

Coach/Admin/Supporter

Tony Lotti

Position: Head Football Coach, Apalachee High School

Nominated by Jordan Adams, Football coach, Apalachee HS

Reason for Nomination: In May, Coach Lotti had surgery to remove a brain tumor. After stays in ICU and the Hospital in Charlotte, Coach Lotti returned to our team and program and has battled through pain and fatigue all while maintaining a normal schedule of full time coaching and teaching on a daily basis. Even though our season may not be viewed as a success through a win-loss perspective, Coach Lotti has shown our players, student-body, coaching staff, and community that our circumstances never dictate our principals. As a former player of Coach Lotti, and now my seventh year apart of his football staff, I have known him to always put the needs of the student-athletes above the needs of his own. Watching the leader of our football program battle on a daily basis coming off of brain surgery, to still lead, grow, and develop our young men has been inspiring to watch and be a part of. I feel that Coach Lotti is more than deserving of this award for the inspiration and the example he has set and continues to set on a daily basis for our football program, school, and community.

My story ... so far

Tony Lotti

Well this is one of those things that, to be honest in my opinion, is a high honor just to have someone think enough of you to nominate you for an award like this. After reading the letters of support that I have received for this nomination, I don't know what to say except I am a very blessed person.

The 2021 season was a culmination of many hardships that ended with the Apalachee football team reaching the GHSA State Football Playoffs for the first time in 12 years (my 4th season here). Even though we did not win the region title and finished 2nd, my head coaching peers voted me their Region 8 5A Coach of the Year for the 2021 season. A high honor. During the course of the 2021 season, I started to experience fatigue that would not go away. With the type of daily work schedule a head football coach takes on, it's not uncommon to feel this way. This time it just seemed different. My team trainer would try to help me each day with trying to manage my symptoms and my team doctor ran a BUNCH of tests trying to find out what the problem was. All of the test kept coming back normal. Many seemed to think it was the stresses of the job, or stress from losing my mother to frontotemporal lobe dementia where I was her primary care giver until her death in my home. Eight weeks later, my sister-in-law of 25 years lost her fight with breast cancer. I just knew I wasn't feeling good and labored to get through each day.

The extreme fatigue continued and my team doctor continued to try and determine the cause over the next few months. I just kept saying: "Doc, we are missing something" and because of our relationship, he kept looking. Meanwhile, I labored through my school day and coaching responsibilities. Then one test came back as abnormal. My testosterone levels were very low, especially for someone my age. My team doctor felt this would definitely explain the fatigue but we had to wait 6 more weeks before we could start replacement therapy because insurance required the wait to verify the blood test with another test. Six weeks later the levels were even lower and I was put on replacement therapy patches. I wasn't getting any better. I was getting worse. Six weeks after I began replacement therapy, the blood tests showed my levels had dropped even further and now it was a 21. Something else was wrong and I was referred to a urologist. The urologist put testosterone pellets in my hip surgically and ran some other tests. One of those tests came back abnormal so I was referred to an endocrinologist in Gainesville, Georgia, Dr. Russell Fung. Dr. Fung was not at all concerned during my first office visit with him. He said he would run some more blood tests but didn't seem to think it was anything major. The next day after my visit with him, he called me and told me that he needed me to come right back for another blood test. I asked him what was wrong and I asked "you found something didn't you?" He replied, "I'm concerned and need to confirm this blood test." After confirming the same results from the 2nd blood test, he said he would need to refer me for an MRI on my brain. Not what anyone wants to hear.

I was scheduled for a MRI on my brain at Northeast Georgia Medical Center in Braselton on a Friday morning. I was planning on going in to school after the MRI and I did. I tend to talk to people (people who know me will say that's an understatement ha ha) whether I know them or not. There were two technicians who did my MRI scan and I struck up a conversation with them after the test and it was an odd conversation. I could tell they saw something but couldn't tell me.

As they walked me out to where my wife was waiting, I just knew they saw something. My wife asked when they thought we would know something and the technicians replied that he had already

submitted the scan and we should hear something in about 48 hours. I looked at my wife and said "it won't take that long. I will probably know today. I am telling you, they saw something."

Have you heard of My Chart? In my opinion, My Chart is the greatest and worst invention in medical history and I have never had a love/hate relationship like the one I have with My Chart. My Chart is a service you can sign up for with your hospital to receive messages and yes, test results.

