

IRON WILL

BY PAIGE ALLEN

An avid endurance athlete, Brian Kozera knows how to work toward demanding goals step by grueling step. This quality brought him through a very difficult period to a triumph only a small number of people have achieved.

In the spring of 2014 Kozera, a police officer and father of three, suffered a hernia while training for a triathlon. During repair surgery at a local hospital, the surgeon discovered a cancerous node, but it was difficult to identify.

Unsure of his next step, he turned to his father, Richard Kozera, a noted physician who at the time was Executive Associate Dean at the Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University. He sent his son to Fox Chase Cancer Center.

The diagnosis compounded a rough patch for the family, as Kozera and his wife, Kristin, had recently learned that their newborn daughter, the couple's third, was born with an extremely rare genetic abnormality and would have lifelong special needs.

"We were just getting pummeled," he said. "It was all so overwhelming."

Under the care of Richard I. Fisher, president and CEO of Fox Chase, Kozera learned he had one of the rarest forms of lymphatic cancer, lymphocyte deficient Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was in stage IV, as it had spread to his abdomen, hip, chest, and spine.

"I was 36, in great shape, and

had a healthy lifestyle," Kozera said. "Having cancer didn't seem even remotely possible."

Although he was confident with Fisher's treatment plan, there was no relief from bad news. During his months of intensive chemotherapy, his father died unexpectedly. Shortly after, the beloved family dog succumbed to an illness.

Good news finally came in April 2015, when Kozera was declared to be in remission after 20

Ironman — swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112 miles, and then running a marathon — helped channel Kozera's motivation and keep his focus on recovery. Although he was hospitalized for 24 days, he never stopped training.

"I drove the nurses crazy by constantly walking around the ward or exercising in my room," he said. "Nurses would frequently find me on the floor resting after a yoga session or workout."

"It was great to have that goal to work for, to push for," he said. "Everyone was behind me. I know I beat cancer because I stayed positive, had tremendous support, and and something to train for — Ironman Austria."

— BRIAN KOZERA, CANCER SURVIVOR

rounds of chemotherapy. But his doctors believed they could also prevent a recurrence. Under the care of Patricia Kropf and Stefan Barta, from the Fox Chase-Temple University Hospital Bone Marrow Transplant Program, Kozera underwent an autologous bone marrow transplant on May 4, 2015.

Just after the transplant, Kozera's friend Jon made him a deal: when he beat cancer, they would finish another 140.6-mile Ironman together. So they registered for Ironman Austria. The goal of completing another

While training, he had to come to terms with the fact his post-cancer body was not as fast or strong as it once was. Six months after his transplant, Kozera completed the Philadelphia Marathon in a goal time of 4 hours and 30 minutes.

"I struggled with running out of gas during what were once simple efforts," he said. "Still I realized that I was lucky to be alive and in the shape I was in."

In April 2016, he and Jon traveled south and finished a grueling Ironman 70.3 on an unusually gusty day in New



Brian Kozera

Orleans. Training was tougher than expected, so Kozera repeated the two simple words that were his mantra throughout his cancer experience: Persevere, Prevail.

“I know I beat cancer because I stayed positive, had tremendous support, and something to train for - Ironman Austria” he said.

On June 26, 2016, just 418 days after the bone marrow transplant, the Kozera family, along with Jon and his family, were in Austria’s Ironman Village. After chemotherapy, a bone marrow transplant, and more than 14 months of intense training, he

and Jon stood together lakeside when the cannon sounded.

They swam through the clear turquoise waters of Lake Wörthersee, rode through the picturesque mountains, and ran through the cobblestone-lined villages, which left Kozera feeling overwhelmed with emotion. For 13 hours, 2 minutes, and 7 seconds, he gave the scenic course everything he had.

“As Jon and I crossed the finish line with spectators cheering us on, I heard ‘Brian Kozera, you are an Ironman!’” he said. “These words had echoed in my dreams.”

Kozera later returned to Fox Chase and donated his Ironman and Philadelphia Marathon medals. They hang next to his room, with pictures of his family and BMT nurses. He wants patients who see the display to know that if they persevere, they will prevail.

Kozera has returned full time to police work, and most importantly, he is back to being an active father to Paige, Josie, and Avery.

“My three little girls need me,” he said. “I need them, too. I am blessed to have the chance to be here with them and thank Fox Chase for giving me that chance.”