

Sports by Chris Fox

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The Rams know something about teamwork

by Chris Fox

Athletes are routinely described as fighters and battlers. They receive praise for their courage, and for not giving up.

If anyone deserves to be called a fighter, it's Glenbard East graduate Alex Pane-a young athlete who has faced many obstacles throughout his life.

Pane, a 2007 Glenbard East graduate, was a member of the 2006 Rams boys volleyball team that captured the third-place trophy at the IHSA State Finals. Pane was a battler on the court, but it's his off-the-court fight that's earned him a legion of admirers who are assisting him.

There isn't enough space in this paper to document Pane's lifelong medical challenges. To be brief, he is no stranger to hospitals and surgeries and medications and tubes and many other things that nobody wants to experience. Pane is now awaiting a small bowel transplant. More details of his battle can be found online on a Web site run by The Children's Organ Transplant Association (COTA). The Web site's address is: www.cotaforalex.com.

Pane's medical condition didn't prevent him from participating in athletic activities, including traveling baseball and volleyball.

"He doesn't let anything stop him," said Colleen Pane, Alex's mother. "He's been that way from the beginning. They [doctors] told us when he was born that he probably wouldn't live to be five."

Some doctors in Illinois didn't offer much hope to the Panes, who were fortunate to connect with doctors at Children's

Hospital of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

"It was really bad," said Mrs. Pane. "We were at a place when Alex was in junior high school when we were basically told to get ready for him to no longer be with us. We were not ready for that, so we just kept looking. We were very lucky to find those doctors in Milwaukee."

One year ago, Alex's teammates on the 2007 Glenbard East volleyball team decided to do something to help some of Alex's fellow patients at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. The volleyball players on the Rams boys and girls teams made 120 blankets, which were distributed to children at the hospital. Mrs. Pane's only regret about that experience was that the Glenbard East volleyball players weren't at the hospital in person to see what joy that had brought to so many children.

The Glenbard East community's generosity definitely did not end with the donation of blankets. People who know Alex, and others who don't know him at all, have offered fundraising help to offset the exorbitant expenses of a transplant and the medical care that accompanies it. There aren't many hospitals that perform the transplant Alex needs. One such hospital is in Seattle, Washington. Alex had hoped to be there by now, waiting for a suitable transplant to become available. Unfortunately, that would involve the passing of someone else of a similar age. History says that he probably will not have too long of a wait.

"Doctors in Seattle told us it's a terrible thing to say he's in an age group that kids do a lot of risky things," said Mrs. Pane. "They think it should happen pretty quickly. He's the only one listed of that age and size in that region [waiting for a small bowel]."

As if Alex's medical challenges don't pose enough obstacles, there is the maze of insurance, bills and other paperwork that his family must face. Insurance-related concerns are the main issues that have him at home in Lombard right now instead of Seattle. Mrs. Pane says she hopes those issues will be resolved in the next few weeks, and Alex will be able to make his way to Seattle. Alex already has some family out there-his older brother Anthony lives in the area. According to Mrs. Pane, Alex would stay in Seattle for six months or so once he has the transplant.

The 2008 Glenbard East boys volleyball team enjoyed a brilliant season that featured a 36-4 record, a DuPage Valley Conference title and regional and sectional championships that propelled the Rams to the state quarterfinals. Another achievement of the program was its assist to Alex and his family on Senior Night-the night of the team's last home match of the season-on May 13. That night featured everything from a bake sale to a raffle to a split-the-pot to a silent auction of donated items (an iPod fetched \$1,600). The Glenbard East Booster Club also donated all the proceeds of the night's concession sales to assist Alex. Right after the Rams won their match over West Chicago, former Glenbard East players-including Alex-played in an alumni game.

The efforts of the entire evening raised about \$9,000.

Glenbard East health teacher Ann Banfield, who used to be an athletic trainer at the school, joined forces with assistant volleyball coach Jen Ennis to lead that night's fundraising activities. Banfield, who deals with her own health issues-a neurological disorder that's required several surgeries has formed a connection with Pane through their shared experiences.

"We really have a lot to talk about,"said Banfield. "I think Alex is comfortable sounding off to me. There are some really good days and some really bad days. It's frustrating-sometimes you make plans, and you can't keep them. It's a hard life to lead, especially as a teenage boy."

Shortly before the Senior Night/Alumni Night, Glenbard East senior Scott Bruzek approached Banfield with an idea. Bruzek, who did not even know the Panes, proposed holding a 5-kilometer run/walk, with the proceeds going to Alex's expenses.

If Scott Bruzek is on your side, you can expect good things to happen. For four years, Bruzek was the student manager of Glenbard East's football and boys basketball teams. He didn't miss a single game in four years, and his dedication, team spirit and attention to detail were invaluable to both teams. Neither Bruzek nor Banfield had ever run (competed in) or run (organized) a 5-kilometer run but their energies led to a successful event. The Alex Pane 5-K Run/Walk took place at Glenbard East on June 7. There were 86 participants

in the event, which raised over \$5,000.

"I wanted to help out," said Bruzek. "It was just kind of an idea that turned into a fundraiser. It's very cool to see the school and the community unite for this."

"People would ask us our goal for what we wanted to raise," added Banfield. "We wanted to raise whatever we could. I didn't know what to expect—it exceeded anything we could have hoped for."

Mrs. Pane says her family is very grateful for the generosity of so many people.

"They had no reason to do any of this," she said, noting that Alex graduated in 2007. "They have done so much for Alex and for us. It's been overwhelming."

"I don't consider it a task," said Banfield of her efforts to help the Panes. "Alex has made us reflect on our lives, and what's important. He's done a lot for us."