

Editors note: Rich Palzewic is a former Wallace resident, now residing in Green Bay. He is a freelance sports writer for the Green Bay Press-Gazette and former manager of the Mid-County Mavericks American Legion baseball team (1994-96). He recently had the opportunity to interview John Pesola and his wife Laurie, from Menominee, about John's recent battle with head/neck cancer.

BY RICH PALZEWIC

You have to go back almost 20 years to find an outfielder like John Pesola in the mid-county area.

The year was 1994, Pesola's first and last year of playing for the Mid-County Mavericks, a new legion club that played its games on an old diamond basically in the middle of a cow pasture.

Eighteen years and a lot of time and money later, the Mavericks still play on that diamond in Daggett, but it's no longer a field overgrown in weeds. It's a first-class ball field thanks to a lot of hard work.

Pesola, a 1995 Stephenson graduate, was as gifted as they came. His effortless strides in the outfield gave fans and coaches the confidence that every time a ball was hit his way, it was an automatic out.

Like a lot of 18-year olds, Pesola had his struggles in life, but nothing compared to the challenges he faced long after his playing days had passed him by.

Pesola bit what he thought was a canker sore on his tongue while eating, and after treating the sore several times with no success, he sought medical attention when it became difficult to eat food on the right side of his mouth.

On March 3, 2011, he was diagnosed with cancer. A PET scan a short time later revealed the cancer had spread and that surgery would be required to remove the dime-size mass on his tongue and 23 lymph nodes in the affected area.

"In a month's time, it had gone from a stage I to a stage IV," said Pesola. "My tongue and neck swelled up and my jaw started to hurt."

"They told us it was the 'hairy' kind, the kind that was spreading fast," said Laurie Pesola, John's wife.

The March 28 surgery was successful and doctors felt like they removed all the cancer, but after Pesola was given two weeks to heal from his neck dissection, they felt he needed to continue with more chemo and radiation to be sure.

36 doses of radiation and three chemo sessions later, Pesola finally completed his treatment in early June of last year and was back to work two months later at KUS when he began to feel better.

"For about a month after the radiation treatments ended, I couldn't talk and was bleeding (in the neck area) from the scabs, like a sunburn," Pesola said. "I lost 65 pounds during it all and looked like an 80-year old man.

"I wanted to quit after the second round of chemo, but the doctors wouldn't let me and I'm glad they didn't," said Pesola, eyeing his two daughters, Maria and Mackenzi.

"After John got done with chemo, the doctor told him to eat everything he liked for a couple of months," said Laurie. "And now that he's put on some weight, the doctors are telling him he's eating too much and needs to cut back," she laughed.

Although Pesola is feeling better, lifting weights and feels pretty much back to normal, he will never be considered in remission because his cancer was stage IV and

wasn't caught at an early enough stage. Pesola's youth and fight do make his chances for survival better than most, though.

Pesola is feeling good enough where he and his family will be at the Hope Memorial Relay this Sunday at the Stephenson Sports Complex. The event - which raises money for local cancer patients and their families - has given out over \$75,000 over six years in gift cards and checks.

Pesola's advice is simple: "Don't give up. I'd go through all the chemo and radiation again if I had to. I'm living and walking proof that everyone can beat this. You just have to have that mindset."

Pesola most likely won't be remembered for his baseball prowess, but now that he's cancer-free for the time being, no one will soon forget that.