



David Samson / The Forum

North Dakota State's Sam Griesel shoots over Cal State Northridge's Atin Wright at the Scheels Center on Dec. 10.

'NIGHT I'LL NEVER FORGET'

Bison basketball player Griesel looks back on traumatic medical emergency

By Jeff Kolpack
The Forum

Fargo

Maybe it was the angel-like presence of Landon Solberg that kept Sam Griesel from falling into a coma, or worse. What started late at night on Nov. 11 in a hotel room in San Luis Obispo, Calif., and continued through the next day will never be forgotten by the North Dakota State men's basketball team.

Griesel, the junior guard and Bison leader, is thankful to be alive. Head coach Dave Richman can only hope he never has to go through that episode again. Willie Guy, Griesel's hotel roommate, hopes he'll never see that much blood again.

Achim and Kathy Griesel, Sam's parents, hope to never again have to make a middle-of-the-night drive to a hospital.

Last week, sitting in a chair at the NDSU basketball practice facility, Sam was thankful for more than just a basketball career.

"That's a night I'll never forget, I never want to experience that again," he said. "I thought there was a chance I was going to die but I wasn't necessarily, 'Oh my gosh, I'm going to die, I'm going to die.' But it definitely crossed my mind."

The odyssey really started in the second half of NDSU's home opener against Concordia College on Nov. 9. Griesel said he felt weird and more tired than usual and

didn't play in the second half.

He got checked out by a doctor the next day and was cleared. The following day, Thursday, the Bison traveled to California for a Friday afternoon game at Cal Poly. NDSU practiced that night and all indications pointed to Griesel being fine.

Richman said Griesel practiced well. The two touched base before the team meal, which included the normal camaraderie and joking between players and staff. Everybody headed to their rooms for the night around 10 p.m.

All was normal, all was calm.

Sam's angel

About an hour later, Griesel felt nauseous and got up to go to the bathroom. He didn't

make it that far. Guy, a junior college transfer who was on his first road trip with the Bison, was awoken to the sound of Griesel throwing up.

Guy thought it was some sort of food poisoning from dinner and he figured Griesel was in the bathroom vomiting. Then he heard it again and it sounded closer.

Guy got up, turned on the lights and saw Griesel lying on the floor in front of the bed.

"Just a pool of blood," Guy said. "It was pretty scary. Really frightening. I've never seen anything like that. I froze for a minute, honestly didn't know what to do."

Griesel was in and out of consciousness. He tried to sit up, but couldn't. He felt hazy, but well enough to talk with Guy. They agreed to get

NDSU assistant trainer Trisha Shannon, who came into the room and promptly called 911.

Richman was awakened to the sound of NDSU director of operations Spencer Wilker pounding on his door. That was nerve-racking enough.

Wilker told him Sam was throwing up blood. What will forever be eerie for Richman was walking into the narrow hotel hallway and seeing EMTs and firefighters working in Griesel and Guy's room.

"When I saw the scene of what had transpired before I got there, it was really scary," Richman said. "Really scary. To see the amount of blood on the floor, to see his extremely pale skin color, yeah, I didn't know what to expect."

GRIESEL: Page B31

BISON FOOTBALL

A proud 'wheel route' alum

Former Bison Chase Morlock impressed with Hunter Luepke's play against JMU

By Jeff Kolpack
The Forum

FARGO — With a ticket-to-Frisco celebration happening all over the place Friday at Gate City Bank Field at the Fargodome, former Bison running back Chase Morlock found Hunter Luepke and gave him some congratulatory words. In a sense, it could have doubled as a "wheel route" signature moment.

As an NDSU running back and fullback from 2013-16, Morlock was a force out of the backfield with the route. It's almost a sneak attack, with other Bison receivers over the middle grabbing the attention of defensive backs while Morlock found space on the outside.

"It's nothing crazy," Morlock said. "It's a simple concept and it's not like they haven't known about it. They know they have that in our wheelhouse."

Play on words, duly noted. Friday night, the Bison ran the route twice and Luepke



Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

Chase Morlock of North Dakota State pulls in a touchdown pass against Iowa during their football game Saturday, Sept. 17, 2016, in Iowa City, Iowa.

scored on both throws in the semifinal victory over James Madison. One was a 32-yard touchdown pass from Cam Miller in the first quarter and

the other was the game-winner, a 22-yard toss from Miller with 13:44 left in the game.

