

Buddy Thomas: Dartmouth's Seth Feldman left courageous and lasting impression

By Buddy Thomas

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I spoke with him just one time. But that 30-or-so minute conversation was long enough to develop into a life-long memory.

To me, Seth Feldman was just another name on a football roster when we met for the first and only time back in May of 1988. The initial handshake took place at the old Dartmouth High School in the office of the school's athletic director and legendary football coach Carlin Lynch. The memory was etched somewhere else, in a private area where, in less than a hour, I would walk away from someone who had been just another name on a football roster to someone who would become the bravest person I've ever known.

Seth had two goals in his young life. One was to play football; the other was to graduate from high school and go on to college. Thankfully, he would realize both. But it was his story of determination through adversity that has made such a lasting impression on me.

With his freshman football season behind him, Seth spent the summer of 1984 working out in preparation for what he hoped would be a breakout sophomore year. The headaches he was experiencing didn't concern him at first because football camp was just around the corner and that was his focus. But when Seth got violently ill during the workouts, he spent the final day in the camp's infirmary. And when the headaches and vomiting continued, he was admitted to the hospital.

Tests was ordered and revealed no signs of a virus. But when a CAT scan was taken and showed a massive growth on the brain, Seth was immediately transported to Children's Hospital in Boston where a biopsy revealed a malignant tumor the size of an orange. Seth Feldman was no longer fighting for a spot on the Dartmouth High School football roster, he was now fighting for his life.

A second operation was Seth's best chance of survival, but doctors were leaving the choice up to him. He took that chance and survived. But, by the time the new school year began, he was facing nine weeks of chemotherapy, followed by four weeks or radiation, which ruled out any chance he had of playing football. But Seth refused to abandon his goal. He still had his junior and senior seasons ahead of him and, after returning to the classroom, he set his sights on the upcoming pre-season camp. By then, the chemotherapy and radiation treatments had stopped and, although weakened, Seth was ready to play.

He made it though the workouts and was assigned to the junior varsity team, where he was penciled in as the place-kicker. He played the entire season and contributed to the team's success by kicking 10 extra points. Seth continued to work hard in the off-season, hoping to kick his way on the varsity squad for his final season.

But, in April, tragedy struck again.

The headaches returned and, when subsequent tests revealed another tumor, Seth underwent still another operation — one that was plagued by complications. He developed meningitis, and during surgery, his neck was twisted, causing numbness on his left side. Following the operation, Seth was unable to sit up, stand or walk for any length of time and spent weeks in rehabilitation. But, five weeks later, he went to his junior prom.

I remember teary eyes forming as Seth talked his way slowly, but clearly, through that interview. And all the welling came from me. Seth's eyes seemed dry and were crystal clear, and an ever-present smile radiated the area. It got a little brighter when he talked about finally getting his chance to play with the varsity team as a senior.

His weakened condition limited him to what he could do. Lynch penciled him in as the back-up place-kicker, and on Oct. 24, 1987, Seth Feldman successfully kicked an extra point in a 21-7 victory over Bishop Feehan. It was his first and only attempt in a season he was so determined to play.

The following May, Seth was among 11 athletes who received the Massachusetts High School Football Coaches Football Association Award, which was presented to a senior football player who overcame a handicap or special hardship to serve as an inspiration to his team.

Following the football season, Seth continued to attend his high school classes, rest and make periodic trips to Boston where he did volunteer work for the Jimmy Fund and lecturing at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute. In the fall of 1988, Seth — a high school honor student — entered Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H.

Sadly, on Dec. 22, 1988, Seth Harris Feldman passed away four months into his freshman year. He was just 17 years old — way too young to die, but old enough to leave a positive and lasting impression on people of all ages. It's hard to believe that 24 years have passed since I was fortunate enough to sit down and talk with the bravest person I have ever met.

Buddy Thomas' column appears weekly in The Standard-Times.