I left the hospital and drove home with my wife so I could change clothes and head to school. I live ten minutes from the hospital and as I was changing clothes, my phone went off notifying me that I had a new test result in My Chart. Well, just me and my wife sat in our living room and read the report. Unfortunately for me it was in narrative form and not pictures. If it had been MRI pictures then I would not know what I was looking at but that just wasn't the case. Reading the report that described a mass in my head followed by the measurements of how big it was told me right off that unfortunately I had a brain tumor. What I didn't know was what will happen next, surgery? Or was it too late for me and I was going to die or what. After all, it took about 7 months of looking before we finally got to this information of a brain tumor. I had all weekend to think about it because my doctor would not see the results until Monday. I went on in to school that day, trying my best to carry on as usual and not to panic until I could hear from a doctor.

When Dr. Fung called me on Monday he asked if I had seen the report and what I thought. I replied "well do you all usually measure masses in people's heads that are supposed to be there?" he said no. I asked what happens next. He said he would need to do a STAT referral to a group of neurosurgeons at UNC Medical Center in Chapel Hill and a STAT referral to a neuro ophthalmologist. This was the end of April 2021 and I was to start the first day of spring football practice. By now, I was starting to have some vision problems. The tumor was large, pushing towards the hypothalamus, pinching the optic nerve and surrounding the carotid artery. I had to plan to be out of school for the remainder of the year and after our first day of spring practice, I told my players about the tumor and that I wouldn't be here for the remaining school year and most of the summer. I left for Chapel Hill North Carolina to have brain surgery the first week in May.

Obviously the next several months were very painful. Following the surgery, I had a bleed in my head that caused me to stay in the hospital longer than originally anticipated. I had lost most of my vision because of the bleed with the hopes my vision would return. Eventually, my vision did return. I was finally allowed to return home on May 15 to see my family with instructions to return to Chapel Hill for follow ups five days later. The hope was in seeing my family that it would help boost my spirits. While home, I started to feel worse and not any better. When we arrived back in Chapel Hill, my doctors immediately admitted me back to the hospital where my health was declining and had to be rushed to the ICU. I had two complications from the brain surgery to remove the tumor. One with the bleeding in my head immediately following surgery and now this one. I had developed acute hyponatremia. I was rushed to the UNC Medical Center ICU unit for treatment because my sodium levels were dropping fast from 127 when readmitted to the hospital, to 124 hours later then down to 121. Honestly, I was really scared because do you remember that lag of time from when I found out I had the tumor on Friday and didn't hear from my doctor until Monday? Yes, I was on the internet doing research during the wait – probably the worst thing I could do because there were a lot of frightening things that came up in the search results. I knew what this complication meant and its unfortunate potential outcome. I asked God if I could please get to stay and heal me but then had to put it in his hands.

I believe in the power of prayer. My brother contacted my wife to tell me about all of the coaches in Georgia I knew (and the ones I honestly didn't know) and those from around the country who were praying for me. That night, my levels started to improve. Took a 180 degree turn for the better. Literally changed just like that.

I was finally released from ICU to a regular room several days later and then released from the hospital to return home to recover with scheduled trips planned to return to Chapel Hill for treatments and post-surgery procedures throughout this year.

I was determined to coach and be back around my staff and kids again. In order to do that safely this season, I would need to come up with some kind of plan to protect my face and head. Practices and games can be a very dangerous place for coaches. Having to wear some kind of helmet would obviously cause me to "stick out" which I honestly did not want. So, I always try to come up with a way to make every situation a teachable moment and wanted to find a way to turn this situation into a positive one.

I decided to go with a hockey helmet. It was lightweight and if it could stop a puck going 100 miles an hour, it should be able to stop a stray football at practice or if I got hit on the sidelines in a game. My surgeons thought it was a good idea. They all knew I was going to coach – not coaching was not an option so they all agreed 😊 So how do I make a head football coach wearing a hockey helmet a teachable moment? Well, my message is GRATITUDE.

I found a local artist and told him my idea that I wanted to decorate the hockey helmet with the names of all of the wonderful people who cared for me. It is decorated with both teams of neurosurgeons and skull base surgeons, all of my doctors, nurses and everyone I was grateful for - for taking care of me. I told the kids when they saw the helmet that the message I want them to have is being grateful for what you do have, not focusing on what you don't have. That when you see me in my helmet everyday this season on the field, I want you to think of someone you are thankful for or of someone who has taken care of you. The fact is that I had many people love and care for me like they were related to me. They all didn't have to do that. I wasn't related to any of them but they cared for me like I was. That is a blessing you should be thankful for. People love you too and that's why we are here. One doctor was so moved after seeing my helmet with his name on it, I could tell but then said "I was just doing my job". I corrected him and said no you were not. You are like me - we have a calling to do what we do. If you had a "job" you wouldn't spend so much time with me, you would call me Mr. Lotti and not Coach. You know how much that title means to me. Nurses wouldn't have sat with me in ICU and held my hand, trying to ease my pain and fear. People with jobs do for themselves and can get fired, what we do is a calling. We serve other people. Sometimes God moves you to help somewhere else but you can never be fired from a calling! The people on my helmet made me feel like I was their only patient and I was the most important person in the world. People don't put that kind of love and attention into jobs, only callings. I wanted to make my helmet an outward expression of Gratitude for them.

