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Clemons dealing with niece's terminal illness

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (AP) - Jacksonville Jaguars receiver Toney Clemons grabs his cellphone, flips through a couple of screens and starts reading the stomach-churning details.

Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma is usually found in children between the ages of 5 and 10. Kids typically survive less than a year after being diagnosed. There is no known cause or cure. Treatment calls for months of radiation. And, ultimately, the brain cancer slowly robs motor function, resulting in partial paralysis, loss of voice and sight and an inability to eat and breathe.

Clemons' 3-year-old niece, Maiyanna, was diagnosed with DIPG in May and it's changed his life and his outlook on training camp.

Maiyanna complained about not being able to see and Clemons' sister, Mycah, took her daughter to a hospital in their hometown of Pittsburgh. Tests revealed an inoperable tumor on her brain stem.

She started radiation treatment about a week later, a sudden change for a little girl whose life had been mostly about princesses, fancy dresses and shiny tiaras.

Hours after getting the diagnosis, the 24-year-old Clemons left Jacksonville to return home and be with his family.

"There's been physical changes to her, of course, but her spirit and her intelligence level and her sense of humor, all of that, is just the same, which is amazing to me because I know she knows she's terminal," Clemons said. "She's old enough to understand. One day, she's never sick and the next she's going to the hospital over and over again and getting tubes in her. But it never fazes her.

"To see a little girl go through that kind of stuff, it makes me look at myself and know I can't feel sorry for myself at all."

Maiy, who has switched to a completely organic diet, finished her most recent radiation treatment two weeks ago - and got some positive news afterward. Tests showed a smaller mass and dying cancer cells in the tumor, Clemons said.

But Clemons doesn't want to get too optimistic right now considering the cancer's survival rate.

He prefers to think about everything in the works for Maiy over the next few months. Clemons and his sister are planning to take Maiy to as many amusement parks as they can. They already hit every one in Pennsylvania and have their sights set on

Disney World, Sea World and Universal in nearby Orlando as well as trips to Disneyland, Six Flags and some of the top zoos.

"We want her to be the focus," Clemons said. "Just so she can see it and experience it and have fun. That's what it's all about as a child. Give her all the things that we never had as kids. That's the goal."

Clemons' other goal is to make Jacksonville's roster. He realizes what that would mean financially and for his family, which includes his mother and his four siblings.

But it's far from a sure thing.

Clemons, a seventh-round draft pick by the Steelers in 2012 who played four games for the Jaguars last season, is behind Cecil Shorts III, Justin Blackmon, Mike Brown, rookie Ace Sanders and Mohamed Massaquoi on the depth chart. The 6-foot-2, 210-pound Clemons is the biggest receiver of the group, but he's also facing some high hurdles.

Shorts and Blackmon are the incumbent starters. The team drafted Sanders in April, signed Massaquoi in free agency and has raved about Brown during training camp. So Clemons is a dark horse.

"He's come in to compete now," receivers coach Jerry Sullivan said. "He's had some days he's wished he could have over and he's flashed some good stuff. For him, it's all about growing and staying consistent."

Clemons had two acrobatic catches near the sideline Monday, but followed those with a head-scratching drop Tuesday. Previously, that kind of error would stick with him the rest of practice, causing him some mental angst.

Nowadays, though, he thinks of everything Mai is going through. He even wears a purple band with the phrase "Mai's Miracle" on his right wrist as a constant reminder.

"She's definitely changed my perspective," Clemons said. "She gives me a new energy, a new focus and a new purpose of why I'm playing. If I'm tired or if I'm struggling or if I drop a ball or if I run the wrong route, I think back to seeing her and all types of tubes in her and going through radiation and losing some of her hair.

"I know if she has the strength to fight through that and be positive about it and be happy every single day, then there's nothing out there that should get me down."

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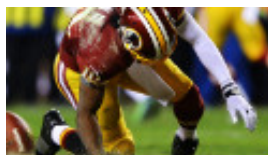
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