

Knights' title brings cheer to ailing coach

Story by Mike Latona
Photos by Andrea Dixon

Watching the action from his team's dugout, the man wearing uniform No. 55 struck a classic baseball coach's pose: left hand on the railing, right hand on his hip, furiously chomping on a stick of gum. Every so often, he shouted encouragement or instruction to a player.

Upon closer observation, it was apparent that this 41-year-old coach was completely bald. When he got up from a stool and shuffled forward a few inches, he did so with great difficulty. He wore a splint on his left arm, injured in a seizure he had recently suffered due to the effects of lung cancer.

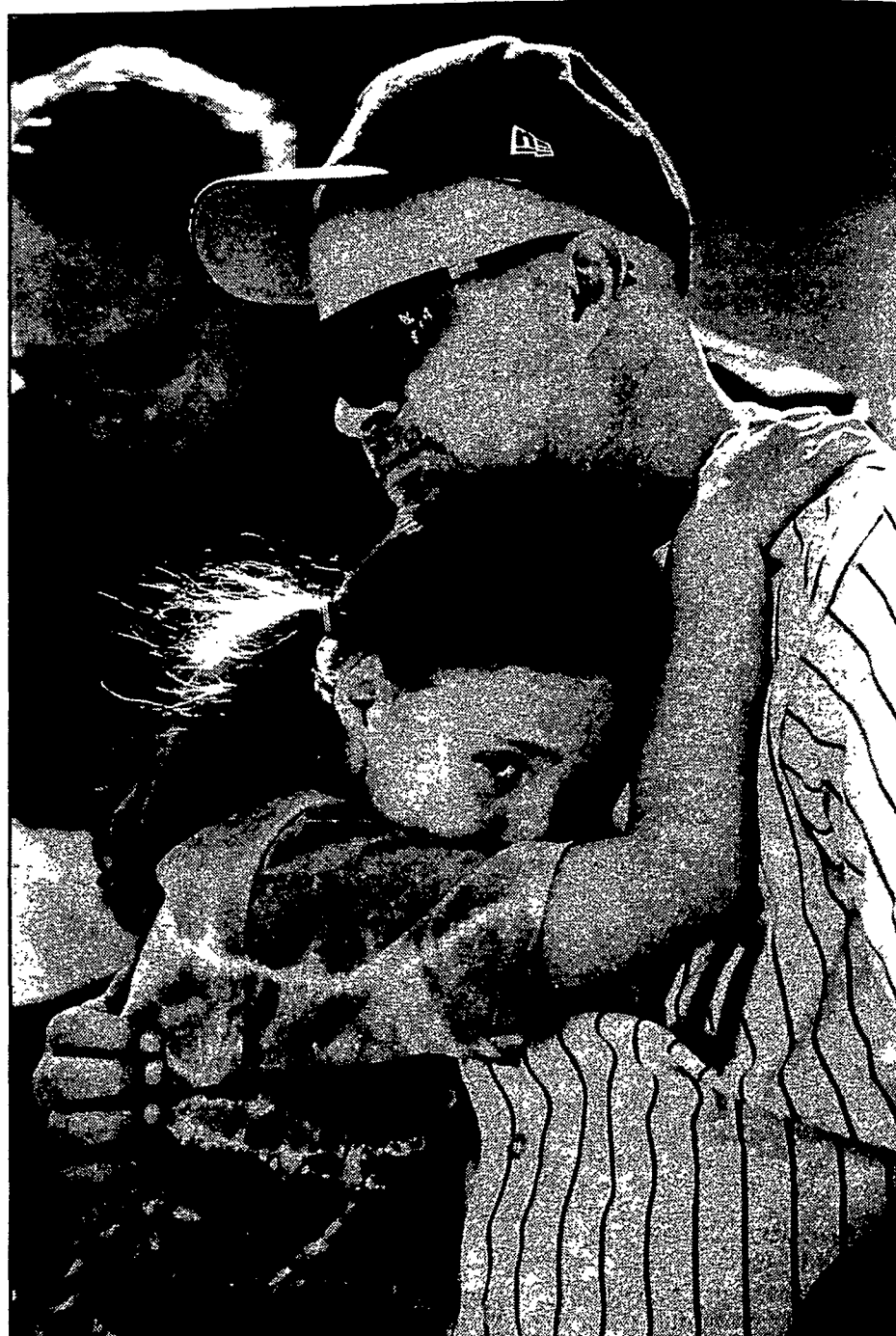
As McQuaid Jesuit High School's baseball team recorded the final out against Irondequoit, clinching a 3-1 win for the Section 5 Class A title, No. 55 remained near

