

Ricky Rolfe

By Leif Tillotson

After more than two decades driving and building race cars, Maine's Ricky Rolfe thought he was prepared for whatever could happen to him involving his racing program. A two-time Oxford Plains Speedway champion and winner of 35 races in six different divisions at OPS, there were very few challenges on and off the track that Rolfe had not experienced and overcome.

What Ricky was not prepared for was the news that was given to him on his 46th birthday. After finding blood in his stool, he went to his doctor to get things checked out. The doctor told Rolfe that he had colon cancer. The news of his cancer was hard enough to take, but even harder was his doctor telling him that due to the size of the tumor it would need to be removed within a few days.

In a short period of time Rolfe was forced to consider not only changes in his 2010 racing program (just weeks away at that point) but also a perhaps life-ending illness. "I have too much to live for and wasn't going to let this disease get me" Rolfe remembers thinking. "I was also hoping the cancer had not spread to any other organs."

On his doctor's advice, Rolfe had one-third of his colon removed as well as 40 lymph nodes. While the surgery was deemed successful, there was still the chance that there were cancer cells elsewhere in his body. Chemotherapy was recommended to make sure that any signs of cancer were removed.

Over the next two weeks Rolfe recovered from the surgery and came up with a plan for his continuing to work as well as going ahead with his racing season. Work came first. His employer, Mitch Green of chassis builder Race Basics, agreed to give him as much time as Rolfe needed for his chemo, appointments and recovery. Green was also understanding of the fact that there would be some jobs at the shop that Rolfe could not comfortably do.

Next came the racing program. "I knew we had to change our plans" Rolfe says "but I still wanted to go racing. Originally we were going to run the full ACT Tour but I knew fatigue would be an issue because of the chemo treatments. The doctor at first didn't want me to race at all but I knew that I was going to do whatever it

took to race. My family knew how much it meant to me to keep racing and they promised to do whatever it took to help me.”

Rolfe owns the car he runs weekly at Oxford Plains Speedway so he was prepared to start the season running OPS regularly and skip races if he needed to. His ACT program, however, was a different story.

The owner of his ACT Tour car, Mark Brackett, was supportive and agreed that he and the rest of the team would adjust their race schedule according to how Rolfe felt. Brackett also assured Rolfe that he would be the one and only driver of the 51ME car for the year. “They said that we would race when I was ready whether it was this year or next” Rolfe says. The team’s confidence in their driver clearly helped him to also have confidence in himself.

Rolfe’s doctors worked with his request to go racing, beginning with where they placed the port in his chest for his chemotherapy treatments. “I took my HANS Device to my surgeon” Rolfe says “so they could put my chemo port where it was not in the way of my HANS when I raced.”

Rolfe requested to have his chemo treatment scheduled in the early part of the week so that he would hopefully be recovered by the time weekend race dates rolled around. He also needed to wear a pump connected to the port in his chest for 48 hours after each chemo treatment. Making sure the pump would be unhitched by the time races came around would also help ease the complications from his chemo.

Rolfe began his racing season at the first ACT race of the year at Oxford in May. While a 22nd place run was not what he wanted, he did have a heat race win and at least he was racing and feeling okay. The next day he began his first round of chemotherapy.

The chemotherapy went as well as could be expected, considering that chemo introduces poisons to your bloodstream in the hopes that the poisons will kill any cancer cells that might be travelling throughout the body. Some issues with diarrhea and constipation, as well as a bad case of hives and swollen feet and hands that sent him to the hospital overnight, were the only major side effects of his treatment. Other than that, fatigue was the main complaint. The plan to take the chemo in the first part of the week worked, as Rolfe was feeling pretty good by the time the weekend rolled around.

It was both a logistical and physical struggle for Rolfe to balance family obligations, work, medical appointments, work on the race car and weekly racing throughout the summer. Despite the challenge, Rolfe did exactly what he had done in every other part of his life and committed to making it all work somehow.

The month of June brought two of the three great accomplishments of Rolfe's season. After a 2nd-place run in the June 19th ACT race at Oxford, he scored a win the next week in Oxford weekly competition. Those successes served both as confirmation of his abilities despite his cancer treatments and also as motivation for the rest of the year.

There was only one exception to Rolfe's regular chemo schedule and that came in the end of July to coincide with the Oxford TD Bank 250. A consistent favorite in the event, the 250 was a race Rolfe did not want to miss. He asked for and received a break in his chemo so that he would be at his best for the 250 race weekend. A tenth-place finish was respectable, especially considering the grind of both the race itself as well as the qualifying that takes place during the day. Rolfe was back on his regular chemo schedule the next day.

Rolfe finished 6th in Oxford points for 2010. Although it was not the points finish he wanted, it was a major achievement for a guy who started his season not only wondering if he was going to race but also wondering if he was even going to be alive through the summer.

Rolfe had raced 4 times with the ACT Tour throughout the season with finishes of 22nd, 19th, 2nd and 25th along with two heat race wins. Again, not great runs but better than not racing at all.

September brought the third and final great accomplishment of Rolfe's season. At the ACT Invitational at NHMS he earned a 7th-place finish. It was Rolfe's second invitation to the ACT race at NHMS and his best outing to date, much better than his 28th place from the 2009 race. The race completed Rolfe's season on a high note and in front of the largest crowd to see Late Models in New England.

At the end of the season Rolfe looked back on the things that were highlights as well as the things that he wished could have gone differently. "I had to let my crew do a lot more of the work at the shop and racetrack" Rolfe says. This was a dramatic departure from Rolfe's previous racing seasons when he spent far more time with a wrench in his hand than a steering wheel. The change in Rolfe's workload, while necessary, was not an easy change for him to accept.

“Other than just being more fatigued, for the most part I didn't let the cancer get to me” Rolfe says. “Once you're in the race car you forget all the bad things that you are going through.” Perhaps it was even Rolfe's racing that helped keep the cancer away, as the power of positive thinking has been proven in studies to play a significant role in whether patients beat or succumb to the disease.

So where does he go from here? “My prognosis is good” Rolfe says. While the danger of a cancer recurrence is always present, at least at the moment things are good. Rolfe is already planning ahead for 2011. “ Next year we plan to run the full ACT Tour” he says.

And so, at the end of the 2010 race season, Ricky Rolfe had not won as many races as he wanted to. He also did not run the whole ACT Tour as he wanted to and he did not win another Oxford Plain Speedway championship. But the fact that he raced at all, and plans to race again in 2011, is the biggest victory of his life for the determined Late Model racer.