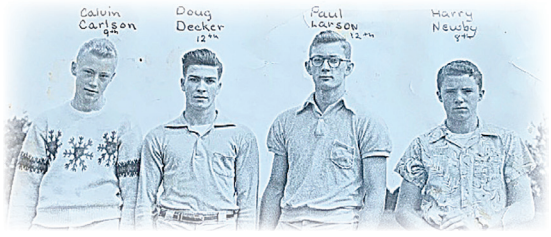

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Nolan, Jackson, Matt and Brooke Pfister. *Contributed photo*

'He was just a great kid'

Esko mourns loss of athlete Jackson Pfister

Jana Peterson
news@pineknotnews.com

The student section at Esko Stadium Wednesday night joined in a moment of silence for fellow student Jackson Pfister, who died last week after collapsing at a game in Aitkin. Some students wrote messages to Jackson on balloons, which were released just before the last varsity regular season football of the year. *Mike Creger / Pine Knot News*

When Esko football player Jackson Pfister collapsed during a varsity game last week and died of heart failure, it shocked and saddened people across the school district, the township, nearby towns and neighboring schools. The messages flooded out across social media, on the phone and face-to-face within hours, offering prayers to his family — parents Matt and Brooke, younger brother Nolan — support to the team, and counseling for the students. The grief over Jackson brought people together.

According to Jackson's grandfather, Russ Davidson, the Ramsey County Medical Examiner determined that the teenager died of heart failure, the result of a congenital heart defect.

The diagnosis was not a complete surprise, said his dad, Matt Pfister. Jackson was born with the defect and had heart surgery three times: at 8 months, age 4 and age 8. The last surgery, Matt said, was very intense.

"We could have lost him at that point. God willing, we didn't," Matt said, explaining that the surgery worked, but it wasn't a guarantee. "We were blessed to have him as long as we did."

Jackson was competitive from a young age, his dad said. He loved to win. Give him a football or a baseball, hockey puck, soccer ball, whatever, he just wanted to compete, he said.

Jackson played varsity baseball — shortstop was his favorite position — football at Esko, and on a travel baseball team in Duluth.

Grateful, grieving

Each summer he was required to have a checkup with his specialist, wear a monitor and endure tests to make sure he could play his favorite sports. Each checkup got better and better, his dad said. He was cleared to play by the cardiologist most recently in June.

"Something happened and we're not exactly sure what that was," Matt said. "But I'm sure it had everything to do with his condition. We were never sure how long we would have him. It could have happened at home, getting off the bus, anywhere. We're just grateful it happened on the football field where he wanted to be."

Jackson, the backup quarterback, had gone into the game against Aitkin when Esko was ahead 41-14. He collapsed on the field, got up again and started to jog to the sideline, when he collapsed again. An ambulance was called and the game ended then, with some three minutes left.

Esko school district administration sent a message electronically to Esko school families Saturday morning, letting them know that Jackson had died after receiving emergency medical care for a cardiac event.

"Please keep the Pfisters in your thoughts and prayers in their time of incomprehensible loss," the message read.

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