

Gabe Blaylock: motivation behind the man

JACKSON – Six-year-old Finn Blaylock lay in bed one Saturday afternoon, staring intently at his dad's laptop computer.

Most children would spend their weekend outside playing with friends or huddled on a couch watching cartoons. Not Finn. He was in Blair E. Batson



JOE PEARSON
editor

“*Everything Finn's been through has motivated me.*”

– *Gabe Blaylock,*
senior swimmer

Children's hospital surrounded by nurses, hooked to machines and watching his big brother Gabe

compete in the state swim meet streamed live to his dad's computer.

At the same time, Gabe, a St. Joe senior and member of the Bruin boys swim team, stood on the edge of the Olympic-sized swimming pool at the Tupelo Aquatic Center ready for the 200-medley relay.

ARCHRIVALS

The Bruins entered the afternoon finals of the swim meet as underdogs to cross-county rival

St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Ridgeland, just a few miles south of St. Joe's Madison campus.

St. Andrew's performed exceptionally well in prelims earlier in the day. The Bruins needed to place well in every event, including the 200-meter relay, if they hoped to knock off the Saints.

It was a fight Gabe and other Bruins were determined to win. At the same time, Gabe knew his little

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brother was facing his own important fight. Last spring, after complaining his leg hurt, doctors diagnosed Finn with a rare form of cancer in an advanced stage.

That was the start of many doctor visits and hospital stays throughout the summer and into the fall. Finn hasn't even been able to return to St. Richard Catholic School, where he would be in the first grade.

"Everything Finn's been through has motivated me," Gabe said recently. "I think, 'If he can be miserable and still pull through, what the heck is a 5 a.m. practice?'"

LONGTIME SWIMMER

Gabe has been on the Bruin swim team since he started at St. Joe as a seventh-grader in fall 2013.

After five years of hard work and attending daily, rigorous, 5 a.m. practices at the University Wellness Center, Gabe landed a spot on the Bruins' No. 1 relay team.

Gabe juggles a lot of roles. Besides swimming, he also is a drummer in the Bruin band and performs at pep rallies and football games. What little free time he had this fall, he often spent with Finn.

Just like everyone else at St. Joe, Gabe is a part of a larger family – one not constrained to genetic heritage and that takes care of each other in times of need. With 400 students in Grades 7 through 12, they often form unbreakable bonds of friendship that last a lifetime.

Just this fall, St. Joe sold gold T-shirts that said "Bruins Go Gold," increasing awareness of childhood

cancer and raising money for Finn's expenses. Volunteers also collected money at home football games to help offset Finn's medical expenses.

On Wednesday, Oct. 10, the St. Joe community staged FinnFest, an after-school event with games, entertainment and food that attracted hundreds and raised more than \$10,000 to help with Finn's medical expenses.

And that brings me back to the state swim meet. This event didn't raise money for Finn. But Finn saw it as a chance to celebrate his big brother who had been by his side throughout the summer and since the first diagnosis.

BRUINS WIN

It was Saturday, Oct. 27.

Bruin swimmers had a good morning at the Tupelo Aquatic Center. St. Andrew's boys team had better times in the pool, but St. Joe swimmers still believed they had a chance to win it all that afternoon.

"Gabe Blaylock asked for two things this year: He wanted to be on the podium, and he wanted to win a state championship," Bruin swim coach Lauri Collins said.

It was in the afternoon when Gabe climbed onto the starting block. Other members of the relay team stood nearby ready for their turn. The crowd was unusually quiet, and the enclosed building didn't render its normal echo.

The starting buzzer sounded. Gabe dove in. He swiftly glided the length of the 25-yard pool. He returned. He touched the wall.

Teammate and fellow senior Jacob Harkins dove from the block to complete his leg of the relay.

In the end, the team placed first with a time of 1:43:45. A few minutes later, the Bruins won the 400-meter relay, sealing a victory over St. Andrew's, winning a state championship and completing both of Gabe's wishes.

The swim team erupted in screams, and Gabe embraced his mom. Back in Jackson, Finn and his dad finished watching the meet live on the computer.

The swim meet made up for a Saturday spent in the hospital hooked to machines with nurses in-and-out of his room. From his hospital bed, Finn remained excited.

"We beat Saint Andrew's butt."