

Survivors

When breast cancer attacked, three women used running as a weapon to battle the disease.

By Jayme Moyer



Breast cancer doesn't play fair. It attacks the young, old, fit, out of shape and healthy alike. The disease won't take into account a successful job, happy marriage or a growing family. Breast cancer comes out of nowhere and wreaks havoc on your life.

These three women are intimately familiar with the disease's lack of discernment. Carol Dellinger, Nancy Reinisch and Peggy Campbell-Rush were at the top of their game when diagnosed: racing, coaching, raising children and excelling in their careers. Each was dealt a blow from breast cancer that could have taken her life, or at the very least, her sense of self. But it didn't. It turns out that the mind of a runner is even stronger than her body.

Something to Hold Onto

No one proves this adage better than Carol Dellinger. In the spring of 2011, the 48-year-old ran the Vancouver Marathon to commemorate 18-months of remaining cancer-free. When Dellinger hit the promenade that lead to the finish line, she raised her arms in a victory "V." There was one thought on her mind: *I'm alive.*

Dellinger's fight for her life began on October 22, 2009. During a routine mammogram, the dental assistant was diagnosed with ductal carcinoma, cancer of the milk ducts. This particular cancer has no symptoms or lumps, and often goes undetected until it's too late.

Dellinger's mother lost her own battle at the age of 54, as did three of her aunts. But despite her genetics, Carol always thought she'd beat the odds. She was the healthy one, the runner. "I found out that breast cancer is an equal opportunity disease," she says. "It doesn't discriminate, no matter how fit you are."



From top: Carol Dellinger after finishing her 250th marathon this spring. Nancy Reinisch sails through the finish of a 2011 triathlon. Peggy Campbell-Rush takes a few moments to stretch before a run near her New Jersey home.



While an active lifestyle didn't grant her immunity, Dellinger believes the mental discipline of running was a lifesaver. The sport gave Carol something to hold onto. Despite the devastating news, she stuck to her planned races prior to surgery, running the Nike Women's Marathon in San Francisco the Friday following her diagnosis.

After running the Cape Cod Marathon the day before her mastectomy, Carol recalls rushing to the airport thinking, *Lord, don't let my flight home be delayed, my surgeon will kill me.* "It's not that I didn't take the cancer seriously," she explains. "It's more that I didn't let it cripple me. Instead of looking at it as a stop sign, I thought of it more as a speed bump – and through it all, I told myself, *I've got a marathon to run.*"

Warrior's Strength

Dellinger planned for a quick comeback. The cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes and therefore did not require chemotherapy. She allotted two months for post-surgical recovery, designating an Arizona marathon in mid-January as her comeback race. Despite losing her right breast, Dellinger opted out of reconstruction. "I wanted to look at my body every day and know what I'd overcome," she says. "I'm proud of the 14-inch scar across my chest. It shows I'm a warrior who went to battle and was wounded, but I've come out stronger."



In the eight weeks following the mastectomy, Dellinger was unable to use her right arm. She couldn't run at all and was hooked up to drainage tubes pushing lymph tissue out of her body. Still, she kept the January marathon penned on her calendar. Dellinger was determined to complete that race. Despite fatigue and pain, she walked every day with friends and stuck to an aggressive physical therapy schedule. "I believe that if you have the motivation and dedication to cross a finish line in a marathon, you can do almost anything," she says.

Nine weeks after her mastectomy, Dellinger crossed the finish in Arizona. The 26.2 miles had taken her a grueling seven hours and one minute—but Carol's slowest marathon was also her proudest. "I proved to myself that I could do it, that I could get through this," she says.

◆ ◆ ◆ *Fighting Back*

In April of 2006, 58-year-old Nancy Reinisch was the epitome of health. Nancy operated a successful psychotherapy practice while running races, competing in triathlons and coaching the Roaring Fork Women's Tri Team. Two weeks before a lumpectomy to remove what Reinisch called a "piece of grit" discovered during a routine exam, she won her age group at the Moab



▲ From left: Carol Dellinger shows high spirits in the middle of a marathon she ran six months post-mastectomy. At the 2011 Race for the Cure, Dellinger poses with her surgical oncologist, Dr. Stephanie Moline.

Live Your Dream

If you're a breast cancer or other health crisis survivor, you could be eligible for an "Athenaship," a scholarship from the Project Athena Foundation to live your adventure dream. The nonprofit provides monetary assistance with entry fees, airfare and gear, as well as free coaching and inspiration, to help female survivors reach their goals. In the case of Peggy Campbell-Rush, this meant traveling to Colorado, where her sister lives, to run a half marathon in Vail last summer. "I'd always wanted to run a half marathon," she says. "I applied and got accepted right away. They're amazingly supportive." To learn more about Athenaships, visit projectathena.org.

Five-Miler in Utah.

But after the cautionary removal, Nancy's life turned upside down. The seemingly insignificant "grit" carried Stage Two cancerous tissue. Reinisch's doctor immediately prescribed a second surgery and 16 rounds of chemotherapy. Nancy was in disbelief. In an effort to wrap her mind around the disease, she opted for genetic testing. The results came back positive for BRCA2, a gene linked to a predisposition to breast and ovarian cancer.

