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When the ball lands in your court

When I signed the National Letter of Intent with St. Bonaventure University, I felt proud. I had worked hard, played harder and sacrificed a great deal to earn a Division 1 tennis scholarship. I felt satisfied with myself.

But I hadn't thought about what was coming.

So after a blurry first year of college, I felt lost. I had a drama-filled team, some frustrating financial dilemmas and a grade point average and major that, according to my dad, "would take me nowhere." College tennis wasn't everything I thought it'd be, and I ended my first year a little disappointed.

But when Meredith Haggerty joined the team the next year, I learnt college tennis could mean more than just a scholarship. And after hearing her story, I understood why:

Holding her dying mother in her arms, Meredith called the hospital, crying. Her mother had passed out after coughing up enough blood to fill a drinking glass.

An ambulance rushed her mother to the hospital, and doctors told the scared high school senior her mother's cancer had left her frail, weighing a mere 85 pounds. She could barely walk, and needed someone to look after her.

And that was the day Meredith chose to give up her dream of playing college tennis to help her mother.

Last February, doctors had diagnosed Meredith's mother with stage three ovarian cancer.

They told her she had six months to live.

"Words can't describe how that day felt," Meredith said. "But I had a 10-year-old brother who did not fully understand what was going on and a younger sister who I needed to be brave for."

Meredith traveled to a cancer treatment center with her mother every Tuesday to Friday of each week for four months. The trip took three hours, and Meredith missed four days of high school each week.

"Being with my mom was more important to me than school," she said. "Although I was a little disappointed because I'd always dreamed of playing college tennis."

Our coach, Michael Bates, recruited Meredith to Bonaventure in the fall, before her mom was diagnosed.

"When she told me she wasn't coming because of her mom, I understood," said coach Bates, "but I continued to call her at least once a week to see how she was doing."

Meredith put her life on hold to try and make her mother's better.

But in July, doctors pronounced her mother cancer free: the first survivor of an experimental drug that kills stage three ovarian cancer cells.

"It was a miracle," Meredith said.

Meredith said coach Bates helped her through it, and he was the main reason she chose to go to Bonaventure.

"He was the only coach that kept calling me even after I told him I wasn't coming to Bonaventure," she said. "He actually cared, and I needed someone who understood what I was going through."

Meredith took summer courses to raise her marks up, graduated and committed to Bonaventure in July. But she still worried about leaving her mother.

"She was still recovering and very weak," she said, "but my friends at Bonaventure helped me stop feeling guilty for leaving home and helped me enjoy life again."

Meredith's problems blew mine out of the water. Her mother's cancer treatments left their family with financial problems galore, but she worked hard and always stayed positive.

She wasn't extraordinary at tennis and received no money to play on our team; but that didn't matter. What mattered was that she was living her dream, and living for herself.

Meredith's essay for her application to Bonaventure read, "My mother's fight against cancer taught me life is too short to live behind my fears. Even though I was scared to go to college and leave her, I knew I had to shoot for my dreams. Tennis was my dream, and once the ball was in my court, I did everything I could to turn it into reality."

I found my sophomore year much more rewarding. Because now, when the ball lands in my court, I know what to do with it: I shoot for my dreams and live for myself.

And in the end, that's the best anyone can do.