

HIGH SCHOOLS

Team Pappas aims to beat cancer

Steve Pappas had this coming.

Not the cancer, not the insidious case of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma the former Gordon Tech and Deerfield basketball coach can't seem to shake.

Pappas is getting what he deserves, all right, but it's rather a massive outpouring of love and support as he searches for a cure.

That cure probably must come in the form of a suitable blood stem-cell or bone-marrow donor, and an organization has sprung up almost overnight to find one.

It calls itself Team Pappas, and it includes dozens of people from the basketball and Greek communities. One of its first events, a blood drive to identify potential donors, will take place from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 6 p.m. Sunday at Fenwick during the National Hellenic Invitational Basketball Tournament.

Pappas, 54, played and coached in that tournament for St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, which he attended while growing up on the North Side. John Venetos remembers the time about 30 years ago when Pappas took over a rag-



Barry Temkin

tag St. Demetrios team of high school-age players that had just lost a game by 40 points and told them they would win an NHBIT title the following season.

They did exactly that and accomplished it by defeating the team that had routed them the year before.

"Steve teaches the importance of not selling out, of playing hard and playing out as a team," Venetos said. "People buy in because that's the kind of person he is."

"He always makes you feel important. People believe in him."

Venetos believes because he was on that team. Now he is Pappas' personal physician and co-chairman of Team Pappas. The other chair is Paul Pryma, a former St. Ignatius and Evanston coach and now an associate principal at Glenbrook North.

Team members from the basketball community include current or former coaches

Greg Kapsimalis of Deerfield, Mike Koize of Highland Park, Ken Davis of Leyden, Dave Scott of Maine South, Rick Malnati of Notre Dame, and Dennis Zelasko of Notre Dame. They are rallying around Pappas because he won and lost with class and respected the game and the people in it.

"I always liked the way Steve's teams played, but more importantly I liked who he was," said Malnati, recalling the time Pappas visited New Trier's locker room to congratulate its players after they beat Deerfield in a supersectional game. "A coach at his best would act like Steve does normally."

Pappas, who will enter the Illinois Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame next month, won 313 games in 17 seasons and finished second with Gordon Tech in the 1990 Class AA state tournament. He left coaching in 2002 but remained at Deerfield as an English teacher.

In August 2004 he noticed a lump on his neck, and tests revealed he had an aggressive form of non-Hodgkin's lympho-

ma. He has since undergone chemotherapy and radiation, and last August he had a blood stem-cell transplant utilizing his own stem cells.

None of it worked for long, and a month ago tests showed the disease had spread to his lungs. That was when doctors determined a donor transplant was necessary

and when Team Pappas was born.

According to Venetos, the chances of finding the right match for Pappas are about 1 in 20,000 people. Team Pappas wants to get up to 25,000 people tested and added to an existing registry and raise \$1 million to help offset the cost.

This, by the way, has nothing to do with embryonic stem cells. Much of the work will be done through Greek churches in and beyond the Chicago area. People of Greek descent have the best chance of being a suitable match, followed by those from other Mediterranean countries, but Team Pappas encourages anyone from 18 to 59 to get tested, which involves

giving a small blood sample or an oral swab.

Beyond helping Pappas, the effort is aimed at promoting transplant awareness—including the potential value of umbilical cord blood—and increasing the number of people on transplant registries.

Team Pappas is planning blood and fund-raising drives too numerous to list here, and some of the blood drives may involve a fee or donation. For information check the Team Pappas Web site, www.stevepappasbasketball.com, or call Venetos at 773-989-6262.

It takes manpower to run these events, and volunteers are stepping forward.

"A lot of former players want to help," said Brian Panek, who played for Pappas at Deerfield and is organizing volunteers. "To me he's the best, and I think any of the guys will tell you the same thing."

"He did so much for me as a player and a person. Whether you played 30 minutes a game for him or didn't play at all, you naturally gravitated toward him because he's such an extraordinary person."

The focus of all this affection says he feels "very humbled and blessed," even if he does

have to start another regimen of chemotherapy. Some days are there others for Pappas though pale still ex warmth and positivity makes him so easy "I'm really lucky many coaching fire so the Greek community stepping up to help match," he said. "I just blossomed into just magnificent."

"You know the m Wonderful Life? It's out."

He is particularly be physically able to working at Deerfield his wife, Cathie, also English. The lesson ics have helped Pappas that off as well as a belief in happy end "All the stuff over I've taught and val

ly is getting challenged he said. "Fortunate been able to walk ti live out the things I and that has helped dously fighting can

"Perseverance, p nacity... but you ki They work. If you b them, they work."

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