours that felt like days and minutes that felt like hours. It was brutal some days."

Seeing that his son was having a tough time dealing with his injury, Scott contacted Gasser explaining the situation and hoping he could reach out to Brady with some words of encouragement. Josh was happy to oblige, sending a lengthy email to Brady in which he shared his experience and imparted advice that touched on everything from the importance of

Royall's Brady Uppena recovered from an ACL tear, and led the Panthers to the 2023 WIAA Division 5 state semi-final in Madison. HSE photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media



**There's going to be days that are terrible and miserable, but you've got to push through and make sure you know what you're doing and what your goals are.**

— Josh Gasser, Former Wisconsin Men's Basketball player, in a e-mail to Brady Uppena

keeping your quad strength up during the rehab process to the value of approaching the recovery with a positive mindset.

When Brady first noticed the email during school, he was so overcome with shock and excitement that he asked to go use the bathroom so he could dart on down to Scott's office — where a Wisconsin State Journal profile story on Gasser has hung on the wall for years — to share the news with his dad.

Gasser's email was something of a guiding light for Brady throughout his recovery.

"He said 'Brady, I'm not going to lie to you. There's going to be days that are terrible and miserable, but you've got to push through and make sure you know what you're doing and what your goals are,'" Brady said. "I taped up the email in my locker and I'd always go read it on days I would struggle."

"(Gasser) was really inspirational to Brady through that process," Scott said.

Gasser's words of wisdom were borne out of his own challenging rehab process where, due to the extent and severity of his injury, he was on crutches for two months rather than just a few weeks and

needed to undergo a couple minor cleanup procedures on his knee.

"I never felt 100 percent confident that I was ever going to be able to come back, first of all, and, if I was able to come back, to be at the level that I wanted to be," Gasser said. "But you just keep working hard every single day, you do what's asked physically and, at the end of the day, the mental toll was far more difficult than anything physical."

Gasser noted that one of the things that helped him get through it all was the advice of others who previously experienced major knee injuries. Because of that, he's always willing to offer up what he knows to those like Brady in the hope that it will help even a little bit.

"There are going to be a lot of days physically where you're not going to feel right because you physically feel off, but the one thing you can control is your mental attitude," Gasser said of his advice to Brady. "Even if you're physically off one day or physically good one day, always having that mental positivity, always coming to work every single day, seeing the light at the end of the tunnel and just taking the mini victories was kind of

what got me through it because there were definitely some dark days."

Eventually, Brady was cleared to return to the basketball court in the summer of 2022. He now had just one high school season left to share with Carter and the rest of his teammates — something so important to him that he decided not to play football in the fall of his senior year to eliminate the risk of an injury that could jeopardize his basketball season.

All that hard work and the ups and downs of rehabbing paid off. Much like Gasser's return to the Badgers after his recovery to be part of those Final Four teams, Brady came back as strong as ever and helped accomplish his family's ultimate goal: securing a state tournament berth that allowed them to share the Kohl Center court together.

Just like those Final Four Wisconsin teams hold a special place in every Badgers fan's heart, the 2022-23 Royall boys' basketball team guaranteed itself a unique spot in program lore by becoming just the second Panther squad to reach state.

It's just one more parallel for Brady Uppena and Josh Gasser to share.

## EDITORIAL

## THROUGH MY LENS

## Welcome to Football St., USA

By NATE BEIER  
HSE Sports Editor



After a summer away from high school sports, we have reached the point where we're just a week away from our first competitions for the 2023-24 seasons.

Sure, there were basketball league nights or some extra club volleyball excursions. Some tried Legion baseball, some tried their local baseball options. Some of our local athletes made a point to hit the weight room, while others may have attended some camps in preparation for this coming school season. No matter how you slice it, we will expect to see the fruits of those labors starting next week with the onset of our first football games of the year.

Now, I get excited for the first week of games just as much (if not more) than the next guy, but each year it does get harder and harder to invest a lot of resources into our small school football teams. A diminishing number of players and change in attitude towards participation has helped the decline in the quality of squads our area has. It's sort of like the evolution of any small town main street. There was once a need for each town to have their own hardware store, their own little one screen theatre, a couple of banks and perhaps even an appliance outlet. As each town has withered away, however, those businesses have left, storefronts were vacated and what was once the thriving heartbeat of each community has turned into a collage of open and closed businesses, occupied and vacant buildings, well kept and crumbling structures. When a town or city can't even find a way to put its own city government building in its downtown, how can they expect others to make a home in that space?

There are solutions, I'm sure. I'm not a great business mind, but I'm a believer that if you want to do something, the correct mindset is more than half the battle in getting it done.

I think there are many parallels that you can draw between our downtown areas and high school football.

Where being a varsity football player was once a coveted role in the social construct of high school, now it's something rather mundane. In fact, the lines between varsity and junior varsity are so blurred today that it's hard to know which is which.

Where it was of benefit to be downtown with all the other local businesses, now it's better to be on the edge of town by yourself perhaps. It's probably even more cost effective to only have one central hub of commerce instead of local offices in each town. That means people will have to travel to obtain your goods or services.

For those that stay in the downtown, they have to deal with a different standard of customer or revenue because, despite being the local option, they have less resources to work with to attract new customers.

Yes, it's sort of eerie to see the direction of our local football teams mimicking our once proud main streets. It's something I hate seeing, but the lack of changes we make to try to stem the problems frustrate me even more.

In both cases, though, I think there needs to be a unified effort from the community to reinvigorate itself. What does it take to attract decent businesses to a disintegrating main street environment? What does it take to get more kids to invest 2-3 months in a sport in a way that doesn't look like they're just going through the motions?

If we want these things to stay, then what are we doing to keep them? If a community sits by idly and hopes for the best, then things will continue on the path they're on. If a community moves as one, they can make some significant changes. However, change takes time and change takes involvement by more than one motivated individual.

Again, I'm looking forward for this next football season. I think we have several local teams that will be eyeing the postseason for the first time in 5-7 years and that's good. Yet, if the goals are just to sneak into the playoffs, then maybe our teams have compromised their belief in higher success like our local establishments along the main drag of each town have done. If that's the case, then what are we really doing?



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