

STAYING RELENTLESS

By Maya Ortiz

On the first day of school Eric Coovert lifted his fist to show his history classes the size of the tumor that was found in his colon in June. Within two weeks of the discovery, doctors removed Coovert's entire colon. He joked with the kids about his wife bedazzling his ostomy bag he affectionately named Poseidon.

To his returning students, the 32-year-old came across positive and straightforward as he told them about his cancer. He handled it all with the glass half-full mindset the students had grown to love the previous year.

After weeks of hearing rumors and seeing a GoFundMe page online, students walked out of class that first day hesitantly confident Coovert had everything under control.

But Coovert felt totally out of control. When the classroom was finally empty, he went to his desk and cried.

Coovert's health issues started 20 years earlier.

At age 13, Coovert was diagnosed with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). The diagnosis led to the development of arthritis, which forced him to quit varsity sports in high school. He also had to adapt to a lactose intolerant diet.

In March 2023, Coovert's stomach started making more noise than usual. Occasionally, students could hear it rumble during tests.

Soon after, he started to see blood in his stool.

On June 4, Coovert went in for his third colonoscopy expecting to hear his IBD had flared up and he would need steroids.

Instead he and his wife were told he had a nine and a half centimeter tumor in his colon and it was possibly cancerous.

The couple was in denial.

He and his wife, Emily Bohn Coovert, were expecting their first child in September. And just a few months earlier, Coovert had been named Kingwood Park's Teacher of the Year. Life was supposed to be good for the Coovert family.

"She was constantly crying," Coovert said of his wife. "Hearing that her own husband, who is 32 years of age, has cancer, was something that none of us were prepared for."

FIRST DAY NEWS.

Coach Eric Coovert holds up a fist on the first day of school to show his students the approximate size of the cancerous tumor found in his colon in June. He had his colon removed two weeks later and started chemotherapy in August. Even during class on the first day of school, the chemo near his right hip was pumping through a port in his chest. Photo by Maya Ortiz.

The diagnosis didn't come as a complete shock to Coovert.

When diagnosed with IBD as a teen, doctors warned him there was a chance he would develop cancer. He was warned, but nothing prepared him for the reality and severity of the cancer.

His stomach pain increased during summer school resulting in two trips to the emergency room

Coovert told his wife he was in "mild discomfort." In reality, doctors told him his colon was swallowing itself.

On June 23, Coovert underwent surgery to remove his colon. He now lives with an ostomy bag, a pouch used to collect urine and stool, to forego the necessity of his colon.

The tumor, which had already grown

to 11 centimeters, was sent to the University of Miami, Memorial Hermann and M.D. Anderson for testing.

A month later, the results came back.

Doctors diagnosed Coovert with plasmablastic lymphoma, a rare and aggressive cancer.

On a day his wife was at a prenatal appointment for their baby, Coovert received the call from his doctors. He had already Googled details of the lymphoma and knew the news was not good. "Dr. Google," as he refers to it, told him there is only a 25 percent survival rate.

Alone with his dog, Coovert let the weight of that news sink in and he cried.

"That was the day it hit me the hard-

est," Coovert said. "I realized there's a chance that I might not be able to see my daughter grow up. I don't care what people say, I cried."

As the school year neared, Coovert created a plan.

He made arrangements with head football coach Clayton Maple to continue his role as an assistant coach. He made arrangements with social studies instructional coach Alan Prather regarding his classes.

Eventually, he got some good news. On Aug. 7, he learned the cancer was not in his bone marrow, which meant it was either late Stage 1 or early Stage 2 lymphoma.

Doctors told him recent research had made Coovert's cancer highly treatable. They said if they can get the cancer into remission there was a high chance it would never return.

To combat the aggressiveness of the cancer, Coovert started the intense chemo treatment EPOCH on Aug. 7.

EPOCH is five different chemo treatments at the same time on a 21-day

cycle. During the first five days of the cycle, Coovert receives chemo. In addition, doctors added a sixth chemo through his spine as a preventative measure.

After the first five days, there are 14 days of recovery where he only sees the doctor for blood work.

On his first day of chemo, he showed up to football practice with the chemo pumping through a port. On the second day, Coovert showed up to the first day of school to meet his students.

