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Athlete, wife, mother and breast cancer survivor
Cindi Hart takes the bumps in life's road in stride

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Taking Life Full Speed Ahead

Athlete, wife, mother and Komen Indianapolis Race for the Cure® Honorary Survivor Cindi Hart takes the bumps in life's road in stride

by Elizabeth Flynn

Select photos by Harold Lee Miller

WANTED: "An outgoing, enthusiastic, inspirational woman with excellent interpersonal skills, optimism and a positive regard for others. Oh, and she has to have gone through the most grueling battle of her life and come out victorious. And she must be willing to share her story for all to hear."

A tall order to be sure, but if she can help someone going through a similar battle, Cindi Hart is more than willing to share her story - and she definitely meets, if not exceeds, those requirements.

Cindi Hart, R.N. - informatics specialist, exercise physiologist, world-class cyclist and speed skater, coach, mother and breast cancer survivor - is the 2006 Komen Indianapolis Race for the Cure(r) Honorary Survivor. She is the first person to hold this new position.

Jane Callahan, chair of this year's Race for the Cure, was on the selection committee that reviewed more than 30 nominations for the post. "We had some great candidates," Callahan says, adding, "Cindi was so compelling."

In fact, Hart, 43, is such an extraordinary woman, the selection committee worried she wouldn't be able to connect with other breast cancer survivors. Hart answered this concern by saying that her message to anyone going through this struggle is the same: "Find your passion, whatever is most important in your life, and fight for it. Do not give it up for the disease."

Though Hart eventually resigned herself to the loss of her long auburn hair and the other negative effects of chemotherapy, she determined early on that she would never give up her bike or skates.

Shortly after her diagnosis in April 2004 of aggressive and invasive ductal carcinoma, Hart listened to her oncologist, Dr. Kathy Miller of Indiana University Cancer Center, describe her treatment.

"She speaks to you in a very comforting voice while you're enraged," Hart says. "And it's at this moment that you do a self-inventory of who you really are, what you're willing to give up and what you'll fight for." It was a defining moment. "I realized I was an athlete and I would not give that up."

A head-on car collision while riding her bike 20 years earlier couldn't keep her off the track for long; and breast cancer wasn't going to beat her either.

"I'm going to Japan (to lead her team in the Special Olympics)," she blurted out to Dr. Miller. "And," her fist pounding the table, "I want to compete in the Nationals - in both speed skating and cycling."

Dr. Miller responded calmly, "OK, so you're a cyclist, right? And you've heard of a guy named Lance Armstrong? We fixed him, we'll fix you."

To call her driven is an understatement. "I have always been goal-oriented. If the goal is recovery, then I'm going to do everything I can to make that the best darn recovery ever. Every step, every breath focused on that goal."

Birth of an Athlete

When Hart was 4, her father took her ice-skating. "I would stay out until my toes were numb, wanting to skate some more," she recalls. Without anyone to teach her, she watched others and learned on her own. At this point, her father described her as "persistent."

A high school boyfriend, who was into recreational bike tours, introduced her to cycling. She started riding in January 1981 and won her first race in April. Fervor for the boyfriend ended, but for cycling, it was just the beginning.

In 1983, she met her future husband, Ken, also a cyclist, and they began training together.

At a training camp in 1984, she met cycling coach Mike Walden. He started Walden School of Cycling in Florida and would eventually coach three female World Champions, 19 Olympians and a multitude of national champions. He told Hart she had what it took to compete in the Olympics.



Hart at the 2005 Track Nationals in Kenosha, Wis. (above)

Crash Course

In March 1984, right before the Olympic trials, Hart was in Fort Meyers, Fla., and had just won a stage race. Two days later, she was road training for the upcoming trials when she was hit head-on by a car. Her father was driving the support vehicle, but was far ahead of her when it happened. When he found her, paramedics had covered her up with a coat. They didn't think she was going to make it.

"They wouldn't let him ride in the ambulance with me; he had to follow the coroner," Hart recalls.

She had a skull fracture, compound leg fractures and was unconscious. She laid in a coma for two weeks.

The 21-year-old was in neurological intensive care for a month, but by August, just five months later, she was competing again, this time with a cast on her leg. She would have plates and screws in her leg until the following February.

"From that point on I've felt I must have a purpose," Hart says about her miraculous recovery from the accident. "I feel that as a coach and mother."



It was at this point she focused more on speed skating. "Coach Walden said that I lost my killer instinct after the accident," Hart says, explaining that she was a much more aggressive and assertive cyclist before the tragedy.

