

Serving Up a Winning Strategy to Beat Cancer

By Kim Edwards | August 01, 2012

Scott M. Lippman, MD, new director of Moores Cancer Center is at the net, poised and ready to beat his fiercest opponent.



“In war, in any kind of battle, even a tennis match, you want to identify your opponent’s weakness and go after it,” said Lippman. “It’s the same with cancer. This is a war, and you want to have the strongest army and plan of attack.”

The 57-year-old tennis enthusiast is nearly a native son of San Diego, having moved here when he was 4 years old. He graduated from Grossmont High School in El Cajon, where he was the school’s top-ranked tennis player, and attended UC Irvine on a full tennis scholarship.

Early Days

His early days in the sport were not as glorious.

“My aunt beat me in tennis,” said Lippman, who as a youngster lost a match to his aunt, a ranked East Coast tennis player. “That really motivated me. I played day and night the rest of that summer. My mom would drop me off at Morley Field early in the morning and didn’t pick me up until after dark.”

During that era — the early 1970s — there were few academies specializing in the game, so Morley Field was “the place to play.” Lippman learned from nationally recognized coaches Ben Press and Pancho Segura, and also played with some of Southern California’s very best, among them John Holladay (USC), Brian Teacher (UCLA) and Larry Belinsky, founder of the San Diego Tennis Hall of Fame. He even occasionally hit balls with Jimmy Connors and his then girlfriend, Chris Evert, when they showed up for Connors’ coaching sessions with Segura.

According to Lippman, it was an incredible time to be involved in the sport. He also appreciates all the life lessons he learned along the way, including the importance of focus, patience, hard work and knowing your opponent. Segura delivered one such lesson when Lippman told him that he

was happy that he could reach the quarter finals of an upcoming tournament, but would probably lose to Howard Schoenfield, the top seed, who (along with John McEnroe) was considered one of the top two juniors of his era. Segura said sharply, "I won't coach anyone who enters a tournament he doesn't think he can win." Lippman went on to beat Schoenfield, the biggest win of his career.

Lippman reconnected recently with John Holladay. "We were wary opponents in the juniors, fighting epic battles that almost always tipped John's way," said Lippman during a recent "legends" rematch at the La Jolla Beach & Tennis Club. They had lost touch until a few years ago, when Holladay's father developed lung cancer and Lippman got involved in his care. "Scott is a great competitor and friend," said Holladay. "I'm glad he's come home, and San Diego is lucky to have him back here fighting the good fight against cancer."

Still in the Game

Lippman put his tennis attributes to use in his nearly three-decade career dedicated to fighting cancer. After graduating from UC Irvine, he received his medical degree from Johns Hopkins University and served his internship and residency at Johns Hopkins Hospital and Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.

He completed his postdoctoral fellowship training at Stanford and the University of Arizona and followed it with 24 years of discoveries, accolades and achievements at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas.

"When I started my training in cancer, we knew very little. The advances and arsenal of cancer drugs were so limited. It's amazing what's happened during my career and especially in the last few years. As a researcher-clinician, I know how important it is to make a real impact in areas that really need help."



Lippman is looking forward to increasing that impact, in part through reconnecting with longtime San Diego colleagues he has worked with from afar and with whom he now has the chance to work side by side. Two such highly respected colleagues are Ronald M. Evans, PhD, head of the Gene Expression Laboratory and March of Dimes Chair in Developmental and Molecular Biology at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, and Barbara Parker, MD, professor of Clinical Medicine at UC San Diego School of Medicine and Associate Director of Clinical Affairs at Moores Cancer Center. Lippman has also reconnected with Johns Hopkins medical school classmate, Mark

Talamini, MD, Chair of the UC San Diego Department of Surgery, and Stanford fellowship contemporary Thomas Kipps, MD, PhD, Deputy Director of Research at Moores Cancer Center.

Importance of Teamwork

From the individual approach of a tennis player, Lippman has evolved into a team science leader who facilitates teamwork across traditional boundaries. This kind of thinking guided Lippman as he led the multidisciplinary team of the MD Anderson Cancer Center Specialized Program of Research Excellence (SPORE) in head and neck cancer. Lippman has applied that same spirit of teamwork in reaching out to nearby academic institutions and top biotech companies on “the mesa.” Indeed, he helped to establish and is chair of the new San Diego NCI Cancer Centers Council, co-chaired by Kristiina Vuori, MD, PhD (Sanford-Burnham Medical Research Institute) and Tony Hunter, PhD(Salk Institute).

“The complexity and ferocity of cancer requires a team to attack it,” said Lippman. “San Diego’s science-rich environment is unparalleled. We can bring together and recruit the best doctors and researchers, assemble the finest team to fight cancer from several different angles, just as a sports team recruits the best athletes. No one clinician or scientist will win this battle alone.” Lippman plans to increase the focus on Moores Cancer Center’s clinical presence. Although he is thrilled at the prospect of heading up such a distinguished team, it was not easy leaving MD Anderson, where he had developed many career-long friendships and collaborations. In the weeks before and since the official announcement of his new position in April, Lippman has been a whirlwind of activity, working hard to prepare for the biggest match of his life. Tennis icon Arthur Ashe once said, “True heroism is remarkably sober, very undramatic. It is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost.” Advantage, Lippman.

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