Local coach finds meaning in illness

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LIBERTY — When David Ritter was young, he dreamed of being a football coach. But his career path took him in other directions.

Then a chronic disease ended his career and wound up putting him back on the football field.

“I always thought I would coach football,” said the garrulous Grays Chapel resident. He had played the sport at Franklinville Middle School and Eastern Randolph High. Then, as a student at Appalachian State University, he coached at Hardin Park Elementary School in Boone.

After graduation, Ritter said, he taught gymnastics at Tumblebees Ultimate Gym in Greensboro, which is something for a man who is 6 feet, 3 inches tall. But the owner of the gym, Sally Newton, “convinced me to look outside football,” Ritter said.

He found his calling in sales, spending 22 successful years in internet marketing with Thomson-Reuters. Then in 2010, Ritter was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, a progressive illness whose three main symptoms are tremors, body rigidity and slow movement.

As a result of his declining health, Ritter retired from Thomson-Reuters in May of 2015. It was a blow to the hard-working family man, married to wife Marla since 1991 with two adult sons, Tyler and Evan, and 12-year-old Cade.

When Cade was born 11 years after the first two, Ritter wondered, “Why am I getting a baby now?” It wasn’t until he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s that the answer became clear.

“I was watching a video of Michael J. Fox,” Ritter said. Fox is a movie and TV star who has been outspoken about his own case of Parkinson’s disease. “He was talking about Brian Grant, a former NBA player with Parkinson’s. “Fox said you don’t ask God to lighten your load, you ask God for broader shoulders,” Ritter recalled. “Have you seen anyone with broader shoulders than Brian Grant?”

“Then I knew why God gave me Cade,” Ritter said. “He’s

HANGIN’ WITH THE BOYS — David Ritter poses with eighth graders he coached in football at NERMS. They are, from left, Brooks Freeman, Logan Stephens, Willie Staley, Logan Newman, Zander Smith, Luke Thomas and Dakota McDaniel.

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my broader shoulders. He's 215 pounds at 12 years old.”

Cade had profited from his father's coaching when he joined a recreation league football team in Jamestown. That father-son, player-coach relationship could resume next fall.

As if Parkinson’s disease weren’t enough to handle, Ritter had two back surgeries in 2011 and a hip replacement in 2012. Then a couple of years ago, he had brain surgery to implant a device for deep brain stimulation (DBS). He’s due in a few weeks for secondary surgery to replace the battery. The DBS emits an electrical current to help with his Parkinson’s symptoms.

Despite the help, Ritter still isn’t able to work a full-time job. “I miss work a lot and my friends,” he said. “I feel bad not being there. I was looking for something to do.”

A couple of years ago, with plenty of time on his hands, Ritter accepted an offer to help coach Northeastern Randolph Middle School’s football team. He is offensive coordinator and special teams coach for Head Coach Billy Arrington.

“I really like Billy,” Ritter said. “He’s a good-natured man.”

Joey Bowman and Chris Rose also help with the team. And Ritter has the full support of Athletic Director David Benbow and Principal Dana Albright-Johnson.

During the past football season, Jason Collins, whose son Mason had played the year before, gave Ritter a scooter. He now uses the motorized wheelchair to get around the practice field.

“My biggest challenges are balance and speech,” Ritter said, calling his accent “southern slur” and joking that his coaching approach is “stumble and mumble.”

But coaching has been a joy to Ritter. “I love working with the kids,” he said. “I love the challenge. I love watching them develop. I like being around the guys and talking football. Coaching really helps fill the void of not working.

Coaching football, however, only requires two hours a day. Ritter wanted something to keep him at school longer.

So he took on the role of president of the NERMS Booster Club. “That keeps me busy,” Ritter said, adding that he buys and delivers food to the concession stand for game days. He also consults with Benbow over the needs of the athletics department.

“With the Boosters Club, I get to see the kids more often, developing our relationships and recruiting for next year,” Ritter said.

“I don’t think the kids pay much attention to the scooter,” he said. “I don’t move well or speak well, but they just want to be coached well.

“After a loss, I had challenges for them at practice,” Ritter said. “The winner of the challenges got to drive my scooter to get water.”

Ritter recalled the athletic banquet last year when he told the athletes, “For two hours a day during football season, I forget I have Parkinson’s. I forget my problems.”

After the banquet, Ritter found a note on his windshield in the parking lot. A player had written: “When I see you work as hard as you do with your problems, it makes me want to work harder.”

Ritter responded by saying he does what he has to do despite his health problems. “But if you work harder as a result, that’s fine.”

He said coaching middle school football, to him, is helping the players “have a good time, help them enjoy the game and go on to play in high school.”

Luke Thomas, quarterback of the 2017 football team, said having Ritter as coach was “a good experience. He shows us how much we have to be grateful for.

“We were playing for him, not just the school. We know he treasures his time with us out there every day.”

As for the reason he has Parkinson’s disease, Ritter said, “I think God gave me Parkinson’s because he knew I'd never shut up or sit down, that I would be an advocate.”

For that reason, Thomson-Reuters presented him the Stu Wolf Distinguished Service Award and made a donation of $10,000 in his name to the Parkinson’s Association of the Carolinas.

“I want people to know there’s life after you get Parkinson’s,” Ritter said. “Hang on to see what life brings you and find the positives.”

One of those positives for Ritter is seeing Cade move up to seventh grade next fall, thus qualifying to play football. That means the father-son, player-coach relationship can resume.