

IN MY OPINION

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Shanteau gets his therapy away from the pool

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Posted: Friday, May. 14, 2010

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Eric Shanteau walks into the Presbyterian Cancer Rehabilitation and Wellness Center Thursday. Around him cancer survivors lift weights, ride stationary bicycles, use elliptical machines and treadmills.

Shanteau is 26, the survivors older. They know his name only if they are students of swimming. In a non-Olympic year, few are.

But Shanteau, who will compete in Charlotte's UltraSwim today through Sunday, has a gift that does not require water.

The men and women in the room are coming back from cancer, cancer surgery or cancer treatment. They're fighting to reclaim their bodies and their lives. And here's the swimmer, the tall 2008 Olympian with the body fat of a brick.

Yet no conversation is forced, every word natural. contact, and stares at the floor, is when Taylor Bar about his accomplishments.

Otherwise, it's a family get-together, but with sweat.

"It just feels great to be around folks with that kind of vitality," says Joe Mayhew, 73, who talks as he peddles. Mayhew was diagnosed with prostate cancer a year and a half ago.

Is this as easy for you as it appears? I ask Shanteau.

"It's not easy but it's the way I deal with it," he says. "This is therapy for me. This is what I've been through. I've experienced what they have."

In 2008 Shanteau was preparing for the U.S. Olympic trials in Omaha, Neb. A high school star in Atlanta and a college star at Auburn, his confidence was absolute.

"You have to have a Superman mentality," he says. "Because everybody you compete against does. And then the reality hammer hit."

Ten days before he was scheduled to leave for the trials he was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

The cancer is aggressive. Yet the Olympics are when every seat with a view of the pool is claimed, when those of us at home watch the way we would a football game, when a solitary sport finally goes global. This was a chance to compete against the world's best in front of everybody.

How do you stay home?

Shanteau consulted with "an army of doctors" and had one overriding question: "If I delay surgery for two months, will I still be cured?"

He decided he would be. He made the team, went to Beijing, swam faster than he ever had and finished 10th in the 200-meter breaststroke.

Shanteau then had surgery Aug.26. Less than a month later, he returned to the pool. As he stretched, he felt a "tearing sensation" in his abdominal muscles. He climbed out.

Three months later at an event in Atlanta he tore up not his abs but the competition.

When Shanteau isn't in the water he often visits cancer patients. He lives in Austin, Texas, and has dived into Lance Armstrong's LIVESTRONG, where he is a member of the Young Leaders Cancer Council.

These are dramatically different worlds Shanteau moves between. I ask him how he'll feel when he walks out of the wellness center and back into real life.

"I'm going back to swimming," he says. "This is real life."



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