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Community support boosts Parchment athlete as he regains movement after injury

by Scott DeCamp | Kalamazoo Gazette
Friday September 12, 2008, 12:45 PM

KALAMAZOO TOWNSHIP --
Today, Austin Cole will slip on his maroon Parchment High School jersey like he has on so many football Fridays in the past.

Only this time, No. 5 will not be on the field when the Panthers' football team hosts Schoolcraft at 7 tonight. Cole, a senior, will not be at his usual receiver and outside linebacker positions. He will not be wearing a helmet or shoulder pads.

Instead, he'll have a brace around his neck and likely face swirling emotions, which have run the gamut since he suffered a spinal-cord injury in last Friday's game against Kalamazoo Christian.

Cole, 17, could move only his index fingers initially. His family feared he may be paralyzed from the chest down.

"The doctors were like, 'Be prepared, because this might be the best he ever gets,'" said James Cole, Austin's father. But in the early hours of Saturday morning, Austin gradually regained feeling in his hands and feet.

Later, he was able to move the rest of his body. He's expected to make a full recovery, though his football career is over.

"I'm nervous a little bit," Austin said Thursday as he and his mother, Tammy Jozo, sat on the steps outside their Kalamazoo Township home. "I'm excited to watch my brother play. I was hoping it was going to be with me, but ..."

A hard hit by a Kalamazoo Christian player last week left Cole motionless on the grass at Soisson-Rapacz-Clason Field. Cole was taken off the field on a stretcher, transported to Borgess Medical Center and admitted to the intensive-care unit.

Jozo said her son remained in the intensive-care unit for a day-and-a-half before he regained all movement and was transferred to another room.

Jozo said ligaments on both sides of her son's spine were sprained and



Mark Bugnaski | Kalamazoo Gazette

Parchment High School senior Austin Cole, 17, receives a tender touch from his mother Tammy Jozo at their North Westnedge Ave. home. Cole suffered a spinal cord injury in a football game last week against Kalamazoo Christian and is at home recovering.

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Clouds float by two students as they overlook Miller Plaza during Western Michigan University's Bronco Bash. (Jonathon Gruenke | Kalamazoo Gazette)

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Touring Prairie Ridge Elementary



A \$14 million facility features a two-story media center and state-of-the-art technology throughout the building and a rooftop garden. The school is about a mile north of the Chime school on Ninth Street, just north of Stadium Drive.

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swollen. Doctors put Cole on steroids, which decreased the swelling and allowed him to move parts of his body.

Cole was released from Borgess on Tuesday and has been resting at home. He is still experiencing some dizziness and requires assistance, but he is expected to return to school Monday.

"Everyone's going to be there for me -- they're going to be excited to see me, but it's not going to be the same," said Cole, who must wear the neck brace at least until his next visit to the doctor in four to six weeks.

Cole's 15-year-old brother, sophomore Adrean Cole, has been elevated to the varsity football team and will play the same positions his brother did.

Austin's been told he won't be able to play football again, though he's hoping to get clearance to return for his true sporting love, basketball. Jozo said doctors treating her son have mixed opinions on whether that's a good idea.

For now, Austin simply appreciates the outpouring of support and is thankful he will be able to lead a normal life.

"I want to make sure everybody knows how thankful we are for their support, their prayers," Jozo said. "His dad and I were just overwhelmed and amazed at everybody who came to see him, sent him well wishes, sent him cards."

Said James Cole: "I have the utmost respect for Kalamazoo Christian. That night, when it happened, the head coach came (to the hospital) and another guy, I think it was a janitor. The next day, an assistant coach and his family stopped by to visit."

The experience has opened Austin Cole's eyes. It's shown him how a community can come together and offer its support.

"At first, before the game, I thought Kalamazoo Christian was one of those cocky schools that just cared about their sports," he said. "When it comes down to it, when somebody's life is on the line, they really care. It's a good school, with really good people.

"I'm really thankful. ... I want to say thanks to all the people at Kalamazoo Christian and everybody at my school, everyone that's supported me. I mean, I wouldn't have been able to make it without them."

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Posted by **nyeratheart** on 09/12/08 at 8:35PM

You are in our prayers in New York!! This was another eyeopener after our own Buffalo Bill, Kevin Everett took a hard hit! He has also recovered to walking again!!

I know you will be facing a lot in the weeks & month's to come; but please remember, a lot of people are praying for you! I have put you on all my prayer lists in NY!!

God Bless You!

Bethany Peacock, a 1969 Parchment graduate.

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Community voices: Taste of Kalamazoo

Gazette reporters Roberto Acosta and Sarah Crone surveyed Taste of Kalamazoo patrons at lunch Thursday. Here are some of the questions they asked:

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