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## Pete Thamel > INSIDE COLLEGE FOOTBALL

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### Manti Te'o in his own words

### Manti Te'o in his own words (cont.)

*We asked SI senior writer Pete Thamel to give an account of his reporting on the Manti Te'o story, which ran in the Oct. 1 issue and can be found [here](#). The story was assigned after reports surfaced that Te'o's grandmother and girlfriend had died within six hours of each other on Sept. 12 and 13, and that Te'o, Notre Dame's star linebacker, was continuing to play.*

On Sunday, Sept. 23, I sat down with Manti Te'o for a story that was due two hours after the interview concluded and would appear on SI's cover later that week. The detail he provided me about Lennay Kekua, who he said had died 10 days earlier -- six hours after his grandmother passed away -- was staggering. He said that they met through his cousin nearly four years ago and started "dating" on Oct. 15, 2011. Te'o told me she graduated from Stanford, lived in Carson, Calif., had family roots in Hawaii and helped take over part of her dad's job in the construction business, though her passion was to work with children and she'd traveled as far as New Zealand to do so. He said she got hit by a drunk driver on April 28, 2012, discovered that she had leukemia while recovering, and received her cancer treatment at St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton, Calif. He never specified that he'd met her in person, and I didn't ask. Why would you ask someone if he'd actually met his girlfriend who recently died?

#### **ROSENBERG: Te'o hoax sparks more questions than answers**

Last night I went through about six hours of interviews from the five days I spent at Notre Dame reporting the Te'o story. Father Paul Doyle, the rector of Dillon Hall, where Te'o lived for three years, told me, "I think I had met the girlfriend. I think she had been here visiting the year before." (He gave Te'o a prayer card that said the men of Dillon Hall were praying for his loss.) Coach Brian Kelly, defensive coordinator Bob Diaco and teammates such as Theo Riddick, Robby Toma and Cierre Wood described in painstaking detail Te'o's emotions on the day he got the call in the locker room that Kekua had died. I was told by teammates and coaches that Te'o had been on the phone with her while getting his ankles taped and for weeks after her death he stayed in close communication with her supposed family.

Before I went to campus, I had conducted lengthy interviews with Brian Te'o, Manti's dad, and Dalton Hilliard, a close friend from Punahou High in Honolulu who played at UCLA. Both said they were in frequent communication with Kekua; Brian Te'o told me he had received a condolence text from her after his mother died. They also spoke on the phone at length, as he did with Lennay's brothers after her "death." Hilliard said he received frequent texts and tweets from her.

**REPORT: Friend says Tuiaosopo confessed to orchestratinghoax**

"She was a very supportive, loving passionate individual," Hillard said. "She was all about God and prayer and being able to have faith. Me and her never met in person. But I felt like this was a testament to who she was. She would still text and tweet me before my games."

He added, "It was a pleasure for me to know her. The fact she made my best friend such a happy man, it's something that made me a happy man as well."

When I arrived in South Bend, Ind., that Wednesday morning, Te'o, his team and an entire campus talked openly about mourning Kekua. I had little reason to believe that she didn't exist.

But in retrospect there were some red flags. When I checked Lexis Nexis to find out more about Kekua, I couldn't find anything, though that's not uncommon for a college-aged student. Nor was there anything on her supposed brother, Koa. I was unable to track down any obituaries or funeral notices, but that might be explained by the fact that she had three recent places she called home, or by her family not wanting publicity.

**TROTTER, BANKS: Te'o hoax's effect on his NFL Draft status**

I called Mike Eubanks at Stanford to check Kekua's graduation year. Te'o wasn't sure if it was 2010 or 2011. Eubanks is an assistant athletic director for football and he coordinates on-campus recruiting visits. He knew Te'o from Stanford recruiting him in 2008 and '09 -- Stanford had gone after him hard. Eubanks, who directed Stanford's football media relations this season, couldn't find her in the alumni directory and thought it was odd that, on such a small campus, he'd never heard of a student dating Te'o. This was the most glaring sign I missed. I thought that maybe she didn't graduate, so we took any reference to Stanford out of the story.

We searched for details about the car crash. Brian Te'o told our fact checker and Manti told me that a drunk driver had hit her. We couldn't find any articles about that accident and took the drunk driving reference out. It was just a car accident.

