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Cancer diagnosis pushed Judson University soccer player to train harder

For Jimmy Romano, an unexpected test of endurance, will

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Jimmy Romano, co-captain of one of the most successful men's soccer programs in the history of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, pulled down his T-shirt collar, revealing a distinctive lump in the upper-right corner of his chest.

The striking abnormality on the tanned, fit-looking body of the Judson University student is why he has had to fight so hard to be able to lead his team in the coming school year. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma last fall and has suffered through months of chemotherapy drugs flowing through a port under his skin. As he experienced the typical effects -- nausea, fatigue, loss of appetite -- he never lost his determination to keep up with the sport he loves.

"He'll play in the cold, in the rain, in the dark, in the mud. He plays hard all the time," said Judson coach Steve Burke.

Romano, 21, maintained a full class load in the spring at the Elgin university, working toward his degree in physical education and his goal of becoming a teacher and coach. He coached two club soccer teams. And even during chemo, he returned to the soccer field to rebuild any muscle he had lost and prepare for the season, which starts next month.

It's all for the goal, he said, of leading his team on an NAIA championship run in his senior season -- and for staying healthy mentally while he's recovering physically.

After an all-conference career at Streamwood High School, he played his freshman season at Elgin Community College, where he was recruited by Burke to play at Judson. Romano, who is a defender, started

in all 23 matches of his sophomore season and was a starter as a junior. But the season presented more obstacles than expected. During a chilly and rainy game in August 2008, his teammates noticed the left side of his neck was swollen.

After visiting a doctor, Romano underwent a biopsy. He received the results in October while studying for a test and spent the rest of the day in tears, texting friends and family with the news: He had early-stage Hodgkin's lymphoma and would have to undergo chemotherapy.

"He's so healthy. He trains and he's in excellent shape. Cancer is the last thing you think about," his father, Jim Romano, said. "When you hear about it, your world stops."

Jimmy Romano lobbied doctors to put off chemotherapy so he could finish the season.

"I said, 'I want to play soccer. It's my passion,' " he said.

He returned to help Judson win its conference championship and appear in the NAIA tournament.

Chemotherapy started in December, and Romano started his second semester classes in January. But he took a break from training. Instead, he coached youth teams.

That meant as many as four practices a week, plus games. He admitted there were times when he was drained. "Going through chemo, I always had to keep busy," said Romano, who also worked at Judson soccer camps this summer. "If I got bored or was sitting around doing nothing, I would start thinking about cancer." ... He started training in June and has worked his way back up to the running, lunges and ball drills. Romano played four games in a tournament on July 12 with his Metro League club team Green White. His doctor told him that for now he will not need radiation or chemotherapy, and Romano hopes to keep building his endurance for Judson's first game on Aug. 22.

"He's been a real fighter, really courageous," Wendy Romano said of her son. "He never felt sorry for himself. It was his mission to overcome it."

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