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Winning in the game of life

April 01, 2010 | Mitzi Bible

Sometimes we're given a talent that holds a promising future in our hands. Then sometimes God takes that talent and we find out He has other plans.

Senior Andy Smallwood, a sport management major originally from Orlando, Fla., came to Liberty in the fall of 2005 on a scholarship from LU founder Dr. Jerry Falwell, who had hoped he would play basketball for LU.

But Smallwood, who had excelled in basketball since childhood, had to deny the offer to play. He had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis two years before and the medication he needed to make it through practices and games was taking a toll.

"It wears on your body, it wears on your liver, and I said I wasn't going to do that to myself for the next four years," he said. "I said, 'I'll trust God with what He's given me and what He's going to do — and the playing part is over.'"

But Smallwood soon found himself back on the court — those who learned of his passion for basketball found a spot for him as an assistant manager of the men's basketball team. Later on he helped to form the LUnatics club, a spirited group of student fans. And for the last two years he has coached rising high school junior and senior girls for the Amateur Athletics Union's summer tournament teams.

"When I realized that I wasn't going to be able to play in college, I decided I wanted to coach," he said. "I prayed about it and got a clear answer on that. That's just been my focus — to get

better at that and to sharpen my brain.”

Apparently Smallwood’s focus was right where it should have been this past summer. As an AAU coach, he took his girls team (which included the best players in the region) to the national championships — and beat out 190 teams from across the country to take the title. They competed with players committed to playing basketball in the ACC, the Big 12 and the Big East conferences.

As a 23-year-old coach, the youngest among his competition, he was proud to see all his young players gain national recognition and earn college scholarships as a result.

When he graduates in May, he plans to pursue coaching and has even received some preliminary offers at the highest level.

Wherever Smallwood ends up, he said he will leave Liberty with everything he needs to succeed.

“We’ve got a group of professors very passionate about sports, very passionate about us succeeding; being here, working here, and [AAU] has prepared me more than anything else would. ... I’ve been in athletic departments other places [and] I’ve seen the kids that come out of sport management programs — what they teach here is relevant to now, not 1960.”

And if he were here today, Dr. Jerry Falwell would be one of Smallwood’s greatest fans. Smallwood, now among one of the last students on campus to have known the popular chancellor personally, said “Doc” had an influence on his life from the beginning, when he offered him a scholarship.

“For me to be able to sit down and talk with Dr. Falwell — he was a big athletics guy, too — and to be able to have any kind of relationship with him is special,” he said.

Smallwood remembers the kid punches he received from Falwell whenever they saw one another on campus, and the time Falwell called him at home following a car accident where Smallwood ended up with a concussion.

“He had a group of guys going to the chapel to pray for me — he took it as if I was one of his kids.”

Knowing the health battles Smallwood faced daily, Falwell played his own role as Smallwood’s coach. “He said, ‘I’m praying for you, but don’t quit, keep your head up, fight through, you’re going make it.’ ... He made me want to change ... to be the best at what I’m doing.”

Now it’s Smallwood’s turn to influence young people in much the same way.

Brittney Campbell played with AAU and saw Smallwood in action. Now a member of the Lady Flames, she has experienced her own share of setbacks, in the form of injuries that have halted her play.

“Andy was always encouraging,” she said. “He was like, ‘Just be strong;’ he tells me, ‘I respect you for your faith, just keep your faith and you’ll get through it.’”

And also like Falwell, in an ironic twist Smallwood is helping young athletes secure scholarships.

“The greatest part about [coaching in AAU] is seeing these kids get college scholarships — the greatest opportunity is to give other people opportunities, and I’ve tried to do my best at doing that.”

Each day still carries some pain for Smallwood (daily pills and twice-a-week shots are a must to keep the debilitating disease at bay), but that’s when he finds himself taking his own advice.

“I can be active [with medication]. It still hurts, but I can do it. There’s nothing that’s going to keep me from what I have to do — I just thank God for the strength to get out of bed.”

And the opportunities before him give him hope and joy — signs he is carrying out God’s plans for his life.

“I’m around the game that I love ... and there’s a lot of times I really want to play, but sometimes when I coach it’s just as good; I can’t put a jersey on for the kids, I can’t put shoes on and go out there and play for them, but being able to explain to them what I’ve been through — in whatever they’re going through, to be able to coach them in that way — does fill that void.”

Eric Brown contributed to this story.