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JMU football team creates friendship with fan with leukemia

Catie Harper | The Breeze Sep 19, 2019



Cooper met with former JMU standout Raven Greene last month in Baltimore.

Courtesy of Kristy Trueblood

In August 2018, Cooper Trueblood was preparing for his first day of kindergarten.

But then, his legs started to hurt, and he was asking to be carried up the stairs. His sister, Evyn, had only been born three-and-a-half weeks earlier, so Cooper's parents and JMU alumni, Kristy and Jason, assumed he wanted attention.

When the five-year-old went to the doctor for his wellness check, the Truebloods were told everything was fine. But Kristy had a feeling that it wasn't.



A trip to the park three days later confirmed Kristy's suspicions. Cooper couldn't run.

"I called the doctor, and I said, 'You know, I'm not gonna try to tell you how to do your job, but there's something wrong with my kid, and I want a blood panel pulled on them,'" Kristy said. "They pulled a blood panel, and we were at Hopkins being diagnosed that day."

Suddenly, a newborn wasn't the only adjustment for the family. At 1 a.m. in the hospital room, as Kristy was trying to feed Evyn, the nurses delivered the news — Cooper had acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

Next came a 30-day, steroid-heavy regime with chemotherapy to fight the disease. His parents couldn't put a number on how many rounds of chemo Cooper endured during that first month, but through it all, they said he showed maturity.

"He's definitely a normal, happy six-year-old now in terms of when he's at home," Jason said. "He loves Legos, he loves playing outside, he loves swimming ... but when you put him in that framework ... he just knows that he's got a day in front of him and he's got to get through it."

During Cooper's treatments, the Truebloods didn't look too far ahead. Their plan revolved around getting through the next visit with the doctors or the next operation. As the process progressed, they took the schedule one day at a time, counting down the days to the end of each part of his treatment. Throughout it all, Cooper was the one helping his parents.

"You honestly rely on the strength of your kid," Kristy said. "The kids carry the parents through those situations."

Prior to Cooper's diagnosis, the Trueblood family had plans to make the trip from Maryland to Harrisonburg for a JMU football game, but Cooper's diagnosis held them back because it was dangerous to have him around so many people. With Kristy ('08) and Jason ('07) being JMU alumni, Cooper's love for JMU football started early because of it.

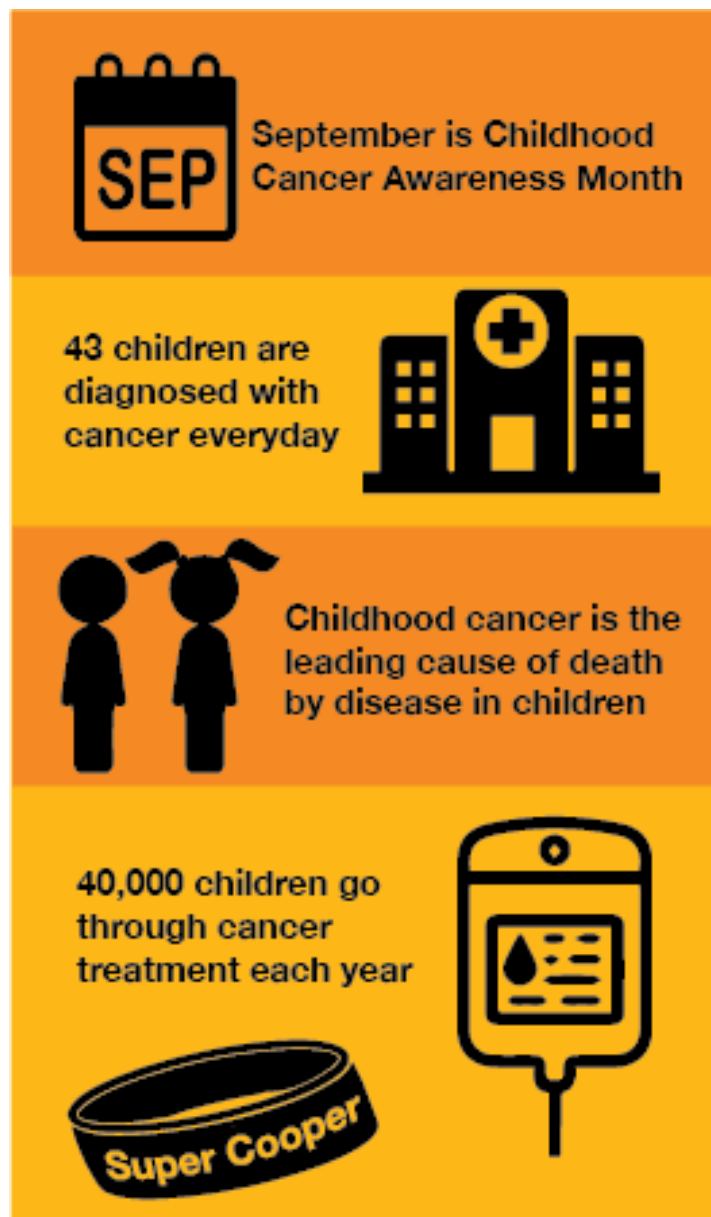
Unable to be at Bridgeforth, Kristy decided to take a chance. She reached out to former JMU football head coach Mike Houston, asking if he'd have the team sign a shirt she sent him. Houston took it one step further.

