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- News Collector
- Hero Assets
- Consent to Treat Form



PAT FORTE EMBODIES SPIRIT OF LIFE AWARD

By Heather Rule, 02/17/17, 10:45AM MST

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Minnesota hockey legend honored for courage

Pat Forte tried to be more than a hockey coach. He was a life coach for his high school players, putting things into perspective for them.

It must have worked. He said he's heard from many former players, now with families of their own, who have thanked him for those life skills he taught.

"I just wanted to make that my own identity as far as being a life coach," Forte said. "And obviously, my former players got the message."

That means something to Forte, who's dealt with his own adversity. In 2006, he was diagnosed with thymic carcinoid cancer and given six months to live. He's still going strong 11 years later. In November, he received the Spirit of Life Award from the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame in his hometown of Eveleth, Minnesota.

Forte grew up playing backyard rink hockey with the neighborhood kids in Eveleth. No parents, no organization. They picked teams and just played the game.

"And to me, I just fell in love with the game right then and there," Forte said.

He played high school hockey and was heavily recruited after his junior season. However, his playing career was derailed by a rare knee disorder that hit his left knee first, then his right.

"The doctors didn't think I'd ever play competitive hockey again," Forte said.

He nonetheless managed to play for a year-and-a-half at American International College in Massachusetts, before even no-check hockey "wasn't worth all of the pain," he said. He's had a total of 16 operations on his knees.

So, he gravitated toward coaching, especially after a class at Bemidji State University taught by legendary coach Bob Peters inspired him. Peters, who led the Beavers to national titles at multiple levels, broke the game down in a simple form.

"I never looked at the game through those eyes before," Forte said. "It almost became an obsession for me then."

Forte started coaching high school hockey in 1988 as an assistant with Chisholm High School for a year. Then he spent a year as an assistant in Austin, Minnesota, coaching with his best friend, Tim Guyer. The two were rivals as players before their friendship blossomed. Forte beat him out for the Iron Range Conference scoring title in high school.

"He's never let me forget that," Guyer said.

The two friends talk daily. Guyer saw Forte's competitiveness as a coach. Forte's teams have been winning teams everywhere he's coached, which isn't by accident, according to Guyer.

"I knew from the first day I watched him coach that he absolutely had the 'it' factor," Guyer said.

Forte's other coaching stops, all in the state of Minnesota, included Brainerd, St. Cloud Apollo, Sartell and Mora at the high school level, and then on to St. John's University in Collegeville.

He spent five years working with the Minnesota Select 17s and a couple years in the Upper Midwest Elite League. He had the opportunity to work with many future NHL players including Zach Parise, Keith Ballard, Chad Rau and T.J. Oshie.

As a coach, Forte was a big believer in creating a strong work ethic for his teams, encouraging them to never give up no matter the score. Just play to the best of your ability throughout the game, he said.

"When time runs out, we'll check the scoreboard and we'll see how we did," Forte said.

Stage Four cancer diagnosis

Forte got a second opinion on his cancer diagnosis at the University of Minnesota.

"They said it was the largest tumor they'd ever seen in a chest," Forte said. "And without shrinking it, there was nothing they could do."

He took medication to shrink the tumor so doctors could remove it. In the process, they also had to remove his right lung. His cancer returned in 2009, incurable and inoperable. He's undergone oral chemotherapy and immune therapy for treatment.

There's one main thing that keeps him going after his diagnosis: His 16-year-old son, Nico.

"He has been my driving force to stay alive," Forte said. "To try to stay healthy where he and I could do things together.

"It also strengthened my faith in God in relying more on him. When you're told that things are inoperable, incurable, you look for a higher power and a higher physician to help you through things."

A teacher currently on long-term disability, he gives his health a C/C+. He had a tumor removed in August and goes to physical therapy to get some of his strength back, since some areas of his body are paralyzed. He's even had to learn how to walk again.

He's the second recipient of the Spirit of Life Award and was overwhelmed when he heard the news. If anybody deserves it, it's Forte, Guyer said, who got a little choked up talking about his friend's award.

"I've got to be honest with you, I had tears," Guyer said, when he heard about the award. "I mean, when I think of spirit of life, he has spirit of life."

The cancer battle made him a better coach, Forte said. He's also talked to youth programs and schools about his journey and how hockey helped him fight cancer. Even his adversity with the knee disorder helped him, he said.

"When you have a strong faith and a good attitude and a real good support system, it's amazing what the body can endure," Forte said. "And it's amazing what the body can achieve. So when you think that you've given it your all, there's a little bit more down there that you can give."

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