Alun Pepper — Britain's Manliest Man

Britain's Manliest Man, Alun Pepper, works to raise awareness of what it means to live after testicular cancer

March 6, 2019 By Justin Birckbichler

Welcome to the Band of Ballers! In this series on ABSOT, I'm turning over control to some other ballsy testicular cancer survivors and patients who have inspired me with their work in advocacy and awareness during and after their diagnosis. This month's feature is all about Alun Pepper, who is Britain's Manliest Men. Enjoy!

My story starts in July 2006, when I was 35. I was watching sport on TV with a beer in one hand. The other came to rest where we men like to place it when we relax and that's when I felt a lump.

My first thought was 'Oh F*#k', not because of what it might, and turned out to, be but because I was not in the regular practice of checking myself and so did not know how long it had been there.

You see, I had quite good testicular cancer awareness due to the Lance Armstrong story

I also knew testicular cancer had good survivability if caught early, but at that time I was not in the habit of regularly checking myself once a month.

I felt the lump on a Friday and on the Monday I was at the doctor. At the time I was getting ready to deploy to Iraq (as I am a fast jet aviator in the Royal Air Force), and maybe due to this I was sent for an ultrasound really quickly. All along, I tried to be well informed from good sources on the internet. Due to this research, I was not shocked that once the ultrasound had ruled out a cyst, a biopsy was required and that required an orchiectomy.

What followed was a routine operation — well, as routine as having your right ball cut off can be. At that stage, the scan showed no spread, which then made me a little surprised to receive a letter with regard to chemotherapy. Once I understood that it was a voluntary process, as a preventive measure against recurrence, and after consulting with my aviation doctor about the potential ramifications to my flying, I went ahead with one dose of carboplatin. The side effects from this were minimal — no matter how hard I tried to milk them to get my girlfriend to make me drinks.

All told, from first detection to being back in the cockpit, it was about 3 months with no ill effects. Although, maybe my jet now had to fly a little more left wing low to compensate for the change in the center of gravity.

Since then, I have wanted to share my experience to educate others about testicular cancer

Like a lot of survivors, I now talk bollocks whenever I get the opportunity. This initially took the form of school visits, including the famous Eton College, and has included professional soccer teams. It was in 2014, whilst reading a men's fitness magazine I saw an advertisement for a competition to find 'Britain's Manliest Man.' After initially scoffing at a seemingly stupid competition (a view I still hold) and turning several pages, something in my mind changed. Wouldn't it be good if the manliest man in Britain could be a testicular cancer survivor? It could have the two-fold effect of raising awareness and showing that having a ball removed in no way affected masculinity.

So I applied and luckily my story resonated with a lot of people. With the help of an appearance on TV, I was lucky enough to win. The competition led to me becoming an ambassador for Orchid (probably the largest male cancer charity in the UK) and has given me a great platform to share my message.

However, it has also been a bit of a burden. I do feel a bit of a fraud as not only have I met many military veterans but also other survivors of testicular cancer whose experience was far more challenging than mine. In no way do I take the title of Britain's Manliest Man seriously, however some people seem to think I have done it for personal gain or to become a 'celebrity'.

But my aim is to have Britain's Manliest man almost as an alter ego to try and get the message across to 'stupid' young men that testicular cancer in no way affects masculinity

I do challenges to emphasize what is achievable after cancer which include: one half marathon, three 100-mile bike rides (sometimes sporting the amazing naked cycle suits from the Male Cancer Awareness Campaign), climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, and obstacle course racing and martial arts training in both Japan and Thailand. All these are done on top of my job going on operations in the RAF.

During the talks many of the same questions come up. As a single guy, I often get asked if I am self-conscious if I'm with a new partner. In truth, I don't think I have met one who could tell unless I pointed it out. Besides, by the time they are close enough to count they have usually committed. I chose not to have a prosthetic testicle put in. Once my girlfriend and I had asked about ones that glow in the dark or vibrate. The surgeon thought were weren't taking the question seriously (he was right) and left.

The question most people are thinking, if not brave enough to ask is about performance in the bedroom. Here I steal a line from the wonderful Wendy Gaugh, and say it's a lot like a double barrel shotgun… one barrel is all you need. But again I am keen to stress the lack of side effects, post treatment, for me I attribute wholely to early detection and treatment and I know others have different experiences.

I think I was lucky in that my personality and sense of humour helped get me through my testicular cancer experience with no mental health issues

My friends also share this sense of humour which lead to my new nicknames on the squadron being iPod (roman numeral for 1 being I) and Uncle Bulgaria (a children's cartoon character called a womble, which sounds like 'one ball'). This banter, for me, was far more cathartic than any sympathy. I was determined to laugh at the situation, I had already bought many comedy CDs in case I needed long doses of chemo but again I was lucky.

This approach lead my Commanding Officer to write that my approach was the bravest thing he had seen outside of combat. Whilst this statement was flattering, it was also ludicrous. Bravery to me is when you are scared and have a choice not to do something but do it anyway. When we are ill, there is no choice.

I still use a lot of humour in my awareness work, which isn't to devalue people who have had more difficult experiences but to make the talks hopefully more memorable. After all — knob jokes are a staple of British humour.

I still do talks whenever I can, brief all RAF graduating officers, and am reaching out to professional sports teams as through them I can reach many more people to share the importance of testicular cancer awareness. I have given a talk to English Premier League winners Leicester City and hope one day to talk to Manchester United and the Oakland Raiders when they visit London. I usually try and get a signed ball to replace the one I lost, for a feature on social media I call #newballsplease.

Finally, be careful what you wish for — I remember one day saying I would give my right bollock to fly jets.

Be sure to connect with Alun by visiting him at @alunpepper and Al Pepper or Uncle Bulgaria — Britain's Manliest Man.

Know someone (or even yourself!) who is supporting TC awareness and would be willing to share their story? Drop their name, contact, and why they should be featured into this Google Form and I'll reach out to them and/or you!

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