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## A Tiger's tale: How an O-lineman rallied Clemson to tackle pediatric cancer

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CLEMSON, S.C. - The orange polo shirt clings to [Sean Pollard](#)'s shoulders and chest as he bakes under the August sun. He just wrapped practice, and after snapping a few dozen photos and signing countless autographs for the horde of kids lined up along the sideline at Clemson's Memorial Stadium, a team staffer had brought him a clean shirt



Sometimes, it's a whispered message from Dabo Swinney that inspires kids such as 14-year-old Bella Muntean, who is battling bone cancer. But ask the Tigers' coaches and players and they'll quickly say Bella and other kids like her are the true heroes.

so he could change from his jersey and pads. It didn't matter. It's hot, and he's a big guy. The sweat seeped through the polyester almost instantaneously.

Pollard never complains, though. These kids have endured much worse.

This wasn't exactly Pollard's project. [Clemson](#) has been hosting kids from Clement's Kindness, a local nonprofit aimed at helping families of children diagnosed with cancer and blood disorders, for a few years, but Pollard wasn't interested in simply scratching his name onto a few shirts and signs. He knew these kids.

Matthew is 9. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor three years ago. He had been on chemo when Clemson lost the 2016 National Championship Game, and he was still on chemo when the Tigers won it in 2017. He wore his Clemson jersey each time, and the nurses referred to him as "the Clemson kid."

Tiraji is 7. He has battled leukemia for three years. He was here with his family, including his two brothers. They're from Ohio, and they're all Ohio State fans. By now, he has forgiven Clemson for knocking his Buckeyes out of last season's playoff.

Bella is 14. A year earlier, she was fighting bone cancer, getting chemo and couldn't walk, and her body is still littered with tumors -- so many the doctors can't count, her mother says. Most days, Bella says, she feels nauseous. But here, on the football field, she's smiling and happy. She got an autograph from [Hunter Renfrow](#), her favorite player. Now she wants to meet Dabo Swinney, and Pollard won't leave until it happens.

His teammates had all hopped on trams for rides back to the air-conditioned football facility, back to watch film or eat dinner. Pollard waits.

Eventually, Swinney wanders over. A line quickly forms in front of him. Bella is at the end, now resting in a wheelchair after spending the afternoon on crutches.

Swinney shakes hands and poses for pictures and smiles and hugs. Eventually, Bella is the only one left. She is thin, with a ball cap pulled down over her brown hair and sunglasses that seem to envelop her entire face, except for a smile that's impossibly wide.

She lifts herself up from her wheelchair as Swinney embraces her. Her mom, Brenda Muntean, hands her a football for Swinney to sign and snaps a photo with her cell phone. The Clemson coach leans down, whispers in her ear.

"We're proud of you," he tells her.

Bella's father, Dorin, begins to cry. He works nearly every day. That's common for families dealing with pediatric cancer. One parent is a full-time caregiver. The other is rarely home. Today is a chance for the family to be together.

Pollard is in the background. He knows what Bella's days are like at the hospital, what the chemo treatments do to her body. He's here to see the other side, to see that smile that hasn't disappeared since Swinney first came into view.

A few months earlier, Pollard was just looking for a calling. Now, he is seeing what was possible.

"These kids go through so much I could never imagine," Pollard says. "You see them come out here with a smile on their face, it gives you an idea of how much they look up to you and how much of a platform you have."

**POLLARD LOOKS LIKE A GIANT** next to the kids he's helping. He's 6-foot-5, 315 pounds, and the sophomore has all the prerequisites for the Hollywood version of the burly O-lineman, complete with a shaggy beard that pokes out in all directions from his face.

"But ask anybody who knows me," he said, "and I'm just a big teddy bear."

The kids in Greenville Hospital's pediatric cancer unit didn't know Pollard, though. He arrived for his first visit as a hulking beast, stomping into a village of bashful elves.