Everyday is still a bit of a struggle but getting a little stronger each day. I have had 4 post surgery procedures since my original surgery back in May and blessed to say that I didn't miss a practice or game this season! Everything was done during bye weeks etc. I will have my 5th post-surgery procedure in February and a recent MRI indicates it looks like they were able to remove the whole tumor! Still healing and fighting the good fight! This football season was a rebuild year and did not go the way we had hoped. The lesson taught and learned this year is: That's life! Good times and bad come. Enjoy the good

ones and keep fighting through the bad ones. You just have to keep moving forward no matter the hardships and adversity you face. You have to keep pushing forward. Tomorrow is a new day and if God blesses you with a new day – be thankful for it!

I believe your circumstances should never dictate your principles. My principles remain intact and my mission each day stays the same, grounded on two key perspectives: First, I am trusted with the care and well being of someone else's child – there is no greater responsibility. Second, I don't have football players, I have people who chose to play football.

Thanks so much for the opportunity to share my story so far with you! What an honor just to be nominated!

Do Right...Right Follows!

Faith, Hope and Love!

Coach Tony Lotti



Apalachee High School

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Jennifer Martin

Principal

Angie Boyd

Assistant Principal

Ralph Neeley

Assistant Principal/Athletic Director

Deigh Martin

Assistant Principal

November 4, 2022

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is in honor and support of Apalachee High School (AHS) Head Football Coach, Tony Lotti. Coach Lotti was my first head football coach hire when I became the principal of AHS. He was not the first head football coach I worked with as the principal, but he was the first head football coach I had a hand in hiring, and intentionally choosing. I will never forget his interview or my complete feeling of relief as we talked. We met at "Sliced" in Braselton, had some pizza, and talked about people. We didn't talk about the game of football, but about how educators and coaches can mold the character of young men and positively impact the prosperity of a community. I was overwhelmed and worried about hiring what would be considered "my first head football coach" in my tenure as the principal, but interviewing him instantly provided me a sense of peace. He was going to become someone I could depend on and someone our students, faculty, and community would grow to love and admire.

Since that interview, almost six years ago, Coach Lotti has gone above and beyond in every way. Not only was he faced with picking up the pieces of a broken program, but just as he achieved momentum, a global pandemic hit. Covid-19 posed so many obstacles for athletic processes and procedures, but you wouldn't know that based on our football program. Instantly, practices and routines happened digitally as we figured out a way to safely host practices with groups of clustered athletes. The planning, preparation, dedication, and attention to detail allowed our football program to get back after it, not only supporting these students physically, but making sure emotionally and mentally they had an outlet during such a difficult time. Our football staff, under the guidance and leadership of Coach Lotti, knew this was a time in our community that was far bigger than football. Coach Lotti made this happen when many schools and programs threw in the towel. Ultimately, this dedication led him to receive Region Coach of the Year, and a seat at the State Playoffs table, which was something that hadn't been done at Apalachee High School in 12 years. Coach Lotti is larger than life. As a published author, and creator of programs that focus on building strong leaders out of young men, he understands what it takes to build sustainability. Even in the midst of a season that might have to focus more on growth and development versus a win-loss record, Coach Lotti never waivers with his expectations on doing the right thing and holding students to high moral accountability.

Naturally, the head football coach and the principal work together in a web of ways. Our relationship is not unlike many in this way. We are in constant communication as

football is a year-long program to build and maintain. I will never forget the day he came to my office, May of 2022, to tell me about his tumor. He was brave and knowledgeable when I was heartbroken. His consistent sharing of what he had already learned from doctors and surgeons instantly brought a wave of peace over me versus the fear I had initially felt when he sat down to tell me the news. I couldn't help but going back to that dinner we had, almost six years ago. Coach Lotti talked about the "dash." It's not about winning or losing, but about what happens in between those wins and losses that define who we are as people. As I listened to this man of great faith reassure me that he was going to be fine, I couldn't help but feel assured that he was confident this was part of his journey. What he has learned and then imparted on our students, faculty, and community, has been priceless. While he was focusing on his health, you would never know he was gone. His coaching staff knew just what to do, and that's because he has created a program that sustains people. I will never work with another head football coach that will put honor and faith above everything else or who will teach our students that doing right begets a life that is right. Coach Lotti has been an inspiration to our students, our school, and community. His impact is timeless and I will always be grateful our paths crossed during our individual careers. He is a man of integrity, honor, and faith and I recommend him, without reservation, for such an honor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JEM". The letters are stylized and connected.

