



William Mullins embarks on courageous and inspiring comeback at Kearny

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William Mullins had every reason to feel great about where his life stood in September of 2022.

As a senior at Kearny High School, he was one of the top students and athletes in the building. As a basketball and volleyball standout, it would also be his last year playing for the teams which were coached by his father, Bill, and alongside brother Matheus, who is just 15 months younger.

As a junior, William was Kearny's leading scorer and rebounder during the basketball season. And in the spring, he led the volleyball team to its best season ever, one that included a first-ever Hudson County championship. He was selected second-team All-State after setting a school record for kills and leading the team in digs. And as a top-five student in his class, he'd be applying to Ivy League schools, among others.

"I was set for a big senior year," he said. "I was the MVP of the basketball team the year before as the leading scorer and rebounder. I was the only returning starter and I was looking forward to playing alongside my brother."

That year, he was also competing on the cross country team.

"In the fall, I was on the cross country team to stay in good shape for basketball season," he said. "I was playing AAU basketball and playing alongside my teammates in fall league basketball games."

It all seemed quite normal, until things began to suddenly go wrong.

"Everything seemed to be going great until in October, when noticed I just wasn't feeling myself," he said. "I felt sluggish and very tired. I couldn't last as long on the court and was struggling to run cross country."

Concerned about it all, he and his family, including his mother Jacqueline, thought it was wise to get checked out.

"I went to a few doctors and they just recommended I rest as I was doing a lot between balancing my academics (including five advance placement classes) and sports," he said. "I wasn't satisfied with that answer as I knew my body well and could tell something was off. I took a bloodwork exam and was told some numbers were off. I went to Hackensack Hospital on Wednesday, November 2, and they diagnosed me with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia."

The news was obviously devastating for William and his close-knit family. It also shook the Kearny community, where the Mullins family has been deeply involved from the time William's grandfather arrived from Scotland.



Bill Mullins has also been a long-time teacher at the high school.

William, meanwhile, was informed by the physicians at Hackensack of what was ahead. His condition would be treatable, but also very intense.

“The doctors told me that it would be difficult, but my leukemia was treatable,” he said. “The treatment would be a 30 month chemotherapy cycle before I could be considered cured. They also informed me that I couldn’t return to school in person due to my reduced immunity because of chemotherapy.

My family and I were stunned as we were not expecting that diagnosis. However, we decided to take the treatment at Hackensack Hospital. We put our faith in God and the doctors that I could overcome this illness.”

Instead of playing hoops that winter for his dad and alongside his brother, he spent much of his time in intensive care at Hackensack. He couldn’t move without the assistance of a walker.

“For the next 10 months, I underwent the most difficult part of the treatment,” he said. “I was in and out of the hospital a lot for the first 10 months. It was a very difficult time. Fortunately, I had God and my family by my side to help me get through it.”

“Initially the whole family was in shock when we got the diagnosis about William’s illness,” his father said. “We had a lot of ups and downs last year, but we had to try and stay strong. We just wanted to help William in any way we could.”

One of things that William did during the time of his treatment was to closely follow the team that he expected to be leading.

He watched every game online, including one that Kearny dedicated to him when a special doubleheader with the girls team packed the gym and raised several thousand dollars for the cancer center at Hackensack.

“I was very appreciative of what Kearny High School, the Kearny community, and others did to support me,” he said.

That support also served to inspire him about making a return to school and sports.

“One of my motivators as I was lying in bed during my hardest times was my want to get back to school and on the courts again,” he said.

As his treatment program shifted toward a maintenance phase, he readied himself to return to school to restart his senior year. But that wasn’t all - the school asked the NJSIAA to also allow him to compete athletically for Kearny, and the appeal was approved.



The Mullins family - from left, mom Jacqueline, brother Matheus, William and father Bill.



William Mullins at the foul line in a recent game.

“My parents asked Kearny High School to make an appeal to the NJSIAA for me to be eligible to play sports,” William said. “The appeal was granted in August. Right before the school year began, I entered the maintenance phase of my treatment, which made me feel a lot better and enabled me to go back to school. When I got back to school, I began to rehabilitate my body by working out at the gym and training for basketball.”

Getting the approval to play was one thing. Making it work was another.

