

# Press Times SPORTS



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## A season lost, and a life saved

St. Norbert College's Davison beats cancer because of COVID-19-canceled season

BY GREG BATES  
CORRESPONDENT

DE PERE – It could have been another dark day for Luke Davison.

The St. Norbert College hockey player was losing his hair, not by choice and not without a fight – but the cancer was starting to take its toll.

Davison's teammate and friend Tim Nicksic organized a Friday night gathering with teammates this April.

The guys showed up, with hair clippers in hand, as they shaved their heads in unity.

"He never asked for anything that we did," Nicksic said. "We did it out of the goodness of our hearts. He's a brother to us, so we took him under our wing. We tried to do anything to lighten his mood. He had lots of stuff going on, so we weren't overbearing. It was one of those things where, 'we're here if you need us,'" Davison, a 25-year-old defenseman, was going through the battle of his life but not alone.

"You go from the highs



Luke Davison, a De Pere native, missed his senior year of hockey at St. Norbert College, but beat Hodgkin lymphoma when the time off allowed him to diagnose and battle the cancer.

of the highs in the sports world and in life to the lows of the lows," St. Norbert Head Coach Tim Cogh-

lin said. "We were devastated when it came out it was cancer, and this was a thing he was going to have

to battle. The troops rallied hard around him. Everybody was in his corner. Our group was tremendous

from start to finish."

Davison seconded that sentiment.

"My teammates were the

biggest factor in keeping me sane and spreading positivity the best they could," he said. "They were incredible throughout the process."

Davison was part of the St. Norbert hockey program's success during his three seasons.

He was a member of the Frozen Four All-Tournament Team when the Green Knights won the 2017-18 NCAA Division III National Championship.

He finished his career with 59 points (10 goals, 49 assists).

### Receiving the tough news

Due to the pandemic, it was announced in early December 2020 St. Norbert wouldn't compete against other schools for athletics during the winter season, including hockey.

Davison, who was raised in De Pere and played high school hockey at Notre Dame Academy, noticed a lingering lymph node on his neck that winter.

About a month later, Davison was hanging out with

See DAVISON page 12B

## A look back: Ashwaubenon's 1996 state title team

BY GREG BATES  
CORRESPONDENT

ASHWAUBENON – Things looked bleak.

A loss by the Ashwaubenon football team in either of the final two regular-season games would have ended the season.

Dan White, Scott Baranczyk and Eric Destache were senior leaders who weren't going to let the 1996 squad go down in program lore with another losing record.

It started in Week 9 with a come-from-behind victory over Marinette to allow Ashwaubenon to sneak into the playoffs.

It ended five games later with the hoisting of a gold ball for winning the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) Division 2 state title.

Now, 25 years later, some of the key contributors to that championship run recall their road to state immortality.

"It still feels like you're



Ken Golomski, now an assistant coach with the St. Norbert College football team, was the head coach of the Ashwaubenon Jaguars when it won its Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association Division 2 state title in 1996.

Rich Palzewicz Photo

a bunch of high school kids when you get together," Destache, who was a starting cornerback, said. "You may not feel that way anymore, but it's all good."

Baranczyk also chimed in.

"It's crazy because I feel like I'm 12 still," Baranczyk, who was a star linebacker, said. "To go back that far, I never thought I'd be able to think back and remember 25 years already – that's crazy. Time has flown by."

Then-head coach Ken Golomski said he knows his guys winning state wasn't a fluke.

"When people write you off and say you don't have a chance, it was sweet in that manner," Golomski, who was at Ashwaubenon for 25 years, said. "Our fans stuck with us. We'd win a game and people would start following us. The City of Green Bay got involved, and the ra-

dio picked us up. We were on the radio for all those games. It was a Cinderella story."

Baranczyk, who was a captain and the team's leading tackler, said it was a core group of guys who were like-minded and driven.

