

Denver Broncos Coach Finds the Perfect Cancer Treatment Team for a Yolk Sac Tumor

Diagnosed with a yolk sac tumor, a rare cancer, in 2024, Zack Grossi was treated by University of Colorado's Laura Graham after a chance meeting in the ER.

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As pass game specialist for the Denver Broncos, Zack Grossi knows how important it is for a team to work together, executing a plan as they move the ball down the field.

"I work specifically with the wide receivers, coming up with plays," says Grossi, who has been part of the Broncos coaching staff since 2022. "It's a great group of guys, and we're looking forward to having a good year."

In 2024, when he was undergoing treatment for a yolk sac tumor with providers at the [University of Colorado Cancer Center](#), Grossi was inspired to see that same sense of teamwork among the doctors, nurses, and others who took care of him.

"Once I got the treatment plan, it became a very clear opponent," he says. "It was fourth-and-1 every day."

Symptoms he could no longer ignore

When the whole ordeal started in January 2024, Grossi chalked it up to the stress of a long season and so much time spent on the road. He had put on a few pounds, so he started working out, but he found he got winded easily. No matter how tired he was, he couldn't fall asleep. If he put his hand to the left side of his rib cage, he could feel his heart beating. Soon after the 2024-25 football season started, he developed a deep, body-racking cough. By the time the Broncos played the New York Jets on September 29, 2024, he knew he was in bad shape.

"We came back from the Jets game, and I had a horrible week. I just felt terrible," he says. "I was talking to one of our trainers, and he said, 'Let's get you in to see the doc.'"

Unusual blood work prompted the team physician to order an MRI, which revealed the problem

that had been causing Grossi's symptoms — a massive tumor in his chest.

"I had called my dad a week or two before my scans, and I said, 'I think something's wrong. I've never felt this bad,'" Grossi remembers. "Then, when you hear those words, 'You have cancer,' you start thinking about everything. Your mind starts racing. You call your family, call your loved ones. I remember I called my wife, and I said, 'Look, I have a tumor in my chest. I have cancer.' And she didn't even blink. She said, 'Well, we have to kill it.'"

Fateful moment in the ER

Plans were made to send Grossi to a cancer center in Texas, where the Broncos had connections, but days before he was scheduled to fly out, he started coughing up blood. He ended up in the emergency room at [UCHealth University of Colorado Hospital](#) on the [CU Anschutz Medical Campus](#), where the on-call oncologist just happened to be CU Cancer Center member [Laura Graham](#), MD, a specialist in the exact type of cancer with which Grossi had been diagnosed.

"I went in and met him in the emergency room that night, and he was really nervous," Graham says. "He had this plan to go somewhere else. And I said, 'Why? You don't need to go anywhere else. This is what I do, and I promise I'm going to take great care of you.'"

Yolk sac tumors explained

Graham explains that a yolk sac tumor — a type of germ cell tumor — is a rare cancer that forms in the cells that line the yolk sac of the embryo.

"They're cells that at some point are going to turn into either sperm or eggs, the sex cells for either men or women," says Graham, who serves on the National Comprehensive Cancer Network Guideline Panel for testicular and germ cell tumors. "Generally, we think of germ cell tumors as being testicular cancers, but about 1% to 2% of germ cell tumors actually start in the chest, which is probably from some abnormal migration during development."

The standard treatment for yolk sac tumors is chemotherapy, followed by surgery, so Graham got Grossi started right away on a chemo regimen that required him to stay in the hospital for the duration of the treatment.

"I told him, 'We need to start tomorrow.' These tumors grow really quickly, but they're incredibly sensitive to chemotherapy," Graham says. "Germ cell tumors were one of the first cancers that we learned we could cure with chemotherapy."

Support system

Grossi responded to the treatment almost immediately, his symptoms subsiding and his blood

markers for the cancer coming down. He developed complications, including blood clots, but he stayed the course through four rounds of chemo with the support of his family and his team.

“The day I got my diagnosis, I heard from (Broncos owners) Greg Penner and Carrie Walton Penner, his wife,” Grossi says. “I had their full support, and they never wavered. It wasn’t just a little bit of support here, a little bit of support here — it was all the way, and they wrapped their arms around me and my family like we never thought was possible. From booking the travel to making me meals when I was getting chemo to medical care to anything I needed; they were there at the drop of a hat. They were great. They couldn’t have supported me and my family more, and I think it made a big difference in my recovery.”

Grossi has similar praise for Graham, whose direct communication style was just what he needed as he was going through the chemo.

“She gave me the facts. She told me when things were good and when they were bad, and I really appreciated that,” he says. “She was always there to answer questions — I could message her on the UCHHealth app at any time, and she would get back to me right away. It was obvious to me that she’s not just working a job and going home. She’s invested in her craft, and she’s invested in the science.”

Surgery and everything after

Not only did Graham see Grossi through his chemo treatment, but she also served as a liaison to the cancer center in Texas where Grossi chose to get his surgery.

“We share patients with other cancer centers all the time,” Graham says. “This little community that treats germ cells is pretty small, so I’m in contact with most of the major oncologists who see germ cell tumors. We all communicate and share patients and share expertise.”

After a five-hour surgery that involved the removal of 15% of his right lung, Grossi is now cancer-free and back on the field working with the Broncos’ wide receivers. He goes to see Graham every few months to make sure the cancer hasn’t returned, but for now he is living life with a new sense of perspective.

“You appreciate the little moments so much more now, and they’re moments that everybody around you is taking for granted,” he says. “It can be the smallest thing, like picking your daughter up from school or traveling with the team and having a good laugh on the airplane. It can hit you at any time. I talk less and listen more now, and I try to be where my feet are every day. You don’t look ahead quite as much, because you have an appreciation for that day, and you try to live that day to the fullest.”

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