

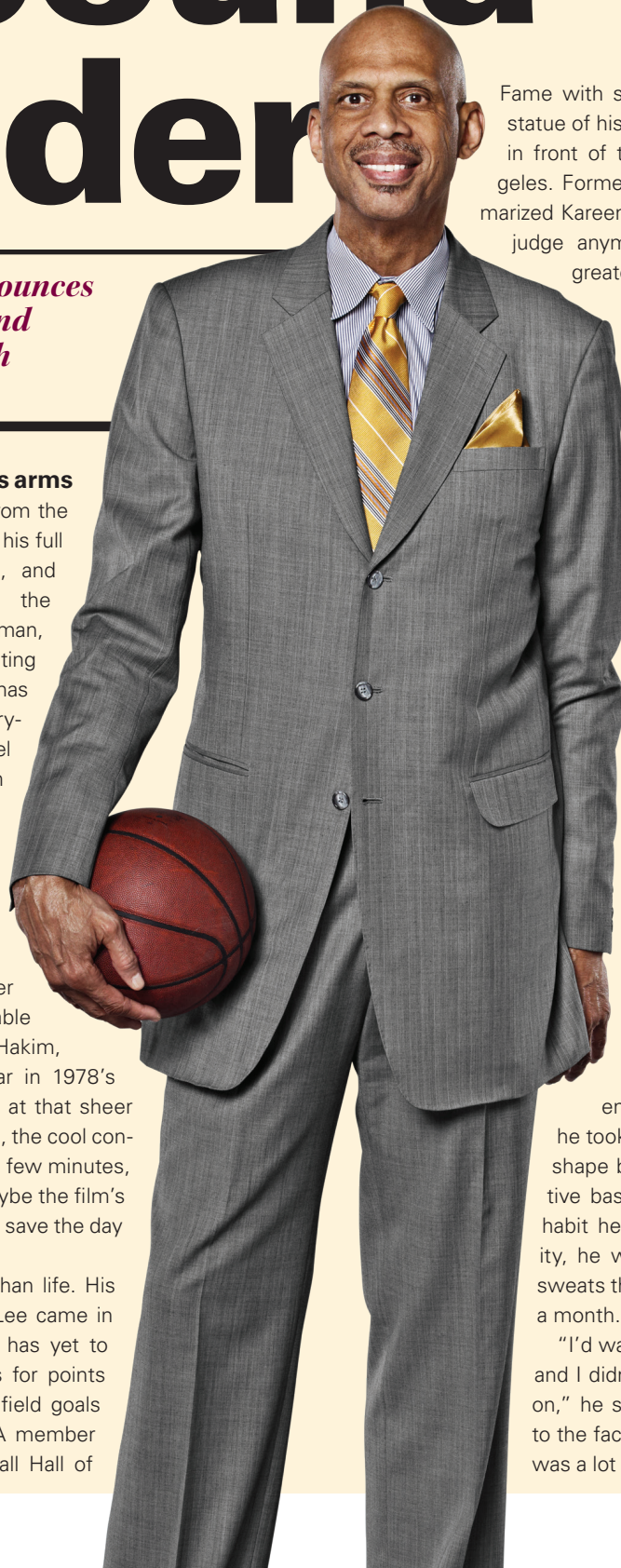
Rebound Leader

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar bounces back from CML battle and works to help others with the disease

Hakim lowers his arms and slowly rises from the floor, extending to his full 7 feet, 2 inches, and calmly looks at the much smaller man, poised in a fighting stance before him. Billy-Lo, who has faked his death to find the people trying to kill him, has battled to this level of the pagoda to eliminate Hakim in whichever fighting style seems to be effective. Unfazed, Hakim stares down at his visitor through dark sunglasses, confident and relaxed. “You little runt. What do you think you’re trying to prove?”

Of course, Bruce Lee’s character would soon overcome the sizeable odds and beat down the imposing Hakim, embodied by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in 1978’s “The Game of Death.” But looking at that sheer volume of space absorbed by Hakim, the cool confidence of a seasoned athlete? For a few minutes, the fight doesn’t seem fair—like maybe the film’s famous star and protagonist doesn’t save the day after all.