Soon after, Cooper received a package in the mail. Its contents ranged from a poster and mini helmet signed by the entire team to videos of the players rooting for Cooper.

Kristy's mom — who lives in nearby Waynesboro — wanted to return the favor.

"My mom made like 350 brownies and sent them to the team," Kristy said. "We sent the whole team 'Super Cooper' bracelets — like the LIVESTRONG bracelets — and the team kind of wore them through the year."

Redshirt senior linebacker Dimitri Holloway was one of the many JMU football players who reached out to the Truebloods to check on Cooper. Holloway says he still wears his "Super Cooper" bracelet every day.



Taylor Sarlo | The Breeze

"Little things like that, it's a motivation for me, just knowing that everybody can't always do the things that you come out here and [do]," Holloway said. "It's just one thing I put in the back of my mind: I'm playing for Super Hero Cooper."

Kristy and Jason showed pictures of all the gifts Cooper received from the Dukes to his oncologist. When they said Cooper had to miss a game, his oncologist responded with a simple "take him."

Kristy and Jason followed the doctor's orders.



Cooper and his family had the chance to attend JMU's game against Rhode Island last season.

Courtesy of Kristy Trueblood

After making sure Cooper was in a good place to travel to Harrisonburg and that there'd be a helicopter on standby if he needed to be transported to Johns Hopkins, Jason and Kristy got their family in the car and made the trip to JMU for its game against Rhode Island last November.

"It was kind of at the right point in his treatment, too," Jason said. "They were not super concerned about him ... His treatments were a little bit more spread out ... he was kind of in this point where it was okay for him to go."

At the game, Houston gave Cooper a game-worn jersey — No. 5 to match his age. The jersey was formerly JMU standout Raven Greene's, who had worn it the year prior during his senior season.

It was here that Cooper's love for Greene started.

Greene, who now plays for the Green Bay Packers, heard about Cooper's story and wanted to make sure he had some updated gear to wear, too. The NFL safety sent a care package to Cooper containing his Packers jersey, a mini helmet and the infamous Green Bay Packers' —

cheesehead. The gifts, his parents said, made him “a Packers fan for life.”

Not long after Cooper received the gifts, he lost his hair. Kristy recalled Cooper telling her he was having a hard time and wanted to feel strong.

Cooper picked a shirt that made him feel just that way — his No. 36 Raven Greene jersey.

During Cooper’s treatment, his family was selective when it came to what friends could come over and often needed to make sure whoever came had a flu shot. One friend who was allowed to visit was his best friend Sebastian, who’s originally from Wisconsin.

When Sebastian arrived at Cooper’s house, Cooper was eager to show him all of his new Green Bay Packers gear. Unbeknownst to Sebastian, Cooper’s favorite player wasn’t star quarterback Aaron Rodgers.

“His friend Sebastian says, ‘Oh, you really like Aaron Rodgers?’” Kristy recalled. “And Cooper says, ‘I don’t know who this Aaron Rodgers guy is ... I like Raven Greene.’”

