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A Season to Remember

What was supposed to be a rebuilding year for the women's basketball team became one of the most remarkable chapters in Titan history.

Story by TIM OBERMILLER

Photos by ROB KURTYCZ



Titan players and coaches celebrate after being presented the trophy as Division III national champions.
(Photo collage by Gary Schwartz)

In June of last year, Illinois Wesleyan Athletic Director Dennie Bridges '61 got a call from his women's basketball coach with some bad news.

Mia Smith, who has led the women Titans since 1998, told Bridges that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Her biggest concern when she called Bridges was what would happen to her team for the upcoming season.

"I told her I was all in to help her," says Bridges. That meant he would prepare himself to step in at any time, if needed, to coach the team. It was a relief for Smith knowing her players would be in good hands with Bridges, who retired from coaching in 2001 after 36 seasons and 650 victories, including the 2007 NCAA

Division III national championship.

"I went to every preseason practice to learn her system, to learn how she coached," says Bridges. "So I could have taken over the coaching, from an x's and o's standpoint. But it was clear to me the thing I couldn't capture was the relationship she had with the team. She has a way of connecting with the girls and inspiring them."



Mia Smith and her players gear up for the final game against George Fox.

"Their work ethic was unlike anything I had ever experienced," Smith says of this year's team.

If Smith inspires her players, it's a feeling she says she gets back tenfold. It's what made her decide to coach, even while undergoing radiation and chemotherapy treatments. Her decision began a journey that finished March 17 at Hope College in Holland, Mich. The Titan women defeated third-ranked George Fox (Oregon) University, 57-48, to become NCAA Division III national champions. The win brought the number of Titan national titles to six, including three in women's track and one in men's baseball.

"The moment for me was when they all dove into the confetti" during the trophy presentation, says Smith. "That's an image that will never leave my memory."

"It's like pure excitement; it's one of the most pure feelings I've ever felt," says 6-foot senior guard Olivia Lett, who helped the Titans overcome a 48-43 deficit with less than four minutes in the game, sinking six free throws in the final 38 seconds to seal the deal.

"They couldn't drag us off the floor. We didn't want to leave," says Lett. "We all wanted to be out there with our coaches and families and our fans. There's no better way to finish a career. I just couldn't ask for a better way to go out."

Although the team finished fourth in last year's national tournament, four of its top six players graduated. The team's schedule for the upcoming year was statistically ranked as the second toughest in the nation among Division III women's teams. Some termed it "a rebuilding year" — an assessment seemingly confirmed after the team lost three of its first four games.

Smith had a different take entirely. "I was always sure," she says. "And I don't say that overconfidently. Their work ethic in practice was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. They just bit into everything I asked them to do. And bit hard."

With four of last year's starting players gone, "we were all over each other," competing for playing time, says Lett, who transferred from Southern Illinois University to play for the Titans in the middle of the 2009-10 season. "So that really propelled us for a lot of the season. But we were also very supportive of each other. Once we got to game time, we knew we weren't going against each other any more. We were trying to accomplish our ultimate goal."

Smith sees the team's Dec. 3 loss by three points to the University of Chicago as a turning point. Undefeated and ranked second in the nation, Chicago "had a huge team, a talented team. And when we played that game, it wasn't about being pretty — it was about outworking the opponent. And I thought if we can mirror this game in everything we do from here on out, we can have a national title."

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Twelve months ago, Mia Smith was bathing in her tub when she first noticed the lump in her breast.

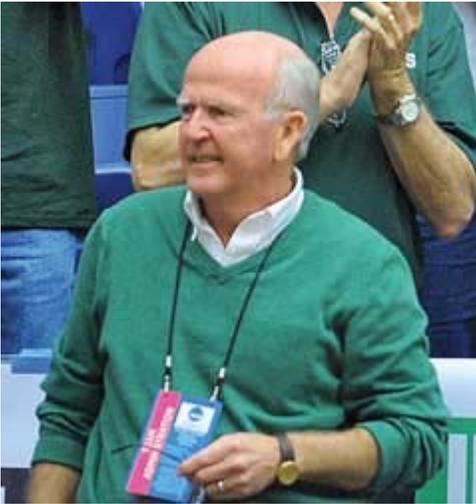
Though a yearly mammogram she'd received just weeks before showed nothing, Smith knew there was cause for concern. She'd been tired, too tired, for the past few months and there was a history of breast cancer in her family.

A biopsy confirmed she had a grade-two tumor, which was surgically removed, along with some lymph nodes. She faced weeks of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. A few suggested outright and more were probably thinking: Why doesn't she just take the year off, get better and live to fight another season?

"I'm going to tell you why I didn't take a year off," Smith says, leaning forward intently. "Because I'm selfish. And I knew this team had special characteristics and I didn't want to miss a single day of that."

She did, in fact, miss practice — just one. Smith certainly saw the logic in doctors' suggestion that she wear a surgical mask and gloves around sick players or, at the very least, that she break her habit of warmly hugging Titan fans whose support "has always meant the world to me."

