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Justin L. Fowler/The State Journal-Register

**Williamsville High School senior Ryan Courson has faced more challenges in his 18 years than most will face in a lifetime. Courson's mantra, "You can't dwell on the past, because it doesn't leave you any time to fix your future," has helped him overcome the adversity and have a successful academic and sports career. For a video interview of Courson, visit [www.sjr.com](http://www.sjr.com).**

14171

FRONT PAGE

## 'Every situation can be overcome'

*Williamsville teen's academic, athletic success stems from decision to fight adversity*

**By PETE SHERMAN**  
STAFF WRITER

**WILLIAMSVILLE** — Ryan Courson, a senior at Williamsville High School, remembers stepping into his mother's Ford Expedition sometime in January of his freshman year. They were on their way to one of his high school basketball games. He had just finished meeting with an

attorney in Springfield, giving a statement relating to a custody dispute between his mother, Danna, and his father, Greg.

Ryan was about 14 at the time. Greg Courson left his family when Ryan was in eighth grade. It was Christmastime, and without his father, Ryan, his mother and two younger siblings had no money. A year later, his father's pursuit of custody bordered on absurdity.

"We were absolutely poor," Ryan says. The four skimped on clothes and never ate out. Danna Courson became a substitute teacher. She brought in just enough money to get by. Lots of friends helped, she says.

Meanwhile, Greg Courson continued to terrorize them.

In January 2004, The State Journal-Register reported he had been accused of kidnapping Ryan's dog, threatening to

kill it and Ryan's mother. There were similar incidents, Ryan says. Eventually, his father went to prison on charges relating to methamphetamine production and property damage.

For the first year after Greg Courson left the family, he kept a psychological grip on Ryan. Until the meeting with the

See **OVERCOME** on page 6

## OVERCOME

■ From page 1

attorney, Ryan said last week, he felt he'd be forever trapped in his father's shadow. He struggled with insomnia.

But getting into the car that day, Ryan says, he had an epiphany about his father.

"I remember specifically getting into my mom's car and telling her about this feeling that struck me — that this stuff wasn't going to bother me any more," Ryan says. "His actions are his actions, and mine are mine."

Ryan took his newfound focus with him on the court that evening.

"I had 27 points that game or something," he says.

Ryan's drive has since landed him numerous, and far greater, achievements.

In the fall, he will attend Washington University at St. Louis, where he'll play football. He wants to major in business and biology, with a minor in chemistry. Then onto graduate school, to earn his MBA and a doctorate, probably in biology. He plans to pursue an executive career in the health industry.

Much of his tuition will be taken care of by scholarships — including \$20,000 from the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, which rewards students who have overcome adversity.

The Alger scholarship also took him to a series of engagements in Washington, D.C. this spring. Ryan rubbed elbows with Colin Powell and Tom Brokaw, ate in the sequestered State Department dining room and had a photo taken of him pretending to arm-wrestle Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

Ryan has earned straight As throughout his high-school career and has an extremely high grade-point average because of all the advanced, high-weighted courses he's taken. He also excelled at football and track at Williamsville.

He even earned a chance to compete in football recruiting tryouts at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Afterwards, a U of I coach took Ryan aside, congratulated him on his skills, but told him he wasn't Big Ten material. Even with that stinging dose of reality, Ryan says going up against some of the best athletes in the country that day counts as one of his all-time highs.

None of this surprises Aaron Kunz, Ryan's football coach and calculus teacher.

"He's always been on kind of a mission when he gets something in his head," Kunz said during a break in classes last week. "He's a rare specimen. In most classes, things come too easy for Ryan."

Perhaps that's why life continues to test his limits.

In eighth grade, Ryan broke his back while playing basketball. The incident also aggravated a back disorder he's had since he was young. He needs to do 300 sit-ups a day to reinforce his lower back muscles. When he was an infant, he was hospitalized after contracting bacterial meningitis, which, he half-jokingly believes, may have cooked his brains up a notch or two in intelligence.

During football practice his sophomore year, a knee to Ryan's side ruptured his spleen. Kunz recalled that Ryan's doctor estimated he'd be on the sidelines for up to eight weeks. But within a month, and with a half-season still to go, Ryan's doctor said he had healed enough to play.

Throughout these years, Ryan's situation at home continued to escalate.

"As far as family life, Ryan didn't talk a lot about what was going on," Kunz says. "What he always did — and what I and his teachers knew — sometimes, he would need to be at home."

Ryan became a father figure for his little brother Cole, 10, and sister Lindsey, 16.

"He went from a junior high kid to a high school man in what seemed overnight," says Kunz, whom Ryan ac-

## Courson file

**Ryan Cameron Courson**  
Senior, Williamsville High School  
Age: 18

**Scholarships:** National Horatio Alger Scholar, Regional Coca-Cola Scholar, National Elks Most Valuable Student, Washington University Eliot Scholarship, Lori P. Kashner Scholarship.

**Honors:** Illinois State Scholar, Prairie State All-Exceeds Team, Williamsville Student of the Month, The State Journal-Register's Scholar-Athlete of the Week, IHSA Academic All-State Team for Football, Williamsville High School Class President (freshman and sophomore years), National Honors Society.

**Activities:** Williamsville High School Football, track, drama club, journalism/yearbook club, YMCA Youth and Government, training for Junior Olympic decathlon this July at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

**College:** Will enter Washington University in St. Louis this fall. Plans to double major in business and biology, then attend graduate school for multiple degrees in pursuit of a leadership position in the health-care field.

knowledges as his surrogate father.

Despite the family mess, Ryan's many talents probably formed there. His father, an environmental driller, also is a natural athlete. Both his parents are smart, Ryan says. Danna finished fourth in her own high school class and recently earned her teaching certificate at the University of Illinois at Springfield. She now teaches at the Sangamon Area Special Education District's school in Springfield.

She calls herself Ryan's voice of moderation.

"I don't ever want him to be full of himself," she said last week. "It's more of a teasing thing, though, a character thing — wanting him to be a caring person. He gets his head up in the clouds."

Ryan's deserved confidence has come with a little pride. He contacted The State Journal-Register to call attention to his scholarships. And a little of his competitive side leaked out as he inquired about whether his story might make Page 1. Of course, it did.

But there's another reason for having one's head in the clouds. Ryan's involvement in sports particularly helped him bury the troubles of his home life, he said.

Danna Courson says the academics and athletics both probably served as escape outlets.

"For the longest time, I felt that I had little or no control over events that were taking place in my life. I was discouraged and at some points despondent. It wasn't until later that I realized that the adversity that I had met had helped me become the individual I am today," Ryan wrote in an e-mail, responding to a question about why he wanted the SJ-R to tell his story.

"When overwhelmed with a situation, the positive impacts can go completely unnoticed. And rarely do people look in retrospect to see that their unfortunate prior experiences have led them to the amazing places they are currently at."

"I want to let people know that every situation can be overcome, no matter how Herculean it can seem. And persevering these difficult times is what allows us become stronger."

Greg Courson was released on parole from the Taylorville Correctional Center on Feb. 9, a day before Ryan's 18th birthday. He now lives with his parents near St. Louis. He did not return a message seeking comment.

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