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Cancer-free Shanteau eager to focus on swimming

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By PAUL NEWBERRY

AP National Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- At his first Olympics, Eric Shanteau was distracted by a far more important race -- beating cancer.

Now, he can focus on winning in the pool.

"I'm going to have lighter footsteps walking around the deck, that's for sure," Shanteau said, chuckling.

In Beijing, he surprisingly made the U.S. Olympic team shortly after being diagnosed with testicular cancer. The 28-year-old swimmer put off surgery until after the games, not wanting to ruin his lifelong dream, but clearly he wasn't in the best state of mind for his one event; he was eliminated in the semifinals of the 200-meter breaststroke.

Since then, Shanteau has been free of the disease. He's also swimming better than ever, raising hopes he'll be able to add something to his legacy beyond cancer survivor.

Olympic gold medalist sounds pretty good, too.

"That would kind of be icing on the cake," he said. "That's one of the things -- maybe the only thing -- that I'm missing at this point."

Shanteau had planned to retire after the 2008 games, but he decided to get back in the water after undergoing surgery to remove the cancerous mass. The following year, he was one of the stars for the U.S. team at the world championships in Rome, winning silver in the 200 breast, bronze in the 200 individual medley and taking fourth in the 100 breast. He also joined Michael Phelps, Aaron Peirsol and David Walters on the 400 medley relay that set a world record.

Retirement was no longer an option.

"It's funny," Shanteau said. "I went back and watched some of the interviews from 2008. I was caught on camera several times saying, 'Oh, this is it for me.'"

He pauses for a second, pondering what led him to stick with the sport that has been such a big part of his life, even when cancer threatened to derail it.

"I just felt like I still had something to prove," Shanteau said. "It just kind of snowballed from there. I started swimming well and better and faster than I ever had before. I just took off and kept going, and here I am four years later."

Shanteau still undergoes cancer screenings twice a year, and there's been no sign of a recurrence. But the disease still casts a heavy toll on his family, having claimed his father's life after Beijing.

"Obviously, losing a parent is very difficult," Shanteau said. "I miss my dad every day, but I know he would be proud to see me continuing to swim and going for another shot at the Olympics."

There have been plenty of good times, as well. Just this week, Shanteau celebrated the first anniversary of his marriage to Jeri Moss, an event that brought some much-needed balance to his life.

"She continues to support me in swimming and continues to be my rock," he said. "It's been a great first year of marriage with her. We've really gotten to a place where we're both very, very happy. And I'm learning how to continue to work on that. One of the things you learn when you get married is how you need to always work on continuing to make it better. I think that translates into the pool. Being happy outside the pool means fast swimming in the pool."

Shanteau is now working with venerable coach Dave Salo, who has long been considered the guru for breaststrokers. The training sessions in Southern California include valuable time alongside Japanese star Kosuke Kitajima, who has swept gold in the breaststroke events at the last two Olympics and is back to attempt an unprecedented three-peat.

Practicing with Kitajima has helped Shanteau refine his stroke -- and shown what he'll be up against in London.

"Kosuke is not a big specimen of a man," Salo said. "But he's got a phenomenal technique. We're trying to learn from his technique and share it with Eric. Eric's made a few adjustments to his mechanics to kind of emulate what he sees with Kitajima. I think that's why we're seeing some success with Eric."

In recent months, Shanteau has been going faster and faster. He swept the breaststroke events at an April meet in California, then did the same a couple of weeks ago at the Charlotte Grand Prix. While it was an upset when he made the team for Beijing -- especially, in hindsight, with what he was going through away from the pool -- he'll be one of the favorites heading into the Olympic trials in late June.

During the day-to-day grind of training and competing, he's no longer defined by the disease that once threatened his body.

"That's just a blip in his career and I think he's fine with it," Salo said. "He goes and gets checked out every six months. It's been clear and he's real happy about that, but he's not looking at this like, 'Oh, I'm a cancer survivor, let me see how I can do.' He just wants to win."

The longer Shanteau goes without a relapse, the more likely it is he'll remain cancer free. But he doesn't run from the disease. He is heavily involved with Lance Armstrong's Livestrong organization and tries to set aside as much time as possible to spend with other victims. For instance, he has visited the Presbyterian Cancer Center in Charlotte three years in a row before competing in the Grand Prix meet.

"It took a little while to accept and fully embrace," Shanteau conceded. "It was really eye-opening to me to become an advocate in the cancer community. But with the help of all my family and Livestrong, they made it a good and easy transition for me. It's something I've really embraced over the past couple of years. I don't think I'll ever be able to stop giving back from all the help I got in the summer of 2008. As long as there's a fight, I'm going to be involved with it."

But, at these Olympics, there will be more to his story.

Shanteau can't wait to see how fast he goes without having to worry about beating a deadly opponent.

"I've grown so much as a person since that experience. I think that will definitely help me coming into this summer," he said. "I'm really looking forward to just concentrating on the swimming part now instead of what's going on with me outside the pool."

Follow Paul Newberry on Twitter at www.twitter.com/pnewberry1963

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