She couldn't do any of that. "I knew that if I walked into practice with gloves on my hands, that was going to be an indicator, so I didn't do those things. I rolled the dice." If a player had a cold, she usually ended up having one, too, but only a stomach bug that hit the entire team took her out for that one practice.



Dennie Bridges (left) supported Smith throughout the season during her battle with breast cancer.

Bridges accompanied Smith to every one of her chemotherapy sessions. They'd talk about the x's and o's, but Smith knew why he was really there and leaned on him for support. When asked about that support now, with her chemo treatments concluded, Smith smiles and tears up. "It means the world to me," she says.

Just days after she was diagnosed, she emailed all her players. Smith decided there was no use trying to keep her cancer private and suspected talking about it might even do some good by raising awareness about breast cancer.

She was amazed at the responses, from her fellow Titan coaches, from the IWU community, which she says is like a family, and even from coaches of opposing teams. She laughed out loud when she got an email from one, saying: "God, I was feeling sorry for myself because I was tired and then looked at your situation and said, 'Get your ass off that couch.'"

For Smith, the most remarkable support was that which came from strangers — people who left voice mails and text messages or sent cards and letters, all saying, "'We're praying for you.' And I've gotta tell you," she says, "I think I got through it because of answered prayers.

"I'm a Christian woman, I'm very faith-based," she adds, "so I know there's a purpose and I believe that's probably the purpose, to get the awareness out there. I don't want my girls to go through this — that would be worse than anything, to have to watch them have to go through what I did. So: self-evaluation, free exams, get your mammograms. Get it taken care of."

Smith and her players seem aware that many people hold the notion that her having cancer led to the championship by creating a sense of purpose among the team.

"I don't think it really affected the season," says Lett, "and that's really a compliment to her. She never let it affect the season. Yeah, when you went home and thought about the fact that she's coming every day and bringing energy to practice — yeah, it was inspirational. But did it affect the day-to-day stuff? No, not at all."

"I've said it numerous times — it's the best chemotherapy in the world to be in practice with these girls," says Smith. "I wish every cancer victim had or could feel what I felt from them in practice or watching them work so hard and then get it right, and to see the excitement on their faces. Those types of feelings have got to be ..." She pauses to find the right word. Medicinal?

"Oh, absolutely. Great choice of words there. Medicinal."

While she wanted her players to focus on their game and not her illness, they did find ways of letting her know how they felt about their coach and her struggle. "Whitewater-Wisconsin is a great team and we were up there

for a big game, and for their games they dim all the lights and then shine spotlights as the kids run out on the floor. They introduce my players and the first one comes out, I can't remember who it was, and I see something pink and think, 'What have they done?' And then the second one comes out and it's [junior guard] Melissa Gardner and Melissa turns so I can see. Then I realized: They all have these pink ribbons on them.

"And I was so thankful there was no light, because I lost it. My chin was quivering, my body shaking and my eyes, of course, filled with tears. I always knew they were supportive, but I knew at that moment that we were going to fight a battle as a team."

Smith tears up recalling such emotional moments, and seems grateful when asked a different kind of question: Did she adapt a certain coaching strategy specifically for the tournament games?



Smith cuts down the net to take back to Bloomington. Her defensive strategy paid off — it was the second-lowest scoring final in the championship's history.

"Thank you for asking that, yes," she says and the intense, tough-as-nails attitude that has led to a 282-108 career record and six league championships shines in her eyes. "That [strategy] was the absolute turning point for us, when we played the conference championship game against Carthage" on Feb. 25 at

the Shirk Athletic Center, the team's last home game.

"I told them, 'Girls, you're not going to beat them by scoring points. You're going to beat them by playing a different form of defense. We've got to be more physical, and we've got to take away all easy passes. Nothing can be easy.'"

When asked if that strategy is reflected in low score of the final game against George Fox, she smiles and says, "Absolutely."

Now that's it's all over, how is she feeling, health-wise? "I'm good; I think I'll be fine. My doctors are very encouraged." She's been given a "regimented treatment plan, and I've adhered to every single thing they've asked me to do."

After winning the national championship, a longtime goal of hers, she says, "I'm not sleeping very well because I'm still too happy. It's hard to sleep when you have a smile on your face — really."

"I did ask Dennie, 'When does that feeling go away?' and he glanced down at his own championship ring and said, 'Every time I look at this ring, I feel the same way I did on that night.'"

More than anything, Smith is thrilled for her players, both present and past. The national title "has a piece of every player that has ever worn the Titan women's basketball uniform," she says. "And a lot of them were at the final-four ballgames, which was amazing. The support from our women's basketball alumni is just overwhelming."

Thinking again of her Titan players rolling in the confetti that night, she says, "There is such an elation watching hard work pay off. This is something that they'll tell their children and grandchildren. Their neighbors will know. It's just an elated feeling that takes you beyond anything you've experience before.

"And, I'll tell you right now. I'm ready to do it again. I'm ready to do it again for sure."

To read about the Titan men's finish in the Final Four, [click here.](#)

To visit the Titan Athletic Website, [click here.](#)