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Grand Slam on Cancer

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA

A winner of 59 Grand Slam championships including a record 9 Wimbledon singles titles, Martina Navratilova is the most successful woman tennis player of the modern era. Martina was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame, named “Tour Player of the Year” seven times by the Women’s Tennis Association, declared “Female Athlete of the Year” by the Associated Press, and ranked one of the “Top Forty Athletes of All-Time” by Sports Illustrated. Equally accomplished off the court, Martina is an author, philanthropist, TV commentator, and activist who has dedicated her life to educating people about prejudice and stereotypes. After coming out as a lesbian in 1981, Martina became a tireless advocate of equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and she has contributed generously to the LGBT community. Martina is the author of seven books, including most recently Shape Your Self: My 6-Step Diet and Fitness Plan to Achieve the Best Shape of your Life, an inspiring guide to healthy living and personal fitness. Martina was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2010.

KEYWORDS *Martina Navratilova, tennis champion, lesbian leaders, lesbians fighting disease and disability, lesbians and medical treatment, lesbians coping with illness, lesbian support systems, best medical practices, breast cancer*

N.B. Martina Navratilova was interviewed for this chapter by Nanette Gartrell

Nanette: I really appreciate your taking the time to talk with me about your experience with breast cancer. As you know, this is the only academic social science journal focused exclusively on lesbians. It’s used very broadly in academia and feminist studies, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies, and medical training. It’s also listed in Index Medicus so

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that all physicians and health providers have access to it. For this special issue, we are interviewing preeminent leaders like you who have had health challenges. We are interested in knowing what happened to you, what you learned, and what you would advise other women who find themselves in similar situations. We're particularly pleased that you're willing to share your story not only because you're out and have a long history of activism, but also because you're the healthiest person anyone can think of. To start, could you give me an overview of your breast cancer—how it was diagnosed, what treatments you had.

Martina: One of the reasons I wanted to talk about this is that I hadn't kept up on my mammograms. Because I traveled so much, I kind of let it slide. You know, when you get a notice from your vet that your dog needs rabies shots, you make the appointment and you go right away. But when you get a notice from your OB-GYN that it's time for your mammogram, you kind of put it on the back burner. "I'll do it next week. I'll do it after the next trip." With my traveling as much as I did, and also changing doctors—I went from my regular doctor to another one—I was in between doctors, and in between cities, and I let it slide. When I finally went for my mammogram, it had been four years since the last one; I thought it had been less than two.

After I had it they said, "Well we want to take another look, but it's probably nothing. Please come back for another closer mammogram." So I went to the Australian Open, and then went back for the second mammogram in February. They took a closer look, and said, "Ah, there's a cluster we're not quite sure about. We'll send you for a biopsy." I went to Denver for the biopsy. When they finished the biopsy, they said, "Oh, it's probably nothing. We see these all the time and they're benign." So I was still feeling pretty confident, until the next day when I got the call from my best friend, Mindy Nagle, who is my OB-GYN. Mindy said, "It's positive." First I thought, "Positive is good." But then I'm like, wait a minute, positive is not good. I sat down, cried for a minute, and then I went to the grocery store and bought all the organic produce I could find, even more than I normally choose.

So that's how it happened with me. It turns out that both my mother and my sister also had these types of clusters. My mom didn't do anything about it, and never knew whether they were benign or not. My sister Jana had a biopsy and they were fine. So I guess it ran in the family—these clusters. It still might have been that nothing came of it, but I wanted to minimize those chances. The reason I want to talk about this publicly is because I didn't realize that it had been so long between my mammograms. I want to encourage women to make sure that they don't let it slide like I did. At the end I was lucky, because it could have been a different story.

Nanette: You were diagnosed with ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS), is that correct? In 2010?

Martina: That's correct. Three years ago.

It was grade 3, which is the more aggressive one, which is why I had radiation. I had a small biopsy, and then I had the radiation about two months later, in Paris. The radiation treatment in Paris cost 1/3 of what it would have been, had it been Colorado. So my insurance company was very happy.

Nanette: Your insurance company paid even though you were treated in Paris?

Martina: It's WTA insurance (Women's Tennis Association), so it's an international policy. I'm covered around the world, which is great. The insurers were happy, because it cost \$10,000, whereas in the States it would have been \$30,000.

Nanette: That's incredible.

Martina: And they used the exact same machines.

Nanette: Did you have a sentinel node biopsy?

Martina: I did. They took the node out, and it was fine.

Nanette: Was this the right breast or left breast?

Martina: Left.

Nanette: So it was your dominant side. And radiation, how was that experience for you?

Martina: I handled it well. My cancer was pretty simple, as far as they go, so I had so many options. Now, looking back, I don't know if I would have gotten the radiation. I mean, you lessen the chance of recurrence, but with DCIS it's pretty good already. But a friend of mine, whom you may know, had the same thing. Hers kept coming back. She ended up having a mastectomy on both breasts. Mine started the same way hers did. She was in the same low percentile, but it kept coming back. Because of her experience, I did the radiation. Looking back at it now, I wouldn't have done it, because it was so debilitating. It really knocked me for a loop. And now my shoulder doesn't feel the same. The tissue around my shoulder and even on my back just doesn't appear right. It affects the tissue forever; the quality of the tissues changes. It's not the same.

If it were somebody else, I wouldn't recommend doing it or not doing it. But if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't do the radiation.

Nanette: How did you manage all your work commitments during the treatment?

Martina: I think it was a testament to my fitness and being in really great health that I was able to play and do commentary during my treatment. My radiation started the first week in May, and it went on through the week before Wimbledon. The French Open was the fourth week of radiation, and I finished just before Wimbledon. I played in the Legends Event there.

