

Sanguine Smith embracing adversity through new role

By Danielle Whaley

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JEFFERSON CITY, Tenn. – Coming to Carson-Newman in 2015 as a freshman member of the women's golf team was an exciting time for Summer Smith, however the journey she ended up taking was not what she envisioned.

Smith came to Mossy Creek from Halls High School where she was a 2012 district champion for the Red Devils and finished in the top-10 three out of her four years in the district tournament. Prepared to continue her career on the greens as a student-athlete at C-N, injuries took their toll, paving the way for her to stay involved in the sport from a different vantage point – serving as a game manager.

"My senior year of high school, I dislocated my knee and I really wasn't fully prepared and healed for freshman year," Smith said. "Freshman year came around, I was fine, but then I wasn't fully at my capability to play golf. Sophomore year was where everything sort of started going downhill.

"Of course, when you come into college, you think, 'Wow, I signed, I'm about to play golf for four years,' but God had a different plan for me, and, honestly, I just had to learn to run with the curveballs."

Smith had suffered stomach issues in her freshman year, hindering her ability to truly take to the greens for valuable playing time aside from the two events she took part in that season. A knee injury in the Christmas period of her sophomore year forced her to take a step back from the sport.

Head coach Suzanne Strudwick had known Smith for a number of years before she signed with the Eagles. That prior knowledge of the Knoxville, Tenn. native's mental and physical drive as an athlete motivated her to give Smith the game manager role, allowing her to still stay involved.

"I cried tears of joy because I thought that I was about to be done because the surgery is not like a normal ACL or MCL; it takes a year of recovery, so I thought I was pretty much done with my sports career in college," Smith said. "When she came up with the idea, I thanked her and was so excited to be able to stick around a sport that I love and has always been a big part of my life."

Strudwick praises Smith for her sensibility and the calming effect she has on the freshmen who tend to look at her example for how to go through their first year with the team.

"It was so evident from her freshman year that her maturity level was at a way more advanced level than where most freshmen are going to be," Strudwick mentioned. "For me, having her still be a part of the team, because she had already become an integral part through practicing and playing, was important so I wanted to keep that going."

As game manager, Smith's primary duty is to work directly with the freshmen, following them on the course to provide insight and give advice on specific shots while helping them work through the game visually. Her presence at events alleviates Strudwick's pressure to look after all of the competitors, allowing the coach to watch on and follow along as the upperclassmen advance on the greens.

Smith has been a student of the sport her entire life as her grandfather, Roy, and father, Travis, were both golfers at Cumberland College. Her father's tutelage has been extremely beneficial, most notably in how she looks at a swing and provide assistance in decision making.

"I think this move has shone a spotlight for her on the mistakes and the things she would focus on as a player," Strudwick said. "Seeing everything play out in front of her and the mistakes that players are making that she also used to make has now given her this tremendous perspective on her own game. Once she does start playing, her physical ability may not be where it was, but her mental game will be tremendous because of that extra coaching perspective."

Aside from course management, her position also gives her the opportunity to serve as a leader on the team alongside head captain senior Elizabeth England and fellow co-captain junior Taylor Hayes.

"Each of them bring their own skill," Strudwick mentioned of the trio. "It's very unusual to find all the facets that you want in a team leader in one person, and so I started naming co-captains about three years ago.

"Unless you have a really special person who embodies all of these leadership traits, it is a joint role. It's not something that one person can take on because every person is gifted in different areas and we want all of those gifts to shine."

Smith is the first player that Strudwick has ever made a game manager while still being a member of the squad. Taking on a position that involved coaching her peers was daunting for the junior.

"You always see them as teammates, and you still do, but it's about wondering if they're going to respect me, but the girls were great about adjusting to it," Smith mentioned. "I just had to be confident in my role and know that I'm here to help them. It was different, but it was definitely a good different because I have learned how to be a better golfer through helping them improve their game."

