Michael Acosta - A Testicular Cancer Mentor

Testicular cancer survivor Michael Acosta mentors others going through cancer.

December 30, 2021 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 Michael Acosta, who helps spread hope for other cancer patients. Enjoy!

I never thought this would happen to me.

I was 17-years-old, a junior in high school in Keller, Texas. I was in the best shape of my life, I had great friends, and I was doing really well in all of my classes. Like most men my age, I was crushing on a woman. She was beautiful, smart, funny and popular; so way out of my league. I thought about telling her how I played basketball in a church league on the weekends, because high school women like athletic men right?

So I went for it and decided I was going to ask her out. However, I never did ask her out, or anybody for that matter. Any chance of me living out my world class athlete dream also went down the drain. Little did I know that my life would soon change forever.

As I was going for a rebound in one of our games in mid-January 2010, I doubled over in pain. I sat out for a few weeks, hoping that rest and rehab would get me back on the court. The swelling went down, and I returned to the court. Everything was going to be great.

But it wasn't.

The next sign that something was wrong came during student appreciation week.

At a pep rally, the principal was drawing names for a gift card. I heard my name come over the loudspeaker, and I climbed down from the top of the bleachers as the student body cheered me on. But when I got to the bottom, I was told my name was called because my parents had asked for me to be released early. I didn't win the gift card. Instead, I won a trip to the doctor's office

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Since the basketball game two months ago, my groin continued to cause a dull pain in my lower

back, along with having a scrotum the size of a softball. I had been to the doctor two days before, hoping to discover the cause of my swelling and pain. He suggested I might have had a massive hernia but did some tests to know for sure.

But this time, I was going to see a urologist. Something was wrong.

At the doctor's office, I was scared, but I didn't want to show it. If it wasn't a hernia, what could it be? My mind was racing through the possibilities.

As I sat there in the exam room, the doctor uttered three words that no one wants to hear: "You have cancer."

My parents began to cry as I sat there stunned. I couldn't believe it. I was 17 with no history of cancer on either side of my family. Why me? The doctor talked some more, but I didn't care nor did I really listen. I was still processing the information, and, in the back of my mind, I was hoping that it was just a bad dream and that I would wake up any minute and start getting ready for school like it was a normal day.

The doctor continued to talk, and I knew that it wasn't just a bad dream. I lost it and began to cry. I cried so hard I had to leave the room. Whenever I think of cancer, I think of death. I had never heard of a story where the person came out on top.

I began trying to figure out how I was going to tell everyone. How do you tell all of your friends that you have cancer and are suddenly in a fight for your life?

Most of that next week, I wasn't in school much. I was sent off for more tests. The exams confirmed that I had testicular cancer. Testicular cancer? At 17? I hadn't even begun living life, and now my last nut was getting ejected from the ballgame. (A little backstory: When I was a baby, I had an undescended testicle removed, and I would later find out from my oncologist that that an undescended testicle put me at higher risk for testicular cancer.)

I was set to live one of my worst nightmares.

My surgery was set for April Fools' Day 2010. I wished the diagnosis had been some sort of elaborate prank, but I knew none of my friends would be jumping out and yelling, "April Fools!" I was nervous. Random thoughts swirled around in my head: "What if I can never play sports again? When they cut me open, what happens if it's worse than what they initially thought? Will any woman ever go out with me after news spreads about my cancerous testicle?"

As they wheeled me down the hall at USMD Hospital at Arlington, I couldn't hold back my tears. They rolled down my face. I could hear them as they dropped off and hit the warm sheets near my ear.

The surgery was about a four-hour procedure. The surgeon removed my cancerous testicle, and when I woke up, I was in excruciating pain in my groin, where he had gone in to remove the

testicle. I would be out of sports and working out for a month while I healed. I felt mad because of the pain I was in and sad that I now felt alone because none of my friends had cancer and did not know what I was going through.

On the day I was supposed to return to school, I broke down.

I hadn't slept much in the four days since the surgery. I was in tremendous pain. I was irritable and scared. Life seemed unfair. I cried and told my mother I couldn't take it anymore, that I was going to quit and give up the fight. I would live out my final months in suffering. I had never felt that kind of physical and emotional pain before. I couldn't move around because of the pain from the incision in my groin. I could go to bed only on my back, and even then it wasn't a guarantee that the pain would be manageable enough for me to sleep.

"I'm done," I told my mom. "I'm ending the fight. I'm going to live out my final months and just be miserable."

I didn't think I was cut out for what the next few months were going to bring –– months of chemo, more surgeries, all the time I would spend in the hospital and away from my friends, all the school work I would be missing.

My mom sat me down and told me words I'll never forget: "You are a fighter."

"Don't you ever forget that. God has a special plan for you. He knows you can do this. This is just a temporary roadblock."

I wiped the tears from my eyes, shouldered my backpack, and was ready to rejoin school and the fight for life.

Chemotherapy was a whole different animal. Anybody who says chemo is easy, I don't know how they do it. It knocked me on my ass. I was tired all the time, nauseous and by the third round, I was vomiting profusely. But I knew if I was going to get better, I had to endure the hardships.

Three rounds of chemotherapy later, I was ready for the news that I was cancer free. I had been through months of hell, and I was excited to get my life back on track. Unfortunately, more bad news followed.

My scans revealed a mass still in my abdomen.

The doctors told me I had two choices. I could have an RPLND surgery to remove the mass, send it off to get tested and go from there. My other choice was to leave it in there and hope it was dead. Eleven years ago, RPLND wasn't what it was today. It wasn't as common in the U.S., and not too many surgeons knew how to do it.

I elected to do the surgery, and what was only supposed to take a few hours, turned into a nine hour procedure. The cancer cells had latched onto my aorta, and had to call in a vascular surgeon to detach. I woke up with a massive stomach ache and it was a struggle afterwards. I was dropping

weight, I was bald and I felt and looked like crap.

Finally, on August 17, 2010, I was finally declared cancer free, but the life after cancer journey was just beginning.

Because I'm rockin' no balls, I'm on testosterone treatment for the rest of my life. I can count on one hand the number of times I've had "normal levels." Sometimes I feel like the testosterone struggle is just like being back in treatment, although instead of losing weight, I'm gaining weight. My moods are incredibly up and down like a rollercoaster. I've lost a ton of muscle mass and my energy is zapped. What a wild ride it's been.

Earlier in 2021, I joined forces with the Testicular Cancer Foundation. There I met an incredible group of guys, that I am proud to call my brothers. Instead of feeling like I stick out, I finally feel like I belong. This group is incredible. We have a group chat, weekly calls and they are an incredible support system.

I've taken on the role of mentoring patients, and anything I can do to spread the word I will do.

I've volunteered with Cook Children's Hospital in Fort Worth, Texas, serving on numerous patient councils, providing insight on how to make patients more "at home" during treatment. My role as a mentor is to be a positive influence on the patient, share insight as to what I went through, but most of all be someone to lean on during their time of need.

My message to all of you is this. Don't give up hope. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

Be sure to connect with Michael by visiting https://www.facebook.com/michael.acosta.50596, @mn_sportsfan, or on Snapchat at mn_sportsfan. He says, "Any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. I'm available day or night."

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 on July 16, 2021. It is republished with permission.

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