

Virtual Mentor

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PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Through the Patient's Eyes: Never Die Easy, Walter "Sweetness" Payton
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On November 1, 1999, Walter "Sweetness" Payton, the Chicago Bears' Hall of Fame running back and the NFL's career rushing leader, died of cancer that was a complication of his rare liver disease. Payton was 45 years old. Payton had been diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC) in 1998, a rare and debilitating disease that afflicts only three in 100,000 people and leads to cirrhosis and liver failure. At an emotional news conference on February 2, 1999, a frail and jaundiced Payton announced his condition, stating that the only cure would be a liver transplant.

"Am I scared? Hell yeah, I'm scared. Wouldn't you be scared?" he asked. "But it's not in my hands anymore. It's in God's hands."

"I'm looking at it as a sprained ankle or a twisted knee," he said. "I have to stay positive. Nobody else can make me stay positive. I have to do that. Then whatever happens, happens. If in 2 years something happens and I get a transplant and my body accepts it and I go on, that's fine. And if in 2 years I don't, then that's the way life was meant to be for me."

Sadly, Payton would not even live out the year. He developed bile duct cancer, a known complication of PSC, ending his chances for a liver transplant. Once a PSC patient has cancer, a liver transplant is no longer an option, since the drugs needed to keep the body from rejecting the new liver make tumors grow faster.

Payton's approach to his illness showed the same strength, fight, and grace that characterized his bruising running style. "If I'm going to get hit," Payton said, "why let the guy who's going to hit me get the easiest and best shot? I explode into the guy who's trying to tackle me." On the field, Payton took hits, dragged tacklers down the field, and stiff-armed his competition as he rushed for a record setting 16,726 yards in his 13-year career. "Never die easy," a saying of one of his old coaches, came to signify his running style, his determination to keep going despite the obstacles thrown in his path, and, ultimately, his attitude toward the end of his life. Payton's memory lives on through the work of The Walter Payton Foundation & The Alliance for the Children and the Walter Payton Cancer Fund.

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