

GOING THE



Duke Cancer Center patient inspires hope every time he laces up his running shoes

By Amanda MacLaren
Photography by Briana Brough

DISTANCE

It's a story Tom O'Donnell never thought he'd be telling.

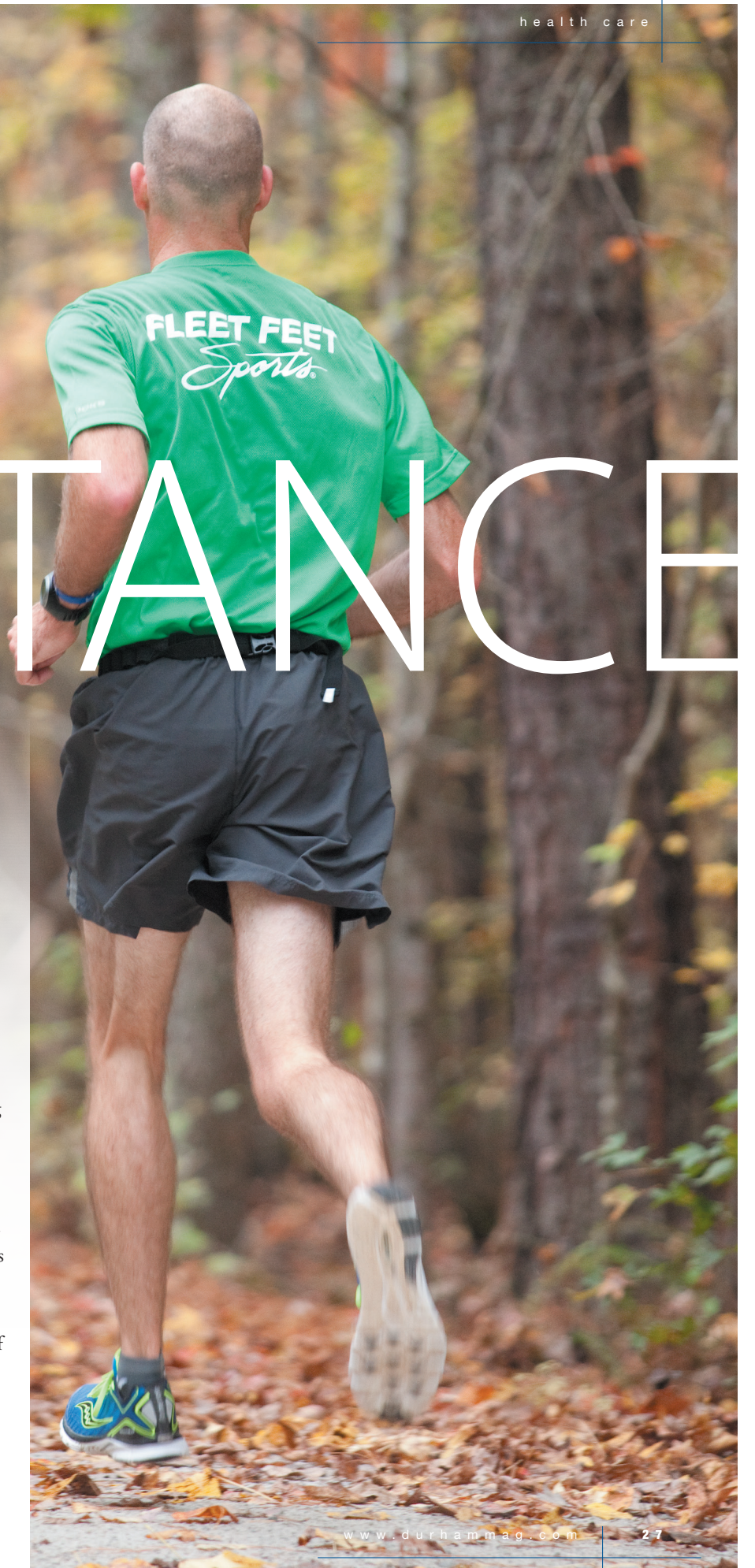
He took a 25-year break from running before getting diagnosed with brain cancer three years ago. Now, as he prepares for his seventh marathon, just try and stop him.

"Literally speaking, it blows my mind," Tom says. "To me, just being able to do it was enough. But then one thing led to another. Every finish line leads to a starting line."

ROUTINE CHECK-UP

Tom's family was planning a vacation in June 2009 when Tom went to his doctor for a check-up. He'd been experiencing an involuntary eye twitch – like the kind a person would typically get if they were tired. Tom wasn't too concerned, but the doctor decided they should probably check it out.

