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FEBRUARY, 2019

FREE



## Obstacles to success? **NO PROBLEM**

for Muskegon Heights' Da'Mari Scott,  
who battled his way into the NFL

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*Veteran Whitehall basketball coach Nate Aardema battles an unexplained vocal cord problem*

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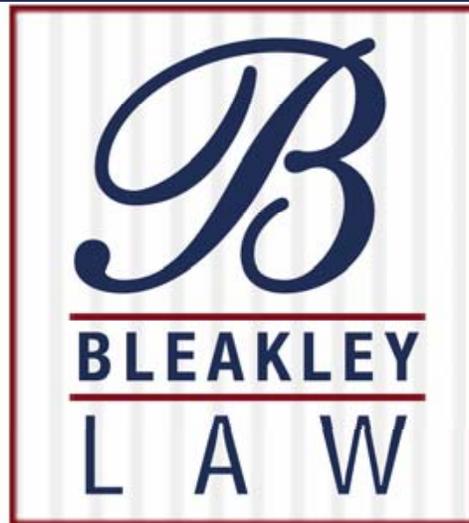
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*On the cover: Muskegon Heights native Da'Mari Scott in action last season for the Buffalo Bills.  
Photo/Joe Croom*



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# Obstacles to success?

# NO PROBLEM

By Mitchell Boatman  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Da'Mari Scott's road to the National Football League has been anything but typical or smooth.

The Muskegon Heights product moved across the country to attend a prestigious high school, but struggled academically. He earned scholarships on the field, but lost them in the classroom.

Scott left his college team at Fresno State after two years, returned to the college after a personal tragedy, and was suspended following his junior season. He went unpicked in the 2018 NFL draft after a strong senior season.

The wide receiver signed a three-year deal with the Cleveland Browns as an undrafted free agent, but was cut from the roster in the preseason. Scott then signed on to the Browns practice squad, got promoted to the active roster last October, but was cut again late in the season.

Scott finally signed with the Buffalo Bills practice squad on Dec. 5 and was promoted to the active roster on Dec. 8. He played in the final three games of the regular season, logging snaps on offense and special teams in wins over the Detroit Lions and Miami Dolphins, and a loss to the eventual Super Bowl champion New England Patriots.

There were plenty of moments when it would have been easy for Scott to call it quits, to say the dream was too hard to see through. But that's not who he is. Each new bump in the road provided Scott with a chance to do something he loves to do - prove himself.

"I've got another chance to prove that I belong," Scott told Local Sports Journal. "I knew I would get an opportunity. I was just trying to control what I could control."



University of Southern California wide receiver Ronald Johnson.

Scott went to visit them in California and found an opportunity too good to pass up: A chance to enroll at the prestigious Cathedral High School in Los Angeles, where he could showcase his football talents to a wide audience of college scouts.

"One day I went out to visit my sister and (Johnson)," Scott



**Muskegon Heights native Da'Mari Scott kept running into serious problems on the road to the NFL, but still managed to break into the league.**

said. "The coaches saw me and told me if I came to California that I could get a college scholarship. I went back home and told my mom I wanted to go to California."

Moving across the country as a teenager without a parent isn't an easy call to make, but it was a chance Scott couldn't let slip away.

"It was a hard decision," he said. "I went by myself at first. But I was going to get a scholarship. I was working for it, all I needed was an opportunity, and I felt like me going out there would be a better opportunity for somebody to see me."

Scott's mother, Donna Covington, also ended up making the move to California during Scott's high school career in LA.

"About a year and a half later, she ended up moving," he said. "She cleaned out the crib, sold everything and moved too. By the end of my junior year she ended up being out there."

The move to California allowed Scott to show off his skills on the football field - but Cathedral sets its standards high in the classroom, as well.

Scott struggled academically, and the Division I college offers he was hoping for started to disappear. Teams recognized his talents, but couldn't count on Scott to meet the academic standards necessary to play in college.

"The school when I got there was kind of harder for me, with it being a private school," he said. "The only thing that kept me driving was that I came all the way to California, there's no way that I'm going to come out here and not have the grades. I just had to lock in."

Scott had to get all A's his senior year at Cathedral, bring up his ACT score, and then go to additional summer classes. Only one college - Fresno State - was willing to bet he would pull it off, and

he ended up signing a national letter of intent to attend the school.

"When I signed, I still didn't have all my stuff together," he said. "But Fresno believed in me and let me do it. I locked in and did it."

"I told myself, 'I'm not going to come to

California to be a JUCO (junior college) product. I could've stayed in Michigan for that.'"

Scott was able to go through the school year with all A's, and achieved the ACT score he needed. But the work wasn't done. Scott then learned he had to ace two more classes in summer school.

"I had to go to summer school and get two more 'A's, then I was



fine to go," he said. "I missed summer workouts going into college. I barely got it done, it was a relief. I went to camp late, but ended up playing my freshman year."

## Ups and downs at Fresno State

The academic gauntlet Scott had to run during his senior year at Cathedral was only the beginning, although his college career got off to a strong start.

