

Sean Swarner on Completing the Explorers Grand Slam After Cancer



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Sean Swarner is a man who has made a life out of defying the odds. When he was told not once but twice that he was dying from cancer, he refused to give in. At Mount Everest, where no one thought a cancer survivor with one functioning lung could summit, Swarner did. And now he's become the first cancer survivor to complete the [Explorers Grand Slam](#) — climbing the seven summits and traversing the last degree to both of the poles. And if that wasn't enough, he also completed Ironman Hawaii. We caught up with Swarner to hear about his story, find out what's next, and see what advice he might have for us.

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When did the cancer first show up?

I was healthy until I was 13 years old, showing no signs of illness. I was playing a game of basketball with my eighth-grade friends at school when I came down from a layup and landed awkwardly, damaging my knee. That caused my whole body to swell up over night in reaction to the injury. I looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy. The doctors started to try and figure out what was wrong, because that should have never happened. What they discovered was shocking. My parents and I were told that I had stage 4 Hodgkin's Lymphoma, and I was given three months to live.

I was too young to really understand what was going on, what death really meant. So I decided that I was going to fight it, and it would not win. I wouldn't allow it to. I really think that my youthful naiveté helped me. I went through one full year of chemotherapy. My body swelled up, I lost all my hair and was sick a lot. But whenever I felt good, my parents pushed me to be a normal kid. I played soccer, ran around, and goofed off whenever possible. Finally it went into remission.

When did the next cancer arrive?

Two years later, when I went in for an annual checkup, they found my next cancer... Askin's sarcoma, located in the lining of my right lung, just under the ribs. It was bad enough that the same day they aspirated it to perform a biopsy, and they decided they had to crack my chest open and take out the tumor. When I awoke I was told I had a 6 percent chance of survival and was given 14 days to live. I was only 16 years old. The crazy part is the two cancers are unrelated. As far as I know I am the only person to ever be diagnosed with both of these cancers.

What was treatment for that cancer like?

After that first batch of chemotherapy, I underwent a month of aggressive radiation treatments. That destroyed my right lung's capability to function. I can breathe and it fills up, but it does not transfer oxygen to my body. The radiation was the only time I remember from the entire year of treatment...

Right before my 17th birthday, I was declared clean. It was over. I had spent four years fighting cancer.

So, naturally, you decided to climb Mount Everest.

It was in graduate school in 2001 that I decided I wanted to do something different. I wanted to use my experience to do something positive, to effect a change. I realized that I had been given a second or third lease on life, depending how you look at it. I wanted to do something incredible to help others caught up in cancer. So I decided to climb Mount Everest, something no cancer survivor had ever done yet. I dropped out of school and moved to Colorado with my brother Seth, and pitched a tent in Estes Park. The two of us had no real experience and barely any money. I would climb Long's Peak once a week with a backpack loaded with 100 pounds of rocks. In between I would reach out to anyone who would sponsor me. My office was a payphone in the campground, then when it became cold and we moved indoors, a payphone at the library. My parents were not happy with me. They said, "We did not get you through two cancers just for you to go kill yourself on a chunk of rock and ice." They supported me, but did not agree with my plan.

What did it take to actually get there?

I sold everything I had, any funds that were set aside for me for later in life I cashed in, and I begged everyone for cash. Seven months before I was to be in Nepal, I was in New York City to present my project to the board of the Johnnie Walker Keep Walking Campaign. I was a finalist. When I was in the bathroom waiting my turn, someone came in and told me that America had just been attacked. We all went outside and saw the twin towers burning, and then collapsing. It was mind-numbing. It made me realize yet again how short life can be, how nothing is assured. They canceled our presentations and ended up splitting the pot with all of the finalists. That money was huge but I still faced one big problem: Not one guide company would take me on as a client. It's understandable looking back now. I did not have much climbing experience — the highest I had ever been was Mount Elbert in Colorado at

14,400 feet (Mount Everest is over twice that high). I barely had enough money to even get there, and most importantly I only had one functioning lung. Every single company told me it was physiologically impossible for me to get above Camp 2 at 21,000 feet. They said it could not be done and did not want the burden of dealing with me. I finally managed to hitch onto the *National Geographic* permit celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first successful summit of the mountain. I was not part of their team, only on their permit, but was on my own with one cook, two Sherpa, and my brother. That was my complete team.

How were you able to make it up the mountain with so little experience?

I fully believe in the mind-body connection. I think that the mind gives up long before the body ever would. Every night I went to bed [and] visualized myself reaching the summit, and I attached all of my feelings to that. If you don't have an emotional attachment to something then what's to drive you when things get tough? If you don't believe something is possible, then it's not. On the mountain things got hard, but I just kept moving forward. In my mind I was still back in Colorado climbing the peaks. All I had to do was keep focusing on moving upward. And then suddenly, I was there.

So you reached the highest point on the planet. Then what?

Once I made it back down I realized I wanted to continue to use my journey to inspire others. I had started my non-profit, the [Cancer Climber Association](#), while I was training in Colorado, so I thought the best way to continue the work was to climb the rest of the Seven Summits. I would be the first cancer survivor to ever accomplish that. I had proven myself on Everest, so fundraising was easier, and I was approached by some sponsors. Over the next six years I knocked out Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, Mount Elbrus in Europe, Aconcagua in South America, the Vinson Massif in Antarctica, Mount Kosciuszko in Australia, and finally Denali in North America. It took me three attempts to make it to the top of Denali. While training for the summits I

decided to try for an Ironman. It seemed like a good way to stay in shape. Finishing Ironman Hawaii in 2008 was one of the hardest things I had ever done. Once I had finished that, I decided to complete the Explorers Grand Slam to also be the first cancer survivor to ever accomplish that, too. There was a lot of fundraising to get to the poles — they are not cheap — but eventually I did it. In 2015 I made it to the South Pole, and this year I made it to the North Pole.

That's an impressive list. Where do you go from here?

Jokingly I tell my friends that I should reach out to Richard Branson or Elon Musk and see if I could go into space next. That would be great. I think I am going to take a break and focus on telling my story to others. I have learned so much about life over these last 15 years, and even before when I was battling cancer. I have seen my own mortality, I have seen death many times and it's not a pretty sight. People need to realize what we all have that's good and start talking, to start building bridges. Life is short, stop bitching and start living a life that makes a difference.

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What's your advice for someone trying to overcome a seemingly impossible obstacle?

You have to redefine your impossible. You have to believe it before you see it. Like I said earlier, you have to have an emotional attachment to the end result. When something puts itself in your way, you have to react, but before you even have an action, a couple of things must happen first. You will have an initial thought and an emotional attachment to it, and based on those, you have an action. If your first initial thought is that it's not possible, then you'll be overwhelmed, and your action will be lethargic. You won't do anything. If you are able to change your perspective and make your initial thought one along the lines of, "I want this, I will overcome this," then your emotional attachment is good and you will succeed. You have to learn how to change

how you see things.

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