

Brighton Bull Rider/Cancer Patient Treated At OSF In Alton, Still Pushes Self To Limit

by Tim Ditman
February 8 2024 3:14 PM



Three, two, one.

Jack Sandford is 14, and his world is about to turn upside down as the gate flings open on his first bull ride.

“I’m an adrenaline junkie. I like to push stuff to the limit,” Sandford says with a smile.

Fast forward to June of 2023, and Sandford’s world is about to change again.

Three, two, one.

The door at OSF Moeller Cancer Center in Alton, Illinois, opens, and Dr. Manpreet Sandhu walks in. She tells Sanford he has cancer in his upper intestine, liver and lymph nodes. It’s in an advanced state and not curable. Devastating news for anyone.

But cancer wasn’t about to slow down the 67-year-old from Brighton, Illinois. He’s still bull riding on a senior tour during chemotherapy, making him a prime example of why staying active during cancer can help in the fight.

Jack’s journey

A Virginia native and Army veteran, Sandford came to southern Illinois around a decade ago to take a manufacturing job. He rode bulls off and on during that time, earning the nickname Sandman.

In late May of 2023, Sandford was at a rodeo and got sick.

“I was throwing up and couldn’t ride,” he recalls.

At first, he and his wife thought it was food poisoning.

“My wife cooks great food, though,” Sandford says, ruling idea one out.

Next stop: seeing a doctor.

Sandford went to OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony’s Health Center in Alton, Illinois. Providers quickly told him more advanced imaging was needed to get to the bottom of things. Then came the cancer diagnosis and a treatment plan.

“I’m here every other Monday getting chemo,” Sandford lays out matter-of-factly. “I get sick. I have my bad days and good days. It makes you irritable and hard to be around. But you just have to not really think about it that badly. You just need to keep moving forward.”

Why staying active is important

In her early visits with Sandford, Dr. Sandhu says it was clear that he wanted to stay active. It's advice she would give anyone on a cancer journey.

"We have conversations with our patients to see where they are and what their goals are," says Dr. Sandhu, a medical oncologist.

"Chemotherapy medicines are strong. They will make your muscles and bones weak," she adds. "If we maintain our physical strength, we're able to counteract those side effects better. In addition, staying active also improves immune health."

"If we maintain our physical strength, we're able to counteract side effects better. In addition, staying active also improves immune health. Dr. Manpreet Sandhu, OSF HealthCare medical oncologist,, Pursuing hobbies can also boost your mental health and bring a sense of achievement, Dr. Sandhu adds. It's something critical during a difficult cancer fight.

"Start slow. Small steps," Dr. Sandhu advises. "We tell our patients: one day at a time. We're not going to look five years out. We're going to look to tomorrow."

For example, Dr. Sandhu sees people who are on chemotherapy and think they are too weak to exercise. She suggests starting on a pedal bike, then progressing to walking. And don't make it a chore. Do it outside with family or friends. Find joy in the activities.

Sandford agrees, especially about having a support system. He's lucky to have two: his family by blood and his bull riding family.

"We always take care of each other. We have a prayer service before rodeo," Sandford says.

Ride on

Sandford is now the oldest bull rider on his senior tour. He's had ups (placing high in competitions) and downs (a broken collarbone thanks to a mean old bull). But he's not hanging up his jacket anytime soon.

"The man upstairs put a bump in the road for me. He didn't tell me to quit," he says.