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Photo by: AP Photo  
Garrett W. Johnson

## Oxford Latest Honor For One Of Tampa's Brightest

By DOUG CARLSON [dcarlson@tampatrib.com](mailto:dcarlson@tampatrib.com)

Published: Nov 22, 2005

TALLAHASSEE - -- Garrett Johnson sat and waited with 15 other college students Saturday afternoon in Birmingham, Ala., while a selection committee debated his fate. They did what any other gathering of the best and brightest students would do: They played hangman, charades, watched a college football game on television and stole glances at a clock.

Two of the 16 would be named Rhodes Scholars, a distinction that has helped shape lives for past winners, including U.S. presidents and senators. The other 14 would forever get to say they were Rhodes finalists.

"I felt I had done my best," Johnson said of the question-and-answer session with the committee that would be the final element of the competition. "All I could do at that point was wait."

After being summoned to a conference room, the candidates listened as two winners were announced. Johnson, a Tampa Baptist Academy graduate and world-class shot-putter at Florida State University, kept his emotions in check when he heard his name.

"I didn't want to react in front of the others, because I knew the disappointment they must have been feeling," said Johnson, who two years ago dealt with a life-threatening blood clot.

Stuck in traffic on the way to the Florida A&M-Bethune-Cookman football game,

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Carmen Johnson made no such attempt to conceal the joy when her son called with the news.

"I started yelling. I just started praising God, giving God the glory," she said.

"It wasn't much of a conversation," her son said.

Days later, the Johnson family still fought to get its arms around the emotions that have followed the news. They gathered in a small meeting room in Tallahassee on Monday as Florida State University introduced its second Rhodes Scholarship winner and first since 1976.

Johnson, 21, won one of the two scholarships available in the Florida-Alabama-Tennessee region. Nationwide, 32 winners will receive an estimated \$40,000 annually, plus a living allowance, to cover expenses for two years of study at Oxford University in England.

Johnson, who graduated magna cum laude in April with a dual degree in English and political science at FSU, is pursuing a master's degree in development studies to aid his desire to work in poverty relief for developing countries.

The former high school state champion shot-putter works in Gov. Jeb Bush's office as a special assistant and recently went to Haiti to distribute food and medicine to areas ravaged by flash floods and mudslides.

He wrote an analysis of two U.S.-Haiti trade agreements that was distributed by Bush's office to government officials in France, Canada, Haiti and the United States. While completing his work, Johnson established himself as one of the top shot put and discus throwers in the world on the way to competing in the NCAA national meet for the Seminoles last spring.

### Studying Up

The path to Saturday's triumph in the Rhodes Scholarship competition began in January, when Johnson met the man responsible for determining whether he met the award criteria.

"Literally 15 minutes after meeting him, I was confident he would win," said Jody Spooner, director of the Office of National Fellowships at FSU. "He is so enormously talented and enormously genuine, and in the fellowship competition that's a deadly combination in terms of success."

After advancing to the final group of 16, Johnson had to answer questions from the selection committee for 20 minutes Friday afternoon at a downtown Birmingham office building.

"I thought they were all softball questions," said Johnson, who tried to prepare for the Q&A by immersing himself in current events, in part by watching CNN.

The first question, from committee Chairman Drayton Nabors Jr., who is chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court: "What are your thoughts on the Roberts-Alito confirmation hearings?"

"I think I knocked that one out of the park," Johnson said.

### Life-Changing Experience

Two years ago, Carmen Johnson called from the family's Tampa home to have an ambulance pick up her son at his Tallahassee apartment after he called her with his leg



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so swollen he couldn't stand. After being misdiagnosed with pneumonia, he went home for Christmas but had to be taken to University Community Hospital as his condition deteriorated.

Doctors there found blood clots in his leg that had broken off and traveled to his lungs. It was too late for the clot-busting procedure that might have averted the crisis, so they administered blood thinners and waited.

Nine days later, Johnson left the hospital in a wheelchair -- the same one he would use to attend classes at FSU the next day.

He lives with the life-threatening condition and managed to resume his place as a world-class athlete with daily doses of blood thinners and extreme care not to bruise himself or otherwise cause internal bleeding.

Johnson accepted the life change in stride, just as he will the Oxford experience.

He will compete one more season for FSU, then give up his final season of eligibility to begin his Rhodes studies in fall 2006. He might return for a shot at making the U.S. Olympic team in 2008.

"I know my life is going to be changed by this experience," he said. "I know I have to take exams in a cap and gown."

Just like any other student.

"Literally 15 minutes after meeting him, I was confident he would win."

JODY SPOONER FSU administrator, about Rhodes Scholar Garrett Johnson

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