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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

## Appomattox's Doug Smith walks by faith while undergoing cancer treatments

**Ben Cates**

Mar 23, 2021



Appomattox coach Doug Smith looks on as the Raiders run a play in 2019 on a practice field outside Bragg Stadium  
News & Advance File

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**L**ast fall, not long after being diagnosed with multiple myeloma, Appomattox football coach Doug Smith broke the news to his high school players via a pre-recorded video.

He talked about the sport he loves, repeating many of the lessons he's instilled since arriving at the school in 2012: Prepare by putting in all the necessary work; show your teammates how much you care for them by giving your all; don't stop battling until the clock strikes zero.

With that same mentality, Smith entered Duke Cancer Center in Durham, North Carolina, this week. There, he will undergo weeks-long rounds of intense treatment and chemotherapy meant to slow the spread of the cancer that had metastasized by the time he was diagnosed in the fall.

The coach, who long ago endeared himself to people in the Lynchburg area and to football communities across the state, has endured moments of doubt the last five months. But he's facing the future with a renewed sense of faith.

"I'm all good, man!" Smith, who turns 58 years old in April, said last week. Cue the smile that invariably lights up the coach's face during conversations. And although this one took place via a phone call, Smith's tone — bright and upbeat as ever — indicated he was smiling through uncertainty. Smiling because he is filled at the same time with hope.

"It sounds weird, but it's been one good thing after another," he added. "I'm kind of like everybody else; not knowing what's gonna happen in your future is tough. But God has a way of giving you joy."

That word — joy — is a constant part of his vocabulary. The phrase "joy through the struggle" became the motto of Appomattox's 2019 team, which captured the school's fourth football state championship in a five-year span. And for a school that has endured an unprecedented number of tragedies in the last six years, that phrase became a powerful reminder of finding contentment despite adverse situations.

Now Smith, who helped guide the school and the surrounding community through difficult times, is facing difficult times himself.

“When you know [God] knows your future, you leave it in his hands and you don’t have to worry about it anymore,” Smith, who has always been outspoken about his Christian faith, said.

He enters his third round of treatments knowing arduous days await. Multiple myeloma forms in plasma cells and can spread rapidly. In Smith’s case, doctors found several tumors from the outset. He underwent five days of radiation in November, then embarked on 13 weeks of injections and medications in December meant to slow the spread of cancerous cells, bolster his immune system and strengthen his bones. At one point, within a 10-day span, Smith lost 26 pounds, going from 185 to 159.

He regained some weight over the winter and resumed physical activities. Still, prior to entering Duke, there were days when Smith felt zapped of all energy.

“And all of the sudden, I’d think, ‘Someone’s just prayed, because I just got shot with energy,’” he said, referencing the support he’s received.

He’s managed to remain active during Appomattox’s abbreviated football season via remote communication. He watches practices on Hudl, a popular platform for reviewing film. Then he sends notes and calls Raiders players with suggestions.

On game nights, he sets up multiple computer monitors at home and streams the action. He’s in touch with interim head coach Stephen Castello, Appomattox’s defensive coordinator, via a bluetooth headset. The football staff has taken on a myriad of in-person duties in Smith’s absence. The Raiders are currently 4-0 with two games remaining, and appear slated for another lengthy playoff run.

The school’s athletic director, Chris Dodge, receives messages about Smith on an almost-daily basis. Some recently found out about his cancer battle. Others ask for updates. All offer prayers, it seems. “The whole community’s behind him,” Dodge

said. The AD has been encouraged by Smith's desire to remain in touch with players. "It's unbelievable that he has that kind of passion for these kids. It's remarkable."

Smith recently picked up his 100th win. Appomattox has installed a new play clock at Bragg Stadium in his honor. Nine years ago, few people would've thought his success possible. Smith arrived at Appomattox in 2012 after three years at Heritage High, a stint in which he won just 13 games. Appomattox won four times his first year. But the Raiders started to improve and, suddenly, everything clicked. Back-to-back undefeated seasons. A 32-game winning streak, the longest of its kind in the state at the time. State titles in 2015, '16, '17 and '19.

Along the way, Smith rallied around Appomattox. He volunteered for countless projects, helped the school and community unite after numerous deaths in 2015, cleared land and comforted residents after a tornado ripped through the area in 2016. And he brought his players along for the array of tasks, asking them to invest in something bigger than themselves, knowing that in order for them to become people of character, they'd have to sacrifice their time and see grief up close and help people in need.

