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Going For The Goal

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Maybe Doug Ulman '99 was meant to go running that warm August night in 1996. His sophomore year was a few weeks away, and he was looking forward to joining the Brown soccer team in Providence for preseason practice. After watching an Orioles game on TV, Ulman and his older brother, Ken, went for a jog through their neighborhood in Columbia, Maryland, a suburb of Baltimore. Doug had no idea that this run would end up saving his life.

After the brothers got back to their parents' house, he notice that his throat felt tight and swollen. Fearing his asthma was acting up, his mother drove Ulman to the local hospital emergency room. Doctors took a chest X-ray and sent him home, saying it was probably just an allergic reaction.

It wasn't. The next day, the hospital called to tell him there was an abnormality on the X-ray, a small shadow. A CAT scan revealed that the shadow was a tumor attached to his ribs. The doctors assured Ulman and his parents there was a 98 percent chance the tumor was benign. Somehow, he knew it wasn't.

The following week, surgeons at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore removed the growth, along with six inches of Ulman's rib. Two weeks later, after the pathology report had been sent to specialists in New York and Minnesota, Ulman learned that his tumor was chondrosarcoma, a rare form of cancer that affects cartilage. A surgeon explained he would need to remove more ribs and part of Ulman's spine, which he would replace with a metal rod. Ulman would be lucky to jog again within a year. Soccer was out of the question.

As his mother wept, Ulman sat stunned. He had spent the entire summer training in sweltering heat with his teammates and hometown buddies, Kumi Walker '00 and Chris Dodson '99. Together they had scrimmaged, lifted weights, and run in preparation for the grueling three-mile run they'd have to complete in eighteen minutes on the first morning of preseason practice. Ulman had worked himself into the best shape of his life. Now he had cancer.

"You're nineteen and you think you're indestructible," says Ulman, who had never been hospitalized before his illness. "Then you're in a hospital bed signing consent forms that say the side effects of your treatment are dizziness, nausea, and death."

Ulman's family sought a second opinion from a specialist in bone tumors, Alan Levine '70, director of orthopedic oncology at the University of Maryland Medical Center. He

told the Ulmans that another operation would not be necessary. Concluding that the first surgery had removed all of Ulman's cancerous tissue, Levine recommended periodic CAT scans to monitor his condition. In six weeks, he added, Ulman could play soccer again.

Elated, Ulman returned to Brown the next day. "I wanted to get back to normal," he says. But his body wouldn't comply. Ten pounds under his playing weight, he couldn't walk more than fifteen minutes without tiring. When he showed up at practice, Walker, Dodson, and other teammates hugged him gently, careful not to hurt his sore ribs. Over the next few weeks, his soccer friends helped Ulman go about life as a college student. He wasn't supposed to lift anything heavy, so teammates helped him move into Andrews Hall. They carried his books to class.

Ulman reported to practice almost daily, initially just to watch. "We'd see him on the sideline or jogging on the track," says Dodson, "and we'd think how lucky we were to be able to play."

Now Ulman needed soccer more than ever before. Playing was the goal of his recovery, and his teammates were his support network. From the sidelines, he watched as the team finished 8-5-4, fourth in the Ivies. When first-year player Walker matched up against the University of Rhode Island's Andrew Williams, the country's top scorer, Ulman stood on the sideline yelling, "Come on, Kumi! Keep on him Kumi!"

"I heard him the whole game," says Walker, who held Williams scoreless that day.

Ulman finally rejoined the team for practices later in September. Head coach Mike Noonan was impressed with how focused, yet relaxed, Ulman looked, unlike his freshman year, when he had pushed himself too hard and passed the ball erratically. In October, when Ulman jogged onto the field against Loyola College - his first college game in a year - his teammates gave him a standing ovation. He logged twenty-five straight minutes, holding a speedy Loyola forward scoreless and passing the ball well. After the 3-1 victory, after the hugs and high-fives and congratulations from parents and friends, Ulman was the last player to leave the field.

But the comeback had taken a tremendous toll. A few days later, he still felt exhausted and sore. The strain of coping with academics, soccer, and cancer simultaneously was too much. Reluctantly, he took the rest of the season off.

Having postponed one goal, Ulman quickly found another - a new calling that pushed his battle with cancer beyond the particulars of his own illness.

While taking it easy for several months, Ulman saw a segment on Prime Time Live featuring cancer survivors, including ABC anchor Sam Donaldson, who'd had a melanoma removed in 1995 from a lymph node. The next morning, Ulman announced to his parents he was going to do something for others with the disease. He wasn't new to volunteerism. At Columbia's Centennial High School, Ulman had been in student

government and had organized blood drives, proms, and class competitions. During his freshman year at Brown, he'd created a Web page for the men's soccer team.

