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Jenn Sommermann aims to race 50 tris before 50

Apr 24 | By Julia Savacool

(Video by Hannah Storm/Brainstormin Productions) *Special to espnW*

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Journeys & Victories: 'Tri' in 50 States

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Jenn Sommermann is attempting to do 50 triathlons in 50 states before she turns 50 (Hannah Storm/Brainstorm Productions).

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It's a good thing Jenn Sommermann discovered triathlons when she did. "I was turning 40 years old, and my friend and I were looking for a way to commemorate the occasion," Sommermann said. "We decided to train for a triathlon."

Because Sommermann was on the East Coast and her friend was on the West, the two trained together virtually, exchanging workout notes and messages of encouragement. Several months later, they competed in the Danskin Women's Tri in Seattle.

"That was it, I was in love with triathlons," Sommermann said. Little did she know, two years later the fitness she gained through the sport would help her win a battle against ovarian cancer.

It was December 2006 when Sommermann received her diagnosis. She'd been feeling out of sorts for months, but had been reluctant to see her doctor.

The symptoms for ovarian cancer are subtle: Bloating, weight gain, fatigue and indigestion are all indicators for the disease, but they are also common symptoms for many women during their monthly cycle. The main difference with ovarian cancer, explained Sommermann, is the symptoms don't go away.



Courtesy of Jenn

Sommermann

Jenn Sommermann has 12 races planned this season. No. 33 on her state-by-state list took place Saturday.

It was by chance she discovered the cancer -- she was pressing on her stomach one night and came across a hard lump.

"I called my husband over, and he felt it, too," she said. "I knew this wasn't good."

She went to see her physician immediately, and an ultrasound revealed a tumor about the size of an eggplant.

"I had Stage 3 ovarian cancer," said Sommermann. "I was in shock. The disease is 94 percent curable if you catch it by Stage 2. But after that, the numbers are not in your favor."

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Sommermann had surgery followed by six months of brutal chemo, which she finished in the summer of 2007. She was determined to stay positive during her ordeal, but chemo eventually took its toll.

"I never considered that I would die from cancer," she said. "That's just not who I am. But I was incredibly sick from the type of chemo I had. There were days when I felt really down, really low. I was just lying on the sofa waiting for it to pass."

Looking for something to give her spirit a lift, she flipped through Triathlete magazine one day while lying in a hospital bed waiting for her chemo treatment. That's when she saw an advertisement for a women's triathlon series that benefited the [Ovarian Cancer Research Fund](#).

"I didn't even know the Fund existed," admitted Sommermann. "Ovarian cancer is such a quiet disease, no one really talks about it."

With that ad, the seed was planted. Sommermann decided she would race all three triathlons in the series to raise money for the organization through its charity group Team Hope.

By the time she'd completed her mission, she'd amassed more than anyone else in her group, a fact which caught the eye of the organizers, who asked her if she'd consider doing more races to [keep the funds coming in](#).

"And that was basically what got me going on this campaign to reach \$100,000 in donations," Sommermann said. "I started thinking that with the right planning, I could do 50 races in 50 states by the time I turned 50."

Her goal was set.

Redefining health

Figuring out the logistics of doing so many races in a four-year period has been the biggest challenge. Sommermann tries to alternate race locations between East and West Coasts, so she doesn't have to spend too much time traveling. At home in New York, she works multiple jobs -- as a teacher at the Swedish Institute of Massage, a personal organizer and financial planner -- all squeezed into hours between training and traveling to compete.

The Olympic tri is her distance of choice: A 1.5-km swim, 40-km bike and 10-km run allow her to test her body's limits, but are short enough she can recover quickly to compete in the next race. The training is intense, but Sommermann has no complaints.

"My personality is well-suited to triathlons," she said. "You are always trying something new, mixing it up in the workouts. The multitasking involved in this sport appeals to my Type-A tendencies!"

Equally important, Sommermann pointed out, while her marathoning friends in their 40s and 50s are seeing their bodies break down due to years of repetitive motion, the mix of swimming, biking and running ensures triathletes maintain a broader fitness base, lowering the risk of injury.

At age 48, Sommermann shows no signs of slowing down. A case of plantar faciitis last winter meant she had

to spend more time in the pool and fewer miles on the road, but the way she sees it, it'll just make her stronger in the swim segment this season.

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"I'm [Comment13](#) growing up," said Sommermann, who admitted she was more likely to be found in a school play [Email](#) than on the soccer field in high school. "I was an artsy kid. I didn't play any sports. I didn't even know I had [Print](#) that competitiveness in me."

Fueled by her desire to spread the word about ovarian cancer, Sommermann, who will celebrate five years of being cancer-free this summer, is letting her competitive streak run rampant. She has 12 races planned this season. No. 33 on her state-by-state list took place Saturday when she finished first in her age group in New Mexico's Coyote Carrera Triathlon. That leaves just a handful of races for 2013, the year Sommermann turns 50 and has pledged to complete her campaign.

Her final race destination is already set: "Hawaii," she said. "My husband has promised to train for the last race with me. After that, we're going on vacation!"

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Andrew Harris · Tampa, Florida

Great work Jenn.

Reply · 3 · Like · Follow Post · April 24 at 8:44pm



Alys Marina Erickson · Northeastern University

Great job. You are a rock star. I also had stage III and have been in remission since October of 2011. I may try a triathlon too. Did a marathon in 2010 and that was my first and last.

Reply · 2 · Like · Follow Post · April 25 at 2:44pm



Gabrielle Revere · Owner at Gabrielle Revere Photographer

Beautiful and Inspiring beyond words!

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Katie Miller Richman · [Subscribe](#) · Director of Social Media Strategy at ESPN Inc.

She's my new hero. 50 tri's before her 50th birthday?

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Janet Egan Garvin · Works at Hearst Corporation

Way to go Jenn! I'm so very proud of you and the work you're doing...

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