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Kenechi Udeze beat cancer, but lost his NFL career; now hopes to help others



Kenechi Udeze, a former first-round NFL draft pick from USC, lost his professional football career to cancer. Now he aims to help others in their fight against the disease. Chad Coleman/Bellevue Reporter

By [JOEL WILLITS](#)
Bellevue Reporter Sports Writer
Today, 10:43 AM · **UPDATED**

"What I'm here to tell you guys ... what I'm trying to tell you is that life is very seldom going to go the way you want it to go. But what are you going to do?"-**Kenechi Udeze**, May 14, 2010, addressing the University of Southern California student-athlete graduates.

Kenechi Udeze couldn't shake the headaches.

They'd started in Minnesota, where the former first-round NFL draft pick out of USC had just finished his fourth season with the Vikings. Killer headaches that morphed into migraines when the 6-foot-4, 281-pound defensive end went home to California for the offseason. Migraines that couldn't be stopped with Motrin, or anything else. He couldn't shake these headaches like he so often did the massive arms of a reaching offensive tackle.

A few days later, Udeze woke up dizzy. The then-25-year-old NFL rising star checked himself into the hospital.

On Feb. 6, 2008, doctors called Udeze while he was watching SportsCenter at his wife's parents home in Idaho. You have a highly-aggressive form of cancer, they said. We need to treat this right away.

The diagnosis: acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), a cancer of the blood and bone marrow.

"I didn't believe it," said Udeze, now a Bellevue resident and an assistant strength coach with the University of Washington football team. "I did not see it coming."

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The next two years would put Udeze through rounds of chemotherapy, a bone marrow transplant and even the end of his young NFL career. But none of that was on his mind on that February day. One day, you're an NFL player. The next, you're fighting for your life.

"My mindset was that I was going to be able to play that season," he said. "I mean, life was good. I was living my dream. I had no idea what my body was about to go through."

Udeze flew to Minnesota the following day. He was hospitalized for 24 days with a dangerously low white blood cell count.

Even before the diagnosis, it was a turbulent time in Udeze's life, despite the perceived glitz and glamour of the NFL lifestyle. He had just become a father to his daughter, Bailey. His marriage to now ex-wife Terrica was admittedly already on the rocks. Now, rounds of chemotherapy lay ahead.

A Long Road Ahead

His mother moved to Minnesota, as did his brother, Thomas Barnes, who quit his job as a corporate lawyer in Denver.

"I don't think anybody could go through that by themselves," Udeze said. "I knew what the concept of family was. It made me really thankful for the people I have around me. I knew I was going to be alright."

The hardest part for Udeze throughout the chemo was the way it changed his body. A self-proclaimed "workout guy," he'd originally weighed as much as 370-pounds in high school, arriving at USC at 340. His NFL playing weight was listed around 281-pounds and he'd come down to 8 percent body fat. He was a physical specimen - and the drugs would wreck havoc on his body.

"I felt myself going soft with all the drugs," Udeze said. "It was taking the life out of me. My energy level was down and I was overwhelmed. My body did a 180 on me."

After four months, the cancer went into remission. During that time, doctors tested his siblings for a possible match for a bone marrow transplant. Doctors estimated his chances for survival without the transplant at 17 percent.

His brother, Eche, was a 50 percent match. Sister Chinasa was about to be tested when doctors found that Barnes, six years older than Udeze, was a perfect match.

"He's the reason that I'm here today," Udeze said.

Recovery

The next two months were spent preparing Udeze for the procedure. Because of his excellent physical shape prior to the diagnosis, his body responded well to all the drugs and radiation.

The transplant was done in mid-July and Udeze spent 12 days in the hospital recovering. He had dreamed that the process would allow him to play football again in the 2008-2009 season. Those dreams were dashed when he was told by doctors to spend the next year resting. For the first 100 days, he had to wear a mask anytime he left the house in order to ward off any possible germs.

"It was like going through an entire reset on my body," he said.

Now in the recovery stage, Udeze had time to think. His perspective was changing. Early on he was depressed, often times angry and easily agitated. He couldn't understand, he said. The Vikings placed him on injury reserve in July, officially ending his return that year. What hurt him the most was knowing his mother's greatest joy had been watching him play football, first at USC and then in Minnesota. He felt he had let her down. He even called his brother, Barnes, the bone marrow donor, to ask if he was a failure.

Slowly, things started to get a little better.

"My whole life changed from the way I look at things," Udeze said. "Every day I learned more. I became more patient."

Still, when he watched the Vikings play in that 2008 season opener, he cried for the first three quarters.

A New Career

Udeze recovered enough to attend the Vikings minicamps in the summer of 2009, but side effects from his chemotherapy stunted his comeback. Udeze suffered from peripheral neuropathy in his feet, nerve damage that caused numbness and affected his balance and ability to push off. Despite being in physical condition comparable to his earlier playing days - including gaining back most of his lost strength and muscle mass - Udeze couldn't push through his feet, critical for an NFL defensive lineman.

"I didn't want to come back and be a charity case," he said. "I could have probably made the team, but I knew I couldn't be the same player. I understood that playing at the highest possible level was no longer in my future."

In late July, just before the start of training camp, he officially announced his retirement from professional football. He would end his career with 117 tackles and 11 sacks in 51 games.

It was time to move on. In May Udeze graduated from USC with his degree in sociology, even speaking at the commencement ceremony six years after leaving the school for the NFL. He was hired by Steve Sarkisian, who he has known since he was 18, to the Huskies staff, a role that has given him a new perspective - and an ability to impart some words of wisdom on those young athletes he now coaches.

"I tell them everyday that it's a privilege," he said. "And just like that, it can be taken from you, just like it was taken from me."

Now a few weeks away from two years of being cancer-free, the 27-year-old Udeze is happy with his place. He's enjoying his role at the UW and he's happily involved with several local charities. He says he'll be encouraging potential bone marrow donors to sign up at all Huskies home games, citing the need for underrepresented ethnic donors.

On June 20, he'll participate in the LIVESTRONG Challenge in Seattle, where runners, walkers and bikers will gather to participate in a 5K run/walk or multi-distance bike rides to raise funds that go directly to cancer-fighting programs and research.



"I was one of those people who never really looked in to going above and beyond to help before the diagnosis," Udeze said. "This helps me think I do the right thing with my life."

Udeze says now that his experience taught him two things: never give up and quitting is not an option. And although his playing days are behind him, he says he's coming to terms with what happened to him.

"I had a lot of questions," he said. "And in time, I've found the answers I was looking for."

For more information on the LIVESTRONG Challenge on June 20 at the Seattle Center, visit www.livestrong.org.

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