

# Breast Reconstruction

A patient's guide to understanding her treatment options

## The Breast Goddesses:

Survivor group helps cancer warriors cross the finish line

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**group of breast cancer survivors and their supporters will gather at Zuma Beach in California** on Sept. 14 to participate in the Nautica Malibu Triathlon Relay and pay tribute to women pushing through chemotherapy, surgery and radiation.

Team TBG, which is short for “The Breast Goddesses,” is composed of breast cancer patients, survivors and previvors who aspire to rebuild and embrace their new bodies. They also want to prove how strong they are after undergoing cancer treatment.

As the founder and chair of Team TBG, Tiffany Grunwald, MD, is committed to helping women discover

both their beauty and warrior spirit during their cancer journey. The plastic and reconstructive surgeon from Santa Monica, Calif., formed the



Tiffany Grunwald, MD

survivor’s group in 2011 with a mission to restore women to wellness after reconstruction and make a difference in the fight against breast cancer. Team TBG empowers and instills self-confidence in women who want to overcome their physical and emotional challenges through a supportive community and physical activities, including triathlons, paddling events, charity walks and fun runs.

Dr. Grunwald credits her patient-care coordinator Sheila Young, a triathlete and co-chair of Team TBG, for encouraging her to run their team’s first relay eight years ago to honor their patients. Sheila also suggested they invite breast cancer patients to join them the following year. That marked the start of Team TBG, Dr. Grunwald recalls.

“We started talking about the

triathlon event with patients, and they would be in awe of the training,” she says. “Still, you look at them and realize they’ve already done their own triathlon with chemotherapy, surgery and radiation, so you know they can do this. Some of my patients have been with us for six years now.”

Since its formation, Team TBG and its supporters have participated in the Nautica Malibu Triathlon Relay event to swim, bike and run. The first relay team consisted of Dr. Grunwald and two staff members, but the group has organically grown to 30 teams with 90 athletes, including cancer patients, family members and medical professionals.

“Unfortunately, I see many new breast cancer patients every year,” Dr. Grunwald says, adding her breast cancer patients account for nearly half of Team TBG. “I hope to keep adding people, so we can continue to raise awareness. My goal is to turn this into a group that not only includes my patients, but other breast cancer survivors as well. I love when people from other states reach out and compete with us. It’s an incredible credit to all the patients who participate and share their story.”

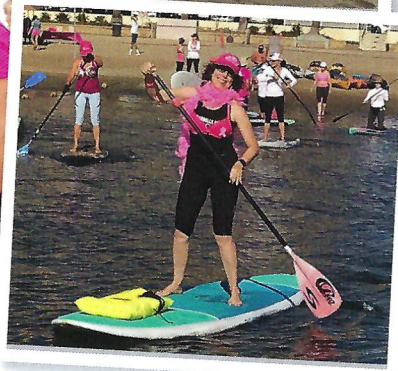
### Embracing the new normal

Dr. Grunwald says she introduces patients to Team TBG’s mission early on in their cancer treatment, often starting with their consultation.

“When a breast cancer patient comes into my office, she feels vulnerable and knows her life is going to change,” she says. “There is so much fear about how her body will feel or what she will be capable of doing after surgery and radiation. We have picture books of what Team TBG does. We tell them they can regain







health and wellness regardless of their reconstruction decision. We show them how women who have gone through exactly what they are about to go through are training with us and competing in the Malibu triathlon. We work with their physical therapist and set goals for them from the beginning.”

Dr. Grunwald says her goal as a reconstructive surgeon is not only about building breasts, but also rebuilding strength and confidence through exercise and a community that makes these women feel like they belong.

“Their bodies no longer feel the same,” she says. “I’ve altered their anatomy. For me, it’s about getting them back out there and helping them feel healthy, strong and beautiful. It’s an important part of my whole process. The biggest thing I hope to accomplish through Team TBG is to give my patients a place where they can learn to love their new normal and their bodies again. That’s the core of what drives me.”

### Training for champions

When Lauren Raissen discovered her lobular carcinoma *in situ* diagnosis increased her risk of developing invasive breast cancer, she underwent a double mastectomy and breast reconstruction. After performing her reconstruction, Dr. Grunwald encouraged Lauren to join Team TBG, and she started paddle boarding with the group in 2013.

“I was in the hospital for a few days, so she caught me at a vulnerable moment,” Lauren jokes, adding she ran her first triathlon with Team TBG one year after her surgery. “I supported them from the sidelines the first time, but I’ve done the run portion of the triathlon every year since then.”

Lauren credits Dr. Grunwald and the group for helping her to rebuild her strength.

“I had several surgeries, and they were really extensive,” she says. “Team TBG got me back on my feet. The more I trained, the stronger I became.”