ROUTE: Page B32

Bison player wearing No. 6 crushes James Madison's hopes again

'If You're Gonna Play in Texas' didn't start blaring over the Fargodome loudspeakers until the final horn sounded and the clock read 0:00. The crowd roared, North Dakota State players danced the two-step and all the usual revelry that accompanies the Bison clinching a trip to Frisco, Texas, happened for the ninth time — just a little later than usual.

James Madison wasn't Sam Houston or Richmond or South Dakota State or Montana State, teams that tapped out early in the Football Championship Subdivision semifinals and allowed the Alabama classic song to blast in the middle of the fourth quarter. The Dukes, again, took the Bison to the wire.

It was cinched, as it should have been, by the Bison defense.

Destin Talbert's remarkable interception staved off a potential winning touchdown by James Madison and NDSU finished the game with defensive



MIKE
MCFEELY

lineman Logan McCormick hitting the Duke quarterback and causing a harmless incompleteness.

The clock expired and the party started after a 20-14 Bison victory.

The most appropriate thing? The Dukes, again, were burned by a Bison player wearing No. 6.

In the national championship game after the 2019 season, it was safety James Hendricks making the game-clinching interception of JMU quarterback Ben DiNucci in the end zone.

Late Friday night in the rocking (finally) dome, it was cornerback Talbert making a game-saving pick of Cole Johnson in the end zone.

MCFEELY: Page B32



Michael Vosburg / Forum Photo Editor

North Dakota State's Sam Griesel shoots in front of Indiana State's Julian Larry during their basketball game on Dec. 13 in Fargo.

GRIESEL

From Page B1

Richman sent Guy to the hotel room of another assistant coach. Griesel remembers a first responder having a difficult time finding a vein to start intravenous fluids. He said he felt like he got “stabbed” seven times.

“Coach Richman was in there, I remember giving him a look; he saw the fear in my eyes,” Griesel said. “It was a very, very serious situation. That’s probably the most people I’ve seen in a hotel room at one time.” Griesel was loaded onto a stretcher and into the hotel elevator. That’s when he relied on his faith, and a close friendship with Solberg and a 9-year-old Bison fan named Blake, to help get him through the fear. Solberg is the West Fargo student who died of cancer in 2019 at age 12, a journey that touched the Bison team.

Solberg’s courage resonated with Griesel, who interned for the Anderson’s Light Foundation in the offseason.

“I know Landon was watching over me for sure,” he said.

His connection with Blake came through the Foundation.

“I always want to be the person to reach out and help them,” Griesel said. “In doing so, I was never expecting to feel that kind of reciprocation from them, even though they didn’t necessarily know.”

Former RedHawks pitcher provides relief

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, Richman, or anybody else from NDSU, was prohibited to ride in the ambulance with Griesel the four miles from the Hampton Inn & Suites to Sierra Vista Regional Medical Center. One of the firefighters responding to the 911 call came to the rescue.

Matt Jeckell, ironically, was a former pitcher for the Fargo-Moorhead RedHawks baseball club in 1997 and 1998. Jeckell and Richman had a common friend in Brent Tehven, who was the RedHawks clubhouse manager in Jeckell’s playing days as a relief pitcher and is currently the senior manager of business development for Learfield IMG College, the firm that is NDSU’s multimedia rights partner. He’s also co-owner of Herd & Horns bar and grill by the NDSU campus.

When he arrived at the hotel, Jeckell noticed a few team members were wearing NDSU gear. Jeckell asked Richman if he knew Tehven and the connection may have helped Richman and Shannon follow the ambulance to the hospital. Jeckell found them a ride.

“It’s one of those things, we’re trained for stressful situations,” Jeckell said. “It was a situation where that person needed medical attention and needed it quickly. I can’t go into detail but I was glad I was the one that was able to provide service and render care. I’m there, it’s like, hey, it’s one of the guys where I spent time in that city.”

Jeckell has been with the San Luis Obispo fire department for almost 20 years. He was part of a 1998 RedHawks league championship team, but gave up the sport a year later because he wanted to move on to a career in fire service.

“I have really good memories of Fargo,” Jeckell said.

Once at the hospital, because of pandemic restrictions, Richman and Shannon were standing outside because only one other person was allowed in to see Griesel. Because of her medical background, Shannon went inside.