The 2013 Fresno State team went 10-1 in the regular season, won the Mountain West Conference title game, then lost to USC in the Las Vegas Bowl.

Scott had a limited role on the team, catching two passes and returning 20 kickoffs. But he did get the experience of playing with future NFL stars Derek Carr (quarterback, Oakland Raiders) and Davante Adams (wide receiver, Green Bay Packers).

"It's just crazy," Scott said of playing with Carr and Adams in college. "I didn't know how good Derek was. When I got there, he was already a true professional. He was a professional then. And I've got nothing but respect (for Adams), he's just got it."

The success of the first season didn't last, however. Carr and Adams went to the NFL following the 2013 season and the Bulldogs struggled in 2014, going 6-8. Scott hauled in eight catches for 214 yards and a touchdown, but lost his starting spot early in the year.

"I ended up getting pulled from being a starter in the early weeks, like week three," he said. "My sophomore year was going pretty bad. Things weren't going well with football or back home."

Scott's mother had moved back to Michigan, since he was in college and there wasn't a reason for her to stay. After the season, Scott decided to move back home to be with her.

"I decided that I wanted to leave and go back closer to my mom," he said.

Unfortunately, she passed away just weeks after he moved back.

The tragedy put Scott at another crossroads. Having just left his team and losing his biggest supporter, it would have been easy to give up. But again, Scott battled through the hard times.

"I knew I had to get it done, because she knew I could do it," he said. "She believed in me. That's the only reason she moved (to California). I decided I had to do it for her."

Scott eventually returned to Fresno State in time for the next season. His teammates voted to make Scott a redshirt - and force him to sit out a season - as a penalty for leaving the program. But his talent was too hard to ignore,

and the coaches let him play anyway.

"I jumped right into workouts," Scott said. "I started with threes (third string) in training camp, but after a week and a half I was a one (first string). But in my mind I was like 'I'm supposed to redshirt, so I don't know what's going on.'"

"I just kept going hard and Coach (Tim DeRuyter) sat me down the week after the first game and said 'I know you're supposed to redshirt, but I want you to play!' They let me play the second game and the rest of that season."



Scott in action at Fresno State.



Playing for Cathedral High School in L.A.

Scott registered 24 receptions for 364 yards and three scores in 2015 and seemed primed for a huge senior season in 2016.

But then came another bump in the road. Scott was declared academically ineligible for the 2016 season by the NCAA.

"I go through camp and before the first game I find out I'm ineligible," he said. "From my sophomore year when I missed three or four weeks of school from being with my mom, I ended up failing a class."

The ruling left Scott unable to play in 2016. But instead of letting the ban get him down, he worked harder than ever, both in the classroom and in practice.

"I was on the scout team the whole year, I was practicing like it was a game," he said. "At the end of the season I ended up being the scout team player of the year. I won scout team player of the week basically every week."

The Bulldogs went 1-11 during the year Scott sat out, and Coach DeRuyter was fired during the campaign.

With Scott back in the fold for the 2017 season, Fresno State made a huge leap forward. The Bulldogs went 10-4 and advanced to the conference title game for the first time since Scott's freshman year, but lost.

"It was good, I wish we had won it, though," Scott said. "I wanted to win the ring because the ring I won with Derek (Carr in 2013), I was just on kick return. I feel like it wasn't my ring. I contributed to it, but that was his ring, I wanted one for me. We were successful though, so I was happy with that."

Scott put up career numbers that year, grabbing 57 catches for 556 yards and one TD. The receptions and yards his senior season were more than his first three years combined.

## Next stop: NFL

After the strong senior year, Scott began to generate buzz heading into the NFL draft. But he was projected as a potential late round pick, if he was going to be selected at all.

"I talked to a lot of teams (before the draft)," he said. "I knew I was a late round to undrafted guy, but everyone wants to get drafted."

Scott did receive phone calls from teams during Day 2 (Rounds 2 and 3) and Day 3 (Rounds 4-7) of the draft, but saw 256 players chosen without hearing his name called.

"On draft day, Day 2, Hue Jackson (then head coach for the Cleveland Browns) called me," Scott said. "He said they liked me. The next day he called me again around the sixth round saying they liked me."

Even though the Browns didn't use a pick on Scott, they extended him a contract offer as an undrafted free agent. The deal was for three years and \$1.71 million. Scott spoke with other teams, but went with Cleveland for his first NFL destination.

"Basically, I felt they had a better plan for me and had the most interest," he said. "So I felt safer going with them."

That feeling of safety didn't last, because Scott was cut at the end of the preseason. He signed on to the Cleveland practice squad after his release and was eventually promoted to the active roster in October.

Scott didn't see any game action in Cleveland, and was waived again in early December. Just days later though, he got another chance.

The Buffalo Bills signed Scott to their practice squad on Dec. 5 and elevated him to the active roster on Dec. 8.



Scott as a Muskegon Heights freshman.

