

Risking It All

Makayla Meadows Does What She Loves Despite Danger

by Kailey Cota

Motioning at her fellow defenders on the soccer field, she aches to unleash a joke about the opposing team. Then she's fearlessly heading the ball and defending the goal. Makayla Meadows, jersey number 17, is having the time of her life playing a game that could potentially kill her.

"In April 2018 I was just chillin' at QT with my family, getting pizza," Meadows ('20) said. "All of the sudden I couldn't walk correctly – I was just dragging my left leg. I thought 'this isn't normal, this isn't right.' But, it eventually went away, so I thought it was just a freak accident or a pinched nerve. When I had an episode at school, my mom decided we needed to go to the doctor."

After eight months of symptoms, she finally knew the diagnosis. Because she plans on going into a career in neurosurgery, Meadows asked for CD images of the MRI. When she pulled up the scans with her mother Tracy Houck, who has spent the past 15 years in vascular medicine, there was no confusion about what they saw.

"I knew exactly what it was before we were even told by a doctor," Houck said. "It was shocking to see it for yourself – and very scary."

Meadows has a grade 5 Arteriovenous Malformation (AVM). AVMs develop when a group of blood vessels form incorrectly during development or shortly after birth, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine. They condition is extremely rare – less than 1 percent of the population has an AVM, according to Mayo Clinic.

Most people have a grade 1, 2 or 3, which is treatable by surgery or radiation. This is not the case with Meadows. She has a grade 5, and her AVM covers one-fourth of her brain. If doctors were to operate, she would most likely end up paralyzed, if not dead.

"Getting a diagnosis was overwhelming," Meadows said. "I'm basically being told, 'This is what you have. Sorry, I can't help you.'"

The AVM covers her entire right motor cortex and some of the frontal and occipital lobes of her brain. She has seizures in which the left side of her body goes completely numb for a few hours at a time – these episodes occur about once every other week. Meadows also has headaches almost every day, and sometimes her vision goes in and out.

If the AVM ruptures, it can cause a hemorrhage – bleeding in the brain. As long as the hemorrhages are not "too totally spectacular," as Meadows says, she should have a normal lifespan. To avoid hemorrhaging, her intracranial pressure needs to remain steady. Because of this, Meadows cannot ride rollercoasters, lift heavy weights, and it's questionable if she should ever have children.

"Doctors don't know how I function because my motor cortex didn't show any function on my f-MRI," Meadows said. "I should not be able to move the left side of my body at all... but I can. It's a miracle."

When the doctors officially diagnosed Meadows, her first question was "Can I continue to play soccer?" Her neurosurgeon asked if she loved it and if she was good at it. Convinced, his response was "Play on."

But soccer doesn't come without



During an away game against Northwestern on April 5, Makayla Meadows ('20), #17, launches the ball away from the goal she's defending. The Girls JV Soccer Team won 2-0, beating Northwestern for the second time that season. Photo by Kailey Cota

risks a – kick or hit to the side of her head could cause her to hemorrhage.

"Watching her play soccer terrifies me because headers have always been her favorite thing," Houck said. "Game before last, she literally did four headers during the game. But I have to sit back and realize that's what she loves and enjoys."

Meadows looks up to all six of her brothers who also play soccer, and they were ultimately the reason she

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began playing club sports in sixth grade. When she moved to South Carolina from West Virginia before her sophomore year, the Falcon JV Coach Bob Blaschke was her first club coach, so seasons together have made them comfortable with each other.

Of course, playing on the JV team as a junior wasn't exactly what Meadows was hoping for. But she loves the girls so much that she says she wouldn't want to play varsity.

"People look at me with pity sometimes, which is really awful because I'm a very independent person, and I can totally take care of myself even though I have this," Meadows said. "I don't think the tumor makes me much different than anyone else. It just forces me to make harder decisions... Soccer was one of the hardest decisions I had to make because I wasn't sure whether or not I could play, and it wasn't because I didn't want to – it was because I have this medical condition that forces me to decide what's best for me, physically and emotionally."

While it was a tough decision, playing has helped Meadows

move forward with her life by making her realize that she can still do things like everyone else, she says.

Another way Meadows balances the stress of her AVM is by pouring herself into painting and ceramics.

"Makayla is funny and sarcastic – a lot like me," Meadows' art teacher and Spirit Club advisor Holly Bentley said. "She doesn't take things too seriously, but she can be very hard on herself when it comes to her artwork. I love and care about her, and it stresses me out that she's having to go through this at such a young age."

During a Spirit Club activity, Meadows met Mackinley Hoffman ('19) and they became fast friends.

"Knowing her, you would never know she was sick," Hoffman said. "Her personality is like 'I don't care, I'm gonna do me – this is it.' Yes, she's strong because of this, but she's strong in so many other ways."

Houck agrees. She says Meadows has been independent since the day she was born.

"She feels like she can conquer things, which is good because that spirit can prevail through even hard things like this," Houck said. "I'm just really proud of her for taking this on and not letting it get the best of her – she's taken her life back and is controlling it as much as she can."

If there's any good that has come from learning about the AVM, it's how Meadows' character and faith have strengthened.

"At first when I got my diagnosis – I'm not going to lie – I was angry," Meadows said. "I was mad at myself, I was mad at God. But then at some point, you have to come to peace with it. Now I look at it like 'how can I turn this horrible thing into a good thing?' It was really hard to make the decision to go from a negative mentality to this positive mentality."

Meadows has been religious since freshman year, but the timing of her baptism and diagnosis is almost providential.

"I got baptized the Sunday after my diagnosis," Meadows said. "I've grown closer to the church now that I've been diagnosed – we're like a tight-knit family."