

Candace Parker Puts a Full-Court Press on Alzheimer's

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Basketball Star Fights Alzheimer's in Honor of Her Mentor and Coach, the Late Pat Summitt



Candace Parker, star of the University of Tennessee Lady Volunteers basketball team from 2004 to 2008, earned a wealth of accolades during her college career. She was the first woman to dunk in an NCAA tournament championship game, a two-time consensus national player of the year and led the Lady Vols to two NCAA championships.

But none of these achievements mean as much to Parker as her relationship with her mentor, Pat Summitt, the winningest NCAA women's basketball coach of all time. The 6'4" standout from Naperville, Illinois, often refers to Summitt as her second mother.

"Coach Summitt was extremely special to me," says Parker. "During my time at Tennessee, we won national championships together. She was named Coach of the Year, was on the cover of

Sports Illustrated, and was named one of the best 50 coaches ever, male or female."

It seemed nothing could slow Summitt down — until her diagnosis of younger-onset Alzheimer's in 2011 at age 59. The news stunned the close-knit college basketball community, including Parker, who had no experience with the disease. In the United States, approximately 200,000 people are living with younger-onset Alzheimer's, a type of the disease that strikes those younger than 65.

"Coach Summitt was sharp. She took the time to learn coaches' names, janitors' names, waitresses' names — she knew everything," says Parker. "And after she got diagnosed, the disease started to affect her everyday life more suddenly than any of us anticipated."

A few months after the diagnosis, Alzheimer's forced Summitt into retirement. She left the sport with eight NCAA



championships and a gold medal as the coach of the 1984 U.S. Olympic women's basketball team. Parker, a star of the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks, made it a point to maintain their close relationship.

"I feel like she always knew exactly who I was, but sometimes it took her a little bit longer to really have that light in her eyes and that passion when she spoke to me," says Parker.

Summitt died in 2016 at the age of 64. That same day, Parker took the court wearing orange shoes in honor of her mentor.

"I had my highest rebounding total that night," Parker says. "She would have been so proud because she was always harping on me to rebound when I was in school."

Determined to make a difference, Parker teamed up with the Alzheimer's Association as a Celebrity Champion, sharing Summitt's story as a way to raise awareness of the disease. She also promoted the Association's lifestyle tips during WNBA Fit Month to encourage healthy habits — like diet and exercise — that can reduce risk of cognitive decline and dementia. In addition, she is active with the Pat Summitt Foundation, an organization founded by Summitt and her son, Tyler, to fight the disease.

"Coach Summitt's experience really opened my eyes to how many people are living with Alzheimer's, and how many people are caring for those diagnosed with this disease," says Parker. "Some people aren't so lucky to have the finances and the ability to get the care they deserve."

Parker plans to continue sharing Summitt's legacy with others — a legacy defined by a spirit that could not be contained, even by Alzheimer's.

"She still was who she was. That never left. She was still considerate. She still put her son first. And she was still extremely loving. I asked her, early on, "What gets you through this?" And she said, "You know, I just put one foot in front of the other and I breathe."

Today, Parker has a constant reminder of Summitt's wisdom. The words "Right foot, left foot, breathe" are tattooed on her right arm.

Words of Wisdom from Coach Summitt

Pat Summitt was known for her inspirational sayings. Below are some of Parker's favorites.

"Attitude is a choice. What you think you can do, whether positive or negative, confident or scared, will most likely happen."

"Here's how I'm going to beat you. I'm going to outwork you. That's it. That's all there is to it."

"It's harder to stay on top than it is to make the climb. Continue to seek new goals."