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Tonic's Really Good Sports Q & A: Kenechi Udeze

BY MARC HERTZ | SATURDAY, JUNE 19, 2010 7:30 AM ET

This former Minnesota Vikings defensive end is a cancer survivor who will speak this weekend at the LIVESTRONG Challenge Seattle event.

Kenechi Udeze, a former NFL defensive end, had his career cut short because of his battle with **acute lymphoblastic leukemia** (ALL). He hasn't let that stop him from helping others, though, and that includes being one of the Global Envoys for **LIVESTRONG**. In advance of speaking at the **LIVESTRONG**



Challenge Seattle event this weekend, Udeze graciously took some time to speak with Tonic.

Talk to us about the event.

What we're trying to do is bring survivors out, people that have been affected by cancer, whether it be knowing someone or going through a treatment right now, and we're trying to raise awareness and trying to raise some money.

How did you get involved with the organization?

I got involved a little while ago, being that I'd dealt with leukemia myself at the end of my career. I just really was thankful that people through the foundation helped me in giving me a platform [to] tell people about my story. And just, you know, to give them a heads up that, if it can happen to me, it can happen to you, so, any which way that you can be prepared and you can understand this more, I'm pretty sure that you'd want to help.

Your life has obviously been affected by cancer. Can you tell us a little about that?

I was finishing my fourth year as a **Minnesota Viking** and I was coming off, really, the best season I had ever had. And so, the last season I was playing in the NFL was 2007-2008, and I started developing these headaches toward the end of my career, and for whatever reason, man, I just sucked it up.

[Later], I woke up the day of the Super Bowl and, at this point, I was in Idaho, visiting my in-laws (now my ex in-laws), and for whatever reason I just felt dizzy and I knew something was wrong with me. So I woke up, went to the hospital that day, and after I sat there for about an hour waiting for the doctor to come back in after I'd given him the blood work, I was [getting] restless, you know, what's taking so long? And when he came back in, he came in with two other doctors, with two oncologists, and they said that we spoke to your team doctor [and that] back in July, your white blood cell count was at 8,300, which is relatively normal. Anywhere between 4,000 white blood cells and 11,000 are considered normal in the medical world. When I went into the hospital that day, my white blood cell count was at a number that was very startling; it was at 279,000. The reason why my headaches had turned into migraines was because my blood was becoming so thick that it wasn't able to travel like normal.

Later, they told me I had a very aggressive acute form of leukemia and they needed to treat it aggressively. And I remember, I had to turn off the TV, you know, because I was watching SportsCenter, and when they said leukemia, I said, "Cancer?" and I said, "No man, not me." I just didn't accept it. I called my family, let them know what was going on, and I traveled back to Minnesota I think two days later, and I began treatment at the **University of Minnesota**. And, six months later, I was in remission after taking chemo. Then I went to my bone marrow transplant stage, with my brother being a 100 percent match.

I'm just really thankful that everything happened at a certain time in my life when I could deal with it, because you hear these stories of people dealing with it for years at a time. Six months out of my life were dedicated to this and then another year to just getting my body healed. And now that I'm feeling better, it's just unfortunate that I suffer from **neuropathy**, which is the reason why I couldn't continue my professional career. The chemo drugs can take a lot out of you and one thing that they can affect is your nerves. I suffered from a pretty bad dose of nerve damage off of the chemo I went through.

So right now I'm a strength coach at the **University of Washington** and everything is going good. I'm looking to become a position coach here in the future so I can guide young men and make them be as productive as possible and make them as good a ballplayer as they desire to be. That's where my life is

now. What I'm doing now, I just want people to be more aware of cancer and, not only that, just to be part of this fight.

Also, I want to get people to start registering and signing up for the bone marrow registry. I was fortunate enough to have my brother as a perfect match, and if it wasn't for him, I was told I would only have a 17 percent chance of making it through my situation. They told me that it was like a one in 200 chance that your brother was even going to be a match. So, this upcoming season at the University of Washington, I'm going to have somewhat of a welcome wagon, [for] people that come to the games and if they want to donate their bone marrow, all they'll have to do is come up, fill some papers out, [we'll] have a cotton swab and rub it in their mouth, then put it in a capsule and, just like that, you're part of the registry. So if somebody needed a transplant, wherever they are in the United States of America or anywhere else in the world, you'd be a part of the registry to help, and it's really an amazing process, to say that I helped someone to live their life.

You're nearing two years cancer free. How are you feeling?

July 16 will be the two-year anniversary of when I had my bone marrow transplant. I haven't had any problems and I'm doing pretty good as far as health, weight, energy levels. So I have nothing to complain about, I'm really happy where I am.

Is there anything else you'd like people to know?

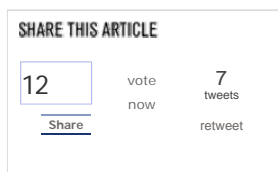
In one way or another, cancer affects just about everybody, whether it be a family member, a friend, a teacher, just about any- and everybody walking this green Earth. My message is pretty simple and clear: Do all you can to help. I'm not asking anybody to be something that they're not. I just feel like as human beings, when somebody needs help, they should receive that help. And if somebody could go out of their way and donate their bone marrow, or just do little things, and coming out and supporting one another, then I feel like we're on the right path.

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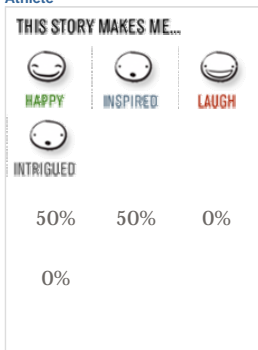
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