

After being diagnosed with lupus, E.C. Glass' Connor Reid-Perry is back on the field, attempting to overcome his trials

Ben Cates
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E.C. Glass striker Connor Reid-Perry dribbles the ball during a Region 4D semifinal game against Blacksburg at Randolph College last June. Kendall Warner PHOTOS, The News & Advance file

His entire body ached. In roughly two weeks' time, he lost 40 pounds. Energy levels depleted, he slept all the time.

It was August of 2021, and Connor Reid-Perry — a standout athlete at E.C. Glass once considered one of the most budding young soccer players in the area — lay at home, without a clue as to what was wrong.

Less than two months prior, he had taken part in a memorable game at Randolph College, where E.C. Glass and Blacksburg faced off with a trip to the Class 4 state tournament on the line. It was an overtime thriller, with Glass falling 3-2.

But there was reason to hope: the standout would return the following spring for his senior season, and the Hilltoppers' roster would be loaded once again.

But sometimes careers don't unfold the way they are intended. Sometimes, they are altered by circumstances beyond one's control. And sometimes, you have to take a detour, no matter how long and uncertain the alternate route becomes, to get back to the place you belong.

For the tall, burly senior from E.C. Glass, nothing is quite like soccer. He's been obsessed with it since the age of 10, when he started playing. His first time out, he scored two goals. And he just knew, even then, that yeah, this was the game for him.

So even now, when someone asks Reid-Perry about what else he's interested in, he might say "nothing really." Of course this may or may not be true, because most people have more than one thing they are passionate about, but his reply shows how much Reid-Perry cares about soccer. And just how zoned in he is when he's around the game.

As a freshman four years ago, he was heralded by his coach, Randy Turille, as the next big-time player for the midtown school. Reid-Perry possessed a quick first-step, was tall and lanky, and could send shots blazing through packs of players.

After a season on JV as a freshman, he was ready for the varsity ranks when the COVID-19 pandemic canceled the 2020 season.

As a junior last spring he served as a starting striker, played in all 12 games during the pandemic-shortened season and scored six goals (fourth-most on the team) and added four assists (fifth-most on the team).

His play helped lead Glass to a 9-3 record and a trip to the Region 4D semifinals. The Hilltoppers nearly knocked off heavyweight Blacksburg for a state berth, but the Bruins eked out the overtime victory. Before the extra period began, Turille huddled with his squad.

"Look guys, I know you're tired," he told them. "It's about guts right now. You've got to dig down and find another level."

A few weeks later, Reid-Perry would be facing a personal battle. And he'd have to dig deep again.

The pains began in June. By August they had become unbearable.

"The joints in my hands were hurting, and we just thought it was a thing," Reid-Perry recalled at Thursday's practice, as E.C. Glass made its final preparations for Friday's game against visiting Jefferson Forest. "We didn't really know what it was. But progressively, it turned from my hands to my shoulders, my hips, my knees, my ankles, and my whole body was hurting."

He stopped all activity. Slept "all day." And for about two weeks, he ran a fever of about 99 degrees. Blood work didn't reveal anything out of the ordinary. His weight was in a free fall; prior to getting sick, Reid-Perry weighed 200 pounds. Suddenly he was down to 160.

When Reid-Perry's temperature rose higher, his family sent for a paramedic, who suggested the rising senior enter the hospital, where he stayed roughly a week. Doctors diagnosed him with lupus, a long-term autoimmune disease that can affect many parts of the body, including joints, kidneys, blood cells, the skin, the heart and lungs.

He missed the whole first quarter of his senior year of school, and wasn't sure he'd ever play on the pitch again.

"When I got out of the hospital," Reid-Perry recalled, "it took me a while [to get acclimated] because the muscles in my legs just hadn't been used much. So walking for like 20 minutes would kill me."

Now, he's on several medications meant to fight against the disease, takes injections, undergoes blood work every month, and watches in particular his sodium intake.

But he's back on the field for the Hilltoppers and is hopeful the medications will cause the lupus to go into remission.

"**My breathing has been different**, definitely," Reid-Perry said. "But it's a lot better than it was say, in January." I played in January, and I could only play for maybe five minutes and then I'd have to rest. Now I can play a lot longer."

