

## Let The Games Begin...

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Tomorrow, I am off to Madison, need to double-check I have all my gear – so much more to pack than when I used to only run marathons. Conna (my donor) and I are very excited to be attending – we will be arriving complete with cowbells to cheer on everyone...it is Wisconsin after all!

Two Sunday's ago, I met up with my SoCal team to pick up my uniform and get the low-down on the games. I believe in total we have ~ 80 team members, and ~ 30 attended the meeting. It was great to meet all these people who have been to multiple games. Most of the recipients were kidney, along with a couple liver and one heart transplant. Some people struck me in particular – the heart transplant athlete is a 19 year woman who received her heart as a toddler from an infant. This is the 6<sup>th</sup> year she has competed. The most recent recipient is a liver 7 months ago. He's an ex-NFL, 2 time Olympian - we joked we had a ringer except his surgery was too new! It was validating for me to hear the kidney recipients say they were on year 10, 15, 20, 25 – those stories give me a lot of hope.

While funds that are raised for the games help cover some of the team costs, a majority goes to sponsoring a deceased donor family to attend the games. The mother of the family our team is sponsoring was at our meeting. She shared how she lost her 18 year old son in 2002 due to a skateboarding accident, hanging on to the back of a car bumper which suddenly stopped. He was on life support for a week but they knew the first day he wouldn't make it and decided they wanted to donate everything -- organs, tissue, bone marrow, eyes, bone, skin. She has met 3 recipients so far and is trying to find others but understands a recipients' difficulty knowing someone died so they could live. While it has been hard, she loves the fact that her son lives on in multiple lives potentially around the world. She described it was the best decision their family made given the circumstances. Their family have heard of the games but could never afford to go so they are so excited to attend and share their experience and perspective.

The main advice they gave to us newbies going to the games – bring LOTS of tissue. The stories exchanged describe loss and love on a level most people cannot comprehend. Some of the more emotional events are transplant toddlers competing on the track or in a pool; recipients struggling to get across a finish line; a pavilion entirely filled with quilts – each patch representing a deceased donor; and the ceremonies honoring and celebrating living and deceased donors.

I won't be bringing my laptop due to too much other gear, but I will have a journal and will transcribe once I am back. No medal expectations for this year – just happy I'm recovered enough to participate. The competitive side of course thinks this is a great opportunity to check out my USA competition and set my sites on next years' World Games in Sweden!

I have a sense this is going to be a very emotional and life changing event for my donor Conna and I to attend and will become a must-do annual event going forward. Thanks to all for your support and encouragement whether it is in the form of comments, donations, and enabling the time away from work to demonstrate one can be athletic again post-transplant.