



BEYOND THE BENCH **SAM DONNELLON**

We often treat cancer survivors as we do competition winners, as champions over a disease that absorbed their lives for a time and threatened their careers. They beat it, we say, won the fight against an unforgiving foe.

As anyone who has lost someone to cancer can tell you, you don't beat cancer. You fight, you live to fight another day. Sometimes it goes away. Sometimes you do.

For two years Dave Lewis fought, taught, coached and parented through a particularly mean-spirited myeloma that eventually mutated into something called "plasma cell leukemia," attacking not just his marrow but liver, kidney and spleen as well, taking his life, finally, in June, at the age of 58. For two awe-inspiring years, he took his medicine like a man in the morning, tutored emotionally troubled kids during the day, and pushed his oft-overmatched high school basketball team towards manhood at night. Sundays were often spent at the nearby Atlantic City Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter.

Somehow he managed husbandry and fatherhood as well, positioning his 10-year-old namesake next to him while coaching the Oakcrest, N.J. high school team.

"One of the things I have said to people over the last year was that I will do everything I can to teach the kids about mental toughness," Lewis said after a particularly grueling day of treatment ended with a two-point victory over rival Lower Cape May one mid-winter night. "They're all gonna deal with adversity in their lives. Every family does. If I can model for them a little bit about how it works or what the deal is, then I've helped them in a way that's well beyond basketball."

Lewis said this while sitting in the same chair from which he had coached most of that night's game, at the end of a week when he'd discovered that the cancer he thought he had beaten the summer before had simply altered its path, and changed its form. A new round of treatments, more aggressive and less hopeful, had been started earlier that day at The University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and Lewis had rushed back to his Jersey shore gym just in time to make that evening's game.

To the uninitiated that night, it seemed as if his assistants, Frank Brown and Andre Clements, were doing most of the coaching. Even 10-year-old son David, seated right

next to him, worked the referees more. A little hand signal here, a few words from his chair—that seemed to be the sum of his father’s contributions.

Until the final two minutes. That's when Oakcrest's star player, Alex Nelson, picked up his fifth foul, a dubious charging call as he drove to the hole. Already incensed over fouls three and four, Nelson slammed the wall behind the basket in anguish, then spun and directed his attention to the referee.

In one motion, his coach sprung from his seat, corralled his player and called a timeout, averting an almost certain technical. In a game Oakcrest ultimately won, 47-45, it was the best bit of coaching done from either side that night.

"We're educators," Lewis said softly a half-hour later. "No matter what happens, we need to teach the kids how to function the right way, how to behave the right way. And I think that's what good coaches do."

As he spoke, one of his unpaid assistants worked on shooting with a young kid at the end of the court. You would find out later that the assistant was once a player for Lewis, kicked off the Oakcrest team as a senior after repeated warnings about lateness and insubordination. Lewis, however, stayed in contact with the player, who was having a hard time both in school and at home, and encouraged his return to the program as a fan, and later, assistant.

"Where do we start?" said Pete Nelson, who had two boys, Erik and Alex, on Oakcrest’s team last season. "Dave is like a father to all these kids. This is like a family. It goes way beyond basketball, even before he got sick."

"I always have felt that the true test of what your team is like is what are they like at 30," Lewis had said that night. "Have they become good fathers? Do they care about their kids? Are they good husbands? That's really the set of values you're trying to teach them and trying to model for them."

There is no cure for multiple myeloma, but there was hope that a stem-cell transplant in June of 2007 had slowed the cancer to a crawl. Lewis even resumed jogging on weekends. With the resumption of the basketball season, though, came a resumption of the fatigue and flu-like conditions he had battled through all of last season. After a particularly hellish weekend in mid-December—which included that first-ever victory over powerful Middle Township—Lewis was admitted Dec. 18 to the Abramson Cancer Center at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center for more tests.

The tests revealed his cancer had returned. He was released the next afternoon, just in time to coach his game against Millville that night—from his seat, of course.

"Last year at the Boardwalk Classic, we won our first game, and then he went right to the hospital, he was so weak," Alex Nelson, the team’s star, said. "He stayed there overnight. He basically ripped all his IVs out the next morning and came back to coach

us the next afternoon.”

There are obvious questions to all this, of course. Should Lewis have spent more time with his family? Turned over the reigns of the team? (In what everyone said was no coincidence, Oakcrest’s promising season collapsed along with Lewis’s health.)

And, finally, there is the most unnerving question: Was his life shortened by the rigorous pace he insisted on maintaining?

Before he died, Lewis addressed and dissected them one at a time. His family—which, besides his son and wife includes two grown daughters from a previous marriage and 13-year-old Emily—attended most games and spent time with him before and afterwards. One regularly baked treats for the team. David was at his side on most nights.

“Just because you have cancer doesn't mean you stop the rest of your life," Lewis said that night.

And so he didn't. He lived it. To him at least, that was how you beat cancer.

At his memorial service, those who knew him well were stunned to see a flag over his casket, and Marine memorabilia among the countless mementos from family and former players. Lewis served in Vietnam for five years, volunteered. Who knew? The Rescue Mission collected enough pocket change to send a couple of cards, filling it with so many signatures it was hard to read the print. There were a number of eulogies, of course, from all parts of his life, and one in particular underlined how much of Lewis’s life remains on this planet.

“Coach told me once that he wanted his son to be like me,” a former player, Rodney Guishard, now in his 20s, told the crowded chapel.

“And here I was still trying to grow up to be like him.”

Sam Donnellon's career began in Biddeford, Me., in 1981, and has included stops in Wilkes-Barre, Norfolk, and New York, where he worked as a national writer for the short-lived but highly acclaimed National Sports Daily. He has received state and national awards at each stop and since joining the Daily News in 1992 has been honored by the Associated Press Sports Editors, the National Sportswriters and Sportscasters Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the Associated Press Managing Editors of Pennsylvania and the Keystone Awards. He and his wife of 22 years have raised three fine children, none of whom are even the least bit impressed with the above.