

Season takes hard turn for a Neshaminy senior

Marco Dapkey is fighting through chemo rather than leading his team.

By Rick O'Brien
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Waiting for Marco Dapkey was a promise-filled senior football season. His Neshaminy High coaches had selected him to be one of the squad's captains, he was expected to be a two-way contributor for the Redskins, and recruiting interest was growing.

All that changed June 13. Struggling with his breathing the night before and into the morning, a panicked Dapkey woke his mother, Rita.

That prompted a short trip to Aria Health Bucks County, where physicians, Rita Dapkey said, thought at first that Marco might have a serious sinus infection, or maybe pneumonia. An X-ray and CT scan revealed much more.

A huge mass was spotted in Dapkey's upper chest, severely compressing his larynx. The 17-year-old was immediately transported by ambulance to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "I knew something was terribly wrong," Rita Dapkey said.

The following afternoon, with Dapkey's family by his side in the intensive-care unit, Spencer Sullivan, an oncology fellow at CHOP, revealed the diagnosis: acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

Dapkey's first question for Sullivan? Not surprising, it wasn't about the survival rate for those with ALL, a cancer of white blood cells and the most common leukemia in children.

"I asked him, 'Can I play football this year?' He said, 'Most likely not.' That's when I got really upset," Dapkey recalled. "I wanted to punch him in the face. I was really, really mad."

Dapkey first experienced some of ALL's symptoms (there is an 85 percent survival rate) several weeks earlier: fatigue, ear infection, headaches, and shortness of breath.

"I never really said anything about it," he said. "I thought it was a sinus infection or something like that. As a football player, you take a suck-it-up approach and keep going."

Dapkey would have been an outside linebacker and wide receiver for Neshaminy, which began its season Friday by defeating Souderton. He has been passionate about football since he was a fifth grader.

That passion intensified for "Little Marco" while he was growing up in East Lansdowne, where one of his neighbors, Upper Darby High standout and future University of Minnesota linebacker Simon Lawrence — known in the area as "Big Marco" — used to knock on the door and ask to borrow his Madden game.

"He was one of my role models," Dapkey said. "At Upper Darby, he was a beast as a running back. I remember him bulldozing defenders."

Dapkey was a quarterback and linebacker at St. Cyril of Alexandria. There, Jay Borrelli, an Upper Darby native, coached him and provided off-the-grid-iron tutoring. "He pushed me to be my best," Dapkey said.

Borrelli, now a special-teams coach at Monsignor Bonner, has been like a "second father" to Dapkey.

Dapkey played two seasons for Bonner, starting at linebacker as a sophomore. "He worked incredibly hard, was the type of kid who would draw others to him," Friars coach Tom Oropeza said.

Dapkey transferred to Neshaminy in January 2009, moving with his mother to the Levittown home that his half-sister, Tanya, 31, shares with her husband, Tim, and the couple's 2½-year-old son, Alex.

Before retiring in June, shortly before her son fell seriously ill, Rita Dapkey was a UPS supervisor for 27 years. A transfer from an Oregon Avenue facility to Willow Grove made living with family in Bucks County, largely for financial



Marco Dapkey, wearing his jersey, watches the pregame coin toss before Neshaminy's 21-19 win at Souderton on Friday. He would have been a team captain this season.

reasons, more practical.

Marco Dapkey's father, Braulio Jimenez, lives near Allentown and works as a truck driver.

At Neshaminy, the 6-1, 185-pound Dapkey earned a starting job as a linebacker. His play down the stretch helped the Redskins advance to the PIAA District 1 Class AAAA quarterfinals and close with a 9-3 record.

"We were anticipating big things from him this year," Neshaminy coach Mark Schmidt said. "He had really stepped it up in the off-season — in the weight room, in workouts, and academically. Physically, he really filled out, got thicker."

Said Dapkey: "Right when I came here, it was like football heaven. Nothing against Bonner, but this program, especially when it comes to weightlifting and training, was already well-established."

Minutes after Dapkey learned he had ALL, Round 1 of treatment, called the induction period, began at CHOP.

During Dapkey's 3½-week hospital stay, weekly treatment included chemotherapy, a spinal tap (a lumbar puncture where chemo is injected into the spinal fluid), and a bone-marrow biopsy. Prednisone, a synthetic corticosteroid drug, caused significant swelling in his face.

Early last month, back at home with the leukemia in remission, Dapkey began vomiting and had severe throat soreness and a fluctuating temperature, with a high of 103 degrees. He returned to CHOP for a five-day stay.

Dapkey, whose weight has dropped from 198 pounds to 182, is in the early stages of Round 2, a 60-day (with a two-week break after the first four weeks) consolidation/intensification phase. He goes to CHOP each Monday for a complete blood count and chemo, takes

chemo pills daily, and periodically injects himself with chemo.

"I'm feeling pretty good right now," he said. "I haven't vomited lately. But my hemoglobin sometimes drops below 8, making me real tired." His hemoglobin was down to 7.5 Friday before a blood transfusion at CHOP.

If Dapkey stays in remission, Round 3, the maintenance phase, is scheduled to begin early next year. The phase's purpose is to kill any remaining leukemia cells that might regrow and cause a relapse. That might last two to three years.

Dapkey, back at school full time and often a spectator at football practice, has been overwhelmed by the support he has received.

There was the Middletown Community Foundation fund-raiser in Levittown, the car wash in Clifton Heights, a \$500 donation from Pennsbury High's booster club, and the Kansas City Chiefs garb and memorabilia sent by former Chiefs coach Dick Vermeil.

Some of the nonfamily mainstays are Borrelli, Schmidt, Oropeza, the people at the CHOP Neshaminy faculty, assistant coaches Dave Ferrara and Neil French, and former coaches such as Jim Burner (Valley Forge Military Academy, Bonner) and Eric Long (St. Cyril).

Lou Lapalombara, a close family friend, arranged a visit to Eagles training camp, where Dapkey caught up with Lawrence, an undrafted rookie who fell short of making the team's roster.

"It's been phenomenal," said Rita Dapkey, a graphic arts designer. "We are so lucky to have so many people helping us fight this disease. I don't know where we'd be without all of them."

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