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Old Scratch with new itch: Saling now a mascot for cystic fibrosis

By Brett Dawson

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Chris Saling was a University of Kentucky freshman when he proclaimed to friends and family that he'd someday be stalking the sidelines at Rupp Arena in a mascot costume.

Later he told them he'd be in the university's boxing club, too.

So it came as no great shock in March when Saling, a 26-year-old graduate of Male High School and UK, announced that he intended to compete in an adventure race — running, biking and kayaking — in Jacksonville, Fla. He had seen one on television and had been drawn to it immediately.

"It looked like a lot of fun, but it looked exhausting," he said. "These people were trained professionals and they were bleeding and puking, and I just thought, 'That would be so fun to do, if I could do that.'"

In theory, he couldn't. In theory, though, he never should have put on that "Scratch" mascot suit either, or fought in a competitive boxing match.

At 6 months old, Saling was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, an inherited chronic disease that affects the lungs and digestive system of about 30,000 Americans.

Those with CF lose more vital nutrients through sweat than the average person. Because of heavy mucus and reduced lung capacity, breathing can be extremely difficult. Less oxygen gets to the muscles, which can make exercise agonizing.

"People with CF don't do adventure races," Saling said.

That's exactly what drew him to it.

Next Sunday he and Team CF — eight friends and family members — will be in Jacksonville to take part in The Bear, a race that requires compass navigation, 6-12 miles of running and biking, as many as 15 miles of kayaking and even a series of "mystery events."

The Bear is supposed to be a challenge for anyone. For Saling it's supposed to be virtually impossible.

That's the point.

Soon after he hatched the idea of participating in the race, he came up with the notion that would become Everyday Has A Finish Line, Saling's foundation designed to raise funds and draw attention to CF.

"Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to do something special for cystic fibrosis," he said. "At the time, you're thinking of huge things you can do, and as you grow up you realize that's not realistic. I can't

put on a huge concert that raises millions of dollars.”

But he figured he could draw attention to the disease by doing something that a guy with CF shouldn't be able to do. And in that area he had some experience.

‘A little spiral' in college

Saling grew up in Louisville playing competitive soccer and tennis. At UK he took up Frisbee golf and became drawn to the idea of entertaining fans as a mascot — an activity that, due to the blistering heat inside the costume, can be grueling.

It was so hard on Saling that he had to go on seizure medication because he got so faint inside the suit. He gave it up after a year, but it wasn't the only chance he took in college.

The night of his first — and only — club boxing match, his mother, Reanna Saling, sat outside in a parking lot and “cried and prayed,” she recalled, having been told by a doctor that a punch to the chest could collapse her son's lung.

For Chris, though, the risks were worth it. He needed to feel alive.

Saling admits there was a time early in his UK days when he sank into near-depression. He was tired of the breathing treatments he was supposed to undergo four times a day for 45-60 minutes each. He hated explaining to visitors why the therapy machine — which looks something like a life jacket fitted with two air tubes — was in his dorm room.

And having been told that the average CF sufferer lives about 35 years — in 2008 the predicted average rose to 37.4, according to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation — he began to wonder if the fight was worth it.

“All my life I kind of thought I would die young, but I was still so young that it seemed far off,” he said. “When I got to college, I went into a little spiral.”

Even when Saling was committed to his treatments, he'd sometimes end up in the hospital with lung problems. He'd be there for a week or more and fall behind in his classes.

Eventually he found a way out of his funk. He committed his life to making memories, and he began to think of ways to help others with CF get through their darkest times.

Now he's committed to his own health, and there's no trace of that old defeatist attitude.

“If you're having a bad day, you can talk to Chris and feel like you're having one of your best days,” said Nick Cowell, a friend from Louisville who'll compete in the race. “Compared to everything he's been through, you realize your life isn't that bad. It teaches you to take advantage of every day you have.”

Now Saling is trying to spread that lesson to others with CF. He's chosen a grueling way to get the message across.

‘No doubt ... I'll finish'

Most days Saling is out of bed at about 9 a.m. for a high-calorie, high-protein shake, then the first of two or three daily breathing treatments. He'll strap on the vest — it loosens the mucus in his chest so he can cough it out — and spend 45 minutes watching TV or reading e-mails from visitors to the Everyday Has A Finish Line site, so named, he said, because living with CF “isn't about the big races,

but the day-to-day challenges.”

After that it's off to a workout. Saling, who stands 5feet7½ and weighs 130 pounds, lifts weights three or four times a week. Most days he runs five or 10 miles, then heads to Seneca Park or Cherokee Park for two hours of mountain biking.

Most of his spare time during the day is devoted to the Web site. At night he's on his feet as a server at Mitchell's Fish Market. He hits the sack about midnight and does it all again the next day.

“He's been kind of burning the candle at both ends,” said Paul Barry, another friend who'll join Saling in the race.

It's all to prepare for a 10-hour race that would be daunting even if he didn't have CF.

“I have no doubt in my mind that I'll finish,” Saling said. “I know that when I get out there, I'll have so many inspiring thoughts and so many people counting on me that I just won't let myself not cross that finish line.”

Some of those thoughts will be from the e-mails he's received from Web site visitors. One woman said her 8-month-old daughter has been diagnosed with CF, and she'll use Saling's efforts as an inspiration as the girl grows older. One man in his 40s with CF was proud to report that he hadn't been hospitalized since he was 15.

There are difficult ones, too, from patients who've had long hospital stays or parents who've lost youngsters to CF.

Saling also knows that some patients can't afford the therapy machine that he's able to have at home because his parents — Dean, a hospital administrator, and Reanna, who works for Jefferson County Public schools — have extensive health insurance.

Those are the things that push him through the pain when he feels “like there's acid in my lungs.”

The irony of it all is that Saling, a young man with designs on becoming the face of cystic fibrosis, doesn't even like to tell people he has the disease.

Sometimes, Barry said, he'll wait until he's gotten to know a new friend before he explains his condition. CF is a part of his life, but he doesn't want it to define him.

“Christopher has lived his life trying to be just like everybody else,” Reanna Saling said. “And yet I think he's been exceptional.”

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Additional Facts

INFORMATION

For information on cystic fibrosis or to make a donation to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, visit Chris Saling's Web site, www.everydayhasafinishline.com.