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Mastering life on the track and in the classroom



When Brittany Stenekes ’20 runs the hurdles, she is completely in the moment. “There isn’t time in a race to think, to plan, nor to strategize, yet every movement and every millisecond is important,” says the native of Dundas, Ontario. “That is the great challenge of the sport, which I love.”

Throughout her athletic career at Cornell, Stenekes has more than risen to the task, breaking school records in the 60-meter and 100-meter hurdles and 400-meter relay, competing in the NCAA Championship preliminaries, and representing her country at the Junior Pan-American Championships in Peru as a member of the Canadian national team.



Brittany Stenekes '20

"What separates Brittany is her focus and determination," says Mike Henderson, the Alan B. '53 and Elizabeth Heekin Harris Head Coach of Women's Track & Field and Cross Country. "She is a great and dedicated athlete with the ability to sort through distraction and overcome obstacles to be at her best when it matters most."

The same traits earned Stenekes a spot in Cornell's 400 Club for high-performing student-athletes after she achieved a 4.0 GPA during her junior year. To Justin Byron, associate head coach for women's track and field, this accomplishment is evidence of her "amazing ability to balance" not only her sport and academics but also volunteer work with youth and elderly in the Ithaca community. "I do not know how she creates the time," he says.

Doing it all with poise is a skill Stenekes worked hard to hone. She arrived at Cornell with four years of track and field under her belt, but aligning college athletics with the demands of her ORIE major posed unfamiliar challenges. She would often miss classes on Fridays to travel to competitions, returning at the end of the weekend with little time to catch up on work. During her first semester, she stayed up late studying on many nights, and she struggled in courses. "I soon learned how to work efficiently and proactively," says Stenekes, who became a regular at office hours and started problem sets the day they were assigned.

Her efforts have borne fruit beyond her coursework. "Being an engineer has made me a harder working athlete," she explains. "In engineering there are no shortcuts. It takes a lot of practice and many hours in the library to understand course material. I learned that on the track, a similar commitment is necessary to improve. In my life, track and engineering are symbiotic."

Stenekes credits Cornell with providing an environment where this dual commitment could thrive. "Being an athlete here has been a privilege," she says. "(Retired women's head coach) Coach Rich Bowman and Coach Justin Byron have never wavered in supporting both my

academics and athletics"—even if that meant, for example, sending her home from practice to study for an upcoming calculus prelim.

On the academic side, Stenekes—who has particular interests in stochastic processes, simulation and data analytics—initially worried that as an athlete she would not fit into the engineering program. "For the first month, I did not wear 'Cornell Track and Field' attire to class because I anticipated a stereotype that athletes could not handle rigorous academic demands," she recalls. Not only did she prove any such stereotypes groundless—her advisor Jamol Pender, assistant professor in ORIE, remembers her as "one of the most engaging and thoughtful students" in his classes, and she has worked as a teaching assistant for several engineering courses—but her concerns were quickly dispelled as her ORIE friends became her biggest cheerleaders.

"This year, my two-year-old son and I had the pleasure of seeing Brittany at a track meet in Barton Hall," says Pender. "Not only did Brittany beat the competition by a wide margin, but the best thing was seeing many of her classmates supporting her during this time, which speaks volumes about how important she is to the ORIE community."

The current pandemic has caused an unexpected and painful end to Stenekes' senior year. "The hardest part has been abruptly saying goodbye to my teammates, many of whom I've seen every day for nearly four years," she says. Nevertheless, Stenekes hopes to attend graduate school in the fall to pursue a master's degree in industrial engineering and management sciences—and to keep competing, either unattached or for the school she ultimately chooses. "I expect running will always be part of my life."

By Olivia M. Hall

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