

Cancer patient still passionate about football

Player continues to suit up for San Diego SunFire

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SAN MARCOS – Elisabeth Lewandowski has every reason to sit out a few games for the San Diego SunFire of the Women's Professional Football League.

It's unlikely teammates or management would criticize her if she missed a few practices or cut back on her workouts. Truth is, they didn't expect to see her back at all.

Lewandowski, 25, who goes by "Zoie," became ill after minicamp in June 2002 from what she thought was heat exhaustion. She'd suffered a few headaches in previous months but didn't give it much thought. What she soon learned, however, floored her.

She had a brain tumor the size of a lemon and needed emergency surgery to remove it.

"I started having migraines in April," she said. "I would lean back and feel pressure in my head, but I thought it was the hot weather or induced by stress.

"I went in the hospital on a Saturday night. By Sunday morning, they had the MRI results and asked to remove it. By Monday, the tumor was removed."

Lewandowski has been in treatment for more than a year. Her cancer, which is in remission, was classified by doctors as one of the more aggressive forms of the disease.

Through it all, Lewandowski hasn't let her illness get her down.

"You would never see Zoie moping around," said SunFire owner and general manager Donna Fox. "She's never felt sorry for herself. I didn't think I would ever see Zoie on a regular basis again. I thought she would high-tail it back to Arizona to be with her family."

Lewandowski, in her second year with the SunFire, has done a lot of things since the surgery people didn't expect. Next month will complete one year of chemotherapy yet she continues to practice and suit up with the team. She also works full-time for a San Marcos software company and vows to remain upbeat for her 23-month-old daughter, Trinity.

"I feel fine," she said. "(The cancer) has really changed my life. What if you were told you only had six months or one year to live? What would you do? There's no reason to be depressed that my brain got chopped into. At least I didn't die in surgery. I try to let God have control over my life."

Lewandowski said doctors have never told her how long she might expect to live. She simply lives everyday as if it's her last. She said she's closer to her family and makes sure her priorities are in order.

"It may sound like a bad thing, 'Oh I have cancer,' but it's a blessing," she said.

"It's something I can benefit from. It's like a new door opened in my life. It makes

me look at the world differently and makes me more loving to my family."

Lewandowski said there was only one time she cried during a doctor's appointment – when it was recommended she not play football. She got a second opinion and was told she could play as long as she was cautious and went back to the game slowly.

"I actually found a sport that I'm good at and now it was being taken away," she said. "That made me cry."

Lewandowski, a 5-foot-7, 146-pounder, has changed positions from wide receiver to free safety because the new position is considered less risky. Still, she said, teammates are afraid to hit her in practice.

"The girls are hesitant to be really tough with her," Fox said, "but she's not hesitant to be tough with them."

Fox said the entire team was devastated when Lewandowski's diagnosis became known. The team accompanied her when Lewandowski was rushed to the hospital. They stood by awaiting results of the MRI and huddled for a prayer when told Lewandowski needed surgery. They visited often during her week in the hospital and were around the house after she was released.

Although she doesn't get much playing time (three plays a couple of weeks ago), Lewandowski doesn't miss a practice or a game. Fox said she's the team's biggest cheerleader on game day.

"It amazes me that she's still around (knowing) the chances of her being out there full-time are very slim," Fox said. "Some girls who get injured and realize they probably can't start don't show up. I don't think Zoie ever once thought she couldn't play."

Lewandowski has kept a daily journal since her surgery and said she's not concerned about getting hurt on the field. In fact, she's been head-butted five times from family and friends giving her hugs.

She said it's hard to stand by knowing she probably won't get in the game but said it's worth it just to be on the sidelines.

"They know I'm committed to the team," she said. "They know this is my passion. Everybody's purpose in life is to have a passion and be committed to that. Football brings joy to my life."

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