

Living strong

Cancer did not stop Tim Vorenkamp from playing volleyball, which has been a big part of his cure.

By Don Patterson

Tim Vorenkamp's fight with cancer began five years ago when he was in eighth grade. His treatment has included round after round of chemotherapy, radiation and multiple surgeries. It has also included volleyball.

His mom, Petra Vorenkamp, remembers some of his roughest days during the chemo treatments, days you would never imagine that a kid could muster up the strength to go to the gym and practice.

"He would be throwing up and looking pale and lying in bed all day, and then he would come out with his shoes on and I would think, 'Okay, I guess we're going to volleyball,'" she says. "Somehow he would always find the motivation to walk onto the court and just look like nothing was wrong. Volleyball would always keep him going – fighting, fighting, fighting. He just wanted to play."

For Tim, volleyball was therapy. And it was therapy without all the nasty side effects.

"Volleyball has always been an escape for me," he said in August, less than a week before leaving home in Laguna Niguel, California, to begin his freshman year at University of California at Berkeley. "Every time I played volleyball, it would be the only thing I could think about. It was really cool because three or four times a week I would have two hours where I could just play and have fun."

It was actually on the volleyball court in 2010 that he first realized something was wrong. When he'd hit the floor after diving for a ball, his leg would hurt a ridiculous amount. Doctors discovered a fast-growing tumor in his leg – "The size of two iPhones stacked on top of each other," he says – and quickly determined that he would need surgery.

Petra got the news first. Tim had a rare and aggressive form of cancer known as synovial cell sarcoma. She broke it to him after he woke up from his biopsy, and she says his optimism kicked in almost immediately.

"I think he cried for about 10 seconds, and then he said, 'I can beat this,'" she says. "That's always been his attitude. *'I can beat this.'*"

Maybe it's just the way Tim is wired, but even as cancer continues to throw major challenges his way, he finds it almost impossible to look at things from anything other than a glass-is-half-full perspective. That was true from the start. When doctors told him five years ago that his cancer was Stage 3, his parents were understandably upset. Tim's reaction was different.

"I was happy because it wasn't Stage 4," he says. "I was 13 at the time. I didn't realize how bad it was. But I knew there was a way to look positive at it. [Being positive] is the only way to go with your life."

Not surprisingly, after the surgery to remove that first tumor, Vorenkamp didn't pay much attention when doctors told him he'd never play volleyball again. They'd taken out a big chunk of muscle in his leg, so it was reasonable to think that he might have to drop out of a jumpers' sport. But that wasn't the way he saw it. Volleyball was big in his life, and it had been for a year

and a half, ever since he'd made the switch from basketball after the volleyball coach at his middle school told him, "We don't have enough players. We need a middle blocker."

Vorenkamp grew to love it in a hurry, and he was already thinking long term about playing in high school and college and maybe someday taking a shot at the professional level. He wasn't going to let cancer interrupt his plans.

"I knew right away I was going to play again," he says. Three weeks after he was done with the chemotherapy that followed the surgery, "I was back on the volleyball court – just to prove them wrong."

By then, it was spring of 2011, and he had traveled a rough road. The chemo process began with surgery to put a port underneath his skin. "I hated it," he says. "I felt like the terminator." But it provided an entry point for the medication. The stuff he was taking was too strong for a vein, so the port was required to take it directly to an artery. For the next six months, he'd go to the hospital for chemo treatment four days every three weeks and sit in a hospital room as a continuous drip flowed into his bloodstream.

"I wouldn't eat at all for those four days," he says. "Every time I smelled food, I would just throw up. I would go home Sunday, and around Wednesday or Thursday I would start eating again. So I wouldn't eat for a whole week. I would lose, like, 20 pounds, and then I would try to gain it back before starting treatment."

The thing is, Vorenkamp was just the opposite of miserable during those tough months.

"It sounds weird, but it was the happiest time in my life. I got really close to my family and my friends, and we found joy in the little things."

And he retained his sense of humor. One time, when his blood counts were way out of whack and he had to be hospitalized and hooked up to IVs, he wrote this in his blog: "The next day and a half consisted of eat, sleep, drinking and going to the bathroom. I felt like a dog because they do pretty much the same thing ... but their whole life!"

Because of the treatments, he missed most of his eighth grade school year, but based on the straight A's he'd gotten in honors classes as a seventh-grader, the administration at his middle school agreed that he should be allowed to graduate on time and begin his freshman year at JSerra High with his class. By then, he was 6-3. In one year, he'd shot up more than half a foot. This, despite the fact that doctors told him the medication would likely slow his growth.

In volleyball, he switched from middle blocker to setter, and by the end of his sophomore year, he landed a roster spot in the USA Boys' Select Program. But that summer, while he was walking down the stairs to the beach on his way to go surfing, he suddenly felt a massive abdominal pain. Doctors found that his lung was collapsed, caused by another cancerous tumor. The lung had been deflated for a full three days while Vorenkamp carried on with his usual activities, including surfing and volleyball.

When he heard the diagnosis, he hoped doctors would give him clearance to delay treatment until he could compete with the USA Select Team, but it was decided that he needed surgery right away. That was a tough one. *Really* tough. But his big-picture optimism didn't fade. He made this comment to his mom after the diagnosis: "One more opportunity to prove that I can beat cancer."