"In Week 13 I got activated in Buffalo and was active the rest of the season," he said. "I played in the last three games, 41 snaps. It was special teams mostly, I got a couple plays on offense."

Scott's run was limited in the 2018 season, but he has big plans for next year.

"It was good to get some experience," he said. "They went to the playoffs the year before, but I feel like we can do it big with (quarterback and fellow 2018 rookie) Josh Allen."

While Scott is now an NFL player in his own right, he did admit to being star-struck once after a game last season.

"I met Tom for a few seconds after a game," Scott said, referring to six-time Super Bowl champion and Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. "It happened so quick. I was walking across the field and you know how the quarterbacks usually meet. Josh Allen was behind me, so I crossed paths with (Brady).

"I was star-struck a little bit, but not until after. Like, man that was Tom - I just shook hands with Tom."

Scott is under contract with Buffalo for the next two seasons, and is hoping he just gets the chance to do what he's done time and time again - prove he belongs.

"I feel good," Scott said. "I'm just training every day, just trying to get better. That's really it. I like where we're headed. We've got a good team and I think we'll be better next year."



Scott taking the field prior to a Buffalo Bills home game last season. Photo/Joe Croom

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# WHITEHALL'S NATE AARDEMA:

## *The head coach who is suddenly struggling to*

# COMMUNICATE

By Ben Velderman  
LocalSportsJournal.com

The 2018-19 season marks Nate Aardema's tenth as head coach of Whitehall's varsity boys basketball team.

And it's been his most challenging season so far.

Part of that has to do with his young team's performance. After a second place finish in the West Michigan Conference last season, and back-to-back league titles before



**Whitehall's Terrell Harris dribbles during a recent game. The Vikings, with a very young roster, are struggling through their worst season in several years. Photo/Leo Valdez**

that, the Vikings have scuffled to a 5-7 record as of this writing, and stood at fourth place in the conference.

But Aardema's current challenges go well beyond his team's win-loss record.

Since last October, Aardema has been

dealing with a barely functioning left vocal cord that has left him with just 20 percent of his normal speaking voice. He describes his new voice as "gravelly sounding," and says he has difficulty projecting his voice – a significant impairment for a coach.

"I can't project enthusiasm or excitement," Aardema told LSJ in a recent interview. "I sound monotone."

The cause of Aardema's voice loss remains a mystery. He has been to two ear, nose, and throat specialists, but they haven't been able to explain why the vocal cord stopped working.

"It's basically just a lazy vocal cord that's not fully functioning," Aardema explained.

Doctors have said that resting the voice is not a solution, and that Aardema is not at risk of losing or damaging his remaining voice. He's had several sessions with a Muskegon-area voice therapist, when his schedule allows, but mostly he's working on his own to maximize the use of his remaining voice.

He compensates for his voice loss by using a microphone during team practice sessions. It's not a perfect solution, because the sound system isn't very clear and often makes his instructions sound jumbled. But he says it helps.

Game days present the biggest challenge, when all the game-related noises sometimes make it impossible for Aardema's players to hear him.

"It's been frustrating, because I've typically been pretty vocal during games, yelling encouragement – although it's debatable if yelling and screaming makes a difference," Aardema said with a small laugh.

Aardema's voice loss isn't a secret around the West Michigan Conference, though most assume it's a simple case of laryngitis. Referees, of course, don't mind the



**An unexplained vocal cord issue, which arose last year, has left veteran Whitehall basketball coach Nate Aardema with very little voice.**

**Photo/Leo Valdez**

idea of a coach with limited vocal capabilities. When Aardema meets with refs before a game, "they often joke that this is going to be their favorite game they've ever worked," he said.

During games, Aardema counts on his assistant coach of four years, Nate Baker, and Whitehall JV coach Christian Subdon, to relay messages to players and referees. That works pretty well, because both men know Aardema's program and what he likely wants in a given game situation.

"It's definitely a team effort," Aardema said about his assistants.

Aardema said he still makes his presence felt from the sidelines during games by clapping and waving his arms "like a lunatic."

"My philosophy is that every team member, up to the coach, is either giving energy or taking energy. I try to give energy," he said.

### ***'Frustrated for the right reasons'***

Complications from the voice loss also carry over into Aardema's day job as a fourth grade teacher at nearby Montague. It's his first year with the district, which happens to be Whitehall's biggest sports rival.

He uses a microphone while teaching, something that has become a common practice in education. Still, Aardema finds it a challenge to get and hold his students' attention.

"I believe a good teacher shows excitement and uses voice inflections to portray

material in exciting ways,” he said. “I’m in a new environment, and I want to make a great first impression. But I just haven’t felt like myself.”

All of the changes have left Aardema feeling less than whole, and searching for answers about how he can adapt his coaching style to help make the Whitehall boys’ varsity basketball team successful.

“I don’t want to say the team has struggled because I don’t have my voice,” Aardema said. “But we haven’t played as hard as we typically do. Is that because of my voice? My ability to communicate? Is it because we’re young?”

The answer might be “all of the above.”