The former starter has a new role as a senior: he's usually the first man off the bench for the Hilltoppers. He also plays for Fredericksburg City United.

It's taken a lot of work to get to the stage he's currently at, where he can play a certain amount of minutes, rattle off shots and take part in conditioning drills. Glass currently plays a fast-paced, high-press game, led strikers Felix Lopez-Valentine and Aidan Palys. Coming off the bench, Reid-Perry gives opponents a different look.

"The kid can fire a ball from anywhere," Turille said, noting Reid-Perry usually enters about 18 or 20 minutes into a half and then plays the rest of the period. "If he gets a good look, he can smash it. And normally they're on track. He's become now the player where you play his feet instead of playing him in space. He's gotten bigger, thicker and taller and he doesn't have the same speed he had when he was younger. ... When the opportunity arises and you want to slow the game down, boom, he's the perfect person to do that."

Reid-Perry's battle with lupus has changed his style of play. He's still trying to get back into game shape, for instance.

"He's just a different player now," Turille said, noting Reid-Perry serves primarily as a distributor currently. "He asked me, and I said, 'I need you to pick up your work rate. Give me everything you've got and I'll pull you off when you get tired.'"

But if the chance to take a shot presents itself, he can always take it.

"I'll never tell him not to shoot it, because he is capable of putting one on a rope from 25 to 30 yards out," Turille explained.

When Reid-Perry first returned to the team, he took a shot. It felt weird. Didn't have much power behind it.

"But I just kept trying, and eventually I got back to where I am," he said. "... I was worried about not being able to score again. That was a worry. I was making plays and getting assists, I just really wanted to score."

He's done that a few times this season, scoring three goals and adding five assists. Turille said that as Reid-Perry gets more fit, he's also producing more as the regular-season comes to a close.

"I'm just happy," Reid-Perry said, "to be able to play again."

The swan song of Heritage's Alaysia Oakes

Ben Cates
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Heritage senior Alaysia Oakes sits in starting blocks at the school on Wednesday.
Ben Cates PHOTOS, The News & Advance

Heritage High School's 2022 valedictorian stood in front of a large crowd at Lynchburg's City Stadium on Sunday and talked about defeat.

She quoted Maya Angelou: "You may encounter defeats, but you must not be defeated."

The valedictorian knows a lot about winning. She's done that over and over again. But she's learned much from defeat, too.

The valedictorian is nearing the finish line. Alaysia Oakes will compete one more time as a Heritage Pioneer: at the VHSL's Class 3 state track championships, scheduled for Friday and Saturday at Liberty University and held in conjunction with the Class 4 meet.

She enters her high school swan song as one of the most decorated young athletes ever to hail from Lynchburg. She also enters with a renewed mindset: losses don't define her greatness; injuries can't replace her strength; moments of doubt and pain can't shake her resolve.

The leadup to this state meet is unlike any in her career. She only recently returned from a hip flexor injury in time to win four events at last week's Region 3C championships, so she hasn't had much time to prepare for this weekend. Still, she will attempt to repeat an incredible achievement from March, when she won five individual indoor state events.

Win all five events in which she's scheduled to complete this weekend — the long jump, triple jump and 100-, 200- and 400-meter dashes — and she'll leave high school with 24 state titles (25 if the Heritage girls win their fifth team title since 2019).

Oakes currently owns 15 individual titles and four team titles.

But this one is about more than just hardware. This meet is about proving she can come back.

After putting on a show at March's indoor state meet, Oakes appeared at the New Balance Indoor Nationals 10 days later. Three months earlier she had signed her national letter of intent to run at Stanford.

"All of that was an extreme high in my life," she said. "Everything was going well. All my hard work was paying off. Everything was good and jolly. And then I hit a wall."

It's the first day of June and we're sitting in a sweltering makeshift press box/storage room that overlooks the track where she's trained throughout high school. Soon she'll resume workouts for the day: dashes off the blocks, sprints on the runway at Heritage's jump pit, a few standing jumps into the sand.