All of that from a man who often wandered Bragg Stadium alone long after darkness had settled and practice was over, who studied film and considered strategies late into the night, who arrived at school on Saturday mornings to spend hours doing players' laundry.

"I wish that I was half the man Doug Smith is," Appomattox County High School principal Poldi Moreno said. "Through all of this, he still gives to other people. He still lives that motto of service."

Smith has received cards and well-wishes from former players, parents, fans, old playoff opponents from across the state and area schools. He's in touch with ex-players, like quarterback JaVon Scruggs, currently a safety at Liberty University.

Scruggs has learned too many lessons from Smith to count. “How to be a better person, how to be a better husband, how to be a better athlete, how to be a better teammate, how to be a better student, whatever phase of life you can think about,” Scruggs said. “He has actually poured valuable time into me. ... Outside of my family, he’s one of those guys that if I need to fall back on something, I can contact him. If something is worrying or bothering me, I can contact him. Whatever it is, he can be that go-to guy for me. I just look up to him as a father figure that I never had.”

Smith faces a grueling stretch of treatments. As he described it: “Heavy chemo, I’ll go bald, lose a lot of weight and feel awful.” Should all his treatments succeed, he knows he’ll most likely live with multiple myeloma the rest of his life. For that cancer, there is no known cause and no known cure. But he plans to return to his duties in the fall, if possible. In the meantime, he’s praying for healing and a greater faith than he already possesses.

“Regardless, one way or another, I think, ‘Man, I have another day to be a witness. I have another day to find a way to live life the right way.’”

That statement from a man who has stood as an example to countless individuals searching for stability and hope. He’s still evolving, hoping to become a more faithful and more loving person.

“I want to live every day like it’s my last,” he added. “I want to give back however and whenever I can because I want to bless others. I’m thankful for today and I’m thankful for tomorrow, if it comes.”

[https://newsadvance.com/sports/high-school/in-seminole-district-bryson-meeks-has-a-home-that-welcomes-him-with-open-arms/article\\_f30b6366-385c-11ec-a3e2-fbe8b0b5350b.html](https://newsadvance.com/sports/high-school/in-seminole-district-bryson-meeks-has-a-home-that-welcomes-him-with-open-arms/article_f30b6366-385c-11ec-a3e2-fbe8b0b5350b.html)

## In Seminole District, Bryson Meeks has a home that welcomes him with open arms

**Ben Cates**

Oct 29, 2021



Bryson Meeks, 16, smiles as he walks onto the practice field at Brookville High School on Thursday.

Ben Cates, The News & Advance

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**B**ryson Meeks is usually content to watch Brookville football games from afar.

The sights and sounds of Friday night, background additions most of us take for granted — the noise of the crowd, sirens blaring after touchdowns, an announcer's voice booming over the PA — they can all be too much for the 16-year-old sophomore, who was diagnosed with autism at 3½ years of age.

So the Meeks family designed a system for home games. Bryson can watch the game from the back of his father's truck. Get bored or too cold and he can hop into his grandparents' car. Need a change of scenery and he'll climb in with his other set of grandparents.

But away games are different. Whenever Brookville prepares to play on the road, Connie Meeks sends out an email to opposing schools, asking if they can accommodate her son. She's never been turned down. That means Bryson is often close to the field but far enough away from the action to feel comfortable. Usually, schools in the Seminole District let her park close to emergency vehicles near an end zone so Bryson has a good view of his dad's team.

"We've never had them turn us down," Brookville coach Jon Meeks said about school officials in the eight-team Seminole. "I think that says a lot about the district."

Without those accommodations, Bryson wouldn't be able to stay to watch his favorite team too long. Maybe for a quarter or so. Because the band might be really loud. Or the crowd too hyped up.

As Connie sent out an email last weekend prior to Friday's game against E.C. Glass at City Stadium, she and Jon started thinking: everyone had always honored their requests for Bryson.

"I've always appreciated it," Jon Meeks said. "And aside from the occasional email, I've never told them how much it means to us, because it makes it a whole lot easier. ... He can stay all four quarters now."

Bryson is, of course, a big football fan. He's also kind of an unofficial member of the team. On Thursday, he practiced kickoffs. Jon Meeks hopes to get Bryson suited up for a game sometime before the season is over, in a blowout scenario. The plan is to call a timeout, let the opposing team know what's about to take place, and let Bryson blast a 15- or 20-yard kick.