The Vikings are going through a rebuilding year with three sophomores on the varsity squad, two more than any Aardema team has ever had. And Aardema’s voice limitations have forced older players to take more of a leadership role on the court, while the younger players learn the system.

Senior Terrell Harris has played under Aardema for three years and said he knows what the coach is trying to say and what his expectations are.

“It’s been different not hearing his voice, not hearing him rally from the sidelines,” Harris told LSJ. “The players need to step up more.”

Fellow senior Ethan McKenzie agrees.

“We put an emphasis on being a player-led team,” McKenzie said. “We’re taking (Aardema’s voice loss) in stride. We try not to make more of it than it has to be.”

All in all, it’s been a season of “re-learning and re-establishing,”

Aardema said. “I’m searching for ways to get the message across and to motivate.”

Whitehall Athletic Director Greg Russell has been watching all of this unfold, and understands that this has been a difficult



**Whitehall High Athletic Director Greg Russell.**

season for Aardema. Russell has been with the district for 32 years – 25 of them as athletic director – and has known Aardema since the coach’s high school days.

“I know he’s really frustrated for the right reasons,” Russell told LSJ. “Nate’s one of those coaches who likes to be involved when he’s coaching, not just sitting on the sidelines. Nate bleeds passionately for Whitehall. He cares not just about the product on the floor, but how he and the team are perceived in the community.”



**“It’s been frustrating, because I’ve typically been pretty vocal during games, yelling encouragement – although it’s debatable if yelling and screaming makes a difference.” - Nate Aardema**

“Nate is a passionate guy who loves his game, loves his players. He wants things to be the best they possibly can be. He wants 100 percent every night. He takes it personally if a kid doesn’t give 100 percent.”

Aardema graduated from Whitehall in 1998 and was a self-described “mediocre” player under former basketball coach Mike Rohen. He credits Rohen, who passed away of a brain aneurysm in February 2000, with encouraging him to pursue a career in education and coaching.

Shortly after graduating high school, Aardema was back in Whitehall, serving as an assistant coach for Rohen while also attending Muskegon Community College. He eventually transferred to Western Michigan University, then returned to the Whitehall district as an assistant coach in 2004, working for and learning from coaches Troy Love, Jeff Duncan and Tony Annese.

Annese, who is currently the very successful head football coach of the Ferris State University Bulldogs, coached the girls’ varsity team during his last year at Whitehall in 2009. Aardema was the first-year boys coach that season.

“(Annese) gave me a lot of responsibility, it was like an internship,” he said. “I learned a lot about being a head coach from him,” Aardema said.

Aardema entered the current season with an overall record of 121-68.

He said much of his coaching philosophy and style are based on what he learned

from Rohen and Annese. That includes not only a commitment to playing hard and competing every minute of every game, but also to being respectful of the referees and exhibiting behavior that reflects well on the team.

Whitehall players are familiar with their coach’s favorite motto: “You can’t be great at anything unless you’re good at everything.”

“Win totals will vary from season to season because talent levels will vary,” he said, “But our expectations can’t change – play hard, compete and prepare. I love competition, to get to our best and see if it’s good enough.”

Aardema doesn’t believe his voice loss will be a permanent condition. He believes that therapy will eventually remedy it.

One thing seems certain – it will take more than voice problems to derail his coaching career. He’s gotten support from assistant coaches, players, the Whitehall community – even from opposing coaches.

During a recent game against Montague, Aardema was having trouble getting the referee’s attention to call a time out. Montague coach David Osborne got the ref’s attention for Aardema, effectively calling a time out for Whitehall. That kind of camaraderie means a lot to Aardema, and exemplifies what athletics are all about.

“What do sports teach us? To take any adverse situation, adapt and overcome it,” he said.



# Tate-ball Returns

By Steve Gunn  
LocalSportsJournal.com

Brad Tate always dreamed of being a varsity basketball coach, just like his legendary father, Jim Tate.

But he obviously never expected the opportunity to arise the way it did, or that he would be able to share the experience with his dad.

Tate has been teaching at Oakridge High School for 20 years. Over the decades he has coached several sports in the district, including JV boys and girls basketball, middle school basketball, track, and most recently golf.

Prior to this season, he spent four years coaching middle school boys basketball at Montague High School, his alma mater.

He left that position after last season, due to family commitments and time constraints. He fully expected to be out of coaching in the 2018-19 basketball season.

But unforeseen circumstances arose in December, when long-time Oakridge girls basketball coach Terry DeJonge resigned due a controversy regarding his alleged conduct with students.

Suddenly the varsity girls basketball team - one of the best in the area - was without a head coach well into the season.

Tate was approached by Oakridge High School Athletic Director Rick Ruel to take over the team. After consulting with his wife and kids, he accepted, and became the new coach on Dec. 28.

"It was a Sunday afternoon when Rick called me," said Tate, 45, who has two children in middle school. "I needed a little time to talk to my wife. People don't always realize the countless hours you put in as a varsity coach, watching tape, planning practices. It's a huge time commitment, and I wanted to make sure it was OK with my wife and kids.

