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# One-time Maverick faces cancer with 'attaboy' spirit he showed on court

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By **Jaime Aron, AP Sports Writer**

DALLAS — Sitting courtside with Mavericks owner Mark Cuban in New Jersey, Ray Johnston watches his buddies play and tries getting lost in the action.

He can't do it. Instead, Johnston imagines the ball back in his hands, spotting Josh Howard, throwing a lob for a dunk and getting a nod of appreciation.

Oh, how he loved those "attaboy" moments.

Johnston never lets the memories linger for long. It's been a couple years and way too many doses of arsenic and chemotherapy since everything happened, all of it so fast:

The scout at the Hoop-it-Up tournament. The tryout. Going from a 25-year-old loan officer with season tickets to having Steve Nash's locker, a No. 2 jersey and being teammates with Howard and Devin Harris on the Mavericks' summer league team.

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Then a bump in a pickup game led to surgery - and a coma. All because of the leukemia no one knew he had.

Two brushes with death later, he awoke with a tube coming out of his neck and seven toes blackened by poor circulation, soon to be amputated. Eighteen months after his cancer was gone, Dallas was playing Miami in the NBA finals and Johnston was facing cancer again. The Mavs lost; Johnston won.

Now it's late on Dec. 5, 2006. The Mavericks have beaten the Nets and are settling in for the flight home. Johnston heads toward his seat, practically giving out high-fives and slaps on the back.

"Good win, man, good win," he says in his Southern drawl.

He passes poker foe Jason Terry, text-messaging pal Dirk Nowitzki and all the coaches. Then he plops his 6-foot-2, 165-pound body into a comfy black leather chair.

That's when he feels it again. That pain in his tailbone that should've been gone by now.

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Johnston grew up in Montgomery, Ala., getting into basketball by shooting free throws in his driveway when he was 4. By fifth grade, he was picked first in games with 40-year-olds at the YMCA. In eighth grade, he made the high school varsity.

Before his senior year, Johnston went to the same all-star camp as Stephon Marbury. Knowing he was no NBA prodigy, Johnston went home with the award for being the hardest worker.

"I was a pass-first point guard with an inconsistent shot," he said. "I was a guy that always went after loose balls. I might not get it, but I'd be on the floor and leave a sweat stain."

The work ethic, along with a devotion to faith and family, came from his parents, who divorced when he was 2 but shared in his upbringing.

His mom, Martha, sometimes had several jobs at once, including a long stint leading Auburn athletes in aerobics. Ray often tagged along, especially Sundays after football games; that's how he got to know Bo Jackson.

Ray Sr., a Vietnam vet, sold insurance and raised cattle. He taught his boy how Johnston men handle tough times and how to treat people right. Strangers were a handshake from being friends. Humility and happiness came naturally. That's why he was always smiling, even on the court.

"We had friends who didn't even have children in the game who would come to watch him," Ray Sr. said.

Small colleges were interested, but Johnston wanted to play in the Southeastern Conference. So he walked on at Alabama for two seasons. He graduated in 2001, then moved to Dallas.

Within a few years, he'd built a life to be envied.

He was dating Miss Texas, working in the mortgage business and was the model on a life-sized cardboard cutout in every FedEx Kinko's store in the country. He also had gigs playing guitar and singing tunes by Dave Matthews and Pat Green.

And there was basketball - leagues at night, weekend tournaments anywhere within a five-hour drive and pickup games from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. nearly every day.

Michael Irvin and Deion Sanders were impressed enough to hand him an agent's business card.

"It's probably a boring thing to hear," Johnston said, "but practice paid off."

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The 2004 Hoop-it-Up tournament was held right outside the Mavericks' arena. Cuban gave it an "American Idol" flair by sending scouts to look for 20 candidates to battle for spots on Dallas' summer league squad.

Once he made that cut, Johnston taught the others plays he knew the Mavericks used. They listened because he was setting them up for shots. Mavs president Donnie Nelson noticed that no matter what combination of players Johnston was with, his teams always won.

When the few who made it moved into the locker room, Johnston settled in under Nash's nameplate. Then Nash showed up to clean out his locker. He'd just agreed to sign with Phoenix.

"Sorry, I'm in your way," Johnston said.

"You're fine," Nash said, smiling and shaking his hand.

Playing behind two draft picks, Johnston's per-minute averages were decent, but he didn't get many minutes.

Still, everyone hated to see him go when the summer league ended. Nelson even offered to find him a roster spot in Lithuania or Croatia.

Johnston had six weeks to decide. Meanwhile, he kept playing pickup ball.



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During a lunchtime game in late August, he got hit on the right shin. It was barely more than a tap, but it kept hurting, then swelling. The next morning, he went to Mavericks orthopedist T.O. Souryal for a surgical procedure that took only 20 minutes.

"You're good," Souryal said in the recovery room. "Keep in touch."

Hours later, a nurse frantically called Souryal. The area below Johnston's right knee was filling like a balloon, only with blood. He was rushed to Presbyterian Hospital, where specialists spent days trying to figure out what was wrong with a 25-year-old athlete whose medical history was one line long: a hernia when he was 8.

With no diagnosis, Johnston's mind raced. Friends came to the ICU to keep him occupied, like the night of Sept. 1, when a game of spades turned into Texas Hold 'Em.

The next thing Johnston knew, it was November. The Boston Red Sox had won the World Series, and President Bush had just been re-elected.

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Johnston awoke to a bright room with get-well cards dangling from the ceiling.

Colored posterboards held hundreds of encouraging e-mails. A guestbook was filled with names and prayers. It was as if all the attaboys he'd ever given had come back to him.