"My body had just kind of had it," Oakes says. She's referring to that trip to New York for nationals. Training and performing had left her with nagging injuries. It was the worst moment of her senior year.

"I knew it was because I wasn't healthy, not because of my lack of ability," she says. "I wasn't nervous. I was actually pretty excited going in. But everything seemed to be going wrong. I lost my spikes. I lost the earrings that my mom had gotten me. Then I had to take a month off, which was a very long time for me. Then I came back and had a hip injury. So it was like everything was telling me to stop. It was super defeating."

It's difficult to accept failure, especially for someone who sets such lofty goals. What would people in her orbit think? Would they judge her? Would her future college coach question her strength?

Maybe that's why that Maya Angelou quote means so much to this 18-year-old track star, for whom the sky is the limit. Doubting is natural. So is being worn out. Defeat is, too. But rather than accept defeat, she came to a powerful realization.

"I had to get out of how everyone else was perceiving me," she says with determined eyes, "and realize that I run for myself. I jump for myself. I know what I went through to get back. So that was a super hard moment for me. But I just kept telling myself to not be defeated, this doesn't define me. ... I know I'm gonna get back healthy. And here I am."

So at graduation, the valedictorian spoke from her heart.

"I talked about how our high school experience has been a roller coaster for us, and some of the things that happened at Heritage and how we kept pushing through those and excelled anyway," Oakes says. "I thought it was a very diverse class, a very determined class."

Determination will be on display one more time this weekend. But Oakes hasn't thought too much about this being her final go-around.

"I don't know why," she said, "if it's because I'm a vet now and I know what it's like? I'm also thinking about the next level, too ... not really thinking about this as my last. Not yet, anyway. But I am excited."

In addition to winning the dashes, she hopes to hit 20 feet in the long jump, a longtime goal. At the indoor championships in March, she hit 19-feet, 10 inches. And she wants to pull off a 40-foot mark in the triple jump, which she hasn't surpassed since The Virginia Showcase in January.

"I haven't jumped too much this season, but I think that's very doable," she said.

Then it's on to outdoor nationals and training for her college career. Those injuries that sidelined her this spring, they may be a blessing in disguise.

"I think a late start to my season should have me peaking perfectly in line with nationals," she said, "so I'm hoping to come out with a win at nationals and place higher than I've ever placed. But the main goal is getting better and doing my best."

We will not witness the likes of Alaysia Oakes inside these city limits for years, maybe decades. She has been described as the greatest athlete to ever walk the hallways of Heritage High. And although this shouldn't affect her legacy, it's worth pointing out that her medal count would be higher if the 2020 outdoor season hadn't been canceled by the pandemic.

But that is the past. And here is the present: an accomplished athlete prepares for her final sendoff, ready to go out with a bang, determined to prove herself once more on the stage where she's excelled time and time again.

"Sometimes it's hard to applaud yourself for things, especially when you know you can always do better," Oakes said. "But I just say that I'm really proud of myself, how I pushed through, especially in the classroom and on the track. That was extremely hard and took a lot of time. ... I've had good experiences, some disappointing ones, and overall I'm grateful for them all."

Pitcher Alex Caruso has become 'a gladiator' on gridiron for young Appomattox team learning to lean on each other

Ben Cates
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Appomattox tight end Alex Caruso breaks through a tackle during a Region 2C quarterfinal game against Allegheny at Appomattox's Bragg Stadium on Nov. 10. Paige Dinger, The News & Advance

APPOMATTOX — Alex Caruso was an 11-year-old kid when the football team here went on an incredible playoff run that resulted in the program's first state title. He took in the sights and sounds and, even though he didn't understand much about the game, dreamed of one day being like the battle-scarred teenagers on the gridiron.

What the kid likely also didn't understand was just how much the teenagers back then needed each other. How when they locked arms prior to kickoff, they did so in solidarity. How when they encouraged each other in postgame huddles, they spoke with a tremendous weight on their shoulders, buoyed by faith in a higher power.

It was 2015, and the Raiders were shocking opponents on a weekly basis while also learning to assist a community shaken to its foundation by a months-long series of tragedies, including the deaths of several high school students.

