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Lacrosse player a study in courage

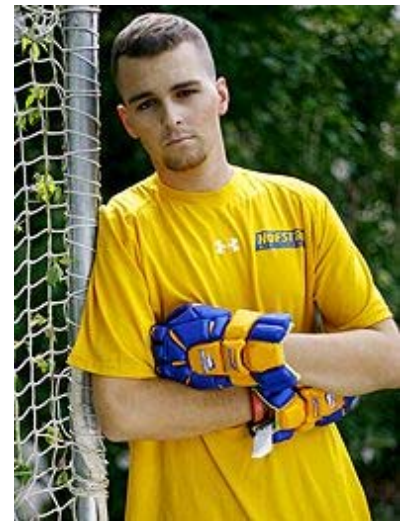
By Joseph Santoliquito
Special to ESPN.com

HOLMES, Pa. -- Nick Colleluori's mind raced. He tapped his foot and looked up at the clock, waiting for his Wednesday morning English II class to end. It was Christmas in September for the Hofstra University lacrosse player. It was the day to pick out new equipment for the coming spring season.

When class finished, then-coach John Danowski met Colleluori in the hall. Nothing more than a coach making sure one of his players was in class, Colleluori thought. But Danowski had an invitation: "Take a walk with me to my office." Colleluori didn't think anything of it.

"I opened the door and my parents were sitting in the coach's office with the team doctor," Colleluori said. "That's how I found out I had cancer."

His parents, the team doctor and Danowski already knew. Colleluori -- a feisty 5-foot-10, 190-pound sophomore -- didn't. On that morning of Sept. 21, 2005, he cursed in front of his parents for one of the few times in his life. Fifteen minutes later, he grasped the situation and sat down as his parents, the team doctor and Danowski set out a game plan to attack the non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.



While facing his own fight against cancer, Nick Colleluori wants to help children with their struggles.

Since finding out, Colleluori, 20, a defender noted for his aggressiveness, has fought through chemotherapy sessions, weight loss, aching, creaking joints, radiation and fingers so swollen he can't bend them. He's fought through a momentary belief the cancer was under control -- and the revelation that it was still in his body and required more treatment. All along, he's held fast to his dream of returning to the lacrosse field, playing for the Pride, doing what he does best -- harassing opposing players into making mistakes.

For now, though, just living is enough of a fight. The same morning he learned about the cancer, Colleluori's parents, Cheryl and Pat, sat in Danowski's office and received a frightening phone call. Evan Brady, a 19-year-old friend of the Colleluori family, had died that morning from cancer.

"I know how scary all this sounds, but I can't get pissed off, I can't get scared," Colleluori said. "Things happen that you sometimes have no control over. I can be angry, really angry. And I was when I first heard. I knew right then when I saw my parents sitting there in the coach's office that something was wrong, and I said, 'f---!' I was angry. But this whole thing has been harder for everyone else -- my family, my friends, everyone close to me -- [than for] me. I couldn't stay angry. I never looked at it as something that I did to myself. It's something that I have no control over. I'm just going to keep on fighting."

Minutes after finding out he had cancer, Colleluori asked to talk to the team. Danowski already had informed the players something was going on. It was Colleluori who told them he had cancer. He said, "This thing has no chance. I don't want you guys to worry about me, I'll knock this thing out. I'm staring death in the eye and cancer has no chance."

Emotion flowed. Some of the coaches had to leave the locker room.

THE WARNING SIGNS AND TREATMENT

Considered undersized to play defensive line, Colleluori was a 170-pound nose tackle for the football team at Ridley High School in Folsom, Pa. He defied larger offensive linemen with quickness and speed, but most of all with his tenacity. Seemingly blocked out of plays, or double-teamed, Colleluori could claw his way through to make tackles.

A member of the three-time lacrosse state champion Green Raiders, Colleluori attracted the attention of Delaware, Drexel, Rutgers and Hofstra, catching the eye of Pride assistant coach Joe Amplo.

"When I recruit, I look for blue-collar tough kids, and I know the roots, and geez, the kid was 5-10, 170 pounds and a nose guard," Amplo said. "I knew Nick was a guy who could change the pulse of the team."

Colleluori started seven games as a freshman, playing on Hofstra's man-down unit on defense.

One morning in April 2005, toward the end of his freshman season, he woke up unable to hear from his right ear. He thought it was an ear infection or a popped ear drum. Medication didn't solve the problem, but tubes cleared it a few months later. Then in August 2005, his right nostril was clogged and he thought it was allergies. But he was told in early September he had nasal polyps and would need a procedure to remove what was believed to be enlarged adenoids. When doctors went in, they found more than what was originally diagnosed.

"They told me there could be a 90 percent chance of nothing and that there was a 10 percent chance it was something," he said. "I felt good because that was a pretty slim chance that it could be something. That's when I was finally told. I prepared myself for both situations, but actually hearing it got me."

No one said a word as Cheryl and Pat drove home from Hofstra, on Long Island, to Holmes, Pa., with Nick curled up in the back seat. Crossing the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, it hit him.

"I couldn't control it," Colleluori recalled. "I couldn't stop crying. I think I cried myself to sleep. I didn't want to leave Hofstra. My mom looked back and asked if I was all right. I kept thinking, what's next? What would I have to go through? I'm petrified of needles and doctors."

Colleluori got the news on a Wednesday. By Thursday, he was at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. During the next two days he had SCAT scans, X-rays and bone-marrow aspirations, when doctors drill holes through the hips and draw out bone marrow and samples.

