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## THE PURSUIT OF LIFE AND BASKETBALL

# **CHRIS TOMASSON**

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George Karl loves holding court with the media, something he does three times the day of a game.

Sometimes, when Karl knows he's going to be talking for a long time, he requests a chair to be brought so he can sit down. The Denver Nuggets coach then pontificates about basketball or anything else anybody wants to ask.

But there was a day in early 2006 when the usually loquacious Karl found himself tongue-tied. It was the day his son, Coby, called to say he had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

"I told him on the phone, and he was just silent," Coby recalled. "It was one of those things where you tell somebody bad news, and they just think about it. He didn't say anything for a couple of seconds. I explained it to him pretty well, about the treatment and everything about it.

"But the silence is the worse part. Because you don't know what to say. You don't know what he's thinking. You know that he's probably thinking the worst."

Karl was thinking the worst. The previous summer, Karl, then 54, had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. But he had successful surgery, and had a good attitude about his recovery.

Then came the bombshell. Coby, his father thought, was a very healthy 22-year-old. He was completing his junior season playing basketball for Boise State, and the dad was hopeful he would make the NBA.

But cancer? Karl scarcely could believe it.

"You're angry when your son gets hit with that," said Karl, who said he took the news about Coby's cancer harder than he did hearing about his own. "You just feel that you failed. I did something wrong, maybe. Maybe I should have given him better nutrition or whatever. What caused the cancer? There's a feeling of, 'Why don't you just give me the

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cancer and let him be free to play basketball."

But two years later, much of the frustration is gone. Karl says he is doing well, and so is Coby.

Coby underwent a first surgery in March 2006 to remove his thyroid and a second surgery in April 2007 to remove cancerous lymph nodes. But he has few complaints about his health these days.

Need some evidence?

Coby was a long shot to make the NBA, but there the rookie guard was with the Los Angeles Lakers on a brilliant June night, a member of a team playing in the NBA Finals against Boston. And there was his father, despite being three weeks removed from having his left hip replaced, having flown in to share the moment with his son.

It was the latest tender moment of several that have occurred this season between the two. On Jan. 21, Coby got in for the waning moments in a Lakers rout of the Nuggets, becoming just the third NBA player to go against his coaching father in a game.

On April 23, the Lakers had another rout of the Nuggets, this one in the playoffs. Coby once again got in during garbage time, and it became the first time a player had gone against his coaching father in an NBA postseason game.

Coby hasn't been active for any Finals games, and he doesn't expect to be. But he's on a team contending to win a championship, something that has eluded his father during his stellar 20-year coaching career.

The two rib each other plenty. Coby is fond of telling his dad that his coach, the legendary Phil Jackson, has a 9-0 lead in title rings.

But there is always love. And Karl said the two having cancer, in a strange way, has brought them closer together.

"April 2 was the one-year anniversary of his second cancer," Karl said. "And it was just amazing what he has been through. How far he has grown and the maturity that he has shown. I think he understands how much he's grown up in the two years that he's had cancer."

It surprises Coby that some consider him an inspiration. After all, as a rookie, he played in just 17 games for the Lakers, averaged a mere 1.8 points. But before he even made the team as an undrafted free agent with a partially guaranteed contract, a highly respected veteran was paying homage to his voyage.

Lakers guard Derek Fisher knows all about cancer. During last year's playoffs, Fisher, then with the Utah Jazz, took a much-publicized leave of absence to tend to his daughter,

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Tatum, then almost 10 months, who was battling a form of eye cancer.

When Coby showed up for training camp last fall, Fisher sought him out.

"The first time I met him, he said he was proud to just be a teammate with me, considering what I've gone through," Coby said. "It was awkward just to hear that because I have so much respect for him."

Fisher may be a 12-year veteran, but he has respect for the rookie.

"I just wanted to let him know, not just because of my daughter and family experience," Fisher said. "Even just as an athlete, you recognize how many battles you've been through and how hard you have to work to get to his point. Battling cancer, on top of everything, he is to be commended, and I wanted to let him know that's how I felt."

Coby, much more introverted than his father, shrugs off any perceived hero status.

"I try to downplay (the cancer) as much as I can," said Coby, who takes two pills every day to make up for not having a thyroid and who goes in for a blood test every six weeks. "In the world of cancer, the cancer I had, I wasn't too deathly ill. Especially talking to people who have had chemo and different forms of treatment that are way worse than what I had to go through. I just try to tell them they're even stronger than I am."

"It's a situation where it is cancer, and it's something that I probably will have to deal with the rest of my life, whether it's check ups or treatment. But it's one of those things where it's crazy to hear different stories from people (with cancer). What some other people have gone through and survived."