That self-reflection through coaching has been one of the biggest assets for her, allowing her to keep her mental game strong despite yearning to get back on the course. Through coaching her teammates, she has found that she has the ability to encourage others while growing in patience and poise.

While she has gotten medical permission to start swinging again, she is still not fully prepared physically to make her return to the greens, but she is closer now than she has been in nearly the past two years.

"A few months ago, I was on crutches and could not move, so everything I go through is a step," Smith said. "Honestly, I think to myself, 'Did this really happen?' because playing golf has taught me how to push through since you're going to have bad and good days. That's a blessing of playing sports too because I'm driven and capable of getting through obstacles."

Her time away from playing will give her extra eligibility once she is able to play again. The business major views her present adversity as a way to learn how to be a more effective leader and manager in terms of handling any negative events in a positive manner.

"She's adapted from taking her competitiveness and wanting to play to keep her from being down in the dumps," Strudwick mentioned. "I haven't heard her complain once and that's a testimony to her resilience, grit and passion for what she sees in this team. She has been a role model for not being down and negative about her circumstance and saying, 'Hey, God had this plan for me at one point but now here's another plan, and I'm really embracing this role.'"

Strudwick says she can almost see a new career path as a coach being paved for the junior through this experience, a role Smith even mentions that she could potentially see herself taking at the high school level somewhere down the road.

No matter the next step, she is adamant about giving her trust to God's plans.

"I hope I'm able to get back to golf and keep doing what I love," Smith shared. "I read this piece in my devotion one day and it's helped me through this situation – 'No matter what happens, I can find joy because my hope is not in this word or in my circumstances. My hope is in the Lord.'"

"I don't know what my future holds but I'm praying about it, and I know God will lead me where I need to be."

Sunday Conversation: A Committed Challenge

By Danielle Whaley

Oct. 8, 2017

Almost every child in England dreams of being a professional soccer player. Duncan Foster was no exception.

As early as the age of four, he was kicking a ball around the house, playing soccer at the youth level where he was mainly coached up by his father and ended up coming to the U.S. to pursue higher education while also continuing his playing career. That playing career included two seasons (and an NCAA tournament appearance) with Carson-Newman's men's soccer program.

Living under the same roof as a coach in his early years led to constant discussions of how to improve individually and with a team. It was in those conversations that Foster found his true passion: challenging others to be the best version of themselves.

"I actually started voluntarily coaching when I was about 14, so alongside playing for various teams, I started coaching and thought, 'I quite enjoy this,'" Foster said. "But it was more than just the soccer side of things, it was everything else that had to do with it."

Becoming more of an assistant coach in just six months' time at 14 allowed him to move onto higher levels of soccer while pursuing a bachelor's degree in Sports Science from Brunel University in London. He started by leading sessions with community-based Fulham FC, moving to the Wycombe Wanderers development center for academy players before making his way to the Premier League as a member of the Reading FC's sports science staff that focused on strength and conditioning upon graduating in 2012.

In the lower ranks, his work tended to have a player development focus, honing strengths of athletes at a mixed-talent level. His time with Reading was different than anything else he had experienced, especially in the outlooks for the team and his role as a member of the staff.

"You learn that the environment is ruthless, high-pressure and full of high expectations so it was less about development and player optimization but more about how the players are going to be in their best place for the game on Saturday. There's no real room for any mistakes at all," Foster asserted. "One thing that really highlighted my time with Reading was learning how you can motivate each player, each personality, when you can talk to them and when it's best to let them do their own thing."

Foster spent one season as a staff member with Reading before working to obtain his MBA at C-N. He was a member of the national finalist team and a Capital One CoSIDA Academic All-District selection in 2013. Going into the following season. He received South Atlantic Conference Preseason All-Conference Second Team honors in 2014 before the season took a turn due to a knee injury.

The injury sparked a mindset that Foster had never had before. Doctors told him recovery would take five months but there was one problem: a combine he had signed up for that was three months away.

"In my mind, I was doing all I could to make it back. I had never really had that mentality before where I wanted to get back," Foster said. "It was a different level of motivation that I tapped into and ended up coming back before that three months and played in the all-star game and combine still two months ahead of schedule."

