

SOFTBALL TOMAH'S PEYTON FOSTER

After months of treatment for cancer, Tomah's Peyton Foster has made a triumphant return to the diamond and is helping THS to one of its finest seasons ever

Tomah's Peyton Foster received treatment and is back to playing sports after being diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin's lymphoma this fall.

Herald photo/illustration by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

Tomah senior Peyton Foster is a classic example of what people think of when the phrase "student-athlete" is invoked — a high honor roll high school student who has been consistently active in both extracurriculars and sports in all seasons throughout her life. Foster expected to shine in her final go around in high school for all sports, and that got off to a strong start in the fall as she was part of a Tomah girls' golf team that got back to the state meet for a fourth straight year. She hoped similar success would soon follow in gymnastics in the winter and softball in the spring, but sports were about to be placed way on the back burner for Foster. A cancer diagnosis would soon dramatically alter the life and the lives of her entire family: mother Hannah, father Jeramy and little brother Holden...



By ZACH RASTALL
Sports Writer

A DAUNTING DIAGNOSIS

Foster was feeling fatigued and not herself for a couple months. At times during the golf season in the fall, she dealt with pain in her shoulder and upper back that she didn't think too much of at the time, but it turns out was the source of the fight that has changed her life.

"In hindsight, you come to find out that's where the mass of the cancer was," said Tomah head girls' golf coach Tonya Gnewikow. "But you would never consider that as a possibility when you're young like that. She just thought, 'oh I tweaked or pulled a muscle' or overuse getting into the season."

Not long after the conclusion of the golf season in October, Foster went to donate blood at a local blood drive and was denied due to her low hemoglobin levels and advised to go see a doctor.

Blood tests and an ultrasound on a lump on her neck in early November revealed that she had cancer. Further tests and a PET scan showed that it was stage 4 Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the part of the immune system known as the lymphatic system.

"I was in complete shock. Obviously, no one ever thinks that they're going to be the one to get diagnosed with cancer," Peyton said. "It's always kind of everyone's fear, but no one thinks it will ever become a reality."

Foster had symptoms such as uncontrollable itching, fatigue, night sweats and the lump on her neck. Still, the thought of someone so young and active getting cancer can be a hard idea to wrap your mind around, especially when it's a loved one.

"She's burning the candle at both ends, she's an

athlete, she's healthy. She had a lump, but I've had lipomas and so I didn't think too much of it," Jeramy said. "And here Hannah had been researching it for weeks and going to places I didn't even think of. So, when we got the diagnosis, I kind of broke down and (Hannah) was like 'we'll get through it' because she had been there already, and it wasn't even on my radar at all."

Once enduring the initial shock of Peyton's diagnosis wore off and the reality of the situation sunk in, the Foster family turned their focus to taking a positive approach to the fight ahead. Despite the cancer spreading beyond her lymphatic system, it's still a type of cancer with a more positive prognosis and the Fosters were ready to take the situation head on.

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SOFTBALL
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TIMBERWOLVES: MVC TITLE 3-PEAT

By ZACH RASTALL
Sports Writer

It's now been over a year since the Tomah softball team has tasted defeat against a Mississippi Valley Conference opponent. Thanks to their 14th straight win in MVC play (moving their league record to 10-0 this year), the Timberwolves have now clinched a share of their third straight conference championship.

Tomah (18-3 overall, 10-0 Mississippi Valley) got the clinching win by defeating La Crosse Central (7-7, 6-3) 6-1 in their MVC matchup Tuesday, May 9 in La Crosse. Junior Madison Johnson went 3 for 4 with a double and three RBIs while also tossing seven innings in the circle in which she gave up one unearned run on four hits and two walks while striking out 10. Senior Peyton Foster finished 2 for 3 with an RBI.

A day earlier, the Timberwolves breezed past La Crosse Logan (5-10, 5-5) to a 15-0 victory in five innings Monday, May 8 in La Crosse. Freshman Anna Wall tossed her third five-inning no-hitter in the last week and a half and nearly had a perfect game, walking just one and striking out 14.

