Cancer treatment hasn’t worked as well as he had hoped

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LAST September, he set himself a target of returning to S-League action by April.

A month on from his initial target, however, Gombak United midfielder Adrian Dhanaraj is still fighting against lymphoma, a battle which started nine months ago.

And even though he remains as positive as ever, the 29-year-old said that making a return to professional football is no longer at the forefront of his thoughts.

“You’re priorities change when something like this happens to you,” he told The New Paper.

“Now, the most important thing is to stay alive and complete this [treatment].”

Gombak sat out the S-League this season, but are honouring Dhanaraj’s two-year contract.

The player, who has played for the national team twice, will undergo the fourth of 21 radiotherapy treatment sessions this morning.

He began the 15-minute daily treatment last Sunday.

The hope is that by the end of the month, the lymphoma will be out of his system for good.

After being diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma last September, he was put through a series of 16 chemotherapy sessions. But they did not work entirely.

So, in March, he had to undergo five sessions of high-dosed chemotherapy before receiving a stem-cell transplant, during which his veins thinned so much he had to have drugs administered through a tube in his chest.

“By right, the stem-cell transplant was supposed to clear everything,” said Dhanaraj.

“Unfortunately, remnants of the cancer remained, so my oncologist said I needed to go for the radiotherapy treatment.”

In total, his cancer treatments have cost in excess of $200,000. Thankfully his insurance plan meant he didn’t have to foot the bill.

While he remains hopeful of making a full recovery, Dhanaraj said he has been through an emotional roller-coaster.

Tragically, just a few weeks after he was diagnosed with lymphoma, his one of his two pet dogs, Misty – a five-year-old golden retriever – was also diagnosed with the cancer.

Misty died last December.

Recalled Dhanaraj: “We found out she had lymphoma only because we had to keep the house as clean as possible for me during my chemo treatment, so we cut her fur.

“That was when we noticed huge lumps on her neck... just like the ones I found on my neck. We did a scan and then we found out it was lymphoma.

Got me down

“Even at her sickest, she was happy and wagging her tail. So to see her dying – my family watched as she took her last breath – it really got me feeling down.”

And although he has tried to keep a positive outlook on his recovery, reading about people who succumbed to lymphoma is understandably never easy for Dhanaraj.

One recent case was that of veteran MediaCorp actor Huang Wenyong, who died on April 20 of lymphoma at the age of 60.

“While after that, I read about a rugby player who died of lymphoma after a relapse, at the age of just 23,” said Dhanaraj.

“When you’re on your road to recovery, you start to think that the cancer is beatable and then you read of all these cases... It just brings you down again.

“It’s important to have the support and positivity around you, and I’m lucky to have that from my parents, my brother and my girlfriend.”

But just as he carved a reputation on the pitch for being a hard tackler and a focused competitor, Dhanaraj has no intention of letting cancer get the better of him.

He is studying for a communications degree at UniSIM, and has two exams lined up next week. Unlike most of his peers, however, he will take them after attending his radiotherapy sessions in the morning.

And next week, he will begin tutoring a child afflicted with cancer, as part of his efforts as a volunteer with the Children’s Cancer Foundation.

His father, Peter, a 61-year-old retired army officer, is not surprised at how his son has coped with the illness.

He watched as Adrian’s physical condition deteriorated during his stem-cell transplant, but knew that his son would quickly regain the toned, fit physique he is known for.

“I think he’s fitter than most S-League players at the moment,” quipped Peter.

“At the end of the day, it’s about how mentally strong you are... and Adrian is definitely strong enough.

“If you are fighting cancer, and you can still spend two hours in the gym and run five or six kilometres a day, that’s really saying something.”

“Even at her sickest, she was happy and wagging her tail. So to see her dying – my family watched as she took her last breath – it really got me feeling down.”

– Adrian Dhanaraj on losing his dog Misty (right) to cancer