

BRIANA SMITH

University of Virginia

College of Arts and Sciences/Women's Track & Field

Nominated by: Angela Crock

Briana entered the University of Virginia as a hurdler and jumper who showed great potential but the hurdles on the track would be the least of hurdles to be overcome during her collegiate career. Like so many students, Briana struggled in the classroom during her freshman year of college as well as in her sport. She had been forced to attend summer classes in order to continue at the institution and she looked forward to the chance to redeem herself but as a student and as an athlete. Feeling that she had overcome the biggest hurdle that she could possibly face, that of collegiate adjustment, she entered her sophomore year with renewed optimism and enthusiasm.

Although she had come a long way in terms of her ability to manage academics, she was still struggling with her training. She battled constant fatigue but attributed that to the demands of training at the collegiate level. She was getting stronger but not improving and eventually she noticed that she had a lump growing in her groin area that she needed to have checked by a physician. She was initially informed that it was a swollen lymph node but when the tests had been completed, she was informed that she had Hodgkin's Lymphoma and that she needed to begin chemotherapy as soon as possible. She would need to travel 2 hours away from Charlottesville for treatment and everyone expected her to take a leave of absence from school in order to do that. But Briana concluded that she definitely wanted to stay in school and decided to do whatever it took to maintain control over her own life in the face of this deadly illness. She felt that staying busy would help her mind stay focused on the long term goal and she was "determined to not let this cancer get the best of her and believed that she was going to conquer it".

That positive attitude and mental determination did help her survive treatments that were often debilitating and left her feeling worse than she felt before the disease had been diagnosed. But she made weekly appointments with both her Dean and Academic Advisor, scheduled her chemotherapy appointments for Saturday so she could be back in school on Monday, and once again stayed for summer classes in order to keep her moving forward in her degree plan. In the fall of 2004 she returned to practice and the chemotherapy treatments were behind her. She returned to competition in track and field in the spring of 2005 and was ranked third on the team in the 60-meter hurdles and has continued to improve from that point forward. This year she has become the team's top 100 meter hurdler and her coach wrote that he "has been coaching for 18 years and I can say that I learned more about the human spirit from Briana and her journey than I have from anything else I have encountered. She is a special person." She is looking forward to Graduate School and pursuing a Masters in teaching so she will have continued opportunities to teach and be a role model.