Tomah senior Kennedy Noth finished 3 for 3 with a walk, three RBIs and two runs, junior Mackenzie Kohn was 3 for 4 with a double, three RBIs and a run and Anna Wall homered as part of a two-hit day. Johnson and senior Hannah Van Treese also collected two hits apiece.

Over the weekend, the Timberwolves got perhaps their toughest tests of the season as part of the Sun Prairie Quad Saturday, May 6 in Sun Prairie.

In their first game, Sun Prairie East (16-4) blanked Tomah 7-0. Junior Olivia Wall doubled while sophomore Libby Mathison and senior Katie Carlson each singled in the loss. In their next game, the Timberwolves fell 10-2 to Menomonee Falls (15-5). Olivia Wall led the way for Tomah by going 2 for 4 with a triple.

Late last week, the Timberwolves blanked Holmen (10-7, 6-2) 4-0 in their MVC clash Thursday, May 4 in Tomah. Senior Lauren Noth went 2 for 3 with a double and an RBI while Kohn finished 2 for 3 with a run scored. In the circle, Johnson tossed seven scoreless innings, surrendering only one hit and two walks while collecting 12 strikeouts.

UP NEXT

The Timberwolves next play La Crosse Logan again, this time hosting the Rangers for a game Thursday, May 11 at 4:30 p.m. in Tomah. Tomah will wrap up its MVC schedule on Tuesday, May 16 with a match in Sparta.



Tomah's Peyton Foster (pictured above with teammate Madison Johnson) returned to catch for the softball team in time for the season opener. Foster said it was a refreshing moment of normalcy she hadn't been able to enjoy since starting treatments. Foster has to wear a brace while catching, but has the support of her team if she doesn't feel up to crouching behind the plate at any point. Herald photo by Nate Beier/GX3 Media.

(FOSTER)
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"We're a strong family, so we went into it like 'we're going to get this.' There was never a negative doubt in our minds," Hannah said. "We never went to the worst places. We tried to go to the most positive places. And she's handled this like a champ. She's really taken it on with every positive outlook she can."

The prescribed treatment was 12 rounds of chemotherapy over the course of six months, the last of which took place on April 28.

The rounds of chemo took a physical toll on Foster. She would undergo treatment on Friday, and it would take her until Monday to truly recover. On top of that physical struggle, it was a challenge for her mental health as well.

"I went from being such an involved, healthy athlete and student to 'the cancer girl,'" Peyton said. "It went from being I was so involved in everything to, all of a sudden, I felt like I had to kind of put my life on pause. But looking back on it, I think that helped me get to where I am right now in terms of how healthy my body is."

A PET scan after four rounds of chemo showed improvement, but it will be the PET scan after her final round of chemo that will reveal exactly how well the treatment has worked and what the next steps will be.

For now, she's rolling with the punches. Despite the challenges and the darker moments in the process, Peyton has continued to regularly attend school and try to live in the moment during her senior year.

"Initially, I think the diagnosis is extremely scary. Especially because when you hear cancer, you automatically think the worst," Peyton said. "But the more you learn about the disease and the farther you get into treatment, I think grasping the idea of what's happening has gotten a lot easier."

A WINTER ON THE SIDELINES

Since she was a toddler, Foster has been involved in gymnastics. That continued on into high school, where she became the star gymnast and a team captain for the Timberwolves.

She could've never imagined that the final meet of her high school career would have come as a junior. Not being able to participate in a sport that means so much to her was one of the most difficult pills to swallow this winter.

"I never got the closure that I wanted," Peyton said.

Despite that, her coaches and teammates did everything in their power to still make her a part of the team.

The Tomah gymnastics team donned "Team Peyton" shirts during their warmups, wore purple ribbons in their hair and wrote letters and cards to her during her treatment. Tomah head gymnastics coach Karen Brown frequently gave Peyton updates after meets and checked in after her chemo sessions. Foster was honored for her contributions to the program during the team's postseason banquet.