Ulman knew the isolation cancer patients can suffer. "I needed to talk to someone else my age who'd had cancer," he says, "but I didn't know anyone." Whenever he or his mother contacted support groups, they were told Ulman was either too young or too old to join. So at night he surfed the Internet for information. He learned about a program for teens with cancer, funded by the Australian government; he read about an "I'm Too Young" support group in Canada. One night, he even found a picture of his type of tumor on the Web. It looked like a yellow-brown cloud cling to a pearly rib.

Several months later, Ulman and his parents launched the Ulman Fund under the aegis of the Wellness Community, a national organization that provides free support services for cancer patients and their families. Ulman's goal was to raise enough money to produce a Web page for young adults with cancer and to provide them with literature and a network of survivors. But first he had to face yet another threat to his own health.

After a series of routine medical checks last winter had revealed nothing suspicious, Ulman believed he was cancer-free. By spring he felt rejuvenated, and he began practicing with the soccer team again. During a checkup, however, one of his doctors noticed a few discolored moles on Ulman's torso. A specialist at Johns Hopkins Medical Center removed several of them, but the following week she called Ulman at Brown to say the mole on his chest was malignant.

At practice that night, Ulman broke the news to Walker and Dodson. Then he headed home for more surgery. Doctors cut out almost a full centimeter of tissue, leaving a three-inch scar.

In June, another melanoma had to be removed from his left shoulder. Ulman didn't slow down. Two days after his surgery, he was back coaching at a Maryland soccer camp. Before long he was training with Walker and Dodson for this year's three-miler, talking about the team's chances for an Ivy title.

Ulman's life seems normal again, but it will never be entirely so. At twenty, his is already a three-time cancer survivor. Sometimes as he runs, he feels a twitch near the seven-inch scar over his ribs. It's a reminder he can't ignore. "When something like this happens," he says, "you lose a little bit of optimism."

Ulman knows there is a 30 percent chance the chondrosarcoma may grow back in the next five years and a 5 percent chance a melanoma will recur on his arm or chest. He keeps a bottle of Coppertone SPF 45 sunblock next to the toothpaste in his bathroom. Other bottles are in the kitchen, in his car, and in his golf bag. He coats himself with the lotion every morning and no longer goes outside without a T-shirt. One of his favorites is a Dodgers jersey with the number 22 - the same number worn by Brett Butler, a fellow cancer survivor.

Meanwhile, he continues his fight for other young adults with cancer. Ulman's informational Web site - www.ulmanfund.org - went on-line in August. As part of an independent-study course at Brown last spring, he produced pamphlets for young people on how to research specific types of cancer and how to handle the fear, anger, and stress that come with the disease. Over the summer, with his parents' help, he organized a celebrity auction and a charity soccer game to raise money for the nonprofit Ulman Fund. He estimates he's spent three to four hours every day organizing events and mailings since last spring.

Soccer has given Ulman a public platform for his crusade. His story has appeared in Rhode Island and Maryland newspapers, in Soccer America magazine, and on the Baltimore TV news. At a \$250-a-plate banquet on June 21 at Pimlico Race Course, benefactors bid on baseballs signed by the Orioles' Cal Ripkin and Brady Anderson and on lunch with Sam Donaldson (Ulman's parents bought the latter for him). In early August, Ulman hosted and played in the Ulman Fund Soccer Classic, a college all-star game in Columbia featuring teammates Walker, Dodson, Josh Anderson '00, John Devine '00, Andy Dixon '99, Phil Lynch '00, Mike Rudy '00, and Ryan Smith '00, along with other top players from around the country. Initially, Ulman had hoped to raise \$60,000 in the fund's first year; now he's aiming for \$100,000.

Ulman has received more than a thousand letters and several hundred phone calls. Some are from soccer fans and from such players as Shepp Messing, the former New York Cosmos goalie. Most are from cancer survivors. The call that meant the most was from a thirty-six-year-old Baltimore insurance adjuster who read about Ulman in the newspaper and immediately recognized his type of cancer. About 500 men worldwide are diagnosed with chondrosarcoma every year; this man had survived it several years ago. The two talked for an hour and met in July for a round of golf, strangers with an instant bond. As Sam Donaldson said to Ulman over lunch, "We're members of the Cancer Club."

This fall Ulman was headed back to Brown, back with his soccer teammates, back to dreaming of an Ivy title. But he's more philosophical than he was a year ago. "It's no longer my goal to be a starter or to score so many goals," he told a newspaper recently. "My goal is to help the team."

Ulman figures he survived cancer so he could learn how lucky he is. He belongs to a loving family and a close-knit team. He's able to help others cope with the disease. "I guess everybody goes through hardships," he says. "Unfortunately, I had to deal with mine at a young age. On the other hand, it has provided me with wisdom and strength, and the Ulman Fund has focused my energy. I think I'll live a more fulfilled life because of what I've been through."