‘I miss him dearly’: AFL legend Jason Watts talks Father’s Day after losing son Cade to cancer

After losing his bright son Cade to cancer last year, Jason Watts says it’s the little things he misses most. The former Bulldogs star talks Father’s Day and how his family are coping with their loss.

Robyn Riley Exclusive Follow
@rileyrobyn08 4 min read August 30, 2024 - 10:15PM Herald Sun 13 comments

Former Bulldogs star Jason Watts with sons Ashton, 18, and Millar, 14 and wife Anita with family dog Lou Lou, dubbed Chewy by his late son Cade. Photo: Wayne Taylor

Father’s Day is a day of mixed emotions for former AFL player Jason Watts. While he is looking forward to celebrating with his two sons Ashton and Millar, missing is his middle son Cade: a loveable kid with dreams of following in his father’s footy footsteps.

Watts is close to his boys, but with Cade he also had a mate to kick a ball or to watch footy or basketball with.

It is those simple things that he misses the most.

Jason Watts’ son Cade passed away last year. Picture: Supplied

Cade died two weeks before his 16th birthday in February 2023 from [an aggressive cancer called Ewing’s sarcoma](#).

These are the most common types of solid tumours in children and heartbreakingly hard to detect which means they are often not found until they have caused havoc in young bodies.

Sarcomas start in connective tissue including fat, muscle, bone and cartilage and can develop anywhere.

PASS PORT
Ca
PASS-PORT.

Jason says he's celebrating all three of his sons this Father's Day. Picture: Wayne Taylor

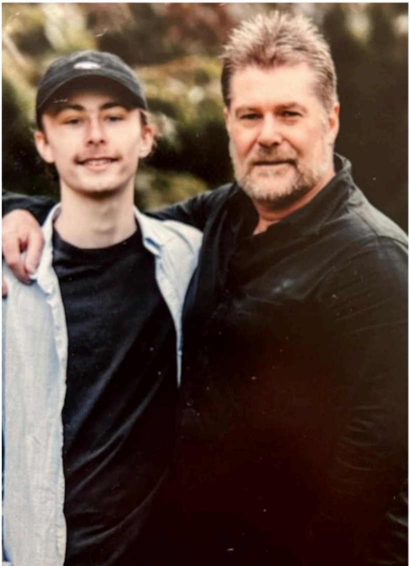
When sports mad Cade complained of a sore shoulder in 2021 and then a niggling pain in his knees and a sore shin, his GP put it down to a sports injury and low iron.

Watts and wife Anita took him to physiotherapists after that for treatment, but when Cade woke one morning with a lump on his head they went to a hospital emergency department.

"They told us that he might be having some issues at school," Watts said. "Which we knew was not the case."

Cade was sent home with a referral for an ultrasound on his scapula (shoulder blade).

"We then got an MRI referral for his scapula, knee and head from his GP, where it was discovered he had cancer."



Cade Watts and his dad, former Bulldogs player Jason Watts. Cade lost his battle with Ewing's sarcoma in February 2023. Picture: Supplied.

Admitted to hospital, Cade would undergo 16 rounds of chemotherapy, 20 blood/platelet transfusions and some 40 rounds of radiation.

"He went through a lot," Watts says. "But his determination (on treatment) put him into remission."

Their joy was short-lived. Five months later the cancer returned — aggressive and deadly.

His father said Cade did chemotherapy at home to try to delay the inevitable.

"For him, there was no second-tier treatment that would cure him," Watts said.

"We tried so hard to find something for him in the way of a clinical trial, anything that could help him. There was nothing available in Australia and overseas they were not accepting patients because of Covid-19.

"Our hope now is the Hudson Institute will continue its research so there are options available for other kids going through cancer.

"For me personally it was like with cancer you don't physically see it early, but you certainly see it at the end."

Victoria

Don't miss out on the headlines from Victoria. Followed categories will be added to My News.

Follow

Cade Watts was described by his dad Jason as pretty unique and universally loved. Picture: Supplied

The family was with Cade at home when he passed away peacefully on February 3, 2023.

The grief for Watts remains raw.

Softly spoken, it is not easy for him to open up about the loss, but he says counselling is helping.

"It just straightens me up a bit and gets me through, you know, my times with Cade and stuff like that," Watts says.

"It's the best thing I've ever done, because … the grief just takes you to too many places."

Watts still looks physically tough, not that surprising for the man known as a handy small forward who led the Western Bulldogs' goal kicking in 1996 and played 57 games before leaving the club at the end of the 1998 season. He now coaches the Frankston Bombers under-19s.

His sporting ability came in handy when with family and friends he launched a fundraising event to raise money for sarcoma research at the Hudson Institute in memory of Cade.

Called Climbing for Cade, there were 21 on that first brutal walk up Victoria's highest peak, Mount Bogong.

Cade and Jason Watts. Team Cade is now hoping to help find a cure for sarcoma that claimed Cade. Picture: Supplied

Playing a big part in organising the event was Watts great mate and former Bulldogs' teammate Jon Ballantyne.

"It was extremely tough doing that walk," Watts says. But that was the point.

Cade had been through so much and Watts says the walk is what his adventurous son would have wanted.

So while Watts will enjoy time today with Ashton, 18 and Millar, 14, he also misses hearing Cade call out 'morning mum, morning dad' as he did every morning, and at night 'love you mum, love you dad'.

"I miss him dearly," Watts says. "Kicking a footy or watching basketball or footy or talking about the Bulldogs. They were pretty big with me and him.

"It's the things you can't do with your kids anymore, to watch them grow and guide them into adults, that's the thing that gets you."

Climbing for Cade along with a fundraising event at Cade's old school Frankston High and the sale of beanies branded with his nickname Cade'O have already helped to raise $24,000 for research at the Hudson.

PASS PORT
Cadeo
PASS-PORT.

Jason Watts and sons Millar, 14, and Ashton, 18. He will celebrate Father's Day on Sunday, but missing is his late son Cade. Picture: Wayne Taylor

The money will go towards a lab led by Dr Pouya Faridi and Grace Huang who are working to develop a new cell line model for finding vaccine targets for Ewing's sarcoma.

Watts says the Mount Bogong climb was a challenge "up to a point" and now they are seeking their next challenging event to help to continue to fund the research in Cade's memory.

"Team Cade just wanted a challenge to put ourselves in," Watts says. "You can't put it on the same scale, but for us the walk was very challenging and we got extreme weather and the higher we climbed, the worse it got.

"In a way it was those things that Cade was going through so it was a reminder of how harsh the treatment was."

Watt remembers a son who was "pretty unique" and his pride that at Cade's funeral, attended by more than 500 people, he saw how universally loved his son was.

"He was just a caring kid with dreams of playing footy and becoming a sports physio.

"He was bright, and really good at sport. It is just sad that at 14 he was diagnosed with pretty much a life sentence."

Now, Watts says, the goal will be to help find a cure for sarcoma that claimed Cade.

To buy a $45 Cade'O beanie to help fund the research, email *neitzwattsy@optusnet.com.au*

More Coverage

New childhood cancer research lab sets sights on a cure