Cancer Recovery Playing Out on the Field: Coach Mike Lemos Takes on A Tough Opponent

After a Stage 3 colon cancer diagnosis and emergency surgery, Tracy High football coach Mike Lemos is approaching his recovery the same way he approaches the game of football—with determination, optimism, and a team behind him.

For Tracy High football coach Mike Lemos, the game of football has always been about preparation, perseverance, teamwork, and overcoming adversity. Now, those same principles are guiding him through what may be the toughest challenge of his life.

Lemos arrived at Tracy High in 2022 after coaching at Dos Palos, Los Banos, and Pacheco. Since then, he has embraced the opportunity to coach at Tracy, build relationships with players and fellow coaches, and become part of a community that he has come to appreciate deeply.

Life was moving along as expected until approximately two years ago, when Lemos began experiencing bouts of fatigue and stomach problems. He visited doctors, made dietary adjustments, and continued trying to identify the source of his symptoms. Unfortunately, the problems came and went, and the underlying cause remained undetected.

During this football season, however, the pain became increasingly difficult to ignore.

Early in the week of October 19, as the Bulldogs prepared for their game against Lincoln, Lemos left practice early and headed to the emergency room. What followed was some life changing news.

"They admitted me right away, did an emergency colonoscopy, found that I had Stage 3 colon cancer, and prepared me for Saturday surgery," Lemos recalled.

A Hospital Bed, a Football Game, and a Team's Support

While Lemos was preparing for surgery, his players were preparing for a different kind of battle on the football field.

The JV Bulldogs entered the Lincoln game undefeated at 7-0. As game time approached, Coach Nelly shared a special note that Lemos had prepared for the team, allowing him to be part of the evening even though he couldn't be on the sidelines.

From his hospital bed, Lemos followed reports from the field as the game unfolded. The first half was close, and despite everything happening around him, his coaching instincts remained firmly focused on the game.

"I was stressed hearing how close the game was and knowing defensive adjustments needed to be made," he said.

At halftime, Coach Guillen made the necessary defensive adjustments, and the Bulldogs responded by pulling ahead in the second half to secure their eighth consecutive victory.

But the most memorable moment came after the final whistle.

Coach Guillen Facetimed Lemos, connecting him by phone with the players and coaching staff. From the hospital, Lemos was able to share in the excitement and emotion of the team's victory.

"It was an emotional time for me, and I was really put more at ease that evening as surgery approached," Lemos said.

For a coach who has invested so much in his players, that phone call was about much more than a football score. It was a reminder that the relationships built on the field extend far beyond the game itself.

The First Battle: Surgery

That Saturday's surgery brought another significant moment in Lemos' fight.

Surgeons removed a softball-sized tumor along with approximately one-third of his colon. Following the procedure, the surgeon expressed confidence that they had successfully removed the cancerous growth.

It was encouraging news, but Lemos understood that the journey wasn't over. The next phase would involve additional treatment to address any remaining cancer cells and reduce the risk of the disease returning or having spread beyond the colon.

After consulting with his oncologist, Lemos is pursuing a three-month course of chemotherapy and oral medication. Treatment is expected to begin soon.

The recovery process and potential side effects will affect his ability to fully officiate wrestling this winter. However, he remains optimistic about returning to the football field in the spring.

"I'm nervous, but very optimistic. Like a football opponent, we are going to defeat this and win," Lemos said.

A Community As Advertised

Throughout this experience, Lemos has discovered just how meaningful the Tracy community can be when someone is facing a difficult challenge.

When he was considering the move to Tracy coaching in 2022, he heard plenty of positive things about the school, its football program, and the surrounding community. After being here, he says

those expectations have not only been met but exceeded. “Now that I have lived it, I can tell you all that this place is special."

He continued, "From top to bottom, I have felt so welcomed. I have experienced the pride and tradition, and now recently with my health struggles, I've been touched by so many. I've got nothing but positive things to say about Tracy."

A Message to Others: Listen to Your Body

As Lemos begins the next chapter of his recovery, he hopes his experience will encourage others to take their health seriously.

He has two important messages he wants people to remember:

1. **Don't ignore what your body might be telling you.** If something doesn't feel right, seek medical attention. Get checked early, ask questions, and don't dismiss symptoms that persist or return.
2. **Appreciate the people and community around you.** Lemos has experienced firsthand how much the support of others can mean during life's most difficult moments. The relationships we build matter, and sometimes those relationships become our greatest source of strength.

The Game Isn't Over

There will undoubtedly be ups and downs in the months ahead as Lemos begins treatment and works toward recovery. But if there is one thing his players and fellow coaches have learned about him, it's that he isn't someone who backs away from a challenge.

He has faced opponents on the football field, helped prepare young athletes for the challenges of competition, and now finds himself applying those same lessons to a much more personal fight.

"Like a football game, there are going to be ups and downs in my immediate future, but I'm going to conquer this. I feel very optimistic," Lemos said.