

Lake Mills provides succor for injured athlete

By Andy Wilcox, Lake Mills Graphic

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LAKE MILLS, Iowa — *Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Sept. 10 edition of the Lake Mills Graphic.*

Lives can change in a matter of minutes, but on Sept. 5, it took only a few seconds as a defensive play ended with a football player lying on the field and a crowd hushed to silence.

Tyler Olson, a junior at Lake Mills High School, or T.O. as he is known by his friends, went for a tackle against Forest City's Zeke Kasper, but that tackle ended with Olson surrounded by his teammates and medical staff.

Olson was taken on a stretcher to Mercy Family Hospital in Mason City, Iowa, then airlifted to St. Marys Hospital in Rochester, where he underwent surgery right away at 1:45 a.m. Sept. 6. The surgery was the first of many challenges Olson faces in the coming months as he works to recover from fractured vertebrae in his neck that controls his shoulders.

For Olson, the game night marked a dramatic change in his life, but the town of Lake Mills and even Forest City football players made sure he was taken care of through prayer and comfort. There has been a great outpouring of support, including a Sept. 7 prayer vigil.

Before the game, Olson had talked to his sister, Kessa, via the online community Facebook, about the upcoming matchup against perennial rivals, the Forest City Indians.

"He said he was nervous and wanted to play his best," Kessa said. "He tried to tackle Zeke, and he's a pretty big guy."

As tragic as the moment was for Olson on the field, he still retained his sense of humor, according to Kessa.

When they put the neck brace on him, the ambulance crew told him it was going to get tighter and asked if that was OK.

“He told them, ‘Hold on a second, my ears are in the way,’” said Kessa.

That sense of humor is a trademark characteristic of Olson and will help him in his recovery, which could take months.

That changed the night for Olson, his parents and sister, who went to Mason City, then to Rochester.

“We said we wanted to go to Rochester right away,” Kessa said at the prayer vigil held at Salem Lutheran.

While Olson was recovering from surgery on Sept. 6, his parents, Medara and Bart Winter, and Craig Olson, along with dozens of family and friends were there to support him with his new team, the doctors.

“He tried to talk Saturday, but the tube made it tough,” Kessa said. “He was able to feel the nurse touching his fingers and toes, but he doesn’t have any motor skills, yet.”

There were hundreds of people who filled Salem Lutheran Church Sunday night as pastors from many local congregations, Lake Mills High School Principal Jim Scholbrock and Kessa offered prayers and best wishes for Olson and his family.

Scholbrock noted school staff would be meeting Monday morning to help students deal with the situation.

“God has definitely heard our prayers and it means so much for all of the visitors that have stopped by his room,” Kessa said filled with emotion. “Tyler has touched all of you guys in some way. He’s got a big heart, and he will always be T.O., but he may not be No. 84.”

The family left the following message for community members on the Caring Bridge Web site: “From Tyler and all of us, thank you, thank you, thank you for EVERYTHING you are doing and continue to do. Do not stop praying, or anything you are doing. Prayers, visits, talking/thinking about Tyler are essential. He feels everything and needs all of you! He needs all of you and misses you tremendously. He has a long way to go and can not do it with out all of you!”

There are several ways to show support for the family, including visiting his Caring Bridge Web site: www.caringbridge.org/visit/tylerolson.

Updates on his condition and notes of encouragement can be sent to his family via the Web site.

Donations are also being accepted at Manufacturers Bank & Trust and Farmers Trust & Savings Bank in Lake Mills to help offset the family’s medical and transportation costs.

Olson supported by town

There had been thousands of visits to the Caring Bridge Website as of noon Sept. 9 — the time this story was crafted — and the pace was quickening as Olson’s teammates, fellow students and others from many different

areas sent in their wishes for a fast recovery.

The school has also been dealing with the repercussions of the injury and a student missing from school.

Scholbrock said, “We met with staff this morning at 8 a.m. to update them on Tyler’s condition, and we also wanted them to watch for students who needed assistance in dealing with this terrible accident. LMAMA (Lake Mills Area Ministerial Association) had representatives here and were able to talk to some students about how they were feeling.”

“We are sad, but encouraged by the updates we are receiving. There are more questions than answers and only time will tell. We will do everything we can to support Tyler and his family. We will also make sure that the students who need assistance are given that help. Thank you to our community, your support is overwhelming.”

Football coach Bill Byrnes said, “We miss Tyler dearly from our school and team. He is a great young man with a great personality. He plays football with all of his energy and we know that is how he will approach his recovery.”

Superintendent Daryl Sherman noted the community support that is so often shown in Lake Mills. “There is a reason why we are called Lake Mills ‘Community’ School and not Lake Mills School. Sunday night’s prayer service and other events are clear examples of how the larger community expresses support and caring for Tyler, his family, and others who are experiencing pain from Tyler being injured.”

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