

Legendary athlete Susan Butcher is facing her toughest challenge: staying alive. Staffer Erin Zammett, a fellow leukemia patient, visits her for one life-changing day.



With Susan, left, and her dogs in the wilds of Alaska

“Can I beat cancer? Can she?”

In November 2001 Erin Zammett, now 28, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for many patients. For almost four years, she has chronicled her experiences in these pages. Recently she met up with world-famous dogsledder Susan Butcher, who’s been diagnosed with a more serious form of leukemia than Erin has. The two bonded over their battle with the disease—and their fierce determination to overcome it.

Searching for inspiration

It’s been six months since my wedding, and the posthoopla blues are still hovering. No, I don’t miss obsessing about flowers and favors (does *anyone* miss that?). It’s the distraction I long for, something to take the focus off my giant question mark of a future. Although my cancer is in remission, it’s likely I’ll never be cured. I stress about that sometimes, but my real worry is that my husband, Nick, and I want to have kids soon, no easy feat for a CML patient. If I stay on Gleevec, the drug that put me into remission, it could harm the fetus; if I go off Gleevec, I’d probably relapse. It’s enough to keep me up at night.

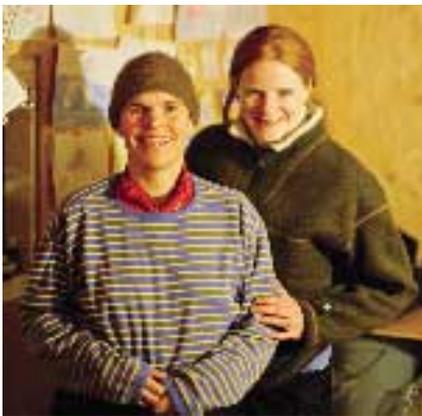
Then I read a newspaper article about Susan Butcher. Susan won the Iditarod—a nearly two-week, 1,149-mile race through the frozen Alaskan wilderness—four times in the eighties and nineties, when men completely dominated

the sport. In December doctors determined she had acute myelogenous leukemia. The story mentioned that she’s remained upbeat, determined, competitive; she even had an elliptical trainer sterilized and put in her hospital room. She’s fighting for her life and still gets in her workouts?! I had to meet this woman. So I flew to Fairbanks, Alaska, and spent a day with Susan and her family, a day I’ll remember for the rest of my life.

Amazing woman, amazing courage

I’m in an airplane 35,000 feet above the Alaskan landscape. It’s as if we’re flying over a giant bowl of whipped cream: Thousands of soft peaks jut out from wide, white expanses. I’m a little nervous about the cold—the temperature is expected to dip to 30 degrees below zero (yes, *below zero*). I’m also anxious about meeting Susan. Before she married and had her two kids, she spent 10 years living alone in a remote cabin in the Alaskan wilderness; her nearest neighbor was 40 miles away, the nearest road, 70. She chopped her own firewood and hunted for her own dinner, all while training herself and her Alaskan huskies for races. Will she think I’m a sellout because I get my meat from the grocery store? Or because I prefer hotels and taxis to tents and dogsleds? Worse, will she be able to tell that I’m not exactly a dog lover? (She has 90!)

Susan lives in Fairbanks but prefers to spend her time



“I see why out here cancer can be the furthest thing from your mind.”



Me with Susan; the cabin she and her husband built; Susan and some of her dogs (she can call all 90 of them by name—even in the dark!)



in the “bush” (Alaska-speak for the wilderness), which is where I’m set to meet her. I leave my rental car in a snowy lot an hour outside of town, and her husband, David Monson, picks me up there in a snowmobile. We zoom a mile up a trail to the cabin that he and Susan built just before Thanksgiving. The 11' x 11' space is smaller than my bedroom, but it’s homey. There’s an entire wall plastered with drawings of turtles by Susan’s five-year-old, Chisana.

Susan’s been out of the hospital only two weeks—she spent 28 days there—but minutes after I arrive, she heads outside to rig up the 20 dogs she’s brought with her for some afternoon “mushing” (aka dogsledding). When I ask Susan if she’s allowed to be mushing, she lets out a little laugh, her icy blue eyes flashing, and says, “It’s not like my doctors were going to tell me no!” She is just as intense as I imagined she’d be. And just as cool.

Susan, 51, has been dogsledding since she was 15. It’s amazing to see her in action. She calls out, “Haw!” and the dogs listen, making a left turn (“Gee” means go right). At times the dogs are running upward of 18 miles per hour. After an hour of watching, I’m ready to give dogsledding a go (*riding* in a dogsled, that is). As we fly along the twisting trails, blinking constantly so our eyeballs literally don’t freeze, Susan’s brother Andrew, who’s steering my sled, says, “By the way, if we tip over, just tuck and roll.” Got it. I wish Nick could see me now! I’m usually such a wimp; if I ride downhill on my bike, I squeeze the brakes the entire time. But right now I feel so free. I can see why Susan lives for this sport. And why out here cancer can be the furthest thing from your mind.

A double stroke of bad luck

Eventually we head back to the cabin to thaw out and chat. “I’d been mushing every day, cross-country skiing and running to train for a 300-mile race,” Susan says about the days leading up to her diagnosis. “When the doctors said I could have leukemia, I said, ‘Doesn’t it count for anything that I feel good?’” It didn’t. Susan was officially diagnosed with AML on December 2, an extra-cruel blow because she *already had* cancer—a rare chronic bone marrow disorder that doctors discovered four years ago (they don’t know to what degree the two diseases are related).

