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Strong for Kids

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**RUSSELL
WILSON**
teams up to fight
childhood cancer



Russell Wilson and children flex their muscles to help publicize Seattle Children's Strong Against Cancer campaign. Alaska Airlines is the lead sponsor of Strong Against Cancer.



Strong for Kids

Football star Russell Wilson
inspires others with his insight
and determination | BY JOHN HICKEY

Two days after Super Bowl 49 ended in a most gut-wrenching manner for Seattle, Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson called up Carly Young to say he wouldn't be breaking their standing Tuesday date. • Young works for Seattle Children's, and she's the link to what have become the most treasured times of the hospital week—Wilson's visits with the children. It's her job to usher the quarterback with the bright eyes and brighter smile around the hospital to see those with broken arms, life-threatening illnesses and despondent spirits.

Young wasn't alone among hospital staff in thinking that Wilson might take a pass after such a traumatic ending against the Patriots. But there he was on the other end of the phone, saying he'd like to come over for the afternoon.

"It was such a surprise," Young said. "He saw six kids, and there were some there who really needed his visit. It was a pretty intense showing of his commitment, because he could have stayed at home, and no one would have said anything, but he decided to spend his time with the kids."

For Wilson, the visit was therapeutic in the wake of guiding the Seahawks to within one yard of a second consecutive Super Bowl win. "I believe God is using me as encouragement," Wilson said. "Through all the wins and a couple of the losses, through all the accolades and life circumstances, the good and the bad, it's important to have perspective on what's important in life.

"These kids' futures are important. They can change the world. I believe that we can change the world one person at a time."

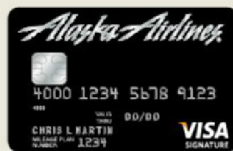
Wilson grew up on the playgrounds of Richmond, Virginia, with particular affinities for baseball and football at Collegiate School, a K-12 prep school with a commitment to athletics and an even larger outreach to the local community. Wilson's older brother, Harry, said the school's focus on the community was pivotal in Wilson's development.

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“It’s part of his anatomy,” Harry Wilson said. “When we grew up, there was a big stress on community service. We’d do projects revolving around it all the time. And our parents raised us right, too. You can’t forget that.”

His mother, Tammy, has said she remembers feeling Russell was going to grow up to be someone remarkable. “I always knew he was going to do something great, something special, because he’s a special kid,” she told mynorthwest.com. “They’d have a game or something ... and Russell would ... kind of run the game. His teacher said he was a little aggressive or assertive. I think he was a leader [even] then.”

Russell was just 4 when he began playing football with the 9-year-old Harry and their father, lawyer Harrison Wilson III,



Russell Wilson brings a smile to Seattle Children’s patient Aylinn, who is wearing a Seahawks shirt in honor of his visit.

who’d played both football and baseball at Dartmouth. Harrison Wilson had completed law school in 1980 to fulfill a promise to his father, but such was his passion for football that he tried out with San Diego later that same year and was one of the final Chargers’ cuts that season before turning his professional attention to the law.

His other focus was his family. Harry was developing into a wide receiver who would go on to play at the University of Richmond, so over time it was no surprise that Russell became the family’s quarterback in the backyard games. Harry’s and Russell’s family games lasted as long as their father’s health held out, but Harrison Wilson was not destined to live a long life. He died at 55 in 2010 from complications of diabetes.

Russell Wilson visited his father in the hospital constantly, praying with him, talking with him and seeing the power of a visit. “That’s what pushed me through the hospital door the first time,” Wilson said. “My dad was extremely sick, and I found that was a way I could help people. I wasn’t afraid of being in the hospital, and I felt the need to step out and do something that would help other people.

“I was almost, no pun intended, immune to the situation. I just believe in miracles. I believe in miracles happening. It happened with my dad [to survive as long as he did]. He did pass away eventually, but, still, this memory [of visiting him] is precious to me. It was incredibly hard to watch what he went through. It’s never easy seeing somebody you love go. That’s what it’s about, to encourage and to love. Sometimes we miss out on that; we ignore that, but that’s what’s really important.”

