

Cancer Is a Team Sport

Marci K. Campbell, PhD

Since being diagnosed with cancer last year, I have had the common experience of seeing cancer mentioned everywhere—novels, TV, movies, newspapers, and magazines. At first, I avoided anything that might show someone ill or dying with cancer. But I gradually have been able to pay more attention to these portrayals. And I found something disturbing—our discourse about the cancer experience is, more often than not, described in war-like military terms. Cancer is a *battle*, we need to *kill* the cancer, *fight like hell*, etc. Rather grim, don't you think?

Cancer treatment is no picnic, and there is definitely courage involved in facing treatments, scans, and news that is good or bad and maintaining positive energy and a good attitude. But that's just it—the war metaphor doesn't describe the richness, the gifts, and the beauty of living more in the moment, taking time to enjoy life, and continuing to be productive and involved in our lives and the lives of those we touch. Cancer can give a new appreciation for all the support and love coming our way. I can't visualize that positive energy flowing through my body and my life in the context of a battlefield or a fight.

Lately, I have been thinking about changing the metaphor to come up with a new way of talking about what it's like to live with cancer. Maybe sports metaphors would capture the experience and convey a more positive image for patients and the public. Yes, Lance Armstrong has done a lot to promote the image of cancer in terms of competitive sports and beating the odds, but there are those of us for whom a win or cure may not be possible. My thoughts about the relevance of sports images and cancer are more about the enjoyment of the game—of being alive.

Cancer is a team sport: Boy is it ever! I have my home team: family—my amazing husband, kids, and grandchild

on the way. My friends and neighborhood “angels” are part of my team, bringing me food, taking me to treatments, and stopping to chat. My medical team is truly superb; they are experts in the field but also caring and accessible. And the nurses are a key part of my treatment team, delivering my therapy with accuracy but also with warmth and conversation. Then there's my work team. Thankfully I have a job where I can continue to work and have the support of wonderful colleagues. And finally, there is my away team: Tibetan monks in India praying for me and calling to check on how I am doing, my cousin faithfully sending cheerful postcards, and e-mails from friends far away. My teams really keep me going.

Stay in the game: This mantra has really helped me when learning to cope with other family members' health problems, and it still keeps me going. Even if this treatment stops working or there's a setback, the important thing is that we're in the game. You can't win if you don't play. Who knows what might happen—new breakthroughs, discoveries, or treatments? Ken Miller, MD, of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, recently told me, “I'm a great believer in the home run”—people responding amazingly to new treatments. I would love a home run but am content with a single, or maybe even a walk. Even if you strike out a couple times, you still can get more at-bats.

Know when to call a time-out: Not a time-out from treatment, but a time-out for yourself. One of the hardest things is slowing down, especially for someone

used to being super-productive, constantly on the go, and doing things for everyone else. I have to give myself permission to lie on the couch and watch junk TV sometimes. Also, I am learning to say no instead of yes to everything. And I'm letting myself indulge in things that feel good—getting a massage after treatments, soaking in a bubble bath, and going to the beach.

Celebrate the small victories: Just playing, surviving another season, is a reason to celebrate! You don't have to win a trophy or be the MVP to be a success. We just hosted a thank-you party for the many people who have helped us during my first year facing cancer. It was wonderful and we had lots of fun.

Why not ask your patients what metaphors work for them? Surely other good metaphors besides sports are out there—art, music, and travel, to name a few. We can start building on these themes, coming up with new messages and ways of thinking and talking about cancer that capture the spirit of the whole experience. We need to convey a more positive, active image for patients living with cancer as well as for their support systems or teams. Maybe the media would even pick it up and change the way the “C” word is discussed. Whatever fits for different people, different perspectives, giving us a meaningful language to describe the crazy and complicated and scary and wonderful aspects of life with cancer.

Author Contact: Marci K. Campbell, PhD, can be reached at marci_campbell@med.unc.edu, with copy to editor at CJONEditor@ons.org.

Marci K. Campbell, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Nutrition at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill. The author takes full responsibility for the content of this article. The author did not receive honoraria for this work. No financial relationships relevant to the content of this article have been disclosed by the author or editorial staff.

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/11.CJON.349