Beyond the Nest: FEARLESS- The Journey of Todd Bradley

Georgia Southern University

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The doctor's office didn't open until 9 a.m., but James and Tomiko Glenn were parked outside by 6.

They weren't waiting for a diagnosis. They had one already: cancer. Todd Bradley, their eldest son, was diagnosed with cancer at 17 years old.

"Dermatofibrosarcoma protuberans," Bradley specified. He said it with an uncomfortable amount of ease. No second-year marketing major should be fluent in oncological terms, but unfortunately, Bradley had become quite familiar with the phrase.
It was his disease and not many others. Dermatofibrosarcoma protuberans, or DFSP, is an extremely rare form of skin cancer that has the ability to spread to deeper tissue, like fat or muscle.

"All that means is that it's a fibrous sarcoma, or cancer within the skin, that actually protrudes and grows outward," Dr. David Cearley, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon at the Augusta University Medical Center, said.

"So that's what all those funny Latin words mean."

But at 9 a.m. on April 14, 2015, James and Tomiko Glenn walked into the South Georgia Medical Practice in Valdosta to find out what that cancer would specifically mean for Bradley.

"The first thing that (the doctor) said was that football wasn't everything," James said. "And that really just drove me over the wall. I went crazy because I was telling him, 'You're telling a kid, a 17-year-old kid, that football isn't everything. But that's everything to him.'"

Football had not just been Bradley's "everything" at the time of diagnosis. It had been his "everything" for more than a decade.

At 6, the quiet kid from Valdosta was introduced to the game by two elder generations: his father, James, and his grandfather, Harry Howell Sr. Both of whom were football lifers with opinions.

"Right away, my dad was trying to put him at running back," James said. But James, a linebacker on Jacksonville University's inaugural team in 1998, had a bias toward the defensive side of the ball.

That bias paid off when Bradley grew in size and dominated youth football leagues across southern Georgia as a budding linebacker. By the time Bradley had reached the eighth grade, he had grown to 5-feet-10 inches and more than 185 pounds.

When lined up opposite of the offensive battery, Bradley's strategy became evident.

"He was running through people," James said. But Bradley's cousin, Jayce Rogers, may have put it best: "He a grown man."

After tearing through wannabe middle-school blockers like they were wet tissue paper, Bradley caught the attention of Rance Gillespie, who was the head coach of Valdosta High School's football program at the time.

He was raised in a family whose motto was, "Nothing less than the best," making it fitting that Bradley aimed his sights at the most historically successful high school football program of all time.
Valdosta High had earned six national championships, 23 state championships and 41 regional championships by the time Bradley became old enough to don the black and yellow.

In fact, the lure of playing for such a powerhouse was a big reason why James and Tomiko decided to move from Clearwater, Florida, back to their original hometown of Valdosta when Bradley was 9.

"This place is special," James said. "Football was a major part of us moving back … I wouldn't have came back if the football and the schools weren't great."

So Bradley had his shot at playing with the best. His first opportunity to impress was his first workout with the team during the spring semester of his eighth-grade year.

He didn't disappoint.

"He was showing up doing stuff the varsity guys were doing for six months," Alan Rodemaker, former defensive coordinator and current head coach of Valdosta High, said.

Growing up, Bradley had heard from his father that their family doesn't play JV. So James pushed Bradley day-in and day-out to be varsity ready ever since the kid first strapped on a helmet.

When the time came, Gillespie rewarded Bradley with a spot on the varsity roster — not to mention a spot in the starting lineup.

"We knew that he was going to be a special kid," Gillespie said. "In my six years at Valdosta, he was the only freshman that actually started games for us. And he played a good bit throughout the season."

Rodemaker estimated that Bradley played about 60 percent of the snaps as a first-year student. Bradley's role with the team was so impactful that when Gillespie held college football recruiting seminars for his juniors and seniors, he sent a special invitation to the 14-year-old because he knew Bradley would garner attention from near and far when the time came.

But that was before the cancer.

"It was like my sophomore year," Bradley said. "I had hit somebody in a game and a big lump came on my shoulder, so like I went to the training staff and told them I felt like I was bleeding on the inside … It was like somebody stuck golf ball up in my shoulder."

The protruded knot on his right shoulder would come and go. The most it would do would cause mild discomfort. Bradley, never one to shy away from a collision, had been
used to the pain.

He kept playing.

