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## Adversity is overmatched against ODU's Ewell

By VIC DORR JR.



Pain, disappointment and frustration tried for three years to hammer Aubrie Ewell into submission. In retrospect,

they never had a chance.

Ewell, a former James River High School standout who now plays women's soccer at Old Dominion University, transformed a personal ordeal into sweet fulfillment by scoring the Lady Monarchs' first goal in last week's 3-2 loss at Hartford. The goal, an authoritative put-away of a teammate's corner kick, completed Ewell's remarkable comeback from a near-fatal automobile accident and a pair of recent soccer-related knee surgeries.

"The rush of emotions was unbelievable," Ewell said. "I wanted to scream and laugh and cry all at the same time. I don't know exactly how to describe the feeling. 'Ecstatic,' maybe?"

"Ecstatic" seems a fair description. Forget soccer, for the moment. Ewell is fortunate to be alive. She was returning to Richmond on a rainy winter day in January of 2010, her freshman year, when her Ford Focus hydroplaned and spun out of control on I-64 near the Fort Eustis exit. The vehicle slid off the highway and into the wooded median. There, it collided tail-first with a sturdy tree.

The rear half of the car collapsed like an accordion. The initial impact slammed Ewell's head against the driver's-side headrest with force sufficient to fracture her skull. The recoil caused her to lurch forward and strike the steering wheel face-first. So comprehensive was the resulting nerve damage that she has lost her sense of smell.

Ewell, a 21-year-old redshirt junior, has "no memory whatsoever" of the accident or her two-plus-day stay in the intensive-care unit at Riverside Regional Medical Center in Newport News. Given the circumstances, she said, "that's probably a good thing."

Subsequent conversations with the emergency medical technicians and law enforcement officers who were first on the scene have enabled Ewell to reconstruct the incident. She knows now that she erred by driving in heavy rain with her cruise control engaged. She knows precisely where her car left the highway. She knows precisely which tree she struck.

"I'm very lucky — no, I'm very blessed — to still be here," Ewell said. "Every time I pass (the accident site), I think about things. I'm not going to say I didn't appreciate life before. But I will say this: Any time something like this happens, I think it makes you take a good, long look at who you are and what you can improve and what's important to you."

She said she performs one ritual each time she passes the site: "I always say a prayer. I always thank God" for her great escape.

This is not empty rhetoric. Ewell said she is profoundly grateful for "every day I have on this earth with my family and loved ones." She is grateful, too, for physical gifts, still intact, that enable her "to play the sport that I love." She draws inspiration from lyrics by Christian singer/songwriter Steven Curtis Chapman: "Out of these ashes, beauty will rise." Not long after her accident, she had the words "Beauty will rise" tattooed onto her foot.

Her other encounters with adversity seem, by comparison, mild. Ewell returned to ODU for the 2010 season. She appeared in 12 matches but did not score. She tore the meniscus and sprained the ACL in her left knee in February of 2011. Surgery, and the decision to skip the 2011 season as a redshirt, followed. She reinjured the same knee and underwent another surgical procedure last March. But at no time did she consider abandoning the sport she has played since early childhood.

"It never entered my mind," she said. "I think that's part of my personality. I hate to give up. I hate to quit. It's very unlike me ever to do so."