

LIFESTYLE // RENEW HOUSTON / FITNESS

Months out of heart surgery, North Houston man tackles ever-greater goals

LINDSAY PEYTON

APRIL 14, 2020 | UPDATED: APRIL 14, 2020 7:22 A.M.



Five months after heart surgery Jason Dragon trains for an upcoming half ironman on the back roads close to Montgomery Texas on Sunday, March 8, 2020.

Photo: Wilf Thorne / Contributor

Jason Dragon almost skipped his doctor appointment. All he needed was some sleep medication to help him adjust to the time change for an upcoming trip overseas. And

when he learned the doctor was running late, Dragon considered just leaving the clinic without getting a prescription.

The North Houston resident didn't yet know anything was wrong with his heart.

But Dragon, 43, stayed. And the visit that ended up changing his life.

"The first thing he did was put a stethoscope to my chest," Dragon recalled. "He said, 'Wow, you have a very pronounced heart murmur. What have they told you about that?'"

The doctor assumed that Dragon had already discussed the murmur with other physicians in his past. He hadn't - and the finding caught him completely by surprise.

Dragon had an active lifestyle. His career in law enforcement required that he stayed fit. He also enjoyed Crossfit, completed several half marathons and even tried the Half Ironman in Galveston. And he'd had several physicals in the past, but no one had alerted him to a heart issue.

Dragon's doctor suggested he see a cardiologist as soon as possible.

"But, instead of going to the doctor, I went to Dr. Google," Dragon recalled.

His Internet searches told him that heart murmurs were common. He decided not to worry and left for his trip.

When he returned, his wife insisted that he go in for an electrocardiogram.

Dragon met with Dr. Tom Nguyen, cardiothoracic and vascular surgeon with Memorial Hermann Heart and Vascular Institute, and was diagnosed with mitral valve prolapse. That means that the flaps on his mitral valve - which connects the left atrium and left ventricle of his heart - don't close evenly. Instead, they bulge upward.

Dragon's mitral valve also leaked.

"Dr. Nguyen said, '98 percent of the time, it's never a problem. But you're in the 2 percent,'" Dragon recalled. "He didn't mince words. You could tell he was certain."

The only option was heart surgery, which Dragon scheduled for October. Typically, this involves cracking open the patient's chest.

"The usual thing they're going to do is go through the front," Nguyen said. "That's the way that they're trained." But he explained to Dragon that there was an option for a less invasive procedure.

Normally surgeons only do a limited amount of mitral valve surgeries annually, he explained.

"Heart surgeons usually only do five a year," Nguyen said. "I did six this week, and it's only Thursday. Because of that, we're able to do more advanced techniques and have smaller incisions."

With this option, Nguyen explained, a complex procedure can happen even with that small incision. The minimally invasive surgery would allow Dragon a quicker recuperation. Instead of two-plus months, he would be fully healed in a few weeks.

"To me, it's a no-brainer," Nguyen said.

Dragon wanted to return to work as soon as possible, so he elected for the minimally invasive surgery.

Plus, he trusted Nguyen: Dragon drew parallels to his career in law enforcement. He often enters dangerous situations and has to rely on his partners. The same was true with the surgery and Dr. Nguyen.

"I knew I had good partners who were going to take care of me," Dragon said. "I was able to enter the process with relative confidence, and I knew I was in one of the best regions in the world to get this fixed."

After the surgery, Dragon stayed in the ICU for four days. Before he left the hospital, he was already thinking of the next Half Ironman - and wanted to begin training.

But first, he had to walk.

After going home, he started with a third of a mile, and he kept adding distance.

For months after his surgery, Dragon fully immersed himself in the training for the Half Ironman in Galveston, which was slated for early April. He worked with a trainer, and added swimming, biking and running to his schedule, for eight to 10 hours a week.

“There’s something to be said for just having the mindset to complete this,” he said.

Then came coronavirus, canceling the event for which he’s trained so intensely. It’s been rescheduled for November, but the organizers also provided an option to register for the 2021 event, which is what Dragon decided to do.

“Just because you have reached a goal doesn’t mean you shouldn’t seek out the next horizon,” he said. “That shouldn’t stop you from having goals.”

He continues his training, now with longer-term goals, equipped with an indoor bike and treadmill, and the addition of yoga to his routine while he moves his workouts indoors to follow social distancing guidelines.

And, his heart is working better these days.

Dr. Nguyen said that Dragon’s heart is actually more efficient. He compared the leaky valve to a car that left a trail of oil in its wake.

“Your heart is like an engine,” Nguyen said. “And it was like it was leaking gas.”

In Dragon’s case, whenever his heart would pump, some of the blood would flow back into his lungs.

“Now, the valve isn’t leaking,” Nguyen said. “It’s working efficiently to get blood back into his body.”

He said that Dragon’s visit to the doctor was serendipitous. “Sometimes, people don’t find out until it’s too late,” he said.

Nguyen recommends that people go for regular check-ups with their physicians.

“Doctors can pick up on stuff that can definitely be life-saving,” he said. “Some signs may be subtle. Maybe you get short of breath. Maybe something else is bothering you. It’s worth going to the doctor to check.”

Dragon agrees – and often recommends check-ups to his co-workers. “Learn from me,” he said. “Go see your doctor, and get a physical.”

Lindsay Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.

Sign up for the ReNew newsletter

Houston's newest source for healthy living.

SIGN UP

By subscribing, you agree to our Terms of use and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our Privacy Policy.

TOP

ABOUT

Our Company	Interest Based Ads
Newspaper Delivery Safety Procedures	Terms of Use
Privacy Notice	Advertising
Your California Privacy Rights	Careers

CONTACT

Subscribe	Customer Service
e-Edition	Frequently Asked Questions
Archives	Newsroom Contacts

HEARST *newspapers*
©2020 Hearst