At 24 years old and only a second-year pro, it isn’t often Greene gets put ahead of players like Rodgers who have a Super Bowl, two league MVPs and seven Pro Bowl selections to their name. But, to Cooper, Greene is the star.

“The smile was on my face the entire time,” Greene said, referring to that story. “I couldn’t hold it back. I couldn’t stop looking at him, and just, I mean, realizing how much he admired me, it really meant the world, and I’m glad that I got a friend in him.”



Cooper wore his Raven Greene jersey to help him feel strong after he lost his hair in January.

Courtesy of Kristy Trueblood

The two friends met in person last month when Greene was in Baltimore with the Packers for a preseason meeting with the Ravens. The Trueblood family let Greene know they were going to try and get Cooper to M&T Bank Stadium for the contest.

It was the night before the Packers' game when the duo came face-to-face for the first time. The Truebloods, along with Greene and his dad, who was in town to watch his son play, gathered at a local restaurant for dinner.

With his Packers jersey on his back and his JMU No. 5 jersey ready for a signature from its previous owner, Cooper arrived at dinner with gifts of his own for his NFL friend — a homemade version of the Superman logo that featured an "R" in the center for Raven, along with "cookies for the Packers."

"I can't even figure how many cookies it was in this huge Tupperware container," Greene said. "[He had] a picture that he had handcrafted himself ... Super Raven, and it was all the Packers colors. I mean, it just really all hit me like a ton of bricks."

The group hung out for two hours. Cooper asked questions ranging from who Greene's best friend on the Packers was to where he liked to play the most. To Kristy and Jason, the interactions between the pair didn't seem like a six-year-old meeting an NFL player for the first time.

Even with a game the next day, Greene didn't rush the visit, only leaving when he had to get back to the team hotel for that night's meetings.



Cooper received a care package from former JMU player Raven Greene with gear from the Green Bay Packers — where Greene currently plays.

Courtesy of Kristy Trueblood

filled with beanies waiting for him.

“Dukes take care of each other,” Kristy said. “It’s such a good community.”

It’s been more than a month since the meeting. Cooper is now in first grade and got to experience his true first day of school at the end of August after not getting to go on his first day of kindergarten last year. Greene just finished Week 2 of his season and is currently on

“He was just asking him all of these normal six-year-old questions that you just wouldn’t think to ask somebody like that,” Jason said. “Raven was the same way. I mean, he just showed up and gave Cooper a hug ... Like, Raven [is] in there coloring with Cooper on his little menu while they’re just kind of having an old conversation like two old friends would.”

As JMU alumni, what Greene did for Kristy and Jason’s son over the past several months doesn’t surprise them. Since sharing their story on the JMU Nation Facebook page following JMU’s loss to Elon last season, there’s been an army behind the Trueblood family.

Not long after the initial post, people from across the JMU community reached out to the family. The mom of a current student in “Love Your Melon” contacted Kristy and Jason, and when Cooper made it to the game last season, there was a care package



Cooper with his Raven Greene Packers jersey last month at the game.

injured reserve.

Courtesy of Kristy Trueblood

But even with separate schedules and over 800 miles between the two, their friendship is still strong.

Greene called Cooper last week to talk about how his first week of school went and check up on how he was doing. As for Cooper, he's at a stage in his treatment where, if someone were to look at him, they wouldn't realize he's currently a cancer patient, his parents said.

Cooper will be in treatment for another two years. The first nine months were active treatment, where "he had four phases where each chemotherapy regimen was very different," Kristy said. Cooper is through that phase now, and for the next two years, he'll be in a maintenance stage — something Kristy describes as a "holding pattern." He receives at-home chemo every day, has blood checks at the hospital once a month and will have spinal and IV chemo every three months.

Throughout the last year, numerous members of the JMU football family like Ben DiNucci, Riley Stapleton, Trai Sharp and Jimmy Moreland have made sure Cooper knows they're behind him, highlighting who they are away from the game.

And, for those players who've reached out to the family, Kristy left them a simple message.

