

Opponents have always
 quailed before Martina
 Navratilova. The moment

the tall, formidably talented tennis player stepped onto the court, she was a woman in total control. Her record 167 singles and 178 doubles titles, including nine Wimbledon wins, are testimony of an intensely focused, determined individual who faced countless opponents with the confidence of a woman born to win.

Until nine months ago when the one enemy all women fear came knocking at her door. "I sat down and cried a little," she admits of her breast cancer diagnosis. "I was devastated." And then, that old winner's attitude kicked right back in. "I talked to the doctor, who is also my best friend, and asked what our plan of attack will be. We went into 'solution mode.'"

Diagnosed with early stage ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS, see box) a lumpectomy and radiation was the recommended form of treatment, rather than the more invasive chemotherapy.

The spirit of a champion

MONEY AND FAME
 AFFORD NO PROTECTION
 AGAINST BREAST CANCER;
 BUT THE RIGHT ATTITUDE
 AND KEEPING ACTIVE
 CAN MAKE ALL THE
 DIFFERENCE, SAYS FORMER
 WIMBLEDON TENNIS ACE
MARTINA NAVRATILOVA
 IN THIS EXCLUSIVE
 INTERVIEW WITH
SHAPE SOUTH AFRICA

PHOTOGRAPHY XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Martina's rules for living



1 Exercise, even if you are recovering from a terminal illness. “I feel happier when I am active.” Breast cancer surgeon and *Shape* advisory board member Dr Carol-Ann Benn says there is scientific support for the role of exercise in combating breast cancer: “Physical activity may well lower a woman’s cumulative exposure to oestrogen and progesterone, and thereby inhibit cancer of the breast,” she says. And Deshun swears by its mental health benefits: “Keeping your body active does something amazing to your mind and gives you the ability to think clearly.”

2 Drink lots of water. “Your body needs to be flushed of all toxins, especially when you are undergoing something like chemo or radiation,” says Martina.

3 Be with people you love who are positive. “Surround yourself with positive people. If you are around negative people who complain all the time you need to stay away from that,” Martina says. “It will help you to change how you feel about the stumbling blocks in life—whether it’s fighting to keep your business afloat or fighting cancer.”

WHAT IS DCIS?

Ductal carcinoma in situ is sometimes called pre-invasive or non-invasive breast cancer. It is a form of the disease in which the cells inside some of the milk ducts have started to turn into cancer cells. Because they are inside the ducts there is little chance they can spread to the rest of the breast tissue or elsewhere in the body. However, if not treated, over time it may become invasive.

“It took about a week to recover as it was such a shock to the system. I started to play tennis but I had to rest almost every five minutes, as I was so emotionally and physically exhausted.”

But she didn’t wallow in self-pity for long. “Then I realised other patients were undergoing chemotherapy and losing their hair. They had it much worse [than me] and were wearing wigs. I now wake up with a smile on my face and do my best every day. It changed my life. You pause and you appreciate everything around you.”

Martina is chatting to us on her hands-free phone while driving to her holiday home in Aspen – a resort famed for its ski slopes – in the United States. She’s in a cheerful mood, gushing over the scenery as she drives. “It’s summer here and it’s so beautiful. Everything is green, and it’s so gorgeous.”



Two months from now she’ll be facing another physical challenge, and she’s preparing for it by getting in plenty of cardio training, hikes, runs and stair-climbing. On December 6, as an ambassador of the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, Martina will climb Kilimanjaro, Africa’s highest peak. She confesses concern about her ability to summit, but plans on taking all the advice she can from the experts – like SA Everest mountaineer, Deshun Deysel (inset picture), who will climb with her. “I am quite coachable,” she says.

“Climbing Kilimanjaro is scaling new heights while battling cancer. The more in shape you are the better you will deal with treatment. I planned on climbing Kilimanjaro when Laureus approached me last year; and those plans haven’t changed [since diagnosis] and I’m gonna get up there and hopefully get to the top.”

In spite of her fitness, Martina knows there are some things out of her control. “I always tell tennis players that there are two things they can control, one is the service toss and the other is attitude. Once the ball is in play you can’t control what the opponent does. You can be in the best shape of your life and still not make a challenge. I want to make it to the top and hopefully everyone else in the party will as well.”

Deshun has nothing but admiration for 54-year-old Martina’s courage. “She took her doctor’s advice but didn’t curl into a ball and say ‘my life is over now.’” After 15 years of mountaineering, including four Kilimanjaro summits, Deshun says she’s gained a humility and a belief that she can achieve anything. “We shouldn’t box ourselves and say ‘I am only a woman so I shouldn’t do this or that.’ It doesn’t mean that we must lose our femininity but it does mean we can hold on to what we truly are and accomplish great things.”

Martina has no idea how she plans to celebrate when she reaches the top. “I wanted to snowboard down but they told me there is not enough snow where we are going,” she laughs. “I guess I will just hit a couple of tennis balls off the top of the mountain!”

“Life doesn’t stop just because you are here,” Martina says referring to her tumour. “You can choose to say ‘up yours’ and say ‘I am going to keep on living!’”

DOING GOOD

The Laureus Sport for Good Foundation is a charity that helps impoverished communities through sports-related community development initiatives. Currently there are 80 projects around the world supported by Laureus. Through its summit of Kilimanjaro, Martina’s group of 28 climbers aims to raise more than R900 000 for the Foundation. Find out more: www.laureus.com