He went in for an MRI and scheduled his follow-up appointment after his vaca-



"Of course, things can change any time. But that's true for all of us. There've been bumps in the road, and there'll be more. [Running], for me, that's my treatment. And I think it's working."

tion. But then the doctor called and asked that he come in sooner.

"I left work at lunch one day to get the results, and they told me they were abnormal," Tom says, his voice straining. "I asked them if they had the right one. They did. I left there with a sheet of paper that said I was a 46-year-old male with a mass on the right side of his brain.

"That changed everything, just that quickly, and I had no idea to what extent."

OPTIONS

After Tom's family arrived back from vacation, he and his wife went in for a consultation with **Dr. Allan Friedman at Duke**, who gave Tom three options: do a biopsy, do nothing or go in and get the sucker out.

"It didn't take me long to decide," Tom says. "I called the next day and told him I wanted to schedule surgery."

Due to its location, it was not possible for Dr. Friedman to remove the whole tumor. He told Tom that the surgery would be a success if he could remove 60 percent of the mass. And he did just that.

"I woke up in ICU, and I could wiggle my fingers and toes," Tom says. "I started crying. You think about all the things that could go wrong, and seemingly none of them did."

One of the greatest risks Tom faced with the surgery was suffering a stroke and losing function of the left side of his body. So, he started using his body as much as possible.

THE JOURNEY

"I called Dr. Friedman's office two weeks after my surgery and asked his PA if I could start running," Tom says. "His response was, 'You want to do what?' I said, 'I want to run.' He said, 'No more than a mile, and not by yourself.' I've yet to run just a mile, and some of my best runs are by myself."

Tom began training to run the **Tobacco**

Road Marathon in March 2010, but his plans nearly came to a halt when he experienced his first seizure a month before the race.

The type of tumor Tom has is called a well-differentiated oligodendroglioma, found in the white matter of the brain.

Dr. Katy Peters, Tom's neuro-oncologist, explains that these tumors tend to sit in places that can cause seizures. They can also become more aggressive and affect parts of the brain that control movement, leaving some patients paralyzed.

A biopsy was scheduled with Dr. Friedman, who found everything just as he'd left it from Tom's initial surgery. Still, Tom was hesitant about going through with the marathon.

"I met with Dr. Peters and said I don't have to do the marathon if it's not a good idea," Tom says. "She said, 'Well you have my email address.' And I said, 'What am I going to do with your email address?' She told me she needed parking instructions."

Tom ran that first marathon on March 21, 2010, with family, friends and his doctor supporting him. He hasn't stopped since, and even competed in the Boston Marathon this year.

"See, when you do something because you can, it's a whole new meaning," Tom says. "When I go to my clinic appointments, I just have to look around the waiting room to realize how fortunate I am. I know that this is the result that they want. But it's not always the result that they get."

"His running really is a symbol to all the patients who can't run who have the same condition he does," Dr. Peters says. "I think his story really resonates with them because they see that he can do those things, and so they feel they can accomplish their own goals."

'THE RIGHT PLACE'

Prior to his surgery, Tom says, "I didn't Google brain tumors, I didn't Google Dr. Friedman. I knew I was

at the right place. I can't really explain it, but I didn't need a second opinion."

He was proven right, and he continues to go in for frequent check-ups and remains close to Duke through gatherings and programs like **Angels Among Us**, an annual 5K and family walk that benefits the **Brain Tumor Center**. In Boston, Tom raised \$38,000.

"When I went to Angels Among Us for the first time and was surrounded by people who were either survivors or had a connection with a patient, it was unbelievably powerful," Tom says. "I get invited to speak at board dinners, and then you're in a room full of doctors and very influential donors who, as Dr. Friedman puts it, get it. You don't have to explain what 'it' is. It's understood.

"I just felt comfortable," Tom continues as he explains that before his diagnosis, he usually felt nervous about speaking in front

of a group of people. "I was there for a different reason, but without every person in that room, I might not be here."

Tom reflects back on the fear he had going in to his surgery, but explains that, stronger than fear, was his hope. That's why he runs. He believes every patient has a marathon in them; they just have to figure out what it is.

"Trust me, if Dr. Friedman could have told me on that consult, 'This is what you're going to do, and it's going to be amazing,' he would have," Tom says. "Of course, things can change any time. But that's true for every one of us. There've been bumps in the road, and there'll be more."

Tom plans on running over those bumps, for as long as he can, for everyone at the cancer center.

"For me, that's my treatment. And I think it's working." **DM**

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