



THE
WINNING
MINDSET
THAT SAVED MY LIFE

TOM HULSEY

My Story

I have always made my health a priority. My parents influenced me from an early age. Mom always taught me to listen closely to my body. She taught me that the body uses pain to warn of something wrong, so I've always paid close attention to that. My Dad and my college roommate, Rex Horton, greatly influenced my commitment to a healthy lifestyle. Dad started jogging and swimming in the 1960s during the first running boom, influenced by the Father of Aerobics Dr. Ken Cooper. Rex, a Division 1 wrestler and cheerleader, practiced discipline in his diet and workouts. I saw the benefits of a healthy lifestyle in both men, up close and personal. Both had a huge impact on me, which led to my commitment to set an example and inspire others to live a healthy lifestyle.

My love of sports started with skating on the ponds of Wisconsin when I was five years old. I learned to play hockey and was

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pretty good at it, which eventually impacted my tennis game. My tennis coach told me to use the same swing with the tennis racket that I used with a hockey stick. I tried that and sure enough, it made a difference. I really liked tennis and worked hard at it. The work paid off and I found myself as one of the top tennis players on my high school team. In the 1980s, I discovered Triathlons and ultimately, the IRONMAN. Once I got into triathlon-type races, I was hooked.

My success in sports helped me create the mindset I needed for the discipline and lifestyle required to train for an IRONMAN. IRONMAN training requires a daily commitment to the training schedule to support the ultimate goal of competing in the race. Mindset is key to keep that training going, to run, swim or bike those miles on a day when you don't feel like it. I never had a triathlon coach. I trained by trial and error, just figuring out how to train and doing what seemed best, day in and day out.

Mindset impacts every part of life and everything that happens to you, good or bad. Mindset gives you a way of viewing the world and everything in it. We each need to decide how to live and what actions to take. That's why I have this motto: "Life is not a spectator sport." And yet, my success as an athlete gave me a false sense of invincibility. I developed an arrogant mindset. My cancer diagnosis changed all that.

Dreaded Words

“You have cancer.”

In February 2015, on my 61st birthday I heard those dreaded words from my doctor. After 10 months of doctor visits because of elevated PSA levels, which continued to increase, a biopsy confirmed my fears. For ten months prior to the diagnosis, worry and dread dominated my thoughts and the possibilities of what would happen to me. This came on the heels of watching my long time friend Bill Rollings spend four years battling and ultimately losing his battle with cancer. I didn't want to end up like Bill. With every visit up to this point I grew more despondent and depressed. I didn't talk to anyone, outside of a few people like my wife, about my situation.

Anxiety filled my life and started to control me. My head spun in disbelief. My sense of success and the ability to deal with any challenge shattered. Often I thought, why me? Haven't I done everything right to stay healthy? I've always tried to inspire others to live a healthy lifestyle. Now I felt like a fraud, and ashamed to tell anyone I had cancer. I didn't even want to fight. I told my doctor I didn't even want to discuss the options.

Dealing with a cancer diagnosis alone and in secret proved a lonely place. If I had to do it over again, I'd have shared my situation with others sooner. I agonized for thirteen months after my diagnosis.

Support of Family and Friends

My family and close friends had a powerful impact on my attitude and mindset about cancer. I wanted to give up in the face of cancer and the arduous battle to beat it, but my wife reminded me of the fight I had in me. She helped me look beyond Bill Rollings' battle to my own life. With her help, I saw the importance of my life to those around me. My story could end differently than Bill's.

Several months after my diagnosis and some pep talks from Lauren, I confided in a close friend, Jan Klodner, a fellow FBI Citizens' Academy Alum. He helped pull me out of my depression and feeling of hopelessness. He inspired me to move from hopelessness to hopefulness by setting goals, to shift from the despair of my situation to the hope the future. Jan did not face a life-threatening illness, yet he applied what he did to recover from major surgery to inspire me out of my depressed state.

When I explained my situation and the cancer diagnosis with him, he shared how he had overcome his recent health challenge. Jan had double knee-replacement surgery, which requires a long and challenging recovery. In addition to being a busy and successful business owner, Jan has a passion for racquetball. He taught me that when life gives you adversity, set goals and never give up.

Jan made it his post-surgery goal to play racquetball in four months. By setting specific goals and keeping his ultimate target in

front of him, he found himself back on the court in four months. He persevered, and continued ramping up his game until he played competitively six months after his surgery.

Jan's clarity of purpose to play racquetball competitively again gave him the drive to continue working at his game every day in spite of the challenges he faced with his recovery. Every day he had to make the decision to continue, to persevere, to look toward the future and follow his plan. Even though he might have felt like quitting on one day or another, he never did. He knew he had to keep going toward his goal no matter what.

Jan encouraged me to set goals to get beyond cancer. Knowing that I had a passion for IRONMAN, he reminded me of the IRONMAN motto, "anything is possible." Looking back, this advice contributed to saving my life. I was ready to give up. His advice emboldened me! At that point, my mindset started to shift and proved a pivotal point in my battle. Based on his encouragement, I set short, intermediate, and long-term goals, which shifted my focus from hopelessness to the future, beyond cancer. If Jan had not given me this encouragement, I might have given up before even starting the battle.

Ultimately, I had a Robotic Prostatectomy May 7th, 2015, National Prayer Day. This gave me a level of solace at a very scary and uncertain time in my life. I knew people were praying for me because of the peace and reassurance I had in my heart. Though the

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surgery saved my life, for me, the mindset shift came first. I felt such despair and depression about the thought of cancer and the battle against it, that I needed the mindset shift to even get to the operating table.

I found recovery extremely rough, both mentally and physically. Using a walker to get around humbled me. Other physical complications that come with recovering from this type of surgery meant I had to swallow my pride and focus on gratitude for being alive. I had always prided myself as ultra-fit and strong! This was not the picture after surgery.

I am grateful to have survived cancer and to have raced two IRONMANs since then. The skills and discipline required for IRONMAN are the same skills and discipline that I used in my cancer battle. I hope that my story and my journey can inspire you in any challenge you have in life, whether it's cancer, finances, loss of a loved one or loss of a meaningful relationship.

Mindset holds the key to overcoming life's challenges. The components of mindset that have served me my whole life include perseverance, overcoming fear, living intentionally, and knowing my options. All these helped prepare me for a battle I never thought I'd have to fight. For me, preparation for whatever happens in life also means looking at options when life doesn't happen the way you expect.

Reflective Questions

What life challenge do you face?

Who can help you in the challenge?