

Dozens Of College Football Teams Sign Up To Save Lives Through The Be The Match Program

An unlisted number came across Colorado defensive end Derek McCartney's phone one Thursday afternoon this spring.

McCartney typically lets such calls go to voicemail, but something compelled him to answer on this occasion.

Three years earlier, McCartney participated in a campus drive through Be The Match, the national bone marrow donation registry. Buffs head coach Mike MacIntyre was in his first year at Colorado, and participated in similar drives during his tenure at San Jose State.

"I didn't actually know the chances of getting picked; I knew they were low," McCartney said of providing a cheek swab for Be The Match in 2013. "If the opportunity ever comes [to donate], we'll cross that bridge when we get there. As of now, I'll just sign up and see what happens."

What happened, MacIntyre explained, was that McCartney "saved a man's life."

McCartney, the grandson of former Colorado coach and College Football Hall of Famer Bill McCartney, was "a 10-of-10 match" for a patient in need of peripheral stem cell donation — remarkable, given the likelihood of a donor-patient match is around 1-in-80,000.

Peripheral stem cells are one of the two focuses for the National Marrow Donor Program, along with bone marrow donation.

The national bone marrow donor registry pairs donors like McCartney with recipients in need of transplants, which, according to BeTheMatch.org, "replace unhealthy blood-forming cells with healthy ones."

Donations aid patients stricken with various ailments, including different forms of cancer and sickle-cell anemia.

McCartney's procedure was the less invasive of the two.

However, five days of necessary drug injections and the 5.5-hour process of having blood platelets drawn and cycled knocked McCartney out of for a stretch of spring ball in March.

"It's more important to save a life than miss a few spring practices," MacIntyre said.

McCartney may have been away from the field, but he wasn't tuned out of the game altogether. He said he watched the 2006 football-themed movie *Gridiron Gang* to pass the time while donating the blood platelets.

Stories like McCartney's become more commonplace each college football season. Players like former Old Dominion punter and holder Joe Pulisic answer similarly unexpected phone calls.

Undergoing the same procedure as McCartney, Pulisic donated on a Thursday and played Saturday in a Conference USA matchup.

He said he knew he "needed to be there for [the] team," as Old Dominion was pursuing the first bowl bid in program history. That same spirit of being there for others also prompted Pulisic to step up when the National Marrow Donor Program informed him he was a match for a 55-year-old patient.

"Imagine it's your dad or uncle or someone in your life," he said.

Pulisic is the first Monarch discovered to be a patient's match, but hardly the first Old Dominion player registered.

Old Dominion's Bobby Wilder and Colorado's MacIntyre are just two of the roughly 60 head coaches Villanova's Andy Talley has brought on board to the National Marrow Donor Program, encouraging players to join every year.

"Andy Talley has really been the driving force of contacting football coaches," said Be The Match representative Dan Gariepy. "I started working with Be The Match about four years ago, and that's when coach Talley was out and about getting other coaches involved in the process by personally calling them — not emailing, but calling directly."

Talley's efforts to help build up the bone marrow donation registry date back much longer than the last few years, though. He first learned of the desperate need for bone marrow donation in the early 1990s and felt immediately compelled to help.

"People were dying needlessly," Talley said. "If they had a match, they'd have a chance to be saved."

The optimal donor demographic are those between the ages of 20-23. Talley knew exactly where to find candidates.

"I thought, I've got 90 healthy football players," he said. "What better place than college football, with the largest numbers on campus of any team?"

Over the past half-decade, Be The Match pairs directly with participating college football programs, footing the bill for \$100 fee per cheek swab collected. The Andy Talley Bone Marrow Foundation in turn helps through fundraising.

Thanks to the partnership, as well as Talley's recruitment efforts, registration via college football continues to grow.

Villanova's been a hotbed for donors. Chicago Cubs outfielder Matt Szczur – a two-sport standout while in college – donated just a few months removed from winning Most Valuable Player of the 2009 Football Championship Subdivision title game.

Three of Talley's Wildcats were matches for recipients in 2015: offensive lineman Jake Prus, wide receiver Jacob Gribb and cornerback C.J. Logan.

Logan is the first African-American player from a Talley-coached team to donate, which bears particular significance.

Talley said need from African-American patients is especially high. To that end, Talley's prioritized recruiting HBCU programs, and recently added Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference member Bethune-Cookman to the growing stable of Be The Match schools.

And that stable will only continue to "snowball," as Gariepy described. Talley said a coach has never said no to the opportunity of hosting a drive when it was presented to them.

Those drives extend beyond teams' locker rooms.

Football's popularity around college campuses attracts more registrants, as the players within programs committed to Be The Match recruit their peers during campus drives.

"Football players at universities are celebrities," Gariepy said. "They have a lot of followers on Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, so we encourage them to use the platforms they have available to get [other students] to come down and register. It's great we can spread our message through them.

"And most of the guys, 99 percent of them, are eager to help us spread the message," he added.

That eagerness shows at Old Dominion, where Pulisic said Monarchs don their jerseys during the drive, and some wear GoPro cameras to capture the experience on video.

Meanwhile, those who have been matches and gone through with the donation function as the best kind of advisers to their fellow students.

“I felt like I knew what I was talking about, and could help people understand the whole process,” McCartney said. “When they hear someone who has gone through it, they get a better prospective.

“That was the coolest part,” he added.

A quarter-century after Talley began his work, the national bone marrow donation registry remains in desperate need of potential donors. Talley’s heading into his final season coaching at Villanova, but will continue his work with the National Marrow Donor Program and Be The Match.

“It’s a labor of love, man,” Talley said. “We’re getting after it.”

As the efforts of Talley and Be The Match continue to expand across the nation, plenty more college students — football players or otherwise — can expect phone calls like the one Derek McCartney took this spring.

With more answering that call, more lives can be saved.