

Basketball official Ashley Steinberg is a cancer surviving role model

Ashley Steinberg is not your typical high school basketball official.

The 34-year old serves as a double role model at the games she works in South Jersey. For starters, she happens to be a two-time ovarian cancer survivor. And secondly, as a young female referee, her presence and personality gives the girls she officiates reasons to think about becoming a ref themselves.

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Steinberg, a Triton High School graduate, admits she wasn't a star athlete. She played basketball and softball when she was young, and then basketball in middle school and high school. A torn ACL at the end of her junior year ended her playing career. She was also involved at Triton as a team manager for the tennis, football and baseball teams. But basketball officiating was something she was familiar with, since her father, Sid, was a veteran ref on the South Jersey scene.

Ashley's life took a drastic turn in August of 2012, just before her 24th birthday, when she was first diagnosed with Stage 1C ovarian cancer.

"I started noticing that my stomach was bloated, felt hard, and would not flatten," she said. "I thought that maybe I was just gaining some weight and decided to wait until my annual exam to bring it up to my doctor. I then explained my symptoms and showed my doctor the bloating of my stomach. I told my doctor that something was wrong."

Washington Township is among the schools to honor basketball official and cancer survivor Ashley Steinberg



The teams from Delran and Cinnaminson joined up to honor Ashley Steinberg and other two other families affected by cancer at a recent game

The doctor agreed, and ordered an ultrasound. The results were not good.

“I went to get an ultrasound, where doctors saw a mass,” she said. “They wanted a better view and sent me for an MRI. Later on that day, I received a phone call from my doctor asking me to go into the office that night with my parents. At this point, I was freaking out, because something was wrong. The doctor told me that I had a huge mass covering my right ovary and stomach, and I needed to undergo surgery as soon as possible.”

From that frightening news, things moved very quickly.

“I met my surgeon at the end of that week and scheduled my surgery for the following week,” Ashley recalled. “I underwent surgery on Sept. 17, 2012. My surgeon removed a mass that was larger than a melon, my right ovary, my right fallopian tube, and tumors on the left side, allowing me to keep my left ovary.

“Pathology results showed that I had ovarian cancer. I did not know what I was going to wake up to, and was very blessed that my cancer was contained. I did not need to undergo radiation or chemotherapy treatments. My doctors considered this to be miraculous, considering the size of my tumors.”

Recovery was tough, but Ashley got through it with the strong support of family and friends.

Unfortunately, the cancer returned.

“My doctors kept a very close eye on me, with bi-monthly check-ups, exams, and screenings,” she said. “Unfortunately, in September of 2013, doctors discovered that the cancer returned to my left side. I underwent a more intensive surgery, where doctors removed my left ovary and fallopian tube, lymph nodes, and my appendix. This cancer was also contained, so I didn’t need any additional treatment except medication.”

Since then, things have gotten better.

“I have not had any subsequent reoccurrences,” Ashley said. “But I have ongoing symptoms caused by my ovarian cancer, including sickness, depression and pain. However, I remain positive.”

It was during the time afterward that Ashley, who works full time as a legal assistant, made an interesting decision. Since she places so much value in family, she figured the perfect way to add an extra dimension of fun and also bond with her dad was to join him as a basketball official.



Brooke Coyle (right), Head of School at Our Lady of Mercy, presents check for ovarian cancer care and research to Ashley Steinberg before a recent game



Ashley Steinberg was presented flowers by Cinnaminson player Katie Ambros as part of the school's Coaches vs. Cancer game

"This is definitely an outlet for me," she said. "I played as a little kid, but I wasn't great or anything. But watching him officiate, he would have a fun time on the court. After my diagnosis, I wanted to get back into basketball and I decided to get back with him and do something that we could together as father/daughter. I ended up doing a board with him, and we had games for a year. As soon as I came over to high school, he retired so he could come to my games and help me. Even now, I'll make a call and if I'm unsure about it, I'll glance over. We'll talk after I go home at night about what I can improve on and what I can do better."

"I'm very proud of her," Sid Steinberg said. "She's strong and she's resilient, and that's why she's a good ref. She doesn't let things bother her. From the situation she was in, this is no big deal. It's great watching her. I come to as many games as I can."

This is Ashley's sixth year reffing basketball, including two spent as a cadet, and she enjoys it greatly. She's become a familiar face on the South Jersey circuit, both for her officiating skill and survival story. Schools have taken the opportunity to honor her and other cancer survivors on nights where she's worked games at their gyms. She and other families have been honored at recent games at Moorestown, Washington Township, Cinnaminson and Our Lady of Mercy Academy. Highland Regional and Camden Catholic are also planning to recognize to her and other survivors in February.

Our Lady of Mercy honored Ashley at its game with Triton on Jan. 30, and also raised funds in her honor for the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition.

"It was an honor to present Ashley Steinberg with a \$3,800 donation towards ovarian cancer research," said Brooke Coyle, the Head of School at Our Lady of Mercy. "She is an inspiration to young women everywhere because of her resilience and courage. It was fantastic to watch her officiate the OLMA/Triton game. Working in a male-dominated field is not easy. Officiating basketball is not easy. Ashley makes it all look easy."