"They were nothing but supportive. They know I love basketball, and they said they would love for me to do it.

"The game has always been a huge part of my life. I've always wanted to coach. I've always looked at the gym as an extension of the classroom. I always figured at some point in my life I would be a varsity coach. I just didn't get a chance to plan for it. It just sort of happened."

Things got off to a little bit of a rough start for Tate, in a very noticeable way.

The Oakridge girls basketball team had built an incredible 88-game winning streak in the West Michigan Conference, going all the way back to 2013. Pretty much everybody knew about the

streak, throughout the area and in basketball circles around the state, and it was a point of great pride for Oakridge athletes, educators and fans.

But in Tate's very first game as coach - at Whitehall on Dec.

30 - it came to a stunning and emotional end with a 67-56 triple overtime loss to the Vikings.

"It was kind of a nightmare of a situation," said Tate. "I took the job on Sunday night, the next day was our very first practice, then we played at Whitehall on Tuesday and lost in triple overtime. That's when the streak ended. It was an emotional loss, and it was very difficult for the girls."



**Brad Tate, right, took over the talented Oakridge girls basketball team in December - assisted by his dad, legendary coach Jim Tate. Photo/Sherry Wahr**

While Tate knows everyone was very proud of the long conference winning streak, he also thinks it might have been a good thing for the players to get that monkey off their backs.

"Every time the girls turned around, they were having numbers thrown at them about the streak," he said. "I know the girls felt some pressure, trying to live up to the legacy that was left for them. But I told them that they can build their own legacy.

"In my life, I know I have learned a lot more from losses than any victory. Getting knocked down, and getting back up, takes a lot

of courage and builds a lot of character. I am so proud of these girls and the way they have handled everything. They are fighters."

Since the stunning loss, the situation has smoothed out nicely for Tate and the Eagles. As of this writing they were 13-2 overall, and in first place in the West Michigan Conference with a 9-1 record.

So despite the turmoil and sudden coaching change, all things still seem possible for the Eagles, who advanced all the way to the Class B state quarterfinals last season, and appear to have the weapons to make another run in the tournament this year.

"I think this team will go as far as the girls believe they can," Tate said. "We're going to be tested throughout the regular season and in districts, but if they continue to improve and play the way they have recently played, I believe the sky is the limit."

The Eagles demonstrated that they are back in the groove on Feb. 8, when they gained revenge over Whitehall in their conference rematch, with a 42-29 victory.

"It felt really great," said senior Halle Jennings, about getting even with Whitehall. "We always beat them. But we've had a rough season with losing our coach, getting a new coach, and when we lost to them the first time, I cried. But it made the whole team want to practice and come back and beat them. After the final buzzer, I felt so relieved. After all that practice, it paid off."

Jennings said she and her teammates have adjusted nicely, despite the unexpected coaching change.

"Coach (DeJonge) was my coach forever, since I was a little kid, so it kind of ripped my heart out," Jennings said. "This is my last year, and I was nervous about suddenly getting a new coach. But if I had to pick a new coach, I would pick Coach Tate. He knows how to coach. Some girls struggled with it at first, but now it's all good."

### *Sharing the fun with his dad*

Tate grew up worshiping his father, Jim Tate, with good reason.

Jim Tate piled up more than 500 wins in his long coaching career at four high schools - Vassar (1971-1975), Shelby (1975-85), Montague (1987-94), and Reeths-Puffer (girls 1994-98, boys 1996-2000).

His boys teams won three West Michigan Conference champion-

ships at Shelby and four at Montague, and his Reeths-Puffer girls team won a Seaway Conference title.

Throughout his career Tate's teams collectively won a nine district championships and three regional titles.

During his elementary school years, Brad Tate faithfully served as the water/towel boy for his father's teams at Shelby, and dreamed of the day when he could play for his dad.

But Jim Tate stepped away from coaching when Brad was in the fifth grade to become the athletic director at Shelby High School. That upset young Brad, and he put his dad on notice that he still expected to play for him - somehow and somewhere - when he reached high school.

"I remember telling my dad that I did not serve as water boy and towel boy all those years, just to find out that he wasn't going to be able to coach me," Tate said.

When Brad was about to enter the eighth grade at Shelby, Jim Tate honored his son's request. He resigned as AD at Shelby and went looking for a boys varsity head coaching job, and prepared to move



**Oakridge standout Sophia Wiard. Photo/Sherry Wahr**

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his family wherever he had to.

For a time it looked as though Jim Tate was going to accept a job in the Midland area, and the family would have to leave West Michigan. But then the Montague job opened up, Jim Tate took it, and the family only had to move a few miles south.

Brad Tate started playing for the Montague varsity as a junior, and was able to live his dream of playing for his father.

He was the backup point guard in his junior year, when Montague posted a remarkable 23-2 record and advanced to the Class C regional finals. He was the starting point guard the next season, when the team went 14-7.

Tate said playing for his dad was everything he hoped it would be, and then some.

