

Heart Tumor Gone, Aspiring Olympian Anderson is on Track



Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times

Antisha Anderson, a four-time national youth heptathlon champion, is recovering from minimally invasive procedure to remove tumor. She feels blessed to be training again so soon.

The last time Antisha Anderson was in this third-floor operating room at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, she was groggy from anesthesia and puzzled by the big, round lights shining down on her.

"They looked like alien eyes," she said, laughing. Anderson, a four-time national youth heptathlon champion and aspiring Olympian, was in that surgical suite Nov. 28 to undergo a rare heart procedure. Returning recently for a visit she was greeted like a friend, not merely a statistical success.

Daniel Bethencourt, the surgeon who removed a myxoma, or tumor, from the upper-right chamber of her heart, said he was thrilled but not surprised by her rapid recovery. "She was the best-conditioned patient we'd seen in a long time," he said, still impressed. Nurses who knew what she endured hugged her and marveled at her lightness of step and spirit. But Anderson became solemn when told the purpose of a machine that dominates the room with its spidery arms and cables that tether it to a console on the opposite wall.

Called the daVinci Surgical System, it was used by Bethencourt to excise the tumor that was attached to her tricuspid valve and led her to faint while training in Carson with the VS Athletics Track Club. Bethencourt estimated there are 10 such systems performing heart surgery in Southern California.

She stared silently at this miracle of steel and human ingenuity. "God is good," she said softly. "It's a whole new life. I can run and I don't have to worry about blacking out or falling down."

Even five years ago, doctors would have had to split her sternum to reach her heart. The trauma would have forced her to wait six weeks to use her arms and three months to attempt any activity. Instead, small incisions were made on her side, neck and groin to insert miniaturized instruments and a high-definition, 3-D camera. Bethencourt, seated at the console, viewed the images and directed the instruments with hand and foot movements. Four hours afterward, Anderson was kicking her legs. "People were saying, 'Did you even have surgery?' " she said. "I guess I was dreaming about running."

Two days later she went home to Little Rock, Ark., where she spent three impatient weeks in bed. Within two months she was cleared to resume training. "It's such a blessing," she said. "I feel like God gave me this opportunity to tell my story: Hey, I had heart surgery and I'm still training for the Olympics, so I think that's a blessing in itself."

Before she can compete in Beijing, she must qualify for the U.S. Olympic trials in late June in Eugene, Ore. That won't be easy. Anderson, 24, has missed enough training that her coach, Cedric Hill, estimates she has a 50-50 chance of qualifying to compete in the heptathlon. Instead of preparing for the seven-event discipline, she will try to qualify in her best events -- the 400-meter hurdles, javelin and high jump.

She plans to resume competing Wednesday and has two months to meet the time and distance standards. "We're rolling the dice a little bit," Hill said. No matter what number comes up, her courage and spirit define her as a winner. "I believe what she is doing will change the lives of her children and grandchildren beyond what happens for her in the short term," Hill said.

Anderson, the daughter of former NFL running back Gary Anderson, learned about her tumor when she was a college freshman. It was the size of a pea, not big enough to remove but enough to keep her from trying for the 2004 Olympic team. "They told me it was harmless, it was benign, so it would be best to leave it where it's at," she said. "So for the next six years I was just competing and practicing like nothing. There were times when I'd breathe really hard, but it wasn't really major."

Invited by Hill to train with the VS club, she moved to Los Angeles in October and moved in with a cousin. For a few weeks, all was wonderful. "Then at practice in November, I ended up blacking out, and I ended up getting rushed to the hospital here," she said.

The tumor was the size of a quarter. Doctors said it could grow to the size of a softball or break off and clog her lungs. Her mother, Ollie, had been deeply shaken when Antisha's tumor was first discovered. "This was more terrifying," said Ollie, who had lost a 10-month-old daughter many years ago and wasn't about to bury another child. "I'm totally, totally relieved now that it's all done. The first thing I'm thankful for is that she's finished with that tumor. The second is that she was able to pick up her training. Her spirit is better. She carried a burden and knew it was always there. It was such a relief."

It took Anderson a while to save the money to return to Carson, but the cost of a plane ticket couldn't kill the dream she has cherished since she was 10 and saw Jackie Joyner-Kersey compete. "She fought tooth and nail to get back here," Hill said. "I told her, 'If you're committed to getting back, I'll be committed to you.' "The big thing is if she can handle it mentally."

After all she has been through, that should be easy. "I just feel like if it's meant for you to do something, you're going to do it," she said. "I always had the mentality that I'm going back to the track, and I ended up being back at the track."

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