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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON ATHLETE OVERCOMES LEARNING DISABILITIES, FAMILY TRAGEDY

DAYTON, Ohio — Crystal Smith wasn’t worried about playing highly ranked Purdue this season.

“Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” said the University of Dayton senior a week before the basketball game. “I wake up each day ready ... for whatever.”

The Flyers nearly upset last year’s national champions. But for Smith, an ever-smiling 22-year-old who appears to have the world by its axis, the loss pales when compared to the battles in life she is winning.

For starters, despite struggling with learning disabilities in reading, writing and comprehension since middle school, Smith is set to graduate in May with a 3.0 grade point average.

“It’s been tough,” admitted Smith, who plays guard for the Flyers. “But I’ve had a lot of help from many wonderful people. Classes and homework come before practice and games. My coaches and instructors make sure of that.”

A recent Department of Education survey, which tracked 14,600 student-athletes at Division I schools since 1992, seems to verify Smith’s claim. The University of Dayton is currently first in the country at graduating the highest percentage (95 percent) of its scholarship athletes.

Smith’s learning disabilities alone — which require her to spend twice the hours on homework as her classmates do — would have thwarted most people her age long before their senior year in college. But her troubled and tragic journey to a cap and gown doesn’t end there.

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For the first 11 years of their lives, Crystal and Christi Smith, her twin sister, lived in an east-Columbus neighborhood filled with gangs, drug dealers and crack houses.

"Christi and I had to literally run to school every day to stay safe," recalled Smith, who is majoring in communication management. "We did what we had to do to survive."

Moreover, their parents split when the girls were barely walking and their mother, Quallia, paraplegic from polio, could no longer look after them. Persia, the twins' father, took over the duties of raising the girls with the hope that someday he would move them to a nicer neighborhood.

After working two jobs for years, that day came. Persia and his girls moved into an apartment in the upper-middle class suburb of Bexley when the girls were 11. It was then that Crystal was held back a year after it was discovered she had learning disabilities.

During the middle-school and junior high years, the girls began to blossom in sports and gain in academics. But tragedy hit in 1993 when, as 16-year-old juniors at Bexley high school, their father died of heart complications.

Despite academic and family setbacks, Crystal Smith emerged as a basketball standout at Bexley High School, averaging about 18 points and 8 rebounds a game. Their athletic prowess and the love of an aunt, Madge Jones, who became their legal guardian, enabled the girls to fulfill a late father's dream — of making it to college. As juniors both girls were offered full athletic scholarships (Christi for track at the University of Akron).

"We didn't have a lot growing up," said Smith, no trace of remorse in her voice. "But we received a lot of love from our parents. We saw how Mom struggled, so we learned early what it means to struggle every day of our lives. And we saw how hard Dad worked to get us out of the neighborhood and into a nice community. It just comes naturally to work hard."

Academic "safety nets" — from providing tutors and educational counselors to mandating homework sessions and time management training — play a large part in UD's success at graduating its scholarship athletes, said Don Ross, academic coordinator for student athletes.

For example, freshman athletes must attend structured study sessions for up to 11 hours a week, Ross said, until they demonstrate the ability to handle their homework on their own.

"Only when our students prove they can maintain good grades and handle the challenges that come with participating in college athletics do they earn more leeway with managing their - more -
own workload," he said.

In Smith's case, because of her learning disabilities, she was required to attend a trial enrollment program in summer 1996 before she was eligible to enroll that fall. She passed with "flying colors," Ross said.

More than study programs, however, are the people at UD who make a difference, Ross said. "The athletes get a tremendous amount of help and cooperation from the faculty here. And that help isn't just limited to athletes — they help any student who needs it. That's just the spirit of the University — to treat each student with respect and compassion."

Someone who has worked closely with Smith is inspired by her passion.

"Crystal has an unbound enthusiasm for life," said Bea Bedard, coordinator of the office for students with learning disabilities. "Nothing ever seems to stop her from attaining her goals. Nothing."

For media interviews, contact Crystal Smith at (937) 285-8970, Don Ross at (937) 229-4425, and Bea Bedard at (937) 229-3684.