

SON, I MISS YOU DEARLY

Father's Day will be tough for footy star

Robyn Riley

Father's Day is a day of mixed emotions for former AFL player Jason Watts. While looking forward to celebrating with sons Ashton and Millar, he is missing his middle son Cade, a loveable kid with dreams of following in his father's footy footsteps.

Watts is close to his boys, but with Cade he also had a mate to kick a ball or to watch footy or basketball with.

He misses those simple things the most.

Cade died two weeks before his 16th birthday in February 2023 from an aggressive cancer called Ewing's sarcoma.

These are the most common solid tumours in children and are heartbreakingly hard to detect, which means they are often not found until they have caused havoc in young bodies.

Sarcomas start in tissue such as fat, muscle, bone and cartilage and can develop anywhere.

When sports-mad Cade complained of a sore shoulder in 2021 and then a niggling pain in his knees and a sore shin, his GP put it down to a sports injury and low iron.

Watts and wife Anita took him to physiotherapists, but when Cade woke one morning with a lump on his head they went to a hospital emergency department.

"They told us that he might be having some issues at school," Watts said. "Which we knew was not the case."

Cade was sent home with a referral for an ultrasound on his scapula (shoulder blade).

"We then got an MRI



Jason Watts and sons Ashton and Millar; and (above) Cade who was claimed by cancer last year. Main picture: Wayne Taylor

referral for his scapula, knee and head from his GP, where it was discovered he had cancer."

Admitted to hospital, Cade underwent 16 rounds of chemotherapy, 20 blood/platelet transfusions and 40 rounds of radiation.

"He went through a lot," Watts says. "But his determination (on treatment) put him into remission."

Their joy was short-lived. Five months later the cancer returned, aggressive and deadly.

His father said Cade did chemotherapy at home to try to delay the inevitable.

"We tried so hard to find something for him in the way of a clinical trial, anything that could help him," Watts said. "There was nothing available in Australia and overseas they were not

accepting patients because of Covid.

"Our hope now is the Hudson Institute will continue its research so there are options available for other kids going through cancer.

"For me personally it was like, with cancer you don't physically see it early, but you certainly see it at the end."

The family was with Cade at home when he died peacefully on February 3, 2023. Watts' grief remains raw.

Softly spoken, it is not easy for him to open up about the loss, but he says the counselling is helping.

"It just straightens me up a bit and gets me through, you know, my times with Cade and stuff like that," Watts said. "It's the best thing I've ever done, because ... the grief just takes you to too many places."

Watts still looks physically tough – not that surprising for the man known as a handy small forward who led the Western Bulldogs' goalkicking in 1996 and played 57 games before leaving the club at the end of the 1998 season. He now coaches the Frankston Bombers under-19s.

His sporting ability came in handy when with family and friends he launched a fundraiser for sarcoma research at the Hudson Institute.

Called Climbing for Cade, there were 21 on that first brutal walk up Victoria's highest peak, Mt Bogong.

Playing a big part in organising it was Watts' great mate Jon Ballantyne, a former Bulldogs teammate.

"It was extremely tough doing that walk," Watts says.

But that was the point. Cade had been through so much and Watts says the walk is what his adventurous son would have wanted.

So while Watts will enjoy time today with Ashton, 18, and Millar, 14, he also misses hearing Cade call out "Morning, Mum, morning, Dad" as he did every day, and at night "love you, Mum, love you, Dad".

"I miss him dearly," Watts said. "Kicking a footy or watching basketball or footy, or talking about the Bulldogs. They were pretty big with me and him."

"It's the things you can't do with your kids anymore, to watch them grow and guide them into adults, that's the thing that gets you."

Climbing for Cade along with a fundraising event at Cade's former school,

Frankston High, and the sale of beanies branded with his nickname Cade'O have already helped raise \$24,000 for research at the Hudson.

The money will go towards a lab led by Pouya Faridi and Grace Huang, who are working to develop a new cell line model for finding vaccine targets for Ewing's sarcoma.

Watts says the Mt Bogong climb was a challenge "up to a point" and now they are seeking their next challenging event to continue to fund the research in Cade's memory.

Watt remembers a son who was "pretty unique" and his pride that at Cade's funeral, attended by more than 500 people, he saw how universally loved his son was.

"He was just a caring kid with dreams of playing footy and becoming a sports physio," he said.

"He was bright, and really good at sport. It is just sad that at 14 he was diagnosed with pretty much a life sentence."

Now, Watts says, the goal will be to help find a cure for the disease that claimed Cade.

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To buy a \$45 Cade'O beanie to help fund the research, email: neitzwattsy@optusnet.com