

"Round 13"

Shane Varga Update 5/20/2011

What happens in a fight when you think you have won and you let your guard down too early? Unfortunately, I recently found that out. You take your opponent's best and most powerful shots. It's kind of like putting your arms behind your back taunting someone to hit you as hard as they can and you promise not to defend yourself. I guess in my fight against cancer I counted 10, but the referee only counted to 9 ½. In my excitement I was too busy celebrating to see my opponent on its feet, angry, and loading up to give me its best shots when I turned around. A normal championship fight in boxing is 12 rounds, but in the fight for life we can't end in a tie. We must go until there is a winner. The scorecard is tied after 12 rounds and the next one will be my last and will decide who wins the 13th and tiebreaking round.

It seems as though I have taken several of those unanticipated punches lately from my opponent. Since May of 2010, I have had a few spots show up on my regular follow up scans that I get about every 3 months. With a 92-97% chance my cancer would never return, no one really believed those spots could be cancer again. There were so many possibilities of what else it could be besides cancer. So many other things that made more sense. As time went on however, a different picture was being painted. The main spot showing up was in the exact spot as the last time I had cancer. However, the spots all seemed to be growing at a slow rate. This is until recently. We tried to biopsy these spots using 3 different methods. They all failed. The main spot was directly next to my heart and these relatively non-invasive methods were just too risky. If one of the great vessels were to be hit, the results could be catastrophic. I later found out that what I would soon go through was well worth it because not only was the spot next to my heart, but growing on it!

The only way to find out what these spots were for sure was by doing a "sternotomy." A sternotomy is the same procedure used for open heart surgery. We held off as long as we could, but my chest mass started to double its usual growth rate the last few scans and in less time than usual. There was no longer any time to waste. We went from what could this be, to you need to get in as soon as you can. It was a good thing we didn't wait. Scans are not 100% accurate and with my chest mass location, things were very difficult to judge. Like I mentioned earlier, the mass ended up attaching itself to my heart. My last scan measured the mass at 5.6cm. It was wrong. It ended up being 20.1cm when they removed it. That's about 8 inches in size. More than double my last mass which was the size of a large fist.

I literally had dozens of churches praying for me. My prayer was that God show me whether or not I should have this major surgery. After all, it had a risk of fatality, I would have to take an unpaid leave of absence from work, and the icing on the cake is that it would take me 6-8 months to make a full recovery from where I was at that point physically. This is the first "punch" I took. My phone rang around 11:30pm the night I had my final scan before I would make the decision to have surgery or not. I have some connections to find out the results of my scans early. The person on the other end said "Dr. ----- called me personally because you have been given a negative scan." I instantly teared up and dropped to my knees. A negative scan means there is no cancer detected. I praised God and couldn't believe it was all over. No more worries, it was the end of treatments. No

surgeries needed, no chemo, no nothing. For five days I tried out my reaction to my oncologist telling me the results of my scan so he didn't know I already knew the good news. I would say my reaction to his news that day was pretty genuine. My SUV value, which is the amount of cellular activity in a mass, had dropped 25%. Before each PET scan, they inject a radioactive glucose substance in you. The cancer cells absorb the glucose and it causes the cancer to emit light on the scan because of the radioactivity. The SUV did decrease, but the problem was that the mass doubled in size. Cancer typically doesn't react in that way. However, nothing in my journey has been typical. My oncologist had a concerned look on his face that I have never seen before. He shared with me that he now thought it was certainly cancer and that the longer I waited to act, the worse my prognosis would become. My heart dropped, I was crushed, and I learned my life would not be normal after all. I have never experienced this type of devastation in all of my life. I went from thinking I was healed to being at a critical stage of the disease.

The next "punch" I took was my surgery. I am still recovering from it and a long way from being healed or even fully functional. I was really upset to learn that I would have to undergo such a life altering surgery. With all the technology we have it was amazing to me that the only sure way to get results would be with this severe of a method. I ended up staying in intensive care for almost a week before I was released. You don't go into a surgery like this expecting it to be pleasant, but it was far worse than I imagined. Maybe the worst part about the whole surgery was the chest tubes that were inserted in me. I had 4 tubes a little less than a foot long each surgically implanted through my abdomen. They had to cut through my abdominal wall and the tubes reached almost to my collar bone. They are put in place to ensure my safety with things like pneumonia. They have to maintain proper drainage so that fluid does not build up. These tubes were the most uncomfortable thing I have ever experienced and taking them out was no picnic either. They basically cut my stitches and yanked them out like they were pulling a weed out of the ground with no pain killer. To see what was in me come out was just shocking.

Besides the chest tubes there was the regular surgical recovery part to deal with. They had to collapse a lung in addition to the rest of the normal surgery procedures. When you have a surgery like this, it is almost impossible to take any kind of a deep breath. It hurt so badly to even begin to breathe deeply that I thought I would never breathe like I used to again. For the record, to this day it still is a challenge and not like it was before. Things like coughing, sneezing, and vomiting were all things you don't want to do. The only one of those three I was unfortunate enough to experience right away was coughing. Even my coughs were shallow. The only deep cough I had was to expel a blood clot in my lung and that was one of the worst pains I experienced. The entire time I was in the ICU I held a pillow over my chest to help with things like coughing. The pillow helped to reduce the force that these things produce against my chest wall. I carried a pillow with me everywhere I went for about 3 weeks. Coughing or sneezing without a pillow would probably feel like getting shot. It was no joke. I get better every day, but it will take every bit of 3-6 months to heal from this. It is now week 7 post surgery and I still am in pain when I get up from bed. Oh, and I would rather be punched in the face than sneeze. Sneezing is no fun, even now.

