



It was a typical physical in the summer of 2004; Vann Pettaway had one every year. And at age 45 and physically fit from running court drills with his basketball players, he expected to fly through it as usual. But this time, the results of his prostate-specific antigen (PSA) test came back high. Because Pettaway is an African-American, and therefore at higher than average risk for prostate cancer, his doctor ordered a biopsy. It was cancer.

"The biopsy showed that my cancer was an aggressive type, and my doctor recommended surgery," says Pettaway. "The diagnosis was at the end of July 2004 and the surgery was on September 14."

Before the basketball season began, Pettaway broke the news to his team at Alabama A&M. His players were stunned, but decided to dedicate the new season to Pettaway, vowing to play hard and give their all to him.

Then, at about that same time, a chance phone call led Pettaway to get involved in *Coaches vs. Cancer*[®], a collaboration between the American Cancer Society and the National Association of Basketball Coaches. He was asked to have his team play in the 2K Sports College Hoops Classic, benefiting *Coaches vs. Cancer*, in November, just two months after his surgery.

"I thought that it was meant to be," he says. "I said yes and I told them why – that I had just been diagnosed with cancer." Pettaway even dropped a game from his team's schedule to make it happen, even though he would still be recovering from his surgery.

Pettaway's post-surgery recuperation continued through the winter making it a very different kind of basketball season. The normally strong and passionate coach experienced considerable weakness, found it difficult to even blow a whistle and sometimes was unable to attend team practices or make it through an entire game. But his team rallied.

Pettaway says, "The players worked hard and did better, so I wouldn't have to holler. They wanted to make things easier for me, and it really brought us closer together. We are a very close-knit group."

The team's hard work began to pay off in the spring of 2005. Initially picked to finish only fourth in the Southwestern Athletic Conference, the Bulldogs began to win, eventually taking both the conference championship and tournament title. This achievement earned Alabama A&M and Coach Pettaway a berth in the 2005 NCAA Division I tournament – for the first time in school history!

Pettaway was ultimately a winner, as well. After his surgery and radiation treatments, he received word in December 2005 that tests showed no trace of cancer. "This was my 'national championship,' overcoming cancer," says Pettaway.

The coach says that having prostate cancer has been such a learning experience – the knowledge from which he now shares when he speaks publicly through *Coaches vs. Cancer*. Because of his own experience, he warns men of all ages that prostate cancer is not just an “old man’s disease,” that it is not necessarily hereditary, and that it doesn’t always have any symptoms.

"Every opportunity I get I tell young men and older men that they can save their lives by getting checked," he says. "I am still here now because of my physical. As aggressive as my cancer was, if I had not been checked, I would not have made it through the next year."

Although the most recent season wasn’t as kind to Alabama A&M, which lost in the first round of the conference tournament, there will be a next year – for both the Bulldogs and for Coach Pettaway.

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