

Ex-Deerfield coach Pappas needs bone marrow transplant

BY TAYLOR BELL

Steve Pappas made many friends during his 32-year basketball coaching career. Now former players and rival coaches are gathering to help Pappas, who earned a reputation as one of the most respected coaches in the Chicago area during successful stops at Gordon Tech and Deerfield.

Pappas, 54, who retired from coaching in 2002, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma in 2004. It is a blood and immune system related cancer that has required treatment by renowned oncologist Dr. Leo Gordon at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital ever since.

Now there is a need to find a donor for a bone marrow transplant, perhaps as early as this summer. One stem cell/bone marrow transplant, using Pappas' own stem cells, didn't take. His brother Jim, his only living relative, wasn't a match.

Pappas remains upbeat. He and his wife Cathie continue to teach English at Deerfield. He still enjoys

watching basketball games and is looking forward to being inducted into the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association's Hall of Fame on April 29 in Normal.

"We're still fighting the fight," he said. "The crusade has started. We're trying to be aggressive at this time. We're going to canvas the international Greek community to try to find a match for me. Fortunately, I've made a lot of great friends. This is an inspiring period for me. A lot of people are pulling for me. It is really humbling."

A committee has been formed to contact Greek churches in the Chicago area, establish a Web site to disseminate information and inform people how to get tested and organize fund-raisers, including a proposed Central Suburban League all-star game.

It includes Dr. John Venetos of Swedish Covenant Hospital, Pappas' physician, coaches Rick Malnati of New Trier, Dave Scott of Maine South, Greg Kapsimalis of

Deerfield, Dennis Zelasko of Notre Dame and Ken Davis of Leyden and former coaches Paul Pryma of Evanston, now assistant principal of Glenbrook North, and Mike Kolze of Highland Park.

The first event that they are targeting to have people come and be tested will be the National Greek Basketball Tournament on April 1-2 at Fenwick High School in Oak Park.

Pappas said his illness is described as a "stubborn lymphoma" that keeps resurfacing in one shape or form. He is scanned every three months. He once had to drive to Northwestern Memorial for 24 days in a row for radiation treatments. He also has undergone chemotherapy.

"As I speak, there are nodules in my lung that require a biopsy to determine if it is a lymphoma or a lung infection," he said. "My health is fine. I am able to work."

Pappas began coaching grade school boys at St. Demetrios, a Greek Orthodox church at Foster and California. He coached freshmen boys at

Niles East, then spent a season at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore., before joining Bill Ociepka's staff at Gordon Tech in 1980.

As head coach from 1985 to 1992, Pappas posted a 146-52 record, a .741 winning percentage. His 1989 squad was 27-3 and lost to Thornridge in the supersectional. His 1990 team, led by Tom Kleinschmidt, was 30-2 and lost to King in the Class AA championship game.

Pappas moved to Deerfield, where his teams posted a 167-102 record from 1992 to 2002. His 1996 and 1997 teams, led by Ryan Hogan, advanced to the supersectional round.

"I miss coaching, especially at this time of the year," he said. "But there are some parts of the game that you don't miss, the long season, the year-round activity. Thirty-two years is enough."

"I have no regrets about retiring. The big thing is the relationships you build with kids and coaches. There is no way you can put a price on that."