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## Pack fan losing sight but not allegiance

Youth back in spot behind bench



After missing a game because of surgery, Gregory Parrish, with dad Greg, was cheering for N.C. State again Dec. 15.

*Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy*

By **CHIP ALEXANDER**, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- In N.C. State's team basketball photo for this season, coach Herb Sendek sits front and center. On Sendek's left is freshman Gavin Grant. Behind him stand seniors Julius Hodge and Jordan Collins.

To Sendek's right, holding a basketball, his sneakers not able to touch the floor, sits Gregory Parrish.

Sendek and the Wolfpack more or less adopted Parrish a year ago as another team member. The 11-year-old, who has lost nearly all of his eyesight because of brain tumors, was invited to sit behind the team bench at home games. He and his father, Gary, joined the Pack on road trips, ate meals with the team and attended team "shoot-arounds" before games.

"It was like a dream come true," Gary Parrish said. "It lifted Gregory's spirits so much. We didn't think it would happen again."

But a year later, Parrish is back and he may be even more enthusiastic. Although 20 pounds heavier, he continues to lose his sight and recently needed emergency brain surgery.

"He had the surgery not long after the [team] picture was taken," said Gary Parrish, a Raleigh postal worker. "He had headaches, which usually go away, but they didn't go away this time."

After surgery to repair a shunt that diverts fluid from the brain, Gregory missed State's first exhibition game. Before the second exhibition, Sendek spotted Gregory and teasingly asked, "Where were you at last time?"

"Coach has told him, 'You're as big a part of this team as any other kid on the bench,' " Gary Parrish said.

Gregory Parrish endures neurofibromatosis, a genetic disorder that caused tumors to grow along the optic pathway. The disorder can be fatal, but Parrish's condition is stable.

A year ago, Gregory had lost 90 percent of his vision. Gary Parrish said his son now has about 5

percent of his sight and can see a little out of the corner of his left eye.

During games, father describes the action to son, who usually wears a Wolfpack cap but has come to games adorned in a bright red wig and with painted face. Gregory Parrish often is on his feet, making noise, shouting encouragement, providing some energy.

"It has been such a great joy for him, something to keep his mind occupied," said Charlene Parrish, Gregory's mother. "He's truly having the time of his life."

A recent issue of "People" magazine had a feature on Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy, a program for children fighting serious disease that offers free basketball training. While photos were being taken on the Duke campus, Gregory was asked his favorite school.

"I want to play at N.C. State," he said.

"That cracked everybody up," Gary Parrish said.

Gregory, a student at Durant Road Elementary, was undergoing radiation treatments at Duke last year when he was asked if he wanted to attend a Duke basketball game. Gregory declared he was a State fan, quickly drawing the attention of those in the Wolfpack basketball office.

Gregory soon was attending State games and was called a "great beacon of courage" by Sendek.

Gregory was all smiles before the Pack's recent game at the RBC Center against Louisiana-Lafayette. Because of television coverage, the game had a 9 p.m. tipoff, meaning Gregory would be staying out late on a school night.

"I'm a party animal," he said, beaming.

For his 11th birthday earlier this month, Gregory received an N.C. State folding chair.

And for Christmas?

Charlene Parrish said Santa brought more Wolfpack stuff.

"An N.C. State jersey and shorts," she said. "He's got the whole uniform now."

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