

Drew Wall embraces life on one leg

Written by Tom Fruehling

Monday, 05 September 2011 17:37 -

After shooting his best-ever nine-hole round of 56 in the season-opening all-Metro high school meet two weeks ago, Kennedy golfer Drew Wall was sorry to miss last week's match, if only to support his teammates.

But, as they say, he had a prior engagement.

On Wednesday, the 15-year-old freshman was one of the featured speakers at the 11th Annual Kirk Ferentz Football Kickoff Luncheon in Iowa City. Afterward, few in the crowd of 300 dignitaries were talking about the coach's remarks. Or those of Iowa President Sally Mason. Or Terry Branstad or Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds. Or anybody else, for that matter.

A three-column headline on the front page of the Iowa City Press-Citizen the next day used a quote from UI vice president of medicine Dr. Jean Robillard, who called the young man "a hero, a true winner" for his courage and determination.

"It was pretty cool," Drew said later, equally excited by the laughs he got "from a couple of one-liners I threw out" and the Hawkeye jersey with his name on the back presented by the head coach himself.

It was nothing new for him to tell his life story and, as an unofficial poster boy for the university's Children's Hospital, tell how lives besides his own are being saved there every day.

And that he's now a member of the Kennedy golf team, with his right leg cut off at the knee and walking on what he lovingly calls his "bionic leg."

Drew was born to be an athlete. His father, Doug, was a star at Jefferson, his mother Robin (Dye) a volleyball whiz at Kennedy and Cornell College.

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Tall like his parents and his own little brother Adam, who's 6-foot-3 and in the eighth grade at Taft, he too had a growth spurt in grade school. He was playing in two basketball leagues as a fifth grader at Madison Elementary when, in January of 2008, he had leg pains that wouldn't go away.

Tests showed he had bone cancer in his lower right leg, and he underwent 10 weeks of chemotherapy at University Hospitals to kill as many cancer cells as possible. Still, a large deadly tumor remained.

At the age of 11, he (and his folks) faced a grim decision. Doctors said to cut out the tumor and the tissue all around would leave his leg essentially useless. They'd literally have to destroy it in order to save it.

Or, he could have it amputated and be fitted with an artificial leg.

"I knew it would change my life," Drew says today. "But I didn't want to have a limp all my life and not be able to do the things I wanted to do.

"With the kind of prostheses they have today, I could still run and jump. I could play football and golf and other stuff. Not like I could before, but I could still do it.

"Amputation seemed like the best option to me. But I think it was harder for my parents."

Indeed, after the radical surgery in April 2008, he quickly adapted to life on one leg. He continued to play the piano, maintained straight A's in school and took part in all activities as before.

He's been an active participant on a youth advisory council helping plan a new Children's Hospital in Iowa City and a spokesman for the Children's Miracle Network.

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While at Taft Middle School, he took golf lessons from teacher (and City Amateur champion) Steve Koepke. He earned a brown belt in tae kwon do. Last year he was on the Taft swim team.

And, as a seventh grader, he personally lobbied in the state legislature for a bill requiring insurance companies to pay for prosthetic devices that can run as much as \$50,000. He has a pen used by Gov. Chet Culver when he signed the bill into law.

"Drew has kept a positive attitude that's just remarkable," says his 89-year-old grandmother Leta Wall, a longtime political activist who often accompanied him to Des Moines. "Can you imagine losing your leg at that young age? But he just accepts what God has given him and goes on. I wish I had the faith that boy has."

While science and doctors' skills may have saved his life, his grandmother says it's faith that lets him live it to the fullest. "He doesn't preach about it. But you can tell," she says.

It is a faith that's surely been tested, for the cancer didn't go away as they hoped it would when the original tumor was removed. Drew had 30 more weeks of chemotherapy after surgery and the prognosis was good.

In the three years since, however, clear tests have inevitably been followed by the growth of pebble-like cancerous cells in the lungs. He's had five separate operations to rid the tiny tumors from his right lung and nearly three dozen weeks of chemotherapy treatments.

Optimism, it seems, is always short-lived. Two months ago, spots showed up for the first time in his left lung.

Drew has had all the chemotherapy he can take for now. So he goes back to Iowa City on Wednesday for yet another grueling surgery the next day to try and stop the spread. Still, he plans to be back on the golf course soon.

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"I try to live my life as normal as possible," he says. "It's not easy. But I take life one day at a time and make the best of it."

Kennedy golf coach Mark Wilden, for one, says the first-year golfer is an inspiration to everyone else on the team, no matter that his personal-best score is a 56 for nine holes.

"Drew doesn't want any pity or anybody to feel sorry for him. He's just one of the guys," Wilden says.

"You know, a lot of times, kids want things easy. Then you look at Drew and what he's up against. But nothing slows him. He challenges himself all the time to get better.

"He's a participant in life. He lives life every day and lives it the right way."