

Aliquippa's DiMantae Bronuagh fights cancer for second time

Lauren Kirschman lkirschman@timesonline.com

There was no way to distinguish DiMantae Bronaugh from the rest of his Aliquippa football teammates as they sprinted across the high school's gym on a Tuesday afternoon at the end of July, filling the stifling room with the sounds of squeaking shoes and ragged breathing.

Save for the port embedded his chest, the one that occasionally peeked out from underneath his black muscle shirt, it was impossible to tell Bronaugh was still undergoing treatment for the childhood acute lymphocytic leukemia he was diagnosed with a year ago in August. On that day, in the opening weeks of conditioning, he just looked like any other football player.

On the inside, though, Bronaugh didn't feel quite right. And, as the week went on, his aunt and caregiver, Anita Gordon, noticed he didn't look well, either. Still, Bronaugh kept going to practice, an unsurprising sight for those who watched him work out through the entirety of his treatment.

By Sunday, though, Bronaugh — known for always insisting to everyone from Gordon to his doctor that he was fine, that he didn't need an extra break or a drink of water — told Gordon he needed to go to the hospital.

He was in pain, and it was devastatingly familiar.

Bronaugh's bloodwork came back abnormal that Sunday night. The next day, a bone marrow biopsy confirmed the fear: He was no longer in remission.

“We have to start over again from the beginning,” Gordon said the next day, bringing back memories of the first time Bronaugh asked to go to the hospital.

Last August, Gordon received a call while on vacation that Bronaugh had spent the night in the hospital. The diagnosis was rhabdomyolysis. Caused by working muscles to the point of breaking down, rhabdomyolysis is the death of muscle fibers and the release of their contents into the bloodstream. It often causes muscle pain and weakness and dehydration. As treatment, doctors gave him an enzyme and IV fluids and kept him overnight.

Three days later, Bronaugh was still in pain. Gordon took him back to the medical center and, after re-tests, doctors said he was just taking longer to heal. When they left the second time, Gordon told Bronaugh they wouldn't come back a third. If he didn't feel better in a few days, she would take him to Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC in Lawrenceville.

Two days later, at 10 a.m., that's where they went. And that's where they met Dr. Scott Maurer, who took one look at Bronaugh and said he wasn't going home that day. When they left, Maurer said, they would know what was wrong with him. Five hours later, Maurer was telling Bronaugh he had leukemia.

Bronaugh immediately broke down. His first thoughts were football.

“You could just see him deflate when they said that he had leukemia,” Gordon said. “He was in denial.”

Bronaugh's official diagnosis was acute lymphoblastic leukemia, the most common form of childhood cancer Maurer treats. Every year in the United States, about 4,000 children are diagnosed with ALL. Over the past 60 years, the prognosis has changed dramatically. In the 1950s and '60s, the cure rate was less than 4 percent. Now, it's more than 90 percent. Between 15 percent and 20 percent of childhood ALL patients will relapse.

The initial treatment plan to cure Bronaugh, who entered remission in his first month of treatment, was six to eight months of intensive weekly chemotherapy followed by three years of maintenance chemotherapy, which involved a low dose of chemo on a regular basis and a visit to Maurer once a month.

By August, a year after his initial diagnosis, Bronaugh was just months into the maintenance phase. Granted an extra year of eligibility by the WPIAL, he joined his teammates for football conditioning. In the next few weeks, he was supposed to have the central line removed from his chest, which would allow him to take contact and play in games.

Now, the plan has changed.

Along with more intensive chemotherapy, Bronaugh also will need a bone marrow transplant once he re-enters remission. Gordon said doctors are hopeful that will happen by December.

Because he has no full siblings, Bronaugh will have to look elsewhere for a match. With the help of Be The Match, which operates a National Marrow Donor Program, Gordon is planning a blood drive with bone marrow-matching expected to take place within the next few months. Donors must be between the ages of 18-44 and in general good health. They are more likely to be a match with someone who shares their race and ethnicity.

On a sweltering day in mid-July, a few weeks before Bronaugh would find out he was no longer in remission, he set up a workout in the sloping, vacant parking lot bordering his backyard.

On one side of the fence, kids of all ages swam in Gordon's pool, trying to cool off in the heat. On the other side, sun beating down on the black pavement, Bronaugh was running. With the sound of laughter and splashing as background noise, he weaved through cones, high-stepped through a ladder. By the end of the workout, he had sweated through his turquoise shirt. He was tired, but he was smiling.

Even through the toughest parts of his treatment, Bronaugh found a way to train. Sometimes he couldn't do much, but he would always try to do something. Maurer had never seen another patient who was able to perform the same way.

"If he would've asked me at the beginning of this if he could be in as good of shape as he is right now," Maurer said in July, "I would've told him that was impossible.

"He defied my expectations about what a young man like him could do as far as staying motivated to participate in football and also continue to maintain training through all of this."