"I cannot tell you what an awesome experience it was," he said. "That is not just a son's opinion, it was a fact. I think he's one of the greatest high school coaches to ever come out of this area."

After high school, Tate followed in his father's footsteps and went to Alma College, where he played basketball and golf for two seasons, then dropped basketball after his sophomore year to concentrate on golf.

Tate ended up earning an honor that gave him something else in common with his father. Back in the day Jim Tate had been named most valuable player one season of the Alma College baseball team. After his senior season, Brad Tate was named the MVP of the Alma golf team.

Now the two are together again on the sidelines.

His dad helped him for a couple of seasons with the Montague boys eighth-grade team. And he had always told Brad that if he ever coached varsity basketball, he would assist him.

So on the day he accepted the Oakridge job, after talking to his family, Brad put in a call to his dad and cashed in on that promise.

Now his dad is with him every day at practice, and next to him

every game on the bench, and Tate couldn't be happier. He says having his father around, with his years of experience and vast knowledge, is good for him and the Oakridge players.

"I'm not going to lie to you, the greatest blessing for me in this job is to get to work with my dad on a day-to-day basis," Tate said.

"I actually feel bad knowing that the program lists Jim Tate as my assistant. He's forgotten more about basketball than I will ever know.

"Watching him work with the kids, it's almost like I get to do student-teaching again."

The game is obviously still in Jim Tate's blood. He originally told his son that he would help coach the Eagles until Valentine's Day, then head out with his wife for their annual winter vacation in Florida.

But Valentine's Day came and went and the elder Tate is still here, coaching with his son.

"The original plan was that I was going to go to practice once or twice a week, no games, and we were taking off by Valentine's Day," said Jim Tate, 70. "Now it's something else. I'm going to

hang around through the (state) tournament.

"It's pretty good for me. It's definitely a young man's gig, though. I am so tired. It doesn't matter if I'm the head coach or assistant coach. I still wake up every day thinking about practice, and after games it still takes some time to settle down. I'm too old for this kind of stuff - but it's a lot of fun."

Jim Tate says he couldn't be more proud of his son, and the role he took on with the Eagles.

"I'm always proud of him," the old coach said. "He's a wonderful teacher, good father and husband, and just a good person. I'm really proud that he stepped into a really tough situation and took it on anyway, mostly because of the girls. He really felt like they were getting the short end of the stick."



**Coach Tate, right, focuses on the action during his team's recent win over Whitehall. Photo/Sherry Wahr**

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# MUSKEGON LUMBERJACKS

## Hakkarainen hits the record books

By Dave Hart  
LocalSportsJournal.com

When the 2017-18 Muskegon Lumberjacks season ended, local hockey fans thought they had seen the last of Mikael Hakkarainen.

The talented forward had accepted a scholarship to play hockey at Providence University, and junior hockey seemed to be in his rear-view mirror.



**Mikael Hakkarainen**

But college life did not agree with Hakkarainen, and he had another year of junior eligibility remaining, so he returned for another season with the Jacks, and the fans are very glad he did.

He's been one of several European Lumberjacks who have consistently put the puck in the net this season, helping the team pluck through its schedule and grab firm control of first place in the USHL's Eastern Conference standings.

As of Feb. 15, the Lumberjacks boasted a red-hot 30-9-3 record with 63 points in the standings, and a healthy 10-point lead over second-place Chicago in the Eastern Conference.

The Jacks were also in prime contention for the USHL's Anderson Cup, which goes to the team with the most points in the regular season. Muskegon was second in that race as of this writing, only one point behind Western Conference leader Tri City (64). Two other Western Conference teams - Waterloo and Sioux Falls - were also in the thick of the race with 58 and 56 points, respectively.

Besides giving the Lumberjacks another legitimate scoring threat, Hakkarainen's return also allowed him to put his name in Muskegon record books, as only the seventh player in Lumberjacks history to record 100 career points.

He achieved that milestone on Jan. 26, when he scored the team's lone goal in a 4-1 loss at home to the Team USA Under-18 squad. The PA announcer at L.C. Walker arena announced the news, and the crowd responded by giving Hakkarainen a long ovation.

As of Feb. 15, Hakkarainen had 14 goals and 25 assists for 39 points. "It feels good, because you can see how much work I put in," said Hakkarainen a short while after recording his 100th career point. "It's good to accomplish that goal, but we lost the game, and I have to help the team get more wins because that's what we are looking for."

Hakkarainen said he knew in his early days at Providence that the college life was not the right fit for him. He only played one game before packing his bags and heading back to Muskegon.

"I couldn't focus on two things at the same time at school," said Hakkarainen, 21, a native of Helsinki, Finland. "I feel like I can be a hockey player one day, so I wanted to just focus on that. I don't regret my decision. I have had a great time here and I am excited about



what the future holds for me."

Hakkarainen started his USHL career with the Chicago Steel in 2016-17, and only produced four assists in 16 games.

"I was struggling point-wise, and I wasn't ready to play in this league," he said.

