

Boston College alum Jake Goodreau of Southwick to receive Ryan Doyle Courage Award from WMass Baseball Hall of Fame

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Jake Goodreau, of Southwick, will be receiving the Ryan Doyle courage award from the Western Massachusetts Baseball Hall of Fame. (Hoang 'Leon' Nguyen / The Republican)

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For once, Boston College baseball coach Mike Gambino lied to his team.

It was January 2019 and the Eagles, with the exception of junior catcher Jake Goodreau, had re-assembled in Chestnut Hill after winter break. Gambino told the players Goodreau simply wasn't feeling well and would re-join them in a couple days. The more complicated truth was Goodreau's to tell.

A few days earlier, Goodreau found out that a seemingly innocuous swollen lymph node was really a symptom of thyroid cancer, which had already spread throughout his neck, chest and shoulders. Baseball, for the first time in his memory, was on the back-burner. Outside of Gambino, the coaches and a few of Goodreau's closest friends, no one on the team knew.

Goodreau, along with his parents, Casey and Tracy, drove to campus from their home in Southwick a few days later. Gambino called a team meeting and Goodreau gave everyone the somber update.

"I remember that was tremendously emotional for him, for all of us, and for the boys," Gambino said. "It was hard and scary and there's a lot of those emotions that go with it."

From that point on, Goodreau's teammates rallied around him as his cancer battle derailed his baseball career, upended every facet of his life and tested him both mentally and physically. Three years later, Goodreau is healthy and armed with a new perspective. In March, he'll be honored at the annual Western Mass. Baseball Hall of Fame induction banquet as this year's winner of the Ryan Doyle Courage Award.

"To go through that adversity, you're able to navigate through a lot easier things," Goodreau said. "Those things you can compare, as far as going through cancer and getting back on the field, as opposed to thinking a guy was going to throw a fastball and he threw a curveball or something. It puts things in perspective."



A photo of young Jake Goodreau, second from right, during his time with the Southwick Regional High School baseball team. (Hoang 'Leon' Nguyen / The Republican)

A standout at Southwick

Before BC, Goodreau was one of the most decorated baseball players in Southwick High School history. Perfect Game USA's Massachusetts Player of the Year in 2016 and a two-time MassLive All-Western Mass selection, the powerful backstop received interest from a handful of notable schools, including Duke, UConn and VCU. [Goodreau committed to BC in Jan. 2015.](#)

As a freshman, he played in only five games and wished he'd done more to compete for playing time. Entering his sophomore year, Goodreau emphasized conditioning more than ever, and after a summer playing in Virginia, entered fall semester in the best shape of his life.

Goodreau rekindled his love of baseball that fall and a strong performance in fall practice led to an increased opportunity in the spring. As a sophomore, he appeared in 21 games with 12 starts, primarily behind the plate. After adding muscle, Goodreau felt like he had a chance to assert himself as more than a part-time player as a junior.

That's when he received his diagnosis. Goodreau hadn't worried much about the lump on his neck but after a few weeks of little improvement, he decided to go to the doctor to get it checked. A routine checkup turned into an ultrasound, which set off enough alarm bells to warrant a biopsy at Baystate Medical Center on the same day. The biopsy revealed cancer, which doctors believed had been spreading unnoticed for years.

"The timing couldn't have been worse," Goodreau said. "Not that the timing is ever good... I never like to play the game, 'What could have been?' Because at the same time, I look back and it now and beat myself up. I wish I could have handled it a little better."

Goodreau and his family traveled to the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, where doctors drew up a treatment plan. Weeks later, surgeons performed a full thyroidectomy, removing approximately 160 lymph nodes -- including dozens of cancerous ones -- from Goodreau's upper body over 11 ½ hours. During his nine days of recovery at Brigham and Women's Hospital, countless relatives, friends, teammates and coaches came to visit.

"All that support really, really helped me being through the hospital," he said. "It was only nine days but it felt like an eternity."

That support, Goodreau said, was key to maintaining somewhat of a positive attitude during the ordeal. He also frequently read Facebook groups for young adults with thyroid cancer. Still, for Goodreau, the long recovery process ahead was daunting.

"It was definitely hard," he said. "It kind of clouded over me, to be completely honest. I handled the news kind of poorly, which was hard. I always thought to myself, 'Medicine these days is better than ever.'"



