

After 12 rounds of chemo, this freshman began a promising golf career - The Washington Post

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Good Counsel golfer Madison Smith is one of her team's top players as a freshman. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

By [Hayley Salvatore](#)

When her alarm went off at 5:30 a.m. one Saturday in March, Madison Smith groggily got into her bathing suit and hopped in the car with her parents to head to her championship swim meet. The Good Counsel freshman aided the Falcons in placing first in their heat in the relay event.

The following Monday, Smith, whose “main sport” is golf and who has been playing since she was 7, tried out for the golf team and made varsity. She became the youngest player on the team and one of just two girls to try out.

More good news preceded that: Smith had completed the last of her chemotherapy treatments just days before those athletic accomplishments.

Smith will compete with the Falcons at the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference championship Monday at Northwest Golf Course in Silver Spring. Sports — and the community

at her school — have boosted Smith’s outlook during otherwise difficult circumstances, and she has continued to thrive even though health issues added a degree of difficulty.

During a trip to Maui in August, Madison started experiencing extreme stomach pain and nausea. While she was initially diagnosed as being infected with E. coli and Salmonella — bacteria consistent with food poisoning — her symptoms persisted after she took medication, prompting her mother to suspect worse. Doctors performed an X-ray, found a stricture — a narrowing of the intestinal tract — and airlifted her to a hospital in Honolulu that was equipped to perform surgery.

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When pediatric surgeon Sidney Johnson was finished, he pulled Molly and James Smith out of the recovery room to discuss the results. In the hospital’s chapel, Johnson told them he had removed 23 swollen lymph nodes and a foot of Madison’s colon and that a biopsy came back positive for both celiac disease and cancer. Molly and James were stunned to learn about their otherwise healthy daughter’s diagnosis.

“We had not even been contemplating that because she’s so young and it’s so rare for her age group,” James said. “It just doesn’t happen, so we weren’t prepared for that.”

Back home in Rockville, Madison was formally diagnosed with Stage 3 colorectal cancer by oncologist AeRang Kim at Children’s National Hospital. According to the National Cancer Institute, fewer than 100 children in the United States are diagnosed with colorectal cancer each year.

“She hit literally a home run,” James said. “It was E. coli, Salmonella, Celiac and cancer.”

Starting chemo on Sept. 14, just two weeks after her first day of high school, Madison didn’t know what to expect. She would have to miss four days every other week for chemotherapy treatments, and she would have to navigate the usual stresses of starting at a new school.

Through a port that was surgically implanted in her body, Madison received medicine for 46 hours that would leave her nauseous and fatigued for the next few days. She was able to do most of her treatments at home and recover on her living room couch cuddled up with her pandemic puppy, Wrigley.

“Friday was always a tough day after she was disconnected from her chemotherapy, and she would just work really, really hard on Saturday and Sunday to feel better to get back to be able to go to school on Monday,” James said.

On weeks when she didn’t have chemotherapy treatments, she would swim for Good Counsel.

Kate Walsh, Good Counsel’s assistant principal, was especially invested in Madison’s success; the families have been neighbors and close friends for many years. When Madison completed her 12th and final round of chemotherapy March 11, Walsh sent out an email to all of the teachers at Good Counsel with the news that Madison had beaten her cancer and had not lost her hair. In the

message email were pictures of Madison ringing the victory bell, indicating the end of her treatment.

Madison became interested in attending Good Counsel after taking lessons from the Falcons' former golf coach, Jim Estes. "He would always like chirp in my ear, like, 'I have a golf team,' and then I just, I liked the idea," Madison said. While Estes is no longer with the program, Madison has thrived under new coach Dan Booth and assistant Casey Collins.

Over the course of the season, she has amassed 8.5 points in match play. Her favorite match was her first varsity outing with the team against Paul VI. Although the Falcons lost, 6.5-2.5, Madison, who was up against a junior boy, won her duel.

"We were tied through the ninth hole, and he was sweating, he was getting nervous and he was like, 'This is not supposed to happen,' " said Madison, whose long-term goal is to golf at the collegiate level. "I like playing against boys because they don't expect it from a little girl."



Madison Smith chats with assistant coach Casey Collins at practice. (Doug Kapustin/For The Washington Post)

This summer, Smith will be playing in her fifth Drive, Chip & Putt tournament after taking two years off (one was canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic, and she missed the other because she was in Hawaii). The Maryland local tournament takes place annually at the University of Maryland golf course, with the top three golfers in each city moving onto the sectional round. Smith placed fourth two years ago, crushing her hopes of making it to the final championship and playing at Augusta National in Georgia.

Playing at the home of the Masters has always been a goal of Madison's, so much so that when she was asked what she wanted to do as part of the Make-A-Wish foundation, her answer was easy — to play Augusta National and spend a few nights in the Crow's Nest, where amateur golfers stay during the Masters.

“If you could say, ‘Yeah I got to play Augusta when I was 14,’ people would be like, ‘Huh?’ ”
Madison said.

That wish has not yet been granted, but Madison is confident that she will reach her chosen destination at some point, whether it’s through the Drive, Chip & Putt competition or Make-A-Wish.

“She’s convinced she’s going to get to Augusta,” James said, “one way or another.”