"Have you ever kicked in a game before?" a reporter asked Bryson after he practiced kickoffs at the end of Thursday's practice.

"Yes," Bryson replied.

"Like when?" the reporter asked.

"Tonight!" Bryson answered. As in, I just did it, what kind of question is that?

This is the type of banter one might have with Bryson. Ask how old he is and he'll joke that he's 13. Ask him where his favorite player, former Brookville standout Micah Glaize, now plays and he'll quip that it's "far, far away" before admitting Glaize plays at Liberty University.

But Bryson is also honest.

Why does he like football? "Because it's cool."

Who does he play catch with? "Everyone."

Who else? "Jonathan Meeks!"

This is why people around Brookville love Bryson Meeks. He's entertaining, loves to be around people, often says and does random things and brings joy to people's eyes.

"He's a pretty happy kid 99% of the time," Connie Meeks said.

Like in the school for instance. Jon Meeks was walking through the hallway recently and Bryson didn't see his father. A janitor was in the hallway.

"And I guess Bryson had this barnyard cartoon movie song in his head, so he grabbed her and they started doing the barnyard dance," Jon Meeks said. "And she didn't have an option. They were gonna do the barnyard dance no matter what. And she was like, 'All right!'"

To say Bryson is strong willed, then, is not an understatement.

He might go up to a random person and give them a hug. Or stand up in a restaurant booth and break out into a song.

The family was once in Applebee's and a tune Bryson loved came over the speakers.

"Once he sings the first line, he's gonna go through the whole song, so everybody just had to accept the fact that they were gonna listen to him sing it," Jon Meeks said.

"There was no stopping him."

Jon and Connie met on the baseball field at Heritage High School in 1996. She was a senior sitting up in the press box. He was a sophomore who played baseball and football. They went on their first date that year and have been together ever since.

When Bryson was diagnosed with autism, Connie and Jon both taught special education, so they were familiar with autism, just not from how to care for a young autistic child. They spent years learning how to handle all kinds of situations.

Among them: they learned to carefully craft the wording of their questions, and never to tell Bryson no.

"We've learned to say no without saying no. With him, no means forever." Jon Meeks said. "So if he asks you to buy him ice cream right now and you say 'Bryson, I can't do that,' he takes that to mean, 'He's never getting me that ice cream again for the rest of my life.' We've learned to say 'Let's go later' or 'Let's try next week.'"

And still, Bryson counts off the days. If Connie tells him they'll go some place 'in a little while,' Bryson asks how long. Sixty minutes, Connie replies. So Bryson starts counting down the minutes.

He loves Christmas, and the family keeps a calendar in their home to mark off the days until the holiday arrives. Jon Meeks came into the room once, and Bryson had a pen in his hands, marking off the days, because surely that would help Christmas get here a lot sooner.

"I wish I had a video camera on him every day for the last three years," Jon Meeks said. "It would be a reality show, for sure."

Football has become a family affair, in part because of how schools from the Seminole District have responded to the Meeks' request. The couple's younger daughter, Braylee, age 12, is almost always on the sidelines for games, constantly cheering the team on with chants like "Go Bees!" Braylee also helps take care of Bryson, who is considered to be high-functioning.

"Braylee is like his big sister," Connie Meeks said. "She's like a little mama bear."

Bryson has taught the Meekses a lot over the years. Things like patience and unconditional love. And there are even lessons in the random things that happen.

One night at 3 a.m. Bryson shook Jon awake. But Jon didn't immediately wake up. So Bryson delivered a firm slap to his dad's face. That got Jon's attention. Bryson was concerned because hours earlier, before bedtime, Jon told him to put his phone away. Bryson didn't like how Jon's face looked at the time. So as Jon laid there in bed, Bryson pushed up his dad's cheeks.

"Smile," Bryson said.

Bryson also loves electronics and YouTube, where he designs videos and provides voiceovers. Some have received thousands of views. But this time of year, it's all football. The family rallies around the sport, supporting dad and his team. And maybe soon, Bryson will get into a game before it ends, to send the ball on its way.

And he'll do it all with a big smile.

"He doesn't know a stranger," Connie Meeks said. "He loves everyone. He wants everybody to be happy."

