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Perry overcomes tough past to lead Michigan this season

Chris Perry has been at the forefront of Michigan's offensive attack this year

By Michael Rosenberg
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — She had come to Michigan to be with him, and now she was not. This hit Chris Perry all at once, moments after the game of his life.

As people disappeared from Spartan Stadium late in the afternoon Nov. 1, Perry scanned the crowd for his mother, Irene Egerton Perry. He was told his mom was home at her apartment. As soon as he got back to Ann Arbor, he went to see her. She hadn't watched the game on TV — too stressful — but she had heard what her son had done.

He had carried the ball 51 times — the most ever by a Michigan Wolverine — for 219 yards. Michigan had beaten Michigan State for the most satisfying victory of Perry's career.

"I bet you're tired," Irene said. "How the heck did you do that?"

He just laughed, as he often does when she starts talking about football.

Chris rested on the couch, across from his mom. It was the first time he had seen her without her hair; before, she had always worn a hat. Now she was in her own apartment and she was tired, and she didn't feel like wearing a hat.

She said she was sorry she missed

the game. She said she was OK. But she said the reality was that she had breast cancer, and even though she expected to survive, there were some days she could barely get out of bed. And then they changed the topic.

"Chris and I talk about anything," Irene Perry said. "We talk about politics, school, we try to talk about football — but that's not always that great because he says I don't understand a thing about football — relationships, race relations, history, the Internet."

She mentioned that now, without her hair, she looks even more like him. Chris said he hadn't thought about that.

Irene always thought they were friends as much as they were mother and son. Chris doesn't share his feelings with many people, but he opens up with his mom. Irene expresses herself more easily — or as Chris often says, shaking his head, "she talks too much."

On this day, they talked into the night. Although Chris can talk to Irene, and Irene can talk to anyone, they stayed away from what was really on their minds. They have avoided it for four months. It's just too big.

"Dying?" Irene asked. "No, I haven't talked about dying with him. I think that's what he probably thinks about, quietly. He doesn't mention it to me."

Chris Perry is one of the best college football players in the country. He has run for 1,435 yards in his senior season, and if he has a big game

Saturday against No. 4 Ohio State, he has a good chance of going to New York next month as a Heisman Trophy finalist.

This is how he always thought it would be.

His mother never imagined it. And sometimes, it must have seemed as if she were trying to throw obstacles in his path.

By the time he reached seventh grade, Chris was already sure that football was his future. It began to dominate his life. He began to slack off in class, talk out of turn, crack jokes at inappropriate times.

He never got in big trouble, but his mom was concerned enough that she thought she had to do something. Irene had divorced Chris' father, Raymond Perry, and was raising Chris and his sister Elizabeth in Advance, N.C.

She told him all the time: "You will not be able to blame you failing in life on me. I will have done anything I could to help you succeed."

She thought about sending him to wilderness camp. Raymond told her no. Her mother, Pearl Bostic, went to look at the camp and said, "No way."

Chris spent 10 months at the Eckerd Wilderness Camp — 10 months with no running water, no electricity, and worst of all, no football. Irene hoped that when he came back, he would behave better.

He thought he did. She thought he

Turn to MICHIGAN, page 19B



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Oregon Daily Emerald