Jennifer E. Martin
Principal, Apalachee High School

Student-athlete

Tyler Brown

Elite Scholars Academy

Nominated by: Tiffany Pippins, Athletic Director

Reason for nomination: Tyler is currently a senior scholar athlete, during her freshman year she had to have her arm amputated due to cancer, less than 30 days before her debut as a high school swimmer. Tyler did not let her arm amputation stop her. She took a splash in the pool on that opening day and has been swimming on the team every swim season since.

Hello!

My name is Tyler Brown, and this is my story!

My Journey

I have had my amputation and been cancer free for a year now. So now it's time to let you in on my journey!

Background:

2016

One day when I was 12 or 13, I came to my parent's room and showed them a mass that I had found under my arm. After going to the doctor that day, we were told it was a simple neurofibroma, and that we shouldn't worry.

Weeks later it started to bother me more; in the way, clothing fit me, how I slept, and the level of comfort I was in on a day to day basis. For over a year we went to see doctors who continued to pass me to other doctors.

We finally were recommended to (let's say) Dr. B, a neurologist at CHOA. He was the one who finally said "this thing has got to go". because he was concerned that it would cause me nerve damage that would later cost me use of my arm (ironic huh).

Surgery 1:

May 16, 2019

My first surgery was to remove the mass. I woke up in tremendous amounts of pain and specifically remember calling out to God to make the pain stop. After much persuasion from my doctors, my mother finally let me take a high dose pain reliever. One pill and I was good.

I was let out of the hospital 3-4 days later with the best news. "A small sample of the tumor came back benign...I didn't have cancer."!

Cancer:

May 2019

Yet less than a week later my parents got a call. After testing the whole mass, it was found that I had a rare cancer that had barely any documented information. So not only was I 'sick' but no one knew what to do.

After MY doctor consulted with cancer specialists from across the U.S., I did a few more scans, and my parents came to terms with my condition; it was decided that I'd go through 2-3 months of radiation therapy.

Radiation Therapy:

July 2019

I started radiation therapy. The first few weeks weren't as bad as I thought. It had only started getting miserable when the skin under my arm started to peel. I hadn't noticed at first though. It took me going to swim practice one day to learn that a layer of my skin was missing.

Soon after the thin layer under my arm, I started losing patches of skin on my actual arm. And eventually, I had a pink arm from the elbow up. And I still did therapy with a raw arm.

The last day of therapy caught us by surprise. It was actually a week earlier than we expected. I was able to ring a bell marking the end of my journey with cancer.

For a month I was healing and living life like before. One day I missed the first half of school to go to an appointment to be told how radiation worked out... well it didn't.

I went to school that day with a new burden on my shoulders. I had to get my whole right arm amputated to save my life. That day in school was the first day I cried throughout this whole process. But life happens. What can you do?

My amputation:

October 23, 2019

I wore a weird but vibrant hoodie with black jeans and a gold cross necklace from my deceased grandfather.

We met my youth minister, godmother, and other family friends at the hospital.

I was handed a gown and walked to the restroom to put it on. After 30 minutes to an hour I was wheeled to a room and put under anesthesia. "alright you ready big bre-". I woke up in surprisingly no pain at all. For the next 4 days, I received flowers, stuffed animals, cards, etc. from people showing their love and support. On day five I was wheeled out of the hospital ready to be back in the world cancer-free...FOR REAL THIS TIME!

Post Surgery:

Just 21 days after my surgery, I had the chance to compete in my first high school swim meet. Even though I was fresh out of surgery, had stitches in my shoulder, and was out of the pool for months; I still managed to swim strong. I was even keeping up with the other swimmers in the pool.

Even though the meet ended well, I still wasn't the athlete I was before everything happened. I made a vow to myself, saying that, not only will I get back to where I was before; but I will eventually be better.

Life Updates:

Since 2019, I have earned many athletic and leadership awards, achieved my goals, and even tried new sports. In swimming, I have gone to two Junior National events where I broke/set records and become a 5 time national paralympic champion. I have been granted awards such as APIVEO's athlete of the month (an organization who chooses one athlete a month and chooses to highlight their athletic abilities, leadership, and more). And I had the chance to be a part of my school's inaugural flag football team.

I am so thankful for the life I have lived. And I am so proud of the person I have become.

