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Photo by Tracy Dreslinski
 Avondale softball coach Lisa Allain, talking with members of the Lake Orion staff before a recent game, has guided her program to a 17-12 record.

Always a coach

Less than a year after losing her husband to cancer, Allain has restored Avondale softball program

By Mike Moore
 C & G Sports Writer

AUBRUN HILLS — It was the same routine she had done for nearly a decade, and there was no time she enjoyed it more than right after softball practice.

So when Auburn Hills Avondale coach Lisa Allain got to her truck following the first day of tryouts earlier this spring, she began dialing her husband’s cell phone without the slightest bit of hesitation.

Before her seatbelt had clicked into place, the seven numbers had been punched and the phone was pressed to her ear.

Then came that reality, that sudden reminder that for just a few innocent moments had eluded her.

Allain had dialed that number hundreds of times and heard Keith’s familiar “hello” on the other end. This call, instinctively placed some eight months after Keith had lost his battle with cancer, would go painfully unanswered.

“It was just so instinctive,” she said last week. “I didn’t even think about it. We had such a great tryout, and the girls looked so good. I just wanted to talk to him and tell him all about it.”

The girls that had Allain so excited to the start the season have lived up to their coach’s expectations. They have not only put Avondale softball back on the map, they have helped begin the healing process.

‘Something wasn’t right’

Allain and the Yellow Jackets were midway through the 2008 season when her husband, Keith, started feeling ill. At first, the thought was that discomfort was

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related to a recent hernia surgery, but after continued pain and a trip to the doctor, a five centimeter mass was discovered on his pancreas.

“The initial results didn’t give us an official diagnosis,” Allain explained, “but we knew something wasn’t right.”

Allain and her husband met with a surgeon near the end of May, where they learned Keith was dealing with stage four pancreatic cancer.

“There’s no cure for that,” Allain said. “They gave us anywhere from six months to two years.”

As she spoke, recalling the tests, the visits to the doctor, and the dreaded news she and her family had to endure, her voice never trailed off. She spoke strong and with an unyielding conviction.

“Some of my first thoughts were ‘what can I do for Keith, for my sons and for my family,’” she continued. “At the same time, we have a dentist office that we ran, and I had to try and figure out what to do with my softball team. Essentially, I decided I had to keep things as normal as possible. I had to stay strong and dedicate myself to the people that needed me.”

Allain would finish out the season missing just one game, “my first in nine years,” she explained. When the final out was recorded, she did a masterful job of balancing everything on her plate while guiding a team that was 0-23 in 2007 to a 5-22 record. Never once did she consider quitting.

“The softball field was my safe place,” Allain explained. “It was a place of comfort, where I could do what I loved — coaching and mentoring. It was the stress relief I needed.”

On July 8, roughly two months after being diagnosed, Keith passed away at the age of 50.

Her best team ever

That night of tryouts wasn’t the first, or last, time Allain has caught herself instinctually reaching out for Keith. She said she still looks over to the gate by her team’s dugout for him; he would usually bring their two sons — Alec, 13, and Bryce, 7 — to just about every game.

“There are times I have to remind myself he isn’t coming,” Allain said. But she’s trudged onward with her home life, work at the dentist office and with the softball team.

A coach is what she is, and coaching is what she does — nothing was going to change that. What has changed, however, is the shape of the Avondale program. Winless just two seasons ago, the girls were 17-12 overall at press time, 12-6 in the Oakland Activities Association White Division.

“This is probably the best group of girls I have ever coached,” Allain boasted. “It’s been so rewarding to be part of a season like this.”

Asked about the perfect finish to this season, she just laughed and said, “a district title, that would be awesome.”

Staying positive

Allain said people constantly ask her how she has managed her life with such professionalism since Keith’s passing. She simply returns their question with one of her own.

“What choice do I have?” she said. “I’ll still break down and the tears will flow out of nowhere, but I’ve always been a positive person. It is what it is, and I have to live with it.”

She’s drawn strength from her softball team. It gives her a reason to smile, even during the hardest days. She entered the season expecting to finish around the .500 mark, and while she never verbally dedicated this season to Keith, “subconsciously, I think I’ve done everything for him in one way or another.”

She's also done it for herself.

“Along with everything else this life has to offer right now, softball has kept me grounded, organized and even distracted,” she said. “Life can be cruel, but I’ve always believed it’s what you make of it. I chose to handle this the best way I could. I’ve always been positive. My hope is that there’s someone out there who can learn something from that.”

Always a coach. Always coaching.

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