

SPOTLIGHT...

Youngster overcomes ovarian cancer to win bronze medal — then calls it a career

By **EAMONN MAHER**
Staff Writer

Two years ago, Maya da Silva was considered one of the top athletes at her school, an elite-level gymnast who also anchored St. Catherine of Alexandria's girls' track & field relay team.

Then one morning, at a pre-school track practice, the 11-year-old felt a sharp pain in her stomach area. It soon subsided, only to return the next morning as she trained with her relay teammates.

This time, however, the pain was excruciating, causing her to curl up in the fetal position. Rushed to hospital, the diagnosis didn't come quickly; a twisted bowel, doctors first thought. Perhaps she needed her appendix taken out.

Eventually, a grapefruit-sized malignant tumour was removed, requiring two major surgeries. A rare form of non-hereditary ovarian cancer had struck her down like a lightning bolt, leaving her hospital and house-ridden for weeks. An ovary and Fallopian tube also had to be removed, although she should still be able to have children.

Chemotherapy sessions would follow, sapping her strength and causing her hair to fall out.

"I think it was because I was doing gymnastics and running that they actually found (the tumour)," said Maya.

"(The doctors) think that because she was so active, it caused the tumour to shift because it was so heavy and it blocked circulation of the blood flow," added mother Paula. "That caused the pain that gave an alert to us about what it actually was. Thank goodness, or it may have gone undetected a lot longer."

It would be a long road to recovery, however, for da Silva. She was sick for weeks, had difficulty sleeping and couldn't even leave the house for fear of exposing her weakened immune system. Her hair fell out and although she returned to school in September of 2011, begging to return to meet her new teacher and for EQAO testing, she wore a wig and a hat as not to draw attention to herself because most people in the school didn't know what had transpired.

Some of her classmates asked the home room teacher

why they couldn't wear hats too, so Claudia DeFazio said that they all could don a cap if they wished. But Maya wanted to keep her illness secret and at times struggled with her plight, wondering why she'd been singled out by this disease.

"Maya had some emotional problems in her Grade 7 year, especially with her hair," said Paula, a vice-principal at a school in Brampton. Dad Paul is a teacher as well and the couple has two younger children.

"She made a transition from a wig to headband to short hair. It was so hard for me to see her go through that because she didn't want anyone to know she was sick."

Maya found comfort in her visits to Camp Oochigeas in Muskoka, where she could share her thoughts with fellow recovering cancer patients, making fast friends with a girl from Ajax named Stephanie Leighton, who'd had Hodgkin's lymphoma.

After Maya and her family went on a Disney World cruise in March 2012, courtesy of the Children's Wish Foundation, da Silva and Leighton were so impressed by their trips that they held a bottle drive that raised \$2,400 for CWF so that another cancer survivor could go on one too.

Not long after the cruise, da Silva could barely perform a bridge, a basic gymnastics movement she'd been able to do before without even thinking about it. She returned to the gym after months of physiotherapy in order to get into

on Maya da Silva

better shape, with no thoughts of ever competing again.

At her pre-cancer physical peak, da Silva trained 25 hours a week, but after returning to the sport, was down to a couple of weekly sessions. Previously a Level 7 competi-

tor, she dropped to Level 6. (Skill levels for Gymnastics Ontario run from 5-9).

But her flexibility improved. She won the first competition in the provincial series in Burlington and Paula noticed that she and Maya's coach, Jennifer D'Alton of Futures Gymnastics gym in Mississauga, weren't the only adults in the gym in tears.

"At first, when I was learning my bridge all over again, it was really frustrating. And then I got everything back," Maya recalled. "My coach asked me if I wanted to do Level 7, but I didn't think I was ready. I was still really nervous."

She also won her next Level 6 provincial qualifier for 13-year-olds at Futures, and while Maya's confidence was building, Paula said nobody thought she'd be in contention for a podium appearance at the Gymnastics Ontario championships in Windsor last month.

Yet, in a field of 27 competitors, da Silva earned a bronze medal thanks to superb third-place routines in the vault and bars, two of the four disciplines.

"It surprised me because I'd never done that well at provincials before," she added. "I didn't think I could ever do my best again, then at provincials, I got my best scores of the year."

So now that she's healthy again, her hair now curly when before cancer it was straight, da Silva is retiring from gymnastics. She explains that after taking it up as a toddler, training to be a national-level gymnast like some of her friends would be too stressful and time-consuming.

"I want to try dance and I really want to learn how to play the guitar. Maybe I'll do soccer in the summer if it's not too late," said da Silva, who is set to begin high school at Christ the King in September.

"Because I've been doing gymnastics since I was two, I never knew how the other sports worked, so I wanted to try something new. (My recovery) has just made me realize that the smallest things are really good things."



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