"He (Walden) said in order to improve my bike racing, I needed to speed skate," she says. "Now, I love them both."

Speed skating and bike racing use the same muscles and techniques, Hart says, but they give you a psychological break from one another. By July 1985, she had added both long track and short track speed skating to her repertoire.

Expanding Horizons

The registered nurse and graduate of Miami University of Ohio moved onto the campus of Northern Michigan University in 1987 to train for Shorttrack speedskating at the school's Olympic Education center.

While there, Hart added another degree to her resume, this time in exercise physiology. "I loved the education," she says. "I found it all applicable to Nursing."

In her last year at NMU, she was named head coach of the resident cycling program for USA Cycling.

Finally in 1990 at age 27, she married “the most wonderful man a girl could ask for,” her best friend and soul mate, Ken. “We are exact opposites,” Hart says. “I help him think out of the box, and he brings my head down out of the clouds.”

In December 1991, Hart was ready, once again, to give the Olympics a shot. She tried out in long track speedskating and came in 12th for a team of 10. Undaunted, she says not making the team didn’t change her goals. “My ultimate goal has always been to improve myself.”

The “wonderful cycling community” at Major Taylor Velodrome is what drew Hart and her husband to Indianapolis. The two moved here in 1992. They were blessed with their daughter Madison (named after the bike race) in 1994, four months after Hart competed and won the Indiana state Track Cycling championships. Hart continued training and competing, but also was very successful professionally.

She learned computer technology from Ken and from classes she took. Combining that with her medical knowledge, Hart became what she calls a “bi-directional human interface.” She is a liaison between programmers who create software and the medical staff that uses it. She teaches the users and then takes their suggestions back to the programmers. She also instructs new staff in the medical community about computer software. Since 1997, she has been a clinical informatics specialist at Regenstrief Institute, a research facility associated with the Indiana University School of Medicine.

The year she started at Regenstrief is the year that her beloved Coach Walden, who was one of the most influential men in her life, passed away. As a coach herself, Hart feels that she is passing on part of Walden’s legacy. “In this way, I feel I am keeping him alive.”

To know the Harts’ unparalleled dedication to sports is to know that the IndySpeed Sports Club was inevitable. The two organized a loosely knit group of cyclists and skaters into IndySpeed in 2001. The not-for-profit organization provides children and adults education and training for skating, cycling, and cross-country skiing. The club fosters state, regional, national, and international amateur competitions, and is home to Hart’s Special Olympics speedskating team, which was victorious in Japan last year.

Lana Richmond, a friend of Hart’s and a member of the club, says she joined just to get into shape. “Cindi is kind of a quiet person,” Richmond says. “She really studies people and tries to understand them so she can help them do their personal best.

The Harts train and coach voluntarily and are not compensated. “We just think a lot of them,” Richmond says.

The Diagnosis

Although Hart is immersed in the medical world everyday, it didn’t make it any easier when she found out she had cancer. “No matter how much education you have, it hits you in the face, just like everyone else,” she says. Awareness probably saved her life.

It was just an itch at first. Then she felt the two lumps, but thought they were just cysts. Finally, she asked her mother, also a nurse, to feel them. Her mother strongly encouraged her to get checked out.

Hart describes how it felt when her doctor called with the results. “What I heard on the phone I was in shock... it wasn’t till days later that it started to boil up from my chest,” she remembers. “I changed clothes, was on my bike and screaming down the driveway in record time. The tears were almost convulsive.”

She road hard and with purpose, going 23 miles per hour uphill. After she sobbed her last tear, she turned her bike around and rode home to meet her latest challenge.

