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'I got it,' new Rhodes Scholar told his parents

Emily Badger | Sentinel Staff Writer  
Posted November 22, 2005

TALLAHASSEE -- Nate and Carmen Johnson were stalled in traffic on Interstate 4, already late from Tampa for Saturday's Florida Classic, when the cell phone rang.

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They'd been waiting for the call but weren't sure what the news would be.

Then their son, Garrett, sitting in a Birmingham, Ala., conference room 600 miles and a time zone away, broke the tension.

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"I got it," he said.

Johnson, a graduate student and track-and-field star at Florida State, had just been named one of 32 Rhodes Scholars from the United States. He will head to Oxford, England, in September for post-graduate studies.

The announcement -- and phone call -- capped a grueling process that spanned six months, eight mock interviews before the final one this past weekend and 40 rewrites of Johnson's personal statement.

Cramming 21 years of his life -- his athletic career, surviving life-threatening blood clots last year, his volunteer work in Haiti -- into 1,000 well-chosen words had been the hardest part. That, and being a bit "anti-social" in the process.

"He hasn't been home in a while. Every holiday, he's been with Jody," Carmen Johnson said, referring to Jody Spooner, director of FSU's Office of National Fellowships.

Saturday's phone call, then, was appropriately rushed.

"I really didn't get to talk to them much," Garrett said Monday. "My mom just started yelling."

Then he had to call Spooner and Harlis Meaders, one of his track coaches. By the end of the weekend, university President T.K. Wetherell and Gov. Jeb Bush, in whose office Johnson has been interning, were lining up to congratulate him.

The honor has been received as an equal reflection on the university, which lately has renewed its efforts to inform students of national fellowships, then usher them through the application process. Johnson is FSU's first Rhodes Scholar in 30 years.

"It's a red-letter day for the university and certainly a very proud moment for our athletics program," Athletic Director Dave Hart said. "I don't think anybody embodies what you look for in a student-athlete any more than Garrett."

Johnson, who attended Tampa Baptist Academy before moving on to FSU, is studying public administration after graduating magna cum laude in three years with a double-major in political science and English. He also holds school records in the indoor and outdoor shot put and is second all-time at FSU in the discus.

In December 2003, midway through his second year on campus -- his career has defied traditional academic labels such as "freshman" and "sophomore" -- he was taken to the hospital with blood clots in his leg and lungs. He lost nearly 40 pounds in the process of recovering but came back to compete in fall 2004 and won NCAA East Region championships in the shot put and discus.

He has a remaining year of athletic eligibility because of his time off from the sport. He will forgo it, though, to move to Oxford.

## PHOTOS



[Garrett W. Johnson](#)  
(GLENN BEIL/  
ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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**Are we taking [the bird flu](#) too seriously or not serious enough? What are your opinions on the potential emergency? (Moderated)**

Cut off travel? Millions dead? Financial ruin? Fear mongering is for the weak and ignorant. "One Nation ruled by the media." I'm sooo scared of inf.A! Yawn. Wake me when it gets here.

Submitted by: Ugly JOe

"But this is a great way to lose a kid," said Meaders, who wrote one of eight recommendations Johnson needed with his application.

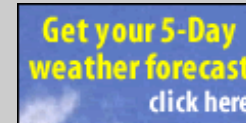
Johnson will begin working at Oxford on development studies, with a focus on poverty in developing nations. Having finally been handed that opportunity, a grinning Johnson now says the past six months have felt like "a breeze."

He never would have used those words while he was in the heart of the process, though. There were times when he felt the stress and weight and expectations of what he was trying to do.

"Every day," he said. "I just haven't done anything except for the Rhodes the last six months. But I really, really wanted it."

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11:08 AM EST, Nov 22, 2005

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Will you be purchasing an [Xbox 360](#) this holiday season?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Results are not scientific

#### Talk about it

**What are your thoughts on [Orlando's ambitious projects](#) now in review, like the Citrus Bowl, arena and arts-center? (Moderated)**

Any team that can afford a \$93 million contract for a single player can afford to pay for its own building. If not, pro sports needs to reevaluate its pay structure and bring it down to reality.  
Submitted by: Jim Duffy, Orlando, FL  
10:50 AM EST, Nov 22, 2005

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