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Musher diagnosed with cancer

By CHRIS TALBOTT, Staff Writer

Trailbreaking dog musher Susan Butcher has been diagnosed with leukemia and is in Seattle undergoing chemotherapy treatments, according to her family.

Butcher was diagnosed late last week with acute myelogenous leukemia and began treatment Tuesday at a University of Washington cancer center, said Butcher's husband, David Monson.

She had been sick for about three years with a blood disorder, Monson said. Doctors believe she will need a bone-marrow transplant once chemotherapy treatments push her cancer into remission.

"We're going to do everything we can to make sure she has the best care," Monson said Thursday from Seattle. "She does have the best attitude. Someone said this might be a tough disease, but this leukemia hasn't met Susan Butcher yet."

Butcher is a four-time winner of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. She's been out of the 1,100-mile race from Anchorage to Nome for about a decade, raising two daughters. But she remains one of the sport's most visible figures with television commercials, a thriving kennel and an active public appearance schedule.

In a letter sent out on a dog mushing e-mail mailing list, Butcher said she found out about the leukemia Dec. 2 in Seattle and flew home early the next morning to pack and prepare for at least a month of treatment. She said she may have to stay there for as long as six months, with a few breaks.

Doctors are testing family members to see if there is a bone-marrow donor match. But Butcher's doctors have told her it is more likely the match will come from a stranger. She encouraged anyone interested to get themselves tested.

"I will fight this as hard as any person can," she wrote. "I love my family, and love my life with them. That will be what will keep me motivated through the hard times."

The Blood Bank of Alaska is organizing a statewide donor drive on Dec. 30 to test anyone who would like to donate a blood sample, according to a news release put out for the family. The test takes about two weeks to process and potential donors will be added to a national database that holds 5.5 million names.

Officials at Butcher's longtime sponsor, GCI, announced Thursday the company will help pay for the cost of the first 500 tests, which will be free for donors.

"Our history goes back at least 20 years, so it was the least we could do," GCI spokesman David Morris said.

Monson said it is unlikely a match for Butcher will be found among donors in a pool as small as

Alaska. The odds of finding a match on the National Marrow Donor Program list ranges from 1 in 20,000 to 1 in 50,000. But those who donate could be saving lives.

“The fact is they won’t just be helping Susan,” Monson said of potential donors. “The chance of an individual saving Susan is very small. We will find a match for Susan. And everyone who chooses to donate could be a match for someone else who needs a transplant.”

Acute myelogenous leukemia is a cancer of the bone marrow and blood that keeps the body from correctly producing red blood cells and platelets. Several Web sites said between 10,000 and 12,000 people are diagnosed with AML each year.

According to The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society Web site, 19.8 percent of people with acute myelogenous leukemia survived between 1995 and 2001. A bone-marrow transplant increases the chances of surviving.

When asked what doctors had told the family about Butcher’s chances for a recovery, Monson said: “That’s a hard question for me to talk about. I don’t know how to answer it.”

Monson asked that friends and well-wishers not send cards or flowers to Butcher in Seattle. Her immune system is weakened by the chemotherapy, making her more susceptible to illness. She is undergoing treatment in an isolation ward.

Send cards and letters to Butcher at P.O. Box 60249, Fairbanks, AK, 99706. A new Web site, www.susanbutcher.com, should be online today. Monson said the family will update Butcher’s condition on the site, which will include bone-marrow donor information.

“We’ve been humbled by how kind people have been,” Monson said. “It’s pretty overwhelming when people do stuff for you and don’t expect anything in return.”

News of her illness came as a shock in the mushing community. Three-time Iditarod champion Jeff King of Denali Park has known Butcher and competed against her for more than two decades.

“I’m sad but I’m not morose,” King said, “because I know if anybody can beat it, she can. I put her on the same shelf with Lance Armstrong. She’s been dealt a tough blow. But she has led the way for us before and I have no doubt she’ll lead the way and handle her illness with the same kind of matter-of-fact, get-it-done attitude she’s always had.”

Butcher became an international sports sensation in the late 1980s while turning in one of the most dominating performances long-distance mushing has seen. Butcher won the Iditarod four times and finished second by less than an hour in a five-year span that began in 1986.

While she was unable to accomplish her goal of becoming the first woman to win the race--Libby Riddles did that in 1985--she carved a significant place for herself in Iditarod history by finishing in the top five 12 times in her 17 trips down the trail.

A protégé of Iditarod founder Joe Redington Sr., Butcher combined intensity, focus, ingenuity and the ability to adapt and push the boundaries of the sport to rise to the top. In a lot of ways, Butcher led the Iditarod into the international spotlight. Today the race draws the interest of millions and winners take home more than \$60,000 and a new truck.

“Her timing was right,” King said. “The race was young but she figured it out. She was a talented, hard-working young woman at the height of her glory.”

King hopes to see Butcher back on the trails soon. She was often in his thoughts as he trained dogs on the Denali Highway earlier this week.

“I was heading back to my tent (Wednesday) night and the stars came out for a while,” King said. “ I found myself thinking of Susan for an hour or two there. I even did a classic childhood ‘twinkle, twinkle little star’ wish for her. I’m just devastated. It made me think back to all the things I have done with Susan and all the things Susan has done for people. She has inspired a lot of people.”