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A winning attitude helps former athlete

Berty trains for lifelong struggle with disease

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Blair Berty played volleyball, and she was good at it. Good enough to walk-on at a college program. Good enough to play Division I.

Now, on her good days, the 28-year-old is happy if she walks across the room unassisted.

That is the demoralizing nature of multiple sclerosis, which assaults the nervous system and impairs the impulses sent by the brain to the rest of the body.

The results are unpredictable, ranging from numbness in the limbs to paralysis or loss of vision. For Berty the symptoms have been, at times, devastating.

The Nashvillian uses a walker to move around and counts getting up to make dinner or do laundry as minor victories. Her wavy brown hair is thinning due to the chemotherapy, and there are days when she wakes up too tired to make it in to work.

"It has kind of been an up-and-down path I have been going on," Berty said. "You are going and you think nothing can stop you, but this has stopped my body."

Hard hit

Berty spent her college years on the court. She was Blair Vollmer then and created her own spot on the Austin Peay team by sending then-Coach Cheryl Holt a self-made recruiting tape. Holt liked Vollmer's swing and her quick arm snap, so she invited her to join the squad. In season, she would practice six times a week, more than three hours a day.

"Blair worked extremely hard for not being on scholarship," said Holt, who is now Peay's senior women's administrator. "She loved volleyball, she loved her teammates, and she did the very best she could do."

Off the court, she was just as active. She played intramural softball, was a four-square fiend in impromptu apartment gatherings, lived it up line dancing with friends, and never missed the chance to toss the football with her college sweetheart and eventual husband, Tim.

"We were athletes and we were used to being active so we did all sorts of goofy things to keep ourselves busy," said former Austin Peay tennis player Celeste Husted. "It was fun."

Now, Berty can't imagine such feats.

Three years ago, after a doctor's visit for an ear infection, she started experiencing unexplained numbness in her left side. An MRI confirmed she had lesions on her brain — a positive diagnosis for MS.

As is typical for the disease, symptoms appeared and disappeared, manifesting in degrees and locations. It wasn't long before her body was in decline.

"When I found out (she had MS) it wasn't a big thing, because I couldn't see the consequences," Tim Berty said. "But when it set in I had to be there nonstop. It definitely hit quick."

As the MS seized her, Berty was unable to bend her legs. She quit as an after-school care provider, unable to keep up with the children's activity level.

She spent her one-year wedding anniversary in bed, struck by a temporary paralysis and unable to go to the bathroom without help. Several months later, she started relying on a walker. She was ashamed to take it to an interview for a new job, but found she couldn't move without it.

"That's when I was starting feeling depressed," Berty said. "I felt like doing nothing. It was, 'Oh poor me.' "

Hope for help

But eventually she regained her competitive spirit.

She shows it with every step she takes across the turf at D1 Training Center in Franklin where twice a week she meets with a dozen other MS patients for a free physical training class focused on strengthening and stabilizing the muscles.

"You just have to remind your brain, 'It's OK. You can do this,' " Berty said.

The goal is to re-teach the body to do simple actions like sit and walk, while maintaining an activity level that doctors say is non-negotiable when it comes to counteracting the disease.

"Blair has always been a hard worker," said Annie Glieber, a college teammate who now coaches volleyball at Carroll University in Wisconsin. "She has always been a positive role model and she never complains.

"To watch your friend go through something like this is hard, but she has such a positive attitude about it, which is great because so many people let MS ruin their life. She is inspirational."

And she is improving. In a month, Berty enhanced her strength and stability enough to walk in her home unassisted.

"We have come to understand that exercise for anyone with a chronic illness is very important," said Dr. Harold Moses, an MS specialist at the Department of Neurology at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. "It doesn't surprise me to hear they have more mobility, more strength, and more endurance. That's encouraging."

There are still times when Berty glances at the other athletes who work out at D1, pushing themselves past exhaustion, overexerting through exercise to become faster and stronger.

It is a painful reminder of her past, but also inspiring.

"I come in here and I see all these great athletes, and I am like, 'I should be out there. I used to be able to do that,' " Berty said. "It's hard, but it kind of motivates me, too. I will be able to do that again. Maybe not to that extent, but the fact that I have gotten so much better. They are great athletes and my goal is to go and join them."