

Chapter 1

No Way I Have Cancer

According to my GPS, I was going 18.4 mph on my road bike on a straightaway in Elmore, Ohio. I know that for some, that is not a blistering speed. But for me, it was as fast as I could go, and I felt like I was flying. I was proud of myself for reaching that speed, especially as I was training for a triathlon that was still six weeks away.

As I sped along, I saw a farmer ahead with about four grass-cutting blades attached to his tractor deck. He was headed straight for the bike path. I could tell by the timing of my speed and his direction that we might reach the same spot simultaneously. So, as a safety precaution, I decided to try and pick up more speed and move over to the far-right side of the bike path.

What I didn't anticipate were the laws of physics, the momentum of that sudden shift carried me off the path and into a field of grass. At first, I wasn't panicked—I thought I could slow down and gradually guide myself back onto the path. But what I didn't see was a giant rock hidden beneath the grass. My front tire hit that rock going nearly 18 mph, bringing my bike to a sudden and abrupt stop. I, however, kept going.

The Crash

I flew over the handlebars, scraping my stomach, hips, and groin right over the bike's handlebar horns. I happened to be riding a triathlon training bike with forearm horns in the middle, which made the trauma from the fall even worse. I hit the ground face-first and, in what would have surely gone viral on social media, flipped completely over, bending myself in half the wrong way. I heard and felt my cervical and thoracic spine crack multiple times.

As I lay there, I remember thinking I might be paralyzed. In fact, I was certain I was. I also remember thinking about how this would change my wife's life. Drawing on my background in athletic training, the first thing I did was stay still and check if I could wiggle my toes and fingers. Although I was afraid to move, I was able to wiggle both, which quickly reassured me that I was not paralyzed. I could move just fine, much to my surprise.

Assessing the Damage

As I triaged myself further, I took some deep breaths and eventually managed to sit up. Everything seemed okay. The farmer on the tractor had turned around and was heading back in the opposite direction—he hadn't seen me. No one had. I was alone, at least three miles from my car.

You may wonder why I didn't call someone for help. I was in the middle of a field with no access points. The closest access point was likely where my car was parked, three miles away. So, I picked up my bike and started walking back.

After a few steps, I realized I wasn't as okay as I had thought. My right hand, especially my thumb, was in severe pain, and my thoracic spine and ribs were hurting badly. I made it back to my car and drove myself directly to the emergency room, where it was confirmed that I had a costochondral injury and a fractured right thumb.

A Routine Checkup Turns into a Life-Changing Diagnosis

That's where my cancer story begins. Several months later, during a follow-up visit with my primary care physician for those injuries, he noted in my chart that I had neglected my 50-year-old medical checkup. You know, the one that requires a colonoscopy, bloodwork, PSA screening—all the things guys love to do and talk about. Reluctantly, I agreed to get it done. Conveniently, the phlebotomist was available to draw my blood that day, so I went home thinking that the worst thing I'd have to endure in the coming weeks was a colonoscopy.

Two days later, I received a call from my doctor's nurse. Most everything was fine—just the usual stuff: slightly high cholesterol, advised to cut down on salt and fatty foods (which broke my heart). But then, she dropped a bombshell: “Oh, and by the way, your PSA was a little high. You should probably call the urologist when you get a chance to schedule a visit.” She mentioned that my PSA number was 52.4, which meant nothing to me at the time, and gave me the urologist's contact information.

Since it didn't seem urgent, I put off calling the urologist for two weeks. Finally, at my wife's insistence, I made the call.

A Shift in Priorities

Scheduling a new patient appointment at this particular urology office was difficult. They were booking six months out, which was fine with me. I didn't want to go anyway. I was in the middle of triathlon training, had an upcoming trip to Australia, a family vacation to the Outer Banks, and a mid-August trip to the Dominican Republic to celebrate my 30th wedding anniversary. October seemed perfect.

As we searched for a date in October, the receptionist casually asked, “Oh, by the way, what was your PSA number?”

I responded, “I think it was 54 or something.”

Her tone shifted immediately. “Oh, wow! Hold on one minute, I'll be right back.”

About two minutes later, she returned to the phone and asked, “Can you come in today? Our last appointment is at 3:30 PM, but the doctor will stay late to see you if you can make it.”

That was the moment when fear and terror gripped my heart. I didn't know what was coming, but I knew it couldn't be good. The urgency in her voice was unmistakable.

The first thing I did was look up normal PSA numbers on Google. I was shocked to find out that not only was mine high, but it was astronomically high. I immediately called my wife, who was still at work, and told her that the doctor wanted to see me that very afternoon. She left work early to meet me at home, and we prepared ourselves for what was about to unfold.

No Way I Have Cancer!

