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A Brave Sight

By Doug Cook

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Doug Cook/The Daily Courier

Ash Fork's A.J. Hovet, blind for four years, proves that not seeing is believing on the football field.



Doug Cook/The Daily Courier

A.J. Hovet (1) and his Spartans teammates took the field Saturday for their homecoming. Hovet, the team's backup center despite being blind, "wants people to knock him over and go through him," says his quarterback Ethan Carman (24).

"A year and a half after I started treatment, I was put into remission," Hovet said Saturday afternoon inside the Ash Fork locker room. "And then, I had a relapse in my brain. The radiation hit my optic nerve. My eyes and brain are very healthy, but not the retina."

Although Hovet's treatments killed the tumor, they rotted his optic nerve, rendering him totally blind. When he's walking, he claps and pays more attention to sounds to compensate for his lack of sight.

"I lost my vision between the ages of 10 and 12," said Hovet, whose father, Allen, died in 2001, two years after he nearly passed away. "I learned how to use my vision with what little light perception I have."

ASH FORK - Confident and poised, A.J. Hovet stood along the home sideline by himself on a rain-soaked Saturday afternoon, bracing for the big football game.

This weekend was homecoming at Ash Fork High School, and Hovet, a 5-foot-8, 155-pound senior backup center, felt as content as he has in a long time.

And why shouldn't this first-year varsity player be thrilled? He is alive - even if the cards he was dealt weren't what he had hoped.

At first glance, those who don't know the 17-year-old boy might think he's just another Regular Joe athlete.

But there is much more to Hovet than meets the eye.

He laughs and jokes with his fellow players, even though, to a degree, he's on his own on a 16-member team based in this Old West railroad town off Route 66 about 50 miles north of Prescott.

Yes, Hovet's in a different place.

When he peers out onto the field as his Spartans teammates run pre-game drills, he sees not much more than a faint glimmer of light.

Four years ago, Hovet, who was born in Cottonwood in 1991, lost his eyesight while undergoing chemotherapy to treat non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma when he was still living in southern California, where he grew up.

A tumor infiltrated his brain and doctors had no other way of wiping it out than to employ radiation and chemotherapy.

In Aug. 1999, doctors diagnosed Hovet with lymphoma, a condition in which the body's white cells multiply so fast that they create tumors. At one point, doctors gave him three days to live.

What's refreshing is that one won't ever find Hovet sulking about his fate. This honor roll student-athlete is upbeat and raring to go.

"There's no stopping him," said Donna Hovet, A.J.'s mom. "He's extremely intelligent. He's always been determined. For me, A.J. was the strength during the tough times. Nobody had any problems compared to him."

Hovet plays center sparingly for the 0-6 Spartans, but his coach, Scott Mayfield, wants the senior to feel like he's part of the team.

Even if he can't run with or catch the ball, he's got his hands on it.

And, perhaps, that's what's most important for a guy who wants no pity and does not feel sorry for himself.

"He wanted to be a part of something. He wanted to be on a team," said Mayfield, who steers a green program that's only in its second season of varsity football in the highly competitive Class 1A North Region. "In most sports, he couldn't participate. But he can snap the ball."

Hovet, who lives seven miles west of Ash Fork, said he mostly appreciates his teammates, who give him rides to and from practice and support his efforts to become part of the mainstream. In school, he uses Braille and JAWS, a speech output program, as well as a mobile manager PDA to keep himself organized.

Hovet has a 3.4 GPA at Ash Fork and plans to push it up to a 3.9 later this academic year.

"I needed help at first getting to classes, but now I could walk this whole campus with my eyes closed," said Hovet, who occasionally walks with a cane. "Everybody at the school is considerate and helpful."

Ash Fork suffered its sixth straight loss Saturday, succumbing to Fredonia in blowout fashion. But it's not about wins and losses for the Spartans. They're still finding their way in a region dominated by stalwart league foes Mogollon and Joseph City, as well as Williams and Orme.

Andrew Williams, Ash Fork's 6-4, 325-pound starting senior center, is close friends with Hovet and at first considered himself Hovet's "human version of a seeing-eye dog," helping him get around on campus.

For the past three weeks, Williams has been ill, which has meant more playing time for Hovet.

"He's always ready for new things, and it's just fun having him on the team because he always has this upbeat attitude," Williams said. "He's doing really well at it."

Usually, Mayfield tries to get Hovet in on at least one series in the second half when the outcome of the game is no longer in doubt.

This past week, Hovet was under center for an entire junior varsity contest.

"It was a good opportunity for him," said Mayfield, who has lived in Ash Fork for 15 years. "We've gotten him in every varsity game except one."

When Hovet goes into a game, he does not huddle with the offense. Rather, he heads straight for the ball in anticipation of the play and waits for the rest of the line to show up.

Once the referee places the ball, the rest of his teammates set him up on it, including starting quarterback Ethan Carman.

"I take him and line him up there with the ball and get him all ready," Carman said.

After the snap, Hovet can't really move forward and block anyone.

But he sure tries.

"He wants to hit and be hit," Mayfield said.

Carman, who has known Hovet for the past three years, said it's "really cool" having Hovet on the team because he's so outgoing.

"He's not concealed at all," Carman said. "He's come a long way. He was kind of mean to everybody at first, but now he's always talking to everybody. Football has given him confidence. He wants people to knock him over and go through him."

All of his Spartans teammates treat Hovet with respect and assist him in whatever way they can.

Much of that comes from Mayfield, who preaches "team" and "family."

Last season, Hovet wanted desperately to play for the Spartans, but he transferred from the Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind in Tucson several weeks into the fall semester - and it was too late.

"I was kind of sheltered in California and never really allowed to do go out and do things," he said. "But when I went to Tucson I was working three jobs on campus. I was delivering newspapers, washing dishes, working in the warehouse delivering mail. It helped me develop the social skills I needed."

However, Hovet left school in Tucson because he grew tired of getting special treatment and wanted to work hard to achieve his goals - which included being part of a football squad.

"When I got back, everyone encouraged me to join the football team," Hovet said. "It's pretty much just like school, except with shoulder pads and helmets."

After graduation next year, Hovet plans to take a trip to Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa with the Foundation for Blind Children.

Eventually, he wants to enroll in college and major in music theory. In fact, Hovet taught himself how to play guitar.

"It's the blind people that I've met through organizations like the foundation who are successful and really show me there's a lot more that I can do than what I think," Hovet said. "My motto is, 'You prove to me that you can't do something.'"

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