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October 22, 2014

# Surviving the Race

## A Second Chance to Run

Just one more race to go—eleven down—and I will complete the 2014 Playmaker's Race Series. If I can muster enough strength and speed, I should be able to finish no worse than fourth in my age group. That would guarantee me a third place in the Grand Master's and first overall in my age group. It's the morning of the MSUFCU Dino Dash 5K. Sunday, October 5, start line is 9:30 a.m. It is also nearly 8 years since I was told I had cancer. That anniversary is October 20. An immense whirlwind of emotions are sweeping over me. I want to do well in this race. And I have been having an incredible year racing. How did I get here? How did I manage to put together those finishes at the other eleven races? How did I survive the disease and the treatments to be here?

October 14, 2006 was my surgery. Sometime between then and October 20, my pathology labs were completed. On October 20, the positive result was presented to me—I have cancer. It was two separate tumors, both in the right testicle. Further tests would reveal cancer activity in my abdomen toward my chest. Time to pick my Oncology team.

Saturday March 22, 2014, the first of the playmakers race series races. I wonder how I stack up against the area's best runners. It's been years since I have run competitively with a purpose. I have run a few races and a local triathlon to prove to myself that I had beat cancer, but mostly to finish. Now I was looking at a bigger race with solid competition and an inner desire to compare myself. I finished tenth that day. It put me in the overall points chase and the age group points chase. The running bug had reignited in me. But could I overcome the bleomycin (a chemotherapy drug) that fouled up my lungs to help beat the cancer.

In December 2006, I started my chemotherapy at Red Cedar Oncology. Julie McClure administered my first dose of chemo. I didn't realize at that moment the bond I would form with

Julie. She is such a great nurse and a wonderful individual. Not just Julie, but the entire staff that Dr. Rapson put together is the most wonderful collection of care givers. The first couple of weeks were extremely hard on my body.

Race two, Race for the Place, really got my juices flowing to compete. I placed fourteenth overall and second in my age group. The course was a bit tougher and my time was slower, but everyone was a bit slower compared to the first race.

As the end of my first week of chemo, my body was feeling a bit overwhelmed. This therapy put me in the office Monday through Friday from 7:00am—3:00pm. The chemistry coursing through my veins was making me tired. The additional medication helped make me irritable and the steroids made me extremely hungry. I ate ravenously. Over the next couple of weeks I thought I was doing OK. I wouldn't know the truth until months later when I really felt good exactly how far down the scale I was. I just didn't know it. I was fighting this with the help of some heavy duty Chemotherapy and the help of Kevin, Lynnette, Amanda, Julie and Dr. Rapson. The hours in the office seemed like days. Everything about this process was brutally long. But somehow, I dug in remembering how hard it was to train for cross country in high school. Running a 15:20 cross-country race wasn't easy and the training was often grueling to get there. I looked back often to lessons Coach Schultheiss and Coach Wismer taught me as a young runner. Those words were echoed by my care givers at Red Cedar Oncology. The upcoming weeks were going to be extremely rough. I am glad I didn't know how rough they would be until it was over.

The next six races were pretty rough on my body. But I had put some hay in the barn. I had the training to be able to withstand the back to back races with little recovery time. I had been running every day since Thanksgiving the previous year—a nice little running streak. At that sixth race, The Mint City 10 Mile Run, I got to see Julie racing again. I had seen her at a couple of other non-series races. She is a wonderful inspiration to me. It was so good to see her at this particular race. It was the first time I have competed in anything longer than a 10K since high school. Could I not only finish, but also compete? I was pacing with a couple of friends. If I could hang with them for three or maybe four miles at 6:30s, I might be able to hang on to 7:00s by myself and break 70 minutes. My goal was to be near 70 minutes at mile seven, I was still with my friends. I was extremely surprised that my lungs could hold up. As I crossed the finish

line, I saw my time. I not only was near 70 minutes, I was well below that time. I had shattered my expectations. 1:07:25.8 for a 6:45 pace. WOW!