Coby does realize that, being an NBA player and the son of a famous coach puts him in a better position than most to make a difference. Due to playing basketball year round in an attempt to stick in the NBA, Coby doesn't have a lot of time. But he vows to help the fight against cancer when he can.

The father and son are planning to hold a charity golf outing this summer in Milwaukee, where Karl once coached the Bucks and where Coby played in high school, to benefit prostate cancer.

"Whatever fits into my schedule, I'm willing to do it," said Karl, who said he gives "tens of thousands of dollars" annually to cancer causes.

Last season, there became even more of a reason for Karl to be concerned about cancer. In January, one of his top players, burly Brazilian forward Nene, was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

"It was just an empty feeling," Karl said. "It was like, 'What the hell is going on? What kind of karma is it that we have to keep going through this again?' There's this energy in

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life and it keeps messing with you. But that makes you stronger. That makes you grow and you understand the importance of and value of life."

Like it is with the Karls, Nene's cancer is under control. He underwent surgery and, after missing 2 ½ months, made a triumphant late-season return to the Nuggets.

Nene said there were a lot of tears after he learned of his cancer. But, at the end of the season, he was asked if he considered what he had gone through a positive or a negative.

"It's a positive," said Nene, 25, flashing his trademark smile. "I know somebody in my position, they're not going to do what I did (coming back to play in the same season). I'm sure about that. God gave me this opportunity to come back and I came back. I know I can sleep and say I did my best."

George Karl also looks for the positive with his situation. But he sure didn't feel that way after being diagnosed with cancer.

"It's something that makes you feel empty," Karl said. "It just knocks you out. You're in a state of mind where you're thinking about it every moment. I'm thinking what's going to happen. What am I supposed to do?"

With his cancer surgery three years behind him, one thing Karl rarely has done is turn down a request to discuss cancer.

"About ten times a month, somebody will come up to me and talk to me about cancer," Karl said. "It's pretty common with me having prostate cancer and Coby having the cancer. Standing up (to) cancer comes in a lot of different packages. I think we're all concerned. We all want to help be part of the solution."

Now, Karl is hoping the federal government will be more a part of it. For the past several years, Karl has been advocating the government step up its efforts to fight cancer.

"Cancer has been federally funded, but it's at a very minimal level compared to the amount of money that is spend on cancer and the treatment of cancer," Karl said. "It just seems like the ledger is out of balance. My feeling is that the government should have a national campaign to fight cancer. Maybe a ten-year campaign to find cures and to research and to attack all cancers."

In the meantime, Karl said the successful battles he, Coby and Nene have fought against cancer only can help get the word out about tackling the disease.

"We can show that we have a good attitude, and we show people that we're kicking cancer in the butt," Karl said.

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Karl has been doing that. Since his diagnosis, he has led the Nuggets to three more playoff berths to make it five in a row, four of them with Karl at the helm. Although they were ousted 4-0 in the first round by the Lakers, the Nuggets are coming off a 50-32 record, the team's best in 20 years.

While he was bothered by a groin strain late in the season, Nene did bounce back to play in seven late-season and playoff games, and showed flashes of his old self in several of them. When he first checked into a game after his return from cancer, he got a memorable standing ovation.

Then there's Coby, who bucked the odds to earn a spot on one of the NBA's best teams. Coby spent part of the season playing for the Los Angeles D-Fenders in the NBA Development League, averaging an impressive 17.5 points in 17 games.

And there he has been in the Finals, his first appearance at one since he was a 13-year-old ball boy for his dad's Seattle SuperSonics in 1996 against the mighty Chicago Bulls.

"I was thinking about it the other day that 14 months ago I was under the knife," Coby said of his second cancer surgery. "I don't feel (like an inspiration), but hopefully I am to some people because we all do think my story is unique. The cancer is part of it, but it's not the whole story. It just shows that a lot of hard work and perseverance is necessary. Everything doesn't always go your way. There were a lot of roadblocks in my way... But, if you really want something, you've got to stay focused on it."

Coby recalled the silence of two years earlier when he called to tell his father about his cancer. But, speaking at the NBA Finals, he couldn't help but mention the "crowd was so loud that I got goosebumps."

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**Chris Tomasson** of the [Rocky Mountain News](#) has covered the Denver Nuggets since 2002, and before that covered the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Akron Beacon Journal for five seasons. Tomasson, a 1985 graduate of Northwestern University, has had cancer in his family. His father died of leukemia in 2001 and his mother has had breast cancer and skin cancer, but is now doing very well.