While Tim was in the hospital for treatment his eighth-grade year, Petra often stayed overnight with him. She still has a vivid memory of something he said on one of those nights. "I

don't know what God's plans are for me," he told her, "but I know he wants to use me to motivate others."

"I will never forget that moment," she says. "It wasn't something you hear a teenager say. But I think he wants to show people that, no matter what you face, you have so much strength that you don't even know you have. He wants to share that you need to stay positive and set goals and look into the future and not linger on what has happened."

It's an attitude he carries with him in all areas of his life. After Make-A-Wish Foundation funded his four-day trip to the 2012 London Olympics, where he cheered on the USA volleyball teams and got to know players like Clay Stanley and Reid Priddy and watched Usain Bolt win gold in the 100 meters, he decided he wanted to give back. During the next two years, he gave speeches about his Make-A-Wish experience at corporations and on college campuses and raised tens of thousands of dollars for the foundation, including nearly \$19,000 at one event called the Walk For Wishes.

"I can still see the smile on his face," Petra says. "It was incredible to experience that people were so motivated to help Tim grant wishes for other children. And going to the Olympics ... it's hard to describe what that does to a cancer patient; it gives you such a boost in hope and changes your life. I hear that from every Wish family."

As for volleyball, the play and energy he brought to the court was clearly inspirational, even for those who didn't know the full backstory about his health. After his junior year in high school, when he shined at USA Volleyball Boys' Junior Nationals with his club team, 949 Volleyball located in San Juan, Capistrano, California, he drew interest from college coaches. Among them was David Kniffin, head coach of the highly successful program at University of California at Irvine, who told Vorenkamp he'd be a great fit on his team.

"He played with such passion," Kniffin says. "Before we knew anything about what he had gone through, I thought, 'Wow, this kid really loves playing.' He looked okay as a volleyball player at that time – a little raw, but I thought he had potential. And the way he talked to his teammates, he obviously had leadership skills.

"And then you start to hear his story, and you think, 'This guy's a fighter and, beyond a fighter, he's a winner.' He knows how to truly compete and he knows how to be fully appreciative of the opportunity he has to play volleyball at a level that someone who has gone through life with good health wouldn't be able to appreciate."

Ultimately, Vorenkamp came to the conclusion that his best option would be to attend Berkeley's College of Letters & Science and pursue a big new goal: gaining admission to Berkeley's business school, which accepts fewer than half of the applicants from its own campus. Health was a factor in his decision. During the fall of his senior year in high school, another tumor was discovered on his lung. He had it surgically removed in December, but then another tumor surfaced, also on his lung. It was removed in July.

"My senior year, I would sometimes go to school for one or two periods and then go home, and then toward the end of the year I was missing a lot of school," he says. "I kept my grades up, but that's when I had kind of a reality check and wondered whether I could keep playing volleyball."

His dad, Pieter Vorenkamp, says: "When he got the notice [of acceptance] from Berkeley in May, I think he was comfortable saying goodbye to a professional volleyball career. That was a huge goal in his life. He had been talking about it since seventh grade. But I think it started to

sink in with him: ‘Can I do this given my physical condition when I have to potentially deal with more of these relapses and surgeries?’ And then he got this fantastic alternative option.”

No matter what direction his volleyball career takes going forward, there’s plenty for him to look back and smile on. As a senior at JSerra this year he helped the varsity boys’ team to its second playoff appearance in the program’s history, and he did it playing alongside his younger brother, Patrick, also a setter, who is now a 6-4 sophomore with great potential. In club volleyball, Tim played in a 6-2 system as an opposite in the front row and setter in the back row, helping his 949 team qualify for junior nationals his sophomore year (he had to miss the tournament because of treatment) and again his junior year, when they finished fifth.

His coach at 949, Justin DeBlasio, notes that Vorenkamp’s blocking skills are “off the chart” and says there were never any outward indications that Vorenkamp was tired or in pain, even though, clearly, he often was.

“He was so good at disguising it,” DeBlasio says. “He would never let anybody know, and you could not tell. He would never dog it, and he would never be last in running lines to try to conserve energy. He would always go full speed.”

Full speed continues at Berkeley, where he considered playing club volleyball but decided he was too busy with classes and other activities to commit that much time to practice. “Life of a college kid, I guess you could say,” he said in a recent text. “I’m loving it up here.”

The medication he’s taking now is brand new, just approved in May by the FDA. “Some long Latin name,” he says. “I can’t even spell it.” This form of treatment, which works by boosting the immune system, has proven effective with melanoma patients.

“It’s cool because the medication I’m taking is always updating and getting better,” Tim says. “I don’t want to be too optimistic, but it sounds almost like [this] could be a cure.”

Vorenkamp says he tries not to think about whatever the long-term prognosis might be.

“I don’t even want to hear it if there is one, because with my optimism I want to be able to live to 80,” he says. “It would be pretty cool to live to 80 battling this stuff. I feel like eventually there will be a cure. Something like this, even though it’s big, shouldn’t stop what you do normally. I want to keep cancer a small part of my life.”