"The key to our success was guys who cared about winning and losing and cared about the game," he said. "Matt Gunville, Troy Coonen, Dan White, myself, Eric Destache, Jason Jacobs, Nick Selk and Dave Woosenraft – there was a core group of guys who spent lots of time in the summer together. The game was more than football to us. Coach Golomski was the leader that built that culture in us."

### Rocky regular season

Ashwaubenon was coming off a 4-5 season in 1995 but entered the '96 campaign with plenty of opti-

mism.

The senior class was stacked with athletes, and the Jaguars were going to be solid on both sides of the ball.

White was a workhorse at running back, and the team's defense had playmakers at every level.

The Jaguars started the season 2-2 before injuries started to decimate the team.

Three starters, two of whom were all-conference, missed time.

Baranczyk said he remembers missing three-and-one-half to four games with a bad shoulder.

Also, Destache missed two or three games and returned for Week 7.

That week, Ashwaubenon lost a double-overtime game to West De Pere, 31-28, to drop to 3-4.

In previous years, that losing mark would have eliminated the Jaguars

See TITLE page 11B



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DAVISON  
from page 1B

the parents of his fiancé, Kaycee.

He told his future father-in-law about the lymph node and was told to get it checked out.

Davison waited a few weeks and decided he needed to follow through on that advice.

"The whole time during this, I was having night sweats, which is a common symptom with this type of cancer," he said. "But, I wrote it off."

Davison was referred to a surgeon for further tests after bloodwork came back normal.

He was told because he had no major symptoms, and the lymph node wasn't irregular, he could wait for a biopsy.

However, after a couple of weeks, the spot started to hurt.

Davison called to schedule the biopsy.

He received a call on his 25th birthday, Friday, Feb. 26, that half of the results came back and were fine.

Davison was told not to worry and enjoy his birthday weekend.

"I had a nice weekend, and Monday came around, and I had just gotten done with my classes for the day," he said. "I was hanging out and (the surgeon) called back and said, 'Hey, basically we found you're extremely positive for Hodgkin (lymphoma).' My first question to him was, 'Is it for sure, or is there still some gray areas where it might not be cancer?' And he said, 'No. You 100% have cancer.'"

Davison was diagnosed with Stage 3B advanced Hodgkin lymphoma.

"My mind went to, 'What the hell? What do I have to do going forward?'" he said.



Luke Davison received words of encouragement through social media and gifts from NHL players and coaches as he underwent chemotherapy earlier this year. Submitted Photo

The next week, Davison had appointments with different doctors every day to figure out a plan.

Before his diagnosis, Davison was skating with his teammates every day, even though St. Norbert wasn't playing games, so he had to break the difficult news.

"That was hard to do," he said, getting choked up.

Nicksic remembers when Davison spoke to the locker room.

"There were lots of crickets," Nicksic said. "There were lots of question marks. When he told us about it, he was upbeat. Everything was going wrong in the world with COVID, our season got shut down, it was our last year, and all I remember is him being upbeat and positive. That was something that resonated with me."

Davison had an early-morning trip in mid-March to a Green Bay hospital for

a surgical procedure to have a port put into his chest for chemotherapy.

After he heard about the surgery, Nicksic reached out to Davison's fiancé to get the specifics.

Players and coaches planned to gather at the front of the hospital to greet Davison before he passed through the doors.

"Everyone was on board, and I didn't know how it was going to go," Nicksic said. "We got there, and we got the Norby Knight costume, the coaches came and we're all dressed up in our St. Norbert hockey outfits. Kaycee took a video, and it blew up. Coaches were calling our coach Coghlin to say how great of a gesture that was."

#### Hockey community rallies

At that point, Davison started receiving well wishes via social media and gifts

through the mail from NHL organizations and coaches throughout the continent.

Davison's older brother, Tim, played hockey at the University of Wisconsin, and lots of Tim's teammates who went onto the NHL told their organizations Luke's story.

Buffalo Sabres Head Coach Don Granato, brother of Wisconsin coach Tony, was one of the first to reach out.

