

Giants' Tuck wears reminder of valiant young friend

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When Justin Tuck puts on his uniform for today's game against the Jaguars at the Meadowlands, he will don the usual appa helmet, jersey, shoulder pads and game pants. He also will be wearing something he has vowed never to be without: a bra given to him from a teenager Tuck says "had more of an impact on me than I had on him."

One side of the bracelet reads "Brick Strong." The other side: Evan Sullivan, the name of the former Pop Warner football s who died of leukemia on Oct. 26. He was 18 years old.

When Tuck, the Giants' Pro Bowl defensive end, met Evan eight months ago, it wasn't under unfamiliar circumstances. Thru the Ashley Lauren Foundation and George McGovern, the team chaplain for the Giants, Tuck learned he was Evan's favorit player and that he was battling leukemia.

Tuck agreed to visit Evan and his family at their home in Middletown, N.J. Pictures were taken and autographs were signec Tuck provided a 90-minute distraction from the enormity of Evan's five-year battle with cancer. But it proved more than just : one-time meeting.

"When I first met Evan, it wasn't with the intention of having a prolonged relationship," Tuck told The Post. "I just wanted to g down there and give him a good word and try to encourage him a little bit. But we clicked so much in that first meeting we exchanged e-mail addresses and then later phone numbers. We actually became pretty good friends."

Evan loved the Giants and he loved football. He was the best player on his Pop Warner team. His teammates nicknamed h "Brick" because of his toughness. He was the team captain and eventually named MVP. Two months after the season, he v diagnosed.

"It was tough to see him going through it with that disease," Tuck said. "One week, I'd go down and see him and he was doi fine. We'd play video games together. He'd be talking trash and I'm talking trash and it's like 'OK, he's better.' Then anothe week, he's hospital bound and couldn't really do anything. It was kind of like an up-and-down roller-coaster."

Athletes often are asked to speak to charitable organizations or people facing adversity. An autograph, a signed jersey, an encouraging word is usually all that is offered.

"It's pretty easy for these guys to do something in a token way," McGovern said. "It's unusual to see guys follow up and be thorough in their expression of concern. Time doesn't allow these guys to do a lot. But Justin is the type of person that founc time to really pursue a relationship with a kid in need."

Whenever Tuck heard Evan was going through a tough period, he called. When he learned Evan had been hospitalized he called or went to visit him. Among the most appreciative was Evan's mother Debi, a single parent after the death of Evan's father in 2006.

"It was really nice to watch," she said of her son's relationship with the famous football player. "Whenever Justin called, Eval had a big smile on his face. It wound up being something more personal and that was really sweet. You don't really see that side of the players."

As Evan's condition deteriorated in October, Tuck invited his friend to the Giants training facility in East Rutherford. Arriving wheelchair, Evan was welcomed by general manager Jerry Reese before meeting Tuck in the lunchroom. Mario Manningh Chase Blackburn, Eli Manning, Brandon Jacobs, Antrel Rolle and other players all stopped to say hello.

Later that day, Evan joined about 13 Giants as part of their weekly Bible study where scriptures and prayers were shared. It was during that visit Tuck and Evan exchanged bracelets. Tuck gave him a pink bracelet for cancer awareness. Evan gave Tuck the bracelet bearing his nickname: "Brick Strong."

The following Sunday, Tuck provided eight tickets for Evan and his family to attend the Giants game against the Lions at the Meadowlands. Special passes gave them field access during pregame warm-ups. The Giants would go on to beat the Lior 28-20, with Tuck recording four tackles and a fumble recovery. It was the last time Evan would be outdoors.

Nine days later, he lost his battle to leukemia. He was buried wearing Tuck's jersey and the bracelet they had exchanged.

"[He's] not the first person that's been buried in my jersey," Tuck said. "But [he's] the first person that I actually knew. It was j special bond. We didn't know each other long. But I'd like to think we both had a huge impact on each other. From me to hi

just tried to encourage him to stay strong and keep his head up no matter what he was going through.

“And from him to me, he taught me to always stay strong. Regardless of how he felt, he always had a smile on his face and cracking jokes. He didn’t want to talk about the disease. He always wanted to talk about the future. He always wanted to talk about positive things. That was really uplifting to me.”

That’s why the most meaningful piece of equipment Tuck will be wearing today is Evan’s bracelet.

“I think of him every time I look down at this,” Tuck said. “I don’t plan on taking it off. Hopefully, it doesn’t break. If it breaks, I’m going to find a way to glue it back together.”

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