I came a long way from sitting in the doctor's office waiting to tell someone about the unknown mass in my arm.



Tiffany
Pippins EdS, CAA
Athletic Director

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Penny Pitts Mitchell

Associate Director

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN :

I highly recommend Tyler Brown for the 2022 GHSA Inspiration Award. Tyler has inspired the student body and faculty and staff here at Elite Scholars Academy in the area of inclusion for all students and unifying the student body.

Inclusion is a belief that ALL students, regardless of label should be a part of the education community and therefore an inclusive classroom or in this case sport's arena, values diversity and the unique contributions each student/student-athlete brings to the classroom/playing field. Tyler has taught us all here at Elite to look beyond individual differences and to make our athletic program one that has a NO discrimination and intolerance environment; a safe place for those interested in ESA Athletics.

We, the faculty and staff and student body of Elite Scholars Academy are one made of many. Our school is a magnet school, which means the students here come from different geographical areas within Clayton County. Although our students come from different neighborhoods and have many differences, they all share a common goal and that is their commitment to the "E", education, leadership, integrity, tenacity and excellence. Tyler has unified the entire student body with her story, her determination, her drive and her perseverance has impacted the Elite Family on the way we think and work towards our academic and athletic visions and missions. Tyler Brown is amongst the many wherefores, that attribute to the unity and spirit ESA Athletics.

The previously mentioned reasons are amongst the many reasons that exist that indicated that Tyler Brown should receive the 2022 GHSA Inspiration Award. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Pippins

Tiffany Pippins

Athletic Director

Info on Inspiration Awards:

Student-athlete

Will Petit

Cambridge High School

Nominated by: Coach Craig Bennett

Reason for nomination: This young man was a starter for our football team as sophomore. Going into his junior year, he was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis. He went from 190lbs down to 140lbs. He had to drop out of school and face a pretty tough road. He didn't get to attend school his junior year or his senior year. We took his case to the GHSA to appeal the 8 semester rule. Fortunately, he was granted the appeal and was able to recover and become a starter for us this year. He is an extremely talented punter and kicker, and has been invited to schools as a recruit (Clemson, Ga Southern, Coastal Carolina, Marshall). He has become a leader at school, helping run several clubs and took on a leadership role with our team.

Will Petit
Cambridge High School

I think the reason I was nominated for this award is that I was really sick and didn't give up. I am including my college essay at the end of this because it explains what I went through. I played all kinds of sports growing up but especially loved football and basketball. I played on the Varsity team my freshman year. After my sophomore season, I got sick and did not know if I would ever be able to play sports again. I went through a lot of pain physically, mentally and emotionally. I could not go to school, watch my team, even get out of bed, or eat. I felt like I had nothing to look forward to. I refused to give up and I was able to take what I learned through sports and use that same mentality to focus on healing. My teammates and friends and coaches cared about me and prayed for me but they couldn't help the same way. I had to take responsibility. I worked with my parents and doctors and put together a plan. I focused on healing like I used to focus on my athletic training. I kept track of everything and how it made me feel. I tried to find what worked best for me. I called the doctors to ask questions, I studied different diets, watched videos and learned from others. I tried different medications and treatments. I set goals and started really small. I read the bible and felt inspired. I appreciated things that I never noticed before. Being able to go fishing or eating a piece of fruit again are things I might have taken for granted, but once I could stand and walk and eat, I was amazed at how much joy I felt. I studied what interested me like football and punting. I watched videos obsessively and by the time I was able to get out of bed and stand, I started doing ball drops and practiced my form just holding and dropping the ball the right way. I was hopeful that someday I would get to try it again. I wasn't jealous of others, I was happy for them. The first year I sat out, I wasn't even strong enough to go to the games, but I would get updates. The second year I was able to watch from the sidelines. First sitting on a bench then standing part of and the whole game and by mid season I could play catch. Even though I didn't graduate with my friends, I got a chance to play on the field again with my little brother and best friend who is only one year behind me. I felt grateful for the opportunity to play again but didn't care about being cool. I worked with the underclassman and even woke up early to pick them up and take them to practice – otherwise they wouldn't have been able to play. I made some different friends on the team and we started a bible study once a week after practice and once a week with other students. Each week, the group gets bigger and I've met new people and made new friends. People tell me I'm doing a good job on the field or in the classroom or working with others, but I really just feel good in my heart. People tell me they can see joy in my eyes and that makes me feel good.

