



As mother battles cancer, ex-Buff Sheetz at her side

Former All-American in midst of leave of absence from coaching

By Ryan Thorburn

Sunday, December 16, 2007

Shelley Sheetz has a favorite new starting five.

The former Colorado All-American is on a leave of absence from her job as an assistant coach at Pepperdine to be with her mom, Carol, who is in the final stages of her fight with cancer.

The painful medical procedures — unsuccessful brain surgery, 25 radiation treatments, six spinal injections of chemotherapy — are over now.

Carol's condition is terminal.

And the Sheetz family seems to be at peace with the process now that an all-star hospice team — made up of a nurse, a nurse's assistant, a social worker, a message therapist and a chaplain — has been called in.

"This has brought our family together," Shelley said. Her two older brothers, Scott and Mark, her older sister, Susan, and their families all live in Longmont or Broomfield. "We've rallied around mom through this."

Carol, who lives in Johnstown southwest of Greeley, was diagnosed with Primary Central Nervous System Lymphoma in June. Doctors had been unable to remove a tumor on her brain, believed to be malignant at the time, because it was covered by optic nerves and she would have likely been permanently blinded.

After enduring radiation treatments Monday-through-Friday for five weeks, Carol's tumor shrank but did not go away. Cancerous cells spread and were found in Carol's spinal fluid.

By the time October arrived, Carol's chances of beating the disease had disappeared. "The doctors determined that there was nothing more they could do to help my mom," Shelley said. "Her body has been through so much. At that point we were looking at Christmas as our goal to get through."

"Christmas is her time. It's a big holiday for her and her birthday is Dec. 26."

Shelley returned home for the duration of this ordeal on Thanksgiving. She wants to return the favor and be here for her No. 1 fan, whose sacrifices and support throughout her life helped make all her hoop dreams come true.

"She has been my rock," Shelley said. "She has always been there for me, good times and bad."

The days typically begin on a high note for Carol, 54.

"Mornings are the best for her," Shelley said. "She wakes up usually between 6 and 8, and that's when she sees the best. The tumor affects her vision and things get blurry. We get quite a bit done in the morning."

The hospice team helps out three days a week from 9:30 to 11 a.m. Meals-on-Wheels arrives to provide lunch. Carol takes a nap in the afternoon and usually has dinner with the family before going to bed.

"The biggest thing is we're all together," Shelley said. "And it's also about awareness. Maybe my mom's story is able to touch someone out there and they will volunteer. There are people out there who are making a difference."

On Dec. 5, Shelley and Carol together attended the Buffs' breakthrough victory over then-No. 21 Wyoming.

"My mom's wish was to see a CU game. She loves the Buffs," Shelley said. "It was all about my mom that night. It was quite emotional after the game when the players thanked my mom for coming."

Shelley is grateful to the CU women's basketball family, especially assistant athletic director Ceal Barry, her former coach, and current head coach Kathy McConnell-Miller, for making that special evening happen.

"She's very passionate about CU and so is her family. She's a special Buff, there's no doubt about it," McConnell-Miller said of Shelley, who led two of Barry's teams to the NCAA Elite Eight during her brilliant career from 1991-95. "She knows she's always welcome back here with her family. To have her around the program, obviously she's back here for Christmas not under the best of circumstances, but she's always welcome here with open arms."

Shelley has also received a lot of support from Pepperdine head coach Julie Rousseau and the athletic department. Her players wanted to honor Carol, who traveled to attend a number of Waves games the past two seasons, and participated in a two-mile "Light The Night" walk recently to raise money and awareness for the fight against blood cancers.

"I've had nothing but great support," said Shelley, who coaches the Pepperdine guards and is also responsible for coordinating the schedule and travel, as well as scouting opponents and recruiting. "They've known the situation all along and supported me. It has been hard because I've been away from the team, but they understand."

On Jan. 4, CU will host Pepperdine at the Coors Events Center. It will be an emotional game for both programs, whether Carol attends the game in person or in spirit.

"It's going to be hard for a lot of reasons. Coming back home to CU was already going to be emotional enough," Shelley said. "And when my players get off the plane that will be the first time that I've seen them since my leave. So that will be hard. ..."

"I hope my mom will still be here and able to be at that game. That's the new goal. For her to see me coaching my team would be pretty special."



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