



POWERED BY

HOPE

PRESENT PAIN AND FUTURE FEAR
ARE NO MATCH FOR TERI GRIEGER

BY MIKE MEEHAN

Photos by Robin Hadder

As she sat in the doctor's office, waiting to go through another chemotherapy treatment, triathlete Teri Griego of St. Louis received the phone call that would lift her spirits, allow her to live her dream and give others hope when facing the most dire of circumstances. On the phone was Peter Henning, senior vice president of television production for Ironman, who had called to inform Teri that she had been awarded a slot as an inspirational participant in the 2011 Ironman World Championships. Very few people, including Teri, thought that this moment would ever happen after her initial diagnosis of colorectal cancer two years earlier.

Teri had set her sights on competing in the Ironman World Championships after nearly qualifying at Ironman Louisville in 2008 — her first attempt at the Ironman distance of swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 miles and running 26.2 miles. She was confident that in 2009, she would return to Louisville and shave off the few minutes she needed to qualify for Kona.

But in the weeks leading up to Ironman Louisville, Teri noticed that her training was not as sharp as it had been in the past and that a few nagging injuries were slow to heal. "I would go off on a long run and I would feel like my feet were in buckets of cement," Teri said. She also had some rectal bleeding that she thought was a result of hemorrhoids developed from spending countless hours riding her bike. Teri initially dismissed the symptoms and attributed them to the normal rigors of training and pressed on. "I thought that if I still had symptoms after the race, I'd go get checked out," Teri explains.

Although she dedicated herself to qualifying for the Ironman Championships, she would again fall short at Louisville. With her health issues not improving, Teri finally decided to take the advice of a friend who suggested she see a doctor to have a colonoscopy. The doctor didn't get very far into the procedure when he

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realized that there was a large malignant tumor in her colon. Teri would be diagnosed with stage 4 colorectal cancer at the age of 48. Although treatable when diagnosed in its early stages, only 8-15 percent of those diagnosed with stage 4 colorectal cancer survive more than five years. After examining Teri further, doctors realized that the cancer also had spread to her liver.

"I was floored and shocked," she said. "From my experience as a nurse, I didn't think I would last long. I thought it was a death sentence. My first thought was, I was not going to be here when my daughter gets married." Teri worked with her doctor to lay out her treatment plan and she began to view her fight for survival as the toughest physical and mental challenge she had been faced with. "The doctor told me, 'This is a full Ironman, we're going to work through it.'"

Teri's diagnosis prompted her two older sisters to have colonoscopy exams. One sister's exam revealed pre-cancerous polyps, which the doctor removed. Her other sister was diagnosed with stage 3 colorectal cancer. Detecting Teri's cancer may have saved her sister's life. "(The doctors) saw a tumor up high; she never would have had symptoms (and it may have never been detected)," Teri explains.

For 12 months, Teri would endure seven to eight rounds of radiation followed by 12 rounds of chemotherapy. Between radiation and chemotherapy treatments, Teri trav-

eled to Kona to watch a friend compete in the 2009 Ironman World Championships. The experience was bittersweet. As she watched Chrissie Wellington cross the finish line to win, Teri thought to herself, 'I'm never going to get here. Physically I'll never be able to qualify again, not after I go through all of this (treatment) — if I'm still around.'

But before she even started her first round of chemotherapy, Teri's thinking began to change about her chances of making it to Kona. There was still hope.



Teri and her husband, David, celebrate after she finished the 2011 Ironman World Championships in Kona, Hawaii.

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Teri needed normalcy in her life to help her regain her mental and physical strength. Normalcy for her meant swimming, biking and running, so she began to do those things again. “It was my outlet to keep my life as normal as I could,” she says. Her focus now was on just finishing workouts — no matter how long it took. She began to run and swim after treatments and took her chemotherapy pouch with her while she biked.

“I don’t know how she was able to compete at that level. Those treatments are debilitating. I experienced an utter fatigue, unlike anything I had ever experienced before,” says Alissa Murphy, a survivor of stage 3 colorectal cancer. “Teri is a true heroine in every sense. She is such an inspiration.”

“I think my body was in condition to do those things because I had been doing them at a high level for so long. It’s amazing what the body can do when you build up to that level,” Teri explains.

But in January 2010, Teri would be slowed again by additional surgery — liver and colon resections. “That was the only down time, post surgery, that I couldn’t exercise,” she says. Recuperating from surgery was difficult. “I got really, really sick and got down to under 120 pounds. It was worse than what I thought.”

Eventually Teri began training again to the point where she felt that competing in the Ironman World Championships was within reach. She hoped to land a spot in Kona as an inspirational participant, but still needed to prove to race organizers that she was physically strong enough to finish a full Ironman. So she trained for and finished Ironman Kansas 70.3.

With another half Ironman under her belt as proof of her physical strength, Teri wrote to the television producer of the Ironman Championships to request entry as an inspirational athlete. Weeks passed as Teri continued to train. She felt strong enough to compete, but she needed to convince race organizers that she could do it. As she faced another treatment, the call that Teri was waiting for came. She was awarded a slot in the Ironman World Championships. In October 2011, Teri and 35 friends and family members, including her oncologist, made the trip to Kona.

“All I could think about was how blessed I was to be out there. How many people get to live their dream? No matter how hot or how hard or windy, it didn’t matter to me, I was so excited to be out there.” As she crossed the finish line, Teri was overcome with emotion when she saw her family. “I was just overwhelmed. I could not believe it happened.”

Although she reached her goal, Teri wasn’t content to rest on that accomplishment. She has become an advocate for creating awareness of colorectal cancer. “It takes a special kind of person to say ‘I have colorectal cancer.’ It’s not an easy thing to talk about. Maybe I have the sense of humor to pull it off.”

Through her humor and wit, Teri is pulling it off. She has raised thousands of dollars for cancer research and awareness



Teri competed in the Ironman World Championships as an inspirational athlete, and her ability to come back from chemotherapy and surgery made her just that.

programs. Last year, she personally raised over \$73,000 for “Pedal the Cause,” a St. Louis-based organization that provides funding for cancer research at area hospitals. She also attends numerous races and events, such as the Undy 5000, the Colorectal Cancer Alliance’s signature 5k event, to tell her inspirational story. “I want to be an example for others,” she says. As one of the featured athletes in NBC’s broadcast of the 2011 Ironman Championships, Teri’s story of hope was seen by millions of people. Weeks after the broadcast, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay declared Jan. 20, 2012, “Teri Grieg Day” in her honor, not only for her physical accomplishments, but for inspiring others.

Teri will never be cured of the cancer that still threatens her life. She continues treatments and fights to maintain her health. In Teri’s life, swimming, biking and running are the norm. They take her away from the reality of living with cancer. Her next goal is to run the world’s five major marathons. She is well on her way to accomplishing that feat. Having run the Chicago, New York and Boston marathons, she will be running the London and Berlin marathons in 2013 to reach her goal. So she continues to train, powered by hope.