

Erie native, Pitt football star Conner has Hodgkin lymphoma

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Moments after announcing he has been diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma on Friday, University of Pittsburgh running back and former McDowell High School star James Conner defiantly vowed to beat the disease and return to the field.

Conner, 20, begins chemotherapy treatments next week for a disease that is "highly curable," according to a physician appearing with him during a news conference at UPMC Rooney Sports Complex in Pittsburgh.

"I will play football again," Conner said, while sitting alongside his mother, Kelly Patterson, Dr. Stanley Marks and Pitt football coach Pat Narduzzi, with several teammates also in the room.

Conner said he received the diagnosis on Thanksgiving morning.

"When I heard those words -- 'You have cancer' -- I admit I was scared," Conner said. "But after thinking about it for a bit, I realized that fear is a choice. I choose to not fear cancer. I choose to fight it, and I will win."

Marks, deputy director of clinical services for UPMC Cancer Center/University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, said Hodgkin lymphoma carries "between (an) 85 and 95 percent" cure rate.

Marks said Conner will undergo six months of chemotherapy beginning Tuesday, receiving treatments every two weeks. He called Hodgkin lymphoma "one of the more common types of cancer that we see in men his age," adding that he is optimistic Conner will be cured.

Marks said the disease is in Stage 2A, and said a scan performed Thursday night showed two "significant" masses, one in his chest and another in his neck. Marks said the disease had not spread to his bone marrow or

organs.

Conner has missed most of this season, his junior season, with a knee injury. He was the Atlantic Coast Conference Player of the Year and a consensus All-American as a sophomore in 2014.

He said he went to Pitt's medical staff after noticing "something wasn't right" while working out. He said he noticed swelling in his face while lifting weights but said the symptoms were otherwise "kind of painless."

Conner and Marks said they are hopeful he can return to the field for Pitt's 2016 season.

But, Conner added, "it's up to God."

Surrounded by Narduzzi and teammates, Conner acknowledged the support he already has received, saying "I know this city has my back."

Well wishes poured in almost immediately from Pittsburgh, Erie and afar.

Narduzzi, in his first season at Pitt, promised Conner "will not face this challenge alone."

"Cancer started this fight, (and) James is going to finish it," Narduzzi said.

Former Fort LeBoeuf High School star Brian Milne beat Hodgkin lymphoma after receiving the diagnosis in high school. Milne went on to star in football and track and field at Pennsylvania State University and played in the National Football League.

Milne said Friday he has reached out to Conner and plans to visit him in Pittsburgh soon.

Conner's former coach at McDowell said he was "literally sick to my stomach" after hearing the news.

"I'm disgusted," Mark Soboleski said. "But James is one of the toughest kids I've ever coached, and I'm sure he's going to approach this the same way he plays football. He's going to run right over it."

Some of Conner's teammates took to social media to share their belief he will be back.

"If I know anything, I know cancer chose the WRONG guy to mess with," Panthers tight end and Pittsburgh native Scott Orndoff wrote on Twitter.

Former Cathedral Prep quarterback Damion Terry, who played against Conner in high school, tweeted, "Everyone make sure they pray for my brother @JamesConner_. If anyone is strong enough to get through this its you no doubt."

Former WJET-TV sports anchor Mike Gallagher, a close family friend, was with Conner this week and said he is in good spirits.

"I think he went through cycles of fear and uncertainty, but now he's very determined to beat this," Gallagher said, adding that Conner is encouraged by the stories about athletes like Milne and Kansas City Chiefs safety Eric Berry, who was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma in December 2014 and returned less than a year later.

Conner suffered an MCL injury in his right knee in Pitt's season opener against Youngstown State. He was coming off a sophomore season in which he rushed for 1,765 yards and a Pitt-record 26 touchdowns and had become the focus of NFL draft speculation.

He acknowledged Friday he had been torn on whether to return to Pitt next season or turn pro. While those football decisions are on hold for now, he said he has no doubt he will recover fully.

"I know there are so many people in the world who were told by their doctors this week that they also have cancer," Conner said. "I want them to know that together we can -- and will -- beat cancer."

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