Results showed he had diffuse large B-cell non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He started chemotherapy at Pennsylvania University Hospital on Oct. 11, 2005. The first treatment took seven hours, but he felt great. He was 187 pounds and able to work out, bench pressing 250 pounds for reps. "I felt strong and my father was,

like, I shouldn't be doing that," Nick said. "I was still running, riding my bike and lifting."

The chemo showed progress, but doctors decided to add four more treatments, which would end Jan. 16, 2006, because not all the cancer was gone. Soon after that, the side effects took hold: shaking, vomiting, weight loss. A spell of bronchitis lasted two months. But he was able to return to Hofstra.

Things were going well.

"Or so I thought," he said. "I was back for five weeks. Then I started getting this tooth pain that was unimaginable. It was so bad, it was like you want to yank your own teeth out."

He was experiencing both pain and numbness from the center of his chin to the left side of his jaw. An oral surgeon told him it wasn't his teeth. After the eight cycles of chemo, the cancer had returned and spread.



The future, in Nick Colleluori's eyes, holds the promise of returning to the lacrosse field with his Hofstra teammates.

The family decided to try a stem-cell transplant. The procedure involved harvesting cells from the bone marrow in Nick's hip and injecting those cells back into his body through the same port in his chest used for his chemotherapy. It took a week and a half to extract the cells, coupled with two cycles of a more aggressive type of chemo. The kid who was afraid of needles endured two-a-days to generate stem cells for extraction. The whole process took eight days, three hours per day, to extract 2 million cells. His blood had to be run through a dialysis machine.

He went in for the transplant May 16 and left June 4.

"They basically kill you from the inside out," said Colleluori, whose fingernails and toenails fell out during the treatment. "They give you a day break and put your cells back in. I was feeling good. I started putting weight back on. I was down to 160 pounds. That's how low I got. The whole time during treatment, I kept going up and down."

He started working out in July. He had every intention of returning to Hofstra to play this fall. He played in a summer league and felt good. He got up to around 178 pounds. He was getting his strength back.

Colleluori thought the cancer was in remission -- or at least under control.

A month went by, and he began getting pain in his gums again. It made him nervous.

"I was told it was all scar tissue," he said, "and I remember we went out and had a big celebration."

On Aug. 1, his glands started swelling again. That's when he got the news that the cancer was still there.

"[Since] I left the doctor's office, I haven't been able to eat or sleep," he said. "I haven't done much or even wanted to go out."

He started radiation Aug. 10. It's easier than chemo, Colleluori said. "It takes me longer to get out of the car and walk there than the treatment takes," he said. "...This is a lot less stressful. And no needles."

He still wakes up with pain, like pinched nerves. One day it could be one knee bothering him, or both.

THE SUPPORT AND THE FUTURE

Pat and Cheryl watch him closely. It gets on his nerves, but he's their son, the third of four boys, their blood. His oldest brother, Pat, calls four, maybe five times a day. His brother Daniel can't bring himself to see Nick without getting emotional, and younger brother Mike, a sophomore on the Hofstra lacrosse team, deals with Nick like he always has.

"I know it's been hard on all of my brothers," Nick said. "Michael and I are best friends. We grew up in the same room together, but my mother and father interrogate me every 15 minutes about [how] I feel. I want to be left alone. When I have something wrong, I'll let them know. I want to be treated as normal as possible. I just don't want to be asked a million questions every day. But I understand where it comes from. It comes from love."

Love from family, and his fiancée, Jordan Costa, and his extended family, the Hofstra team. Danowski, now the head coach at Duke, calls regularly. So does Amplo. When Seth Tierney was named head coach in June, one of the first things he did was call Colleluori.

"It was an emotional phone call for me as well as the family," said Tierney, who was an assistant for six years at Johns Hopkins and whose mother beat colon cancer. "Nick was very concerned where his future would be, especially with a new coach coming in. I just wanted to make Nick feel secure that he wasn't going to lose his job on the team. We're not going to win without Nick Colleluori. He's more important to this team than I am. He's the kid everyone on this team lives and fights for. That's all I want right now from Nick, and that's to keep fighting. In my eyes, my priority was to support him."

Once doctors told Pat his son could have hard candy, he filled his cabinets with bags and bags of it. Doctors told Pat soup was OK, and he went out and bought two cases.

"That's the way my dad deals with stress, but the most frustrating thing for me, other than the pain I deal with every day, is watching my family go through all of this stress," Colleluori said. "I feel like I don't have this much stress, why do they have to go through it?"

The most amazing thing is that he's made a point to reach out to others in his situation. Fundraisers in his name have generated beds for local hospitals. He counsels cancer patients, and he's changed his career goals. He now wants to counsel young cancer patients, after *he* beats it.

He already has a head start. He sought out an 8-year-old girl who was recently diagnosed with cancer and talked to her. She lives in fear. He told her not to be afraid, that she can beat it, that he's going through the same thing and they're going to fight it together.

Nick will turn 21 on Oct. 19. The radiation appears to be working. The stem-cell transplant has prevented further spread of cancer. No more needles for now.

His plan is to return to Hofstra in January and possibly play next spring.

"Coach Tierney has been amazing," Colleluori said. "He still wants me to be on the sidelines for every game this season. I don't plan on missing a game this year. I missed three last year because I was in the hospital."

Right now, I'm not afraid of anything."

Joseph Santoliquito is the managing editor of RING Magazine and a frequent contributor to ESPN.com.

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