



*Design by Alli Brightwell.
Photo by Abby Brumm.
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RYAN MELL (11) CONNECTS TO DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES DESPITE HEALTH ISSUES CAUSED BY ENLARGED SPLEEN

“You caused me a lot of trouble, little guy!”

Ryan Mell (11) pointed toward the bright diagram on the screen with one hand, clutching a University of Georgia football in the other. The AP Language and Composition students’ laughter filled the room as they watched Mell sarcastically mock the image on the screen. The screen displayed a diagram of a spleen, a vital organ in charge of producing white blood cells.

As the laughter slowly faded, Mell paused and looked at the diagram. Clutching the UGA football even tighter, Mell used his free hand to animatedly explain how the diagram on the screen held a significant connection to his life.

“During my freshman year, halfway through my first high school football season, I got very sick,” Mell said. “I felt very fatigued and was just not feeling [normal]. I’d had health issues regarding [blood] platelets before, but I thought something was different [this] time.”

Throughout his childhood and youth, Mell struggled with an uneven blood platelet balance. A low blood platelet count prevented his body from forming healthy blood clots, allowing him to become easily fatigued and injured. Days at school sometimes resulted in extreme exhaustion. An occasional football practice produced accentuated pain and bruises.

“I’ve always had an issue with low platelets. I was born with low platelets, and they have caused issues in the past,” Mell said. “My [low platelet] count caused me to bruise up easily and get tired. My body was always in a constant overdrive.”

Despite moments of weariness and discomfort, Mell continued to live his life normally, only subtly affected by his low platelet count. He spent time with family, worked hard in school, and focused on his passion, football. For several years, the low platelet count did not stop Mell from playing the game he loved.

“[When I was playing football in my younger years] I had no preconceived notions of an enlarged spleen,” Mell said. “I loved it and was able to play like normal until halfway through [my freshman season] when I got sick.”

Suddenly the normality seemed to change. Classes seemed longer. Practices seemed more intense and difficult. As Mell’s health continued to decline, he found himself away from the classroom and field, sitting in the uncomfortable cold of a doctor’s office.

“I was tested for viruses and mono. The tests came back negative. [Doctors] decided to get an ultrasound just to see if there was anything wrong with my platelets,” Mell said. “They found that something was wrong. I was diagnosed with a chronically enlarged spleen.”

With the diagnosis came disheartening news. Mell was told that he could no longer play football. The spleen, an abdominal organ involved with the production and removal of blood cells, played an important role in the body’s immune system. An enlarged spleen, however, had the ability to cause fatal issues within the body.

“There were upsetting dangers [of having an enlarged spleen]. If I were to play football, a contact sport, I would get hit,” Mell said. “And if I got hit, [my spleen] could rupture. If [it] ruptured, I could die.”

Shoulder pads were exchanged for purple and gold t-shirts. Cleats, replaced by tennis shoes, were untied and left in his locker. Spleen troubles placed Mell permanently on the sidelines, even after he went through surgery to remove his spleen.

“I spent half of my freshman [season] on the sidelines, didn’t play at all my sophomore year, and even though I just had surgery to remove my spleen, I decided not to play my junior year either,” Mell said. “[After my spleen-removal surgery,] I could have gone back. I chose not to

go back to football because I did not feel like I was physically or psychologically prepared.”

Though the pain of losing a passion hurt Mell, he was able to place his energies into other athletic and creative outlets, where he also excelled.

“Though I can’t play football due to the danger of contact sports, I can invest time in shot put. I started playing it in middle school. Shot put has helped me in that it reminds me of football,” Mell said. “The form that you have to have for shot put is very complex, as is football. So, though I do not love it nearly as much as I loved football, [shotput] gave me a reminiscence of [the game].

I’ve also been encouraged by friends to join things like yearbook, so I can be creative. That helps with the football situation.”

While Mell had not reached a perfect state of health after his

surgery, he knew that his body and mind were more in sync. Classes didn’t feel so long. Pains didn’t randomly arise. Though sicknesses would periodically come, Mell felt more balanced and at ease after his surgery.

“Positively, I have a regular amount of platelets now, so fatigue is not as big of an issue. I don’t bruise as easily as I once did. Overall, it’s been weird,” Mell said. “When I had my spleen, and it was causing problems, I was always standing on a middle ground. I didn’t feel good; I didn’t feel horrible. I definitely didn’t feel great. Now, though I still get sick from the platelet issues at times, I’m not on that middle ground. I’m doing a whole lot better.”

Story by Abby Brumm

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