During the three years Russell spent at North Carolina State, he played both football and baseball, developing his leadership skills as the quarterback and developing into enough of a baseball prospect as an infielder with a

JUSTIN REARDON / DIRECTOR, STATION FILM



While best known for his prominence on the gridiron, Russell Wilson is also Alaska Airlines’ Chief Football Officer. In a series of humorous commercials, Wilson shows his comic timing as he runs the flight attendants through a series of obstacle-course drills. He is seen here in an ice bath, playfully bantering with Alaska Airlines Captain Mike Swanigan. It is clear that Wilson enjoys his work with the flight crews.



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Q&A

Russell Wilson answers questions from Alaska Airlines employees.

Caleb Jones (Station Operations, Seattle): How do you keep up your drive and determination and continue to focus on winning after such a difficult finish to an otherwise remarkable season?

Russell Wilson: I am only 26 years old. I have so much of my career ahead of me. I am excited for the challenge of growing as a player and person, and just getting better every day. I don't look backward, only forward. Every year is a new opportunity to do great things.

Cindy Skrinski (Cargo, Seattle): As a rookie quarterback, what one thing did you do to gain the respect of veterans in the huddle?

RW: There wasn't just one thing. Respect is something gained over time. For me, it was a collection of moments and events that let the veterans know that I respected them and the game. It was about preparation and execution and consistency. Veteran players have earned the right to demand those things from a young player. To this day, I still feel that way. I never take anything for granted. Preparation, execution and consistency are the goals every day.

Allyson Logan (Airport Services, Seattle): What is your favorite place to vacation: the beach, the mountains or somewhere in between?

Also, tell K.J. Wright hey from one Seattle transplant from Mississippi to another! Love you all. Go, Hawks.

RW: My favorite places to vacation are places I have never been. I love to explore and learn new things. There is so much out there I still want to see.

Jennifer Wade (Airport Services, Seattle): If you were to host a dinner party inviting four people who have had a huge impact on your life, who would they be, why, and where would the event take place?

RW: This one is impossible to answer. I could never choose just four. I would love to sit down with Jesus and just talk about His plan. I would want my father there, too. I miss him every day. There are so many times I just want to look up and see him standing on the sidelines. I just want to know what he is thinking. I would want my family there—my mother, brother and sister. From there, I would include the hundreds of coaches, teachers, mentors, advisors, pastors, relatives and friends who have shaped me into who I am. I am who I am because of them, each and every one.

Joseph Moore (Station Operations, Seattle): You're always listening to music and have your headphones on. What's your favorite song/band?

RW: I mostly listen to R&B and gospel. I really like Anthony Hamilton. The music just calms me and allows me to focus.

Trevor Peterson (Station Operations, Missoula): If you could give a young child advice on how to pursue their dreams of professional sports, what would that advice be?

From my 6-year-old son, Maddox Peterson, who says, "GO, HAWKS!"

RW: Dream big, work hard, and eliminate negative influences.

potent bat that the Colorado Rockies made him their fourth-round pick on June 8, 2010.

On June 9, Russell visited his father, by this time unresponsive and unable to speak, to tell him about draft day. It proved to be the last thing he was able to tell his father. Later that day, with Russell at his side, Harrison Wilson passed away.

Russell had made time for hospital visits while at North Carolina State, and he made time for visits while at the University of Wisconsin, the school to which he transferred in 2011 after Wolfpack football coach Tom O'Brien had some concerns about Wilson's desire to go to spring training with the Rockies rather than playing spring football. Wilson had completed his undergraduate work in just three years, so he was able to transfer to Wisconsin, where he led the Badgers to the Rose Bowl in his only year.

Wilson continued to make time for hospital visits in Seattle after the Seahawks made him their third-round pick in the 2012 draft. A need to visit is hardwired in him, as Seattle Children's was to discover.

"He came unsolicited, knocking on our door," said Doug Picha, president of the foundation that supports Seattle Children's Hospital and Seattle Children's Research Institute. "I remember when he started to appear, it was before any of his success.