His newfound self-motivation from the recovery paired with his experience in strength and conditioning encouraged him to help the team off the field. In the spring of 2015, Foster decided to take everything he had learned while working with Reading and use it to help rejuvenate his Eagle teammates through strength and conditioning sessions. He planned out a monthly schedule of what the team would do on a daily basis in order to become stronger and better as a whole. With the initiative set by Foster and other returning players, the goal was to help the team to get back to winning the conference.

"2014 wasn't the best season for our team," Foster mentioned. "We implemented that conditioning stuff and won the conference in 2015. I'm not saying it was because of me but because of the mentality that the returning lads and seniors brought through the spring and grew through the fall as well."

After his time was finished with Carson-Newman, Foster joined the Myrtle Beach Mutiny as an assistant coaching position. He helped coach the squad to becoming regular season champions and national quarterfinalists. In 2016, he returned to playing, this time as a captain for the Knoxville Force where they team went from not winning a league game in consecutive seasons to qualifying for the conference playoffs. Staying with the team this year, an injury pushed him to take on another coaching role as the squad was named the regular season division champions.

This year, Foster found himself making his way back to Mossy Creek to be a part of the men's soccer team yet again but this time as an assistant coach.

"When Stephen (Lyons) got the job in December, I sent him a text because I had worked with him at Tenn. Olympic Development Program. I liked his instructions, communication and interaction with the players," Foster said. "Initially, it was all about how I could help his transition to a new place, team, administration. He agreed to me coming in last spring for four or five sessions to just observe and be around the guys."

Those few outings were what helped him to be named a volunteer assistant coach for the men's soccer program in September. In his new position with the team, he works with the players and coaches in observing strength and conditioning sessions and practices in order to help the team maximize their potential.

"He has experience, not just coaching but sports management and exercise science side of things with sports psychology in other aspects of the game that are important to being successful," head coach Stephen Lyons said of the newest addition to the staff. "I think it says a lot that he and Kavi (Luchowa) are both on the staff as alums not just of their commitment to the team but also how much this program means of them."

"Having Duncan on the team adds to the balance between the players and coaches, and I think that is very important."

Foster echoed Lyons' sentiments on the staff.

"We all work really well and it helps being able to give your opinions and be on the same page because we, as a coaching staff, push each other to be better and in turn that pushes the players to be better," Foster said. "Through the sessions and conversations, I like to plant the seed and let them figure out where to go and guide them on that process. It's just trying to get the best out of people."

"Just simply, I love it. It's not an obligation to come up here at all, not in the slightest," Foster said. "It's like, if the opportunity is there for me to add value to the players, then it's completely worth it."

Foster uses the time he spends with C-N as a way to put what he's learning in his Master of Science from the University of Tennessee into action. He also works as a graduate research assistant at UT while coaching a 15U girls' soccer team.

With all of this real-world application of his Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior classes, he found a way to share his knowledge with people beyond the teams he is involved with. He started a blog (commit2better.com) to put everything he is reading and learning in a place where other can find information and hopefully be inspired to better themselves by providing challenges for readers to do, putting what they read into action.

While he would love for his blog to turn into a business that consults teams and individuals on growing, he knows that the future is uncertain. The one thing he is certain about is his plan to keep motivating others, whether on or off the field.

"I want to be in a position to help me and challenge them to perform at their best, whether it's in life, sport, arts, military. Wherever it is, I just want the opportunity to help people. I don't know what it looks like yet, but I'll get there and it will be great."

On the Headset: Githens Leads VFL Films' Signing Day Production

By Danielle Whaley

Feb. 2, 2017

On a typical Wednesday morning, most people find themselves fast asleep when the clock reads 5:15 a.m.

This is no typical Wednesday morning.