For the interview on Sunday afternoon Te'o and I sat in the linebacker meeting room in Notre Dame's football facility and he looked straight at me as he spoke. His eyes welled up at times. The only time he didn't speak with confidence was when I asked how they met. I didn't press him, as it was clearly something he didn't want to share. I suspected they may have met online, understood he wouldn't have wanted that public and moved on.

Here's what Te'o told me that day about his relationship with Kekua, and comments from others for the story:

**TE'O:** On April 28 [my girlfriend] got in a bad accident and was hit by a drunk driver. Ever since April 28 she's been in the hospital. She recovered from the accident but we were always wondering why some days she would be doing well and the next day she would be down in the dumps and complaining about pain in her back. It was then that we found out she had leukemia.

**SI:** Sorry to cut you off, just trying to get the timetable right.

**TE'O:** It was the beginning of July. She and I, man, we had this relationship where it was just amazing. With all that time on her hands in the hospital, she was never thinking about herself and what was hurting here. She was always thinking about others. She went on and wrote a letter to me before every game. Things that she would want me to know. So yeah.

**SI:** Did she send them to you?

**TE'O:** She had them all on her iPad and her family found [them]. Her family, what they would do is they would read it to me. And then they'll send it to me in a picture.

**SI:** You called them one day leading into each game?

**TE'O:** Yeah, I'll call and check up on them and see how they're doing, see how things are going. Just like I check in on my family at home.

**SI:** What day this week did they read you the letter?

**TE'O:** Friday. I checked in on Friday.

**SI:** How did you meet her?

**TE'O:** We met just, ummmm, just she knew my cousin. And kind of saw me there so. Just kind of regular.

**SI:** How long were you dating? I know that can be a complicated question.

**TE'O:** Oct. 15 was the official date. Of last year. I've known her for four years. So we've been friends.

**SI:** So you dated for about a year.

**TE'O:** Yeah.

**SI:** Just want to make sure I have her name right.

**TE'O:** Lennay Kekua.

### **Notre Dame AD calls for Te'o to speak publicly**

**SI:** How do you want her to be remembered?

**TE'O:** Lennay was so special. Her relationship with the heavenly father was so strong. She's so humble, hard working. And her main thing was her family. Her family was everything to her. As long as she took care of her family. And as long as she knew that her relationship with our heavenly father was strong, she had faith that everyone would work out. With her it was just always loving God and her family. I was just blessed to be part of that.

**SI:** How old was she when she passed?

**TE'O:** She was 22.

**SI:** She has a Hawaiian sounding name. Is she from there?

**TE'O:** Her real name is actually Melelengi, but her friends couldn't say that so they just called her Lennay.

**SI:** What did she do?

**TE'O:** She actually just graduated from Stanford. She worked at Clark's Construction Company, I think. She replaced her dad after her dad passed.

**SI:** When did her dad pass?

**TE'O:** In October. She took that mantle for him.

**SI:** Does the family own a construction business?

**TE'O:** No. But they're part of the whole administration, the higher-ups. Their family worked really hard and worked their way up. She's very smart, very smart and very intellectual. She worked there but her main dream was to work with kids. She traveled all around. She taught at elementary schools. She flew to New Zealand to just work with kids. That's what she loved to do, work with children.

**SI:** What did she study?

**TE'O:** She graduated in 2011 or 2010. 2011.

**SI:** What was her major?

**TE'O:** Her major was in English and something. I'll double check.

**SI:** I can call Stanford and check. They have to have some record or note that she passed.

**SI:** So long distance relationship?

**TE'O:** She was supposed to come [to visit me at Notre Dame]. She was just cleared to come to the Wake Forest game, my senior game. It was mainly just on the phone, every day.

**SI:** Your dad told me that he called you at 7 a.m. on the day she died. He said when he woke up he had texts from Lennay. I'm confused. Walk me through that day.

**TE'O:** She was actually getting better to the point where she was cleared to fly and was sent home. She was doing better. So I woke up in the morning and my parents woke me up and they told me about my grandma. And my girlfriend was just someone who was so loving and caring and cares for others. She really loves my parents and my parents love her. She called and she offered her condolences on behalf of her and her family and she was telling them that she loves him and how they're thinking and praying for us.

And then I remember I went to class and went to workouts and after workouts, right before I was about to come into meetings, I got a text message from her phone but it was her brother. Every time her brother texts me he just says, "Bro." I was like, "Why is her brother texting me?" Then I get a phone call from her older brother's phone. He's just crying. And immediately I felt like, "Oh my Gosh, what just happened." And then he told me, "She's gone bro."