The day I found out I had prostate cancer, I remember repeating to myself over and over, “There’s no way I have cancer... there’s no way I have cancer... there’s no way I have cancer.” It became a sort of mantra. It felt like a million things were racing through my mind, but the most significant thought was about my dad, who had died young at the age of 46. I had already outlived him by five years, and part of my strategy for living longer was to maintain my health through weight control and a healthy lifestyle.

The Weight Loss Journey

In 2015, I embarked on an aggressive weight loss journey, determined to improve my health. I began consistently counting my calories, limiting myself to 1,800 calories a day. Mind you, I didn’t necessarily eat healthier—I simply restricted my caloric intake. In addition to that, I started running and quickly became an avid runner. Within about a year, I had lost nearly 60 pounds, going from 263 pounds to a low of 207 pounds.

Part of my running strategy was driven by my competitive nature. I couldn’t just run for the sake of running; there had to be a goal. So, I began entering 5Ks, which led to 10Ks, half-marathons, and eventually triathlons. Over time, I completed four triathlons (both sprint and Olympic distances), two half-marathons, a handful of 10Ks, and at least 20 5Ks. There’s something addictive about the pre-race jitters and the excitement of race day.

I was always “active,” but my activity gradually dwindled over the years. In the 1990’s, in graduate school, I earned a master’s degree in exercise physiology, became a certified strength and conditioning specialist, and am as a licensed athletic trainer. I’ve had a fantastic career that involved working with elite athletes in both performance enhancement and sports medicine. I was surrounded by healthy, active people, which made the words “You have cancer” sound even crazier to me.

As I mentioned earlier, my dad died at age 46 from complications related to bariatric surgery. His untimely death was a major motivation for me to live longer and not put off the things I enjoy for some undefined time in the future. His passing inspired me to stay active, maintain a moderately healthy lifestyle, and pursue a life of adventure before it might be too late.

A Life of Adventure

That commitment to adventure led me to many exciting, bucket-list-level experiences. I’ve walked on the Great Wall of China twice, swum in the Great Barrier Reef three times, trekked an active volcano to find endangered mountain gorillas in Uganda, cage-dived with great white sharks off the tip of South Africa, written a few books, completed a Ph.D., started hiking the Appalachian

Trail, visited Lord of the Rings filming locations in New Zealand, and toured ancient historical sites such as the Library of Celsus in Ephesus. I've taken my wife on a gondola ride down the Grand Canal of Venice, moved my family to live in Rwanda and Australia, and was even featured on HGTV's House Hunters International. Life was great and only promised more exciting adventures.

No Room for Cancer

This life I was living had absolutely no room for prostate cancer, let alone “advanced metastatic prostate cancer.” It just seemed impossible. Even more baffling was the fact that I didn't have any of the typical symptoms associated with the type of prostate cancer I was eventually diagnosed with. Typically, someone with advanced prostate cancer experiences trouble urinating, frequent urges to urinate, or sexual dysfunction. I had none of those symptoms. I never felt the need to get up in the middle of the night to pee, and when I did, I could always empty my bladder entirely. My wife does confirm that I had no issues with sexual function.

The absence of symptoms, combined with my active lifestyle, completely contradicted everything I thought I knew health. This only reinforced the crazy idea that I couldn't possibly have cancer. And yet, I did. The refrain “There's no way I have cancer” still echoes in my mind to this day. It wasn't just denial; it didn't seem right.

My medical oncologist recommended genetic testing to determine whether I had any pre-existing genetic markers for prostate cancer. He was confident that something would show up. But, guess what? There was nothing. Zero. Zilch. I had absolutely no genetic predisposition or markers that indicated I was predisposed to prostate cancer.

When the genetic counselor called to give me the results, she actually said, “You're just incredibly unlucky.” My first response was to lean into my faith and declare otherwise, which I did, “I rebuke that” I remember thinking to myself.

Faith and Discontinuity

You see, I have always believed—and still do—that the Lord gives us blessings without sorrow. That's a direct quote from the Old Testament, one of King Solomon's famous Proverbs (Proverbs 10:22). But how could this be without sorrow? This diagnosis seemed to violate one of my core beliefs. There was no way I could have cancer. My lifestyle didn't lead to it, the symptoms didn't show it, and my faith didn't allow for it. Yet, I had it, nonetheless.

This is exactly what management guru Peter Drucker referred to as a “discontinuity” in his famous discourse on the seven drivers of innovation, a discontinuity occurs when beliefs and perceptions do not align with reality. In other words, it's an irregularity or contradiction between what you expect to happen and what actually happens.

This was certainly a discontinuity for me. There was no way I could have cancer, and yet I did. How do you reconcile that? The questions it raises can be overwhelming and burdensome. But, as I've learned, sometimes life presents us with realities that defy our expectations, and we are forced

to face them head-on. The silver lining is that discontinuity, if you don't let it beat you, drives you to innovate. So, innovate, I did. My wife and I started to the process of reinventing ourselves.

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