



**SUSAN
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Triathlon? Me? Am I crazy?

I'm just a girl who can't say no, and now I'm in a terrible fix.

There I was, talking to a group of female cancer survivors, when I heard the most amazing words come out of my mouth.

Yes, I told them, I'll compete in your TEAMSurvivor triathlon next summer.

If you know me, you're rolling on the floor. I'm not a great physical specimen. Oh, I do yoga and lift weights. But after a lifetime of being the last kid picked for the team, I've always considered sports something for others.

Why did I make this stupid promise? Partly it's the same impulse that caused me to shove 10 privet berries up my nose on a bet at age 6.

But mostly it's because of these women, these amazing, amazing women.

One by one, they stood and told stories: *I was diagnosed five years ago, had a breast and some muscles in my arm removed, and went through chemo. Then I climbed a mountain and ran a marathon. Cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me.*

This would be hard for me to believe, except I already

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knew one of them.

I met Diane Stojanovich in the Mount Horeb High School weight room. One day she was sweating away in a T-shirt that read "Cherno Brain." I figured she got it from someone else. She doesn't fit any stereotype of a cancer patient.

It turned out that in 1998, when she was training for her first marathon, she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. She's one of only four people still alive out of 110 who started an experimental treatment program with her. Since her diagnosis, she's run 40 marathons and completed the 2003 Ironman. She entered her first Danskin TEAMSurvivor Triathlon when she didn't know how to swim.

Oh yeah — she's still considered terminal.

"I have stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma," she said. "I'm in what they call my first remission, because there is no cure."

Stojanovich and Noreen Warren started the Madison chapter of TEAMSurvivor in 2001, and it now has about 130 members.

So, of course I couldn't say no to her. But I did think about weaseling out.

"They won't let you," said Mary Cirilli. "I know. I tried."

Cirilli, a state Department of

Workforce Development employee who gives her age as "old," was challenged to do the triathlon on a retreat with other cancer survivors. "My husband asked me if I had my will made out," she said.

But Cirilli did her first triathlon in July 2005 and was back for another this July.

"What I learned about myself is that I have an awesome body," she said.

Not awesome in the Jessica Simpson sense. Awesome in the more important, "I can overcome anything" sense.

I know I'll learn a few things about myself training for this event. It's not much in Ironman terms — a 3-mile run, a 1/2-mile swim, a 12-mile bike ride — but for me, it'll be like climbing Mount Everest.

I'm a minor-league cancer survivor — I had a malignant melanoma cut out of my arm 16 years ago. One of my snotty newspaper friends calls it my "courageous 45-minute battle with cancer."

Still, this makes it more difficult for me to say no to these women who have been through so much more.

As Dora Briegleb, a feisty survivor from Boulder, Colo., asked me on Saturday: "You've already had cancer, what else are you afraid of?"

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