



## West Forsyth's Trey Rood hangs on to football in cancer battle

By Michael Carvell  
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Football is more than just a game for West Forsyth's Trey Rood.

The sport serves a higher purpose, supplying much-needed hope and motivation in his battle against life-threatening cancer.

The tall and lanky kid who wears the No. 5 jersey for the Wolverines got some startling news over the summer -- melanoma was detected in his body again, and this time it had rapidly advanced to the worst stage.

While his family members staggered to comprehend the devastating diagnosis, Rood had a quick question for the doctors.

"I asked if I could I still play football this year," Rood recalled this week at football practice. "I wanted to know, and I had to know. I love football, it's my passion. This is my senior year, and I wanted to play."

Yes, Rood has been permitted to play for West Forsyth this year -- when he wasn't in Germany for alternative cancer treatments. Rood has appeared in three games for the Wolverines, including Friday at Johnson-Gainesville. West Forsyth has three more games left.

The 6-foot-3, 170-pound Rood is nowhere near the electrifying player he was as a junior, when he earned all-region and all-county honors at safety. However, Rood is making tenfold the impact this year -- inspiring his team, classmates, the community, and many other people fighting cancer across the metro area.

"All Trey wants to do is play football, and he's not going to let anything hold him back," West Forsyth coach Frank Hepler said. "We're all worried about 100 different things with Trey, and he's focused on getting back out there on the field.

"Trey's attitude about his situation is amazing ... he's a special kid, a one in million."

*"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?" [Matthew 6:25, New International Version]*

Trey says he repeats Bible verses silently each day for peace of mind about the skin cancer that seems to have everyone else around him worried sick. Melanoma is rarely found among high school students, with the median age for diagnosis being between 45 and 55.

Rood's cancer traces to a discolored mole on his face that was removed when he was 10. No one thought much more about it until a small lump grew behind Rood's right ear during his freshman year of high school.

Early tests appeared to indicate that the mass was benign, but when the tumor was removed, a series of biopsies revealed it was Stage III of malignant melanoma. Rood underwent a second surgery to remove lymph nodes on the right side of his neck in an attempt to stop the spread of cancer cells.

"It was a huge shock and life-changing news when he was first diagnosed," said his mother, Cherie Rood. "Then he went through all the [medical] treatments over the next year and did so well. Trey was so strong and had such a great attitude through it all."

Cancer was a distant memory by Rood's junior year, as he fully regained his health and played so well that he began attracting attention from several colleges. He led West Forsyth's defense interceptions and was second in total tackles. Last summer, he attended camps at Furman and Georgia Southern.

However, Rood was dealt another blow this past June when routine X-rays showed a tumor in the lung area -- the same spot that was cancer-free only four months earlier. The 1.5-inch circular mass is located on the pulmonary artery, which carries blood from the heart to the lungs.

This cancer was far worse. Stage IV metastatic melanoma has a grim prognosis: Without any treatment, a patient has a life expectancy of six months.

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Cumming is a booming suburban area on Lake Lanier located 45 minutes north of Atlanta. It still has the charm of small town, with the football team and numerous residents forming prayer groups after word spread quickly about Rood's dire condition.

The family was forced to take quick action -- either stay in the metro area and undergo treatment, which would likely involve the removal of Trey's left lung, or go to Germany for an alternative non-surgical approach that has not been approved in the United States.

While under tremendous deadline pressures to reach a decision, Cherie took an afternoon walk down the street to clear her head. As fate would have it, a neighbor joined in for the exercise and happened to mention she knew a practicing oncologist in Germany. "I took that as a sign," Cherie said.

On July 13, Trey began seven weeks of clinical treatment in southern Germany. The alternative method is called immunopheresis -- a process based on the theory that filtered blood, without inhibitors in it, allows a person's own immune system to attack and destroy cancer cells.

Rood caught the 10-hour flight to Germany in mid-September for another three weeks of medical care and will go again Nov. 1. The family is encouraged by the unofficial results.

"We have a lot of reasons to feel like things are going in the right direction, but we won't know anything definitive until the [X-rays] in November," said Trey's father, Charlie Rood.

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After the cancer, the biggest obstacle is money. It costs nearly \$80,000 per month for Rood's overseas treatment, and health insurance has yet to cover any of the bills.

The family's life savings has been depleted, and Charlie has been unable to find work after being laid off in residential construction financing. Cherie has worked for 21 years in sales for private mortgage insurer, with the company permitting her to accompany her son on the trips to Germany.

The good news is that West Forsyth and the surrounding community have been active with fundraisers to assist the family. A pancake breakfast and raffle raised more than \$30,000, while some opposing football teams have passed around buckets for contributions.

The "Tee Off for Trey" golf tournament is planned for Atlanta Country Club on Oct. 26, and the Web site PrayForTrey.org is set up for donations.

The "Pray for Trey" Facebook page, where people can post messages and get updates, has more than 2,600 members, while many West Forsyth students wear plastic wrist bracelets with the same phrase.

Rood, who is a lifelong Georgia Bulldogs fan, got a letter in Germany from Vince Dooley and a couple of e-mails from Mark Richt. One of Hepler's former players at Florida's Plantation High, Georgia defensive tackle Jeff Owens, heard about Trey's situation and requested a wrist bracelet to wear this season in his honor.

The normally shy and soft-spoken Rood has been overwhelmed by all the attention. "It makes me feel better knowing that people are thinking about me and praying for me," he said. "It's big ... it's one of the most important things going for me in this process."

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