



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

GLOBE SOUTH SPORTS

The Boston Globe

Wrestling regimen inspires in battle with melanoma

By Justin A. Rice, Globe Correspondent | January 21, 2010

Facing 30 radiation treatments after a cancerous mass was removed from his neck in the fall, Jeff Parker drew strength from his wrestling career at Foxborough High and, later, at the University of Buffalo. Especially a punishing preseason in his first season at Buffalo in which he vomited in nearly 30 straight workouts.

"I'll puke but, guess what, I'm not going to stop," Parker said. "It's going to take a lot more than that to break me."

The 25-year-old Parker took that mentality into his radiation treatments last September and did not vomit once.

"I was thinking of it kind of like [wrestling] preseason," said Parker, who was diagnosed shortly after July Fourth with melanoma before undergoing surgery in early August. "Thirty days and I'm done; it's not too bad."

During his treatments, Parker never missed a day of work at the Kraft Group or a practice session as an assistant wrestling coach at Franklin High.

A fanatic fan of the Food Network, he even kept his weight up despite losing his sense of taste.

"I don't want to shrink down to nothing," said Parker, down to 225 pounds after wrestling at 260 in college. "I take pride in being a big guy."

The cancer spread after radiation and metastasized in several vital organs, and he is undergoing experimental treatment at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. With Parker's medical bills mounting, a pair of his former college teammates, Mickey Moran and Joe Muscarella, organized a benefit in his honor.

Buffalo's match on Jan. 30 against Ohio will double as the "Takedown Cancer" event. Proceeds from the match and a sports memorabilia auction will offset the cost of Parker's treatment not covered by insurance. The surplus will be donated to Dana-Farber, along with Carly's Club, a pediatric cancer organization in Buffalo.

In just the first three weeks of fund-raising, the drive raised about \$6,000. Buffalo coach Jim Beichner thinks they can raise \$20,000.

"It wouldn't have snowballed if we didn't have a kid of character like Jeff Parker," Beichner said. "He's extremely well liked and well respected."

An academic all-conference selection and SUNY Chancellor award winner, Parker won 73 matches at Buffalo. His senior year, he earned the "Ideal Bull" award, presented to the school's most well-rounded athlete.

Overwhelmed by the support, Parker is uncomfortable with the attention but knows it's for the greater good.

He's motivated by the resiliency of the children at Dana-Farber hopping out of cars and onto crutches.

"They don't feel sorry for themselves at all," Parker said. "I don't feel sorry for myself but I feel sorry for them. If I could help them at all, that's what I want to do."

Parker also hopes to leave an impression on his wrestlers at Franklin High. He tells them how he endured plenty of lows before reaching his highest highs.

"A lot of your best stuff will happen after there's been a lot of bad things," he said. "In eighth grade, I was 6-20 and had a pretty down season. My senior year, my record was 40-0. In order to get to that 40-0, there was a lot of bad things that happened to get there."

Parker developed his toughness by training with Father John McLaughlin, who had built a hall of fame coaching career on the mat at Woburn High. About eight Foxborough wrestlers went to train with McLaughlin at St. Mary's Church in Foxborough, but after one session Parker and his best friend, Mike Ragusa, were the only ones to return religiously, drilling on an unpadded commercial-grade rug in the church basement.

"When new people would come in and work with them and say, 'Are you kidding?' Parker would say, 'Rug burns will make you tougher,'" McLaughlin recalled.

As a senior at Foxborough, Parker was the all-state and New England heavyweight champion, and then wrestled at Binghamton University before the program was cut.

He transferred to Buffalo before red-shirting his first season with a hip injury. When he returned to the mat, he took the starting heavyweight spot and was named cocaptain his senior season.

Two months after graduation, Parker noticed a lump on his neck that was diagnosed as melanoma a few weeks later. Soon the son of a cancer survivor was himself undergoing surgery to remove the muscle that runs from his ear down the side of his neck to his clavicle.

Despite responding well to treatment, doctors soon spotted cancer on his liver and lungs.

His father, Walter, 54, who has been free of stomach cancer for four years, has a hard time comprehending it all.

"It's kind of shocking, two people from the same family, two different cancers," Walter Parker said. "It's really heartbreaking, as hard as this kid worked, to see this happen."

"We continue to have faith and hope and pray that he beats this like I did."

Father McLaughlin is also praying.

"I pray he's healed from cancer; I pray that God remembers how great of a person he is and how giving he is and the type of person he is," said McLaughlin, now based in Washington, D.C.

Parker knows his wrestling foundation has been his greatest weapon against cancer. But in his mind he has only survived preseason conditioning and still has a long season to go.

With only two sessions of his new treatment under his belt, Parker has to go back for more every three weeks with no end in sight.

"This part of my battle with cancer is going to be more [about] things I learned from wrestling," Parker says. "Those [radiation treatments] were quick and I could see the end. This one is longer. I don't know the end. I can't see the end right now. It's like the day-to-day grind of a regular season."

To learn more about the fund-raiser for Jeff Parker, go to www.ubathletics.buffalo.edu/wrestling/news/parker-benefit.shtml. ■