Hakkarainen was traded to Muskegon midway through that season, and managed to score nine goals and collect five assists in 32 games for the Lumberjacks.

In his sophomore season with the Lumberjacks in 2017-18, Hakkarainen only managed to play in 36 games due to various head injuries. But he made the most of his playing time, scoring 15 goals and picking up 31 assists for 46 points on the year.

"It was frustrating having a good season, but not being able to play all the time with injuries," he said.

Hakkarainen's current season came to a temporary halt in early February when he was blocking a shot in a game and injured his foot. Recent X-rays have shown no break, so he's expected back in the lineup soon.

"The original diagnosis was that there was a break, but it looks now like a deep bruise," said Lumberjacks Coach Mike Hamilton. "We will have him hit the ice soon and see how much pain he can tolerate."

Hamilton will be more than happy when Hakkarainen does return to the lineup, particularly with the Clark Cup playoffs just around the corner.

"He's a very skilled hockey player who adds some serious punch to our lineup," the coach said. "We were very happy to get him back."

Hakkarainen is unsure where the hockey world will take him in the future. But he was a fifth-round pick of the Chicago Blackhawks in last summer's National Hockey League draft, which means he could turn pro and join that team's farm system next season.

Hakkarainen is just one of several European-born players to have a very big impact on the Lumberjacks this season.

Leading the team in scoring is Russian Egor Afanasyev, who had 20 goals and 24 assists by mid-February for 44 total points. That total put him in eighth place on the USHL 2018-19 scoring chart.

Second on the team was Russian Alex Yakovenko, who had 17 goals and 25 assists for 42 points, which are pretty impressive numbers for a defenseman. He was 10th in the league scoring race in mid-February.

Fifth on the team scoring chart was Russian forward Daniil Gushkin, who had 13 goals and 15 assists for 28 points. The ninth-leading scorer, yet another Russian, was Igor Larionov (the son of the former Detroit Red Wings great of the same name), who had seven goals and 14 assists for 21 points in only 22 games with the team.

"General manager Ryan Bennett, and his predecessor John Vanbiesbrouck, did a fabulous job forming good relationships with agents and scouts overseas, and that has fed us some high-end young players," Hamilton said.



# MUSKEGON RISERS

By Andrew Johnson  
LocalSportsJournal.com

In recent seasons, the Muskegon Risers soccer club has veered toward building a roster with more home-grown talent.

Former local high school and college stars, like Cody Loss, Dylan Mines and Ryan Wagenmaker, now play prominent roles for the Risers, who compete outdoors in the summer at Muskegon Catholic Central High School and indoors in the winter at L.C. Walker Arena.

But one of the most familiar and beloved players for local fans is definitely not a West Michigan native.

Stu Collins grew up in Ireland, but made the hard decision to come to the United States in 2010, when opportunities were lacking in his native country.

Since then he's become a staple in the West Michigan soccer scene, and perhaps the most loyal of Risers players, serving as captain of both the outdoor and indoor squads since 2016.

"I kind of had my mind made up in the middle of 2009," said Collins, 30, a native of Cork, Ireland, about coming to America.

"I kind of decided that I needed to get out of there. Ireland was in a recession at the time and not much was going on in the country,



## Captain Stu Collins, an Irish transplant, still working hard for that elusive championship

especially for someone involved in football."

Collins, a soccer standout as a youth, started shopping his skills around American colleges, and settled on Davenport University, after the coach at the time, Carl Whitehouse, went to the trouble to go all the way to Ireland to meet with him.

"I had a friend who was at Davenport, and he got me in touch with coach," Collins said. "Then coach actually came to Ireland and I met with him in Dublin. It really was kind of how it all happened, and it was one of those things that just was meant to be."

Collins had a great experience at Davenport. He was a three-time all conference selection and set school records for games played, starts and minutes played.

His leadership skills were so obvious that he was instantly offered a position as an assistant coach with the team when he graduated, which is rare in college athletics. He still holds that position today, and helped

the Davenport program win its first National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics national championship in 2014.

"I became an assistant straight out of playing," Collins said. "I didn't go the traditional graduate coach route, and I was very lucky to be given the chance."

While he excelled at Davenport, Collins was always aware

of the fact that he was a long way from home, and left behind his mother, father and three sisters in Ireland.

"It was honestly very tough for the first 18 months to two years, and a big culture shock," he said. "I was kind of very set in my ways, and I had grown up one way and brought up in an environment that was hard. I'm not necessarily from the most affluent area. I had to try and find ways to eat and get around when I first got here. It took me a while to find my feet."

### *The Risers experience*

While serving as an assistant coach at Davenport, the opportunity to play soccer again, with the Risers, presented itself in 2016, when the Muskegon club was one year old.

"The process started around Christmas of 2015," Collins said. "An opportunity arose and I spoke to (Risers owner) Matt Schmitt and I liked him a lot. I liked what his vision was and what he was trying to do.

"They wanted some veteran leadership and it just fit well. It was one of those things that was a no-brainer, because I had been missing the game at that point."