Kareem is used to being larger than life. His study of martial arts under Bruce Lee came in the middle of an NBA career that has yet to see its equal, setting NBA records for points (38,387), minutes (57,446), career field goals (15,837) and All-Star honors (19). A member of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of



Fame with six NBA championship rings, a statue of his likeness was recently unveiled in front of the Staples Center in Los Angeles. Former Lakers coach Pat Riley summarized Kareem’s 20-year NBA career: “Why judge anymore? Let’s toast him as the greatest player ever.”

Now long retired from basketball, and 30 years after Billy-Lo, the next “runt” in Kareem’s path came at the cellular level: Philadelphia chromosome-positive chronic myeloid leukemia (CML), diagnosed in 2008.

“My reaction was that I was in a fight for my life,” he said. “I kind of saw it as a challenge to my existence.”

It wasn’t his first run-in with cancer. Kareem carries the genetic risk for colorectal cancer and watched as it claimed the lives of both his grandfather and uncle. His father nearly died himself from the disease, which eventually took a large section of his intestine. Kareem was briefly involved with a colorectal cancer educational campaign from 2006 to 2007 to help raise awareness of the risk.

So when he began experiencing symptoms of his CML, he took notice. Always in tremendous shape between a lifetime of competitive basketball and an advanced yoga habit he credits for his career longevity, he was perplexed about the night sweats that occurred two to three times a month.

“I’d wake up and just be soaking wet, and I didn’t understand what was going on,” he said. “I initially just attributed it to the fact that I was getting older, but it was a lot more serious than that.”

Kareem’s doctor ordered some blood work, which showed a sky-high white blood cell count. That was the first indication, he said, that something was awry.

“I figured I wasn’t a candidate for anything that would be life-threatening,” he said. “It took me entirely by surprise, and it was a very frightening moment to have somebody tell you that you probably have leukemia.”

His first call was to his son – in medical school at the time – who deciphered the medical jargon and assured him that leukemia isn’t always life-threatening, that many drugs have been developed in the past decade that are quite effective for many people.

The first drug Kareem tried proved useful at first, in spite of side effects such as severe hand cramping and fatigue. But after the drug’s effectiveness began to level off, Kareem switched to nilotinib (Tasigna), which not only helped Kareem achieve the molecular response he was looking for but also eliminate any life intruding side effects.

