

## **Student-athlete uses power of optimism, competition to overcome Cystic Fibrosis**

By Cullen Parker

The boat engine roared to a start. The sun shined brightly overhead as a light summer breeze blew across the bright blue lake.

Ashley Combs slammed her feet into the tight rubber bindings mounted on her long jump water skis known as the ‘nightmares.’ Her fellow University of Alabama water ski team members cheered her on from shore.

She tightened her helmet one last time before looking up at the red ramp several hundred yards down the glassy, calm lake.

Seated on the starting dock with her skis in the water, she thought about how she was about to fly over 100 feet off a five-foot ramp. A rush of adrenaline filled her body as she looked up at the boat.

The line tightened. Ashley slid off the starting dock and began speeding down the lake towards the ramp.

On shore, Ashley did not seem different from her teammates. She possessed an enthusiastic drive for competition and a deep passion for water skiing.

But, Ashley is not a typical athlete.

She suffers from Cystic Fibrosis, which is a hereditary disease that affects the digestive system and lungs.

According to Medical News Today editor James McIntosh, the disease causes the body to produce a thick and sticky mucus that clogs the lungs and obstructs the pancreas.

McIntosh explained that Cystic Fibrosis can be life threatening, and people with the disease tend to have a shorter-than-normal life span.

According to McIntosh, Cystic Fibrosis affects more than 30,000 people in the U.S. alone.

Ashley said that water skiing gave her a positive outlook on life despite fighting the disease.

“It saved my life honestly,” Ashley said.

### **Saved by water skiing**

Ever since she was a child, Ashley always had a place in the water-skiing community. She recalled learning to ski when she was only four years old.

“My dad and my grandpa taught me how to water ski,” Ashley said. “It was what I would look forward to every single weekend.”

As she grew up, Ashley said that the lake became a place to find comfort and support, despite her struggles with Cystic Fibrosis.

“When I was growing up, even though I was teased in school, the lake was a safe place to be, and I forgot my troubles,” Ashley explained. “Things could be going pretty wrong, but when I was at the lake, it was OK.”

JB Combs, Ashley’s father, said that he always knew she would be an athlete.

“My mindset was to raise an athlete,” JB said. “The better condition she was in when things went south, the better the descent would be. If she’s in better shape to start with, she’ll be in better condition to handle physical problems in the future.”

Ashley said that she attributes much of her success, both on and off the water, to the way her parents raised her.

“My parents had some pretty cool strengths that impacted a lot of the way that I have been able to grow and be successful,” Ashley said. “My mom was very meticulous and by the

book, while my dad wanted me to be limitless. He didn't want people to look at me as limited and see me as a risk or weaker."

When it came time to choose a college, Ashley said that The University of Alabama was the perfect place.

"I always had this weird idea that I wanted to go to the south, and water skiing is what got me there," Ashley said. "Also, ever since I was little, my favorite song was 'Sweet Home Alabama,' by Lynyrd Skynyrd."

### **Providing a home**

Ashley said that The University of Alabama water ski team quickly became her new home in college and provided her with strength to fight Cystic Fibrosis.

"If I hadn't been on the ski team, I don't want to even know what my life would have been like," Ashley said.

Ashley added that her friends are what kept her strong through her struggles with the disease.

"My friends on the ski team provided me with what I wasn't giving myself any other way," Ashley said. "It literally could not have been more important that I had all of that while I was there."

Santiago Varas, Ashley's boyfriend, explained that water skiing provided important consistency while fighting Cystic Fibrosis.

"A lot of people with Cystic Fibrosis struggle with finding a passion," Varas said. "Skiing has been a way for her to find her passion."

JB said that one of the hardest parts about Cystic Fibrosis is choosing how to live your life, since it adds extra risks to any activity.

“I think a shorter, more fulfilled life is better than a long unfulfilled life,” JB said.

JB added that Ashley is a part of a very small group of Cystic Fibrosis athletes.

“The combination of her drive and love for water skiing and athletics coupled with Cystic Fibrosis makes her unique,” JB said.

In 2013, the National Collegiate Water Ski Association named Ashley female athlete of the year.

### **Spreading optimism**

Although Ashley chose to live a very active and fulfilling lifestyle, she said it can still be very challenging at times.

“Staying optimistic is a full-time job,” Ashley explained. “Sometimes Cystic Fibrosis can be a little bit of a thief of joy. I have worked really hard to be somebody that looks past things that suck and chooses to just live and be happy.”

Unfortunately, Ashley said that with Cystic Fibrosis, optimism is not always a reality.

“Optimism is really freaking hard,” Ashley said. “It is worth it and makes life a million times better, but it is not always reality.”

While at the University of Alabama, Ashley said that she decided it was time to make a change in her life and share her passion with other Cystic Fibrosis patients. In 2015, she started the Smash The Barriers nonprofit foundation.

“I definitely had this anxiety about needing to do something before I’m not here anymore, and to make an impact, and just wanting to share joy with others,” Ashley said. “I know what water skiing has given me. It has given me a quality of life that you literally can’t put a price on.”

Ashley said that she wants to be an advocate and help other Cystic Fibrosis patients find their passion.

“Sometimes parents give up before their children with Cystic Fibrosis can find their passion,” Ashley explained. “I want to be the middle man in helping that not happen.”

Ashley said that the foundation will act as a type of counseling service that helps people suffering from chronic illnesses improve their quality of life.

“It will aim to improve the lives of children with chronic illnesses in a manner that instills a lifestyle filled with passion and a community of like-minded people.” Ashley said. “I will meet with a child and their family and talk with them about what their child likes to do. When I figure out what that is, I will pull all community resources and give them all of that information and help them get started.”

Ashley explained that she hopes the foundation will grow once she graduates, since she will have more time to focus her efforts on it.

“I would love for this to be the type of foundation that can be like the Make-A-Wish Foundation, but on a daily level,” Ashley said. “I want to provide them with that joy and gratification, but my goal is to make it an experience they can have every day.”

### **Setting the example**

JB said that Ashley became an example of how to live a positive life.

“She has definitely taught me to live and embrace the moment and live life to the fullest as opposed to going through the motions,” JB said.

Ashley said that most importantly, do not waste your life.

“We took life as one of those things that is temporary, Ashley explained. “We weren’t going to waste it. Those changes are continuing still with my family.”

Varas said that many people turn to Ashley for advice because of her optimistic outlook on life.

“People are always coming to her asking for advice on what they are struggling with,” Varas said. “She is always helping people and doesn’t really ask for a whole lot of help. She is definitely someone who gives more than she takes.”

Ashley said that she learned that giving up is simply not an option.

“If it’s not working right now, it’s not done,” Ashley explained. “Even in the moments when you feel like you are up against the wall and have no options, you just have to rearrange what your plan is.”

Ashley added that in the end, people need to embrace who they are to live a fulfilled life.

“Be proud of what you are without letting it be all of you,” Ashley said.