**SI:** How did it happen?

**TE'O:** It was just so sudden. I don't know the details of it. It was just a surprise.

**SI:** What was her older brother's name?

**TE'O:** Koa.

**SI:** What did he have to tell you?

**TE'O:** I kind of felt it. He was just crying and crying and crying. I just had to calm him down. I was like, "You have to speak clearly, I need to know what's going on." That's when he told me, Lala is gone. That's what they call her. They call her Lala.

**SI:** How did you feel in the locker room when you got the news?

**TE'O:** I just felt that it just turned black. Things got dark. I have never felt that way before. And I don't know. I couldn't control anything. I was just, pure, just I don't even know the feeling. I can't even describe it. I just broke down.

**SI:** Why did you go to practice after you found out the news?

**TE'O:** I knew for me that my girlfriend and my family would want me to be out there. They wouldn't want me to be sulking over things. I knew for me, the best way to show them that I loved them was to play the best game of my life on Saturday. In order to do that, I needed to be out there practicing no matter what I was going through. I needed to just suck it up and get out there and get my work done and be ready to represent them the best way I know how on Saturday. When I got out there, it was hard. But I just brought my team up. Coach brought my team up. He had them come out and explain to them what happened. I told them I love each and every one of you. I lost my grandmother the night before and found out this morning that I just lost my girlfriend six hours later. Never in my life has family been pushed to the forefront. My goal is now, and has been, but there's more to it now. Just to make sure I see my family and loved ones again. I told them, this is my family. You guys are my family. I love each and every one of you. Stick together. And I told them, my girlfriend always told me, "Send roses while they still can smell them, tell them they love you (sic) while they still can hear it." I told them to make sure you tell your family members you love them every single day.

**SI:** You have a wedding ring on?

**TE'O:** It's my church ring. I wear it to remember her. To remember my girlfriend.

**SI:** Did she give it to you?

**TE'O:** It's a CTR ring. It stands for choose the right. I always wore it. I had to switch it from my right to my left.

**SI:** What is it made of?

**TE'O:** Steel. Some sort of steel.

**SI:** Coach Kelly said he was more worried about you this week than last week?

**TE'O:** It was harder than it was the previous week. I was rolling. The feeling of it settling in that, she's not physically here no more. You just can't call her. I talked to my girlfriend every single day. I slept on the phone with her every single day. When she was going through chemo, she would have all these pains and the doctors were saying they were trying to give her medicine to make her sleep. She still couldn't sleep. She would say, "Just call my boyfriend and have him on the phone with me, and I can sleep." I slept on the phone with her every single night.

**SI:** You would literally sleep with your phone on with her on it?

**TE'O:** With her on it.

**SI:** When you woke up?

**TE'O:** She's be on it.

**SI:** What would the phone say?

**TE'O:** Like eight hours. Lucky she had AT&T so it was all free or my family would kill me.

**SI:** When did you start talking to her all night?

**TE'O:** When she got in her accident?

**SI:** So starting in April?

**TE'O:** Yeah and you know, she was in a coma. I would try, and you know.

**SI:** Hit by a drunk driver. What were her injuries?

**TE'O:** I don't know. She had a lot of different injuries.

**SI:** How long was she hospitalized?

**TE'O:** She was in that hospital for about two months.

**SI:** Wow, did she get out?

**TE'O:** She didn't get out. She went from there. Remember she got in the accident and she was in a coma. We lost her, actually, twice. She flatlined twice. They revived her twice. It was just a trippy situation. It was a day I was flying home from South Bend to go home for summer break. It was May. Mid-May. That was the day where they said, "Bro, we're going to pull it. We're going to pull the plug." I remember having this feeling like everything is going to be OK. They were telling me, "Say your goodbyes." From April 28 to around mid-May, I was always talking to my girlfriend who was on a machine.

**SI:** She couldn't communicate?

**TE'O:**No. She could only breathe. One of the miraculous things was when I talked to her and she would hear my voice her breathing would pick up. Like quickly, and then she would start crying. But her breathing would quicken, and she would start crying. So her brother was in the room with the nurse. They were monitoring her. She said, "Who is she on the phone with?" Her boyfriend. She was like, "That's amazing. She doesn't do that with anybody else." So that happened. And then she flatlined and we were losing her.

