

# Coca sisters enjoy two magical seasons as MSM teammates

written by Dwain Hebda |



For the majority of the Coca sisters' athletics career — all of it actually — the roles of older sis Alexia and little sis Ava remained comfortably aligned.

Three years apart meant they never had to share a roster, let alone playing time, from the earliest days of soccer through various sports at Our Lady of the Holy Souls School in Little Rock and assorted non-school leagues. In fact, the only time the two athletes ever squared off was in the driveway, intense though that was.

"I feel like if we're goofing around then it's not as serious, but if we get mad at each other and we foul each other, then yes, it gets really serious," Alexia said of those contests.

"It's been really fun," said mom Kelley Coca. "Of course, when they're both out there on the floor at the same time it's nerve-wracking, for sure. But that is the time when I take the most pictures. We try to get them together, interacting. It's just nice to see them getting along well and working nicely together."

"I think that we usually get mad at each other from the beginning," countered Ava. "So, we just start with aggressiveness."

Given this, you can imagine the culture shock the two experienced when Ava, 15, reported for the first day of class as a Mount St. Mary Academy freshman last fall, where she'd ultimately get moved up from the freshman basketball team to join the varsity where Alexia, 18, is the starting point guard. Not only that, but for much of the season the two have found themselves

both on the floor at once, a surreal sight even for their parents in the stands.

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The Cocas are an athletic family with the girls and their older brother Aden, now 20, starting in sports as preschoolers. By the time they reached middle school, Alexia was down for almost anything in season, playing basketball, volleyball and running track and cross country for the Wabbits. Ava played one year of volleyball but preferred basketball and track.

Even the Coca parents got involved; Kelley and her husband Mark spent years coaching the kids at Holy Souls; she shepherded them in track and he coached their basketball teams as well as Aden in baseball until high school. Spending that much time with the kids gave them a ringside seat to how they developed as competitors.

"As athletes, Alexia is scrappier and Ava tends to use her brain more," Kelley said. "Ava is successful because she's a smart player. Alexia is also, but Alexia is really scrappy. I would also say Alexia is the worker bee where with Ava, things come a little more naturally."

Part of what's brought the two together for the basketball season is necessity; the Belles are short on experience with five seniors and the rest being underclassmen. The team is one game under .500 as of Feb. 21 and fourth in the 5A Central Conference. Though the current of rivalry never feels too far below the surface, both girls are deliberately generous in assessing the other's skillset.

"She's one of the only ones who consistently makes her shots," Alexia said. "As a point guard, we drive and dish, looking for those type of people who can shoot. It's gone really well, surprisingly. I think it's gone pretty solid so far."

"I feel like she's really good at reading the defense," Ava said. "She can see the whole court differently than the other players. She's a good ball handler. When we're on the court together, I feel like I listen to her more as a teammate than as a sister."

The duo has one more season together as both have made the varsity soccer team. The goal is to compete for a state title before Alexia heads off to Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia where she's signed a letter of intent to play college soccer.

"I think we're going to be really good this year. I'm really excited," Alexia said. "All the upcoming freshmen have played club, so they have experience. In the past it's been just a bunch of athletes, but now it's a bunch of soccer players."

For Ava, the goals for this final season with her sibling are more personal.

"My goals are just to start varsity and to continue to get better," she said. "Just to be kind of more like my sister."