

Hilly rider coming out of cancer

Month after mastectomy, cyclist tackles tour

By Nicole Kauffman, Hoosier Times

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Perhaps no one was more excited to hop on a bicycle and tackle 48 miles of rolling hills on Saturday than Cindi Hart.

"It's like a family reunion for me here," the Indianapolis resident said, smiling and greeting fellow cyclists at Edgewood High School, the headquarters for the annual Hilly Hundred ride.

The event is one the nurse, avid cyclist and speed skating coach has participated in about 10 times. But Saturday was special.

"This year's my 'coming out' party," she said. "I'm coming out of cancer."

On Sept. 14, Hart had a bilateral mastectomy after several rounds of chemotherapy.

She has battled fatigue and the loss of her hair and appetite, a result of battling the cancerous tumor detected in her breast in May.

Getting back on her bike was one way of showing those around her how she benefited from their support and love.

"It wasn't the knowledge that I was mortal, not the cancer, that made me stronger. That makes you weak in the knees," she said. "When you see people rallying you with their caring thoughts and their love, you want to show them that they're investing in a good thing. That you're gonna fight it. You're gonna come back stronger."

Stronger is one thing to call the 42-year-old.

Since May, she has collected top awards for her biking, including winning the American Bicycling Racing National Track Cycling Championships and the Indiana State Championships Track Cycling Championships.

"I don't think her experience is dissimilar to the accomplishments that Lance Armstrong has made," said Hart's surgeon, Robert Goulet Jr., associate professor of surgery and medical director of the Indiana University Breast Care and Research Center.

"This is a lady who was training for the world championships while she was getting chemotherapy and losing her hair. To focus on competing at that level knowing she was facing the challenge of a breast operation — I'm awed," he said.

Hart said being an athlete gave her extra motivation during her illness.

"I never realized before this how much my identity as an athlete was important to me," she said. "I chose to continue to train, bike ride, coach. (Cancer) took my hair, it took my breasts, my fingernails. It took my summer. I wasn't gonna let it take my identity."

She saw being aggressive with the disease part of being a good role model.

"I want to show the girls that I'm coaching and my (9-year-old) daughter that



Friend Joe Niccum takes the helm of a tandem bicycle for Saturday's leg of the Hilly Hundred, in front of Cindi Hart. Niccum, a seasoned biker with good hill-climbing ability, was ready to help pull some of Hart's load if her strength lagged because of her recent mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. Hart's husband, Ken, not pictured, was set to ride along on another bike. Staff photo by Monty Howell.

cancer's not a death sentence. You don't have to give up," she said.

Not that anyone thought she would.

When asked what went through her mind first when she heard about her coach's breast cancer, 15-year-old speed skater Abby Nicks smiled.

"The first thing I thought? She can beat it. If anyone can beat it, she can. She's tough," she said.

Hart's husband of about 15 years, Ken Hart, said the chemotherapy really "took it out of her," but in general, "she took it much better than most people do."

While her surgeon calls Cindi Hart a great spokeswoman, he said she is not alone in facing breast cancer bravely.

"Virtually every patient I speak to that's newly diagnosed with breast cancer, the concern is never, 'What's going to happen to me?'" he said. "It's always, 'What's going to happen to my kids, my family, my job?' There's always a concern for others, other than themselves."

On Saturday morning at the Hilly Hundred start, Hart got on a tandem with her friend and fellow cyclist Joe Niccum, the 2004 Hoosier Cup champion. She was relieved to know she wouldn't have to brake or shift, because she was sore and stiff in her chest area from recent reconstructive surgery.

She said she recommends exercise to anyone facing cancer.

"It gets rid of depression and alleviates stress. And (it helped make me) a healthy candidate for surgery," she said.

By the time she heads to Nagano, Japan, as head coach for the U.S. speed skating team at the Special Olympics in 2005, she has no doubt she'll be in tip-top shape.

"I feel better every day," she said.

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Cindi Hart, center, greets her friend Jomay Chow, left, of Columbus, Ohio, Saturday morning at the Edgewood schools complex in Ellettsville as they prepare for the first day of the Hilly Hundred bicycle tour. Staff photo by Monty Howell.