The day I went home, that was the day they were going to pull it. They were saying their goodbyes and all that. I said, "Babe, I'm never going to say goodbye to you. If you really want to go, she really missed her dad, so I said, "If you want to go, be with dad, go. Just know that I love you very, very much." I had this very positive feeling that everything was going to be OK. I landed in Hawaii. By the time I said my goodbyes. Not my goodbyes, my I love you, I'll see you later, that kind of thing, I jumped on the airplane to go to Hawaii. They were scheduled to pull the plug while I was in the air.

So right when I landed, I was expecting to get a voicemail saying she's gone. So I landed and I had a voicemail from her brother saying, "Brother, call me back right now." So you can imagine what's going through my head. I was like, "What am I going to do? How am I going to take this?" And so I called him back, the doctor came in and he saw something and he wants to try some treatment on her to see if it works. From there she slowly started to get better. Slowly. Eventually she came out of her coma and she started having memory problems and she couldn't remember because of the accident. That's how much damage she had to her frontal lobe. She had memory problems. I was actually the first person that she talked to. She was breathing, breathing. When I talked to her, I would say, "Babe, do you know who this is?" I knew she knew who it was because her breathing would pick up. I was like, "Relax, chill. Breathe slowly. Breathe slowly." And then, that was when she first started to speak was that conversation. I was like, "Babe, I love you. I love you." Very slightly she said, "I love you."

**SI:** Was that right when you got back?

**TE'O:**Then she started to make progress.

**SI:** This is unbelievable.

**TE'O:** As she started to make progress. She had her good days. And then the next day she'd say, "Babe my back is sore. I can't feel it. Something is wrong. I don't know what's wrong. My chest is burning." And stuff like that. They said that they took her in and ran some blood tests and that's when they found leukemia. From that hospital she was treated for cancer and then she went to St. Jude's. She was in St. Jude's and then she went to another hospital.

**SI:** Your girlfriend's funeral was yesterday?

**TE'O:** I talked to [her family yesterday]. I cried. I cried at 12 noon yesterday. At 9 a.m. California time.

**SI:** She was buried in California?

**TE'O:**She was always in California. Her family is from Hawaii but they live in California.

**SI:** Where did you meet her in California?

**TE'O:**She actually came to one of the games. She saw me at one of the games.

**SI:** October 15, I assume is USC?

**TE'O:** That was in November. But she saw me at the USC game of my sophomore year. We were still just friends, we were acquaintances.

**SI:** Where did she live then?

**TE'O:** Carson.

**SI:** The funeral service was in Carson? At 9 a.m., a closed casket?

**TE'O:** Yes. The family was telling me, what the plans were and at 9 they closed the casket and stuff like that.

**SI:** Where were you at noon yesterday?

**TE'O:** It was kind of actually perfect timing. I was getting my reps and in my mind I said, "What time is it? What time is it?" It was perfect timing. Right when coach was like, "All right, second group get it," I turned to him and was like, "Coach what time is it?" He said, "It's 12:01." As I walked back to the (inaudible) I just cried.

**SI:** I just want to make sure. Lennay had an iPad. She wrote a series of 12 letters to you every Friday before a game. Who read these to you?

**TE'O:** Her brother or her sister. Noa is her twin brother.

**SI:** How long was each letter?

**TE'O:** It was about a page.

**SI:** That will be one of the things you look forward to.

**TE'O:** Her words run through my head. One of the words in her letter was, "Babe, after every quarter, instead of looking around, close your eyes and thank the Heavenly Father for another quarter and focus yourself. Just focus on the here and now."

*Editor's note: On Nov. 30, Thamel did a follow-up interview with Te'o for SI Present's bowl issue. He reiterated the story about the iPad letters and how one of the siblings would read the letter of the week out loud to them. The supposed family went through enough painstaking detail to say that her brother spelled his name Noa.*

**TE'O:** "The last letter I received was after the Stanford game and she wrote one more for the senior game. They (one of the siblings) would read it for me before the game and send it to me so I can read it."

## TEAMMATE CIERRE WOOD

**SI:** So Manti stood up in front of the team?



**WOOD:** He stood up in front of the team and told us what happened. It was on the field. He told us, "I love you guys." We got his back. We always had his back, we've always had his back since he came in. And that's not going to change.