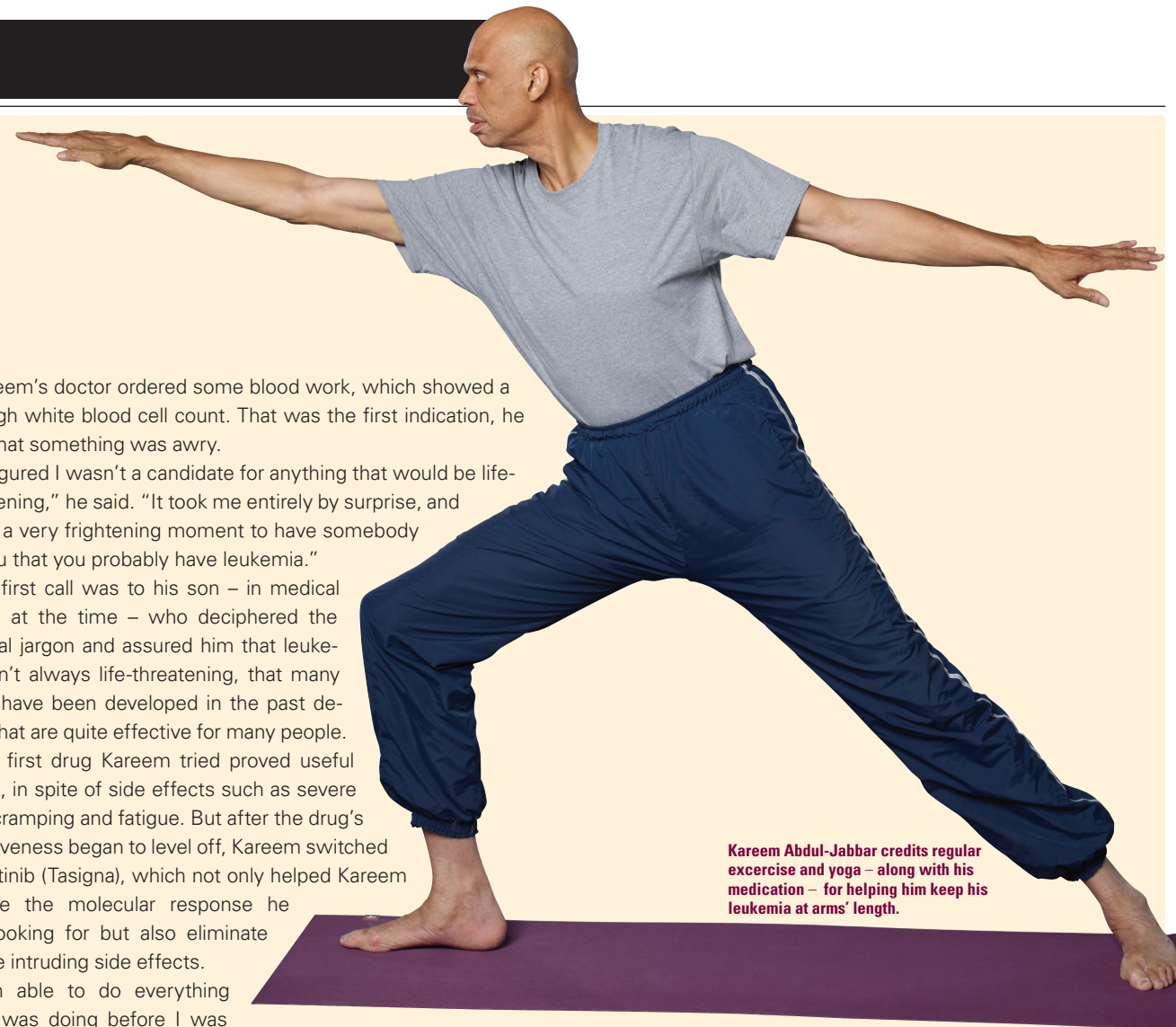
“I’m able to do everything that I was doing before I was diagnosed,” he said.

With his leukemia under the control of his medication, Kareem has focused on several new ventures, including filmmaking – the documentary “On the Shoulder of Giants” was released in 2011 – as well as writing. In addition to an autobiography and memoir, he recently published a children’s book about the history of African-American inventors and is planning a trilogy of books for kids learning about basketball and life. The first installment – called “Sasquatch in the Paint” and loosely based on his life – hit bookshelves September 2013.

His advocacy efforts have also reached across borders. Named a cultural ambassador for the United States in 2012, he’s traveled to Brazil in a partnership with that country to upgrade its educational system, particularly in the areas of science and math.

Among the many responsibilities involved with these creative efforts, he’s also in the middle of a nationwide educational campaign, appearing at summits across the country, meeting with CML patients in various stages of their cancer journeys.

“I’ve found that I’ve been able to do a lot of good just sharing my story with people and letting them know that they’re not alone and that they have the opportunity to treat this disease,” he said. “So many people think that once they’re diagnosed, that’s it, and it’s just going to be a slow descent into a bad end, and it doesn’t have to be that way.”



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar credits regular exercise and yoga – along with his medication – for helping him keep his leukemia at arms’ length.

So while his schedule stays full – he hopes to eventually get back into his piano practice if he’s ever home long enough – Kareem remains ever grateful for the advances that have led to his successful treatment and the opportunity to share his story with others.

“Using my celebrity just to raise awareness really helps because research is the key to the ongoing elimination of threats like this,” he said. “So every time we figure out a way to treat a different aspect of the various blood cancers, we’re saving lives and making it possible for further discoveries. So all of these things work together to make for progress, and there’s been great progress in the past 10 to 12 years.”

Kareem and his doctors now simply keep a close eye on his blood levels with checkups and blood work appointments every 90 days. He also stresses the importance of a healthy lifestyle – exercise, plenty of sleep, good nutrition – especially when you’re battling cancer. That combination, along with his treatment plan, allows him to keep the enemy in front of him at arms’ length.

“I kind of relied on my martial arts training,” he said. “Sometimes you have to eliminate everything except the thing you have to defeat, or it’s going to get you.” ■