"What you do on the field matters," Kristy said. "But oftentimes, it's what you do off the field that matters most."

Contact Catie Harper at breezesports@gmail.com. For more sports coverage, follow the sports desk on Twitter @TheBreezeSports.

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FEATURED

Daka and Carter provide defensive boost for JMU football

Catie Harper | The Breeze Dec 5, 2019



John Daka has thrived over his last two seasons, becoming one of the top players in the country.

Tristan Lorei | The Breeze

Sports and dynamic duos are almost synonymous.

There have been the ones who have graced the fields and courts for all to witness, like Serena and Venus Williams, and Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. There have also been the ones — while fictional — who have been ingrained in the memories of sports fans through TV shows and movies, like Benny and Smalls.

In recent years, JMU football has added its own dynamic duo to the college football history book. Ron'Dell Carter and John Daka have come together as a vital pairing on the defensive front, making even some of the best quarterbacks in college football quiver.



"The looks on their faces sometimes is priceless," Carter said.

A quarterback's sheer discomfort fending off the duo was on full display during the Dukes' trip south to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Against the Mocs, Carter and Daka combined for nine tackles, four tackles for loss and a sack.

There was constant pressure on Chattanooga senior quarterback Nick Tiano. With players coming from every direction, Tiano and the offense tried their best to crack the JMU defense. And for a time, they found success, sitting tied at the end of the first quarter.

But then, Carter and Daka took control.

Carter remembers watching the Mocs line up, knowing which play was coming. The redshirt senior defensive lineman instantly called to his defensive counterparts, "Hey, the 'naked' is coming."

And sure enough, it was. It didn't take long after the snap for Tiano to be greeted in the backfield by Carter.

"Kid you not, the play came right to me, I hit him," Carter said. "And he was just like, 'Bruh, how'd you know that play was coming?'"

The simple answer is film. Carter and Daka, along with their teammates, study their opponents each week in order to get ready for the upcoming game.

With a dedication to studying the game and learning the ins and outs of their opponents, Carter and Daka have helped create a lethal defensive line with teammates like junior defensive lineman Mike Greene and redshirt junior defensive lineman Adeeb Atariwa. Between Carter and Daka, they've had 43 TFLs, 22 sacks and 18 quarterback hits this season alone, helping to earn high praise from those who walk the opposite sideline. Daka and Carter both sit within the top-10 in the nation this season for TFLs.

"This is not one of the better defenses in the league or in the country [this season]," Towson head coach Rob Ambrose said following his team's loss to JMU. "This is, right now, one of the better defenses that have played in this league and in the country ... These guys are really, really talented, and when they want to play, they're pretty darn scary."



Ron'Dell Carter has been a threat on the defensive line since he arrived at the school in 2017.

Samantha Linczyc | The Breeze

In order to create a powerful combination on the field, there's a need to build a relationship before the pads snap on. For Daka and Carter, much of that relationship has been created through constant communication.

Their conversations are often centered on hot takes. A frequent discussion between the pair: music. And when it comes to that topic, there's not much harmony.

"I will never agree with him on music," Carter said, throwing a jab at his teammate sitting to his right. "His music taste is horrible."

For Carter, he says he identifies more with the millennial crowd and their taste in music, enjoying rappers like Jay-Z and Lil Wayne, even saying there are rappers his younger friends listen to that he doesn't even know the names of. Daka, though, strays from the highly regarded rappers and listens to other artists like Kodak Black.

"I don't go with the social norms," Daka said with Carter quickly interrupting, arguing that his taste wasn't a social norm.

Whether it's on the football field or talking about music away from the game, Daka and Carter have cemented a partnership few can rival. But, if you ask the pair, it's not just about them. Both men are quick to mention players like Greene and Atariwa for helping the defense succeed up front.

"I'm just, like, a fan, sort of, when I'm out there," Daka said. "We're all as hype when somebody else makes a play as if we made a play."

Following an early playoff exit last season, Carter and Daka have helped change the mindset among the roster. The Dukes said they weren't happy losing the CAA title last year or failing to make a deep playoff run. When the team reconvened under head coach Curt Cignetti, it worked to correct last season's mistakes.