Failure to Thrive

"Failure to thrive." That was the diagnosis listed on my chart as I lay in bed during my sixth hospital stay in eight months. Between the beeping alerts on the intravenous machine and the nurses sticking me with needles every four hours, I could barely sleep. I was being fed through a tube and my

only form of exercise was frantically unplugging myself from machines and sprinting to the restroom 25 times a day.

The previous year, I was the starting linebacker, punter, and kicker for the Cambridge Bears High School football team. I also played varsity basketball. I was 6'3, 199.9 pounds of pure muscle. My life revolved around athletics. I was in complete control, or at least I thought I was.

Ulcerative Colitis, an autoimmune disease, shook my life. I had bleeding ulcers throughout my large intestine, and my body was degrading. My pain level was 10, the highest rating possible. Some people pay large sums of money to lose weight. Not me. My weight started dropping like green mallard ducks from the sky. In under seven months, I dropped 63 pounds. I had no appetite. I was sleeping on my toilet and leaning over to vomit in the shower. I had flash fevers on a daily basis, and I lost a lot of blood. The exhaustion was unbearable.

The effects of my illness were woven into my life. Other than my family bringing food to my room, I didn't see anyone. I returned the food uneaten. I felt isolated from the world. It hurt to sit down because my body weight rested directly on my bones. The doctor recommended I drop out of school to focus on healing. I kept asking, "Why me?"

My doctor prescribed me medicine that suppressed my immune system. The medication was infused into my body with an intravenous drip machine. At the same time, I took morphine to help manage the pain. I took this for three days. Thankfully, my dad stepped in to change medication so I would not become addicted. Over the next several months, I tried a variety of immunosuppressants from daily infusions to shots to medications that made me sick. Each one worked a little, but then was declared ineffective. The doctors were discouraged and recommended that I have surgery to remove my large intestine. I didn't want to do this because it would be near impossible for me to play sports and go back to the way things used to be.

I followed various diets to try to cure me of this disease. I was put on a bone broth diet. I only drank bone broth, vegetables, and lentils with no salt and no flavor. I called this "Mud Water". It reminded me of "potions" that my cousins and I made out of mud, grass, and leaves when we were kids. I had to try something different, so I shifted to a ketogenic diet. This was primarily filled with vegetables,

nuts, seeds, and meat. I saw some improvement but was still suffering greatly. My diet evolved to more of an animal-based diet filled with quality grass-fed meats, raw organs, raw dairy, fruit, and honey. My body reacted very well to these foods, and I began to heal. Now, I study nutrition and talk with my functional medical doctors about the benefits that nutrition has on my health.

I still have ulcerative colitis and still have to manage some symptoms, but I am getting closer to remission. I have regained nearly all of my weight. I am finally back in the classroom and back on the field. I am starting Varsity Football again and just made the Varsity Basketball team. I am getting recruited by Division 1 Colleges to play football. I experienced great hardship but have also grown to be a stronger person in many ways. My work ethic is better. I appreciate things more. I am closer to my family. I have an unwavering faith. I have learned that I am not, and will never be, in control. And I'm ok with that.

Will Petit
770-687-3556

To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing this letter on behalf of Will Petit. I first met Will as a rising 9th grader during the spring of his 8th grade year. He would come over to Cambridge, where I am the Head Football Coach, and work out with a group of 8th graders getting ready for the upcoming season. Will was a really hard worker, kind of quiet, but was very respectful and easy going. We were excited about Will becoming part of our team. Will very rarely missed any workouts during that spring, and continued that during the summer preparing for his 9th grade season. He quickly became one of the better players in his class and moved up to the JV team during the year. He was a tremendous kicker and punter, but his football aptitude and work ethic allowed him to get moved up to Varsity and started a few games for us as a kicker and as a safety/linebacker. We had a pretty tough season, but Will was a bright spot for us and we were looking forward to his growth for the next year.

Will worked really hard in the offseason. He played basketball as well as ran track. He came back to us in the summer and put on some weight so we moved him to outside Linebacker where he thrived. He became an elite kicker and punter for us his sophomore year. We had games that season that he took over on defense and got us out of some bad situations as our punter. This kid had it all, a great personality, athletic, a hard worker, and a poise about him that we didn't usually see in a sophomore.

That year, toward the spring, we got sent home and shut down for COVID. We stayed in touch with all of our players, but we couldn't do much. Going into our summer workouts, we had to hold them differently that we had in the past. Will's mom, communicated with me that Will was struggling with Ulcerative Colitis, something he had battled for a few years. He would come to practice and try to do what he could, but his pain had gotten so bad, it was hard for him to be with us. This was one of our guys, a starter, who we wanted and needed. Not just for football, but Will brings a joy to you that is contagious. He was going to have to stop practicing. We thought he would be back, we talked about getting him back right before the season. I remember he came to one practice, and he had to leave because he was in so much pain.

