

# The Phoenix

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## *Cass Bargell*

*Full Contact  
Rugby Player*



# Better Than Be

## Harvard rugby player returns to the field after ostomy surgery

By Rolf Benirschke

When Cassidy Bargell, known as “Cass” to her friends, a senior at Harvard, was facing ostomy surgery, she had one very important question for Dr. Kristen Crowell at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, “Will I be able to play rugby again?” She was relieved and delighted when Dr. Crowell answered definitively, “Yes! You can do whatever you want. It’s not going to be an issue.”

Having been raised in a family of athletes, Cassidy loved sports and grew up in the mountains of Colorado skiing, running, swimming, and playing basketball. She was first introduced to rugby by one of her friends when she was in the eighth grade.

### Rugby It Is

She did not really think rugby was going to be her sport, but soon realized that she loved it, and had the combination of skills to be a serious competitor. If you are not familiar with the game, Cass describes it as a “full-contact sport, kind of like American football, but much faster-paced with no stops and no padding.” (Makes my time playing in the NFL sound like a walk in the park!) And meeting Cass you might be surprised, because at 5’4” with her long blond ponytail draped over her shoulder and the absolute sweetest smile you can imagine, it is difficult to picture her like the beast she is on the field.

Her high school coach was the one who planted the idea of playing at a Division 1 college and she landed a spot at Harvard to live out her dream of playing a varsity sport. Her list of athletic accomplishments is lengthy and impressive, including being named to the All-American First Team as a freshman and becoming a finalist for the Sorensen Award, which recognizes the top collegiate female rugby player of the year.

Things continued to look up for Cass when, a sophomore, Harvard won the national championship! In love with the sport by now, she began to seriously consider

playing after college, training with a senior national team whenever she had the opportunity.

### Sent Home

Unfortunately, in the spring of Cass’s junior year, (2020) COVID hit, and she returned home to Colorado, resigned to taking classes online. While that was disappointing academically, it freed up more time for her to train for rugby, where she earned a practice spot as a World Cup player. Cass was enjoying life

immensely and things could not have been going any better...until the fall...when she suddenly started experiencing GI symptoms that are all too familiar for those of us who suffer from UC or Crohn’s disease.

### Concerning Symptoms

Cass attributed her severe abdominal cramps, diarrhea, frequent trips to the bathroom and fatigue to her intense training in a highly competitive environment. The one symptom, however, that worried her the most was the bleeding. Remembering those days, Cass says, “I was really scared when I saw blood in my stool.”

As she continued to get sicker, Cass sought out the sports dietician at the Olympic Training Center, as well as a nurse practitioner, who both assured her that she most likely had internal hemorrhoids or perhaps a small fissure. The dietician suggested she modify the timing of her eating and simplify her diet by eating smoothies for breakfast. Even though she had now lost 15 pounds, Cass continued to train at an elite level, taking supplements and doing her best to manage her disease.

Cass admits that after Googling her symptoms, she really was hoping to “avoid seeing a doctor at all costs.” It wasn’t until after speaking with her parents, in January of 2021, that she finally decided to see a physician. Interestingly, he once again diagnosed her as having internal hemorrhoids.

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# efore



*Cassidy Bargell playing rugby for Harvard in Spring of 2022 after ileostomy surgery.*

## **Sicker and Sicker**

As COVID restrictions eased, Cass returned to in-person school and sports in the fall of 2021 and was excited to be back on campus. Now, as the co-captain of the rugby team, she felt additional pressure to play well and contribute at a high level. Unfortunately, Cass's symptoms were worsening by the day, and she "knew there was something really wrong" as it became increasingly difficult to just keep going. She remembers, "I was just getting sicker and sicker and was afraid to leave

my room. I was struggling to find something to eat that didn't upset my stomach and, at practice, just walking during the warm-up phase was painful and I had to run off the field multiple times to use the bathroom. I would wake up drenched in sweat multiple times at night and was completely exhausted."

Obviously concerned, she saw another gastroenterologist who assured her that she was suffering from a food intolerance and internal hemorrhoids. Cass continued to tell herself, "This will go away, this will go

away. It came on quickly and it will go away quickly.”

### Pushing Through the Pain

It is difficult to imagine that Cass was able to endure such adversity for so long but, like most elite athletes, she knew how to live with and push through extreme pain. Her breaking point came one Monday when she had lost so much blood, she thought she was dying. So, she called her mom, spoke with her coach, and then



caught an uber with her co-captain to the nearest emergency room.

After a round of diagnostic tests, they reached the same conclusion as all the other medical professionals – internal hemorrhoids and food intolerance. Luckily, they had also ordered a CT and when those results came back, Cass was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. While the medical staff wanted to admit her to the hospital immediately for a colonoscopy, she defiantly pushed back and said, “Hey, I know how to live with this, and I’ve got a big game coming up this weekend. It can wait a few days.” Relieved that she wasn’t dealing with colon cancer was a tremendous boost to Cass’s mental state and she was fully convinced that with the right medication she would be cured.

### From Field to Hospital

When the colonoscopy was finally scheduled, her mom flew to Boston to support her. Cass practiced the rest of the week and started her colonoscopy prep on a Thursday night after practice while drafting a paper

for her biology class. The colonoscopy the next day confirmed the diagnosis of severe acute ulcerative colitis and Cass began taking an oral prednisone just in time to jump on the bus for a game against Quinnipiac where she started and played 60 minutes of the 80-minute game.

Cass’s optimism for a quick recovery was short lived, however, when she found herself back in the hospital a few days later after experiencing pain so severe that she could not even walk to class. Six days later, Cass faced a heart-breaking weekend when she went from leading her team onto the field to watching the game from the hospital. But Cass refused to give in to despair and instead focused on the upcoming game in two weeks against Harvard’s biggest rival, Dartmouth.

She remembers pumping herself up by saying, “OK, if I can get out of the hospital on the Tuesday before the game I can practice twice – on Thursday and Friday – and the coach will let me play on Saturday.” Her mom, concerned about the turn of events, returned to Boston and stood by helplessly while Cass failed four or five rescue doses of a biologic medication. In pain and miserable, her frustration was compounded when she was forced to miss the Dartmouth game and didn’t even have the heart to watch it on television.

### Surgery Scheduled

As the reality of potential surgery became ever more likely, Cass began Googling ‘professional athletes with an ostomy’ and found an article detailing my return to the NFL following my ostomy surgery. Cass shared how this provided a small measure of hope to her as she was desperate to return to rugby. It was on November 5, 2021, that Cass underwent ileostomy surgery. She remembers feeling markedly better as soon as she had cleared the anesthesia and that it felt “like a weight had been lifted off” her shoulders and that whatever was to come had to be better than what she had been enduring for so long.

Since her surgery, Cass has returned to full-contact rugby and even helped her team win an Ivy League 7s championship in the spring of 2022! And while she is only 22 years old, Cass has gained a wisdom beyond her years that I’ve observed in so many ostomates when she confidently says, “I have a bag and still love my life. I still love playing rugby as a Division 1 athlete with inflammatory bowel disease and an ostomy. I didn’t choose for all this to happen to me, but I do have the opportunity to choose every day that I’m going to be better than before because of it.” 🌈