Getting involved with Dr. Grunwald’s training program with fellow survivors was totally motivating.

“There’s something to be said about training and participating with women who are going through the same thing as you,” she adds. “You can identify and feel each other’s pain and help each other move through it. I’m in better shape now than before I had my surgery.”

Team TBG’s training program for the annual triathlon event begins every March. Team members meet at Venice Pier every Saturday and split into groups to walk, swim, run or bike. Dr. Grunwald says the training program is suitable for any fitness level and notes many participants never trained for a marathon or competed prior to their diagnosis. Team TBG also hosts a monthly Champion Paddle event, where women participate in stand-up paddle boarding to recognize their own strength and honor other champions battling the disease.

Dr. Grunwald says watching the women transform mentally and physically during the triathlon training and Champion Paddle reminds her of why she started Team TBG, adding she experienced her own evolution as an athlete in the process.

“Their transformation is the motivation to keep it going,” she says. “A lot of people are at that stage in their life where they’ve let things go, and breast cancer can certainly be a wakeup call. My patients want to make positive changes in their lives, and this is a great opportunity for them to become healthy, strong and better for their second chapter. Many women take that opportunity and really embrace it. They train with us and go on to do other things, even beyond what our group



does. That makes me so happy.”

Their two-hour training sessions often end with coffee and conversation on the beach. The weekly meetups provide women with an outlet and a safe haven to discuss their cancer experience, and she notes that many look forward to the camaraderie and sisterhood.

“There are always new women to the group who are in the middle of treatment and radiation, and other women will share their tips and challenges,” Dr. Grunwald says. “It’s a beautiful and different aspect for a support group in a survivor community. It’s incredible to listen to them talk to each other about the sequelae they have from chemotherapy or how their implants look in their sports bra.”

Although Dr. Grunwald concedes she is nervous about competing in the swim portion for the first time, she says watching her patients train for the event pushed her to step out of her comfort zone this year.

“Sheila once told me she gets through the triathlon by thinking about our patients and what they go through during treatment, and that pushes her to keep going whenever she struggles with a run or swim,” Dr. Grunwald recalls. “It’s a little nerve-racking for me, but I’m excited. I just look at my patients during the triathlon, and I’m so inspired. It gives me empathy for patients who have to do things they don’t want to do, like surgery. Yet they show up anyway with a smile on their face and they get through it.”

### Finishing strong

After being diagnosed with stage-two breast cancer six months after giving birth, Candice Witek opted for a bilateral mastectomy and underwent breast reconstruction with Dr. Grunwald. She found out about



Team TBG during an office visit. In 2013, Candice joined at the end of her seven-month chemotherapy treatment and completed the triathlon’s 10K in 55 minutes.

“I cried so hard when I crossed the finish line because it meant a lot more to me than just running,” says Candice, who has competed with Team TBG nearly every year. “I was athletic before my diagnosis, and it was a powerful feeling to know that I could get my body to do that after cancer. When you run across the finish line, it’s telling cancer you haven’t stopped me. You haven’t changed who I want to be. You’ve haven’t ruined me. It’s a mutual feeling we all share.”

The mother of three says Dr. Grunwald and Team TBG members provided her with the support and positivity she needed to get through her recurrence four years ago and adds she looks forward to joining them at this year’s triathlon event along with her husband.

“It’s a club you never want to

be in, but it’s also a really beautiful, supportive group of women,” she says. “Crossing the finish line marks an anniversary and another year of us making it. You get really beaten down by the surgeries and chemo, and you’re trapped in your bed for months on end. To get out there and push yourself just makes you feel alive and healthy. I cry every time.”

Dr. Grunwald anticipates the moment she will see all 90 Team TBG athletes on the beach dressed in their fluorescent pink shirts. The Breast Goddesses will put their six-month training to use as they transition from swimming to cycling to running, passing their timing chip to other teammates after completing their race portion. Dr. Grunwald describes the event as a celebration and says they are unapologetically loud in their cheering.

“These women are out there rocking their scars and showing newly diagnosed women and everyone else that cancer is not the end of their health and wellness,” she says. “I love seeing patients who never thought their body could do this come into the transition area, where everyone’s hugging and high fiving them. For me, that is the last step of breast reconstruction – to see them feel so proud of their body and what it’s done.”

Dr. Grunwald says the joy she experiences watching patients cross the finish line is one of her favorite moments. She says she is grateful to be a part of their journey.

“I get to see their grit and determination up close,” she says. “They come in scared and vulnerable. Yet, you see the warrior spirit rise as they go from vulnerability to a sense of pride and appreciation for a body that not only survived cancer treatment but can also perform as a strong athlete. It grounds me every day.” 