

Last Hurrah for a Hero



Don Shirley at the 2005 LFL Media Challenge.

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A round of applause for Don Shirley, the man who served as the inspiration for Lift For Life.

The spectacle that was [Penn State's](#) 17-10 win over Ohio State at Beaver Stadium Oct. 8 assaulted the senses: the sound of 109,839 fans roaring in unison; the dizzying sight of the students hopping to the staccato beat of "Zombie Nation," shaking a sea of alabaster pompons; the feel of the steel stands quivering.

So you may have been distracted during a presentation between the third and fourth quarters, when representatives of [Lift For Life](#) presented a check for \$30,000 to the Kidney Cancer Association. LFL, now entering its fourth year, was created by Penn State football players, who use an annual conditioning competition as the centerpiece of their effort to raise money and awareness for the fight against kidney cancer.

There were smiles and handshakes all around when the presentation was made in the south end zone. The most recent contribution boosted LFL's overall payout to the KCA to \$81,000. Because the treatment of kidney cancer is so unique compared to treatments for more familiar forms of the disease, every penny is vital.

It was another great moment in the short history of a great movement. Yet in a cruel twist, as LFL took another giant step toward establishing itself as a permanent part of the Penn State (and perhaps national) landscape, the man behind the challenge was in no shape to lift for his life - he was fighting for it.

Twelve years go, Don Shirley, a high school English teacher and baseball coach, was diagnosed with kidney cancer and had a kidney removed. Five years later he was declared cancer-free, beating a statistical trend that says two in five people who contract kidney cancer die within a half decade. But in September 2002, a routine X-ray showed a grapefruit-sized tumor in the area where his kidney had been. The cancer was back, and he immediately began treatment.

Don's son, Scott, was a walk-on receiver at Penn State at the time, an Academic All-Big Ten

performer. Feeling helpless, Scott enlisted a couple of teammates, and, by the following spring, had devised the concept of Lift For Life. In it, the team's annual midsummer conditioning competition was turned into a fund-raiser, with anyone willing to contribute being allowed to watch such events as the iron cross, the coach buddy push and the giant tire flip. The idea caught on, and over the course of the next two and a half years LFL - the first charity run exclusively by student-athletes - grew.

At about the same time LFL began, Don Shirley had two surgeries to remove the tumor. He somehow beat even longer odds this time and began living a relatively normal life. This past April, Don even participated in the Lift For Life Media Challenge, outlasting a media partner who called for a garbage can on more than one occasion.

But in May, tests showed a speck on his liver. Two weeks later, the speck had grown into a lesion. It was cancer again. And by June, it had spread throughout his body.

So Don Shirley went back on conventional cancer treatments. In July, with FDA-approved therapies exhausted, he began a clinical trial that stopped the spread but not the residual damage of the cancer already in his body. As of early October, he was still experiencing pain, nausea, confusion and shortness of breath.

This time, there would be no miracle comeback. Two weeks ago, the Shirley family was advised to seek hospice care because Don, who still wore a Lift For Life T-shirt every day, was showing "signs of impending death." Scott, long since graduated from PSU, had taken a leave of absence from his job as project engineer with Clark Construction in Bethesda, Md., to help his mom. Don required near constant assistance, which was more than one person could handle.

Don was embarrassed by the help he needed. Which, while understandable, was preposterous. This is, after all, a man who spent his life helping people, through teaching and coaching, and with the dignity he displayed while fighting a horrible disease and the courage he showed while enduring clinical trials. And a man who served as the inspiration for a charity that will save folks long after he is gone.

Don Shirley died Monday at about 5 p.m. He leaves behind a strong family.

And a powerful legacy.

"When this all happened, I said this is bigger than my dad or any one person," Scott explained a few days before his father passed. "There are diseases out there people aren't fighting against that we should be. Kidney cancer is becoming better understood now, and I feel we've helped in some way."

If you'd like to help, visit <http://www.upliftingathletes.org/>