"When his stock was rising, everybody at the hospital started to know who he was. I said to myself, 'Let's see how this goes; let's see how strong the commitment is.' His commitment is amazing. And it is so meaningful to these kids. Every Tues-

day is Blue Tuesday—they all wear their Seahawks garb."

One of the patients wearing Seahawks colors each Tuesday is Kennedy O'Day. The 8-year-old was diagnosed with leukemia in September, and just before Christmas she got the chance to meet Wilson.

After introductions, the two sat and talked like old buddies.

"It was a great experience," Kennedy said. "It helped take the weight of hearing about my diagnosis away. I was super excited, wearing my Seahawks jersey. It was a big moment for me."

Kennedy's father, Jim, said the meeting was a blessing. "After the diagnosis, we were dealing with some heartbreaking issues.



Quarterback Russell Wilson is shown in action against the Green Bay Packers during the 2015 NFC championship game, which the Seahawks came from behind to win.

Just before Christmas, Russell came by. It's kind of hard to put into words how much it helped. For our family, to take some of the focus off her cancer, even for a little bit of time, it makes a huge difference for us."

Kennedy is doing well these days, as is Greta, a 2-year-old who is part of Seattle Children's Strong Against Cancer campaign (strongagainstcancer.org). Greta was one of the first to participate in Strong Against Cancer's prom-

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ising cancer immunotherapy clinical trials. In a nutshell, doctors extract blood from a cancer patient with relapsed leukemia or neuroblastoma, reprogram the blood's T cells to get them to recognize cancer cells, then reintroduce the blood back into the patient, where the reprogrammed T cells multiply quickly as they seek, attack and destroy cancer cells without harming normal, healthy cells.

The Strong Against Cancer campaign seeks to raise funds for this important effort. It has received excellent support since its televised debut at the halftime of the Seahawks–49ers game on Thanksgiving Day.

Greta was just 1 year old when the standard treatments—chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant—ran their course without alleviating her leukemia, said her parents, Maggie and Andy Oberhofer. She got a second chance when the family learned that the trials at Seattle Children's were starting. They packed up their house in Portland and moved north.

"When she relapsed after three or four months," Andy Oberhofer said, "there wasn't much we could do until this trial came along." They are back in Portland now, with Greta doing much better.

It so happens that Andy went to North Carolina State, and Maggie went to Wisconsin. "We spent the first year arguing who Russell belongs to ever since he came into our lives," Maggie said.

"He's such a good guy with those kids," Andy Oberhofer said. "When he picked Greta up the first time, he was ear-to-ear smiles. He loves kids, and anybody who sees



Seattle Children's patient Kennedy O'Day poses in Seahawks colors with Lisa Brandenburg, president of Seattle Children's Hospital.

"When we surround those who are a little bit down or whatever with encouraging people, good things happen."

him with kids knows that none of this is faked. What he's done has meant a lot to us as parents at a time that was just excruciating."

Strong Against Cancer means everything to the Oberhofer clan, or as Maggie Oberhofer said, "Our daughter would not be here without this trial."

In December, the trial's principal investigator reported that 11 of the first 13 patients in phase I of the clinical trial have achieved complete remission.

"We're not saying this is a lasting cure," Picha said. "What we're talking about is that the promise of cure is out there. When we were putting the Strong Against Cancer initiative together, we asked Russell, who was already seeing some of these kids, if he would partner with us, and he said he absolutely would. He's our team captain. We announced the \$100 million goal at halftime of the 49ers–

Seahawks game, and we've raised over \$11.3 million to date."

Strong Against Cancer is being publicized on billboards and in other media around the Northwest. There is Russell Wilson, team captain, with his special kids, everybody's arms reaching to the sky.

Even after a Super Bowl loss. "A loss like that gives you good perspective," Wilson said. "It's the fight, the continuous belief that you are going to get better. I believe the Seahawks will get better. I think that when we surround those who are a little bit down or whatever with encouraging people—nurses, doctors and the others around here—good things happen. That's what I was trying to do after the Super Bowl, to be supportive."