Pollard's journey here began in Haiti, of all places. He was one of 16 Clemson football players who had traveled there last spring as part of a charitable event, and he returned with a mission in mind. He wanted to help. He just didn't know how exactly. So he talked with Jessie Carroll, a coordinator of Clemson's [P.A.W. Journey program](#) (though she has since moved on to another job) and asked for help. He said he loved kids. Carroll had an idea.

Carroll connected  
Pollard with  
Sandra Miller of  
Clement's  
Kindness, and they  
immediately hit it  
off. Still, Miller  
wanted Pollard to  
meet the kids.  
Everyone thinks  
they want to help  
kids with cancer,  
but seeing them up  
close, exposing  
yourself to the real  
trauma -- it can be

too much. Pollard was excited.

He entered the first room and quickly made friends. He wasn't a giant. He was a playmate. He crawled on the floor, played board games, shaded in coloring books. The smallest girl in the place -- Pollard guesses she was about 2 -- climbed into his arms, and he carried her from room to room as he visited other patients.



Sean Pollard formed friendships with patients like 16-year-old Haley Hilliard, who has Hodgkin's Lymphoma, and became a giant playmate to other kids. But sitting in his truck later, it hit him how hard they have it. "I cried for almost an hour," he said.

Pollard has a younger sister. She's 8. He saw her in every kid he met there.

"They opened right up to me," Pollard said.

Pollard had braced himself for what he would see there, but the enthusiasm the kids showed for a new friend was undercut by the overwhelming burdens they faced. They were hooked up to tubes and connected to machines, and, in spite of all the energy they had around him, he knew he had been lucky enough to see so many of them at their best.

After the visit, Pollard slumped into the driver's seat of his truck and it all hit him at once.

"I cried for almost an hour," he said.

A day later, Pollard marched into Carroll's office and said he had an idea. He wanted to start his own foundation, wanted to raise money to help the kids he had met. He wanted to use his cachet as a Clemson football player to make life a little easier for the parents he had talked to. He wanted to build something that would last beyond the kids' next chemotherapy treatment, beyond his career in a Tigers jersey.

For the next couple of months, Pollard was in Carroll's office nearly every day. They would launch a foundation -- the "All Off For Cancer" fund, a play on Clemson's "All In" battle cry -- and, while Carroll helped with the logistics, Pollard brought the idea to life.

The plan was simple enough. He'd host an event for the kids at Clemson's sprawling new football facility. He'd enlist the help of his teammates. He'd promote it to Clemson's fans. He wanted to raise \$5,000. And for the coup de grace, the thing that would really sell the event, the kids -- some as young as 4 -- would be given electric razors, and they'd give each player who volunteered a makeover.

**IN THE FIRST WEEK AFTER THE EVENT** was announced, a few hundred dollars trickled in. It was good that folks had noticed, but it wasn't exactly the enthusiasm Pollard had hoped for.

Miller told Pollard not to worry much about money. His event was going to raise awareness, and for a local nonprofit, that's huge. Simply exposing Clemson fans to the work would bring in revenue down the road.

That's not how Pollard operates, though. He wanted results. He wanted cold, hard cash that could make an immediate impact. He needed more attention for the event, and it just so happened Clemson's new football facility had a barbershop.



**Sean Pollard**

@spollard76

We're going to shave our heads to show support for our friends with pediatric cancer—help us, donate here:

[clementskindness.com](http://clementskindness.com) #ALLOFF

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So Pollard took a seat in the chair, and Carroll went to work styling his mane to attract some eyeballs. She might've emptied a bottle of mousse to tame Pollard's hair, but by the end, it was standing straight up in a Mohawk, and he looked like the world's nicest punk rocker.

"We gelled it until it wouldn't move," Carroll said.

She snapped a picture, and Pollard posted it to Twitter and Instagram with a link to his fundraising site. Teammates loved the look, and they quickly shared the image. Fans joined the fray, too, and within a few days, Pollard had already hit his goal of \$5,000 raised, and the event hadn't even taken place. It was a windfall.

