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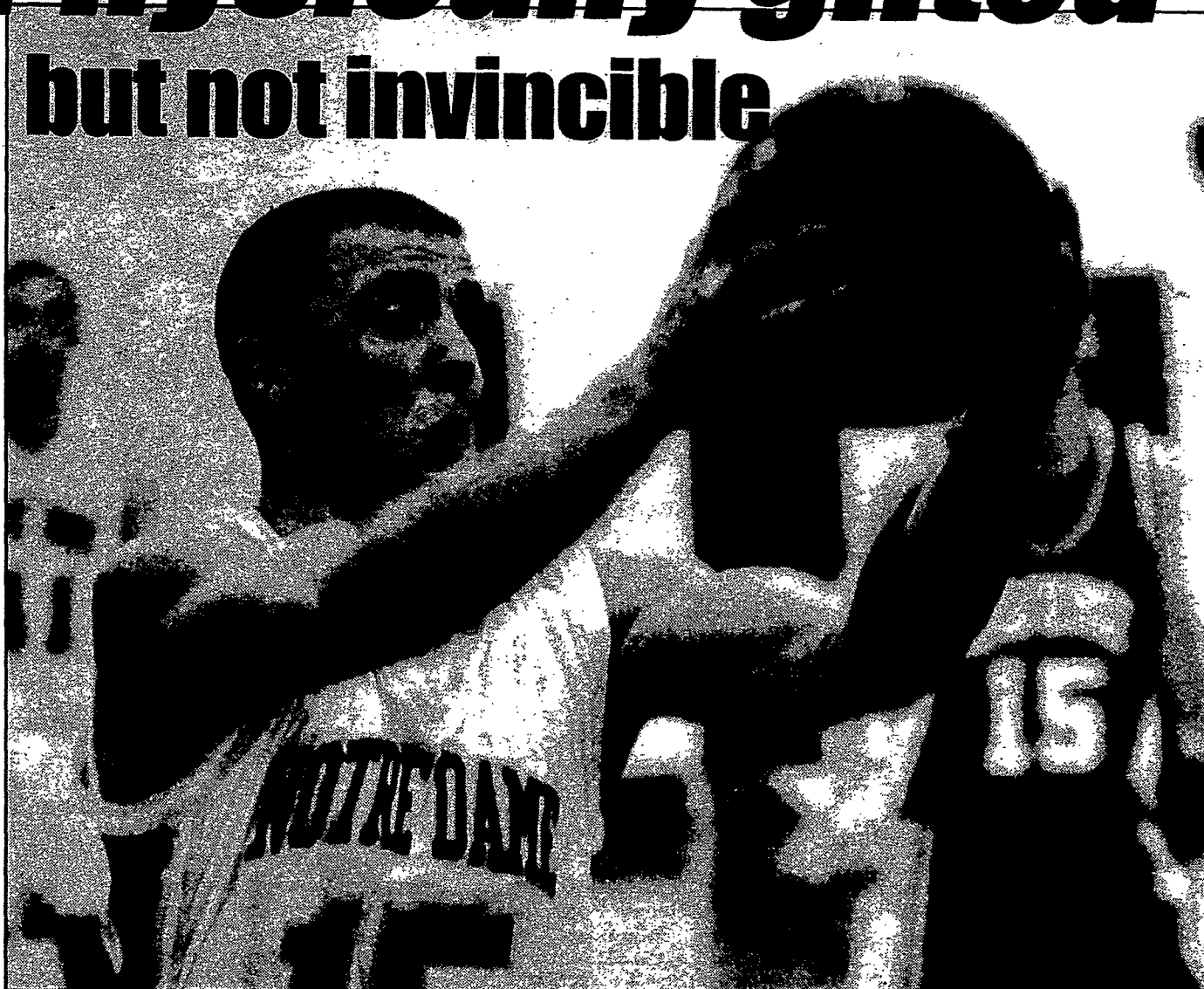
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ON the MOVE

Story by
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Photos by
Andrea Dixon

Physically gifted but not invincible



Notre Dame's Pat Manuel intercepts a pass from a Waverly player during a basketball game Jan. 4 in Elmira. Pat is the winner of the Ernie Davis award for football.

