



By NICK WILLIAMS | The Tampa Tribune
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VALRICO --

On Friday, Zach Hooper, a 16-year-old junior at Durant High, will strap on his pads and helmet and run onto the field at Bloomingdale, proudly wearing blue and gold. His parents, Anthony Hooper and Natasha Francis, will be in the stands. They will be cheering. They also may be crying. Less than a year ago, Zach had a near-death experience after suffering an allergic reaction to medication he took before the team's homecoming game last season. The reaction put him in the hospital for a month. His physical condition was so gruesome, the sight was too hard for some family, friends, teammates and coaches to bear. But through endless hours of medical attention, faith and courage, Zach is able to continue playing football.

"I wasn't sure if I would play again," Hooper said.

Early last season, Hooper suffered a back injury and started taking a non-steroid anti-inflammatory pill for the pain. Before his team's homecoming game against Sickles on Oct. 15, he asked a teammate for an over-the-counter pain medication. The mixture of the two medicines initiated the drug reaction. Though his condition worsened during the game, he continued to play.

"My eyes got really red," Zach said. "I played but I didn't know how sick I was."

Francis knew something was wrong when Zach said he wanted to go straight home after the game. He was supposed to be on the sophomore homecoming court that night. Initially, Francis thought it was food allergies so she gave him Benadryl.

The following morning, Zach's body was sore. His throat was swollen and he had trouble breathing. Natasha took him directly to the emergency room at Brandon Regional Hospital. He said he felt like his skin was burning and almost instantly, his body was covered with hives. The small red marks quickly grew into blisters that covered his entire body, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. They even began to form inside his mouth and throat.

Outside of Zach's room at the hospital, Francis was trying with all her might to hold it together.

"It was three in the morning and I couldn't stop bawling," she said. "The nurse said 'it's going to be OK.' I had to step out so he didn't see me cry."

"It was real scary," Zach said. "Everyone around me was crying and panicking."

Zach was transferred to St. Joseph's Children's Hospital, where a nurse from the burn unit identified his condition. Hooper was diagnosed with Stevens-Johnson Syndrome and toxic epidermal necrolysis, a deadly skin disease caused by an allergic drug reaction. According to the Stevens-Johnson Syndrome Foundation, drug reaction is the fourth-leading cause of the death in the U.S.

Days later, he was moved to Tampa General Hospital, where he would spend nearly three weeks in the intensive care unit. Though doctors immediately began treatment, his condition worsened. His fingernails and toenails fell off and his skin eroded. The disease also causes the mucous membranes to become inflamed, which caused his lips to bleed. Severe conjunctivitis caused inflammation in his eyes.

While lying in a hospital bed, Zach thought it was the end.

"It crossed my mind," he said. "I didn't think this was how it would happen."

"Seeing him deteriorate before my eyes was the hardest thing," Anthony said.

Four years ago on her 39th birthday, Francis was told she had breast cancer. She underwent surgery to remove the cancerous tumor and her doctors said they were able to catch it in time.

As a breast cancer survivor, she knew how Zach felt. She also knew there was hope.

Anthony, who had witnessed tragedy time and time again as a member of Hillsborough County's Fire and Rescue Department, wouldn't accept his son's demise.

Teammates and coaches visited Zach at the hospital and hung his jersey in his room. Back at Durant, the players put No. 5 on their helmets and during a prep rally, the team told the student body it was going to win for Zachary.

"It made him happy when they came to see him," Francis said. "He wanted them to be there."

Eventually, Zach's skin began to heal and little by little, he started walking around the hospital. He was able to eat more solid foods and his finger and toenails grew back. He was cracking jokes and making people smile. He was his old self again.

"It was a matter of praying to God," Francis said.

Zach's left eye is still slightly puffy, but fortunately, he retained 20/20 vision. The syndrome can leave some partially or completely blind. The spots where the blisters covered his body are still visible. He returned to school in January.

In 1996, Jean McCawley created the Stevens-Johnson Syndrome Foundation after her daughter Julie, who was turning 1, was diagnosed with SJS in 1994. Julie's eyesight was significantly damaged as a result, but she survived. Jean said finding research on the disease was almost nonexistent and she vowed to help spread awareness so other families could learn the warning signs and how it was treated.

When she learned of Hooper's case and how he's going to play football this fall, McCawley was amazed.

"He's very fortunate to be able to do what he does," McCawley. "We had people who were so active and are now disabled."

Last year, former NBA center Manute Bol died of complications with SJS.

McCawley said there are no accurate numbers of how many diagnoses and deaths are directly related to SJS.

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In the spring, Zach rejoined the team and scored on a two-point conversion in the team's 25-0 win over Strawberry Crest in the spring jamboree.

"When I saw him run that in, I was like, 'wow, he's back,'" said Anthony, a former assistant coach at Durant. "It was good to see."

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