In the days before Bronaugh's relapse, Aliquippa assistant coach Sherman McBride passed him running up the steep hill next to the high school, wearing a weight jacket in the 90-degree heat.

It's that drive that allowed Bronaugh to quickly gain back the 30 pounds he lost during treatment. That drive that had him back playing 7-on-7 football with his teammates this summer just a few days after a spinal tap.

And it's that same drive he'll need now to help him beat cancer for the second time.

"It was just another heartbreaking thing for our kids to overcome," said McBride, referencing Bronaugh's relapse and the death of 16-year-old Marcus Tigner in July. "When people talk about Aliquippa kids, you can't tell me these kids aren't tough. These kids have overcome adversity time and time again."

“I’ve never really been down,” Bronaugh said in July from the couch in his living room, shortly before he headed outside for his workout. “I can’t really be down when everyone’s helping me out.”

From the time Bronaugh was diagnosed, he was never alone. He had his family, his teammates and friends, his coaches. The entire Aliquippa community rallied around him. When he struggled, the people around him kept him going.

The first game of last season served as a rallying point. Banners that read “24 Strong” hung on the fence along the sidelines and in the end zone. Fans wore red to show their support. People made donations and ordered T-shirts — with all proceeds going toward Bronaugh — at the front gate.

“We as Aliquippans,” McBride said, “are always going to be there for one of our own.”

Bronaugh was determined to make that home opener. It happened so soon after his diagnosis Gordon wasn’t sure it was a possibility, but the hospital gave him a day pass to attend.

He ran late, but it didn’t matter. McBride and coach Mike Zmijanac had already agreed the Quips weren’t going anywhere without him. They stayed locked inside the fieldhouse long after kickoff time. If it came down to it, they would take penalties. But they were going to wait.

“I think our kids were accustomed to looking for No. 24 to appear,” McBride said. “They were expecting him.”

“I didn’t think that everyone would be like that,” Bronaugh said. “I thought I’d have to hurry up and go in the side door, but everyone was waiting for me. It was pretty shocking actually.”

The support didn’t stop at Aliquippa. It extended throughout WPIAL, from rival schools like Beaver Falls to across the area at Woodland Hills. When Bronaugh first came back from the hospital, he said it felt like a weeks-long welcome back party. Someone visited him every day.

“I think some of the things that have helped him are the generosity of the schools around that have donated to him,” Zmijanac said. “The combination of that and his teammates who want him around. His presence means a lot to us because he’s just a kid and we’re rooting hard for him.”

Since news of Bronaugh’s relapse spread, Gordon has seen the same kind of support building back around him. It’s been overwhelming, she said, the amount of people who have reached out to her about finding out if they are a bone marrow match.

“Football to me is like a big fraternity,” McBride said. “Everybody in the area, you might compete, you might play these teams and everything, but everybody always finds that place in their hearts to look out for each other when somebody has a certain situation that goes wrong.”

"It's not about wins and losses sometimes. Whatever happens, these kids and communities and other teams, they'll still be backing him."

Bronaugh, while grateful, is still struggling to come to terms with his new reality. He'll spend the next few weeks in the hospital and has been avoiding attention as he restarts intensive treatment. Having football stripped away was a heart-wrenching blow, but Gordon said Bronaugh's getting stronger emotionally every day.

Just like when he pushed himself — so often exhausted and sick — through his workouts, he's moving forward one step at a time.

"He likes to keep to himself," Gordon said. "He doesn't like all the attention. At this point, I think it's becoming too much for him, especially when he's trying to overcome the fact that it's back.

"He's thankful for all the well-wishing, but now he's just in a place where he just wants to try and deal with it."

This isn't a football story.

Coach Mike Zmijanac made that clear in a hallway at Aliquippa High School, the sounds of his players running audible from the other side of the door. For a long time, from Bronaugh's perspective, it was. What he wanted, what so often kept him going, was the promise of football.

While he sat out last year, he went to every game he could, wore his No. 24 jersey, stood on the sidelines with his team. When he couldn't make it, he made Gordon text him updates, pressed her for specifics she didn't know enough to give him.

On a cold day in March, a light snow from the night before still clinging to the front yard of his house, Bronaugh lay down on the floor, back pressed against a bag of dog food. Treatment had been difficult lately, leaving him tired and battling a stomach ache. If he didn't have visitors, he would be sleeping.

There was a question.

"What are you most looking forward to?"

A quick answer.

"Football."

Even before Bronaugh found out he was no longer in remission, Zmijanac firmly stated he would be a part of the team even if he couldn't play. It's a different battle for Bronaugh now. Not a fight to get back on the football field, but the task of finding something else to fight for. When McBride first spoke to Bronaugh after he relapsed, he told him as much.

Football isn't life, he said. Life is life.

"Once we figure out his status and everything and how much he can do, I'm sure he'll come to practices just like he was doing before, come to games just like he was doing before," McBride said.

"Nothing has changed as far as our feelings toward Bronaugh. He's still a part of our team. He still has his number. The only bad thing is he won't be playing."