

No playbook for game of his life

Game plan changed when Western Illinois football coach Don Patterson learned he had cancer.

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This has been a very different football season for Don Patterson.

Each week has brought a challenge, just like it has in each of the 31 years since he started coaching.

But the trials Patterson faced in 2008 were not on the field. The 10th-year Western Illinois coach met them not in Macomb but in Iowa City - at the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics.

What started as jaw pain was found to be tonsillar cancer.

"I was in denial for a while," Patterson said. "I thought maybe I had a tooth infection, since I missed a six-month dental appointment."

When his teeth checked out fine, Patterson went to see team physician David Miller. The news there was not good.

"He could see that I had more of a problem than a family practitioner could solve," Patterson said. "I needed a specialist with this type of problem."

So the 57-year-old went to the university hospital's department of otolaryngology - in plain English, the ear, nose and throat department - for additional testing.

On Wednesday, July 1, Patterson received the test results. They revealed he had a form of cancer that usually affected men aged 50 to 70, right in Patterson's demographic.

Tonsillar cancer also is linked to smokers and drinkers. Patterson is neither.

"I'm 0-for-2 there, so I guess it relates to that I'm a little unlucky," he said.

The good news: The cancer was curable, although treatment is difficult.

That night, Patterson told his assistant head coach, Mark Hendrickson, the news.

"We have worked almost every day for 16 years together," Hendrickson said. "The moment he told me, there was an amount of shock and disbelief that I had to let it soak in."

With Patterson set to leave the next day for a previously scheduled visit to his mother and family members in Texas, Hendrickson was the only person in Macomb who knew.

"There was a time period for eight or 10 days when nobody knew but myself and (Patterson's wife) Lisa," said Hendrickson, who assumed the head-coaching duties in Patterson's absence. "It was a funny feeling knowing what was going to take place when he got back."

The trip to his native state gave the Pattersons a chance to tell family members personally. When they returned, on July 10, they told members of the WIU administration. The next day, other members of the coaching staff were told, as well as the team members in Macomb for offseason conditioning workouts. Those players called the ones who weren't in town, like senior linebacker Jason Williams.

"I called the school and luckily, Coach P answered the phone," Williams said. "After talking to him, I felt better because he was pretty confident about it."

Patterson's attitude stemmed largely from what he has told his players through the years.

"I promised them I was going to be mentally tough," Patterson said. "That's what I ask of them all the time, and I wouldn't ask it of them if I wasn't going to do that myself."

Said Western Illinois athletics director Tim Van Alstine: "He's coaching this like he coaches everything else. 'It's third and four. What do we do?'"

Treatment begins

On July 14, Patterson underwent surgery, the first step before a seven-week radiation and chemotherapy treatment that began in August.

Patterson made it a point to get to Missouri Valley Football Conference media day July 22 in St. Louis.

"I've got two focuses," he said then. "First to talk about our football team, and the second to reassure everybody that I'm going to be OK."

When introduced by Valley commissioner Patty Viverito, Patterson received a standing ovation from the coaches, administrators and media members in attendance. It was one of many outpourings of support from throughout the football fraternity that Patterson received while undergoing treatment.

One morning, right after Oklahoma claimed the No. 1 ranking among major-college teams, Sooners coach Bob Stoops called.

Patterson could not talk, but his wife relayed the message from Stoops.

"She said, 'Are you sure you have time to be talking to Don when you're trying to defend the No. 1 ranking?' Bobby's response was, 'Of course, I have time to be concerned about an old friend,'" Patterson said. "Those things mean a lot to you. It's gratifying that so many people care about how you are doing."

The Pattersons moved to a downtown hotel in Iowa City that week so Don could begin radiation and chemotherapy.

It was a return of sorts for the Pattersons. Before coming to Western, Don was an assistant for 18 years at Iowa. That familiarity was comforting, especially for Lisa.

"I had a pretty good support network of friends there that would take me to lunch or dinner," she said. "We were right across the river from the hospital. In convenience and ease, that helped."

The only time the Pattersons returned to Macomb was after the first week of treatment, when the players reported for fall camp Aug. 3.

"That first weekend we came home, he started not feeling well. We didn't realize what that first chemo treatment would do to with him," Lisa said. "I just panicked, since I was away from my security blanket, which was the hospital."

"If something happened, I'd take him there and they would take care of him."

Don then settled into the routine that carried him through the next six weeks.

Radiation treatments were at 10:45 a.m. Monday through Friday. The first day, Patterson was asked if there was any particular music he wanted to hear while he underwent treatment.

His choice? "12 Songs," a CD by Neil Diamond.

"I listened to Neil Diamond for 35 treatments," Patterson said. "A lot of people suspected that I would not like Neil Diamond anymore, but that's not true. He got me through it OK."

On Wednesdays, Patterson also had his weekly chemotherapy treatment.

"Wednesdays were real long days," Patterson said.

In addition to the care from the doctors, Lisa also did what she could to help her husband.

"Don will probably tell you I'm a little bit like Nurse Ratched sometimes," she said in reference to the notorious nurse from "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

"I had to come to understand I could push when he felt well and when he didn't, I should just shut up," Lisa said. "That was hard for me to get past, because I'm a rule-follower. When the doctor said you should do this, and do this, and do this, that's what I wanted him to do."

Patterson attended a pair of Iowa football games, where he'd sit in a Kinnick Stadium suite for the first half before he left. He also addressed the Iowa squad, at coach Kirk Ferentz's invitation. Patterson and Ferentz worked together on Hayden Fry's staff at Iowa.

"I'm sure he was sincere, because he sent me their practice schedule so I could pick the day," Patterson said. "It was very gratifying that Kirk said he'd very much like me to talk to the team."

Patterson's last day of treatment was Sept. 16. Four days later, when Western played Stephen F. Austin in Macomb, Patterson was on the Leathernecks' sideline as an observer.

The Recovery

As hard as the treatment was, Patterson said the recovery period after was difficult as well.

"The hardest part was to finish the treatment and think, 'Now I'm going to be OK.' But it doesn't happen that way," Patterson said. "That's what they tell you: It's going to take a couple of months to get you all messed up and it's going to take a couple more months to get healthy again."

Dr. Kristi Chang was Patterson's attending specialist. Because of doctor-patient confidentiality concerns, she was not available to be interviewed.

"It's been difficult to sit and watch him go through this," said Lisa Patterson, who survived melanoma when she was pregnant with her daughter, Brooke. "I didn't have to go through nearly what he had to go through, but I understand that anxiety you sometimes feel."

Don has lost weight as a result of the treatment. He has taken nourishment through a feeding tube since the treatments started and likely will until mid-December.

"After a while, the worst TV commercials start making the food look good to you," Patterson said. "The biggest fear is that when I'm able to eat again, I might have lost my appetite for food. But I don't think that will happen. My taste buds will be damaged for a while, so food won't taste right to me when I'm able to eat."

Patterson is able to drink water and sweet tea, which has more calories.

"The most important thing is that I haven't forgotten how to swallow," Patterson said. "Believe it or not, adults can forget how to swallow, and there's never been a day go by that I haven't swallowed."

Patterson continues the recovery process but was well enough to return to actual coaching starting Oct. 26, the week of the Northern Iowa game.

As for the future, Patterson has one final appointment Dec. 16 for PET and CAT.

"Three months to the day of the last treatment," Patterson said. "We keep our fingers crossed that is the day we find out I'm cancer free. I have so much faith in those doctors and that hospital. This treatment is very, very difficult, but it is survivable."

"The odds are I'm not going to die from tonsillar cancer. The odds are very much in my favor."

FRIDAY: Getting back on the sidelines

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