I think of taking care of my health prior to cancer—the active lifestyle and decent eating. I was putting hay in the barn for the struggle of chemotherapy and radiation. I was hoping to just survive. But when it was over, I was going to shatter my own expectations. I couldn't know it at the time as I was exhausted constantly. I could barely walk a block without being fully winded. I thought I'd settle for just being alive. After all, this was cancer I was fighting, not just runny nose.

Two races later came my longest challenge since high school when I competed in my first marathon. I was actually going to compete in a 1/2 marathon. 13.1 miles. And by now I was actually thinking I was going to compete. In February, I had set my goal to be around 1:30:00. But as the race approached and I looked at my year and times, I adjusted that goal to be 1:27:00 or 6:40 per mile. I thought that time would make me competitive and that it was reasonable. Friday night prior to that race, as I officiated a local high school football game I was concussed. I probably should not have run and the attending doctor at the game told me as much. I ran and with the injury, I still managed a 1:26:51.0 for a 6:38/mile pace. Twenty-fifth place overall and second in the 50-54 male age group. There were over fourteen hundred runners in the 1/2 marathon.

Two races to go. The Playmakers Autumn Classic 8K (five miles). Fourteenth place overall and second in my age group. Another fast day for me—30:24 for a 6:07 per mile pace. And the series finale, the Dino-Dash on the campus of Michigan State. It's a chilly morning with a bit of wind, and my dad and mom are there. They were at all of my races. Mom takes pictures and dad video records. It is always so good to see them there, just like they were always there as I was battling cancer.

I was so excited about my final chemo treatment. I was ready to be done. Then a few radiation treatments, to go and I could hopefully start to live a life of a survivor. I wonder if I will ever have feeling in my toes and fingers again. I wonder if I will get my memory back. Chemo brain is very real to me. I had a very difficult time remembering anything for any amount of time. The anti-nausea drugs and a ravenous appetite had packed on over 40 pounds. My knees hurt just to walk. I hope I can still do things with my kids and wife. What do survivors do? What happens now? There were so many questions bouncing around my head. But here I stand, ready

to walk out of treatment for the last time. I had very mixed emotions that afternoon. I had met some absolutely wonderful people. They became like family to me. They may never know just how much they really mean to me. My heart was beating wildly. I was glad I had to go back for regular checkups.

So now it's here. I am at the starting line. My heart is beating furiously. I can't remember being this nervous at a race in a long time. The series is about twenty minutes from its conclusion for me. I see a couple of the really fast guys lining up. I need to hang with them. I need to hang onto hope this chemistry in my veins is working. The countdown to the start: ten... nine... Just one more treatment... two... one... I am off. I go hard. It's the only way I know—go as hard as I can for as long as I can. I fight the nausea, fight the headaches. I feel like I have hit my stride. My pace is quick and comfortable. I am breathing deep. I am relaxed. Dr. Rapson is taking great care of me. I have an entire team making sure I get through this. First mile in the books at 5:50. A bit fast but I feel great. I cannot believe I spent Christmas in the hospital because of my cancer drugs. Only a couple of weeks into the treatment and BAM. So this is how it ends? I am feeling pretty weak and small. Why am I failing? I want to beat this! I shouldn't be here. I am only 45 years old. I have a wife and kids. This second mile sure hurts. I am struggling just to maintain. I see a gap between me and the runner in front of me widening. Did I go out too hard? Second mile split is 6:05. Okay, so I dropped 15 seconds. Just relax the body and turn the legs over. I don't care who is behind me. Behind me doesn't matter. It's in the past. I need to look forward. I just need to fight this disease. Dr. Rapson's staff is so positive. Thank you Lynnette for kicking me in the keister. I need to fight and realize I have wonderful people helping me. But I have to want it. I can see the final turn approaching. A ninety degree right hander and about a hundred meters to go. I can see the clock. It's in the 18s! I cross at 18:31! That's a sub 6:00 per mile 5K.

I look for the results. Tenth overall, second in my age group. It's over! I am third in Grand Master and first in my age division. I feel as if I won it all! I did. I won back my life. After five years of checkups, Dr. Rapson says I am cancer free. I have been for an additional three years. Eight years ago, I started a race for my life. Eight short years later I am racing for life.

Thank you Dr. Rapson. Thank you to your entire staff. I love you all.