Richman went back to the hotel for maybe a couple of hours of bad sleep. Guy barely slept, either. He said a couple of prayers for Griesel

and tried to shut his eyes.

“Just thinking of him all night, really,” Guy said.

Long and winding road

Somewhere amid the chaos, around 1:30 a.m., Sam called his parents, who had flown from their home in Lincoln, Neb., to Los Angeles, arriving around midnight. Achim and Kathy planned to spend the night in LA and drive north to San Luis Obispo the next day for the game.

Their sleep was short-lived.

Sam told his parents medical people treating him thought it was a bleeding ulcer, but wouldn’t know for sure until seeing a doctor in the morning.

“Looking back, we’re glad he was the one we talked to,” Kathy said. “Had we heard he was in the emergency room and couldn’t speak to him, that would have been worse.”

The Griesels got on the highway with their rented car and headed out of the city. Needing a jolt of caffeine, they looked for a coffee stop but couldn’t find one. Not even a 24-hour truck stop.

“Nothing but dark and winding roads,” Achim said. “That was difficult.”

They talked to Shannon on the phone. They talked with Richman. Not only was the call informational for the parents, but it helped them stay awake.

They had yet to hear the details of the pool of blood and the trauma of the hotel room, which was a good thing. Kathy said Sam was joking with her on the phone and in retrospect that was probably a way for Sam to deal with the situation.

He joked with the ambulance people on how NDSU was going to beat Cal Poly. He joked with the hospital nurses about the same thing.

“We realize now that was a coping mechanism for him,” Kathy said. “We didn’t know what all happened. That was

probably good.”

The Griesels arrived around 5:30 a.m. The hospital staff was good to them, bending the COVID-19 rules a bit so they could see their son since visiting hours hadn’t started. They asked the Griesels if they were there for the motorcycle accident patient.

They weren’t, but Sam ended up bonding with said patient in the ER. They couldn’t see each other because a curtain separated them, but there was more joking.

“They chatted it up,” Kathy said. “The guy said he was hoping Sam would get famous in basketball so he could buy him a new motorcycle. That was their deal.”

Back at the hotel in the morning, Richman told his team the particulars of the previous several hours. Most of them didn’t know anything.

“You get into coaching, they hand you this book of Coaching 101,” Richman said. “You find out quickly a bunch of chapters that are left out and this is clearly one of them. I’m concerned. Scared. I love this kid, I love all of our guys and hits you in a different way like that. It’s a family member. And then there’s the cold, callus part. You have to turn around and you have to get a team ready to play a game.”

Sam had successful surgery to cauterize his now diagnosed bleeding ulcer around noon. The news that Griesel was going to be OK reached the team before tipoff, which gave everybody with the Bison program a peace of mind.

Sam, still groggy from anesthesia, kept asking the nurses if he could go to the game.

“I don’t care if I have to be in a gown or there has to be five nurses with me, if I’m in a wheelchair, whatever,” he said.

He was able to watch it, the first half anyway. Exhausted from the

anesthesia and the surgery, he fell asleep at halftime.

He woke up to a 60-57 Bison win. Rocky Kreuser had 20 points, eight rebounds and two steals to lead the way.

The road back

After flying back to Fargo, Griesel had another procedure before being allowed back on the court. He lost so much blood in a short amount of time that his body needed help to recover. That included a blood transfusion.

Once afraid of needles, he’s done 180-degrees on his appreciation for them. They helped save him in the form of people donating blood to help patients like him.

“Now it’s nothing, I’ve been poked so many times,” he said. “I can’t wait to donate because I’m so grateful for people who do that.”

He got an iron infusion over a week ago and the plan is to get one more. Meanwhile, his return to the court was an infusion into the team. It was a calculated plan to get his health and basketball shape up to speed, culminating in Fargo last Monday night.

Griesel scored 25 points, many of the clutch variety, in a come-from-behind win over Indiana State. Seconds after the final horn, the events of the previous month hit him hard. He was too emotional to leave the court.

Richman put his arm around Griesel, but neither had to say anything. They knew what it all meant.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Griesel said. “Some people thought I was super tired or hurt, but it was just a really long month — emotionally and especially mentally. It all hit me at once, a little overwhelming at the time. But to do that in front of a home crowd and knowing so many people out there that care about me were able to see me back to myself was a special moment for me. A speechless moment.”

START YOUR CAREER HERE.

jobsHQ

JOBSHQ.COM

Forum
Communications
Company