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Runner Waitz shows true grit

In first public comment about her illness, she refuses to worry, takes cancer in stride

Jim Castor

PITTSFORD — Six months after her 51st birthday, Grete Waitz was horrified to hear words that couldn't possibly be true. It was two years ago April, and her doctor in Oslo, Norway, had just told her that blood test results were conclusive. "You have cancer," was the diagnosis. A low red blood cell count had led them to other tests that confirmed it.

This fit and health-conscious Olympic medalist, celebrated marathoner — she won the New York City race nine times, a triathlete, author and advocate of women in sports was unexpectedly stricken with a life-threatening illness.

Arriving in Rochester Tuesday with her husband, Jack, for appearances connected with Thursday night's JP Morgan Chase Triathlon, Waitz agreed to speak publicly, for the first time, of her ordeal.

"The roof caved in," she admitted. "I never smoked, my parents never smoked, there's no family history, I don't care where I am thinking, 'I'll die next week.'"

She says she feels fine now, she's working out again, traveling with Jack and says she has no pain.

"I'm responding well to treatment," she said. "It's not spreading. But there's no guarantees."

She dislikes talking about it.

"For two years I chose to be very quiet about it," she explained. "I'm a private person, and I don't believe, even though I'm outgoing, that people have a right to know everything about you."

"That has helped me to think positively and not dwell on the negatives. You talk about it so much, it just drags you down."

Armstrong an inspiration

She's drawn inspiration from, among others, Lance Armstrong, whom she met in November after Armstrong ran the triathlon and placed the finishing medal around his head. "I read his book while I was in treatment," she said. "His experience is mine."

They've also shared e-mails. One from Armstrong was, "Like me — you are a fighter and I know you are gonna win."

Waitz refuses to specify what type of cancer she has, and she won't say how many surgeries or treatments she's had. Only her family — she's very close to her two older brothers, Jan and Arild Andersen — and closest friend

"They're all protective of me," she said of the brothers she used to chase around the track as a child. "The media for information, and they don't say a thing."

As one of Norway's most celebrated citizens, Waitz has been immortalized with statues in Oslo and at the Norwegian Epcot Center in Florida. She's also featured on a Norwegian postage stamp, has a race of 40,000 runners named anywhere in her home country without being recognized.

In the United States she has been a Corporate Challenge spokeswoman since 1988, represents Adidas athletic (a fifth one is due out soon) and is widely recognized as the pioneer advocate for women in distance running.

But she politely resists revealing anything in her private life that would place her in more limelight.

"Jack insisted I go and get checked out," she said, explaining her reluctance to seek a blood test in the first place I'd been feeling at a loss for energy. But I just figured, I'm old. You slow down when you're old."

Jack didn't even go with her that day.

"Who knew?" Jack said. "None of us expected this. It happened so quickly. The hospital called me. 'Grete has cancer.'"

The journey from then to now has been arduous, as all cancer patients can relate. Few ups and lots of downs.

Her first round of intravenous chemotherapy started two weeks after diagnosis. She said in the early days she battled depression in the United States again.

"I had a lot of discomfort," she said, "but I can't say I ever had any severe pain."

Her husband says her pain threshold, like that of many elite athletes, is practically off the charts.

"She'd cut herself and wouldn't even know she was bleeding," he said.

She's also received radiation and even now continues on an indefinite chemo schedule in Oslo spaced between depending on her travel schedule.

Food can be a chore

"Right after chemo, food tastes bland," she said. "I'd force myself to eat. I've never liked sweets but I'd push down dishes of ice cream."

Jack reminded her of the time they were having dinner and Grete asked for dessert.

"My goal was 3,000 calories a day," she said. "I told the waitress, 'I'm going to have whatever has the MOST calories.'"

"Food ... you don't savor anything. You just push it in."

Hair loss comes with the territory, too. Instead of her traditional ponytail, she wears a honey blonde hairpiece style.

"It reminds me of my teenage years," she said.

The cancer set her workout schedule back just two weeks.

"I hated being a couch potato. Two weeks after having chemo, on the day of the first New York Corporate Challenge I ran the same 3.5 miles on my treadmill."

"I got on it, it didn't feel so bad, and pretty soon I had the incline cranked up a little. I made it the whole way and I was proud."

Her lifestyle is her message.

"In terms of fitness and battling through cancer, exercise helps you stay strong physically and mentally.

"I have it, I deal with it. I can't change it, so why waste energy worrying about it."

"It's just like she lives her life," her husband says. "She looks upon it as another challenge."

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