

Intelligencer Journal/Lancaster New Era

Alzheimer's face

In our view

Alzheimer's disease now has a face.

Her name is Pat Summitt.

Summitt is the women's basketball coach at the University of Tennessee. She has won more games -- 1,037 -- and more national championships -- eight -- than any other college basketball coach -- male or female.

To accomplish that, she has been tough, hard-nosed and, at times, irascible. But to her players and to the university, she has been a steady hand -- a motivator, a counselor and a role model.

She's now taking on a different role -- one with which women and men can identify -- as a high-profile victim of early-onset Alzheimer's.

Alzheimer's is a horrible disease. It steals not just from the body but from the mind. A person is "there" one moment and gone the next. Those who have loved ones with the disease come to cherish the brief interludes when victims remember names and places and people. Sometimes it lasts for a few hours; too often, it passes in an instant. The disease robs people of their dignity if not their soul. Its cause is unknown as is its cure.

Summitt was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's this past summer. She had concerns at the conclusion of last season when she couldn't think of what play to call at a crucial point in a game. Several other instances of forgetfulness prompted her to consult doctors at the Mayo Clinic.

After being told of her condition, Summitt spoke with university officials, who agreed to allow her to continue to coach, although she has delegated additional responsibilities to her veteran staff.

Doctors are not always able to diagnose early-onset Alzheimer's. The symptoms usually develop slowly.

Furthermore, memory loss may occur for reasons other than Alzheimer's. Most of us experience so-called "senior moments" when a name, a word, a place or a password gets lost in the gray matter in our brains.

Summitt is performing daily mental exercises to attempt to slow the effects of the disease. She is remaining active and involved -- an important step because Alzheimer's patients often withdraw from others.

Summitt wants to coach three more years. If she is able to do so, she will provide hope for those with the disease and perhaps blaze a new path for victims and their families.

Pat Summit is a highly successful basketball coach. She also is a high-profile victim of early-onset Alzheimer's disease.