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## Pedaling through the pain

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By Sharon Liao and Julia Savacool

Colleen Whealdon-Haught was smart, fit and dedicated to the disciplined lifestyle of an avid cyclist.

"She even bought lights for our bikes, so she could drag me out at 4 a.m. for a ride before going to work in the morning," said George Varhola, who met Whealdon-Haught in the summer of 2000, when they were both naval officers in Newport, R.I.

Ironically, it was Varhola who introduced Whealdon-Haught to the sport. In a matter of months, she'd surpassed him. "She really threw herself into her training. She followed a very regimented schedule. That's just who she was -- always wanted to improve."

His admiration for Whealdon-Haught's competitive spirit grew into something more, and by the fall of 2004, the couple was planning a wedding for the following summer.

In May 2005, however, everything changed. "She found a lump," Varhola said. "She was only 26. We thought, 'No way is this breast cancer.'" Tests showed otherwise.

The couple quickly moved up their wedding date, and as soon as the celebration ended, Whealdon-Haught began treatment. Despite feeling fatigued and nauseous, the cancer made Whealdon-Haught even *more* committed to her training.

She biked her way through a mastectomy, three rounds of chemo, radiation and several other surgeries, determined not to lose her physical strength, despite feeling ill from the drugs. "Cycling gave her some control over her body, when her body was essentially failing her," Varhola said. "She didn't want cancer to win; and she didn't want to feel sorry for herself."

After a year of treatment, her cancer went into remission. Given a new lease on life, Whealdon-Haught was more driven than ever to improve her racing times, incorporating grueling interval workouts into her weekly routine and elevating her competitive status (based on time) from a Category 4 to Category 2 cyclist.

"Training with her was really hard; she was relentless," Varhola said. "You couldn't get her to let up. There were times, to be honest, when we'd just do our own thing. She was tenacious in her efforts to become a better athlete."

While undergoing treatment, Whealdon-Haught passed the bar exam and started working 12-hour days at a law firm near her home in Arizona. Fitting in a full-time job, chemo sessions and training for long-distance cycling races wasn't easy -- a fact that made her love it all even more.

"She was just so determined," Varhola said. "Her attitude was, 'I'm not giving in. I am going to fight this as long as I can.'"

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She never asked for help, but this was a way of having some power over her disease. She could use her bike to fight back.

” -- *George Varhola*

Sadly, Whealdon-Haught's cancer returned in 2008. This time the diagnosis was metastatic breast cancer and it had spread to her liver and spine. Though her doctors refused to put a time frame on the illness, the couple knew her days were limited.

They tried every possible treatment. Nothing worked.

True to character, Whealdon-Haught channeled her energy into something positive: In the time she had left, her plan was to train and race in El Tour De Tucson, a 109-mile ride through Arizona's desert-scape.

For many people, taking on this level of intense training while also being treated for cancer would be virtually impossible, both physically and emotionally.

For Colleen, it was just one more way to flip cancer the bird and show her friends and family -- but mainly herself -- the stuff she was made of. "She wasn't the type of person who liked to talk about what she could do," Varhola said. "She would rather show you."

Her competitive times would enable her to ride with the elite cyclists, but her husband, not quite the athlete she was, had to qualify first.

"She signed me up for a bunch of preraces so I could finish with a fast enough time that would allow me to ride with her," he said. "Colleen was like, 'You're on this train with me, George. You're going to be part of it.'"

Varhola trained hard and met the race "platinum" standard that enabled him to ride with Whealdon-Haught. Qualifying times in hand, the couple headed to the start line with a handful of fellow biking friends who acted as "domestiques" -- the cycling term for road bikers who create a shield around the main cyclist during a race to block the wind, offer water support and give her a push when she's struggling.

As the miles wore on, Varhola could see his wife was hurting, but she did not let up. Buoyed by her teammates' encouragement, she forced herself across the finish line, exhausted. "That was the day I saw such an inner strength in Colleen," said Varhola. "She literally had no quit in her."

### **A new challenge**

Shortly after El Tour de Tucson, Whealdon-Haught signed up for the LiveStrong Challenge, a 93-mile charity race in Austin, Texas, in the fall of 2009.

But this race would be different: She would cycle as a member of a team she assembled to raise money for cancer research. "Forming [Team Colleen](#) was a big move for her, because it was really not who Colleen was, to ask for help," Varhola said. "But I think it was part of her fight, to beat cancer by raising money. Doing a charity race was a way of having some power over her disease."

She raised more than \$60,000 for cancer research -- an amount impressive enough to "win" her a ride with Lance Armstrong.

The LiveStrong Challenge would be held at the end of October 2009. But by July of that year, the toll of cancer left Whealdon-Haught too weak to continue training. She took her last ride with her husband on July Fourth, up Mount Hood.

Sensing that she would not make it to the LiveStrong Challenge, even as an observer, friends arranged for her to meet Armstrong at another race in New Mexico. Despite her rapidly declining condition (Varhola had to pull over the car during the drive there so Whealdon-Haught could vomit), she was adamant about making the trip.

At the race, the seven-time Tour de France winner and champion of cancer research spent 45 minutes talking with Whealdon-Haught about everything from training to treatment. "You could see they had a connection," Varhola said.

### **Support Team Colleen!**

Help Whealdon-Haught's team raise money and awareness for cancer research. Go to [www.teamcolleen.org](http://www.teamcolleen.org) for more information on how you can help.

On Oct. 4, 2009, Whealdon-Haught passed away.

Rather than let Team Colleen vanish with his wife's passing, Varhola continues to work hard to keep it going in her honor, actively recruiting cancer survivors to join the charity ride group. "The best way to describe it is that I feel empowered by raising money to fight the disease through cycling," he said. "With this team, you can be going through chemo and feeling so sick, yet you get on the bike and have an amazing ride. It is life-affirming."

### **Joining the cause**

Team Colleen continues to help other women who are going through struggles similar to the one its namesake incurred.

Lisa Salgado, a 39-year-old nutritionist and personal trainer in Tucson, had just finished a year of chemo and radiation treatment for breast cancer when she joined Team Colleen last year. With the help of the team, she trained for El Tour de Tucson. "I'd been an Ironman before cancer happened," she said. "After treatment, I was depressed, physically struggling to get back to the shape I'd been in. Cancer makes it feel like your body has betrayed you. I was frustrated, and the group was just what I needed to help me push myself forward."

Today, Salgado is training for another Ironman. "If it weren't for Team Colleen, I don't think I'd be doing this," she said. "It showed me that I could get through cancer and still be the person I was."

That resolve echoes Whealdon-Haught's own quiet determination. You can feel some of it wash over you just reading a quote she posted on the Team Colleen website: "There were so many times in races or training when I knew my body was so beat and tired, I didn't think my muscles could do it anymore. But you do it. You push a little further and you push through it. That's the way life is."

