

PROFILES OF COURAGE

PHOTO BY RICHARD CHAMBERLIN



Jay McCutcheon just keeps on running.

Getting to the Finish Line

*Jay McCutcheon fights back after
vertebral artery dissection*

BY LESLIE LICHTENBERG

Samuel Johnson, one of the most quoted men of the 18th century, once said, “Great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance.” Such can be said of Jay McCutcheon, who throughout his adult life has performed many noteworthy deeds through both strength and determination. A former pro soccer player, sports marketer and promoter of urban living, Jay spends all his time these days sharing the message and mission of the Active Survivors Network (ASN), an organization dedicated to promoting health and fitness for survivors of catastrophic or long-term illness.

Jay founded ASN in 2003, less than two years after he suffered a sudden and debilitating brain stem stroke, the result of a fluke vertebral artery dissection. Ironically, the stroke occurred just three weeks before Jay was to compete in the Ironman USA Triathlon, a grueling sporting event that includes a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a complete marathon (26.2 miles), all in succession. The dissected artery, one of four that provides blood flow to the brain, created a blood clot that impacted the brain stem, leading to a virtual shut down of all of Jay's involuntary systems. In short, this man— young, strong and in peak physical condition—was forced to face the cruel reality that he was unable to walk, talk, swallow or see.

"I don't know why it happened," admits Jay. "Could the stroke have been a result of a genetic defect, years of hard physical training, or the pounding my body took in soccer? There are many possibilities," he says.

Whether or not seven years in professional sports contributed to the unexpected turn of events in Jay's life may never be known. However, his early career in pro soccer—including separate turns with the Ft. Lauderdale Sun, Baltimore Blast and Chicago Sting—did pave the way for a successful transition to sporting goods marketing with Umbro USA, at the time the country's leading provider of soccer apparel.

"It was a good time to make a career move," says Jay, who was 30 when he hung up his soccer cleats in 1990. "The game was growing and we [Umbro] were growing with it."

In 1998, Jay left Umbro and returned to Baltimore and took on a new professional challenge, as vice president of marketing for the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore. He spent the next four years implementing marketing programs to attract businesses and residents to the city. Then, in 2001, toward the end of his training for the Ironman, Jay began to experience dizziness.

"I attributed it to fatigue and the long, hard months of training," says Jay.

After checking in with his doctors and undergoing an MRI that revealed

nothing, Jay resumed his daily routine. The vertebral artery dissection and resulting brain stem stroke, which occurred just a few short days after his initial symptoms surfaced, changed Jay's life forever. Following seven days on a respirator in the University of Maryland Medical Center's Neurological Intensive Care Unit, Jay spent two weeks in rehabilitation and thereafter began the long, arduous journey toward recovery. Confined to a wheelchair with little more than weekly at-home physical therapy sessions to guide his recuperation, Jay quickly grew frustrated.

"I was left to my own devices to figure out how to recover," he says.

"Recovery is all relative, but I was not prepared to sit in front of the television for the next 25 years."

With the support of his wife, Kay, a personal trainer, Jay devised his own plan of recovery, beginning small and working toward more challenging goals. Shortly after reaching his first milestone, getting out of the wheel-

chair and into the car, Jay boldly forged ahead with the keenly focused and sometimes unforgiving mentality that only an athlete knows. Soon he was swimming, with his stomach tube still intact, and later, with the help of a friend who is a vestibular therapist, began to test the natural "self-rewiring" of the brain that would eventually improve his sense of balance.

As his remarkable journey toward healing gained momentum in January of 2003, Jay competed in the Disney Marathon and delivered the American Stroke Association's keynote address at the pre-marathon banquet—Jay had an epiphany.

"There is no manual for recovery from a catastrophic event or illness," says Jay. "When your lifestyle consists of going to the gym every day and an unexpected debilitating condition virtually changes that overnight, that experience itself becomes the true and valuable learning tool."

Recognizing the importance of physi-

cal fitness in his own recovery and the dearth of medical research on the impact of physical activity on survivorship, Jay was compelled to launch ASN. Dedicated to promoting improved quality of life through physical fitness and advocating for survivor needs in the areas of athletics and activity, ASN was established to reach out to the more than 50 million Americans recovering from or living with long-term illness. Using the Internet as its primary communication venue, ASN connects survivors who, in their efforts to deal with this lack of resources from the medical community, share common experiences, regardless of their diseases.

"Education is the first step; motivation is the second," explains Jay, who describes the majority of ASN members as "the converted," those who have already made the leap in recognizing

the critical, perhaps life-saving role fitness plays in recovery and survival.

In addition to member matching, ASN hosts and sponsors various

sporting events geared specifically to survivors, including its own Survivor Harbor 7 in downtown Baltimore, the country's first race with a survivor division for athletes with chronic disease or recovering from a catastrophic illness. Last year, ASN received a noteworthy boost by becoming the first non-cancer related organization to receive two grants from the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

While much of his energy today is devoted to building ASN, Jay manages to make time for a daunting daily workout regimen that would send most healthy individuals running for the showers. Despite continued nuisances, including double vision and a lack of sensation on his left side, Jay has no plans to give up swimming and running.

"When it hurts, you just hang in there, because eventually it goes away," says Jay. "I know that it's possible to run through it, and I remind myself that some people are just trying to get to the finish line."

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