

SPORTS

Hall of Fame courage

Blaine gymnast presented U's Szott Award for cancer fight

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Whenever you're around Braxton Battaglia, you can be sure an element of gymnastics is going to follow.

It could be time in the gym, where the 10-year-old Blaine gymnast is most at home, or spending many hours practicing at Twin City Twisters. Or perhaps in a conversation about her favorite athletes to watch compete.

And it has been at the heart of Battaglia's life-altering battle throughout the past year, fighting B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia. The sport, and Battaglia's passion for it, has forged her strength, fighting spirit and ability to overcome adversity, as well as enhanced a heart that led to her creation of the TeamBrax1 Fund in an effort to help other kids and families.

This resolute combination led to Battaglia recently receiving the University of Minnesota gymnastics program's Abby Szott Courage Award, and with it a spot in the University of Minnesota Gymnastics Hall of Fame.

"It has kept me strong and taught me to believe in myself," Battaglia said. "You can learn that when you fail, you can work harder to get back up again."

Battaglia's journey in the sport began at the age of 3, when her mom signed her up for rec gymnastics.

"My mom wanted an indoor activity during the winter," Battaglia said. "Plus she said it would be a good foundation to transition into any sport."

While she would go on to participate in other sports too, there would be no desire to ever move away from gymnastics.



Blaine 10-year-old Braxton Battaglia during a visit with members of the University of Minnesota football team at the University of Minnesota's Masonic Children's Hospital. Battaglia, a passionate Gopher fan, recently received the gymnastics program's Abby Szott Courage Award for her fight with leukemia and her efforts to help other families by creating the TeamBrax 1 Fund.
Photo submitted

The connection was instant.

She quickly began learning new skills, making new friends and reaching new levels, most recently moving into the JO program and competing at Level 4 at Twin City Twisters in Champlin.

"I enjoy getting to see my friends, pushing myself to work hard and achieving my goals of getting new skills," Battaglia said. "It is hard because each level is different and harder the higher up you go, but it is also fun since the higher you go the more fun and challenging the skills are."

Everything would be thrown for a loop in May 2018, though, when Battaglia began experiencing pain in her wrist. An orthopedic doctor originally thought it was an overuse injury, putting Battaglia in a cast. When she resumed training, more joints began to hurt, but not at the same time.

An extended break from gymnastics was recommended,



While dealing with her own diagnosis, Battaglia has been busy with work on the TeamBrax 1 Fund, seeking to help other patients and families at the University of Minnesota's Masonic Children's Hospital.
Photo submitted

with Battaglia's parents bringing her to her pediatrician that August. Blood work indicated a low white blood cell count and a possible autoimmune disease,

with a referral to a doctor indicating she had polyarticular juvenile idiopathic arthritis, pain in the joints with no real cause, but that can go into remission

with treatment.

Over the next few months, Battaglia began to feel much better, even making it back to compete. While the goal was to return for a single meet, Battaglia completed her full level 4 season and finished fourth in the state meet all-around.

But in January 2019, she began feeling sick again, developing a headache that would not go away. A return visit to the doctor revealed a diagnosis no one was expecting in B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Battaglia's determination and fight honed in gymnastics was soon put to use as she started chemo treatments.

"Gymnastics teaches you to keep trying over and over again," Battaglia said. "Until you get a new skill, and get it right."

Her treatment road map began with a month-long induction phase, then two-month periods of consolidation, interim maintenance I, delayed intensification and interim maintenance II.

Great news came in mid-December, as after nearly a year's fight, Battaglia was ready to officially start a final 18-month phase of maintenance, with a targeted date of ending chemo in May 2021.

"I am looking forward to having a normal life again," Battaglia said.

Along with gymnastics, Battaglia also has a deep connection to the University of Minnesota. She has drawn on both in her recovery journey.

Her family looked to the Gopher football team's "Row the Boat" mantra in the face of adversity for strength, then the connection grew stronger when Battaglia became a patient at the University of Minnesota Masonic Children's Hospital.

"They have been amazing," Battaglia said. "They are all so nice and understanding."

Throughout treatment, she began meeting and spending time with many Gopher athletes, coaches and families.

In the beginning of this year, Battaglia was honored during

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the gymnastics program's Hall of Fame banquet as one of three recipients of its Abby Szott Courage Award, presented to gymnasts who have "displayed or incorporated their love of gymnastics while encountering or overcoming obstacles in their lives," University of Minnesota women's gymnastics head coach Jenny Hansen said.

"It means a lot because I feel honored to receive this award and I love Gopher gymnastics so much," Battaglia said.

Her passion for Gopher athletics has also included the football team, with a close connection to head coach P.J. Fleck's family.

Braxton's doctors worked to rearrange her treatment schedule to enable the Battaglia family to attend the New Year's Day Outback Bowl in Tampa against Auburn. Fleck invited Braxton to deliver a speech she wrote herself during bowl game preparation, sharing her experience in front of the entire football team.

The Gophers went on to win 31-24, after which Battaglia received hugs from Fleck and Gopher holder Casey O'Brien, a five-time cancer survivor who won the 2019 Disney Spirit Award as college football's most inspirational player.

"I was nervous, but it was really cool at the same time," Battaglia said. "It was so cool that P.J. asked me to do it and to have the team cheer for me at the end of

my speech.

"It has been very cool to get to interact with the Gopher football and gymnastics athletes and to be able to share my story with them and have them support me."

For her part, Battaglia is looking forward to getting better and continuing her own gymnastics career. She has enjoyed a return to the gym for workouts and will be paying close attention, as always, to her favorite sport this year as it takes center stage at the Summer Olympics.

"I am excited to hopefully watch Grace McCallum, since she is my friend and has been so supportive of me," Battaglia said. "She is also a Twin City Twister and I feel so proud to be at the same gym as her."

While dealing with her own diagnosis, Battaglia has also been at work to pay it forward for other children. She is a 3M Open Masonic Children's Hospital Representative and has created the Team-Brax1 Fund, a fund created by Battaglia aimed at helping patients and their families at the Masonic Children's Hospital. People can learn more about the fund or contribute by visiting tb1fund.org.

"I wanted to help other kids in the hospital to help their stays be more enjoyable and less scary," Battaglia said. "It means a lot to me to help other kids and families at the hospital."

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Braxton Battaglia (from top, left to right): during a visit with University of Minnesota gymnasts Kaitlyn Higgins and Maddie Quarles and coach Jenny Hansen at the University of Minnesota's Masonic Children's Hospital; with sister Brylee, who is also a Twin City Twisters gymnast, at the University of Minnesota gymnastics Hall of Fame banquet; with standout Minnesota gymnast Grace McCallum during a visit; and with Brylee and Goldy Gopher at Gopher football's Row the Boat BBQ at the hospital. Photos submitted