

Wrestler Faces Cancer, Up to Challenge

By Jessica Shirey

He had just competed in the NCAA Division I Wrestling Championships. Adam Frey, Cornell University 141-pounder, saw his season come to a close after a 2-2 tournament finish.

"Adam went from being one of the nation's top freshman to a down year," Head Wrestling Coach, Rob Koll said. "He was up 6-1 against (Garrett) Scott at nationals but then got majored. We couldn't figure out why."

"My legs would go numb (during matches), and I ran out of gas by the end of the first period," Adam said. "It was just bizarre."

Without knowing about his current opponent, Adam returned to Cornell University with his eyes fixated on next season.

Adam traveled East Malloryville, a back country road between Cortland and Ithaca N.Y., at least twice a day to attend classes and practice. He left for campus a bit earlier the morning of Tuesday, March 25, as he returned to his off-season routine stop at McDonalds.

Afterward, Adam continued the drive down the narrow, winding highway.

"It's a pretty dangerous (part of the road)," he said. "Most people drive down the middle. I was kind of in the middle but still toward my side."

Adam then saw another vehicle heading directly at his Honda CR-V.

"My first thought was to swerve, and that's what I did," he said.

He swerved right and then left and hit debris with the back of his vehicle.

"It caused my car to spin out of control, roll down a hill and hit a tree at 55 miles per hour," Adam said. "I was still in my seat but in the bed of my SUV. I was just numb."

At first, Adam thought he was paralyzed as a result of the numbness and extreme pain in his head and neck.

"I remember telling myself to breathe. I felt as though I was about to pass out from the pain," he said.

So far as Adam could tell his injuries were not life threatening. He knocked his door open in order to exit his vehicle.—

"I kind of fell (from my car), because it was tipped. I was in a daze and had to find my phone," he said. "I really had to search but eventually found it behind my seat in the bed."

While most would have dialed 911, Adam, who is accustomed to taking charge, called his roommate Gene Nighman for transportation to Cortland Memorial Hospital.

Although he was still in a lot of pain, Adam didn't believe he had sustained serious injuries. "Man, I was hurting, when I got there but

knew I wasn't hurt. I was just dazed and a little concuss."

He had a routine Computerized Axial Tomography (CAT) scan in order to determine the extent of his injuries and to check for internal bleeding and any head and or neck trauma.

Adam should have received good news - no major injuries - but was soon stunned with the test results. "Everything came back negative. I had whiplash, and then I got the 'but.' It was just odd. I was in shock and felt numb."

Bad news loomed for Adam, as three tumors had been discovered. He has a grapefruit-sized tumor between his kidneys, with two smaller, golf ball sized tumors found on his lung and liver. His largest tumor weighs an estimated 10 to 12 pounds.

"It was like a nightmare, and I couldn't get out. I felt pure horror and shock," he said. "I felt alone. It was just me there. And, my phone was dead. I just felt alone."

Koll also experienced disbelief when told about the cancer.

"I was doubtful and thought it'd be a cyst. But then the doctor took me in the room, where the CAT scan had been done. I saw the actual size of the tumor (between his kidneys), and it was just massive," he said.

A couple days following his accident, Adam underwent a pair of biopsies at Cayuga Medical Center.

Adam's first biopsy tested a growth underneath his nipple and was done without anesthesia.

"I had a tissue growth from a hormone imbalance due to the cancer. It was benign but actually a sign of the cancer," he said.

Under anesthesia, Adam had a second biopsy of the largest tumor. He said a 10-inch needle was used for the procedure to penetrate his approximately eight inches of lower back muscle tissue.

"I was lying on my stomach and couldn't see the needle. I heard them talk about it and caught a glimpse after. It was huge, but I didn't feel anything," he said.

Adam said the tumors on his lung and liver were not tested and were assumedly connected to the largest. He was preliminarily diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, a cancer which attacks the lymphatic system.

"I was originally diagnosed with lymphoma because of the location of my tumors," he said.

In the days to follow, Adam's news worsened, as his diagnosis was changed to a rare, germ cell testicular cancer by doctors at the Hillman Institute for Cancer Research in Pittsburgh. His cancer developed as a result of a high number of testicular cells, which did not group and gathered in the lower abdomen near his kidneys.