National Signing Day means an early start to the day for the employees of VFL Films, and that is especially true for Tom Githens, the producer of VFL Films' live National Signing Day broadcast. Before the sun even begins to rise over Rocky Top, he is busy working in the Ray and Lucy Hand Digital Studio to make sure everything and everyone is in place and ready for the six-hour online show.

The New York native is in his fourth year at Tennessee working with VFL Films and has produced all of the Signing Day broadcasts for Tennessee football. While these shows do focus on the recruitment and signings of football players looking to join the Volunteers program, there is also a focus on the fans who watch it and conveying a specific message to them, a goal that Githens has had for the shows since last year.

"Last year we wanted to teach the game and know why it was that everyone loved certain players," he said. "We were able to get some VFLs to come back -- Erik Ainge, Al Wilson -- and they were able to draw, illustrate and show us why it is. So for the common fan, Joe Football, it's like, 'Oh wow, ok, so that player is really good!' So, they feel almost smarter in a way."

In signing Team 121 on Wednesday, Githens wanted to show just how deep Tennessee football is with such well-known players in key areas moving on from college football.

"While that may scare Joe Football, at the same time, the recruiting that has been done by Butch Jones and his staff has made it so they have talent at every level at every position," he said. "So, freshman all the way through senior at every position on the field, they have guys who, as Butch calls it, have the 'Next Man Up' mentality.

"That's what we really wanted to do: to take what is important to coach and transform that into to a message on a big platform."

The live online broadcast is just that -- a big platform. The show itself is shot in a studio crowded with coaches, staff and crew members. But in the control room, Githens is at the helm of the production. While it does seem like a daunting job, he says the hardest part of serving as the captain of the entire crew is not taking the entire show on by himself.

"When you understand the strengths and weaknesses and you understand the people around you, you put them in roles where you think they will succeed, and if they succeed, then we all succeed," he says. "Trying to captain a crew is almost as much luck as it is skill because you're fortunate, more than anything else, to have people who will buy in."

"When you have people who buy in and have bought in for a while now, you're able to work together. It's special."

That togetherness of the VFL Films crew is one thing that consistently stands out to Githens since it does make the Signing Day show planning and production process easier to handle. This year was the first year that the show was done with the typical live production model of having a producer and director. Between himself and director Ross Goodman, who recent Tennessee graduate, they were able to share responsibilities.

"It's amazing to think that we split roles in where years past where I think those roles were shouldered a lot on a few people," he said. "I know this year we took fewer roles and spread them across more people but, still, it's just so much."

While the entire process of planning and producing the live broadcast is a tedious task, he says there is nothing quite like opening the live show at 7 a.m.

"Everything up until that point, you have the ability to go back and change," he mused. "As soon as the show starts, there's only one way to go. You can go up and down, but you can only go forward."

In the midst of trying to accurately convey the intended message to the viewers, running a smooth production with crew, coaches, former and current student-athletes, Githens also ensures that the most is being made of the technology and equipment found in the Ray and Lucy Hand Digital Studio by everyone involved, especially the students who are a part of the crew now and for years to come.

"Ray and Lucy Hand gave to us this unbelievable facility, so for us to do nothing more than basically put the pedal to the metal would be short of disappointing," he said. "What's special about this is knowing that it moves the needle and knowing that we do it with students, too."

“We’re teaching and we’re doing, and, at the end of the day, there’s nothing better than that. There’s nothing more satisfying than that.”

Freshman Williams Shaping Into Form

By Danielle Whaley

Jan. 24, 2017

The transition from high school to college is exciting but sometimes challenging for any college student.

For Grant Williams, his transition has been just that, but it has also been a fast one.

The freshman forward joined the Tennessee basketball team this season after an impressive high school career at Providence Day School in Charlotte, North Carolina. During his senior campaign, Williams found himself being awarded Associated Press All-State honors for a second straight year after averaging 15.8 points, 10.1 rebounds, 4.0 assists, with 3.0 blocks and 0.5 steals per game. Heading into that senior year, he already had scored more than 1,100 career points.

While his performance on the court was notable, he said that his coaches were the ones who really made his time there worthwhile in shaping him into who he is today.

