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## Urbandale boy provides inspiration

BY TOM BARTON • [TBARTON@DMREG.COM](mailto:TBARTON@DMREG.COM) • AUGUST 18, 2009

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He may be an Iowa Hawkeye fan, but an Urbandale 9-year-old has become a beacon of inspiration for an Iowa State wrestler and his coaches.

Zac Duncalf was diagnosed with a form of leukemia and lymphoma in May. His mother, Monica Duncalf, 30, said he is a high-risk case because the cancer is not only in Zac's blood cells, but has also settled in other places of his body, including a large mass in his chest.

He's endured a bone biopsy, a spinal tap and had a catheter installed in his chest to drain fluid from around his heart. His treatment will last more than three years.

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Yet through it all, the Rolling Green Elementary fourth-grader continues to stay strong and upbeat. He's able to participate in classroom activities - and take visits from grapplers - from his hospital bed.

### Keeping connected

The Urbandale school district provided Zac a laptop connected to Skype, which allows him to use the Internet to make video and voice calls, send instant messages and share files so that he can stay in touch with classmates on days when he is too sick to go to school.

Zac, with the help of his mother, even delivered a lesson about platelets via a Web cam built into the computer.

Part of the reason Zac is in the hospital is because his platelet count is too low. To help his classmates



Zac Duncalf, 9, got a surprise visit from Mueller, 23, last week at Blank Children's Hospital. In the background is Zac's Iowa State wrestling coaches autographing his wrestling shoes.



understand, Zac and his mother borrowed an analogy from his doctor: They described platelets as gummy bears.

"They help the blood clot, so they're like gummy bears, allowing the blood to stick together," his mother explained.

His teacher at Rolling Green, Nema McGinnis, said the class is studying the human body, specifically the circulatory system.

"(The students) are curious and I try to update them as much as I can. I let the students ask Monica questions. She has explained quite a bit to them and they absorb that," McGinnis said. "Zac is straightforward with them about why he's in the hospital. For us, it's a great learning tool and for him, with Skype, he can still join us even though he can't physically be here ... I think it's something that's helpful to Zac, having daily contact with friends he's normally used to seeing every day."

#### An inspiration

For Iowa State assistant wrestling coach Chris Bono, Zac's attitude is an inspiring example of hope and a reminder not to give up.

"This is what Iowa State wrestling is about. This is true life, the kind of people we fight for. This is someone who will touch our lives and be an inspiration," Bono said outside of Zac's hospital room Wednesday.

Accompanying Bono were ISU head wrestling coach and Olympic gold medalist Kevin Jackson, assistant coach Yero Washington and 23-year-old ISU wrestler Mitch Mueller of Iowa City. They visited Zac, who is a wrestler, to provide encouragement.

"What's up, Zac? We bought you a card and an Iowa State T-shirt," Jackson said as he walked into the hospital room. "We hope to see you in this soon one day. I just hope you're not a Hawkeye fan. But you might be, the way you're smiling."

Zac's dad is an Iowa State fan and contacted the team. Jackson, Bono, Mueller and Washington signed his wrestling shoes, the T-shirt they got him and an Iowa State T-shirt his father bought him.

"Tell us about your wrestling skills. Win any tournaments?" Bono asked.

Zac qualified in March for the 2009 Iowa AAU State Wrestling Tournament at Veterans Auditorium, which his mother calls "the barn."

"What did you do in the barn?" his mother asked.

"I pinned someone," Zac said smiling.

#### Facing reality and questions of faith

As of Wednesday, Zac had been in the hospital for the better part of a week. He was first admitted Aug. 5 because he needed platelets, his mother said. He left at about 8:30 p.m. Aug. 7, after receiving one unit of platelets and two units of blood. He ended up back at the hospital around 10 p.m. on Aug. 8.

Zac had developed a neutropenic fever of 102 degrees. The fever happened because the number of neutrophils - a type of white blood cell that helps the immune system fight infection - in Zac's blood stream was extremely low.

Essentially, his mother said, it is a sign that Zac's body is not recovering on its own from the last round of chemotherapy. Instead, he's having to rely on blood transfusions.



Walker Duncalf, 4, left, spends time at the hospital with his brother, Zac. Zac's treatment will last months. On days he is too sick to attend school, he makes videos and voice calls, sends messages and photos. Thanks to the Urbandale school district, Walker is connected to Skype. He even delivered platelets via a Web cam to classmates.



Zac Duncalf, 9, a wrestling fan and fourth grader at Blank Elementary School, was diagnosed with lymphoma in May. He got a surprise visit from wrestling coaches and a team member from Iowa State at Blank Children's Hospital. Head coach Kevin Jackson presents Zac with a T-shirt. Next to Jackson is assistant coach Chris Bono, a wrestler at Iowa State; assistant coach Mitch Mueller; and Zac's mother, Monica Duncalf.

### •How you can help

The best way to help Zac is to donate blood, his mother said.

Zac had to wait most of a day to receive blood because the hospital was low on his particular blood. During the summer months, the blood supply in the country is low because the demand is high and the number of donors is lower, according to the American Red Cross. The center estimates approximately 100 units of blood every day.

Eligible blood donors must be at least 18 years old, in good health and weigh at least 120 pounds.

"His doctor's exact words are, 'He will be here until the cows come home.' His body has to start showing that it can recover on its own," she said.

Depending on the day, Zac does OK, his mother said. But then there are those other days.

"There are times where he's only worried about school work and cartoons," Monica Duncalf said. "Then there are the times when he asks faith questions. He doesn't ask me why it's happening to him, he asks, 'Why do people get sick?' and questions about God. It's hard to put things in gentle enough terms not to shatter his faith and trust in God. It's hard to answer his questions, but they're expected."

Monica said they've come to the conclusion that God has decided their family is strong enough to endure this.

She said, "Somewhere, sometime, some good will come of this. Maybe this will teach somebody a lesson about life, family and faith. Everybody asks the question of 'Why?' None of us are wise enough to have those answers, but we get through it the best we can."

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•Thoughts for Zac

Those interested in sending cards or well wishes can contact Monica Duncalf at [mduncalf@msn.com](mailto:mduncalf@msn.com).

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