

## Back in the circle

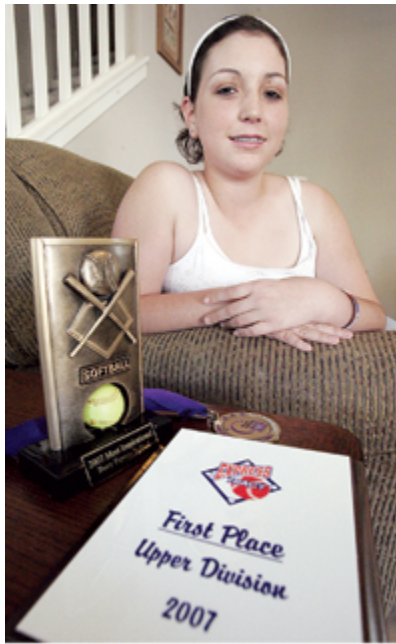
Chris Roberts/Tracy Press Saturday, 30 June 2007

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It's the championship game. Bottom of the last inning and you're the star pitcher, out on the mound. Your team's up two with two outs to go. Somehow — through mistakes, fate and softball — the unthinkable happens and the other team finds a way to win.

Fast forward two seasons and the team is back. You are back, out on the mound and the team's up again. But you're going to win this time — a softball game is nothing. It's easy.

You beat cancer.



Paige Fernandez was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia when she was 11. At one point during treatment, she was too drained from chemotherapy to do much but lie on the couch. Now, she's back throwing fastballs to her mom (below) and leading her competitive softball team to the Tracy Express Fastpitch Softball 13-and-under championship. Glenn Moore/Tracy Press



When she was 11, Paige Fernandez was one of 3,000 Americans nationwide, and one of even fewer children, diagnosed with acute lymphostatic leukemia, a cancer with no known risk factors or exact causes. It attacked her white blood cells, sapped her strength and immune system and would have eventually ate away her bones.

She started to feel fatigued during the fall ball season. Her family took her to see the professionals, guessing it was a routine disease like mono.

Doctors found cancer — but with her white blood cells five times stronger than they would have been at a typical diagnosis (50,000 instead of 10,000).

She dodged short-term bleeding and potentially long-term anemia and missed only one season of softball — playing the 2006 season only a year into her 2½ year treatment. This year, her R&B Construction Ghostriders won the Tracy Express Fastpitch Softball 13-and-under title. She was the only pitcher to throw in every game, struck out six in four innings of work in the trophy contest, and was declared cancer-free April 21.

Paige Fernandez, 2 — Everyone Else, 0.

"To remain highly athletic throughout the treatment ... really reflects a very high level of motivation," said Dr. Kent Jolly of Kaiser Permanente Sacramento, where Paige was hospitalized for eight days following her Jan. 5, 2005, diagnosis as well as several times throughout her treatment. "Most kids find the treatment too daunting to maintain normal activities."

Not that Fernandez's resiliency was a surprise.

"(As a player), she's got a great attitude, she's always in the game, and when she's out there she doesn't want anyone to get the best of her," said Mike Calmes, her coach in 2004 and 2007. "I made it a point to make sure I could get her (this season)."

Her recovery was still a challenge.

She had loads of support from her family, but softball was out of the question, and she was withdrawn from school — with too few white blood cells to fight off infection, she'd get sick. But that wasn't so bad.



Chemotherapy was harder. She lost 10 percent of her weight, was too exhausted to do anything but lie on the couch in between weekly blood draws, took up to 14 pills a day (ground into dust and put into a shake by her father, Fred Fernandez) and had medicine put into two “spark-plug like things in her chest,” her mother Doreen says.

Paige also lost her hair — eyebrows and all.

“Oh God,” she says now, laughing.

She was in remission after four weeks, went to Kelly School with a wig on underneath a ball cap after a year of homeschooling, and came back to play softball right after she had the “spark plugs” taken out, almost exactly a year after diagnosis.

It was only a year because she played softball — the treatment is a year longer and the chance for relapse higher among boys. Paige had a little luck, too — 75 percent of treated cases never have a relapse, according to Jolly.

Now 14 years old, she'll have monthly checkups for a year and periodic visits until she's 21. But from the sound of it, she got over the cancer faster than some athletes would have gotten over that loss, so long ago.

“It went by so fast,” she said. “I can't believe I'm already off treatment.”