

# ALL in for ALA

## Girls volleyball supports teammate after cancer diagnosis

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editor in chief

Only a few months ago, the final week of the 2015-2016 school year, a familiar feeling of anxiousness and excitement hit the students at Lafayette. Finals were being taken, days were short and the long-awaited summer was almost here.

For junior Ala Blaszczyk, summer wasn't the only thing on her mind.

"It was the last Thursday of school. I remember because I was supposed to take my math final the next day," Blaszczyk said.

That Thursday marked a very important date for Blaszczyk.

"I was diagnosed with stage two Hodgkin lymphoma," Blaszczyk said.

Lymphoma is cancer that attacks cells in the immune system. These cells are all over the body, in places such as the lymph nodes, spleen and bone marrow.

Lymphoma causes these cells to change and grow rapidly out of control.

"Luckily it's Hodgkin's, which means it's curable. They think it was caused by some sort of virus," Blaszczyk said.

A few warning signs for lymphoma include fever, swelling in ankles or legs, fatigue, enlarged tonsils, headache, etc. For Blaszczyk, her warnings were a little less noticeable.

"My shoulder area was a little swollen, and I thought it was a knot on my neck because it was aching. I put a heating pad on it. I didn't think much of it," Blaszczyk said.

When it started to look and feel

different, she was aware that it wasn't just a sore muscle.

"The next day, I found another one lower on my collarbone. I went to my neighbor, who's a nurse, and she told me it was probably mono," Blaszczyk said.

A Monday doctor visit resulted in clean blood tests and an appointment for an ultrasound.

"I went for an ultrasound on Thursday. As soon as I got home they called us and said they wanted to do a biopsy because they were a little worried. I went back to the hospital that night and got a chest scan, and that's when they told me that there was a mass there. The next day I had a biopsy, and they confirmed that it was lymphoma," Blaszczyk said.

Being a healthy, competitive athlete since elementary school, this diagnosis was the furthest thing from Blaszczyk's mind.

*"You hear stories of people who have cancer and you always say 'it's not going to happen to me.'"*

**Ala Blaszczyk, 11**

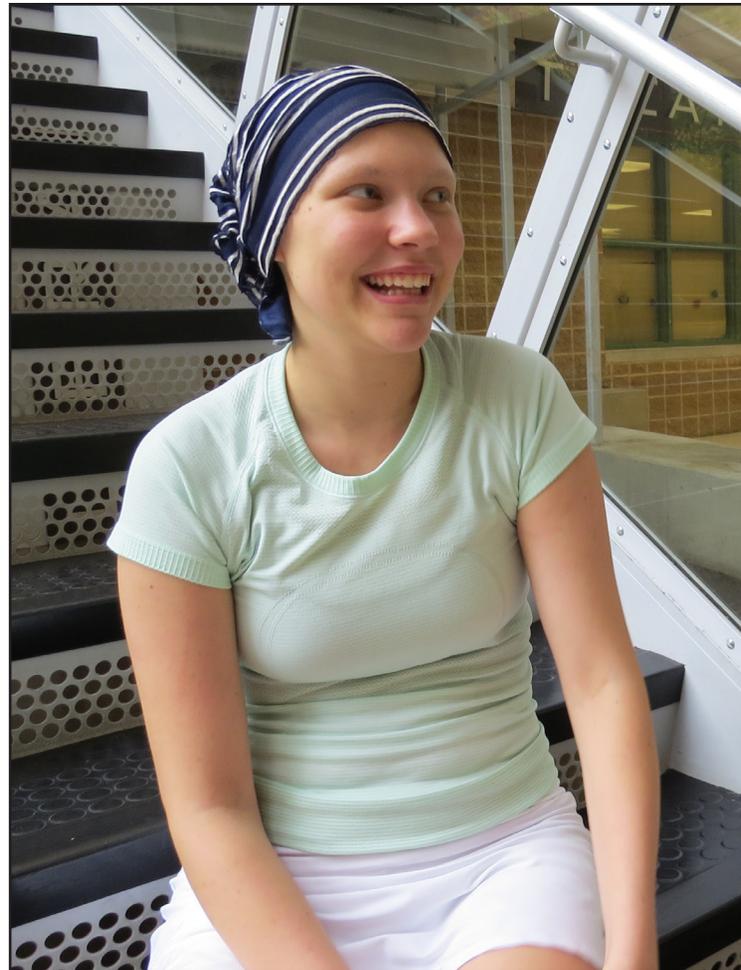
"I've always been like that, too. It's just shocking when it actually does happen to you," Blaszczyk said.