the dugout as his players rushed the field to celebrate. Then the team flocked to him with congratulations. Family members and friends, and even umpires and opposing players, followed suit.

Mike Fennell has battled for his life these last few months. Even if the Knights had lost the title game on May 31, their head coach would have merited praise just for showing up at Rochester's Frontier Field.

As it turned out, the Knights prevailed, and Fennell had his first Section 5 title in 10 years as the Knights' head coach. It was also his 200th career victory, leaving Fennell with an ear-to-ear grin as he basked in the attention of media and well-wishers after the game.

"Obviously, this has been a tough year," Fennell said. "Physically, emotionally ... (but) I know I'm still part of the program. I hope I added



McQuaid baseball coach Mike Fennell receives a hug from his daughter Kaelen, 7, after McQuaid's victory over Irondequoit at Frontier Field, Rochester, May 31.



Coach Fennell (center) raises the Section 5 Class A championship trophy with the help of his team.

something to the game today."

Two of his McQuaid players said that Fennell added quite a bit with his presence.

"It's given everyone that extra drive," said catcher Paul Knittle.

"It was a real inspiration. Every time we were in doubt, we'd look over at him," added Mike Ryan, the winning pitcher.

The Knights' success has been a welcome distraction from the pain the coach had endured since being diagnosed with non-smoker's lung cancer last November. Though he has closely monitored the team's progress, Fennell became so weak from chemotherapy and other treatments that he missed most of this season's games and practices.

Yet Fennell's positive spirit has played a big role in his fight against cancer, said Patti Messina, a clinical research nurse who has worked closely with Fennell during his illness.

"I think it's because Mike is so charismatic. He just has this aura about him. I've been doing oncology for almost 20 years, and Mike is definitely one of the most special people I've ever met," said Messina, from the University of Rochester's James P. Wilmot Cancer Center.

McQuaid's players, at the suggestion of Knittle and Ryan, began the season by shaving their heads as a show of unity for their coach, who had lost his hair from the chemotherapy.

Ryan noted that assistant coach Butch Kelsey has filled in admirably in Fennell's place. In fact, Section 5's Class A Coach of the Year honor — normally given to an individual — was awarded to the McQuaid coaching staff.

Even with this tough situation, the

Knights have focused so well that they've compiled one of the most dominant seasons ever by a Rochester-area high school baseball team.

"We left Coach Fennell and the whole situation off the field," Ryan said.

The Knights, ranked No. 1 in the state and 25th in the country, preserved their perfect season record by knocking off Irondequoit. They went on to defeat Greece Athena and North Tonawanda — with Fennell again in attendance at both games — to reach the state Final Four set for June 9 in Utica. McQuaid heads into the state semifinals with a 27-0 record.

Fennell said he couldn't be prouder of his team for all it's done, saying they're the ones who deserve the credit.

"We have some very talented, very dedicated players," he said. When it was mentioned that Fennell's team had dedicated the season to him, he replied, "That's great — but I want them to do it for themselves."

Even so, the biggest cheers on May 31 were reserved for Fennell as he walked to home plate — with two players supporting him — to receive the Section 5 championship trophy.

"I'm physically whopped. I should have had a walker or wheelchair, but I'm not using my wheelchair on a baseball field," Fennell said with a laugh.

In honor of Fennell, Messina threw out a ceremonial first pitch before the sectional title game against Irondequoit. The Knights' championship run, she noted, seems to have given their coach a renewed strength.

"He's still in the fight for his survival, but he's doing remarkably well. His spirit is tremendous," Messina said.



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