

# Survival of the Fittest

Is **SEAN SWARNER** invincible? He may not look it, but considering he battled two deadly illnesses and some of the world's tallest peaks—and beat them all—you just might change your mind.

BY ERIC BUTTERMAN

**S**O MANY PEOPLE HAVE DIED trying to conquer this thing. It's a climb that seems endless, more treacherous than almost anything you can imagine. And once the worst of it is behind you, all it takes is one false move—one tiny slipup—and you may never be heard from again.

You might think this is Sean Swarner's description of climbing Mount Everest, but the words better describe his fight against cancer, a disease that struck him not once but twice and, by the numbers, should have put him six feet under.

I first met the 32-year-old Swarner early in 2006. With a smile that never seemed to waver, the boyishly handsome Willard, Ohio, native was instantly likable and the picture of good health. He was gearing up to climb Mount Denali in Alaska, the tallest peak in North America. Professing that he'd never met a mountain he couldn't climb, Swarner was full of hope. "It shouldn't be too bad," he told me with a laugh. "It couldn't be worse than Everest. . . ."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Because before Swarner ever set foot at the base of that mountain, he had to overcome an uphill battle for his life.

"The first time I got sick, I didn't actually know anything was wrong," Swarner says, looking back. "I got a knee injury playing basketball when I was 13, and every joint in my body swelled up. My parents took me to the hospital, and my doctors had some CAT scans done. That's when they found the cancer." It was a form of Hodgkin's disease, already in its final stages. "They thought I would be dead in months," he remembers.

Swarner was determined to beat it. "The treatments made me lose all my hair and gain 60 pounds. Not good for the popularity of a freshman in high school," he says. Swarner has always been a fighter, and through it all he persevered, beating the disease into remission.



JOE FORENO

As Swarner's health improved, his life returned to normal. He worked hard to shed the pounds, and his hair grew back. He was active and athletic—he even broke a record on his high school's swim team. But it didn't last. Less than two years later, inexplicably, he was confronted by the disease again. "I couldn't believe it," he says. "During a checkup, they found a golf-ball-size tumor in my right lung. It was Askin's sarcoma—another form of cancer. I'm the only one ever to get both. The doctors gave me a 6% chance to survive." That left Swarner with approximately two weeks to live.

"I was just so mad. I didn't want to fight for my life anymore. The doctors put me in a medical-induced coma to give me chemo and radiation. A man of the cloth even read me the last rites—but my parents wouldn't have it and insisted that he leave. They felt that I wasn't finished yet, and they were right."

Swarner's two weeks turned into a month, then two, and he continued to

hold on. After 11 long months of chemotherapy, Swarner miraculously beat the cancer once again. Although it left him with only one fully functioning lung, and he was missing a lat muscle on his right side, he was alive and otherwise in good health.

At the age of 17, having faced death twice, Swarner had already experienced more hardship than some men see in a lifetime, but he was far from defeated. In fact, Swarner believed he was saved twice for a reason. And he made a commitment to helping others stricken with



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the disease. At first, he planned to become a doctor and help others fight cancer. But he couldn't deal with watching people die day after day. "I needed something more positive."

Always a natural athlete and outdoorsman, Swarner felt there had to be a way to incorporate that passion into his mission. "I found out a cancer survivor had never climbed Mount Everest, and that got me interested in mountaineering," he says, laughing. "It just sounded like something I would do." So Swarner made a decision to dedicate his life to climbing mountains for cancer. He even moved to Boulder, Colo., to train for Everest in the Rockies.

Just nine months later, he found himself high up in the Himalayas, attempting to summit the world's tallest peak. He was making decent progress until a giant roadblock hit him. "Because of the extreme altitude, I got edema," Swarner says. "My brain started swelling from the elevation. It wasn't easy to deal with, but I couldn't let it hold me back. I still felt I was destined to get to the top."

He carried on. The edema eased, and on May 16, 2002, he reached the summit. "I was in tears," he says. "It just seemed so hard to believe. But I'd already beaten cancer, so I knew it was possible." As the first cancer survivor to defeat Everest, Swarner decided to take the challenge even further and climb the highest mountain peak on every continent, becoming only the 11th climber ever to do so.

Swarner climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Elbrus during just two weeks in 2003. In 2005, he tackled South America's Mount Aconcagua. And in February 2006, he climbed Mount Kosciuszko in Australia. Denali in Alaska was next.

"The Denali climb started out fine," Swarner says. "As we went higher and higher, my body was handling the climb well. But then I lost my footing on one of the steep, snowy sections. I was suddenly falling down this huge mountain. I barely remember it, but I fell over 100 feet. I was eventually able to stop myself. The adrenaline wrecked my ability to think logically. We weren't that far

from the top, but I was freaked out. I could have kept going, but things just didn't feel right. For the first time in my life, I had to turn back."

Swarner returned to his home in Boulder to continue his training. He also made time to visit young cancer patients at hospitals around the country. "You can see their faces change when I tell them about how I'm climbing mountains," he says. "They see the possibility and realize that this thing doesn't have to be a death sentence."

Far from it, in fact. Having regrouped after his experience on Denali, and inspired by all the faces of cancer patients he'd met, Swarner climbed Mount Vinson in Antarctica in January 2007. Standing at the mountain's peak, he confirmed once again that, with the willpower and the drive to make it hap-

pen, anything is achievable. "When you have cancer, you're told all the things you can't do," he says. "That's one of the reasons for my seven-continent trek around the globe. I want to inspire people and show them that you can overcome difficulties. You can beat what's got you down and keep climbing."

Swarner has picked May 16 as the day he hopes to overcome his last challenge, Denali, finally climbing the mountain and completing his seven-summit goal—five years to the day since Everest. Where he goes next is anybody's guess, but one thing's clear: It's definitely *not* all downhill from here. **MS**

Sean Swarner's *Keep Climbing* is in bookstores now. For more on Sean, check out [seanswarner.com](http://seanswarner.com). Or, to donate to his charity, visit [cancerclimber.org](http://cancerclimber.org).

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