



Grace Lombardi makes an impressive softball comeback at Red Bank Catholic

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The Spring of 2023 was supposed to be a special time for Grace Lombardi.

A gifted softball player, she was set to close out her middle school years in Ocean Township, and then play a very competitive summer season before enrolling as a freshman at her dream high school, Red Bank Catholic, which is where her mom, Tracey was the former head coach.

But before any of that happened, something went terribly wrong.

On March 23rd of that year, Grace told her mom and her dad, Bart, that she felt pain in her arm and neck. That in itself was unusual, since she was never one to complain about anything that might keep her off the field.

“She’s tough,” Tracey said. “So when something hurts, then something really hurts.”

She rested a few days, but things worsened. In fact, she was soon in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Jersey Shore Medical Center, after the symptoms expanded to tingling and numbness in both arms and legs, as well as muscle spasms.



Imaging discovered two bulging discs and something much more ominous - an area of trauma behind her spine.

Over the course of several weeks, different neurosurgeons had different opinions, and to make it all especially nerve wracking for the family, which also includes Grace’s older brother, Cole, and younger brother, Bryce, was the growing uncertainty. And all the while, Grace was still experiencing recurring symptoms.

More testing revealed what was likely a tumor on her cervical spine. All sorts of troubling possibilities were presented - including a glioblastoma (a brain tumor.)

“I had no idea what that meant,” Grace said.

Her mom, however, obviously did.

"I had immediately asked if it could be cancer," Tracey said. "The doctor said he'd like us to do an MRI with contrast to get a better idea, and the location of it was in her spine near her neck. He got the results and asked us to come in without Grace. He said that it didn't look good, and it could be glioblastoma."

The next step was to develop a further plan to deal with the situation. And to make it all worse, the anxiety was building since the process was taking weeks.



Grace Lombardi flanked by her brothers, Bryce (left) and Cole (right)

Ultimately, surgery was to be performed by Dr. Thomas Steineke at JFK University Medical Center in Edison. There was also more: depending on the structure of the tumor in relation to the bone in her spine, he might have to place rods into her neck.

After an eight hour surgery on May 9, 2023, the tumor was removed, and no rods were required.

After more time waiting for the biopsy results, he found the tumor to be an osteochondroma, which is rare bone tumor. Most importantly of all, it was also found to be benign.

"We didn't find out the results until two or three weeks later," Grace said. "I didn't really know a lot, which was good, so I wasn't thinking it was that big a deal until the day of the surgery. Then I was like 'Wow, this is really happening.'"

With her diagnosis looking brighter, the next step was to ease back into softball, which made her case somewhat different from other student-athletes who've battled back from serious medical situations. Because for Grace, it wasn't just a matter of feeling better health wise. It was also a matter physically returning to action after a complicated surgery on the top of her spine and in the area of her neck and head.

Having gone through the whole episode, and then not being able to play softball for unknown length of time, took an additional toll. She was ultimately cleared to play for her travel team late that fall.

"I wasn't myself," Grace said. "Nothing was clicking. I felt like a new player, that my body wasn't connected. I didn't want to injure my neck, I was scared to dive, and in the batter's box, you also have to turn. There was a lot that was still going on, physically and mentally."

Last year, she debuted as a freshman for Red Bank Catholic, but was nowhere near 100 percent while recovering and also playing an elite varsity schedule. Still, she had 26 hits in 79 at-bats for a .329 batting average. In her first game, she tripled in a 6-2 victory over Wall, which is the school where her mom was an All-State player in the 1990s.

This year, Grace is fully back to form and has established herself as one of the best players in the state. A lefty-hitting second baseman who bats third in the Red Bank Catholic lineup, she's playing hard and most importantly, not playing scared. In fact, her offensive numbers have been among the tops in New Jersey.

As big of a story as her medical journey may be, there's another aspect to Grace which adds an additional dimension to all that she endured.

Her brother Cole, who is two years older and a senior at Ocean Township High School, has Prader-Willi syndrome, which is a rare genetic disorder that manifests itself in multiple ways. Cole has been hospitalized in Pediatric Intensive Care Units several times throughout his own life, and needs much extra care and attention.

Grace has always been a supportive sister to Cole, and has done a great job of handling situations where she has to sacrifice her own needs in deference to her brother, which is hard for any teenager.

But then, almost out of nowhere, Grace became the one who needed help. It was a major adjustment for herself and her family.

"I've seen him go through a whole lot, so it definitely helped me stay calm," Grace said. "I've learned so much through him. He's a great brother."

"They call siblings of special needs children the Glass Child," Tracey said. "They give up a lot of attention, they have to have more patience and understanding and empathy. They just grow differently."

Grace's journey has certainly made her parents proud.

"I'm extremely proud of her perseverance, strength and courage," Tracey said. "To have to go through all that adversity as a young kid, she's handled it with maturity and grace, and the way she's bounced back has been special."

"The one thing that was hardest for me with the surgery was that I couldn't play softball," Grace said. "That was the thing that I couldn't handle. And it was hard seeing everyone else playing and having to sit there. I'm really happy to be back and playing and being a part of my team."