

Shooting from the hip: Sherry's valiant battle

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My caller ID said it all. My father was calling, and before he even told me, I knew it. Our dear friend, Sherry Katzmarzyk has passed away at the age of 35 after a valiant battle with colon cancer.

But this tells very little about Sherry and her inspiring life story.

Back in the early 1990s, my father was and still is head coach for the Jonathan Law High School girls track team. During that time I was the assistant boys coach. Training sessions often overlapped, so all of the coaches worked with all of the athletes.

That's how I met Sherry. She was a tiny sprinter with a laundry list of health conditions, including cystic fibrosis, severe asthma and a nasty case of diabetes. Not exactly the foundation for a track star. Sherry, however, had put it in her mind that she was going to be exceptional on the track and nothing would hold her back. Not any of the physical conditions, the miserable New England weather and certainly not any opponent.

Each day Sherry spent a significant part of practice coughing to clear her lungs of mucus so she could train. She also puffed her asthma inhaler when needed, and between repeat-sprints Sherry often had to munch on candy to keep her sugar levels where they needed to be.

Sherry, my father and I all shared a love for Peppermint Patties, which were always nearby.

I asked Sherry one day how she could put up with the aggravation of all of the medical issues that plagued her. She started laughing and said, "Do I have a choice?"

That was Sherry. The kid with the biggest problems always with the biggest smile and the biggest goals.

During her time at Jonathan Law, Sherry led her team to a record of 54 wins and 9 losses. She won numerous conference titles and was an all-state long jumper.

But more than any of that, Sherry was a teacher. She taught everyone from coaches, teammates to opponents by quiet example that anything was possible if you saw the cup half full. That was what she did.

Let's face it, one kid said during those years, how can anyone possibly complain about aching muscles when Sherry keeps running and pushing herself through all that she had to deal with.

None of her illnesses were contagious, but Sherry was.

Her intensity, love for life, competitive spirit and happy disposition carried all of us when it was dark, rainy and cold, which is most of the spring months in Connecticut.

Sherry loved to sing and she saw humor in everything that came along. Even when she was a veteran and a freshman sprinter from a rival school blasted onto the scene and knocked Sherry from her perch as the one to beat in the 100 meter and 200 meter in our conference, Sherry shook hands, walked away and commented to me, "Man, she is a good one."

Sherry came back and beat this kid later in the year and handled the victory with the same class as she did when she'd been defeated.

It was almost as if she appreciated the new rival, something else to push her a little more.

Sherry later became an assistant coach for my father and we could see her slowing down although she still never complained.

Sherry went on and earned a college degree, got married and lived more of a life in 35 years than most people do in 100 years.

I hadn't seen Sherry in about three years, since my mother's passing. Sherry looked great. She was strong, healthy, smiling, laughing and making sure that everyone else was taken care of...she was still the team captain.

Selfishly I am glad I didn't see her during her last year. I'm not sure I could have handled watching my hero as cancer ravaged her and slowly took her away from us.

Seems unfair, doesn't it? After battling all of those problems her entire life Sherry got hit with an unwinnable battle of cancer? Sure, that's what we might say or think.

But not Sherry.

To Sherry, cancer was just another rival. And until the very end Sherry fought as only she could, leaving us all shaking our heads in disbelief...just like she has when she was sprinting down the track all those years earlier..

I'll never completely understand it.

But then again, I'm no Sherry.

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