"Unfortunately, when seasons go bad, coaches get put at fault for it a lot," Carter said. "But sometimes ... it's the leadership that's really the problem."

Prior to the start of the season, the Dukes took part in what they called "summer validation." Before JMU took its first snap of the 2019 season, the players had to understand why they were the No. 2 team in the country and correct what went sour last year. Carter remembers telling

his teammates that he didn't care if they liked him or not this year, he just wanted the best out of the Dukes during his senior campaign.

Much of the discussion over the summer was centered around making sure the older players would step up and hold their teammates accountable. Throughout the regular season, Daka and Carter showed what it meant to be a leader.

"Accountability [was big], and I felt like we lost our confidence as well," Daka said. "I feel like we're just trying to, like, not show the world that we're the No. 2 team ... I just feel like, internally, we had to feel like we were that type of team."

It can be argued that the pain they felt at the end of last season has helped fuel Carter and Daka to put together an almost picture-perfect senior year. Both are finalists for the STATS FCS Buck Buchanan Defensive Player of the Year.

While some may selfishly want the award to themselves, when the pair was asked why the other one is the best candidate for the honor, there wasn't much hesitation in their responses. To Daka, Carter has put together a career that few can rival and is what he calls a "way more complete player."

Carter, though, points to Daka's performance in 2018 — along with what he's done during his true-senior campaign — as to why it should be the Upper Marlboro, Maryland, native who takes the coveted award.

"John was a rotational guy last year, and he led our team in sacks and TFLs," Carter said. "He played 20, 15, less snaps than me and had more TFLs and more sacks ... He's somebody that is naturally gifted — certain things, you just can't give someone."

Neither player will know if they won the award until the season concludes, and they're not focusing too much on it anyway. To them, the individual accolades don't mean as much as team success does.

Both Carter and Daka stressed the importance of the group staying humble. Even when there have been numerous coaches and players sending their praise to the pair and the line, the duo makes sure everyone is still focused on improving because Carter and Daka know what happens when a team loses that mindset.

"We've seen what happens when you're complacent," Daka said. "We've seen what happens when you lose that hunger; we've seen what happens when you feel like you can do [it on] your own."

Within the next month or so, the pair will suit up in the purple and gold one last time. No one knows for sure when that day will come, as it's dependent on how the team performs in the playoffs. But for the dynamic duo, they know where their final game should be.

Carter and Daka want it in Frisco, Texas, on Jan. 11.

Contact Catie Harper at breezesports@gmail.com. For more football coverage, follow the sports desk on Twitter @TheBreezeSports.

https://www.breezejmu.org/sports/jmu-football-plays-spoiler-to-second-homecoming-crowd/article_6d260cc6-f2c5-11e9-b37a-9f50bdc4005f.html

JMU football plays spoiler to second homecoming crowd

Catie Harper | The Breeze Oct 19, 2019



Redshirt senior defensive lineman Ron'Dell Carter tackles a William & Mary player in the backfield.

Trevor Cockburn | The Breeze

It's Ron'Dell Carter's world, and William & Mary is just living in it.

The redshirt senior defensive lineman put on one of his strongest performances of his career as the Dukes spoiled William & Mary's homecoming with a 38-10 win to advance to 7-1 (4-0 CAA) on the season.

Carter started strong and fast against the Tribe, posting three tackles for loss in the opening half, which tied the career high he set last season against NC State. The Baltimore native finished the day with six TFLs, one sack and 10 total tackles.





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"Every time I turned around, it seemed like he was in the backfield," JMU head coach Curt Cignetti said. "I was really impressed with the effort."

JMU Football emerges victorious over W&M

JMU beats W&M in a CAA face-off.

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JMU defensive lineman, Jalen Green, talks with teammates while warming up before the game at Zable Stadium.

Trevor Cockburn | The Breeze

JMU senior
Trevor Cockburn



When the game got underway, the Dukes' defense quickly forced the Tribe off the field on a three-and-out. But, an interception from redshirt senior Ben DiNucci on the ensuing drive and a 73-yard run from freshman Bronson Yoder that put the Tribe inside JMU's five seemed threatening early.