I’ve been through a lot, but I can’t imagine having two kinds of cancer.

“You know, you just kind of take it in stride,” Susan says. “You put one foot in front of the other and do what you have to do.” Susan is approaching cancer the same way I have: as an obstacle to overcome. She’s no stranger to perseverance. In 1985 she saved 13 dogs—and herself—on the Iditarod trail by fending off a crazed, 2,000-pound moose with an ax. She had to scratch from the race, but she came back the next year and won—and won it again the following year. Oh, and the year after that, too. “I don’t know the word *quit*,” she says.

When I ask if any other incidents in her life prepared her for dealing with cancer, she tells me another wild story: “It was my second time climbing Mt. McKinley, an 18-day trek up glaciers and over huge crevasses. On the sixteenth day I got pneumonia and started coughing up blood. I had to hide that from my climbing partners or they wouldn’t let me summit. They didn’t know I was sick until we were standing on the top of the mountain and saw blood dripping out of my mouth. While you’re doing these things, you don’t see the big picture, but afterward it seems amazing what you’ve accomplished.”

Susan’s chemo was hell—it included multiple infections and fevers so high she can’t remember a three-day chunk of time—but given what she’s been through, she did indeed take it all in stride. I mention to Susan that for me, one of the hardest parts of having cancer is not knowing what the future holds. “I’m type A, and I like to control everything, so it’s hard,” I tell her. She laughs. “I’m type *triple A*,” she says. Then she goes into how her challenges with fertility (it took her three years to get pregnant with

BASIL CHILDRIS

her first daughter and four with her second) taught her to go with the flow. “Talk about not being able to plan. I never knew if I’d be having a baby or running the Iditarod!” she says. Still, she’s been on top of her oncologists every step of the way. “I drive them insane because I ask a million questions,” she says. “A visit for me is like two, three hours.” I feel a pang of cancer guilt; these days, my questions for my doctor—who’s based in Portland, Oregon—generally involve which restaurants to try while I’m in town.

The will to survive

As we’re talking, David walks in from chopping wood. “The moose is all breaded,” Susan calls out to him. “Can you cook it?” By this point I’m fancying myself a true adventurer; so I dive right in. I’m surprised at how good the moose (which, naturally, Susan had shot herself) tastes—sort of like skirt steak, only

milder and a bit chewier. Afterward Chisana invites me up to the loft to watch *Singin’ in the Rain* on her new iBook. She tells me she likes my eye makeup. I’m sure it’s halfway down my face at this point—I’m so embarrassed that I even wore it—but I say, “Thank you.” Tekla, Susan’s 10-year-old, comes up too, and I can’t help thinking how lucky these girls are. Can you imagine having a mom like Susan Butcher?

Back downstairs, Susan and I start talking about hair. Mine never fell out (losing it had been a big concern when I was first diagnosed), but she lost hers almost immediately. “I think I look *great* without hair!” she says, grinning. “I’ve had 40 years of waist-length hair that I’ve had to braid every morning. I’ve always wanted to shave it all off!” I ask her if she’s ever had a “Why me?” moment. “No, I don’t think so,” she says. She pauses, then adds, “Sometimes when I see someone who’s vastly overweight and smoking, I think, I don’t smoke and I’ve lived in the bush my whole life, and I’m a professional athlete. How can *they* be doing fine? But then again, I can’t complain. I’ve gotten to do exactly what I wanted to do in life.”

I’m sure it helps that, like me, she’s married to a great man. “I feel lucky to have David, but it must be harder

for him than for me. There were days when just putting the stethoscope to my chest was painful, and David would see me wince and say, ‘Isn’t there *something* we can do?’” I tell Susan about my sister Melissa, who was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2003, and how it was harder to watch her wrestle with her cancer than it was to deal with my own. She nods, knowing what I’m talking about: Her half-sister has lymphoma. We commiserate about how crazy it is to have so much cancer in one family, then the conversation turns to what lies ahead.

The plan is for Susan to do two more rounds of chemo, followed by a bone marrow transplant—a grueling procedure in which doctors will basically replace her immune system with one

“I’m type A, I tell Susan. She laughs. I’m triple A, she says.”

from a donor. A transplant comes with at least a 15 percent mortality rate and requires a year of recovery. Because of Susan’s preexisting cancer, she can expect

a greater chance of complications. I feel almost guilty; thanks to Gleevec, my prognosis is looking good. I want to cry when she says, “I guess you could say the odds are not in my favor;” but we quickly focus on the positive: If all goes well, Susan will be cured of *both* her cancers. “There are a lot of unknowns,” she says, “but I’ve pushed myself to amazing limits before.”

I could stay in that cabin with Susan and her family all night, but it’s 8 P.M., and I need to catch a plane back home. I hug everyone goodbye and thank them for the incredible time. They have no idea what this visit has meant to me. To see someone in Susan’s situation is gut-wrenching, to say the least. But at the same time, she’s keeping it all together, smiling, laughing, *living*—and that’s totally inspiring. I feel like my soul has been recharged. Sure, uncertainties lie ahead; I can’t shake that I may never be able to have kids. But I’m healthy right now, and that’s what I need to focus on. Thanks to Susan, I know I’ll be able to. Susan makes me want to be a better human being, a better woman and with any luck, someday, a better mother. ©

For past installments of Erin’s diary and to learn about becoming a bone marrow donor, visit glamour.com.