

Teen upbeat after near-fatal football injury

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer
Monday, January 25, 2010



There's a blank spot in Matt Blea's memory that covers a 17-day interval. He remembers the opening kickoff sailing over his head. He remembers retrieving the ball and getting good yardage on the return, "but there was a penalty on the play." He remembers the next couple of plays.

Then, nothing. His next memory is waking up in the hospital and his father, Dave, telling him he needed to do speech therapy. Matt couldn't talk at all, but it wasn't because his brain was malfunctioning. He had too many darn tubes in his throat. He grabbed a paper from his dad that listed some vocal exercises and angrily threw it over his head.

He doesn't remember the hit that put him out of the Big Bone Game, the traditional Thanksgiving Day game at San Jose City College in which his team, San Jose Academy High, lost to San Jose's Lincoln High 36-18.

He doesn't remember banging his helmet on the artificial turf, or getting up and wobbling toward the sideline before collapsing. Or his father, an assistant coach, pleading with him, "Don't give up! Stay with us!" Or the 2 1/2-hour surgery at Valley Medical Center that saved his life.

Blea - it rhymes with pray - was in a drug-induced coma for a week to keep him calm and limit the swelling of his brain. The 16-year-old spent nearly a month in two hospitals and lost 31 pounds from his 5-foot-5, 140-pound frame. He has a scar that circles the left side of his scalp, as if he had been seared with a red-hot horseshoe.

Although doctors say his long-term prognosis is good, he'll never play football again.

Cause for concern

Matt's story unfolded at a time when the football world is paying closer attention to head injuries, especially concussions. Congress is investigating the preponderance of concussions in the NFL, and the league tightened rules regarding when a concussed player can return to action. Bay Area fans watched in horror as Cal star Jahvid Best sustained a concussion and a back injury in a spectacular fall Nov. 7 against Oregon State.

An estimated 68,000 concussions occurred during the 2008 high school football season, according to the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study. Ohio State Associate Professor Dawn

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Comstock, who helped organize the study, points out the number would be far higher except that "up to 60 percent of sports concussions go unreported" because of football's play-hurt credo.

In another troubling statistic, Comstock said, "In 2008, 16 percent of high school football players who had concussions in which they lost consciousness returned to play the same day."

Another study, in the Journal of Athletic Training, showed that running backs and linebackers are the ones most likely to sustain concussions. Matt played both positions, and one of the hospital doctors said in a press conference that he had suffered from "second-impact syndrome," meaning he probably had suffered an earlier concussion. Not true, according to both Matt and his father, a longtime youth football coach.

"My wife and I talked about it many times," Dave Blea said. "If he was ever diagnosed with a concussion in his youth (football) days, he was going to be out for the year. That's something we never wanted to fool around with."

When the brain injury came, it was a whopper.

If it hadn't been for quick action by paramedics and hospital personnel - Matt was in surgery within an hour of collapsing - Matt might have been the third high school player to die directly from a football injury in the United States in 2009. The Annual Survey of Football Injury Research says the fatality numbers have dropped fairly steadily since there were 26 direct deaths in 1968, as equipment has improved and spearing - going head-first into an opponent - has been outlawed.

Giving up his love

Matt had played football since age 8, and his one significant prior injury was a broken hand when he was 12. Now he's hanging up his No. 21 jersey, the one he wore in honor of his hero, 49ers star Frank Gore.

"I'm a little bit sad," he said, sitting in the family living room and giving his first interview since the injury. "But I have my family."

He talked of how difficult it was to sit out the first few games of the season after transferring from Willow Glen to San Jose, which his parents thought would be a better fit for him academically.

"Football's my love," he said. He was an excellent player; perennial doormat San Jose won four out of five games when he became eligible. The thing he loved about the game had nothing to do with touchdowns or well-executed plays. It was "just making friends," he said.

He's going to run track - the 100 and 200 - when he gets back to school. The plan is for him to return in April after he completes speech, physical and occupational rehabilitation. He'd prefer March.

"He's very driven, that boy of mine," said his mother, Jane. "He's very motivated. He's like the Little Engine That Could. Everyone was always telling him he couldn't do things because he was little."

The 'scariest moment'

On the final play of his football career, witnessed by about 5,000 people, Matt was going out for a pass, but it was underthrown and intercepted. As he went to make the tackle, he was hit in the chest by a safety - a clean hit.

As he fell back, his helmet hit the artificial turf, his brain slamming against his skull. Before the game, Dave Blea had noted the hardness of the surface and told Matt and another kick returner to watch out for kicks taking big bounces off the turf.

His father knew immediately that Matt was seriously hurt. "I didn't see his pupils," he said. "I just saw white. He was like a boxer who got punched. He got to the sideline and collapsed. It was probably the scariest moment of my life.

"I've coached him since he was 8, and he's gotten up from the hardest hits I've ever seen."

Doctor provides hope

At Valley Medical Center, Dr. Robert Lieberman performed the surgery to evacuate Matt's acute subdural hematoma, essentially a clot between the skull and the brain. Part of his skull was removed and later reattached.

"Dr. Lieberman was very calming and assuring," Jane Blea said. "It was amazing how he made us smile in such a difficult time."

The next day, Dr. Marco Lee inserted an intracranial pressure monitoring device to prevent the pressure from the brain on the skull from reaching the danger point. The device also uses digital imaging to monitor the effects of the treatment.

Matt's mother, who didn't leave his side for a month, set up a soundtrack of some of his favorite music. And how many 16-year-olds have "Moonlight Sonata" on their iPods?

When he was brought out of the coma, he couldn't feel anything on his right side, much less walk. The rehab started immediately. He was taken to Kaiser Permanente's Santa Clara Medical Center for a week, then back to Valley Medical for two more weeks. Two days before Christmas, he got out and ran a brief lap around the hospital lawn.

"They made fun of me because my leg would drift off," he said.

Outpouring of support

Dave Blea, a general manager for Staples in Morgan Hill, and Jane, a store manager for Designer Shoe Warehouse in Milpitas, raved about the medical treatment Matt received. They were overwhelmed by the outpouring of support not only from San Jose High Academy but also from Lincoln High and other schools, from Bay Area sports figures to ordinary people who had suffered strokes and wrote to commiserate.

Matt was visited in the hospital by Stanford football star Toby Gerhart. "We talked about what football has done for us," Matt said, "and what it's like to get pumped up before a game."

Shortly before kickoff in the Sun Bowl in El Paso, Texas, he texted Gerhart good luck. Gerhart quickly texted back to thank him.

The family finally got to have their long-delayed Thanksgiving dinner, combining it with a Christmas feast. They were guests of the 49ers at the Detroit game, then watched the team's walk-through the next day in Santa Clara. A special treat for Matt was getting to meet his role model, Gore. More recently, the Bleas were treated to a Sharks game and a locker room visit with the players.

Because of concerns about his short-term memory loss, Matt has to have someone with him at all times, in case he forgets to turn off the oven. He had to relearn simple tasks, like taking a shower. Part of his rehab will be to write thank-you notes to all the people who sent get-well cards and letters.

He says he's thinking of becoming a math teacher or a social worker. Asked if he's different now, he said he's happier. "I'm proud to have my life."

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