[https://newsadvance.com/news/local/we-need-this-virginia-10-miler-returns-with-cheers-camaraderie/article\\_101cb5a0-1e2b-11ec-8bf3-07d9ac16d1b8.html](https://newsadvance.com/news/local/we-need-this-virginia-10-miler-returns-with-cheers-camaraderie/article_101cb5a0-1e2b-11ec-8bf3-07d9ac16d1b8.html)

After Further Review

## 'We need this': Virginia 10 Miler returns with cheers, camaraderie

**Ben Cates**

Sep 25, 2021



Front-runners round a curve in Riverside Park while competing in the Virginia 10 Miler on Saturday, Sept. 25, 2021.

Kendall Warner, The News & Advance

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**W**hen he was a kid in the 1970s, Jeff Harrington used to sit in the parking lot at the old A&P Supermarket off Langhorne Road and watch runners in the Virginia 10 Miler. The famous guys, like Bill Rodgers and Frank Shorter, were larger

than life to a young guy who would eventually blaze his own trail in the Lynchburg road race.

So when Harrington, who estimated Saturday's 10 Miler was his 24th, looked over and saw a group of kids briefly join him during his run, he thought back to the old days.

"They were trying to run with me for about half a mile and I'm cheering them on and I'm thinking, 'That was me back in the 70s.' It's just wonderful being out there cheering everyone on and they're cheering me on, so it's a good feeling."

That spirit of camaraderie and encouragement was on display Saturday morning, as the race returned for the first time since 2019. It was canceled last September because of the pandemic; so from midtown to Riverside Park and back up Farm Basket Hill to the finish at E.C. Glass, the smiles, waves, whistles and claps all seemed to take on extra significance this year.

We've lost a lot since runners last took to the Lynchburg streets in droves — loved ones, time with friends and family, simple moments we may have otherwise taken for granted. For the thousands of folks running Saturday morning, the return of the 10 Miler felt like a chance to reconnect.

"We need this in our community," said Robin Steckley, a Forest resident who finished first in the Female Senior Grand Masters division with a 1:23.17.

Steckley has participated in the event since moving to the area with her husband John in 2011. As she approaches Riverside Park each year, elite packs of runners — the ones admired by the rest of the field for their professional abilities — are exiting, making their way back up Rivermont Avenue. She always cheers them on.

"They're so beautiful to watch," Steckley said.

And by the time she exits the park each year, other runners are there to cheer for her as they loop their way into the park for the race's halfway point. The encouragement, then, becomes cyclical.

"In some ways, we inspire them, and the elites inspire us," Steckley added. "I love that about our community."

She was on the course last September for an unofficial run when the Color Guard, which vowed to carry on the tradition by running the course, passed by The Farm Basket on its way to Rivermont. Steckley was running up the hill. She stopped and saluted from the roadside on a course that was eerily quiet for a late-September Saturday morning.

Meanwhile, the Guard soldiered on that day, chanting and hoisting flags to honor the armed forces. They were back in 2021, marking their 20th year of existence. Among them was John Casler, who finished six months of chemotherapy in May and competed in the 55 to 59 age bracket. His goal was just to finish. He did, with a time of 2:21.05.

And those are a few examples why the race continues to attract a wide range of folks. Elites run with amateurs and stand with them on the same awards stage. Runners of all ages — from kids to high schoolers to adults, old and young, dot the landscape. First-timers and race vets alike crowd into the streets.

Harrington could see all that for himself as a kid in the A&P parking lot. A multi-time winner in his age bracket, Harrington finished the race in 67 minutes Saturday, good for third in the Male Masters bracket.

"No excuses, the weather's perfect," he said with a smile. "Seems like I'm a little older now. But I think I ran it smart. I had energy coming up Farm Basket, which was a rarity for me. The older you get, you still wanna run the time you did when you were younger. Anyway, I'm happy with it."

He pointed out a buddy walking past, Frank Gonzalez, who finished the course in 1:06.08, good for second in the Male Masters division.

"He usually passes me at nine miles," Harrington said, that same grin on his face. "He passed me at seven this year, so I think he's getting faster and I'm getting a step slower."

And banter like this one get echoed all across the lawn on E.C. Glass and along Langhorne sidewalks every year. In 2021, they were reminders of how much we've missed, and how much we crave not just human interaction, but friendship. Folks congratulating one another, stopping to talk about the weather or the intricacies of the course, maybe ribbing each other about their finish time or recalling 10 Milers of old.

It's always like this. The serious, the lighthearted, the diehards, the rookies looking for a challenge and finding one, the young and the young at heart — you can find them all here. At a race that belongs to no one, but somehow, to everyone.