

Jaka Jakopič: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE- MY CANCER JOURNEY **“Heads up!”**

I'm Jaka Jakopič and I'm 28 years old. When I was in second grade, I told myself that when I grow up, I would be a lawyer in the morning and a football player in the afternoon. And so I was. I opted for law as early as primary school, where I enthusiastically studied languages, in addition to English also German and Serbo-Croat, while also attending music school to learn playing the piano and study theory. A lot, isn't it? Oh yes, I forgot about football. It was the meaning of everything to me and in it I found everything, relaxation, anger, defeat, victory, pain, animosity and a lot of friendship, even more self-discipline and respect for people, nature, objects. Why am I telling you all this, to let you get to know me, I wanted to have everything, but in reality all I wanted to do was play, play football. Then came high school and enrolment at the sports grammar school, where I became familiar with many sports and therefore even more convinced that football is what I want. With football I learned about responsibility, defeats and ever-increasing competition which would only grow as the years went by. I was up to it though. I enrolled at the Faculty of Law and at 19 signed my first professional contract. I began earning my living by playing football. The atmosphere was dependent on results, when others rested I studied, well, at least I tried to study. I signed a contract to play in the first division when I was 20 and moved away from home for the first time. I re-enrolled at the local faculty of law and trained, cooked and studied while playing in front of full terraces. Appetites began to grow. Unfortunately, I was born in Slovenia, where sport allows you to earn a wage which would make good living if you were to keep earning it up until you were 60. However, that's not the way it works out and studying was still on my mind. I was the new signing on the team and for the first time ever, I would feel pressure, which I took too personally. The club went into administration and I moved back to Ljubljana, while my faculty stayed far away, 150km away to be precise. That's actually not that much, if you don't happen to train twice a day and earn your living by doing this. The manager began to exert pressure and a really great injustice followed, which was picked up by the media, the fans were on our side but we couldn't go up against this nonetheless.



I was taking my disappointment home with me. Bumps grew, I was out of breath, I sweated at night, yet still I refused to go to see a doctor. I had many, too many excuses, and they were such that even the club physician fell for them, he believed me when I said that the lump on my chest was a result of a collision on the field. I only have my girlfriend to thank for convincing me to go and see a GP. It was a short route from there to the Institute of Oncology. The chronic disease was Hodgkin's lymphoma. My first reaction was thank god it's not cancer. But it was. What followed was an operation, 15 chemotherapy

sessions and 32 irradiations. If I look back now it was fine. Nothing was horrific or terrible. That is what sport gave me. You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, yet alone beat cancer. I didn't think much of the people that look at this from a negative point of view. I am a person that always gives 100 per cent and I would have a 100 per cent opportunity to get better. No more football. So what. No worries. I cared little for what had previously been the most important thing in my life. Really. What I cared about was living, living in any way. And I did. I did all the things that I hadn't done previously and found myself as they say. I discovered something truly great. I am what's most important. If I go, football will still be played. And I did everything that I could. My club extended my contract and kept paying my wages. I didn't train. I watched the training sessions when I wasn't in hospital and went to games whenever I could. The lads were winning for me and I helped them out when I was there, giving them energy and optimism. What did I miss? Someone who had beaten this disease, someone whom I could speak to about it. I met Lance Armstong, he was an athlete and made it back. Man what I would give to do the same. But unfortunately, Lance was only there in his book and on television. He wasn't there in person, no one was... Everyone here in Slovenia hid their disease. I didn't meet any women either. I began writing and recording my thoughts, linked up with the Slovenian Oncological Patients Society (DOBSLO) and started to publish my stories in the Society's magazine, eventually making it into the Management Board. I wanted to do something. Well, in the meantime, I had begun to believe that I could make a comeback in football after my rehabilitation and systematic work. And only 7 months after I completed my radiation treatment, I started playing in the third division, became the league's top scorer and helped my team to win promotion to the second division. Soon people began to show interest, as only one year after my treatment had I become one of the most prominent players in the second division. So I played and kept working in the Society.



Together with a former team mate, we started the HEADS UP campaign, which is currently familiar to almost everyone in Slovenia, although a lot of the credit must go to the advertising agency behind the campaign. The agency earmarked me as the front man of the Heads Up campaign, as I was the only one in Slovenia who had made it back to professional sport after such a disease and was big enough to say it. And not because of me, but because of the people who are still sick and who will now have hope and a path to getting better. To make them see that there is not only death in cancer, but life as well. That's why the Heads Up campaign, which was above all intended to raise awareness among healthy people, make them aware of the disease, let them know that it is not infectious, has unfortunately also become a campaign which delivers the message that it can affect anyone, anywhere...we were more than successful. We were present in every football loving town and city where first division football is played and informed the players of the disease. We were present at international matches. The Heads Up campaign

made it into handball, and we made appearances both at men's and women's matches...and everywhere we went, we received a positive response, making a direct impact on around 50.000 people and delivering the message indirectly to more than a third of Slovenia's population.

But we wanted more. Women are open, they like to talk and show their emotions. In our society, which this year celebrated its twentieth anniversary, there is 18 self-help groups and all of them include women. The men's group, on the other hand, is only one, although it is seeing a drastic growth as we speak. Why? Me and the men's group leader Grega became friends and started the project the CYCLE OF LIFE. We invited 8 other guys who beat the disease to join us on the cycle and we visited every Slovene hospital where oncology patients are being treated, ending up cycling 600 km in five days. We proved that there is normal life after cancer and showed many people the way. Many patients identified themselves with us and received an additional motive to live. Maybe we made someone's final hour comfortable or extended our hand and they will join us as early as next years...The purpose was to show ourselves in order to make things easier and nicer for everyone else with the same battle.



In hindsight, I learned many things, maybe too many for this talk...there are many things which bother me, even more which give me joy, but most of all I am happy that I had cancer and that it wasn't the gloomiest period in my life, as I got to know myself, I realised that I appreciated myself and that I still enjoy football and being with my girlfriend the most. Oh yeah, now I'm playing in the first division and a short while ago a new owner came into the club promising to make us the richest club in Slovenia☺. Maybe you aren't familiar with the African saying, WHEN YOU PRAY, MOVE YOUR FEET. So when you pray, be aware of yourself, love your faith irrespective of what it is, believe in anything and don't forget to move and do something for yourself, you know what they say about fate. If everything was destined to happen, we wouldn't need brakes in our car and we wouldn't have to cross the road every time by looking left and right first. Thank you for your attention...I wish you a nice sunny day no matter what the weather...

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