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### An inspirational fight to the finish

#### 7A power Geneva draws strength from assistant coach's spirit in battling cancer

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It would be easy for Geneva running back Michael Ratay and his teammates to get swept away in their dream season.

The undefeated Vikings head into this weekend's Class 7A playoffs as a No. 1 seed, and Ratay has rushed for nearly 2,000 yards and scored 34 touchdowns.

But every day at practice, Ratay and his teammates deal with a stark reality that lends perspective while also inspiring their exploits on the field.

Running backs coach Mark Fagot has been waging a courageous battle against terminal cancer since April, when a doctor told him that patients in his condition generally survive eight weeks.

Fagot, 55, has handled his fate with a remarkable sense of humor and a fierce urgency to keep everything as normal as possible.

On Monday, he cooked 32-ounce porterhouse steaks for the seven players who come to his house for weekly film sessions—including his son, Drew, a fullback who leads the interference for Ratay.

He allayed the apprehension of his fellow coaches recently upon returning from a visit to the doctor, proclaiming, "Hey, guys, good news—my cholesterol's down!"

When confronted with the dreadful news back on April 22, the former Illinois fullback looked the doctor straight in the eye and said, "OK, so how do we beat this thing?"

What began as a very aggressive form of small-cell lung cancer metastasized into his brain and lymph nodes, later infecting the bones and liver.

Over the summer, Vikings coaches and players shaved their heads in support of Fagot, who lost his hair while undergoing chemotherapy. Co-workers at Riverfront Chrysler Jeep in North Aurora also went bald in support of their sales manager, who resigned last week.

"That was pretty inspirational," Fagot said. "Hey, this is not about me dying. It's about me living.

"So many people take so many things for granted. Live one day at a time and just enjoy life. I'm grateful



for every day I spend on this earth.

"I can wage the battle and I can take the pain. The ending is left up to someone much greater than me."

Three of his closest friends are traveling from California, Ohio and Downstate Danville for Saturday's home game against Rolling Meadows.

"Nobody complains at practice because all you have to do is look over at him," Ratay said. "Coach Fagot keeps everything normal and is always happy. He makes little jokes and always finds a way to make practices a little fun.

"It's amazing. I can't really explain it. If something like this ever happened, you hope you could handle it like that.

"Everyone has to face adversity sometime in their lives, and he is a prime example of handling the biggest adversity of all."

If Geneva goes on to win the state championship, imagine this scenario: the players hoisting Fagot onto their shoulders and carrying him off the field in Champaign.

"That would be the ride of my life," he said.

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