The Risers have had their ups and downs during Collins' time in Muskegon, but the club has developed a loyal fan base in the summer and winter seasons, with good crowds at every home game.

Collins has come to admire the franchise and the local fans who have developed a fast attachment to the team.

"They really are trying to get behind it as best they can," Collins said about the fans. "They're at all the games and make their presence felt. They care about the team and about creating a fan culture. It's really cool to see.

"I think the business development has been brilliant. If you look



at the kind of life the arena has taken on, with the crowd and production, it's excellent. Especially compared to the first arena season, when the turf wasn't the best quality. They've put goals in it now and it keeps growing. The challenge from an indoor perspective is lack of training facilities.

"From the outdoor point of view, we've had a collection of good teams and good players. But like any amateur/semipro club, it's hard to get the commitment that's necessary to succeed, because guys have to have other jobs and commitments. I think in terms of the business and size of the club, it's strengthened every year."

While the Risers have been competitive at times, in both indoor and outdoor competition, they have yet to win a league championship.

The current indoor season may be the toughest so far. As of this writing Muskegon had a 1-6 record in the Major Arena Soccer League 2, along with a -28 goal differential, which was worst in the league.

Collins said the lack of success has been frustrating. He points to the lack of roster consistency and adequate training facilities as ongoing issues.

"It's extremely frustrating," Collins said. "I came from a program in college that won, and I continue to be involved with a very high level college program. A lot of these guys (on the Risers roster) have won where they've been.

"The thing that has been most frustrating is that you don't know on a daily basis who you're going to have. Our guys would love to train three times a week if we could, but the facilities just are not there. Trying to condense a couple sessions into once a week, that's just so tough, but the coaches are doing a great job."

### **Team leader**

While the current season hasn't gone as well as the Risers had hoped, fans are still very happy to have Collins around, for his playing skills and leadership. On the field he's very versatile, and can play anywhere, from defense to attacker.

"He can kind of change," said Risers Coach Ben Ritsema. "He's pretty versatile. He really plays any role that we need. For indoor specifically, he's been a defender who brings some grit and strength, but yet has the ability to score."

Collins leadership, particularly with younger players, is at least as important as his playing skills.

"He's going to say the right things," Ritsema said. "He's been our captain for a long time, and he's always going to lead the right way by working hard. He's got a lot of coaching experience, so it's almost like having a second coach on the field."

Being a captain isn't something that Collins takes lightly.

"I'm very vocal and loud," he said. "That's because I have standards for myself, and I know those guys want the same for the club. Sometimes I have to be the bad guy who's barking out orders, so it can be a hero or villain role at times. But more than anything I want to support the guys in everything they do."

Soccer obviously consumes Collins' life. He plays for the Risers during the summer and winter, coaches at Davenport in the fall, and is the full-time technical director for the Vardar Youth Soccer Club of Michigan. In that role he oversees several coaches in the program, and coaches three teams himself.

That can be a lot to juggle, but Collins says it works out because he has the full support of his wife, Kelli, who is pretty busy herself in her role as a sales executive for Comfort Research.

"It's tough, but we understand we're building for the future and we're fully supportive of each other," said Collins, who lives with his wife in Kentwood. "It makes it so much easier to do what you love when you have that type of structure at home. I couldn't do everything that I do without her support."

While his busy life in America has taken Collins further and further from his roots in Ireland, he's still keenly aware of his loved ones there.



**Muskegon Risers captain Stu Collins, who hails from Cork, Ireland, leads the team in the summer and winter seasons. At top, Collins barks directions during a summer match. Middle, he stands next to Coach Ben Ritsema. Right, Collins unleashes a shot.**



While in college, Collins went back and visited his family once or twice a year. But he got away from that routine following the tragic death of his mother.

In December he went back to Cork to see his family for the first time in two years, when he returned for the funeral.

"My mother passed away two years ago at age 54 of leukemia," he said. "I was very close with my mom, and I kind of avoided going back for a couple years because it was so tough. She had been diagnosed five months before she died, and she had to miss my wedding after her diagnosis."

While the trip home in December may have been tough, Collins is thankful that he went, and said he maintains close ties with his family.

"I got to see my sisters and my dad, which was great," he said. "I speak to them two or three times a week, and I'm very close with one of my nephews."

As much as he loves all the soccer, Collins said he can envision retiring as a player sometime in the near future. But he would love to win a championship with the Risers before he hangs up the cleats.

"I'm hoping to put it off," he said. "But I think about it a lot, and it's definitely on the horizon. My body tells me that. But more than anything I want to win something as a club. I feel that I owe it to them and I want it for the community. I want to win a trophy before I pack it in, but I would think I'm not too far away."



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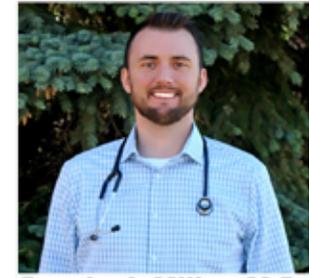
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