One of the people eager to participate was Kathy Becker, the director of operations for Clemson's women's basketball team. Her youngest son, Colt, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma just days after his first birthday. A few months later, he was in surgery, where doctors removed a tumor the size of a softball from his stomach. Ten months later, his cancer had returned. More radiation. More surgery. More nights in hospitals. Becker and her husband, Pete, rarely saw one another. One was taking care of Colt, the other handled the rest.

"We're like ships in the night," Becker said.

Events like Pollard's were an opportunity for the family to bond and laugh and feel normal after nearly three years of treatment and hospital stays and complications. She wanted to help, so she recruited her players, too.

The event was held in the players' village of the new football complex. Clemson brought in a stage. Pollard gave a speech. Then the players -- 15 including Pollard -- took their seats and waited for a group of rowdy kids to attack them with clippers.

Colt took his swipes. The others did, too. In the end, virtually everyone's hair was a mangled mess. Wisps of hair here, clumps of hair there. "Shaved" wasn't the right word. "Dismembered," maybe.

"Our guard [Cade Stewart](#) went from a mullet to a bald head," Pollard said.

The kids loved every minute of it. The players -- well, they survived. The women's basketball team swooped in to salvage what they could.



"The kids didn't know how to shave heads," Becker said, "and neither did we."

The photos got shared, and more revenue came in. Within a few days, the event had raised more than \$10,000 for Pollard's foundation. It served as a full month's worth of fundraising for Clement's Kindness' general fund, and the money went to help more than 16 families with everything from utility bills to paying for travel for treatment.

**ON WEDNESDAY, MILLER WAS ON CAMPUS** at Clemson again. She met with Swinney to accept a check on behalf of his own foundation. It's more money going to the cause, more funding for basic needs and family outings.

She had something for Swinney, too. It was a letter from Bella, the 14-year-old with bone cancer.

In the letter, she told Swinney about how she endured 11 months of chemotherapy, about how the cancer spread to her lungs, about the weeks she spent relegated to a hospital bed, about the addictive narcotics she had to take for the pain, about the tumor that was removed from her leg that left a long scar covering more chromium cobalt than bone. She wanted Swinney to know her story, and to know what her visit to Clemson meant.

She has returned to high school this year. She's still undergoing treatment. She still has pain and nausea and a million worries about what the future will hold. But she has hope, too, and, after meeting Pollard and Swinney and seeing Clemson's players work, she had inspiration.

"You took time to meet us, speak encouragement to us, take photos and sign our footballs," she wrote. "Let me tell you, it was an honor. You were overheated and sweating in your uniforms, and you never complained. Your strength, stamina and perseverance inspires me to keep fighting."

Pollard isn't done, either.

Last year, he shaved his bedraggled beard during the season. He caught hell from former teammate Ben Boulware, himself a model of unkempt facial hair, for a dereliction of his masculine duty. So Pollard hasn't shaved since, and after his "All Off" event, he asked Swinney for permission to keep up the beard indefinitely. The plan, he said, is to hold his event again next year, then again after his senior season, inviting the kids back to shave his beard during his final go-round. Each day, the beard gets a little longer, a little scragglier, and the kids get a little stronger, earn a little more hope.

It's a funny thing, Swinney said, how a little strength and hope can blossom among people so desperate for more of it. That's the lesson he has tried to impart to his team, the lesson he hopes carries those kids through another chemo session and his players through another week of practice.

"It's perspective," said Swinney, who'd written back to Bella from his hotel the night before Clemson faced off against NC State in a game that would all but secure the Tigers' third straight trip to the ACC title game. "The little things you take for granted, someone else is praying for."

The football season has pulled Pollard in a dozen different directions the past few months. He has fought for a starting job, splitting time with [Tremayne Anchrum](#) at tackle. He has suffered the indignity of Clemson's first loss to Syracuse. He has heard the criticism of the line's performance through much of the season. There aren't any easy days playing football at Clemson.

And yet, there are no complaints. He's here, he's playing, he's got a future sketched out in sharp detail.

"I can sit there and complain about being sore, but these kids are getting needles stuck into them, going through things we can't imagine," Pollard said. "It makes it easier to pick my head up."

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