And when her immune system could handle it, Peyton would join the team to watch and support them.

"When I was there, they made it feel like there wasn't a time that I hadn't been there," Peyton said.

But the love and support extended far beyond just Tomah. Any meet her family was at, they were served a reminder just how much support is out

there for them. "Judges and teams that Tomah doesn't even compete against rally together for a fellow gymnast that many of them hadn't even met. Just to see that camaraderie and that love for someone else that's so involved in the sport, I think it opened our eyes and I think it opened Peyton's eyes too," Jeremy said. "Sports goes a lot further than just doing your routines and participating in the sport. You build relationships and bonds that cancer's not going to break."

RETURN TO THE SOFTBALL DIAMOND

Dan Wall has coached Peyton since she was 10, with Wall's daughter, Olivia, as one of her longtime teammates. He wanted to help make sure Peyton got closure with softball if at all possible, so he approached her about the idea of playing and made it clear to her and her family that they'd love to have her whenever she felt up to it.

That wasn't something that was ever really on her radar during her treatments — especially since she plays a physically exerting position at catcher — but she proved up for this challenge too.

felt kind of like a simulation for the past couple months."

A return to the diamond was going to be special no matter the circumstances, but it's a bonus that this year's Tomah softball team has enjoyed a sensational spring, winning 12 in a row to start the year and clinching a third straight Mississippi Valley Conference title.

Peyton's presence has meant a lot to her teammates and coaches, and her resiliency helps ensure everyone appreciates the season more than ever.

"This year she's just embraced that she's going to battle the stuff and that when she gets to get out on the field, it's lucky for all of us," Wall said. "Getting to play now is a joy versus sometimes being a job."

When you're winning, it starts to feel more like a job. But just with how she's handling everything, she's kept it in perspective for me especially."

If you would've told me at the beginning of my treatment that I would feel good enough to be playing a sport by the end of it, I would have looked in your face and laughed because I felt horrible

- peyton foster



With her final round of chemo in the rearview mirror, Foster still has at least a couple weeks left in the softball season where she intends to be out on the field to practice and play more consistently than she was during treatment. It's a major milestone for her in this difficult fight.

"After you get diagnosed with cancer, I don't think life ever goes back to quite being normal. I think it kind of changes your outlook on life and how you take each day," Peyton said. "Going about the end of my senior year and the end of my senior season without the worry of if I'm going to have to miss because of an appointment or if I'm going to feel bad because of treatment is so exciting."

FINDING LIGHT IN THE DARK

The last several months have been an understandable whirlwind for the Fosters amid Peyton's cancer battle, though there are valuable lessons they've learned from it all. They're taking less for granted, have a renewed appreciation for the community around them and are finding the good in every bad.

Events like prom, her 18th birthday and graduation all take on an even more special meaning now. Peyton even hopes to pursue a career in pediatric oncology once she's off to college.

"A very negative diagnosis has been a very positive experience. And that sounds really crazy to say," Hannah said. "I never thought in the beginning I'd say it'd be a positive experience, but we've seen so much good, we've seen so much love — from the community, from her teams, from the hospital staff. Everyone has tried to rally around her."

The importance of finding life's silver linings is a pivotal part to navigating cancer battles and any of life's trials and tribulations, though the Foster family doesn't want to paint an overly rosy picture. "Cancer sucks" as Peyton puts it, and there are difficult, despairing moments during the fight.

But what matters most is not letting those challenges overtake and consume you, and to battle them the best you can with a positive mindset.

"Life doesn't stop for cancer. You can take cancer and treat it however you want to, but life's not going to stop for you," Peyton said. "It's going to keep moving and you can either move with it or you can dwell on it and let it contain your life. I decided to not let it do that. I didn't dwell on it and, if anything, I feel like I use it as more motivation to better myself."

