

trusting in hope

BY SHOSHANNA RUTEMILLER
PHOTO PROVIDED BY THOMAS SMITH



FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD SWIMMER THOMAS SMITH, WHO IS DIAGNOSED WITH BONE CANCER, BELIEVES THAT, WITH HOPE, HIS DREAMS CAN BECOME A REALITY.

with Irvine Aquazot teammates Ken Takahashi, Justin Hanson and Matthew Wong, set the national age group record in the boys 11-12 400 yard medley relay with a 3:53.04 at the California Winter Age Group Swim Championships.

Smith, however, had kept his surgery a secret from coaches and teammates prior to the championship meet: "I respected them enough to let them not be distracted by it. Our coaches wanted us to perform well," he explains, "and we are expected to perform well no matter what."

That seems to be Smith's mantra.

Just 15 days after his bone cancer diagnosis, in December 2011, he set another national age group record in the boys 13-14 400 yard medley relay, along with teammates Tyler Lin, Hanson and Wong at Winter Sectionals. The quartet clocked 3:29.45, the first time a 13-14 age group medley relay had broken 3:30.

"To be in that racing atmosphere was a gift," he says. "You're always told to race as if it were your last season—that was actually going through my mind."

Even though Smith's cancer continues to grow, it is not aggressively malignant. Every 90 days, he returns to the hospital for doctors to track the cancer's growth. Should the cancer cells' growth suddenly progress faster than the growth of a normal adolescent boy, treatment options will be discussed, including the possibility of amputating his leg up to his mid-thigh.

Thomas Smith looked on in wonder as swimmers competing at a Paralympic meet in Southern California removed their prosthetic limbs before climbing onto the blocks and diving into the water.

After being diagnosed with knee cancer in December 2011, Smith, 15, may one day be doing the same thing.

On Nov. 30, 2011, Smith showed his father a large, abnormal bump on his left knee. An X-ray two days later showed a startling picture: a solid lump with a collection of rays

protruding from it. The image was a telltale sign of bone cancer.

PERFORMING WELL NO MATTER WHAT

But Smith's story actually begins in the summer of 2009, when he noticed a bump on the right side of his body. He underwent testing in September, several weeks before he began middle school. The diagnosis was lymphoma, and Smith, only 12 at the time, had to have the lymph node surgically removed.

Less than three months later, in December 2009, Smith, along

FOCUSED ON SWIMMING

Meanwhile, Smith continues to focus on his swimming.

"I was joking around with the boys (on his record-setting relay) the other day that the time's coming up for us to set another national record," he says with a laugh. That kind of goal setting keeps Smith levelheaded in and out of the pool.

Taped to his bedroom wall is a list of goals for the next four years. The list starts with small, short-term goals, and eventually broadens to include the ultimate dream: competing in the Olympics.

"I always keep (Rio) 2016 in the back of my head, to give myself at least a shot at it," he says. "But whatever happens in (the next) four years is a long, long time."

Short-term, Thomas wants to be ranked top-five nationally in his specialty events, which include the 100 and 200 back, 200 IM and 100 and 200 free. He works closely with his father to accomplish this, laying out a number of daily training goals.

"(The cancer diagnosis) didn't change my relationship with swimming, but it changed how I viewed myself as a swimmer. It's no longer an obligation, but a gift," he says, adding, "It's a sport that's very demanding, but if you do it correctly, it's going to pay off."

With two national records to his credit, Smith's commitment to the sport has paid off. He has his sights set on someday competing on a Pan Pacific Championships team and racing at nationals and Olympic Trials.

SHARING THE JOURNEY

Despite his success, Smith emphasizes that his journey is not just his own: "Cancer affects not just you, but the people around you," he says. "It was the people around me that kept me focused."

Smith became emotional as he described the implications of having cancer, pausing to regain his composure before listing the people who have supported him after the diagnosis. That list includes family, friends, coaches, teachers,

teammates and his pastor. He and his family are very involved with their church. After competing at the 2012 Junior National Championships, Smith departed on a mission trip to Panama. It was his first time to Panama without his family.

After he was diagnosed with cancer in his knee, Smith reflected on his experience as a pre-teen volunteering at the Paralympic meet. Although he was healthy at the time, the meet was impactful then, just

as it personally resonates with him today. It reminds him that even if his bone cancer eventually progresses to a stage that would require amputation, it is not the end of the world.

"I have this quote on my desk," he says. "It says, 'Hope is not a dream, but a way of making dreams become a reality.'" He pauses before adding, "I have always trusted in my hopes and not my fears." ♦

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The advertisement features a smiling swimmer wearing blue goggles and a blue and yellow swim cap, holding a large, ornate gold medal. The medal has a dark center with a white logo and the text 'ROWDY GAINES MASTERS CLASSIC' and 'POWERED BY LIMU'. The background is dark with a subtle pattern.