According to Cancer.org, Hodgkin's disease accounts for about three percent of all childhood cancers.

"Everyone thinks they're invincible, and this was really a realization that I'm not and that this really can happen," Blaszczyk said.

After the diagnosis, Blaszczyk decided to go through chemotherapy treatment to try and terminate the cancer.

"It was a 12-week process, and every cycle was three weeks. The first week of every cycle I had three days of chemo which was intense. The second week there was less



Left: Junior Ala Blaszczyk started classes this fall, along with all of her classmates. She is working with teachers to manage the workload. (photo by Kayley Allen)

Top: Blaszczyk tuned into the volleyball game via headset on Sept. 8. The coaches have the headsets to communicate during the game. (photo by Mollie Rogan)

Bottom: Blaszczyk and junior Merry Gebel grab a selfie last spring before Blaszczyk was diagnosed with lymphoma. (photo courtesy of Merry Gebel)

chemo being done and the third week I would come in so the doctors could do lab work to see if I needed anything and what the status was. And then that process was repeated," Blaszczyk said.

The demanding schedule of the chemotherapy treatment changed Blaszczyk's daily routine and especially impacted her volleyball involvement.

Since 4th grade, volleyball has been a big part in Blaszczyk's life. She was a typical student athlete — eating, sleeping and breathing volleyball.

Because of the physical and mental demands of the chemotherapy treatment, Blaszczyk was unable to do some of the things she had been participating in for the past eight years.

"I was pretty isolated from volleyball when it first happened, and I couldn't compete in Nationals with my club team. When I had time I decided I should go to open gyms, but that was when I could still do stuff," Blaszczyk said.

When the chemotherapy's full effects set in, Blaszczyk was unable to do some things that came naturally to her before.

"I can't set because my fingers are numb, I can't move as fast because I don't have reflex in my legs. The chemo affects you and makes you less focused. You also have to take steroids, so you gain weight and you can't sleep at night. In school it's hard to focus, but my teachers are helping me with that," Blaszczyk said.

Because volleyball has always been a big part of Blaszczyk's life, she's made several friends through Lafayette's team as well as her club team.

"Girls on my club team were good friends with girls on the Lafayette team, so word got around pretty quickly. I received a lot of texts and

tweets, which was really nice. The support was crazy," Blaszczyk said.

Blaszczyk and junior Merry Gebel both play on Lafayette's volleyball team as well as Rockwood Thunder, a local club team.

"She came up to the team after a scrimmage and told us what was

*"It's hard because she's a really good setter, and at practice and games she always pushed everyone to be better."*

**Merry Gebel, 11**

going on. We were all shocked because none of us thought that would ever happen to someone we're so close to, let alone Ala," Gebel said.

While Blaszczyk was going through her chemotherapy, Gebel and some of Lafayette's team decided to show her their support.

"Me and some of the girls decided to go to Ala's last chemotherapy session. Also, a few of the girls on the Rockwood Thunder team and I decided to cut our hair and donate it to Locks of Love. We just wanted her to know how much we support her and that we are there for her no matter what's going on," Gebel said.

Not only did volleyball change for Blaszczyk, but for Lafayette's team as well.

"Now, she can't play as much because she's always tired so it's hard when she's not there. It's different on the court without her constant motivation," Gebel said.

Varsity volleyball coach Zachary Young agrees there's a little bit of a change not having Ala always on the court.

"Ala is a very motivated and driven player, and we miss not being able to see her everyday," Young said.

On Sept. 8, Lafayette's volleyball team played Eureka. The theme for the match was "All in For Ala."

Weeks prior to the game, some of Lafayette's players ordered purple bracelet's with the words "All in for Ala" and sold them to students and staff during lunch.

The game also featured a 50/50 raffle to raise money for Ala and her family.

On that Thursday, the team sported their jersey's to school, per usual, but they were different from their normal home jersey's.

The numbers on these jersey's were marked with lavender glitter; lavender representing cancer awareness.

Lafayette's volleyball team has been State champions for five years in a row. This being said, these athletes have always known how to bring their A- game. During this match, they wanted that win more than ever.

Due to the increased drive and desire from the players, varsity, junior varsity and freshmen volleyball teams all defeated Eureka.

"All of the proceeds from that, as well as the concession stand, went to Ala and her family to help with medical bills," Young said.

The diagnosis not only affected Ala's health, but her outlook on some things as well.

*"I think I really centered my life around volleyball too much."*

**Ala Blaszczyk, 11**

"This whole journey has made me realized that your health and your family is what's really important. I don't know if my body will allow me to be as competitive now, so I'm going to focus more on school. I need to focus on getting better," Blaszczyk said.