Zach Carson – Climbing a Mountain of Awareness

Testicular cancer survivor Zach Carson shares how his diagnosis sparked a desire to spread awareness

April 8, 2022 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 Zach Carson, who shares his story to support others. Enjoy!

It all began for me in May 2019. The entire month of May I was in excruciating pain in my abdomen. At first, I thought it was a bad stomach ache. But it didn't stop. My doctor thought that it could be IBS. So, I kept working and going to school as usual. The pain never stopped. I wasn't eating and I was barely sleeping. Eventually, went back to the doctor, and they asked me if I had any pain in my testicle. I didn't even think much about it because the stomach pain was so bad. I went in for an ultrasound and they said there was something there and they would have to do more tests. That night I couldn't sleep or eat again.

The next morning, May 25th I told my mom I was done and to take me to the ER, because the pain was so unbearable. There they did a CT scan and found that the tumors had spread. Since it was Memorial Day weekend, I couldn't see an oncologist until the 28th and my 22nd birthday was the 27th.

Without a doubt, I can say that was the worst birthday of my life.

We had no clarity; everyone came to see me and spend time with me. I had to call it early to lay in my bed because I was in such horrible pain. I remember my family coming and giving me hugs while I was lying in bed.

We did get answers the next day and found out it was stage 3. I had my testicle removed and began chemo at Northwest Community in Arlington Heights, Illinois. Luckily it was only a few minutes from my house. I was scheduled for 4 rounds of BEP. I began chemo June 17th, 2019, and I ended up finishing early on August 23rd, 2019. They cut my last two bleomycin treatments. I couldn't be happier they did that too by the way, because by that point I was so done with chemo. I don't have enough time, nor do I want to talk about everything I experienced through chemo: the side effects, the treatment, everything. It was brutal. But when you're in that situation all you can

do is take it one day at a time.

It felt like I had an army of support behind me, and that's because I did.

I have to thank my doctors for all their advice and helping me along the way: Dr. Ross, Dr. Rich, Dr. Eggener, & Dr. Wolf. And a very very special thank you to my chemo nurse Michele. Michele you're the best and I love you! She saved me a room every single time I came in for chemo. It was my own private room I could sleep in, and watch Netflix and spend time with my family and friends.

Michele was my nurse in chemo but my mom and my girlfriend at the time were my nurses at home. My mom is a RN at the same hospital and refused to let me go to chemo alone. Even during my last surgery she never left my side, which in the end we were both very tired of each other from being in the same room for a week. Daniela, my now fiancé, was there for me the entire time as well. She held my hand at night as I fell asleep and was the best girlfriend I could've ever asked for. How did I get so lucky? I don't know how I could've done it without either of them. I couldn't have done it either without my faith in God and my church, St. Peter.

The prayers and love I received was overwhelming.

I have to shout out Martin Garrix too. Anyone who knows me knows that I'm the biggest Martin Garrix fan in the world. I've seen him live many times and I've met him multiple times too. When I was halfway done with chemo I took a picture and posted it online. It was me in the chemo chair holding my Garrix flag.

That day I went home after chemo and took a nap. I woke up feeling paralyzed. I was in a full body sweat and I could hardly move. Somehow I managed to grab my phone and call for help. I almost went to the ER that night for the bleo but I ended up not needing to.

But you know what I saw that night during that bleo reaction? A comment and multiple DM's from Martin Garrix telling me I'll get better and that he is here for me. We have been in touch ever since. He consistently checked up on me and sent me amazing messages about feeling better. 3 days before my RPLND I flew to Minnesota to see Martin in concert. He had messaged me and wanted to see me and we took this picture. By far, Martin is one of the nicest guys in the world. He has the biggest heart and couldn't be more supportive.

Lastly, and most important I have to shout out Alex Bartlett, who was a huge part of getting me through my treatment.

At first I was very hesitant to ask questions or talk to survivors. But eventually I opened up on a couple Facebook groups and that's where I met Alex. Alex had finished treatment before me and gave me advice on everything. He was my mentor throughout it all. His story is also on here as well. Alex's drive to help cancer patients after he was diagnosed was truly amazing. All he wanted to do was help others. He was the most selfless guy ever. His cancer came back at the beginning of 2020 and he passed away in June. (Editor's Note: Before his passing, Alex shared his story here

on ABSOT. Coincidentally, Alex was how I connected to Zach. Zach mentioned Alex at the TCF Summit 2021 and I went up to talk to Zach immediately after.)

When I had finished treatment, I didn't want to talk about cancer at all.

I was the opposite of Alex. I became so anxious every time I heard the word chemo or cancer. After Alex passed that's when I met Matt Ode. Matt has been a huge inspiration to me since we met. (Editor's Note: Matt is also a member of the Band of Ballers!) He has helped teach me how to move on after treatment. Without Matt I don't think I would be writing this right now. Matt made me see that I need to keep Alex's memory alive and help others. Since then, I have done exactly that. I routinely help other guys who have been diagnosed or know someone who has been diagnosed.

My biggest frustration about this whole journey is the lack of awareness around testicular cancer.

It is the leading cancer in young men, yet nobody talks about it. I wasn't taught about it in school. I've always heard about breast cancer, but never testicular cancer. The NFL wears Pink for breast cancer and there is a whole month where I hear about breast cancer. Don't get me wrong there should be breast cancer awareness but we can do awareness for both.

I don't understand how there can be so many guys in the dark or don't know how to check themselves. I'm constantly trying to spread the word and tell young guys to get checked if they think something is wrong. I carry TCF cancer check cards that I hand out to guys in public all the time. I will continue to spread awareness and give back to cancer patients the rest of my life.

Almost 3 years later, my life is much different.

I live in Georgia now with my fiancé. I just graduated college as well. Daniela and I are looking to get married around Summer 2023. I am so excited for the future with her by my side.

I will never let cancer define me as a person. But my cancer journey is far from over. The mental and physical damage that cancer has had on me is something that only survivors will understand. I have a lot of plans for the future including lots of travel, specifically New Zealand. It's always been my life goal to visit New Zealand as a die hard Lord of the Rings fan. In the chemo chair I told Daniela, "If I get through this I am going to climb Mount Sunday in New Zealand." If you're a Lord of the Rings fan you will know Mount Sunday as Edoras of Rohan. But if you don't know Lord of the Rings.. look it up. It's magical.

Lastly, I will never stop spreading awareness for testicular cancer and helping others.

Be sure to connect with Zach by visiting him at: https://www.instagram.com/zachcarson/, https://www.facebook.com/zach.carson.50, or ZachJCarson@gmail.com

Until next time, Carpe Scrotiem!

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