Nathan ADRIAN discusses his first three months with testicular cancer

“Swimming, for me, IS healing”

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In January, Adrian broke the news on social media, writing that he had “already started treatment and the prognosis is good.”

Since then, a lot has happened to the 30-year-old sprinter, but he hadn’t discussed many details until we reached him by phone on March 13 at his home in Oakland, California.

He said he had returned to “full training mode” with Dave Durden, his coach since 2008, at Adrian’s alma mater in Berkeley. “This week and last week were the first weeks I felt like it was the right thing to do,” the 2012 Olympic 100m freestyle gold medalist said.

But Adrian had also lost 10 to 15 pounds, missed two winter meets, and acknowledged that “relative to where I was and relative to where I need to be, I’m certainly behind.”

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I’m still swimming the normal sets, still trying to swim the rates of my team-mates, but that’s what I’m having to fight. It’s probably going to be over a year until I get back to normal. I forget that all the time.

Was your first symptom visual? Pain? Both?

I just kind of hit myself awkwardly and there was more pain than there should have been. I can’t remember exactly what happened. I think I turned around a corner awkwardly at home and kind of grazed it or something. I thought, ‘That’s weird. It shouldn’t have hurt THAT bad.’

So I started to keep an eye on it. The pain went away but the swelling and hardness never did, so then it was like, ‘Something’s obviously wrong.’

How quickly did you go to the doctor’s office?

I think it was three weeks from the first day that I felt something.

After the initial tests, were you worried about getting the results?

Yeah. I think any time a doctor’s like, ‘Get this checked out,’ part of you is concerned no matter what. My test results came back and, for testicular cancer, if there’s a mass that’s vascularised, in almost every case, that means you have cancer. So you see the urologist and try to get the tumour removed as soon as possible.

So the first surgery was to get rid of the tumour. The second surgery was to remove lymph nodes? Correct. The second one is called retroperitoneal lymph node dissection, but we did it laparoscopically so there’s an L in front: L-RPLND. They go in through four small incisions versus one massive one and the recovery was a million times better.

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“My coordination is awful”

Are you currently doing any other treatment besides surveillance? No, surveillance is it, hopefully. If surveillance detects a recurrence, then we have to go and do the traditional chemo.

When were you able to swim again? I got in the water after the first surgery. But after the second surgery, I had to take time off to let my incisions heal. Then I was back in again.

Have you thought about when you might be able to race again? Hopefully in April. That can change, but that would be the hopeful time.

It seems like every swimmer has a different relationship with the water. How would you characterise yours? And given what you know about your body now, do you think the relationship has changed?

My relationship with the water is one of resilience for. It’s just not there yet because we just cut through them. When you've only been in the water for four weeks because you had to treat cancer, you have to be fair to yourself. And I’m not going to sugar-coat this. I have found times when I emotionally very drained. I’ll [react to] certain things that wouldn’t normally bug me or things that I should have more emotional resilience for. It’s just not there yet because I had a traumatic experience and I have to give myself time to heal. The great thing is that swimming, for me, is healing. I love my job. I love waking up every morning and doing yoga and all that good stuff to try to regain flexibility and pliability.

Do you feel mentally sharp?

I am working this slowly because it’s a 56-month process until I need to be really-really fast again. When you’ve only been in the water for four weeks because you had to treat cancer, you have to be fair to yourself. And I’m not going to sugar-coat this. I have found times when I emotionally very drained. I’ll [react to] certain things that wouldn’t normally bug me or things that I should have more emotional resilience for. It’s just not there yet because I had a traumatic experience and I have to give myself time to heal. The great thing is that swimming, for me, is healing. I love my job. I love waking up every morning and doing yoga and all that good stuff to try to regain flexibility and pliability.

“Great! That’s what I want to hear!”

Now you’re among a small circle of extraordinary athletes who have faced testicular cancer. Did the most famous one contact you? Lance Armstrong did text me. He was very nice to reach out and do that.

What did he say? Just thinking about you, be strong, you’ll get through this.

The absolute highlight: celebrating the Olympic gold with medley relay team-mates Cody Miller, Michael Phelps, Ryan Murphy and Nathan (on the right)
Any new realisations at least? How important it is to recognise that you have limited time. Just a disclaimer, no doctor ever told me that the prognosis was bad. Every one of them was very straightforward in saying you have anywhere from a 97-99% chance of a five-year survival rate and, beyond that, most people don’t have any side effects. I’m very thankful for that. But even so, you still have to sit down, talk to a doctor, and as they’re looking at you, hear them say, “You have cancer.” That makes your mind go to all sorts of crazy places. Now I have an understanding of how delicate life is – or a better understanding than I did six months ago. And I feel blessed because many people don’t have the opportunity to come to that understanding: that we definitely have limited time here. It’s not like I’m suddenly a heathen doing crazy things to enjoy it, but the time that I got to spend with my mom, for instance, was really special to me. She and my dad came down [from Washington] and stayed at my house. I cannot remember the last time we spent so much time together. It wasn’t like we had to run around and do a million different errands. It was like, no, we get to really enjoy each other’s company – whether it was reliving memories or just sitting on the same couch and reading a book together. That meant a lot to me.

Then, this February, Ethan Gogulski, a promising backstroker at Texas A&M, was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Right. I talked to him, actually. I was ahead of him by a couple months, so I kind of knew where he was at.

What did you say to Ethan? Similar to what Eric had offered me, ‘Hey if you have any questions, feel free to reach out.’ Also, like Eric conveyed to me, ‘I understand how much work you put into your season to get ready to swim fast. This just throws it off a little. There’s still time.’ He’s a freshman. ‘You will have plenty of time to make sure to get really fast times and score at NCAAs.’ Just keeping everything in perspective.

Last question: I don’t know if you’ve thought about this, but what have you learned about yourself in the last couple of months?

Oh, I’m still learning.

Eric Shanteau, twice survivor

American breaststroker Eric Shanteau was 24 when he was diagnosed with Stage 1 testicular cancer just two weeks before the 2008 US Olympic Trials. Faced with an awful dilemma, he made the tough decision to delay surgery (with medical clearance) until after he returned from China. He went on to win Olympic gold in London 2012 by swimming the heats of the 4x100 medley relay and watching as Nathan Adrian anchored the US to victory in the final. After that relay, Shanteau retired and remained cancer-free for 9 years.

“My odds of recurrence were next to nothing,” he said by phone from Los Angeles in March. But in 2017, doctors found a golf-ball sized tumour buried so deep that he couldn’t see or feel it. “It took me about a month to realise something wasn’t right.” He said, “The way I noticed it: my nipples hurt.” They were extremely sensitive because he was producing HCG, a hormone produced by pregnant women that is also a marker for testicular cancer. “It should not be in males,” he said. “The blood test told the story. It was elevated way higher than the first go-around. We did a scan, saw the tumour, and got going with full chemo and more surgery.”

So for three months, Shanteau spent five consecutive days hooked up to toxic chemicals for eight hours a day, followed by one day of another drug the next week, and a single day the week after that, then repeating the 5,1,1, cycle. “I worked through the whole thing and was as active as I could possibly be,” he said, although he no longer swims “just because of time constraints” between his job selling cardiac medical devices and a family that includes his wife and two young children.

“The second time around, I was a lot better prepared to deal with it,” he said, but now he finds himself in an extremely rare statistical category in which there isn’t much data to extrapolate his future.

“Three weeks ago, everything was clean and clear,” he said.