"At first, it would swell up and then it would go back down," James said. "We didn't think anything about it because it swelled up and then it would go down and then it would swell up and then it would go down. And then eventually it just stayed. As we got close to the (junior) season … it was something that the doctors said they would get done after the season."

And despite the cancerous tumor that was growing underneath his shoulder pads, Bradley kept excelling on the field. His junior campaign was the best of his high school career, and he earned the No. 1 jersey for the Wildcats.

"We talk about who's best to exemplify the things we want our program to be about," Gillespie said. "And the things we wanted our program to be about were character and education and football. And Todd excelled at all three of those. And that's the reason he wore that number. Now that's a tradition at Valdosta and that's a special number."

When the offseason came around, schools had already been eyeing Bradley. He was the leader of Valdosta's defense with still another year on the books to prove himself to the scouts. But, as they had agreed, it was time to take a look at that cyst.

Dr. Stephen Zeigler performed the initial surgery to remove the tumor. No one, including Bradley, thought anything of it. In fact, Bradley's parents thought the procedure would be so routine that James had his sister-in-law take Bradley to the doctor.

But then James got an unexpected call.

"Something is wrong with Todd."

The tiny lump turned out to be the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface lied a cancer deep within the dermis layer of the skin that had begun to spread like a weed.

"I lost it," James said. "I cried. The crazy thing about it is you push your kids so hard, you push them so hard so they do their best. And you know there were times we argued about it. And I thought he wasn't doing his best, or I thought he could do better, or I thought he could lift more weights or do more pushups that night, and you think about those times and you start to hate yourself because you feel like it's your fault. Football just became so small at that point. It was one of the hardest times of our lives."

For the next six months, Bradley and his parents made the four-and-a-half hour trek up to Augusta once, or even twice, each week in order to see a specialist — Dr. David Cearley.

Sometimes the appointments lasted just 20 or 30 minutes. The longer appointments
forced the family to stay overnight, where they frequented the Ronald McDonald House as hotels just became too costly — especially after the amount of travel ended up costing James his job as a foster care case manager.

And, of course, football was off the table. Dr. Cearley said it didn't take long to figure out how much football meant to Bradley and his family.

"We went through this stuff about the actual condition, and it was kind of like once we got through all that stuff, Dad's like, 'OK now let's talk about what's important. Say you take this out, could he play football again?'

"And I just looked at him and I said, 'I don't see why not.' And I could see the look of relief and happiness on his face."

But at the end of the day, the doctors were still playing a guessing game. It was impossible to determine how far the cancer had spread until Bradley was under the knife. At that point, Dr. Cearley essentially had to cut and test his way through the two-hour surgery.

"If you don't get all the way around it, a wide margin, then you can leave tumor behind," Dr. Cearley said. "So I knew there were tumor cells still in his skin but they weren't the kind that I could see, and I didn't know exactly where or how far to make my margins so I had to kind of guess a little bit."

During the surgery, Dr. Cearley's team faced two complications.

The clavicle, which is thinly covered by a layer of skin, does not have much fat or muscle to shield it from the spreading cancer. Had the cancer continued to aggressively spread throughout Bradley's shoulder, the doctors could have been forced to excise his collarbone and replace it with a metal rod or plate — therefore ending his playing career.

Secondly, and much more seriously, the cancer had begun to spread dangerously close to Bradley's carotid vessels in his neck. If the skin around the vessels were infected with cancer, Dr. Cearley would have been forced to cut the procedure short and consult a vascular surgeon.

At that point, Dr. Cearley added, the results could have been life-threatening.

"We carefully sort of dissected on top of the vessels so we could free up the tissue and then we cut out another ring of tissue around the vessels," Dr. Cearley said. "Turns out that one was negative, so we were done."

Just like that, Bradley was cancer free. The tumor, which could fit in the palm of your hand, was excised without causing permanent damage to Bradley's clavicle or carotid vessels.
Now came the journey back to the field.

"It just took like the whole layer of skin off my shoulder," Bradley said. Dr. Jack Yu, a pediatric plastic surgeon at the Augusta University Medical Center, then performed a skin graft to allow skin to grow naturally on his right shoulder about a month after Dr. Cearley's surgery.

With the skin graft, which was taken from Bradley's groin, the new skin on the shoulder looks normal but isn't as sensitive.

"We were joking that he could tackle people stronger because it doesn't hurt there as much," Dr. Yu said.