And then, the JMU defense clicked, forcing the Tribe to settle for a field goal on its second possession of the day after redshirt junior safety D'Angelo Amos chased down Yoder.

"Oh, that's big — especially when they just get a field goal," Amos said on downing Yoder. "That's all you really can ask for it at that point. Of course, we wouldn't let them score at all but that's just constantly Coach Cignetti [and] Coach Hetherman just teaching us to always give 100% effort."

In Amos' return following an early-game exit last week for a targeting call, the returner found his footing, giving the Dukes strong field position multiple times throughout the afternoon. The first dominant return came with around three minutes remaining in the opening quarter, as he took the ball on a 49-yard return to the William & Mary 13.

It didn't take long for DiNucci to find a man in the end zone after Amos' return. On the second play of the drive, DiNucci connected with redshirt senior wide receiver Brandon Polk for a 16-yard touchdown pass to open the JMU scoring. With redshirt junior Ethan Ratke hitting his 37th extra point of the season, the Dukes took a 7-3 lead — one they wouldn't relinquish.

"Today, they were better than us in all phases," William & Mary head coach Mike London said.

With JMU on the board, the defense went to work and limited the Tribe offense to only 32 yards for the remainder of the half. Carter led the way for the Dukes, and with lights-out performances from redshirt senior linebacker Dimitri Holloway, redshirt junior safety Wayne Davis and Amos, the Tribe struggled to find success.

The William & Mary offense saw some bright spots throughout the game. A fake field goal that ended in a touchdown put the Tribe within two scores of the Dukes. But, when senior quarterback Kilton Anderson went down and junior quarterback Ted Hefter came in, the Tribe couldn't find its way to the scoreboard.



The Dukes finished Saturday's matchup allowing only 75 yards on the ground, 119 through the air and a single touchdown. Through eight weeks, JMU has only allowed over 100 yards rushing once. JMU's defense also forced three turnovers in the game, all of which were interceptions.

"An offense like that, it's the one-on-one battles those things really never change in a game," Cignetti said. "We were whipping them up front, we were tackling in space and we were doing a good job covering and we hit the quarterback a number of times."

While the JMU defense put on a show, the offense had a quieter outing, even with putting up 38 points.

For the first time this season, JMU didn't see much success on the ground. Coming into the game with the best rushing attack in the CAA, the Dukes couldn't seem to solve the William & Mary defensive line. The most notable news to come out of JMU's backfield was when freshman running back Latrele Palmer's redshirt was forfeited after taking a handoff with 13:50 remaining in the opening half.

Other than Palmer's appearance in the game, the run game failed to get much going. Even with two touchdown runs from junior running back Percy Agyei-Obese, no JMU back posted over 75 yards on the ground. The Dukes finished the contest with 126 rushing yards.

"I thought they ran well, you know, sometimes there's just not many creases," Cignetti said. "We were getting good pushes at times in the second half, and it was just a little bit disappointing to me that we couldn't finish a few of those drives."



After the opening drive interception, DiNucci settled down and led JMU on six scoring drives through the remainder of the game. The Wexford, Pennsylvania, native finished with 250 passing yards and two touchdowns through the air.

The connection between DiNucci and Polk didn't stop after the opening touchdown. DiNucci found the Ashburn, Virginia, native seven times for 77 yards as Polk led all JMU receivers in the contest. Senior tight end Dylan Stapleton finished the day with a career-high 54 reception yards off four receptions — including a career-long 39-yard catch.

"Four-for-54, that's a huge day for Dyl," DiNucci said. "Just being able to have that security blanket underneath when ... stuff breaks down, being able to hit him — he did a good job today."

JMU returns to Bridgeforth Stadium next weekend for its own homecoming game. The Dukes are slated to meet Towson with kickoff scheduled for 3:30 p.m.

Contact Catie Harper at breezesports@gmail.com. For more football coverage, follow the sports desk on Twitter @TheBreezeSports.

Catie Harper

Pat Summitt, Erin Andrews and Lindsay Czarniak were three names that inspired me growing up. Here I am now at JMU, Czarniak's alma mater, taking steps to live out my dream. As Pat would say, "I'm going to keep on keepin' on, I promise you that."