His mom was behind the decorations - and the mood.

When a doctor said there was a 1-in-whatever chance he'd make it, she shot back, "You just may be looking at the one."

During the coma, Johnston had to be shocked back to life. Twice. His lungs collapsed, five days apart, with an irregular heartbeat in between. His kidneys failed. Twice. Blood clots in his brain led to seizures.

The culprit: acute promyelocytic leukemia, which the American Cancer Society says accounts for about 3 percent of leukemia cases.

The cancer was declared in remission about two weeks after Johnston came out of the coma.

It wouldn't last.

By the spring of 2006, Johnston was worried when he was playing football and the 40-yard spirals he usually threw went only 4 yards. Dozens of excruciating arsenic treatments later, he was a two-time cancer survivor.

The early December road trip with the Mavericks was somewhat of a celebration, but the joy was short-lived. All because of that aching tailbone.

He was hospitalized again in late December. Using arsenic, chemotherapy and radiation - the medical equivalent of a triple-coverage defense - cancer was again pummeled into remission by early February 2007. He received a bone-marrow transplant on Feb. 28, a few weeks after turning 28.

The next step was waiting to see if his body would allow a new immune system to take over.

If he could make it to 100 days, his chances of surviving would soar.

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Johnston went through all three rounds of cancer with a strong support system.

Mom moved in. Dad flew in plenty. And there were lots of prayers from family in Alabama and friends in Dallas.

There also was his Dallas family. The Mavericks.

Souryal, the team doctor, visited nearly every day of Johnston's first 132-day hospital stay. They became so close that Johnston and his mom later spent a few nights at Souryal's house. The doctor eventually announced the friendship was too strong for Johnston to be his patient. Then he realized Johnston's case was so far beyond the realm of an orthopedist that it didn't matter.

Nelson visited whenever he could, called when he couldn't. He was a constant source of advice, encouragement and swag, bringing everything from a Mavs cap to John Mellencamp's manager.

"It's hard not to fall in love with people like him," Nelson said. "He has this infectious love of life, a winning attitude and a competitive spirit. It's what makes him a guy that can overcome all odds to make the Mavs and then become a miracle man conquering death."

Cuban actually knew Johnston the longest, having played against him on the pickup-ball circuit.

Now their bond is so strong that when Cuban said he'd considered selling the Mavericks after losing to Miami in the finals, but didn't in part because of people whose lives are impacted by the team and the impact those folks have on him, Johnston thought, "He's talking about me."

"He was one of them, absolutely," Cuban said. "The Mavericks are more than just me or Dirk or our win-loss record. It's a community trust. You recognize that there's more to a team than just the organization itself, and Ray embodies that across the board."

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These days, Johnston hardly resembles the guy in the Kinko's cutout.

Having bottomed out at 120 pounds, he's up to 145. Still, he's bald, bony and often in pain, sometimes sitting on a "booty pad" or propping up his right leg, the one that still has three toes.

But something hasn't changed from his modeling days - the smile. It's always there, the doorway to a charismatic personality that still turns strangers into friends, from greeting volunteers at the hospital to offering a high-five to a crying kid at a restaurant.

That attitude can be traced to his strong faith, and his favorite scripture: "A cheerful heart is good medicine, a downcast spirit dries the bones."

The first setback was so devastating he needed six months of recovery and rehab. Then he started traveling, dated another Miss Texas and got a commercial real-estate degree. He wound up working for the Heroes Foundation, an organization that promoted baseball to at-risk youths and wanted to get into basketball.

The second time cancer invaded, Johnston was so determined not to break stride that he flew to Las Vegas to coach his Heroes team the day he left the hospital. He later rounded up some relatives and got picked to be on "Family Feud," although their visit was postponed when Johnston went back in the hospital.

The third comeback hit high gear when oncologist Robert Collins declared Johnston's recovery among the best he's seen for a recipient of a bone marrow transplant. Then Johnston asked his survival chances if cancer returned.

"Not good," the doctor said.

"Great!" Johnston replied. And he meant it. If this new immune system didn't work, there would be "no more pokes."

"There are only so many Ws you can get in life," he said.

This isn't giving up. It's starting a fast break toward the rest of his life, free from worry.

He picked up his favorite acoustic guitar and started rubbing calluses back into his fingertips. He took a date to a Mavericks playoff game.

Soon after, he went to Nowitzki's MVP coronation. They shared laughs and a hug in the locker room before the

ceremony, Johnston retelling his story of moving into Nash's locker a few hours before Nash moved out.

"Ray is definitely one of the toughest guys I've ever met," Nowitzki said. "He's just a great guy."

Johnston knows he can't fulfill many of the dreams he once had, so he's come up with new ones, such as making it to "Family Feud" and doing more with Heroes.

His main goal is becoming a motivational speaker. After all, that's what a point guard is supposed to do - make everyone around him better.

"I had a nice little run 'til I was 25, then I had three years that were pretty up and down," Johnston said. "For people to see that I've gone through all this and I can still be upbeat, maybe that will push them to do something in their life that they wouldn't have done before."

Johnston still hopes to marry and have two boys, one in the NBA and one on the PGA Tour. Another dream is having the Dave Matthews Band mark the five-year anniversary of his transplant with a concert in his honor. At the Mavericks' arena, of course.

The odds of that happening are a lot better than a college walk-on making an NBA summer league team after being spotted at Hoop-it-Up.

To start, he hit the 100-day milestone a week ago Friday.

Attaboy, Ray. Attaboy.

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On the Web: [www.ray-johnston.com](http://www.ray-johnston.com)

*The Associated Press*

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