“I started my rehabilitation doing physical therapy,” he said. “Eventually I started shooting baskets with my father over the summer. I started shooting two feet away from the basket as I didn’t have much strength.”

Another person also entered the picture. Bob Lucas was William’s freshman basketball coach at Kearny. A long-time coach and administrator, he made working with William a priority.

“As a freshman, I knew William was special,” Lucas said. “He listened and followed my every direction. He had potential to be a great player. He worked hard and was awesome to coach. He did become a great player and was varsity MVP his junior year.

“I met his father by chance at an event in August,” Lucas said. “He told me about William and his dire struggles with cancer. His father told me William respected me and thought I was a great coach. His father asked, now that I am retired, if would I take some days and work with William to get him back on the court.”

With that, William and Lucas embarked on a special training journey.

“I put together an 85 day plan, starting September 1 and ending right before the season started,” Lucas said. “We joined the YMCA in Rutherford, the old Nets training facility.”

“I was blessed to have my father and Bob Lucas to help me,” William said. “Coach Lucas contacted me and we set forth on an 85 day workout program to get me ready for the basketball season. Coach Lucas was great. He drove me to and home from the Meadowlands YMCA where we worked out at least three days a week. Coach Lucas said he was going to help me, and he did more than what anyone could have expected. Not only is he a great basketball coach, but he is a great person.”

Their training sessions paid off. Not only did William return to the classroom, he was also on the court for the first day of practice in November.

“We made it,” Lucas said.

“Without Coach Lucas, I would not be playing basketball this year,” added William.

William’s role isn’t the same since before he got sick. He isn’t the leading scorer. That honor now belongs to his brother. Bill Mullins is no longer the coach. Instead, he gets to sit in the stands as a very proud father.

“William has an amazing, strong faith in God and during the whole time of his illness he never complained or said ‘Why me?’” Bill Mullins said. “His faith was so inspirational to us all.”



William Mullins at work during his training program to prepare for his return.



William alongside Bob Lucas, who constructed his 85-day training program to return to basketball after extensive treatments for acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

The family is also proud of the way Matheus has handled it all, as well.

“When he got the news of William’s illness, he said to William not to worry, that we’ll be playing together next year,” Bill Mullins said. “They have done everything together - basketball, soccer, volleyball...”

“During the season, it’s very nice to have my brother with me on the team,” William said. “Since we were kids, we have been playing sports together.

There’s a new normal attached to William’s basketball approach. He’s still undergoing leukemia treatment, after all, and some days are better than others. There also excellent ones like Jan. 13, when he scored a team-high 11 points against Union City.

“I’m still not 100%, but each day I feel myself getting stronger and better,” he said. “Since I am in maintenance, I am still taking oral chemo daily. During the tougher part of my treatment, I was taking a lot of steroids, which caused me to gain a lot of weight. Since the start of basketball season I have lost 15 pounds.”

“It’s definitely emotional being back on the court after being out for so long,” he added. “I was very happy and excited. I was very grateful to God for the opportunity to get back to doing what I love: playing sports.

“Most games last season, I was in the hospital. I was not able to make it in person to the gym to watch games, but I made sure to watch them all online,” he said. “Last year during the basketball season I could hardly walk. I want to thank God for how far I have come. My family was so supportive and helpful to me. I can’t thank them enough.”

“William has his chemo ports removed, and scored 11 points in a game,” Lucas said. “I’ve coached high school and college basketball, and this is the most rewarding moment of my life.”

“Our family is very proud of William,” his father said. “William has been so courageous this whole time.”

The family is extremely grateful for the support and prayers they’ve received from the entire Kearny community, including local pastors Matt Swiatkowski and Dave Paszkiewicz, who provided much support for William during his hospitalizations and beyond.

There’s one other aspect to William’s story - the inspiration that he’s given everyone in town and at the school.

“William is an amazing person,” said Vincent Almeida, the Kearny athletic director. “He is incredibly intelligent and has a work ethic like no other. Most amazing is William’s positive attitude. This young man can overcome and achieve anything he puts his mind to. William is both an inspiration to his team and all of us at Kearny High. He has shown us what true courage is, that we should appreciate every day with our family, teammates and friends, and lastly, to be bold when faced with adversity and attack the obstacle.”