Now Caruso, 18, is a standout on the 2022 team, and an unlikely one at that. And now this group of teenagers is leaning on one another through difficult times, too, learning that faith and unity can not only bolster the team during another improbable playoff run, but also become building blocks for the future as they hurdle toward adulthood.

On a sunny afternoon last June, Caruso celebrated in a dogpile near the pitchers mound at Salem Memorial Ballpark. His Raiders had just won the Class 2 state baseball championship, the first team to ever accomplish that feat in the program's lengthy history. And Caruso had been one of the stars, pitching a complete game in a 4-2 victory over John Battle.

It was a magical time for the talented right-hander. Appomattox finished the season with a 23-1 record, Caruso was named Class 2 player of the year by the Virginia High School League after going 9-0 with a 1.76 ERA on the season and hitting a white-hot .416, and the then-junior celebrated the title with his father and coach, Joe.

"I've wanted that since I started playing baseball," Alex said of winning the state title with Joe. "That's always been the goal."

Two days later, on a Monday, weights clanged away at the school. Caruso was already getting into shape for football.

He didn't grow up playing the sport. Prior to his junior year, when he joined the varsity squad, Caruso had only participated in one season of football, and that was when he was a little kid.

So when Caruso showed up last year as an inexperienced junior, coach Doug Smith may have been a little skeptical. Whatever concerns he had didn't last long, though. Caruso listened, asked questions, studied the game and the Raiders' schemes, and earned a starting spot.

As a senior, he's developed into one of the Raiders best skill players, a 6-foot-1, 205-pound tight end who can move out to receiver, a reliable outside linebacker, a guy who also makes appearances on special teams.

His Raiders (9-3) are in the middle of another playoff run and will travel to Glenvar on Friday for the 7 p.m. Region 2C championship game. They're shooting for their sixth state title in eight seasons. But this playoff run is an unlikely one, because Appomattox lacks the experience some other recent teams here have displayed. It's a young group comprised of many players who haven't gone through steady training at the youth level. As a result, Smith and his coaching staff are playing catch-up, urging players to buy into the system.

"Such a young and inexperienced group," Smith said Wednesday afternoon, as he stood on the field at Bragg Stadium after practice concluded. "I know that sounds weird because we're getting ready to play our 13th game, but it's the truth. We're still getting used to communicating, recognizing formations and what those concepts are, where we had guys in the past who knew those concepts.

"So it's all of us being on the same page, coaches and players. It's been tough. We've been very fortunate to have some high football IQ kids [in the past] and these guys are getting there. We're still working on it."

It's rare for upperclassmen here to earn significant playing time if they lack experience.

"We've had a couple do that," Smith said, "and they've gotten playing time, maybe play some special teams, but we never could count on them."

Caruso has succeeded because of his athleticism and willingness to learn at all costs.

"When we call plays, I know he knows what he's doing," Smith explained. "That's what's so weird. If he doesn't know, he stands in front of you and looks you in the eye and he asks and you to answer him, and he's got it. He doesn't shy away from not knowing.

"And he doesn't come off the field. To play both ways and he's on extra points, kickoff, kickoff return. He's a gladiator out there. It's just weird. To do baseball all year long and then come out here? We have all our offseason work and he doesn't get any of that. So I'm just thankful for him."

His days often begin early. Caruso leads the school's chapter of Fellowship of Christian Athletes, which has proven popular among football players here for years. A receiver who graduated last spring, Collin Slagle, previously led the FCA group and asked Caruso to take it over this school year. Caruso believes the group is essential to the football team's success. Faith has been a constant theme in the program since Smith was hired prior to the 2012 season.

"We couldn't do anything without our father in heaven," Caruso said. "None of this would be possible without him."

Smith couldn't be happier with Caruso's leadership, and with the fact that younger players are poised to lead FCA once Caruso graduates next spring.

"I've always prayed for that," the coach said, "because I know one day I won't be here, and I'm thinking I hope they can carry it on. Because it's huge. ... With Alex, for a kid whose got baseball and football and then he's got classes, to say, 'I'll meet kids up here at 7:15 in the morning for FCA,' to lead it and not just show up and sit back and listen, but to lead it, that means he took hours to prepare for what he's about to do. That's why I say he's exceptional."