The final “punch”, the one that would be the best chance of sending me to the canvas for a ten count, also came while I was in the hospital. Two days before I left the hospital I got my results back from my biopsies. It was cancer, again. If things came back negative, I think going through this major surgery wouldn’t have seemed that bad. I would have had my life back and after I recovered, I would go back to normal. Unfortunately, I am left with a shell of who I was before my surgery and I have to use this feeble body to battle cancer again. You don’t really want to go into fighting something like cancer when you can’t even open a child proof bottle, but it is what I must do.

I want to go back to the second I was given my bad news. For weeks I thought about how I would react either way, but nothing I imagined was even close to how I reacted. The Dr. told me it was in fact a relapse and at that moment two things happened. First, my adrenaline kicked in like I have never felt it before. My first reaction was I wish my cancer was in a human form because I want a piece. I was ready to start battling at that very second and I felt like I could do some serious damage if I had to. So, I learned that I was more than ready to fight and that the bad news was not going to affect me.

The second reaction I had after a few minutes was a deep sorrow. It was a sorrow not for myself, but for those who know me and care about me. It was so hard on the people in my life the first time around. I can’t imagine the worry and stress that will accompany this trial. The thing I hate most about life is to see anything suffer. Personally, suffering when it comes to my own self gives me strength, but when I see anything other than me suffer, it breaks me down and I don’t do well with it. Unfortunately, that is what those around me are left with, watching me suffer again. Knowing this is causing great pain to the people I care about most is why I felt the deep sorrow.

Part of my news was finding out I will need a stem cell transplant. Included in that is that they are only about 50% successful in cases like mine. Yet another “Punch” that could have knocked me down and out. That percentage in itself puts life into a new perspective. It is a little scary to know your life comes down to a coin flip, but I cannot focus on that or think like that. No good will come of it.

The type of transplant I will need is an Autologous Transplant. This means I am my own stem cell donor. Stem cells are immature cells that are produced by your bone marrow. The short version is that I will have 2 cycles (4 treatments) of chemotherapy, donate my own stem cells about a month after my last treatment, get 5 consecutive days of essentially fatal doses of chemo that will kill my cells all the way to eliminating the cells in my bone marrow and completely taking out my immune system, resting on day 6, and introducing my stem cells back into my body on day 7. It takes about 3 weeks for immature stem cells to find their way to my bone marrow and grow to mature cells. I will be in the hospital for at least 3-4 weeks or until my blood counts are healthy enough to leave. It is my stem cells that will allow me to live. Without the stem cells re-introduced back into my body, the damage from the high dose chemotherapy would take my life in a short amount of time.

If you ask me how I am doing I will tell you, "I'm perfectly happy." I have a lot of pain, a long road to recovery, enduring more treatments, and a huge medical procedure to deal with, but I have one thing that makes it all worth it. I still have LIFE. Until that is gone, why wouldn't I be happy? There is a lot I could complain about, a lot I could get down about, but you will never see that from me. I have something worth fighting for that is more important than worries. It is fragile and I may lose it sooner than I want, but it will not be taken from me before I squeeze everything out of it I possibly can. Sometimes it takes bad things to make you realize that life is only as good as what you can endure and how you endure those things. This is the thing that drives me through these tough times. Times when some people might quit fighting or turn their back on God as if it is his fault. I won't. I take great pride in something that gives me more strength than anything else. Something that crushes an opponent. What is that thing to me? It is the one thing that even if this does take my life ensures I will NEVER, EVER, lose. It is taking your opponents best shot, best effort, on their best day and getting up no matter what you look like or what you feel like and truly be able to say from the heart "That's all you got!" What else can they or it do to you? You have taken everything it has to offer and with that phrase it shows one thing. I will NEVER give up and you cannot EVER beat me. You can do everything in your power to break me down, but you will NEVER accomplish your goal against me. I have cancer, "That's all you got", I'll beat it. I have to have an open heart surgery and be weak and in pain for 6 months, "That's all you got." I will heal in time and strive to be stronger than ever to shove it in your face. You take my life, "That's all you got," I have eternal life through God and with him I will never have to suffer again. So, you see cancer you will never win. I get to take everything terrible you do to me and turn it into something great. I get to show people that no matter what happens in life, it will be okay. Bad things happen to every one of us on a daily basis. If you take anything from what I share with you, take at least one thing for me. A piece of my attitude. When these awful things happen to you or people you care about, certainly take whatever time you need to process things or sulk for a while, but eventually look it in the face and say "That's all you got!" Turn it into a positive somehow and let it make you grow. Otherwise we lose and we are all way too powerful to ever lose to anything. Let me leave you with this.... If you are a believer this should hit home. We are all a piece made from God and who does God lose to? God doesn't lose, EVER, and neither will we if we realize where we came from and the power we have inside us.