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Sports

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Cousin offered Mourning the gift of life

BY ISRAEL GUTIERREZ
Knight Ridder Newspapers

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. - (KRT) - When Jason Cooper was making the six-hour drive from New York to Virginia in November 2003 to visit an aunt who was dying of cancer, he didn't know he was on the verge of saving a life - and, in turn, affecting the lives of so many more.

Alonzo Mourning is once again playing at a level that earned him NBA superstar status, thrilling thousands of Heat fans in the process, and he can trace his revived success back to the day Cooper made that trek.

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``It's no surprise to me that he's playing at the level that he's playing at or that he's a contender, with the rest of his teammates, for a championship," Cooper said of Mourning.

Cooper tends to have that kind of faith. He's inclined to believe everything will work out for the best. This story only strengthens that conviction.

Cooper remembers vividly arriving at the hospital room of his aunt, Margaret Fennell, and was greeted by Alonzo Mourning Sr. Just before they were about to pray for Fennell's well being, a CNN reporter on the hospital room television announced that Alonzo Mourning Jr. was retiring from the NBA because of complications from a kidney disease.

``My son's retiring from basketball," Cooper remembers Mourning Sr. telling him. ``He's gonna need a kidney transplant."

It didn't take long for Cooper to realize he could, maybe, if everything fell perfectly into place, help the NBA star. So much had fallen into place already.

Fennell, Cooper's aunt, was Mourning's grandmother. Mourning and Cooper were cousins who hadn't seen each other in nearly 25 years. Vague childhood memories of playing at family reunions were the only history the two had.

But they were cousins nonetheless, and Cooper wanted to make sure a message reached his cousin.

``My dad called me," Mourning, 35, said. ``He said, `Your cousin came down to see Margaret in the hospital.' I said, `Who?' He said, `You might not remember him, but Jason, your uncle Ronnie's son.'

``I said, `Dang, I haven't seen him in a long time.' "

No matter. The message remained the same: ``I'll help - if I can."

Cooper offered to take the necessary tests to see if he could donate one of his kidneys to Mourning. It was an eerie coincidence that Cooper decided to make the trip to visit his grandmother on that particular day, and that the news came across the TV screen at that particular time. Some would say it's more than a coincidence. Whatever the explanation, that moment put in motion an act of selflessness and kindness that would reinvigorate an NBA star, and created an unbreakable bond between two cousins who didn't figure they would ever be this close again.

‘A LIFESAVER’

``Jason, man - he's a lifesaver," Mourning said. ``It's just God sent how it all worked out. Things don't happen like that just because it happens. People just say, `Oh, it's a coincidence.' No it's not. There's a reason why Jason went to that hospital to see his aunt on her deathbed and I just so happened to come up on the television. I mean,

come on, that's not a coincidence. That's somebody higher than us planning all that out.

``It all worked out, because look at me."''

Mourning always maintained his sculpted frame, even after he was diagnosed with focal glomerulosclerosis, a disease that doesn't allow kidneys to filter waste properly, in October 2000. But to look at Mourning now is to see a refreshed, recharged athlete, one who remembers how he felt five years ago, when he was on top of the sports world as an Olympic gold medalist and among the NBA elite.

``I'm back to my old self again," Mourning said. ``I haven't felt this way since 2000."''

In between that 2000 diagnosis and the December 2003 transplant surgery, Mourning never felt like himself, and in playing stints with the Heat and New Jersey Nets, he had come to grips with the idea that the feeling was permanent.

``I was sick to the point where I didn't even realize how sick I was," Mourning said. ``I was getting accustomed to feeling that way for three years and thinking that, `Hey, I'm going to feel this way for the rest of my life.' I forgot how I was supposed to feel."''

And when Mourning reached the point where his options were a kidney transplant or a life on dialysis, Cooper was among a handful of friends and relatives who offered Mourning a kidney.

Mourning had five uncles who were tested as potential matches, but none matched. Mourning Sr. was an option, but he had hypertension, and removing one of his kidneys would be a serious health risk.

Mourning's friend and NBA nemesis Patrick Ewing was tested, and he was a match. But he, too, was on blood-pressure medication for a slight case of hypertension.

That left two friends, neither of which matched, and another cousin who was not in the proper physical shape to be offering a kidney.