Caruso's leadership role is important, in part because these players need each other and the encouragement that comes with belief. That need all of that, especially right now.

The tragedies that occurred in 2015 were followed by other unfortunate developments. An EF-3 tornado ripped through the county the following winter. Players dealt with personal issues over the years, knowing Smith was standing by to help. And in the fall of 2020, Smith was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, for which he likely will always undergo treatments. He missed coaching from the sideline during an abbreviated COVID-altered campaign in the spring of 2021, but coached virtually and handed off in-person duties to defensive coordinator Stephen Castello. The Raiders won their fifth, and most recent, championship that spring.

This season also has been marked by struggles. A senior lineman has been in an ICU unit in Roanoke and is headed home soon, Smith said, although the player is likely diabetic.

Another player, freshman Jahmil Scott, is dealing with the death of his mother, Argenlina Scott. Teammates have rallied around Jahmil, who goes by the nickname JJ. Argenlina died Nov. 16. She was 57.

"These kids are learning to deal with death now," Smith said. "JJ, he really thought his mom was gonna make it, and then all of the sudden she was gone, just like that. And that's a young kid, a ninth grader."

Two days after his mother's death, JJ suited up as the Raiders won at top-seeded Radford, the team's signature playoff victory so far. JJ stood in front of the team after the game and cried. He told players and coaches how much he appreciated their support, and then added this: "I just want to thank you guys for all the hugs you gave me."

"That's what killed me," Smith said. "It was big for him, just being hugged by his teammates. That was huge for him. He's a special guy. He wants to do his best for everybody out here."

It was a moment of mourning amid the happiness of victory, and it helped the closely-knit group bond even more.

"These guys are grouping together, praying about it, and you just know they're trusting in God through all these bad things," Smith said. "When bad things happen, they might say 'Why, God? Why, God?' Well, God is with us, and that's what we get to tell them."

The season is winding to a close. Should the Raiders win this week, they'll head into the state semifinals the following Saturday and possibly to the state title game on Dec. 10. Right now, no one here wants the run to end. Appomattox will try to defeat Glenvar, a playoff rival, for the sixth time in as many years on Friday.

"Sound, as usual," Smith said of the Salem-based Highlanders. "One of the best coached teams we ever go against. Nasty and mean and strong up front. Great receivers and great routes and always a good quarterback. And if they have to run it, they've got some wiggle. They've got backs that can shake a little. They're just tough. And they play us harder than just about anybody. Last year it went down to the wire. I don't expect anything different."

The team heads into the game well fed. This week, volunteers joined to provide players with Thanksgiving meals, to be eaten at school and taken home. It's become a fall staple at the school, as volunteers routinely supply the team's needs. Usually, Smith only has to make one phone call; volunteers organize to do the rest.

"People have really stepped up to help these kids," Smith said.

Caruso will return to the baseball team after the season ends. The Raiders already have started working out together one day a week. Most of the talent from last year's team has returned, so Appomattox will have a chance to repeat as state champs. But first, Caruso has unfinished business with the football team. When he began working out two days after winning it all in baseball, he did so with a football goal.

"I knew that once we won the state championship, the next one is the most important," he said. "So that's where we want to get to."

He thought back this week to attending football games as a kid. It's special, he noted, being part of such a storied program.

"Coach Smith and Coach Castello — just two great people, great program, great culture they have here, and you see that and you're like, 'I want to be a part of that,'" Caruso said. "Ever since they started winning in 2015, you see the culture and you want to be a part of it."

Over the years, many youngsters here have felt the same way, dreamed the same dreams, hoped to one day become a Raider. And every year, it seems, the team rallies around each other to overcome some sort of hardship, whether it be of the personal kind or one that affects the entire school.

Smith talks about the resilience of his players. About the struggles they sometimes endure. About how he hopes lessons they can use as adults are being instilled now. Then he pauses.

"I don't know where we'd be without faith," he continues. "We go through problems, and God knows we're going through storms. And he's teaching us through all of them. We're gonna learn through the storms."