‘You can’t walk around sad and upset’

Karnick battles through thyroid cancer

If you're looking for any inspiration look no further than Ashley Tukes-Karnick.

“You can’t walk around sad and upset,” Karnick said. “You’re allowed to be mad at life, but you can’t live life mad. I was upset because I did so much to get where I’m at physically.”

Karnick was deep in the woods competing at a cross country regional in Lansing this past season when she began having a hard time breathing.

“There was no one back there,” Karnick recalled. “I passed Das (Campbell) at the two mile. I thought I should go back to Das and stop running, but once I passed him he went to the three-mile mark. I just decided to drag my body out. I was only 800 meters from the finish line. I might as well finish the race. I was already there.”

After finishing the race, Karnick went to the hospital and learned that her blood oxygen levels were extremely low.

Later that week Karnick went to see a specialist where she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

“How are you going to fix it,” Karnick asked immediately. “They said it’s curable. So how are you going to cure it? They told me radiation. First thing that came to my mind was becoming a superhero. I thought I’d become the Flash with radiation in my body.”

They found two growths on her left thyroid that they removed.
“It could have been worse,” Karnick said. “When you hear cancer you think, for women, breast cancer, pancreatic, stomach, colon, throat or lung cancer. It’s curable, but it’s not that common, but there is ways to cure it.

“Alright then fix it,” Karnick added. “It could have been much worse. Coach Kim (Renas) lost his wife and I know some athletes that have lost battles with cancer.”

This almost felt like piling on.

“I went through a divorce, went back to school fulltime, while working fulltime, and I’m a mom, then this gets dumped in my lap,” Karnick said. “Then you look at it. How many people are divorced? How many single parents go back to school, work fulltime and raise children? People may look at this as a curse, but I look at it as a blessing because it makes you strong in life. You don’t look at life as ‘oh woe is me’ anymore.

“You say what it is, you admit it and then you carry on,” Karnick added.

Karnick first became a Monarch in 2006 after leaving Bowling Green where she had received a scholarship to run track in 2003.

“I should have come to Macomb in the beginning,” Karnick said. “When I first got here I was 21 and thought I went from D1 to this Community College, but I’ve done more here at Macomb than my whole time at Bowling Green. I was a National champ, a four-time All-American. I still hold the record in the 500 at Ohio Northern.”

But Karnick also hit a road bump that first season at MCC.

Karnick got into a really bad car accident after getting hit by a drunk driver. She dislocated her hip, fractured a shin and twisted a knee cap.

But that didn’t detour Karnick.

“I came back next year and Coach Kim elevated me to a whole new level,” Karnick said.

Karnick left MCC after receiving her Associate Degree.

After taking a number of years off, Karnick was coaxed into coming back to college where she still had eligibility left to compete.

“I’m not really a school person, but as I got older I kept thinking I can’t tell my daughter to go back to school and finish things up if I don’t,” Karnick said. “I started back at Macomb and was running road races when I saw Coach Das over the summer. We ran a race together. Well we were in a race together. He told me I might still have eligibility if I wanted to come back.”

And that’s just what Karnick did and her five-year-old daughter, Morgan, has been by her side every step of the way.

“They told me if I came back, trained and was a part of the team, they’d put me on full scholarship,” Karnick said. “I was very nervous, for one I’m not 18 and I haven’t done hill workouts in five or six years. It’s different than running around your neighborhood or your gym than coming in here and running 200s or 12 400s with kids in the high school.

“It was hard, but I accepted the challenge,” Karnick continued. “I was scared. Road races my best time was 20 minutes flat. I came to Macomb and I couldn’t break 22 minutes the first time. Then I had to realize all the factors of life. I just came back to school. I still have to be home to cook dinner. I have to take a kid to school, work, fly here and jam in practice, lifting and jam in work. I needed to remember how to study, how to retain information and take tests. It was a challenge, but once I got the hang of it everything fell into place. Coach Kim and Coach Das helped talk me through it. They reminded me what I was and where I could be at again.”

But how was this soon-to-be-32-year-old going to relate, let along compete against, kids 13 to 14 years younger than her.

“When you run 15 400s with someone you bond,” Karnick said. “When you go through the practices and the 10-mile long runs and the bus rides you become a family. When I come in now it’s like, ‘Tukes can you do this and this for me. We need this.’ Let me fix the problem.”

Her role and place on the team just came natural.

“It fits for me to be here, whatever role I’m supposed to play,” Karnick said.