

SPORTS

Cancer won't stop South Kitsap youngster from playing soccer

BY MARK KRULISH

Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — Nothing — not even cancer — can keep Jesse Eyre away from soccer.

It doesn't matter that he has just spent an entire day receiving chemotherapy. As soon as he gets home, his cleats go on and he's out the door to practice.

And when he's not practicing or playing, he's watching his sister's team practice. Then he stays late to shoot and dribble around. Eventually, he convinced some teammates to come out and do the same. And when he's at home, Eyre's in the backyard, doing drills with his father, four siblings or by himself.

"Speed is what we're working on right now," he said.

A center midfielder's motor never wanes, and that's the attitude the 13-year-old Eyre, a young man whose delightfully infectious personality stands out as much as his technical skills, had toward both soccer and his illness.

It didn't make sense to him to come home, mope around and lie on the couch all day. Rather than spending time feeling sorry for himself, he simply went out and did something he loves.

"Being somewhere I don't want to be all day long, and getting medicine and all this stuff making me sick, I'd rather go do something I really like doing," Eyre said.

Soccer has been a part of Eyre's life since he was 4. As part of a military family, he's



Photo courtesy of David Eyre

Jesse Eyre, 13, never stopped playing soccer while battling cancer.

moved around plenty, but played wherever life took him.

When they made their most recent move to Washington, he was already signed up to play in South Kitsap. Making sure to take his soccer equipment on the plane so he wouldn't have to wait for it to show up, Eyre began playing with his new team just a few days later.

He currently plays for South Kitsap United Boys '06.

Eyre's life challenge

In February, Eyre's world nearly collapsed on him. He came down with a stomach bug and noticed one of his lymph nodes was standing up. Several weeks of tests followed until he was diagnosed with Nodular Sclerosis

Hodgkin Lymphoma.

It was devastating but familiar news for his parents, both of whom are cancer survivors. His father David was diagnosed with cancer when he was 19 years old. His mother Kirsten had it when she was 14.

Together they were able to coach Jesse on what he could expect. Their experience with cancer and Jesse's maturity

allowed them to handle it frankly and soberly.

"In our minds, it's something you get better from and you move on," Kirsten said.

Since the cancer is not inherited, the chances of two parents and their child having this type of lymphoma were minuscule. But then again, odds were low that David and Kirsten would even have children in the first place. One of the side effects of chemotherapy is infertility. Five kids later, those odds have clearly been beaten.

"We had less than a 30

percent chance of having kids," Kirsten said. "So when the kids started coming, we were pretty pumped."

Jesse is the oldest and his love for soccer has set the tone for the rest of the family — all of his siblings are playing soccer in one form or another. And it never waned through the various treatments he underwent.

A seven-hour surgery was followed by five 21-day cycles of chemotherapy. He had blood work done every four days as well. But as soon as it was all over for the day, the youngster was back out on the pitch.

"He was out on the field during his chemo, he's losing his hair, and he's just putting everyone to shame," said Matt McDaniel, the director of South Kitsap United Select Soccer. "He never slows down, he's always smiling and always working hard."

Eyre's attitude inspired his team to create a patch with his initials, which the players will wear during this season. And Eyre will be with his teammates every step of the way. By early August, he was done with chemotherapy. His body had responded so well, radiation wasn't necessary.

Instead, he got to spend the last couple of weeks of summer getting back to his previous fitness level and dreaming of one day playing professional soccer. Perhaps lining up for his favorite club, Manchester City, wearing the No. 22 kit of his favorite player, Christian Pulisic.

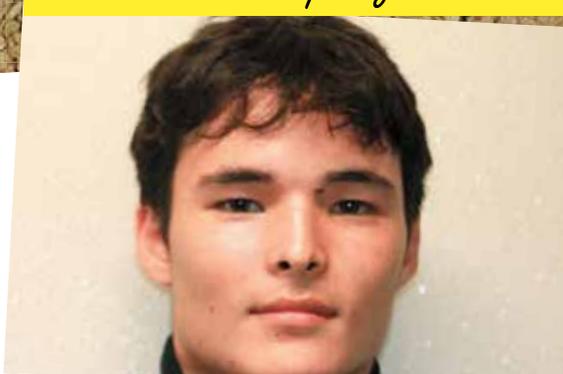
And nothing, not even cancer, can stop Jesse Eyre achieving those dreams.

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Athlete

Joshua Willis

Central Kitsap High School



Central Kitsap's Joshua Willis left his mark on his school's brand new athletic field in week one. His huge rushing performance helped the Cougars to a 41-17 victory over Olympic in the 42nd Battle of Bucklin Hill. Willis spent his sophomore season as a backup running back and saw limited action. In his first chance to be the starter, he carried the ball 36 times for 254 yards and two touchdowns. His first of the game came in the first quarter with Central Kitsap trailing 14-0. Willis broke a tackle near the left sideline and sprinted free to the end zone for a 42-yard touchdown to cut his team's deficit in half. He also scored a 70-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter, which put Central Kitsap ahead 35-17.

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Photo courtesy of David Eyre

The patch featuring Jesse Eyre's initials, which will be worn by the South Kitsap United '06 Boys team this season.