Reinisch was faced with a difficult decision: Undergo a double mastectomy and lose both her breasts—or live with

the possibility that the disease could return. "I got hit hard by cancer," she says. "But I wasn't just going to sit around and wait and watch and worry."

Reinisch credits her sport, and the support of family and friends, with giving her the courage to make the proactive choice to opt for surgery and reconstruction. She now calls herself a cancer athlete. Nancy explains, "I think that some of the theories on how to treat and work with cancer will change based on the concept of the cancer athlete. It's really important for people like me to have a purpose other than cancer."

Symbolic Acts

For Reinisch, that purpose meant keeping her commitment to coach her triathlon team and to continue to run during chemo. A month after her diagnosis, Reinisch's family joined her in Colorado to run the Boulder Boulder 10k. As Nancy had recently shaved her head due to the therapy's effect, they jokingly dubbed the race "Balder Boulder Boulder." One of her nephews hadn't prepared for the run, so he and Reinisch, weak from treatments, stuck together, walking and jogging all the way to the finish. "It was a great time," she says.

Nancy tried to maintain a flexible attitude throughout her treatment, though by the end of 16 rounds she could barely run. Still, Reinisch willed

▼ From left: Nancy Reinisch shows her spirit with fellow "Teamo Chemo" teammate, Heidi Halladay, at a Boulder triathlon. Members of the Roaring Fork Women's Tri Team celebrate with their coach, Reinisch (bottom).





▲ From left: Peggy Campbell-Rush toes the line at the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. Peggy poses with her two daughters the day they donated their hair to Locks for Love, an organization that makes hairpieces for cancer patients.

herself to get outside, shuffling at a slow pace and walking. When the fatigue and “seasickness” got to be too much, she would travel to local races to cheer on other athletes. Reinisch stopped thinking of running as a fitness activity, but instead, as a symbolic act. “I needed some semblance of who Nancy was before cancer,” she says. “Before cancer Nancy was a runner and a triathlete. I knew cancer was going to change things, but I also knew I could keep my identity.”



Finding Meaning

Peggy Campbell-Rush was 42 when she was diagnosed with triple-negative, Stage Three breast cancer 15 years ago. “It was pretty much a death sentence,” Peggy says. “There was no guarantee I’d live even a year.”

At that time, the New Jersey resident had three children under the age of ten and a career as an education author and school principal. Before her diagnosis, Peggy exercised every day and competed in local 10k races. But after, she wondered if she’d ever be able to run again.

Cambell-Rush was confronted with a seemingly devastating prognosis: immediate mastectomy followed by months of chemotherapy. After her surgery, however, Peggy realized she didn’t

miss her breast nearly as much as she missed running. While still undergoing chemo, she walked around the block—just to see if she still could.

Encouraged, Peggy decided to jog the Race for the Cure in Princeton. Before the race, Peggy’s oldest daughter and husband helped shave her waist-length hair, now falling out, and she found a scarf to wear over her head that would stay in place while running. “I kept hearing cheers,” she says, “and when I realized they were for me, I ran the rest of the race sobbing. It meant so much to me to feel like a runner again. I suddenly felt like nothing could hold me back.”

Despite the odds stacked against her, Campbell-Rush successfully made it through her chemo and emerged cancer-free. But 18 months after her diagnosis, Peggy’s father was diagnosed with breast cancer, then two years later, her mother. “It was so surprising to all of us,” Campbell-Rush said. “We were living healthy, active lifestyles, we didn’t smoke. We did everything right.”

The Campbells proved that a family can weather tragedy together. Both Peggy’s parents survived and her own cancer remained contained. To celebrate, Campbell-Rush teamed up with her mother, a former physical education teacher and Peggy’s first running

coach, to run the Race for the Cure in New York City in 2007. Campbell-Rush has placed in the top of the survivor category every year since. “I should have been first last year, but I had some Achilles tendonitis,” she says with a smile. This year, the mom and daughter pair was chosen by the Susan B. Komen Foundation as featured survivors—a six-foot placard at the race expo shares their photo and story with the world.



Sharing the Strength

Carol Dellinger and Nancy Reinisch have also found ways to use their experiences beating back breast cancer to inspire other women runners. Nancy published *Chemosabe: A Triathlete’s Journey Through the First Year of Breast Cancer* in 2008, drawing on her psychotherapy skills and coaching experience. She also started a cancer walk and talk group at Valley View Hospital in Greenwood Springs. Carol has become a bit of a celebrity in Spokane driving a pink Chevy truck with “Survivor” airbrushed on the sides and gracing billboards and buses as a living image of the power of early detection. After completing her 250th marathon in May, she decided to go for 250 more.

Carol, Nancy and Peggy knew they couldn’t control cancer’s intrusion into their lives, but with strong minds and big hearts, they were able to maintain a sense of self and personal power. As Dellinger puts it, “Cancer picked the wrong women to mess with.” ■

Jayme Moye, award-winning freelance journalist, writes about the people, places, ideas and events that are changing the way we think about our world. Find her at jaymemoye.com.

PINK POWER!

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month! To learn more about how the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation is helping women the world over to raise funds and awareness to fight this disease, visit komen.org.