Adam's odds for a complete recovery were cut by 10 to 20

percent but still remained between 60 to 70 percent. He will undergo four months of intensive chemotherapy before having tests to determine if additional rounds of treatment will be required.

Adam's chemotherapy treatments come in three-week cycles. He receives a steady dose of two drugs, Cystoplatinum and Etoposide, during the first week, with the exception of Tuesday, when he's given a third drug, Bleomyicin. He's only treated with the Bleomyicin the following two Tuesdays. Adam is also required to take a self-administered white blood cell booster injection at home.

His chemotherapy treatments potentially cause sterility, hair loss, nausea and loss of appetite.

Knowing the side effects, Adam felt uneasy and counted down the hours until his first treatment.

"I didn't know what to expect, and it was nerve wrecking," he said. "I felt like I was about to wrestle a big match. I was jittery. I like to know and was journeying into the unknown."

Adam's worries were alleviated by the staff at the Hillman Institute.

"You wouldn't think it's a place where cancer preys. It's an upbeat, comforting place. There isn't a feeling of despair or hopelessness," he said. "It's not really as dreary as you might think. The staff and patients are happy. It really helped."

Adam found out the first week of “chemotherapy wasn’t that bad.”

“I was pretty calm but expected the worse. I didn’t feel anything or react to the treatment. I felt no different. It was easy,” he said. “It didn’t hit me hard. I worked out after. I felt as great as great can be with cancer.”

Adam said it takes technique, conditioning, strength and heart to get your hand raised in a wrestling match and doesn’t view this bout any differently.

“I already have the best care and medical technique. I’m staying in shape to boost my immune system,” he said. “I have the inner strength, and I will win at any cost.

“I’m not going to throw in the towel. I can’t find it within myself to give up at anything. I can’t have this beat up on me at 22-years-old.”

Adam said a positive attitude is the best winning strategy, but as in any contest where the stakes are high, the slightest doubts can grow quickly.

“At times it’s easy. Other times it’s hard. I push doubt out of my mind. Doubt and death go hand-in-hand with this disease. It’s going to be tough mentally, physically and emotionally, but I’m ready for it,” he said.

Adam believes his 16 years of wrestling and its rigorous discipline and continuous determination to emerge victorious, prepared him to

fight the disease.

"I have a strong body and mind. The mental toughness from wrestling is really unparalleled. I can be a glutton for pain. And, that's going to be huge," he said.

"I don't think it will be as hard on Adam, as it would other patients," Koll said.

He said Adam has pushed himself to breaking points before and can do it again.

"It's not going to be any more painful than what he's already put his body through," Koll said. "Wrestling has given him the physical and mental anguish of a Spartan in battle."

Adam said his bout with cancer will be tougher than any practice or tournament.

"(Cancer) will be tough to beat. I'm not going to underestimate it. I'll find the focus to beat this," he said.

However, Adam doesn't only want to win his own battle, but looks to serve as the backbone in his fellow patients' fight as well.

He said support is a key factor in fighting the disease and many are not as fortunate as him.

"I have great friends and family. I'm also lucky to have the support of many fans through my Web site (adamfrey.us). I have the best support base," he said.

"I draw on their strength every day. It gives you a second wind, when people are cheering you on. It gives me more reason to beat it."

Adam wants to be a breath of fresh air to other cancer patients and bring them the same positive attitude.

"These patients have lives and people who care about them. I'd like to inspire them to fight harder. It would be gratifying to pull them through," he said.

Despite the great battle lying ahead, Adam's educational and wrestling goals remain unchanged.

He looks to enroll full-time at Cornell next spring and pursue his major in government.

"I might get a double major and add history. A lot of the courses overlap," he said. "I'm also considering law school and looking into corporate law."

Adam plans to redshirt the 2009-10 wrestling season in order to prepare for his return to the wrestling mat. He will also petition the NCAA in hopes of gaining a sixth year of eligibility.

He is also determined to return to his old form.

"I want to win nationals and the Olympics. I want to win the hardware. I have high goals and am not training for second," Adam said. "I still want to win it, and that's the goal."

Like Adam, Koll is confident he'll return to the mat. "I'm

reasonably certain he'll be back."