

Pickering football team coping with paralysis of teammate

BY WILL TUBBS • WTUBBS@THETOWNTALK.COM • OCTOBER 14, 2008

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PICKERING -- Red Devil coach James Marcantel has been around the game of football most of his life and has coached the sport for more than 30 years.

His assistant at Pickering High School, John Cook, has been around for an equal amount of time.

Neither had seen nor were they prepared for what occurred Friday night when Pickering visited the community of Dry Creek to take on East Beauregard High in a district football contest.

On Pickering's first play on offense, junior Jan Veintidos collided with an East Beauregard linebacker, collapsed and never moved again.

"We were running an isolation play," Marcantel recalled. "He was trying to clear a linebacker out of a hole, and right at the moment of impact, Jan kind of ducked. He looked like he was paralyzed by the time he hit the ground."

Veintidos, a fast-rising star on the small-school track scene, suffered an apparent broken neck.

He is currently in what Marcantel reported as "critical but stable" condition at the LSU Medical Center in Shreveport but remains paralyzed.

Marcantel reported that as of Monday, Veintidos was in good spirits despite his still serious condition.

"He's got a lot of questions," Marcantel said. "He's worrying that the other player was hurt and wants to know if he's OK. He's trying to understand what happened."

Following the worst injury he's ever seen, even the veteran coach has had trouble putting the situation into words.

"It's hard to describe," Marcantel said of the scene Friday night. "When it happened, you always hope for the best. I've had a lot of kids fall out on the field, and you get out there, and they're OK. When we got out there Friday, you could tell right away that this was the real deal.

"You could see he was hurt. He was having trouble breathing because of the injury. You see he was scared, see the fear in his eyes. He didn't know what had happened. It's been tough. This kid was like a member of my family."

Described by coaches and teammates as a model citizen and great competitor, Veintidos is reported to have lost consciousness en route to the Beauregard Regional Medical Center on Friday night. But did come to in time to ask a family member to contact a coach at Pickering to inquire about the score of the Red Devils' football game.

"Just before the second half started, we were down by one point," Marcantel said. "I got word that he was alert and wanting to know what the score was. I told my team that and that I wasn't going to be the one to tell him we'd lost. I'd like to think they used him as inspiration. We scored on the first play from scrimmage and never looked back."



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Pickering football coach James Marcantel discusses the injury of one of his players, Jan Veintidos, who was injured in a game against East Beauregard High in Louisiana. Veintidos, who was injured in a game against East Beauregard High in Louisiana, remains in stable but critical condition in a hospital in Shreveport after suffering an apparent broken neck. (Will Tubbs/wtubbs@thetowntalk.com)

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Pickering, which trailed 15-14, scored 22 unanswered points in the second half to win, appropriate given the fact that 22 is, as senior tailback Cartez Shanklin pointed out, Veintidos' number.

"He's my best friend, so this has been tough," Shanklin said. "He's helped me out a lot. When he was on the field, he was always pushing me to play harder. When he got hurt, it gave me something to play for. I'm playing for something bigger than just me and the team. I'm playing for him."

Monday afternoon, while most teams were beginning the process of preparing for another Friday night of high school football, Marcantel spent a considerable portion of practice trying to get his team's focus on anything other than what they had witnessed three nights earlier.

"It's hard to believe that this happened to someone you know," senior tailback Paul Marcantel, the coach's son, said. "It's something you hear about happening in other places, but you never think it will happen to your team. It's difficult to accept ... It makes you appreciate every single snap. You realize life is unpredictable."

The Marcantel family, Shanklin and many other members of the Pickering community traveled to Shreveport to be with Veintidos and his family when the young man underwent surgery during the weekend.

"I was able to talk to him for a little while," Shanklin said. "He's still all about Pickering football. It's amazing that he's able to keep fighting like this. He was always like that, a competitor. He used to tell me if you work until your body gets numb, that's when you get stronger ... Even though he was younger than me, I always looked up to him."

Now, the rest of the Red Devils are rallying around Veintidos as the coaching staff has ordered special stickers for the team's helmets and will be painting a special emblem on the field for this Friday's game, which will be Pickering's Homecoming.

"I want these things to be an inspiration, not a distraction," coach Marcantel told his team. He later added that he wanted his boys to "Pray for Jan and play for Jan."

"I think we're ready to play," Paul said. "What he's going through right now, the way he's dealing with it, it's inspiring to me. It makes me want to fight that much harder."

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