Being recognized as a two-time survivor by so many schools is something which touches her deeply.

"This is why I love reffing," she said. "Being a part of the community and taking part in cancer awareness, not just for me, but for the people who've lost family members and friends, and also with survivors, is very special. It's another way to connect with people."

Aside from the tributes, she's also grateful to share her story so that young girls and anyone else in attendance pay attention to their own health.

"I like to inspire people," Ashley said. "But if I can help save someone's life by creating awareness for early detection, especially for ovarian cancer, it's so very important. I was 24 years old. If I can get a young girl to find her diagnosis and help save her life, then I'm doing my job."

"This cancer doesn't get diagnosed easily," she said. "When it is diagnosed, it is often too late. Also, this cancer most often occurs in older women. I am young and I've had this cancer twice. My goal is to spread as much awareness as possible to save the lives of other females. I want people to learn how to take care of their bodies and listen to what their body is trying to tell them. I hope that sharing my story, strength, and determination inspires people."

It's a message that has resonated throughout the South Jersey community.

"She's a great person for kids to see," Cinnaminson coach Bret Jenkins said. "She shows them if you are ever unfortunately diagnosed with this, it doesn't mean that it's over. You can still beat it and you can still do things actively."

As inspirational as her survival story may be, the other aspect is how her presence as a young, vibrant woman - right down to her fingernails painted in black and white officials' stripes, resonates with teenage female athletes. It helps the players view officials in a different way, since the majority of refs are less relatable older men.

Coaches, meanwhile, appreciate Ashley's presence, not just for being a good example for the girls, but also because she calls a good game.

"She's somebody that makes the girls comfortable," Jenkins said. "If they feel they have to talk, they can talk to her. She's so personable with it, and she's not afraid to talk about a call. That's great for the girls to see, and coaches, as well. She can also motivate girls to think about becoming officials. She's about as good of a role model as you can get."

Rochele Johnson of Cinnaminson is one of the many players who has taken notice of Steinberg's presence on the court, and what she represents as both a cancer survivor and female official.

"She's a nice person, she's very genuine and you can see that she loves the game," Johnson said. "She's someone who makes you think about becoming a ref. It would be a cool experience to not only see other girls play, but support them and help girls basketball grow in South Jersey. I definitely think I can do that. I would look into it."

That viewpoint is something which pleases Steinberg greatly.

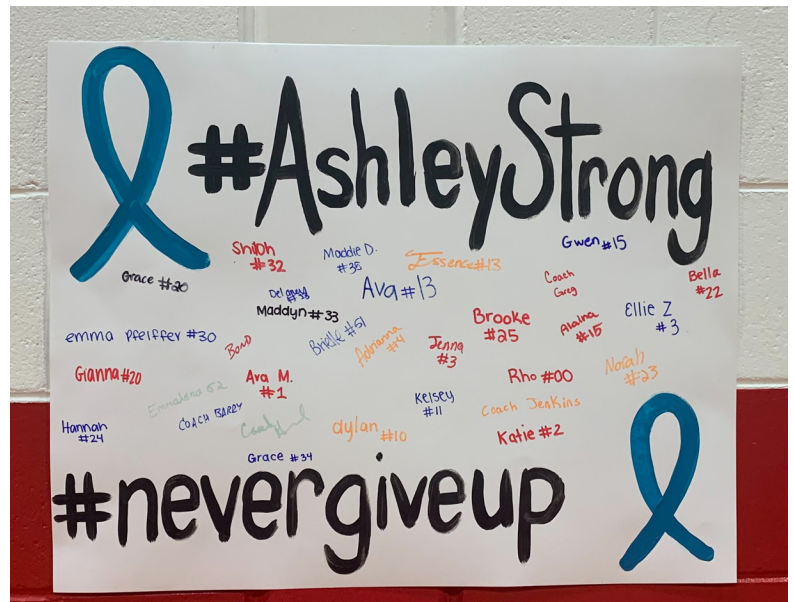
"I'm very touched that I can make such an impact in the game of basketball as a referee and be an inspiration to these basketball players," she said. "I appreciate them acknowledging my love and passion for the game."

Ashley has found officiating so rewarding that she's expanded it to another sport - football.

"Three years ago, before Covid, I did take the cadet class and passed the first semester," she said. "But with my job, I thought it would be hard getting out of work early between football and basketball, so I decided to not pursue football and just partake in being apart of the chain crew and be the clock operator. As last season ended, a lot of football officials asked me to come back on the field and be a part of their crew. I really started to enjoy being out on the football field when I was a part of the chain and clock crew. So I that decided this March, I will be attending the cadet program to become a football official."

To learn more about ovarian cancer, visit the website for the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition at <http://www.ovarian.org>

**Think you might be interested in becoming a high school sports official?
Check out this link to learn more: <https://www.njsiaa.org/officials/become-official>**



Cinnaminson girls basketball players hung this poster in honor of official Ashley Steinberg