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# Mele a natural ballplayer

# Longwood sophomore fights to return to diamond

ALEX MELE SMELLED fresh air for the first time in three weeks Tuesday.

For one night the 15-year-old Longwood sophomore was back home, free from the confines of Stony Brook Medical Center, where he's undergoing treatment for acute myelogenous leukemia (AML). For one night he wasn't another kid fighting cancer, he was what he always yearned to be: a ballplayer.

### **EXTRA** POINT



Joe Werkmeister

It didn't matter that Mele had lost close to 40 pounds since November, that his white blood cell count had plummeted, that his body was too weak to fight off the simplest infections.

"All he wants to do is play baseball," said Mele's father, Lou.

It was no sur-

prise that with his first chance to leave the hospital since Christmas, thanks to an increase in his cell counts, Alex insisted he join his teammates Tuesday night at the All-Pro Baseball Academy for a winter workout. Baseball, after all, is his life.

"He's a good kid," said Mike MacKenzie, Mele's junior varsity coach. "He's one of those regular old kids who just wants to play ball.'

Alex was the kind of kid who was never sick a day in his life, his father said. When he began suffering from high fever and swollen glands in early November, the doctors thought it was mononucleosis. A blood test revealed their worst fears.

Lou received a phone call instructing him to rush Alex to the emergency room. His white blood cell count was so low, they thought the lab had made

"When we brought him to the hospital they redid it and found out his levels had just crashed," Lou said.

The news hit Alex harder than a runner crashing into him at home

"It was devastating that I couldn't play baseball for another two years," he said. "It was my life over here and it got taken from me.'

Before the leukemia Alex had started to hit his stride as a baseball player. A catcher/third baseman, he developed into one of the top hitters on Longwood's JV team his freshman

He wasn't the most talented athlete, but possessed a superior work ethic. Everything he got he earned through determination.

'He wasn't the fastest kid, but he could hit the hell out of the ball," MacKenzie said.

By mid-season Alex was starting on a team that lost only one game all



Longwood sophomore Alex Mele hopes to return to baseball by the summer as he battles leukemia. A fundraiser at Longwood High School is scheduled for Saturday, Feb. 7, to help Mele and his family.

season. In the summer he played on the Brentwood Bandits team and on a Longwood team at Baseball Heaven.

As a sophomore this year Alex hoped for a shot on the varsity team. Now he has a new goal: return to the field by the summer.

"He's taking that work ethic and putting it toward his recovery," Lou

In the hospital Alex does his best to keep sharp. He'll bounce a tennis ball off the wall when he's by himself. His dad will bring him his bat. In between his chemotherapy sessions he'll do physical therapy. The other day he walked on a treadmill for 13 minutes, baby steps back toward the batter's

Lou spends countless hours at the hospital. A single father — Alex's mom, Lisa, died in June 2007 of congestive heart failure at 39 — Lou begins his day be getting his 11-yearold twins, Jake and Leah, ready for school. Then it's off to the hospital to see Alex until about 2:30 before heading home to get the twins off the bus. He helps the kids with homework, makes dinner and takes the family to the hospital. Around 8:30 he brings the kids back home. Sometimes when the kids are asleep he'll head back to the hospital before finally settling in bed himself at nearly 4 a.m. for a few hours of sleep.

"My day is hectic," he said. At the hospital they'll play cards (Alex enjoys Texas hold'em) and watch movies. They talk sports, always

Alex counts the days he's in the hospital. It was at 55 before his break this week.

"It's a waiting game," Lou said. "There's no glamour. It's just waiting for the machine to beep and here comes the next medicine.'

Though it's been a difficult 2 1/2 months, Lou said the community has pulled together to help his family. Students in the middle school where MacKenzie teaches made Yankeeblue bracelets with "Alex's Team" inscribed on them. They sold 1,000 and donated almost \$2,000 to the family.

Many of his friends from baseball visit him in the hospital.

"I tell the kids earlier in the year that I'm a spiritual guy in a sense that once we're linked, we're put together for a reason," MacKenzie said.

Several parents of baseball players organized a fundraiser at Longwood High School for Feb. 7, where they hope to raise funds for the Mele family. There will be a haircut-a-thon with \$10 haircuts, a chinese auction, craft fair, 50/50 raffles, food and beverages and a DJ. It starts at 11 a.m. and ends at 4 p.m.

Alex most likely won't be able to attend, but his sister and brother will be there.

Alex will undergo his third round of chemo when he gets back to the hospital. From there he'll transfer to Schneider Children's Hospital in New Hyde Park for a bone marrow transplant.

The prognosis is good, Lou said. But amid the uncertainty that inevitably surrounds his condition, Alex remains driven by one goal: playing baseball.

Joe Werkmeister is the sports editor of the North Shore Sun. He can be reached at joew@northshoresun.com or 744-0404, ext.19.