The only drawback that was that I was a little tired, but nothing really hugely noticeable. It happens very gradually—that loss of energy. One day I had to take a nap, because I was really tired. Another time I was playing hockey and I had to stop after about ten minutes because I had no energy. But I was OK for the most part. I was still playing and doing commentary during the French Open. I handled it really well because of my really strong constitution.

Nanette: And your level of fitness.

Martina: That helped. I think that's cumulative too. You don't get to that level of fitness from all of a sudden starting to eat right. For me, it was three decades of healthy eating and being very healthy. Of course I also think that the positivity of an athlete came through, in that you get into the solution immediately. As you would if you are playing a match and you are losing: you try to figure out how to win. You have to stay positive, you have to stay in the moment, and you have to figure out a way out of it. Even though physically I couldn't do anything about the cancer—I had to have doctors and machines do that work—I was immediately in the solution and not in the problem.

Nanette: How has your tennis influenced your breast cancer outcome?

Martina: Any champion in any field, particularly athletes and particularly in individual sports, can't make excuses. It's your responsibility: you win or you lose. You have to stay positive, and you have to stay there until you get it right. That kind of mindset is obviously very helpful to me. It would be in any walk of life, but particularly with something like this. And who knows how much this kind of mindset affected me on the inside.

Nanette: That is a powerful message that we'd like to highlight for other women who've had or who develop similar health conditions—your dedication to health and fitness, plus your very positive, solution-oriented outlook. Could you also comment on being out as a lesbian leader and your long history of activism? How do they play a role in your outlook?

Martina: Overall in my sense of well-being and feeling confident—that makes you who you are, doesn't it? Could I have been as good a tennis player had I not been out? I don't think so. Could I have been as positive about life if I hadn't been out? I don't think so. It's all connected in that way. The energy that it takes to deny who you are, trying to pretend, is just ridiculous.

Until I got diagnosed, I had no idea how much stress affects you physically. I had the biopsy on Monday, February 21. When we got the report, Mindy called me about 5 o'clock in the evening and she said, "I'll call the other doctor, because I want to find out what's really going on." She called back an hour later and said, "I'm picking you up at 5 in the morning, we're going to be in Denver at 8. The doctor's going to see you. We'll get an exact diagnosis, and find out what you need to do. Then we'll drive back." So we did. She drove me, and we got back at 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

It was great news: I didn't need chemotherapy, only radiation; I didn't need a mastectomy, only a lumpectomy out of my very small boob. So great news all the way around. Yet, that night we had hockey practice. I play on the local hockey team. I went to hockey practice, and I was absolutely exhausted. I had to keep resting after every so many minutes. I had to keep sitting down. I was so out of breath that I called it quits. I thought either I was going to get hurt or hurt someone, because I couldn't control myself. I had no strength. The next day I played tennis with a friend. I hadn't played for a while, so I just hit some balls. The same thing—I had to stop every five minutes to take a drink of water. I thought, wow, this is all stress from dealing with cancer. It really made me realize how much stress affects you physically. After the initial shock, it took about ten days or two weeks before I felt physically back to 100%.

So when people stress about little things, I think, it just isn't worth it. Unless it affects your health, it's just not worth even talking about. I never was too much of a stressful person anyway. Stress sort of rolled off me, like, I can't be bothered. But even more so now. That's what I want to tell people—how important it is not to let little stuff get in the way because it just doesn't matter. Put it in perspective.

Nanette: What about your support system during that time?

Martina: Huge. At first, I was like, "No, I'm fine," when my friends said, "Can I do anything?" But my therapist said, "You know, studies show that if you have five friends or more giving you support throughout this time, you have a much better chance of recovery." So then when people asked if they could help, I accepted that help. If I needed something—whatever it was—I was willing to ask for that help. And, because of that—though I don't know what the results would have been otherwise, or it's too soon to tell—I'm now cancer free. I know that it helped me so much knowing that I could count on people.

You can be strong on the inside but it also takes strength to ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness. To me, it's a sign of health.

Nanette: That's so true. I know that both from personal experience and also in my professional work as a psychiatrist. Do you have any other advice

for women, or lesbians in particular? Some people view aspects of lesbian health as distinct from women's health, and others don't.

Martina: I look at lesbian health as a separate health issue because many lesbians like me never took birth control pills. Also, many don't have children. Therefore, they go through different hormonal changes than women who have had children. Now more lesbians are having kids, so it doesn't affect them as much that way. I just look at it totally from a statistical viewpoint, not any other way, whether we are more likely or less likely to have these cancers. I have no idea what those numbers are, but I know that lesbians, because we don't have to worry about getting diseases or getting pregnant, slouch off on the OB-GYN. That's not a good thing.

Overall, I had the best of care. I was in good hands. My care here in Paris was impeccable as well, which anybody has access to here. One thing that did strike me during my treatment, in a good way, was how strong women are. You know, when I was doing my radiation, there were several women who were much worse off. They were getting chemo as well as radiation, losing their hair, and everything else, and they were all very supportive. Just so strong and dignified. That's what really struck me—how strong women really are. That was very encouraging.

Nanette: That's really nice. And anything else do you'd care to add?

Martina: For me, it's all about encouraging women to take care of themselves. We're so good about taking care of everybody else that we don't take care of ourselves. How can you take care of somebody else if you're not in good health yourself?

Nanette: Excellent point.

Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today and for sharing your experiences with others who can learn from them.

Martina: Sure.

Nanette: I wish you excellent health!

Martina: Thank you.