Southwick's Jake Goodreau is the recipient of this year's Ryan Doyle Courage Award.

Shoulder struggles derailed comeback

Goodreau had two goals when left the hospital following his surgery. First, get healthy enough to get back to how life was before the diagnosis. Second was to start gearing up to resume his baseball career.

But in the days after surgery, doctors informed Goodreau of another brutal reality: the nerve damage in his right shoulder was so severe that he might never lift his arm higher than 90 degrees again. This naturally posed a problem for a baseball player -- and was particularly upsetting for Goodreau, who throws right-handed.

Though his initial shoulder strength was better than doctors had expected, Goodreau missed the entire 2019 season while recovering. Getting back to full strength took months. His new reality included extensive physical therapy, unusual sensitivities to touch and difficulty shaving. Through it all, Goodreau tried to be around the team as much as possible.

"Just to be there with them made me happy and made things feel a little bit normal," he said. "I didn't have to go home to talk about my last appointment with my parents. I just got to go to the field and watch my friends play baseball."

In the fall, with mobility and strength issues occasionally lingering, Goodreau began ramping up for his senior season. Physical and mental challenges prevented him from returning to the player he once was. In the spring, he was on the roster but didn't expect to take on a meaningful role. In the team's third game of the year, against Northern Illinois in Winter Haven, Fla., Goodreau made his long-awaited return to the field.

With BC trailing, 12-3, in the eighth inning, Gambino called upon Goodreau to pinch hit. The senior catcher wasn't expecting to enter the game. As he walked to the plate, Goodreau thought about how far he had come from a year prior, when he was bound to a hospital bed and could barely walk around his room.

"I was shaking when I was in the box," said Goodreau, who grounded out to first. "I don't even think I saw the first pitch. It was nothing special; I think we were down by a lot. I couldn't believe I could feel that way about a very insignificant at-bat in the game."

Goodreau took his second and final career at-bat 13 days later, striking out against Fairfield.



Jake Goodreau, of Southwick, holds up a framed photo of his Red Sox Alumni Game in 2018. (Hoang 'Leon' Nguyen / The Republican)

Returning to the diamond

Originally, Goodreau intended to continue his baseball career after BC, potentially while pursuing a master's degree elsewhere. But he ultimately decided against it, realizing that school wasn't for him anymore. Since graduating in 2020, he has explored various potential career paths while managing a liquor store in Agawam.

"It's very hard to try to just leave something you were so competitive at and trying to find a job," he said. "I was outside for a fake 9-to-5 for most of my life. It's kind of hard to grasp onto reality a little bit."

Though his playing days are behind him, Goodreau isn't planning to stay away from the baseball diamond. Goodreau has long aspired to get into coaching and is in talks with Southwick High about coaching junior varsity this spring. If all goes to plan, one of the most accomplished alums in program history will lead the next wave of Rams baseball players.

"I want the chance to be able to give back to Southwick," Goodreau said. "Southwick gave me a lot when I was down."

Gambino, who has nearly two decades of coaching experience at various levels, believes Goodreau is cut out for coaching.

"One of the first things is just his ability to connect with people," Gambino said. "Across the board, he's got a great personality and that will translate to connecting with players."

As a coach, Goodreau hopes to connect with players in deeper ways than simply teaching them on-field fundamentals. Overcoming cancer gives him a unique perspective on how to help young people deal with various issues.

"I was only 21 and this stuff can happen to kids who are even younger," he said. "To be somebody who went through something, whether it's worse or better — it's not up for comparison — but if somebody went through something hard, I can relate to them."

Before he dons his uniform again, Goodreau will be honored at the Western Mass. Baseball Hall of Fame induction banquet on March 10. He follows Orioles slugger Trey Mancini, who spent a summer with the Valley Blue Sox, as the latest winner of the Ryan Doyle Courage Award, named for the standout Minnechaug athlete who died of cancer in 2019.

Goodreau said he got chills when he was told he won the award. He has spent time in the last few weeks researching Doyle and familiarizing himself with Doyle's story.

"When you're given an award that's named after somebody... it's bearing a lot of weight," Goodreau said. "It's something that you carry around with you forever."