Don had a jersey made with Davison's No. 28 in a locker next to the jersey of the Sabres' Jake McCabe, an Eau Claire native and family friend.

A fellow Hodgkin lymphoma survivor, he also called Davison.

All-time great Mario Lemieux sent a letter to Davison wishing him the best, as well as a signed hockey puck and T-shirt from his Mario Lemieux Foundation.

The Winnipeg Jets sent items to Davison, who played high school hockey with then-Jets defenseman Mason Appleton, now of the Seattle Kraken.

The Boston Bruins shipped a team-signed jersey and Charlie McAvoy signed stick.

Davison's brother Tim had a good friend who played on the Chicago Blackhawks, and knew how big of a fan he is of then-Blackhawks defenseman Duncan Keith, now of the Edmonton Oilers.

"They hooked it up where Duncan sent me a jersey, which was the coolest thing in the world," Davison said. Nicksic said he heard from Davison about a team or coach reaching out to him on a weekly basis.

"It was cool to see," Nicksic said. "These teams, guys and coaches, they don't know anything about him. They could blink an eye, and it would be nothing to them, but they went out of their way to show support. That helped Luke. It was refreshing to see from an outside standpoint."

It's been said the hockey community is one of the closest-knit group of athletes.

"It was amazing to see the amount of support in the hockey community," Coghlin said. "Lots of prayers and lots of faith, that's how you get through it."

#### Chemotherapy hits hard

Two weeks after the port was installed, Davison started rounds of chemotherapy. Davison said it hit him hard, draining all of his energy.

"Each time I had chemo, it felt like I played 10 hockey games in a two-day span," he said. "I'd be completely exhausted."

While going through chemotherapy, Davison was finishing up classes at St. Norbert.

He said his professors went above and beyond to help.

Davison earned his degree in accounting this May. After the first three rounds of chemotherapy were complete, a PET (positron emission tomography) scan was administered to see if cancer was still present.

"That one came back clear, and there was no more cancer," Davison said. "In the first one, my body was full of it – that was encouraging. Me, my fiancé and our families were confused why I had to continue (with chemotherapy) because that scan came back so good. The doctor said there's a study

that shows if you finish your recommended rounds, there's a 90-something percent chance the cancer will never come back versus if you stop, there's a 60% chance it will."

After six rounds of chemotherapy, 12 treatments in all, he had his final round Aug. 27.

Davison had a final PET scan Oct. 22.

Six days later, he learned he was cancer free – after a difficult six months, it was over.

#### 'A new chance at life'

From the time he was diagnosed to being cleared was a grueling time for Davison.

"Our season was canceled, and we were upset," Nicksic said. "Not only because of COVID, we thought we should be playing because everyone else in our conference was playing, and it was our last year as seniors. We had no idea what we were going to do next. Luke had the bump on his neck, and he went and got that checked out, something he wouldn't have done if we were still playing. You talk about a blessing in disguise and seeing the silver lining in things. Yeah, we didn't have a season, but if we were in season, he wouldn't have gotten that checked out until at the end of school and he would have found it three months later. You never know how that could have gone."

Coghlin called the season a success, even though the puck didn't drop once.

"All of the negative surroundings of COVID, the only thing our group will truly remember is Luke Davison beat cancer," he said. "The lasting memory for all of us is Luke Davison beats cancer."

Near the end of September, Davison and his fiancé Kaycee – who are getting married in November 2022 – accepted jobs and moved to Arizona.

Davison is working at the accounting firm Eide Bailly in Phoenix.

"It's a new chance at life, basically," Davison said. "I've had to downplay lots of things in my life and especially this, but I did so I could get through it. I'll probably deal with it at a later point in my life and the magnitude of it all, but I understand it is a like a new chance at life. God put me through this for some reason, I'm still trying to figure that out. It's helped me learn not to take things for granted and show the people in my life you love them and how much they mean to you."

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