
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Giant Heart

Super Bowl champ Mark Herzlich shares his inspirational story and talks about how CrossFit helped him regain his strength after battling cancer. Julie Buehler reports.

By Julie Buehler

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Jerry Pinkus

When I met Mark Herzlich, the world's media was asking how he got to be where he was.

The scene was surreal. It was Super Bowl week in Indianapolis, and Herzlich and his team, the New York Giants, were taking on the New England Patriots for a world championship. Microphones were shoved inches from his mouth, one removed only to be replaced with another. Personal questions rained on him. But he didn't complain. Things have turned out OK.

When Herzlich was introduced to CrossFit, he had recently had a titanium rod implanted in his left femur to strengthen the body's biggest bone. He had endured months of chemotherapy and radiation, as well as physical therapy to pry what muscle he had left in his body off the bones. You see, the heat of the radiation and the cancer-seeking chemicals burning through his veins did not distinguish which cells to set ablaze, so the muscle had melted to bone.

By the time Herzlich—a self-described “workout freak”—was ready for physical activity, he wasn't the hulking, 6-foot-4, 245-lb. Boston College linebacker who was projected to be a first-round pick in the 2009 NFL Draft.

Fourth and Long

Herzlich is well known in the sports world for his incredible story of survival. In the fall of 2008, he was an All-American linebacker at Boston College. He was projected as a top-round NFL draft pick, which would come with a very nice payday. But after a mysterious “screaming” pain ravaged his left thigh, the explanation sent a sledgehammer through his dreams.

On May 12, 2009, Herzlich heard the words no one can prepare to hear. He was diagnosed with Ewing’s sarcoma, a bone cancer that moves fast. The doctors were confident they caught the tumor in time: while it had eaten the tissue from his knee to his hip, it had not spread beyond his leg. His parents were in the office at the time of the diagnosis, and Herzlich’s father asked the question most pressing on his son’s mind: “Doc, can he play football again?”

Herzlich was told that day he would never play football again.

Considering one of the treatment options was replacing Herzlich’s femur with that of a cadaver, the idea of sending 250-lb. bodies hurtling into the repaired leg was not something the doctor agreed with. Herzlich was told that day he would never play football again. Suddenly, the young man who had made his way through life relentlessly pursuing opponents on the football field had a very different and dangerous opponent.

“It was definitely a change of scenery,” Herzlich said. “You have expectations for yourself when you’re competing at any sport or any activity. You want to be the best you can be, and when that gets taken away, they say, ‘You have no shot at being what you wanted to be. That dream is over.’

“So my thing was, all right, I wanted to be the best cancer patient I could be. I wanted to be alert at all times. I tried not to get sick with my treatments. So I kept my competitive nature up a little bit by doing that.”

Despite the doctor’s dismissal of his dream, Herzlich sought whatever treatment gave him the best chance at returning to the field. Rather than replace his femur, a solution that would have eradicated his cancer but also his athletic future, Herzlich chose to pursue the cancer with

chemotherapy, radiation and a less invasive surgery. From May 19 through Nov. 3, 2009, Herzlich received chemotherapy and five weeks of radiation to shrink and remove the cancer from his leg.

On Nov. 23, doctors implanted a titanium rod into Herzlich’s femur to reinforce the bone’s strength. After the weeks of radiation and chemicals burning through Herzlich’s system, no one was sure how long it would be until he got his strength back—or if it would fully return.

Then Herzlich walked into a CrossFit box in January 2010.

Road to Recovery—and the NFL

“CrossFit is different,” Herzlich said. “In football, you’re in a weight room and you want to see who can bench the most amount of weight one time or squat the most amount of weight one time, and CrossFit is about how many of this exercise of this certain set can you do in a certain time. It’s all about lapping people, and it’s all about ‘I’m on my 25th burpee and they’re on their 10th burpee ...’

“I was doing it with all these little girls, and they could run for days, and I’m not built to run for days, but I felt like was competing against them in that. And it was cool because it didn’t have to be in a big meathead gym setting.”

Herzlich needed to rebuild the muscle lost from radiation and chemotherapy, but he had a larger goal that went beyond achieving normal function: he wanted to return to the football field at Boston College, and he wanted to get to the NFL.



Courtesy of Julie Buehler

The author talks with Herzlich about how he beat cancer and achieved his dream of playing in the NFL.

Jerry Pinkus



Mark Herzlich: Super Bowl champion.

"Mentally, I figured I finished my chemo, I finished my surgery, so OK, I'll be back to normal," Herzlich said. "But that's not really how it works. I wanted to do a lot more than I could sooner than I could."

The man who had earned a reputation for intimidating opponents with thick eye black on game day was now competing against ladies—and loving it.

"I had been limited for so long," Herzlich said. "Coming back and just starting to work out felt amazing, and then ramping it up each week and each month was great."

Herzlich kept going to his box with the dream of returning to football propelling him. Not only was the former ACC Defensive Player of the Year having to slowly and painfully reconstruct every strand of muscle, but he was also doing it in the company of 20 or 25 women every day. The man who had earned a reputation for intimidating opponents with thick eye black on game day was now competing against ladies—and loving it.

"It was kind of cool. I always thought I was in good shape, that I could work out with the best of them, but they (the women) never stopped," Herzlich said. "They had no reason to be there other than they wanted to do CrossFit. They wanted to be in shape. They just kept going. And I thought, 'I can't stop. If these girls are going for all 25 or 30 minutes, you know, I have to keep going harder.'"

He added: "But I'm not going to lie. They beat me most of the time. It was just kind of cool to have a workout bond with people other than football players."

But it was football Herzlich really wanted back. He fought through the shock, the sickness, the despair, the pain and, step by step, regained his strength. But with a titanium rod in his leg, the question remained if the femur would hold up to the violence of his beloved sport.

“There was a nervousness at the beginning that maybe the leg would break and wouldn’t heal again,” Herzlich said. “And I had to say, ‘This is the decision I made that I want to play again. I’m going to take my chances and hopefully everything is going to be OK.’ I’ve taken a lot of hits on my leg, and I think the first time, I was like, ‘Ooo—I’m glad that held up.’ But since then, it’s been fine.”

The leg was fine enough to allow the linebacker to play for Boston College again. And it was fine enough to prompt a phone call from New York Giants head coach Tom Coughlin, who invited Herzlich to training camp in 2011. It was also fine enough to allow him to suit up for 11 games this past season and then sit with the world’s media before the Super Bowl to answer questions about how he got to where he is.

“It’s all about never giving up.”
—Mark Herzlich

The answers to that question could easily fill a book—and likely will. When asked how he would describe his journey from cancer survivor to the Super Bowl, Herzlich said, “It’s all about never giving up. (That’s) really the essence of human nature and the survival of the fittest and what goes into it. You always want to push yourself to be the best and never being satisfied. But if you’re not satisfied, then you’re always pushing for something greater, and that’s what our team is doing right now. That’s what I’m doing right now. ... We’ve gotten this far, but we’re not satisfied with just being in the Super Bowl ... we want to win it.”

And win it the Giants did, notching a 21-17 victory over the New England Patriots on Feb. 5.

And so, Mark Herzlich, meet the Lombardi Trophy.



Courtesy of Julie Buehler

About the Author

Julie Buehler is a freelance writer and sports broadcaster. She’s covered the NFL, NBA, MLB and college football in Southern California and Arizona for more than a decade. She’s as well known for her prolific flexing as she is for her grasp on the English language.