

Effects of testing are proof positive

By Leilana McKindra

Failing a drug test is rarely a good thing. In the case of Brevard's Adam Cordell, though, it most likely saved his life.

Earlier this year, the sophomore was diagnosed with a form of cancer so rare that the type of chemotherapy being used to treat it didn't exist until three years ago. Cordell's chances of survival are good, however, thanks in part to the drug screening that tipped doctors to the seriousness of his condition.

The NCAA drug-testing program primarily intends to discourage the use of performance-enhancing and recreational drugs. But a recent increase in positive tests for human chorionic gonadotropin, or hCG, in males has called attention to a disturbing link between that hormone and potentially cancerous tumors.

In a woman, the presence of hCG indicates pregnancy, but the hormone is not usually present or is produced at extremely low levels in healthy males. It is banned by the NCAA and other professional leagues because it can be used to stimulate the natural production of testosterone, which is suppressed during and after long-term use of anabolic steroids.

However, because hCG also is produced by some kinds of tumors, medical professionals now recognize an elevated level of hCG in males as an important marker that has led to two cancer diagnoses in NCAA student-athletes in two years.

The first was former Tennessee basketball standout Chris Lofton. The three-time all-American tested positive for hCG and was diagnosed with and treated for testicular cancer after the 2006-07 season. Lofton's experience alerted the NCAA Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports that an elevated hCG level in a male student-athlete was a tumor marker.

As for Cordell, he had just completed his second season as a member of the Tornados' offensive line when news of the positive drug test arrived. Although he felt that he was in the best shape of his life, he'd had one lump removed from his breast three days after the drug test, and he'd been



Brevard football student-athlete Adam Cordell (No. 53 at left and below) received an unintended benefit from an NCAA drug test when it detected hormone levels that had been inflated because of an existing cancer near his lungs.

battling what he thought was a lingering case of bronchitis.

"It turned out that my hormone levels were messed up from the cancer (resulting in the positive test). I thought I'd been sick with bronchitis, but the tumor is sitting right on top of my right lung," Cordell said.

He has withdrawn from Brevard on the advice of doctors to undergo aggressive treatment for primary mediastinal germ cell cancer, a rare form of the disease that affects about 500 people a year worldwide.

Three years ago, Cordell said, doctors would have given him less than a year to live. Thanks to recent medical advances, though, his prognosis is good. In fact,

Cordell anticipates eventually returning to the field for Brevard. To do so, in addition to enduring four rounds of chemotherapy, he will undergo surgery this summer to remove the tumor.

"No athletics director wants to receive news that one of his or her student-athletes has tested positive for performance-enhancement drugs, but receiving the

news that one of your student-athletes could potentially have a life-threatening disease is even more devastating," said Brevard AD Kim Pate. "But in this case, had we not been informed of this possibility, Adam may not have discovered the cancer in time for treatment."

Using the Lofton and Cordell cases as prompts, the competitive-safeguards committee has spent nearly two years studying the issue. During that time, positive hCG tests have gone from an average of one to two a year to seven in 2008-09.

The group is unsure of the cause of the sudden spike but acknowledges an increased Internet presence for hCG, particularly for bodybuilding. However, at its June 2009 meeting, the committee reviewed its protocol in cases in which a student-athlete tests positive for hCG and inserted a 30-day accommodation to allow for further medical testing. Student-athletes remain eligible during that time and are required to report the findings back to the group. If no medically based cause is found for the positive test, then the drug screen is confirmed as a positive, and the student-athlete is eligible to enter the appeal process.

Mary Wilfert, NCAA associate director for health and safety, said the NCAA is concerned about student-athlete well-being and fairness, both of which are in play with this issue.

"We want to make sure that student-athletes know that this could be a medical issue if they test positive, but we also are going to address this the same way we would treat any doping offense," she said. "We want student-athletes to excel in healthy and safe ways, not in ways that cheat the game."