"The thing that I really wanted the most and that gives me happiness, besides my family, is teaching," Coovert said. "I told the doctor, 'I'm going back. I want to teach.'"

Returning to work meant sharing his story, though.

His players were the first ones in the student body to know.

"Seeing tears in their eyes after I told them [was hard]," Coovert said. "But then afterwards every single one of them came over and gave me a hug. And I was crying by the end."

On the night of the first football game this season, Maple had his players line up to show Coovert the back of their helmets.

On their helmets was a sticker of a lime green ribbon, representing their support for their coach's battle against lymphoma.

The team's motto this season is "stay relentless." Now, the motto is Coovert's.

For the team, the "stay relentless" mindset represented a hunger they longed to maintain.

For Coovert, the relentless mindset is getting him through

six different chemo treatments and helping him be there for his recovering wife and his baby who was born Aug. 23. He is also trying to keep up with and help his students and players every chance he gets.

"Sometimes people talk about all these things that they are, that they want to be," Maple said. "But he was actually showing

it like, 'Hey, as long as I'm able to get out here and do my job, I'm going to do it.'"

Coovert knew no other way.

He learned his work ethic from his father, who he said is his hero. When he first told his parents, his mother cried and his father was in total shock. His in-laws could not believe it either.



INSPIRATION AWARD. Eric Coovert does an interview on the red carpet of the Houston Sports Awards on Jan. 30. He was honored as the Inspiration Award Winner. After winning the award, Coovert returned to the hospital for a stem cell transplant. "With lymphoma, there's always a worry that some of the cancer cells, not lymph nodes, but cancer cells themselves are still floating around in my system," Coovert said. "So the thought process is they're going to give me more chemo, which is higher dosage to completely wipe my whole entire system – all my red, white blood cells, all that stuff – and then reinject stem cells that they've already collected whenever I was in remission." Photo by Maya Ortiz.

"They kept on saying, 'It's not fair. It's not fair,'" Coovert remembered. "Why on earth does one of the nicest people they know have something so terrible?"

As they grappled with the idea, they prepared to help.

This was not Emily Coovert's first time taking on a caretaker role. She originally moved from New York to Houston to care for her mom who was battling Stage 4 ovarian cancer.

His wife, due to her experience helping her mother beat cancer twice, understood the highs and lows of what he was going through. So did her mom.

Coovert's mother-in-law decorated his baby's nursery. His sister-in-law flew in from Miami to make schedules for his medicine and prepare meals.

In addition, Kingwood Park football coaches pushed to start a GoFundMe to help offset the costs of treatment.

He said no a dozen times and even got upset with some of them.

"I've never asked for anything from

anyone," Coovert said. "I've always been that person. I got this from my dad that you work your tail off to make this world better by helping out other people, but you don't ask for help."

It is a lesson that has been hard to unlearn.

The most help arguably came in his classroom.

Because of the toll the chemo was taking, Coovert couldn't teach like he had planned. He knew he would miss whole weeks recovering from his treatments, and even on days when he would show up, teaching for six hours was just not feasible.

Prather stepped in to take on a co-teacher role with Coovert.

"He wants to teach. He wants to be active. He wants to work," Prather said. "We're trying to empower him, but also give him flexibility."

Senior Dana Herrera signed up for AP European History because of the impact Coovert had on her during Dual Credit U.S. History as a junior. She was one of many who voted for him as teacher of the year last spring.

"He's one of the most passionate teachers I've ever met," Herrera said. "He makes me want to be him when

I'm older."

Prather has supported Coovert in his mission to provide his students the support they need this year. The community has helped provide meals for his family. Money has been raised at school and through the GoFundMe he eventually let coaches create.

If he could, Coovert said he would give 100,000 shoutouts.

He worries about how to properly thank all those who have given him so much.

The answer they tell him is to win. Beat cancer.

That may be one major reason the video of him talking to the football team in the locker room on Oct. 13 went viral. That night, Coovert stood in front of his players and talked about how their grit and determination on and off the football field inspired him.

"You guys are my family. Your inspiration has made me stay relentless in my battle," he shouted. "I got a call from my doctor last night that I've gone 1-0 against cancer."

As the room erupted into cheers, it was clear that was the most anticipated victory of the season.