**SI:** You guys are there for him. How?

**WOOD:** I mean, everyone was texting and calling him. I'm pretty sure he didn't want a lot of people at his condo. If I come out my door and turn right I'm at his door. I was over there sitting with him and talking to him, telling him everything would be OK. I couldn't imagine if anything like that happened to my girl. It was really, really tough on him. He had all his brothers there to keep his head up and keep him focused.

**SI:** Tell me about the scene.

**WOOD:** The whole time, I'm just sitting there asking, "Would I be able to do it?" I don't think I would have, knowing how much I love my girl. I would be so distraught about it. I would be so down in the dumps I wouldn't know what to do. He held himself together and we gave him all the time that he needed to get out what he wanted to say, what he needed to say. He left it like that. It was all in the circle. I don't know how long it was.

## DALTON HILLIARD, A HIGH SCHOOL TEAMMATE WHO PLAYED AT UCLA

**SI:** Tell me about Lennay.

**HILLIARD:** She was a very supportive, loving passionate individual. She was all about God and prayer and being able to have faith. Me and her never met in person. But I felt like this was a testament to who she was. She would still text and tweet me before my games. Good luck brother. Good job out there today.

The fact that she would do that for someone she never met. The fact that [Manti] and I are such great friends and brothers. Who she was and is as a person. Pleasure for me to know her. She made my best friend such a happy man, it's something that made me a happy man as well.

## FATHER PAUL DOYLE, RECTOR OF MANTI'S DORM, DILLON HALL

I was surprised to hear about it on the news. No one had called me, and I'm the team chaplain for God's sakes. It was a surprise to me. You don't have to put that in the article. I was at practice two days last week. They typically practice 20 to 24 periods a day. I stay for five and stand there and watch. Last few weeks I have stood on the defensive field.

He acknowledged me. I don't want to be a distraction. He waved to me and he did last week. I had no idea what he was carrying with him at the time.

I had the other chaplain. He didn't know about it either. He said I'm watching the same thing. To lose those two people. I think I had met the girlfriend. I think she had been here visiting the year before. He might have even asked me to pray for a health condition that she had. That sounds vaguely familiar, but I know she was a beautiful person. I had no idea it was life threatening. And then she's gone.

We prayed for them Sunday night by name, as we do anyone that loses a close relative. Of course Manti wasn't there. I'm going to give him a card saying the men of Dillon Hall are praying for Mrs. Santiago and for Lennay.

## MARK THESING, TEAM CHAPLIN FOR ROAD GAMES

I checked with (Jack Klunder), Director of Football Operations and we spoke back and forth. Thursday night. Friday. We made special mention of that during the mass. Unfortunately, I've been with the team a number of times with deaths. As a matter of fact, there's been three other incidents.

Anytime at Notre Dame, we bring that to faith, we bring that to prayer. I think it was important to Manti and to his teammates and being there and recognizing that this is something that we have a higher power for to deal with these issues.

## BOB DIACO, NOTRE DAME DEFENSIVE COORDINATOR

I was basically with him when he got the call about his girlfriend. He was distraught, as you would imagine. And an hour later he was at practice distraught. But you know, he compartmentalized what he needed to. He wasn't focused on himself. He was focused on himself and was focused on what those people would want him to do in that moment and he was focused on his teammates and in general.

"Everyone that I love here is over there. I'm going to be with them." That's what he said to the team. Basically, he explained the tragedy that happened and explained that why he was here and why he was important that he was with them.

Everyone loves Manti. Whatever he needs. Everyone is all in. It's the culture of this team. Everyone is all in.

## BRIAN KELLY, NOTRE DAME HEAD COACH

Like no circumstances that I can remember in 22 years that a young man has been hit with incredible news just before practice. And when I find out about it, and I come out of the meeting room, there's 10 players around him, sitting with him. Supporting him. I asked all the players to go back to their meetings and I sat with him and Robby Toma, his close friend. We spent a little time and I brought him up here to my office. Take your time to talk to your family in here by yourself. He did that for about an hour. I came back in and told him to take the day and hang in here and take a nap.

I need to be around the people I want to be around. I need to be at practice. If that's how you feel, you need to talk to the team and tell them why you're out here. You need to tell them why you're here. We stretched and broke them down and brought them together and Manti told the team why he was out there and how important all of them were.

### ROSENBERG: Te'o hoax sparks more questions than answers

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