THE PERFECT MATCH

And then there was Cooper.

``Jason was 6-4, an ex-marine, in great shape, 30 years old and the perfect match," Mourning said. ``After they ran a test and everything, Dr. Gerald Appel called me and said, `Look, your cousin Jason is the match. He's the guy we want to use. If you can call him and tell him what we came up with, we'll go from there.'''

Mourning made the call, which he admits was rather awkward.

``It's not like you're calling them to borrow \$20," Mourning said. ``It's, `Hey, man, you're the one.' "

Cooper agreed without hesitation, but Mourning still gave Cooper every opportunity to back out - even until the day of the surgery at New York's Columbia Presbyterian.

``Even before going into the procedure, they make you walk in and everything because you can put a stop to it at any time," Cooper said. ``Zo, he and I were side by side - and he was like, `Listen cuz, if you want to, you can walk through those doors and straight out the back and I would understand and I wouldn't be mad at all.'

``Then the doctors were like, `All right, it's time.' And I walked into this room and it's about the size of a corporate conference room. I was starting to trip. I was like, `Wait a minute, what's that for?' "

The scary-looking equipment wasn't nearly enough to deter Cooper. He went on with the procedure and woke up hours later to only one thought.

``The first thing I said was `praise God,'" Cooper said. ``I opened up my eyes and I was like, `Ah, I'm alive.' It wasn't even hard at all."

PAINFUL AFTERMATH

Mourning's memories are slightly different. He recalls being in great pain after the surgery. And the day after, despite the pain, doctors told him he had to get out of the hospital bed and walk around to promote circulation.

``So I had an IV in this arm, and IV in the other arm, I had a heart monitor on and I had a catheter," Mourning said. ``So I had everything hanging from my body, and I had this nightgown. So I'm walking down, inching down the transplant hall."

Mourning's walks turned into visits of other transplant patients. He met a 15-year-old who needed a kidney transplant because of complications from a heart transplant. He met a lady who was in the hospital for better than two months after her kidney transplant.

Mourning, though, was out of the hospital in five days. Doctors credited his quick recovery to his supreme physical condition. Cooper left the hospital rather quickly, too. But he didn't go to his New York home. Mourning didn't let him.

``When I left the hospital, I was getting ready to go home and Zo was like, `Nah, man, you're coming to stay with me,'" Cooper said. ``I don't have a cook. Zo has a cook. So I just relaxed and let them take care of me, and I tried to just get better as soon as possible so I could get out of there and his family could return to some sort of normalcy."

Cooper, who works in special-ops security for Deutsche Bank, said the only ill effect he felt from the surgery was

fatigue upon returning to his job. He blames himself for trying to return too quickly. Apparently, he shares his cousin's passion for hard work.

Mourning is finding out more about his cousin every day. The two have become quite close since the surgery, and Mourning says he and Cooper share similar thoughts on faith and religion. More than that, they now share a friendship, which is Cooper's ultimate reward for donating his kidney.

"I offered money, but he didn't want anything," said Mourning, who was told there is a slight chance his disease could resurface despite his new kidney. "He knows that I'm there for him if he ever, ever needed me, I'm there. He saved my life. He's never taken advantage of that.

"That's an incredible feeling, when you have somebody that can have that type of impact on your life, and he doesn't want anything but your love and your friendship in return."

Mourning and Cooper speak often, but Cooper's work schedule doesn't permit him to watch as many Heat games as he would like.

CHECKING SCORES

That's the main reason why Mourning recently sent his cousin a Pocket Surfer, which allows Cooper a wireless connection to the Internet through his cell phone. Now Cooper can check scores or highlights any time he wants.

But if Mourning can fulfill his dream of winning an NBA championship with the Heat - an opportunity available to him because of a kind-hearted cousin - Cooper would prefer a more personal connection.

"I'll definitely come down to Miami for the championship parade," Cooper said. "I feel absolutely happy for him, for more than so much the whole championship situation. The fact that he's down there in Miami with his family, that's much better. He belongs down in Miami. I don't see him retiring anywhere else except for down there in Miami, so I'm really happy for him.

"And the fact that now he has the opportunity to get a championship, it just puts the icing on the cake."

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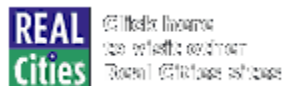
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