

Swimmer triumphs after mastectomy

Vancouver woman found ways to keep cancer treatment from blocking her stroke



Arlene Delmage practices with her swim team, the Oregon Reign Masters, at Mt. Hood Community College in Gresham, Ore. The championship meet, from which the Vancouver woman brought home a cluster of medals, took place 10 weeks after she had a mastectomy.

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The number of medals Vancouver resident Arlene Delmage won during the 2012 U.S. Masters Swimming Summer National Championships is impressive.

But the year that led up to the July event makes the victories incredible.

Just 10 weeks before the championship meet, the 50-year-old underwent a mastectomy, the latest procedure in her treatment for breast cancer. The surgery meant replacing her breast tissue with an expander, a sort of place-holder for a breast implant, and required cutting her pectoral muscle, which kept her out of the pool for a month. When she registered for the swim meet, Delmage wasn't even sure if she would be able to perform her favorite stroke, the butterfly.

But come race time, not only was she able to perform the butterfly stroke, she earned gold medals in the 100 and 200 meter races for women 50 to 54 years old.

"Swimming saved my life," she said. "It's so cliché, but it's true."

Delmage first noticed the lumps in her breast last summer. Three biopsies found cancer in her breast and lymph nodes. She had a port put into her chest and underwent chemotherapy for five months. The treatment ended in January, but the side effects lasted through March.

Delmage stayed in the pool as much as possible.

"I'd just go flop around in the pool for a while," she said. "It made me feel better."

In mid-April, Delmage had the mastectomy, which required a four-week vacation from the pool. Two weeks after returning to the pool, and at her friends' urging, Delmage signed up for the national meet. She entered the slowest qualifying times for six different races. The coach of her swimming team, Oregon Reign Masters, added her to two relay squads.

Her first race was the 400-meter individual medley, 100 meters each of the butterfly, backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle. She took third place.

"I was nervous because I didn't know if I could do it," she said. "I had no expectations. Zero. None. But I did it, and it felt nice."

Next up was the 200 meter butterfly. When Delmage touched the wall at the end, her teammates gave her surprising news: She finished first.

"The first thing I said was, 'I must have had really good surgeons,'" Delmage said.

She credits those surgeons — breast surgeon Dr. Toni Storm-Dickerson and plastic surgeon Dr. Allen Gabriel — for making her success at the event possible. After the 200 meter butterfly, Delmage picked up two more gold medals — the 100 meter butterfly and 200 meter freestyle relay — and finished second, third, fifth and sixth in her other events.

After Labor Day, Delmage will be on Gabriel's operating table again, this time to replace the expander in her chest with a breast implant.

In the months since the expander placement, Delmage said swimming has been uncomfortable at times, but less painful than it could be. That's because when Gabriel inserted the expander, he used Botox to lessen the pain.

Normally, Gabriel said, the pectoral muscle would push down on the expander, which is placed beneath the muscle. The Botox temporarily numbs the muscle so it doesn't push as much, he said.

Initially, Delmage hesitated to have the reconstructive surgery. She worried about whether she would be able to swim, particularly the butterfly stroke, after it.

"My concern was the pectoral muscle," she said, "because I wanted to be able to continue to live my life the way I wanted to."

But after talking with Gabriel and hearing of the success of his past patients, including a volleyball player and marathoner, Delmage decided to have the procedure.

A few weeks after the swim meet in Omaha, Neb., Delmage had a follow-up appointment with Gabriel. When he asked Delmage how her swimming was going, she pulled out the gold medal and gave it to the surgeon.

"I think she's definitely a huge inspiration for breast cancer patients, for everyone," Gabriel said. "If we want motivation, we just look at Arlene's life."

"She had goals, and she met them. Nothing stopped her," he added. "She wanted to go swim, and she did. She won."

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