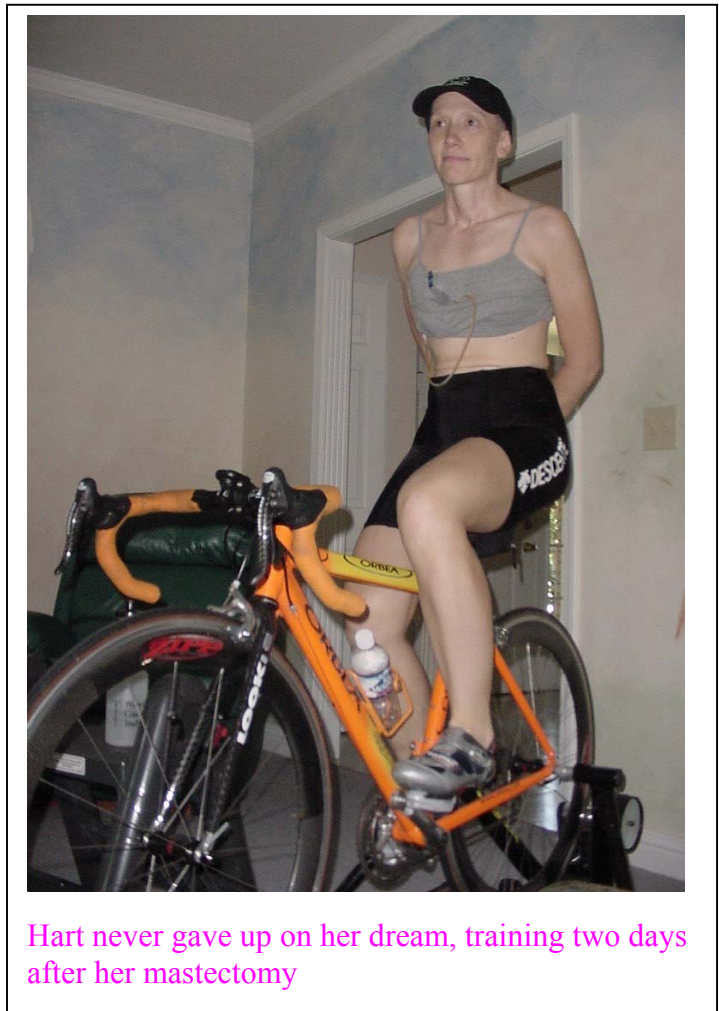
She continued to race during chemotherapy, winning a state championship two days after her second infusion, and a team time trial three days after her third. “I have to admit, after the fourth round I got so tired I couldn’t find the energy to get on my bike anymore,” Hart says.

But the chemo worked. The tumors shrunk, she had a double mastectomy and, after a biopsy of the sentinel node, was told that the cancer had not spread any further.

While undergoing chemo during the summer of 2004, Lance Armstrong was her inspiration, winning his sixth Tour de France. She thought about what she would ask for if she had a last wish. “To take my family to Paris, to watch the next Tour,” Hart says.

One year later, she got her wish, though she now knows it won’t be her last. She was chosen by the Discovery Channel, Armstrong’s team sponsor, as one of four Cancer survivors that would be followed to France, as they watched Lance Armstrong ride his final Tour.

It was filmed for a special called “Chasing Lance: The Fans,” which aired last December on the Discovery travel channel. The reporters heard about Hart when her surgeon, Dr. Robert Goulet Jr., who was part of IU Cancer Center (Armstrong’s medical team), reportedly said, “Cindi Hart is to breast cancer what Lance Armstrong is to testicular cancer”



Hart never gave up on her dream, training two days after her mastectomy

There is a segment in the special about the survivors at home, filmed during the Fourth of July weekend in 2005. A crew came to Indianapolis and followed the Harts at their house and workplace. The crew even interviewed Mayor Bart Peterson. By the end of the month, the Hart family was standing on the Champs-Elysees in Paris witnessing Armstrong's seventh victory.

"It was a dream come true for me," Hart says. "Knowing I was watching his last show. It was a historic event."

The Survivor

As Honorary Survivor, Hart speaks at the Komen Foundation's Pink Ribbon Celebration early this month, and will serve as the primary spokesperson at the Indianapolis Race for the Cure on April 22nd.

She recalls last April, her first time to attend the race, when she entered the survivor's tent. "You feel kind of strange at first because you're not used to publicly declaring your survivorship," she says, "but there's this welcoming face and they put the pink boa around your neck, and it's a celebration of everything you went through. I was speechless."

Hart also was given a medal, and she says of all her national and international medals, "That pink medal stands out. It's the race of all races."



Cindi dons a pink boa as this year's Honorary Survivor for the Komen Race for the Cure.

Hart says she draws strength from Friedrich Nietzsche's famous quote: "That which does not kill you makes you stronger." "It has a lot of truth in it," she says.

Not one to set the bar too low, Hart's future plans include possibly riding in the "Tour of Hope" with Lance Armstrong. She will try out next month for the team, sponsored by the Lance Armstrong Foundation, which rides from San Diego, CA to Washington D.C., in eight days. Last year, she was close (making the top 50 out of 1300), but they only take the top 20 cyclists. "I think my chances are good this year," she says.

When will Hart finally hang up her skates? "I'll probably race until there are no more women in my age category, then I guess I'll race the men!" she says.

In other words, we'll be watching Cindi Hart race for many years to come.

