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Steve Kelley

## Ex-Sonics strength coach pushes back against cancer



Daniel Shapiro

Before the cancer, players used to tease Daniel Shapiro about his raspy voice. They would imitate him, some sounding like Louis Armstrong, others like Dick Vitale in the finals days of March Madness.

It was part of the give-and-take of the Sacramento Kings' workout sessions. And Shapiro took the kidding in the spirit it was intended.

He was used to it. For as long as he could remember his voice was as abrasive as 60-grit sandpaper, so he wasn't overly alarmed at the end of last season, his first-full year as the Kings' head strength and conditioning coach, when the scratchiness worsened.

Most strength coaches yell a lot, and Shapiro, a former Sonic assistant strength and conditioning coach and Seattle Pacific graduate, figured he had over-taxed his vocal cords and they needed a rest.

But during pre-draft workouts in June, he began losing his voice repeatedly, and there were days when it wouldn't come back.

"It was a really weird summer," Shapiro said at Friday's shoot-around at KeyArena.

An exploratory procedure found an inch growth on his right vocal cord, but because Shapiro was 29 and didn't smoke, rarely drank and was in excellent shape, his doctors were almost certain he didn't have cancer.

"I mean I was a strength and conditioning coach, give me a break," Shapiro joked.

Two weeks after the growth was discovered, however, a biopsy determined he had throat cancer. And two weeks after that, more than half of his right vocal cord was removed.

"I wasn't really scared of the cancer or death, or things like that," he said. "I'm young, healthy. I mean if it was my time to go, then it was my time to go. But the one thing I was scared of was they told me I might lose my voice and I was thinking about my livelihood and about whether I could still do what I do."

His voice was one of his tools. It was as important to Shapiro as a blueprint for a builder.

But there is something ineffable about Shapiro, a wiry, kinetic bundle of energy. Something inside him wasn't going to allow him surrender to cancer.

After seven seasons as an assistant with Seattle and two years as the head strength coach at Dayton, Shapiro returned for his second season in Sacramento.

"He's one of the best in the business, and I think it's good for him to be back and working, just to take his mind off his situation," Sacramento forward Shareef Abdur-Rahim said. "And for us, we were worried about him and to see him being around again, you knew it was going to be OK."

Although his prognosis is excellent, Shapiro's type of cancer can return if he abuses his voice. Since September, he has worn a projection-amplification system called "Chatter Vox." He will have to wear something like this for the rest of his life.

"The great thing is, now that he's back, everything's the same," said Kings forward Corliss Williamson. "The only thing that's changed is that he has this little voice box. But he's the same person. I've been around a lot of strength coaches in the league and he ranks up there with the best. He has such a great spirit."

A head set with a microphone that looks like the kind of instrument security guards at rock concerts wear, is connected to a pack belted to Shapiro's waist, where an amplifier projects his voice. Without the device, he speaks barely above a whisper.

"I figure now, if the worst thing I have to do is wear a head set the rest of my life to do my job, then I'm OK," Shapiro said. "I just don't have the capacity to yell anymore. I can't ever raise my voice, so this thing does it for me. But as long as I can get my point across, I'm OK with it. People ask me, 'Can you still compete and still coach without really projecting your voice?' The answer is yes."

Shapiro underwent reconstructive surgery on his right vocal cord, and even with his device, he has learned to set limits on how much he talks. Eventually the cords get tired and he has to stop talking. Occasionally he gets winded, or light-headed.

"I try not to let anybody know when I get light-headed," he said. "I just take a couple of deep breaths. I don't want guys looking at me and saying, 'Take a seat and relax.' I'd rather them just not know when I'm catching my breath."

Since his return, Shapiro has been all motivation and no distraction to the Kings, who have been riddled by injuries in the season's first month.

"It's inspirational to see him out here again," Williamson, an 11-year veteran, said. "You never know how you're going to respond to something like cancer. This is part of his livelihood. Part of his job is to talk to us while we're working out and running. To see him bounce back and adapt to the situation is a great thing."

Daniel Shapiro didn't surrender to his diagnosis.

"I'm still here," Shapiro said. "Here I am."

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