This went on for a couple of weeks, until I got word from his parents that he had gotten worse, he would be dropping out of school for the time being. Checking on him every week was really tough. Our players and our coaches wanted him to just get better, we had put football on the bottom of the list. We wanted Will back. Each week got a little harder. I would text him and ask him how he was doing. Early on, he would say he was good, later on, he would get more and more honest with me and tell me it wasn't good. He would come to our games, stand on the sideline with his jersey on, which gave us hope that he would be with us once again. Right before our eyes, this young man who had grown to be around 6'2", 195lbs, was now only a shadow of himself. A kid with eyes so bright, had now faded in to 6'2", 140lb kid with no gleam in his eye.

Going into what would be his senior year, it wasn't much better, and Will would not be coming back to school or to the team. Will has told me how he would not be able to get downstairs to get his medicine. He was in so much pain and now thinking he would never play sports again, a three sport athlete with a real chance to play in college. That he didn't care anymore, all he wanted to do was stay at home and hang out with his family. I remember us talking, and he said would you want to do a Bible study with me. So that fall, almost every week, he and I would study a Bible verse and discuss it. I was

amazed at how he had grown in his faith, and how mature he had become through this life changing medical event.

We then started talking about trying to appeal to the GHSA to allow Will to have an extra year, since he medically couldn't go to school or participate in sports. Thankfully, the GHSA allowed him to appeal the 8 semester rule and have a chance to come back to school and play with this team once again. He has been a standout again for this team, back to 6'2" 190lbs. His physical presence isn't what has changed the most, it is Will himself. I see a different kid. I see a young man who appreciates life, and appreciates the people around him, I see a kid who is so much more outgoing than he was, leading younger people and teammates, helping run a Bible Study Club, that gleam and that smile is back. While he has gone through so many changes, physically and mentally, his diet has changed drastically, he is still that special kid that we saw as a 9th grader. This story is why I nominated Will for this. His courage, determination, his toughness, kindness, is why he should be chosen.

Thank you,

Craig Bennett

Head Football Coach

Cambridge High School

Student-athlete

Abigail Tatum

Ola High School

Nominated by: Chelsea McCreary

Reason for nomination: For those that don't know our girl, Abigail was first diagnosed with Stage 2 Diffuse Astrocytoma of the right frontal lobe in March of 2017. She underwent a craniotomy with a gross total resection of her tumor, George, followed by six months of PT/OT/ST. For the past five years she has thrived in spite of long-term effects from the tumor and surgery, and just entered her senior year of high school. This past June, Abigail was told the tumor has returned and has progressed across the midbrain, thus taking surgery off the table and introducing chemotherapy and proton radiation. Abigail's original goal was to hold off on starting treatment until she was able to finish her last two credits needed to graduate, and her last season as a varsity cheerleader. She has been an Ola High School Varsity Cheerleader for 4 years, leading her team to 3 Region Championships and 2 top 3 State finishes- and determination to finish her cheer career with as a State Champion in November. Unfortunately, "George" had other plans. Abigail's August visit with her neuro-oncologists determined that waiting is no longer an option as her symptoms have progressively worsened. While this isn't the news we hoped for, she is determined to knockout George in round two. Abigail started chemo the Friday morning before the first competition. Her port was placed in her chest and a "port-pillow" was inserted to keep her entry clean and safe for stunting. As long as her platelets and levels are stable, Abby is cleared to cheer. She has since, not missed a practice, a competition, or game. She is determined to lead her team to a State Championship in November. Each day is a struggle. There are practices where she sits, goes full out, and days where she can do bit and pieces. Her skin is bruising and her hair is thinning... but she is AbbySTRONG!!!!!!

my name is Abigail Tatum and I have been nominated for the GHSA inspiration award. This blows my mind how I am accomplishing my dreams through tough times. Ever since I was a little girl, I have wanted to help people and to guide people in their walk here on earth. I've also wanted to help people walk in their spiritual life. I beat brain cancer as an 11 year old in 2017, and now I am battling again as a senior in high school. I cheer both varsity sideline and competition cheer. cheerleading has brought me peace and happiness that I didn't think I would ever be able to have. While I am the one being nominated for this award, cheerleading has done way more than just inspire me. Cheerleading created a home and a family that cannot be forgotten or replaced. I think that this award is amazing, and while I am battling some thing, so big, there are so many things in this world that are bigger than me and my fight. I want to change the world one person at a time. I want to inspire those who have decided that they aren't worth the fight, or that they don't believe they can make a difference. I also want to help and inspire those who are like me, and want to change the world. I think I was nominated because I believe I have the power and the drive to change the world for the better.

