

Can't keep a good man down

Meet Sean Swarner: One lung—seven summits

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If passersby to Littleton's Jackass Hill Park ever see some guy hauling a heavy bundle of old SUV tires through the neighborhood, he is not the original jackass in question.

"Most people slow down and just kind of stare at me. I just wave at them," said Sean Swarner, who raised as many eyebrows at Big O Tires one day when he came in and asked for some discarded product. "Now, I'm the crazy guy walking around dragging tires behind me. It's to simulate the sled we're going to be using at the North Pole."

Oh, is that all? If this rubber-made trip to the Pole were not unusual enough, add to it Swarner's 15-minute jaunt last week up the 1,576 stairs of the Empire State Building.

And his life-threatening ascents up the highest peak on each continent.

Did we mention he has only one functioning lung?

"The body adapts incredibly well," the 42-year-old adventurer ventured to explain. "I don't want to say I'm a starfish where you can cut off a leg and it'll grow back. But it definitely adapts. One of the greatest things about the human condition is the mind. For 90 percent of the humans out there, their mind gives up before their body does."

Littleton's Sean Swarner has not let the lack of one functioning lung or two unrelated forms of cancer keep him down. Here, he stands on Mount Vinson, which boasts the highest summit in Antarctica.

Photo courtesy of Atrium PR

Sean Swarner (in yellow jacket) and his team embark on Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

Photos courtesy of Atrium PR

Climbing to the top of the Empire State Building in 15 minutes is just air-conditioned play time for two-time cancer survivor Sean Swarner. In April, he will pull a full sled to the highest peak on the North Pole.



In Swarner's case, that jaunt up 102 stories was child's play. Like his walks through Littleton, his scaling last week of a New York City icon was nothing more than prep work for his upcoming North Pole expedition, part of his Seven Summits series or Explorer's Grand Slam.

In April, the Littleton man will be traversing the northernmost point on Earth in a team of six people, including two videographers, each hauling his own sled load of provisions. In addition to a planned documentary film, the author-adventurer will stake a symbolic claim for those, like him, who have fought—or continue to fight—the disease that nearly killed him.

"I'm bringing a flag up there and I'm hoping to get as many people

touched by cancer as possible to go with me," he said.

By the time he was 16, Swarner had been diagnosed with an unusual combination of Hodgkin's lymphoma and the unrelated and rarer Askin's bone cancer. At 13, a doctor gave him three months to live. Surviving his Hodgkin's gloom, the boy's prognosis was cut to 14 days three years later with the Askin's diagnosis.

"There were some nights I went to bed, I didn't even know if I was going to wake up the next morning," he said. "Maybe it wasn't necessarily resilience, but maybe it was stubbornness. Being a teenager, every kid's stubborn. Hormones are kicking in."

That double shot of

chemotherapy and radiation was so intense that one of his lungs was destroyed in the process and for a year he was placed in a series of medically-induced comas.

"The treatments were so harsh, they didn't want me to remember them," Swarner said, piecing together the recollection. "I don't remember much about being 16 years old."

What may have been the boy's saving grace was his boundless athleticism. By the time of his double diagnosis, he was a champion swimmer with eyes on Olympic gold. Nicknamed "Nature Boy," he was also a committed outdoorsman—and when cancer came, "Nature Boy" saw no reason to go inside. If he could climb the mountain of cancer, why not Kilimanjaro?



sat cold and frazzled, staring at the face of an ominous 45-degree-angle, mile-long sheet of ice.

"I knew I was dying," he said with some irony. "My brain was swelling

Among his multitude of adventures, Swarner leads a group—including a few grant-supported cancer survivors—on an annual hike up Africa's highest peak in a fundraiser and journey of self-discovery. He says while many expeditions to the summit see a 45 percent success rate among participants, his own expeditions come closer to 95 percent.

"We look at the mountain differently," he said. "Everyone else is focused on the top, getting there—they forget to have fun. We're the only group on the mountain dancing and telling jokes. The summit becomes the byproduct of having fun."

That's not to say that Swarner's time on the peaks has not had its physical and emotional valleys. On Mount Everest, he once came face to face with the fear of death as he

and I was starting to think about potentially being killed by cancers. I turned back to my not-quite normal childhood in Midwestern Ohio."

In remission for years, Swarner says these days he tries to think about cancer only once a year on the occasion of his annual physical. When he is not climbing the next mountain, he keeps his mind occupied as a motivational speaker and author. *7 Summits to Success* is his latest e-book.

As a "life coach," Swarner says people tend to overcome their obstacles after they

start to realize that they can be their own best teacher.

"I don't have all the answers. I just have all the right questions," he said. "People who are looking for things in their lives can find it themselves."

For 90 percent of the humans out there, their mind gives up before their body does.
—Sean Swarner, mountain climber/author