But even a chunk of missing skin wasn't going to prevent the senior from being with the team. He and his family even traveled to Atlanta to watch Valdosta open the season against Norcross in the old Georgia Dome.

"It was hard sitting in the stands," James said. "I cried when they were in the Dome and they were playing Norcross because I saw agony on his face. A lot of people don't realize how difficult it was … He had four surgeries to get it repaired in eight months."

At that time, many people didn't even know about Bradley's cancer. The family kept it quiet, only letting close friends and family know. James said Bradley hated being considered a charity case.

So the senior quietly traveled the road to recovery — until it led him to his first game back. After months of rehab, Bradley was cleared for physical activity on Wednesday, Sept. 30.

"I remember I was standing out on the practice (field) and I see this blur go running by me," Gillespie said, recalling that Thursday practice. "And it's Todd."

One day later, Bradley played 56 snaps in a loss to Camden County. He was winded, Rodemaker called him a little overweight, but Bradley was back on the field. Fewer than six months earlier, he couldn't have even been sure he would keep his clavicle let alone be playing football again.

"The wound wasn't all the way healed that time when he went back to play," James said. "I just remember him getting home, he couldn't even take the bandages off of the wound without peeling some of the skin. That was the only time I changed the bandage because he didn't want my wife to see it because he knew what would happen. My wife would see it and would freak out."

For the first time, James asked if Bradley wanted to quit football after that.
"He looked at me like I was crazy."

End of discussion. Bradley finished out his senior year at Valdosta and earned a spot on Tyson Summers' Georgia Southern squad to continue his dream of playing the game he loved.

"It was pretty inspiring," Summers said. "I stopped whining and complaining about the little things that I was mad about at the moment and said, 'This is an amazing kid.' And I know that every second that I'm going to be around him for the next four, four and a half years that I'm going to be a better person because of him."

But as much as Bradley loves the sport, it sometimes seems like it doesn't love him back.

One year and three days after his triumphant return to the gridiron, Bradley found his playing career in jeopardy once again. While warming up with some non-contact drills for Georgia Southern's matchup against Arkansas State, Bradley landed awkwardly on his left leg.

He collapsed and had to be helped off the field. He had torn his ACL with just four games of collegiate ball under his belt.

"My heart sunk for him," Summers said. "And so as we went over there, I told him, 'There's no reason to be upset, there's no reason to be frustrated right now. You got a long career ahead of you and if you can beat cancer, what's an ACL?'"

Fewer than two weeks after suffering the injury, Bradley printed out a list of goals. The header, in all caps and bold, read: "THE RETURN PART 2."

It's tough to imagine a 19-year-old already having a second iteration of a "return," but Bradley took the recovery in stride once again. Alongside safety RJ Murray, who tore his meniscus a week before the Arkansas State game, Bradley did everything he could to once again wrap up rehab and help out his team.

"We both were just competing, both trying to get back," Murray said. "Seeing who could do what the strongest, the longest, things like that. We're both competitive people and Todd's real high-spirited. So if he would do something twice, I would do something three times. It got to the point where they had to kick us out of the training room because we were just in there doing rehab for way too long."

As a result of that competitive spirit, Bradley came back stronger than ever (accomplishing No. 7 on his list of 10 goals). Linebacker coach Pat Bastien said Bradley had the highest squat numbers out of any linebacker on the team.

And he did it coming off a torn ACL. How would Bastien describe that?
"Freaking ridiculous," he said. "It's a heck of an accomplishment for him."

Of course, Bradley is looking to do more than just excel in the weight room. Before he tore his ACL, Bradley had made strides on Georgia Southern's young defense — going as far as starting the entire second half in the Western Michigan game.

Although the knee injury made him and the coaching staff wait to see his potential, Bradley is getting his chance this year.

Before the season, Summers named Bradley, a sophomore, his starting Mike linebacker. Through the first three games of the 2017 season, Bradley is in a three-way tie for total tackles (17) along with Murray and Rashad Byrd. He's also second in tackles for loss and tied for second in sacks.

Bradley will be the first to tell you how hard the road was to get here, but he'll be quick to point out that he's not letting the past dictate how he's handling the future.

"Sometimes the injuries bothered me, but when I'm out there I'm not worried about reinjuring my knee or hurting my shoulder because God got me," he said. "And if it does happen, I mean it's all His plan. It's a blessing in disguise. I don't play scared like that. I play fearless."

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