

1. High School Sports -

Girls basketball scoring champ defied expectations, rewrote record book

- Updated: Feb. 21, 2023, 6:49 p.m. |
- Published: Feb. 21, 2023, 6:30 p.m.

By

- [Corey Annan | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)



Rylie Theuerkauf (14) of Tenafly celebrates with assistant coach Kris Kristian after scoring her 2000th career point during the girls basketball game between Tenafly and Old Tappan at Tenafly High School in Tenafly, NJ on Tuesday, January 3, 2023. Scott Faytok | NJ Advance Media

This wasn't how Rylie Theuerkauf wanted to end her high school basketball career.

Tenafly was down by more than 16 points with just a few minutes left to go on Monday's North 1, Group 3 state playoff game against Pascack Valley. While the game was well over at

that point thanks partly to a 17-2 third-quarter run by Pascack Valley, Theuerkauf never seemed to let her (or the entire team's) energy slip.

For the entirety of the fourth quarter, Theuerkauf's effort was still as high as it was during the opening tip. On offense, she continued to keep Pascack Valley's defense on its heels with her aggressive play, attacking the rim or finding space to rattle off a deep three-pointer.

Even as some of her teammates looked frustrated as Tenaflly's deficit grew, Theuerkauf showed just how much her leadership has grown since her freshman year. A three-year captain, Theuerkauf kept her head up high throughout the latter stages of the game, keeping her teammates' spirits high on the court and on the sidelines with high-fives and motivational words in between possessions.

"I think that the way she goes about her business is an example of a great leader as well," head coach Devin Feeney said after the game. "It really helps to have a player on the court (like Rylie) to encourage her teammates on and off the court. She's definitely very vocal."

But as the final seconds winded down on her historic high school career, tears began to flow down her face as it dawned on her that her high school basketball career was over. But her will to win, the drive to compete didn't leave the court until the final whistle blew.

"I would rather win a game and have zero points and lose a game and have 50," Theuerkauf said. "That's just how I am, I hate losing so much."

Theuerkauf's never say die attitude is the same one that made her the greatest player to don a Tigers jersey. With 2,482 career points, the Wake Forest commit is Tenaflly's all-time leading scorer and the 15th Bergen County girls basketball player to surpass 2,000 career points.

Rylie spent nearly every day during the summer of 2020 practicing shooting drills, putting up over 1,000 shots a day on her dad's shooting machine. Sometimes, she practiced her shooting drills at Demarest, where Rylie's father, Mike Theuerkauf, is the head track and field coach.

However, when Demarest gymnasium underwent renovations, Rylie asked Tenaflly's athletic director, Joseph Carollo, to open the gym up for her for a week in mid-July so she could continue to practice her shooting.

"She initiated all of that on her own," Carollo said. She came into the gym for the whole week to come in and work on her (shot). How many kids do that? That's why she's going to Wake Forest on a full scholarship, people notice that."

Mike Theuerkauf always appreciated her daughter's passion for basketball from when she first started playing in the second grade. But it wasn't until a recent tournament that he attended that made him realize that his daughter was truly a rare talent.

"I traveled with her this past summer and she tore it up in a national tournament in Chicago," said Mike Theuerkauf. "She was playing against the best players in the country and she looked to be on an equal footing with everybody out on the court. After I saw that she could hold her own with anybody in the nation, then I realized that she's a special player."

Theuerkauf, who is currently ranked as the No. 85 recruit in ESPN's national recruiting rankings, leaves Tenaflly girls basketball in a better place than she found it. In her first three seasons at Tenaflly, the program finished with a 23-41 mark despite Rylie finishing as the state's leading scorer in her sophomore (30.4) and junior seasons (36.4).

Amid doubts about her future at Tenaflly during her sophomore year, Theuerkauf tried to look at things from the bigger picture. While there was little to no team success, seeing the little improvements each day in practice or in games showed her that the program was trending in the right direction.

"Anyone would have doubts if you're 3-12 on the season," she said. "But I always just felt that the (Tenaflly) community and the strength of everyone else around me kept me going through it all."

Tenaflly finished the 2022-2023 season with its best record (17-8) in well over a decade, with Rylie finishing her senior season averaging 28.4 points, good for third in the state behind Manchester Township's Devyn Quigley (34.7) and Paul VI's Hannah Hidalgo (29.6).

"(Senior year) has definitely been one of my favorite seasons," Theuerkauf said. "Our team is really close this year, which I think helps. So we'll do dinners, or we'll do lunches together. And we'll just like be together off the court too. I would say it's been a really big part of our success."

Theuerkauf is grateful that stuck through those rough seasons at Tenaflly, despite the temptation to pursue potentially greener pastures elsewhere.

"I would say that it's almost not even just my individual success," Theuerkauf said. "When I came my freshman year, there was nobody who no one who tried out, I would say there (were) about 20 girls who tried out that year. Once I got to my senior year, we had a real program to work with. There are a lot of girls that want to be on the team now."

"During my freshman year, I think it was just my parents and maybe two other parents that would come out (to games) and now we actually get supporters. I think that's almost what I look back on the most; people want to be a part of our program now."

The opportunity for greener pastures began in seventh grade when Theuerkauf began to earn national recognition playing for NYC Exodus, one of the nation's most competitive travel AAU programs that regularly traveled across the country to compete in arguably the nation's top basketball circuit, the Nike Elite Youth Basketball League.

Theuerkauf was highly recruited across several private schools and academies in the Tri-State area. According to Rylie's parents, Judy and Mike Theuerkauf, transferring out of the district to potentially play for a perennial N.J. powerhouse program like Blair Academy, or an out-of-state school like Christ The King (NY), were on the table.

Rylie and her parents were also heavily considering Loomis Chaffee, a college preparatory school in Connecticut that is considered to be one of the top girls basketball programs in the New England area.

According to Theuerkauf, there were too many reasons for her stay at Tenaflly. Feeney was her middle school volleyball coach and someone that she trusted to help her develop her game at the high school level. Her best friend and future co-captain, Anna Taufield, would also compete at Tenaflly. Furthermore, Tenaflly's highly renowned classes also aligned perfectly with her future goals, as Theuerkauf is considering a career in education.

Most importantly, Theuerkauf wanted to feel like she could enjoy high school more without worrying about basketball all the time.

"I feel like I got to be a kid and have all of those high school experiences with my friends," Theuerkauf said. "I didn't have to take an hour bus ride home and back every day, or I didn't have to live at a private school. People always used to tell me, 'oh, Rylie you have always be training for basketball 24/7.' Like yes, I train, but then I also get to do everything else outside of it."

Judy (Rylie's mother) and Mike Theuerkauf would've supported whatever decision Rylie chose, but ultimately, they saw Tenaflly as a more rewarding challenge for Rylie whilst also allowing her to balance school, basketball, and social life.

"She took the harder route," Mike Theuerkauf said. "It's easier to go to a dominant program and be one of many stars on a dominant program. It's difficult to stay in your hometown with a smaller program. They don't have a lot of girls. There's no freshman team. It's just JV and varsity (at Tenaflly). It's tougher to be a leader in those situations, but those are the situations that will make your future brighter."

###