Pat Manuel grew up idolizing Joel Stephens, a multi-sport star at Elmira Notre Dame High School in the mid-1990s who went on to play professional baseball.

"When I was a kid, I had a Joel Stephens haircut," recalled Pat, 17. "I still have pictures in my room that he autographed when I was in sixth-grade CYO."

By the time Pat joined Notre Dame's varsity football team as a freshman, in 1998, his idol was enduring the ravages of colon cancer. Stephens died that fall at the age of 22.

Three years ago Pat became friends with Josh Palmer, a former football standout at Southside High School and fellow parishioner at Our Lady of Lourdes in Elmira. At the time, Palmer's weight had dropped from 180 to below 115 due to Hodgkin's disease. Pat maintains a close friendship with Palmer, 22, a senior at Mansfield University and whose cancer is in remission.

On Dec. 9, Pat received the 39th annual Ernie Davis Memorial Award, named for the former Elmira Free Academy and Syracuse University football star who died of leukemia in 1963 at age 23.

Three supreme athletes, just like Pat. All stricken by cancer at a young age. Two died in their early 20s.

That's enough to keep a young man humble — even when that young man is considered the best football player in Elmira and also excels at basketball and lacrosse.

"It's truly a reality check. If you score touchdowns or shoot baskets, you can think you're invincible," Pat said. "But you're just as susceptible. It really makes you step back and think about what's important in your life."

Pat was voted ahead of 32 of the Elmira area's best football players in winning the Ernie Davis Award. He said he's honored to have this link with the Elmira legend — not because of Ernie Davis the 1961 Heisman Trophy-winning running back, but because of Ernie Davis the person. Davis was renowned for his pleasant disposition, as well as the courage he displayed during his fatal illness. More than 10,000 people paid their respects at Davis' funeral in 1963, and the following year a junior-high school in Elmira was named after him — Ernie Davis Middle School.

"You see (an ESPN) SportsCenter show and they'll tell how great a football player he was. But you hear stories from people here in Elmira, and they'll tell you how great a person he was.

That's more important than any touchdown he scored," Pat said.

The Ernie Davis Award is co-sponsored by the Twin Tiers Sports Boosters and Elmira Star-Gazette newspaper, which have also begun a Joel Stephens Award to denote outstanding players outside the metro Elmira area.

In addition to the Davis award, Pat was named to the All-State third team. He was Notre Dame's starting quarterback for three years, leading the Crusaders to a cumulative record of 22-7, including 6-3 this past fall. He set a career record for touchdown passes with 42. In basketball, Pat — who stands 5-foot-10-inches and weighs 185 pounds — is the starting point guard and had helped the Crusader varsity to an 8-3 mark through last week.



One adult who's been a big factor in his life is Mike D'Aloisio, his current basketball coach who was also ND's veteran football coach before stepping down after the 2000 season.

"He's been one of my best friends; his door is always open. There's so many lives he's turned around, kids who had strayed off the path," Pat said. "The kids are his life."

Josh Palmer remains a key inspiration as well. He's begun a fund to assist people who, like him, have been affected by cancer.

Similarly, Pat said he'd like to use his fame as an athlete "as a vehicle to help others."

Pat, the son of Bo and Chris Manuel, is a longtime altar server at Our Lady of Lourdes and was presented with a diocesan Hands of Christ award this past fall. An 89-average student, he hopes to attend the University of Rochester in 2002-03, where he would like to major in business and continue playing football.

Though he's looking forward to being on his own, Pat said he plans to avoid getting caught up in the party atmosphere.

"In college you're going to have a full plate, and you need to make good choices. You're going to get run over if you don't," he stated.

Ernie Davis, Joel Stephens and Josh Palmer will also play a part in this decision-making. Knowing how their lives were affected by illnesses, Pat said he owes it to himself to fulfill his potential.

"Seeing (them), I don't see how anybody couldn't have a good work ethic," he said. "You're selfish if you don't."