Connor O'Leary — CMO of Testicular Cancer Foundation

Former *Amazing Race* winner and bicyclist Connor O'Leary became the chief mission officer of TCF to help support others.

August 20, 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 Connor O'Leary, who works as the chief mission officer of the Testicular Cancer Foundation. Enjoy!

When I was 19, I was racing bikes in Europe with the U.S. National Team. Everything was great: our team was doing well, and I was living in Belgium. I mean, how could things NOT be great, right? But I had this nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right. I thought maybe it was the intense race schedule wearing me down.

I ultimately flew home from Europe to see a specialist to figure out what was going on. After a quick "feel up" and ultrasound, the doctor came in and delivered that three-word message that I'll never forget:

"YOU HAVE CANCER."

We. Were. Stunned. With devastating news like this, time, distance, and location lose their meaning. My dad broke down. I tried to listen to what the doctor had to say, desperate to find a point of reference, but all I noticed was happening around me.

The whirr of the air conditioning above me.

The crinkling of the paper beneath me.

The smell of cologne from the patient before me.

The fluorescent light pouring down from the ceiling.

I managed to stay upright, which at that moment, honestly felt like a victory in itself.

Cancer? At the age of 19? I felt so perplexed. I didn't even know at 19 I was susceptible to cancer.

Quick PSA: Turns out I was susceptible, and all men are… So get checked! (Editor's Note: Get on the ball and learn how to do a self-exam here.)

I remember feeling like my body had betrayed me. For seven years, I focused on eating well, training hard, putting in the time, and enduring the pain. I had focused on being as healthy and fit as possible. I learned at that moment that cancer doesn't discriminate. It doesn't care if you are 15 or 50, an athlete or a couch potato. Everyone is susceptible and needs to ensure they are advocating for their own health.

Cancer was my new reality, and the life I knew was quickly disappearing.

I had the standard radical orchiectomy followed by a four-round cocktail of BEP chemotherapy. The days at the hospital seemed never-ending; five days a week for eight hours I tethered myself to the chemo drip…

This became my new normal.

About three weeks toward the end of chemotherapy, my shoulder started to ache. Considering all of the other side effects, this was not concerning at first. Then that ache intensified. Over the course of two days, it went from a dull twinge to a sharp pang. It then burned like wildfire as it spread down my back, shoulder, and across my entire rib cage.

I couldn't eat. I couldn't move. The next morning, my dad found me sitting upright in a chair, barely conscious. I was rushed to the hospital. You know you're in trouble when you bypass everyone in the waiting room in the ER. IVs were hung. Veins were poked. Tests were run, and then the doctor came in to deliver the news.

Pulmonary emboli. Blood clots had exploded in my lungs like hand grenades, and there was a particularly large clot clinging to my port. They were concerned that if that clot hanging on port came loose, it would travel to my brain…

And that would be it.

I spent the next week lying in a hospital bed, coughing up blood, while blood thinners ran through my veins, and praying that the clot on my port didn't break loose. It was touch and go for almost two weeks, but eventually, the blood thinners did their job. The clots dissipated, and I was able to finish my last round of chemotherapy.

I finished my final round of chemo a shade of the athlete I once was. In his book The Prophet Khalil Gibran wrote: "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.

That is precisely how I felt. My cancer fight had made my soul strong but had left my body scarred. It was not an easy road, but I ultimately returned to the top of professional cycling among other pursuits like participating on The Amazing Race and working with the incredible folks at the

Testicular Cancer Foundation. (Editor's Note: I thought I was cool running Tough Mudder and then it turns out Connor won season 24 of The Amazing Race.)

As cliché as it sounds, the entire cancer experience really put things into perspective for me.

I learned more about myself, my capabilities, and what it means to truly suffer in those eight months than ever before. Above all, it taught me how precious life truly is. I started living, taking advantage of every opportunity, and creating deeper connections with the people in my life.

I never had ambitions or thought I would end up working with a nonprofit organization. But when I connected in 2014 with the Founder of the Testicular Cancer Foundation (TCF), Matt Ferstler, it seemed like a natural fit.

Here at TCF, we focus on education, community, and support for testicular cancer. As the chief mission officer, I connect with newly diagnosed patients, caregivers, and survivors every day. I see how this disease can affect individuals and families. It breaks my heart when I hear of someone passing from a disease that is 99% beatable when caught early.

I want young men to understand how simple a testicular self-exam is and how important it can be.

It takes 60 seconds, once a month, and can not only save your life, but save you time, money, unnecessary treatment, and treatment-related side effects. If you feel something, see a doctor.

It is through working together that we will affect change, raise awareness, and ensure men know the warning signs of testicular cancer. As a survivor and men's health advocate, I am grateful for all the individuals andorgs out there raising awareness and breaking down the stigma associated with men's health and TC. Hats off to you, Justin, for your work in the TC arena! (Editor's Note: Dawwwww!)

Be sure to connect with Connor by visiting him on TWITTER / INSTAGRAM / FACEBOOK / EMAIL. Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

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!

This post originally appeared on A Ballsy Sense of Tumor. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/connor-oleary-cmo-testicular-cancer-foundation