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Dale the Resilent

Former FSU baseball coach has battled, beaten cancer five times

Resiliency is defined as a person's ability to recover readily from illness.

If anyone can be described as having resiliency, it is Fredonia resident – and former Fredonia State head baseball coach – Dale Till.

Since 1973, Till has battled – and beaten – five forms of cancer, the last of which were cancer of the small intestine and esophageal cancer, both of which occurred in 2013.

“The doctors have been really surprised, especially this last deal where I had esophageal cancer and cancer of the small intestine,” Till said. “They’ve been real surprised that I’ve had so much (cancer) and I’m really doing real well. I go out to breakfast every morning, but I was laid up pretty good. I had surgery last March 13, which was my birthday. I had it in Florida in Port Charlotte and then I got home and I went to Roswell, which I have a lot of faith in.”

He was first diagnosed with colon cancer at the age of 35 and then in 1988 he was told he had colorectal cancer. If having it twice was not enough, Till, then 51, was told he had kidney cancer.

“People have been amazed that I’ve had all this cancer,” Till said. “Most people wouldn’t know that I had cancer in 1973 and that I’ve had it so many times.”

The first three times Till had surgeries or treatments, he relied on the doctors and staff at Roswell Cancer Institute to get him healthy again. But up until 1988, Till said the cancer really had not caused too dramatic of a change in his life.

“The big thing that changed was in 1988 when I had the colorectal cancer,” Till noted. “I ended up with an ostomy, so I’ve had an ostomy since 1988 and sometimes it’s been a pain, but I wouldn’t be here (without it). That’s been a pain in the butt, but it’s something that you have to learn to live with.”

Besides the doctors and staff at Roswell, helping Till through his battles has been his wife Ann.

“I’ve been real lucky that I’ve had a wife that was a nurse and who looks after me when I’m in the hospital,” Till said. “She isn’t afraid to talk to the doctors and not just talking to them, (but saying something) when she sees something, so I’ve been real lucky there.”

Despite the recurrence of cancer, Till never stopped playing baseball and softball, nor did he give up his post as head coach at Fredonia State. There was one instance, however, when Till had to miss a few weeks when he had surgery for colorectal cancer.

“For the most part, the cancer didn’t really interfere that much with coaching,” Till said. “The one that did, the colorectal, I was out quite a few weeks and I couldn’t do anything and (assistant coach) Dave Criscione kind of took over. That was the one where I was really hurting, but the other cancers I had, I was just lucky. Like when they removed my kidney, I recovered quickly from that one.”

Till led the Blue Devils to 424 wins, an East Coast Athletic Conference title in 1982, back-to-back SUNYAC West titles in 1990 and ’91 and an overall SUNYAC championship in 1990.

“Probably the best memory was when we won the SUNYAC title in 1990,” Till said. “We were trailing Cortland and came back and won the game in the bottom of the ninth. You’ve got to be a little lucky, but that was probably one of the highlights. And we won an ECAC tournament and that was exciting.”

Till, who was named SUNYAC Coach of the Year in 1990, had three players drafted to play professional baseball, including Jeff Shaver (1985, Oakland Athletics), Chan Galbato (1985, Montreal Expos) and Steve Strauber (1986, Detroit).

“I missed the atmosphere,” Till said, referring to the time immediately after he retired in 1999. “I don’t miss it now, but in the beginning, I guess you could say I missed it. But I felt it was time to have someone else take over.”

When he wasn’t coaching, Till could be found playing baseball and fast-pitch softball on diamonds across the area.

“In 1955 I hit three-straight home runs when I was in college,” Till said of one of his fondest memories as a player. “And I think it was in 1960 I hit three-straight home runs playing in the Grape Belt League.”

But Till was not just an average baseball player, as he was a perennial .300, or better, hitter and was named a Grape Belt or County all-star eight times. Most of Till’s success came during the 1960’s and ’70’s, when he helped the Cassadaga Bombers win six titles. However, once he started playing fast-pitch softball, Till found a new sport to love.

“I didn’t start playing fast-pitch until I was about 30,” he said. “I really enjoyed fast-pitch softball. The pitching was great and we entered a lot of tournaments. I just wish I would have gotten into that when I was 20 or 21. I really enjoyed it.

“I miss fast-pitch softball,” the 1994 inductee into the Western New York Softball Hall of Fame added. “But I mean I haven’t played in a lot of years now. I watch (baseball) on TV, but I had my fill. I just turned 77, so I guess when I did quit playing, I just had enough.”

And if there is anything else Till has had enough of, it surely has to be cancer, a disease that, according to the American Cancer Society, will take the lives of nearly 600,000 U.S. citizens in 2014.

“There’s hundreds of people in our area that have had cancer and they have made it through and are living a normal life,” Till conclude. “And there are many, of course, the other way, that didn’t make it.”