

Football receiver tackles cancer

By Ashley Hocking

Last March, senior Zay Boldridge's mother, Kalila, got a telephone call that changed Boldridge's life forever. Boldridge's doctor informed his mother that he was in cancer remission for Hodgkin's Lymphoma disease.

"Zay didn't believe it and wanted to hear it from the doctor himself," Kalila Boldridge said. "We went to the doctor and his oncologist told Zay that he was in remission."

Boldridge will continue to visit his doctor on a monthly basis for many years to ensure the disease does not return.

"There's always a possibility of it coming back," Boldridge said. "But, we're just hoping that it doesn't."

Boldridge received the diagnosis on Dec. 9, 2012, a day before his 17th birthday.

"That was the first time I ever saw my brother cry," Boldridge said.

Boldridge was bedridden in the hospital for a week. After countless tests were conducted, doctors concluded that he had not one, but two diseases in his chest.

"There was a different disease in there called histoplasmosis eating the cancer, but it didn't fully take it away. It just made it smaller," Boldridge said. "It's always going to grow back. That's why I always have check-ups and stuff, so that we can make sure it doesn't grow back faster."

Boldridge was discharged from the hospital just in time to make it to the LHS v. Free State basketball game on Dec. 14, 2012. Both city high school's student sections set aside their rivalry for a night and adorned themselves with purple, the official color of Hodgkin's Lymphoma disease.

"We will always be forever grateful for how much time, effort and love was put into that game. It was amazing to walk into that gym and see Zay walk by the crowd. I never thought I was going to see my son leave the hospital," Kalila Boldridge said. "I was in total awe when I walked into the gym and saw everybody in the 'Pray for Zay' shirts and in purple. I cried. Zay truly felt loved, and he needed that support from his school and the community."

Supporters collected donations, sold T-shirts and wristbands and set up a bank account to help pay for medical bills. A grand total of \$3,000 was amassed for the Boldridge family.

For the following four months, Boldridge and his family visited oncology and infectious disease doctors three times a week.

When Boldridge received the news that his body no longer showed signs or symptoms of Hodgkin's Lymphoma in March, the first thought on his mind was football.

He was not cleared to play contact sports until the fall season had already begun.

"We didn't get him until the second week in June. He had about seven weeks with us in the weight room," head football coach, Dirk Wedd, said. "When he walked in, he had not lost a great deal of strength, which shocked us all. . . Once he got in the weight room, he gained a lot of strength."

The wait did not hinder Boldridge. His only concern was getting to play under the Friday night lights once again.

“I didn’t think that I’d get to play my senior year,” Boldridge said. “It’s great to be back on the field.”

With the football season in full swing, Wedd has stopped easing up on Boldridge because of his disease.

“At first, Coach Wedd laid back off of me. He used to yell at me like all the time. Now, he’s starting to get in the yelling stage, which I don’t mind and I really want him to because that’s a motivation,” Boldridge said. “I feel like I’m one of the leaders of the team. They can look up to me and realize my situation.”

Ever since Boldridge defeated Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, he has pushed himself to live everyday as if it were his last.

“I just keep moving forward. You never know when your last breath is going to be or your last play,” Boldridge said. “Just do it as hard as you can. Don’t take a day or a play off.”

His motivation has paid off. At the LHS v. Olathe South football game on Sept. 5, Boldridge scored the first touchdown of the football season.

“When I scored that touchdown, it reminded me of when I beat it. It’s like the cancer is the corner and I’m me. I just ran past the cancer and I just scored,” Boldridge said. “It was an amazing feeling at the moment. I didn’t even know I was in the end zone at first, I just kept running.”

Moments like these show how far Boldridge has come since his life-altering diagnosis last winter.

“Back in December, I was sitting in the hospital room... He goes, ‘Coach, you look like you don’t think I’m going to play next year.’ And I go, ‘Well, more importantly, let’s just make sure we get you well. Then, we’ll worry about football.’ He goes, ‘I’m playing and I’m going to be a good player for you,’” Wedd said. “You remember that stuff. When he did it, he came sprinting over. Basically, the G-version would be, ‘I told you I’d be back coach.’ It was cool, and that’s why you coach for 40 years — because of kids like that.”

When football season comes to a close in November, Boldridge plans to trade in his helmet and shoulder pads for a jersey and basketball shorts.

“I believe that this [basketball] season will be different for the boys’ relationships. The whole team of boys has endured so much right along with Zay,” Kalila Boldridge said. “I believe it will make their bonds stronger and relationships stronger. Last year and this year will be seasons they will never forget.”

The past calendar year has been an eye opener for the Boldridge family and brought it closer than ever before.

“Zay will always be an inspiration to me. Just the fact that he held his composure and kept himself together when I was falling apart. Of course, he had bad days during cancer and cried and yelled, but overall Zay chose to be a fighter instead of laying down and dying,” Kalila Boldridge said. “He proved that you can overcome anything with faith. He chose not to give up and look at him now.”

Despite the obstacles Hodgkin’s Lymphoma disease has created for Boldridge, he has always kept a positive attitude.

“I’ve always felt that I was going to beat it,” Boldridge said. “Even though I did have it, I never felt like I really did have it.”