

Surgery on Friday? Not in the fall

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SARASOTA -- The doctors up at Tampa's Moffitt Cancer Center probably never had a patient like John Sprague.

Who else but the Riverview High head football coach would try setting his own date for surgery? And succeed?

"I think they're used to doing what they want to do," said Sprague. "I think that was the first time anybody said, 'That ain't happening.'"

Surgery on a football Friday? All right, it's just the kickoff classic, Riverview and North Port, a meaningless game, but it's still football, doc.

That ain't happening.

So it's this Friday morning. Not next. No golf, at least for a while. Putting on a shirt may be a pain.

With it all comes a responsibility Sprague accepts. The fire to spread the word, the lung capacity to make it heard.

Get checked. The best advice any cancer survivor can give.

"Ironically," said Sprague, "I had my best checkup this time, the time they found this."

Sometime after 7:30 Friday morning, doctors at Moffitt will remove a cancerous mass from an area near the left shoulder blade.

He's had cancers and pre-cancers before, squamous cell carcinomas, stuff that can target 58-year-old football coaches who can't block the sun.

This one's different. Rare and aggressive. Microcystic Adnexal Carcinoma, cancer of the sweat glands. Only 300 such cases have been documented.

Rare and aggressive, but treatable. Once Sprague learned it wasn't the other cancer, he could exhale.

"He's like, 'Just tell me it's not melanoma,'" said Dr. Jennifer Trent, Sprague's Sarasota dermatologist, who discovered the cancer.

"I said, 'It's not melanoma.' He said, 'OK, we'll take care of this.'"

It won't happen without a souvenir. The surgery will leave a healthy scar on Sprague's back. Because this type of cancer can recur, doctors will excise a significant portion.

So, please, no how-ya-feeling? pats on the back.

Sprague's lucky, and he knows it. Trent found the growth during one of Sprague's quarterly checkups. He didn't notice it.

"Thank God, she found it," Sprague said.

He doesn't plan on being down for long. Matter of fact, Sprague's first-period students shouldn't expect anyone else walking through that door Monday.

It could be the perfect opportunity to start preaching the message.

"It's too late for 50-year-olds who used to lay out in the sun and put baby oil on," he said. "But right now, everybody needs to go to the dermatologist, especially if you're blue-eyed and light-skinned. It's nothing to play with."

Nah, Sprague would never mess with the Big C.

Even with a passing game.

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