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Prep Zone: Cancer-stricken coach an inspiration



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Mark Fagot said the first question he asked the doctor after being diagnosed with cancer centered on his ability to keep coaching football.

“I said I’m still going to coach,” Fagot said.

Doesn’t sound like much of a question, coach.

“I just told him,” Fagot said, correcting himself.

Fagot, in his 10th year as a Geneva football varsity assistant, was diagnosed with small-cell lung cancer in April, cancer that spread to his brain to his liver to his bones – “pretty much everywhere,” Fagot said. Despite the life-threatening condition, Fagot remains a presence – and inspiration – for Geneva football.

“He’s around as much or more than he’s been in the past and he’s handled things marvelously,” Geneva head coach Rob Wicinski said. “He comes in with a positive spirit and a positive attitude every day. What a great role model for the kids to see how you’re handling the ultimate adversity.”

A golf fundraiser to help defray his family’s expenses is planned for Monday at Tanna Farms Golf Club in Geneva. Already, though, acts of kindness have streamed in from throughout the community.

When it was recommended that Fagot eat as much as he could handle to maintain strength, so many desserts were delivered that Fagot had to start discouraging the generosity.

“I couldn’t eat it all and my wife didn’t want to gain 20 pounds,” Fagot said.

Many of those close to Fagot shaved their heads over the summer to show solidarity, including dozens of players and coaches in the Geneva program. One night, Wicinski stopped by at about 10 p.m. to show off his new look.

“My wife was in bed and I woke her up to take pictures,” Fagot said.

Fagot, 55, said his football playing career – he was a running back at Danville High School and the University of Illinois – provides experience at living with pain, though nothing truly prepares someone for the radiation and chemotherapy treatments he receives at Dreyer Cancer Center in Aurora.

In discussing his situation, Fagot keeps a remarkably even-keeled outlook, tearing up only when discussing his son, Drew, a senior running back for the Vikings.

“Drew’s an amazing kid,” said Fagot, who along with his wife, Robin, has an older son, John, who also played at Geneva. “He’s had to work for everything he’s got.”

Drew’s presence on the team makes Fagot’s medical struggles register all the more acutely for the Vikings, but Fagot said he is determined for the team not to be distracted in what shapes up to be a superb season. Geneva opened Friday with a 49-7 win against Dundee-Crown.

"I made it clear to them – this season is about them, it's not about me," Fagot said. "I told them I'm not 6-feet under yet, and I plan to be here with them and coaching for a good, long time."

Wicinski hopes his players will more fully appreciate their blessings, just as their coach does.

"I wanted to make sure the boys understood this is not about dying, it's about living and taking every day for what it's worth ... the kids have really felt it," Wicinski said.

Fagot has given his cancer a name – Otto – a handle Fagot said seems fitting for a movie villain.

The plan, Fagot said, is "to see if I can kick Otto's butt, but it's a hard one to kick, unfortunately."

In that battle, Fagot has a team – and community – in his corner.

"I know I have people praying for me all over," Fagot said. "I can only do the fight. The results are up to a power much greater than myself."

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