To the selection committee,

I am not sure I can adequately put into words the type of person Abigail Tatum is, but I will whole heartedly try. Abigail Tatum has been a member of my Varsity Sideline and Competition program for 4 years. As a freshman, she was an alternate on our competition team. She showed up for 6 straight months, practiced hard, studied hard, was an amazing teammate... and she never competed with the top 16. Abigail encouraged from the side for an entire 6 months. What that means in other sports, like football- is training for 6 month and never playing a down of football. It took an unbelievable amount persistence, determination, and drive; I can honestly say not many athletes could have done that. Instead of letting it define her, she defined it.

She came back the next season; same Abigail- a determined leader, hard worker, and tough athlete. She swapped in and out with some other team members throughout the season, finally got to compete as an Ola cheerleader and had the opportunity to fight the Covid season alongside her 18 teammates.

Then, what I call the rebuilding season rolled around. Abigail's junior year, a post Covid season, a season of a team full of freshmen, and a year of finding our way again. Abigail was monumental in this season. She competed in all 6 regular season competitions, won her 3rd straight Region title, and competed at the GHSA State Cheerleading Championships. She was what we, as a coaching staff, considered a cheerleader that would compete every week. Her position was never questioned, and her work ethic never wavered. She was so solid for us in this year, and she led the newbies in most respectable way; teaching them what we call the "Ola Way" on the mat every day.

That brings me to her Senior year... what I have not mentioned is that Abigail had a brain tumor in the 7th grade. At that time, she had the tumor removed and was cleared to try-out for cheerleading. This summer, June of 2022, was her 5-year mark. The last scan of the 5-year "Golden Ticket", no more scans mark... and that scan came back with a sighting of "George" her brain tumor. She came to me on a Wednesday summer practice- "it's back, my cancer is back". I was shocked, hugged her, cried, and she said back to me "stop, let's practice". And that was her attitude then entire season, don't worry about me, we need to practice. At that time, the doctors told Abigail and her family that surgery was not an option this go round, that Abigail would have to have Chemotherapy and Radiation. Abigail's request was to wait until the second week of November, the week after the GHSA State Cheerleading Championships. The doctors agreed, until the July scan. Unfortunately, that promise was broke, George grew bigger, and Chemotherapy was to start in August. The new promise was to remain cleared to cheer if her levels stayed steady. That promise was kept. Through 3 rounds of oral chemo and 3 round of IV chemo, Abigail competed in all 6 regular season competitions, Co-Ed State Sectionals, and the GHSA State Championship where we placed 5th as a team. She had something to fight for.

Throughout this season, I have watched something that only a few coaches get to see in their career. I got to witness 1 person; 1 single teammate completely define everything that we were as a team. Abigail's outpouring love of this sport, this team, and the success of it was evident in everything WE did. Her selflessness was contagious. The team motto was "do it for Abby". Multiple times I heard cheerleaders say, "if Abby can do it, so can you". There was no feeling sorry for yourself or getting sympathy from the coaching staff. They know, Abigail was out on that mat; nauseous, hair thinning, port in, blurred vision, weak, but yet- she is the strongest person I know. We have hard practices. Abigail didn't let me take easy on her. There were days when I told her "It's ok not to be ok", allowed her to mark her stunts, or sent her home early. On those days she was mad at me for sure. She would tell me and her team- "This is all I got".

The last 4 days of our season were my favorite. Wednesday practice, the day before her last practice as a cheerleader, Abigail had a 10 am chemo appointment. In true Abby fashion, she showed up for practice. With 45 minutes to go in practice, her port (located on her chest), started to bleed. Abigail is a back-spot, and her port was hit 25 times a practice, but today... it had had enough. I looked at Abigail, it that parent to child look and said "you're done today". She flat out told me "NO, go find me a band aid". What did I do... found her a band aid and we went on with the rest of practice. The day of state, I was a nervous wreck. I have coached here at Ola for 10 years, and I had never been so nervous. I wanted it so bad. I wanted a solid routine, a hit, for Abigail.

We hit. We had a solid routine. Abigail was out there. I cried throughout most of the routine and ran straight to her when it was over. Backstage- the tears were rolling down most of their faces, and that is a moment I will NEVER forget. They did it and they did it because of Abigail. She single handedly cultivated everything that I could ever want in a team. They loved hard, protected each other fiercely, and competed for something bigger than themselves; all because of Abigail. She is everything that I could ever want in an athlete. It is with the greatest, tearful honor to nominated Abigail for this award.

Coach Chelsea McCreary