"Coach (Bryan) Field, Coach (Jonathan) McIntyre, Coach (Michael) Boyer and Coach (Aaron) Zucker were great coaches," Williams said. "They were mentoring me both as coaches and as father figures because I was around them 24/7. They were just there for me, and they helped mold me into the guy I am today both when I'm off the court smiling and joking around and when I'm on the court taking on some of the top competition in the country."

During his days at Providence Day School in Charlotte, Williams became one of only four players ever to be named The Charlotte Observer's Player of the Year in back-to-back years (2015 and 2016).

Williams caught the eye of numerous schools, including Ivy League institutions such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale. Tennessee assistant coach Desmond Oliver watched Williams extensively since the ninth grade and has seen considerable growth throughout the process.

"Ironically, his game hasn't changed a whole lot; he has just gotten better at what he was doing back then," Oliver said. "He needed to get himself in better shape. I think he has changed a lot here at UT in that regard because his conditioning has gotten a lot better."

That conditioning is what Williams considers to be the toughest part of his transition to the college basketball world. Through that conditioning, he worked his way into head coach Rick Barnes' system, one the freshman said is like no other.

"I wouldn't be able to guard it if I played it in high school, nor would I be able to coach against it if I end up being a coach one day," Williams said. "So, it's just something that you have to take and accept and let the system work for you rather than trying to work out of it."

Williams drew postgame praise from Arkansas head coach Mike Anderson after posting 15 points and 11 rebounds against the Razorbacks.

He has done just that in his short time on Rocky Top, all while balancing classes, homework and learning the ins and outs of playing under the second-year coach of the Vols. Nearly 20 games into his inaugural season at Tennessee, Williams has found himself leading the team with 5.5 rebounds per game. With his 6-foot-5 stature, he is quite undersized for his position, causing his productivity to come as a surprise to most, including coaches around the Southeastern Conference.

Arkansas head coach Mike Anderson praised Williams for his relentlessness.

"When he posts up, he may be undersized but I tell you, he plays big. I thought he was really active," Anderson said. "He was a great pickup for Rick, with the way he plays. Even going down the stretch we had to box him out on the free-throw line because somehow he came up with it. He never stopped. I love his motor. He has a big-time motor."

Along with leading the team in rebounds, Williams leads the Vols in blocks with 2.0 blocks per game. For him, blocking shots has always been one part of the sport that he loves most. His determination to make plays on the defensive side of the ball comes from the emphasis that Barnes puts on glass presence and inside rebounding, keys that Williams takes into consideration every time he steps on the court.

While he has proven himself as a defensive leader for Tennessee, Oliver believes that there is still so much more potential for Williams than what fans have seen on the court thus far.

Standing at just 6-5, Williams ranks fourth in the SEC in blocks per game (2.0). He is the only player listed inside the top five standing shorter than 6-9.

"He hasn't even tapped into 50 percent of what he can do once he's fully engaged physically and mentally into the game," Oliver said. "I think there's a whole lot of Grant that hasn't been seen in terms of playing harder for longer.

"I do think he's a very intelligent kid, so I think he understands what we're trying to teach within our system. Unlike a lot of freshmen that come here in their first year and they struggle to understand the system, I think Grant understands the system. His challenges are more physical, where we're asking him to master the system but also be the hardest-playing guy on the court at the same time."

With a significant portion of his freshman year ahead of him, Williams looks to continue to grow both on and off the hardwood. While he does feel like he has matured and toughened up through this transition, he says there is still room for improvement.

"I have to get smarter, stronger, and quicker," he said. "I just have to do a better job overall -- leading, being more vocal, and establishing a better presence inside, because it's on and off right now, and I need to be on it the entire time."

As for what he's most excited about looking forward in his career at Tennessee? Simply put: community.

"When we start winning and when we start bringing these fans in, I can't wait," he said. "I saw pictures and videos of it from back in the day, and if that happens soon, I'll be ecstatic."