

# DEFYING DISABILITY

## Sophomore overcomes hearing loss to succeed in basketball

**TANNER COERR** EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Despite his impressive 6'3" stature, sophomore Roman Ludwikowski is a gentle giant. While his physical presence makes him a stalwart on the basketball court, when he's off of it, he is a quiet kid with an intense devotion to improving his skill set.

To get to the varsity level, Roman has had to overcome a unique challenge: he suffers from profound hearing loss and has worn cochlear implants since infancy to overcome his deficit. Growing up with hearing loss forced him to question his potential as an athlete.

"[I worried] because I've never seen anyone that played basketball with cochlear implants," Roman said. "I wondered, 'What's it going to be like in the future?'"

Although soccer was his first love, it was difficult for Roman to be accommodated because the size of the field placed him so far from coaches and teammates. During middle school, he switched to basketball, and it was at that time that he began to struggle with insecurities that came from his hearing.

"I would see kids or parents stare at his

ears, like, 'What are those things?'" Roman's mother, Emily Ludwikowski, said. "That's when the questions started coming. 'Why me? Why does nobody else in our family have this?'"

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**- ROMAN LUDWIKOWSKI  
SOPHOMORE**

Having a hearing impairment on a basketball court is difficult to surmount. Student sections take pride in their ever-increasing noise level, and players must wade through the noise to hear directions from their coach. Roman sometimes struggles during intense moments.

"One time, [my travel team's] coach was

telling me and my teammates [a play] during the game and I couldn't tell what he was saying, so I didn't know what to do," Roman said. "Usually I tell the coach that if I can't hear right, just use signals."

Although his hearing impairment is unique to him, to his teammates, he is just another member of the team. The team has worked to ensure that he is not treated any differently than any of his fellow players.

"When coach [Mike O'Brien] is trying to get his attention, he'll tell someone to tell Roman to come to him, and then O'Brien can talk to him right next to his ear," sophomore teammate Nick Karageorgos said. "[The coaches] learned to work around it, and it's a normal routine for them."

As someone who didn't have a deaf role model to look up to as a child, Roman tries to fill that void for any children who have similar disabilities.

"I'm [always] glad to help little kids that wear hearing implants," Roman said. "I've been happy to help them if they want to be better at basketball."

Roman's mother attributes much of her son's success to public schools in Fairfax County for the support they provided him throughout his youth.

"There are a lot of hard-of-hearing schools that we could have sent him to, but we wanted him to have as typical of a childhood as possible," Emily Ludwikowski said. "I have to credit the special education teachers he has had. I have a whole new respect for that field. Early on, they taught [Roman] to be an advocate for [himself]."

The implants can be advantageous in unexpected ways. When opposing crowds try to taunt Roman, he can simply shut off his hearing to improve his focus.

"When he's shooting free throws, he can turn off his earpiece so it's dead silent [while] he shoots them," Karageorgos said.

Roman has reached the varsity level, but his goals are higher than that. With the help of his support system, he is aiming to continually improve as a player and a person.

"Even though I have lost hearing, [my coaches] still treat me like a normal person," Roman said. "They understand I don't hear them well, and that helps me become better."



**COMMUNICATING ON THE COURT** — Sophomore Roman Ludwikowski calls out offensive assignments during against Langley on Jan. 12. The noise of the rivalry game was a challenge for Ludwikowski, who wears cochlear implants, but he was still an impactful rebounder.