Greta Oberhofer, one of the first patients in the Strong Against Cancer immunotherapy trials, is doing well.

In the Seahawks' huddle, there is no question that Wilson is the leader. When he visits Seattle Children's he gets the same kind of defer-

ence. But it's best to remember that Wilson's pro football career was not a given, nor was his level of success. Tom O'Brien, the North Carolina State football coach, tried to drum up support for Wilson's entering the NFL draft after Wilson's junior year, but no team was much interested. Given Wilson's relatively high status in the MLB draft, there was a chance Major League

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Strong for Kids

Baseball would be the path he'd walk down. Except for one thing. Harrison Wilson had wanted to be an NFL player and, despite rave reviews as a receiver, never realized that dream. His son, perhaps fueled by his father's early death, wanted the NFL, too.

"Picking football over baseball was a tough decision for me," Wilson said. "It was a major risk in my life. I was projected as a Major League second baseman because of my size [5-11] and my ability. So that was one thing.

"I had this fire, this passion, to play this game of football."

"Then on the other side I had this fire, this passion, to play this game of football. I identified my skill set, and I knew I could make all the throws and lead the team and win Super Bowls. So I took the risk. I'm glad the Seahawks took the risk, too."

Harry Wilson said his brother's decision early on to graduate from N.C. State in three years instead of four "was the smartest thing he did."

"The plan was for him to graduate in three years, and then if he got drafted by an MLB team, he could leave if he wanted to and still have his degree," Harry Wilson said. "What he didn't know is that he would wind up transferring like he did. He's good at leaving every option open as long as possible, and he's smart enough to say it was a no-lose situation for him to take those extra credits every semester if he could handle the workload. He could."

The Rockies took him, but after Wilson had played his one year at Wisconsin, he was football-bound. Eventually, the Texas Rangers would acquire Wilson's rights in the Rule 5 draft, gambling





READ MY PINS

The Madeleine Albright Collection



MARCH 13 – JUNE 7

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Images: Madeleine Albright wearing *Liberty* designed by Gijs Bakker, Photo: Diana Walker; Designer unknown, *Serpant*; Anton Lachmann, *Bluebird*, Photos: John Bigelow Taylor.

Read My Pins. The Madeleine Albright Collection has been organized by the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Generous support for this exhibition was provided by Bren Simon and for the exhibition catalogue by St. John Knits. The local presentation of this exhibition is curated by Stefano Catalani.

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Strong for Kids

on the chance that he might be a two-sport star someday.

So no one should be surprised during spring training this month if Wilson appears in a dugout or two with the Rangers. He's no Bo Jackson, not yet, "but I always say, 'Never say never,'" Wilson noted.

He loves Seattle—he lives in the area year-round—and he wants nothing more than to add another Super Bowl ring or three to his collection.

He also wants to keep reaching out to kids with health challenges. "What I hope for when I walk into the room is to put a smile on their face," he said. "When I walk into the room, I'm praying for a miracle. I'm hoping that God is coming to touch these kids and somehow find a way. That's what I'm praying for, and that's what I'm looking for. I care about these kids and their moms and dads. And the reason why is on behalf of my own dad."

Brother Harry understands that philosophy more than most. "Our dad was a big part of our lives, and with his death, Russell said, 'I'm going to dedicate this [my career and volunteer work] to my dad; I'm not leaving anything on the table.'"

Russell internalizes life lessons and knows what's really important, while also being able to focus on the present, his brother said. "For some people who are really good at what they do, it turns out that what they are really great at is compartmentalizing. Russell is really, really good at that. I'm really close to him, and I'll find out a year later that he was injured in a game, something like that.

"It's crazy. I don't know how he does it, but it's a special skill he's developed. That, for him, is what allows him to be successful."

Russell Wilson is successful in touching the world, transforming it one bit at a time.

Harrison Wilson would like that. ▲

John Hickey writes about Seattle-area sports.

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