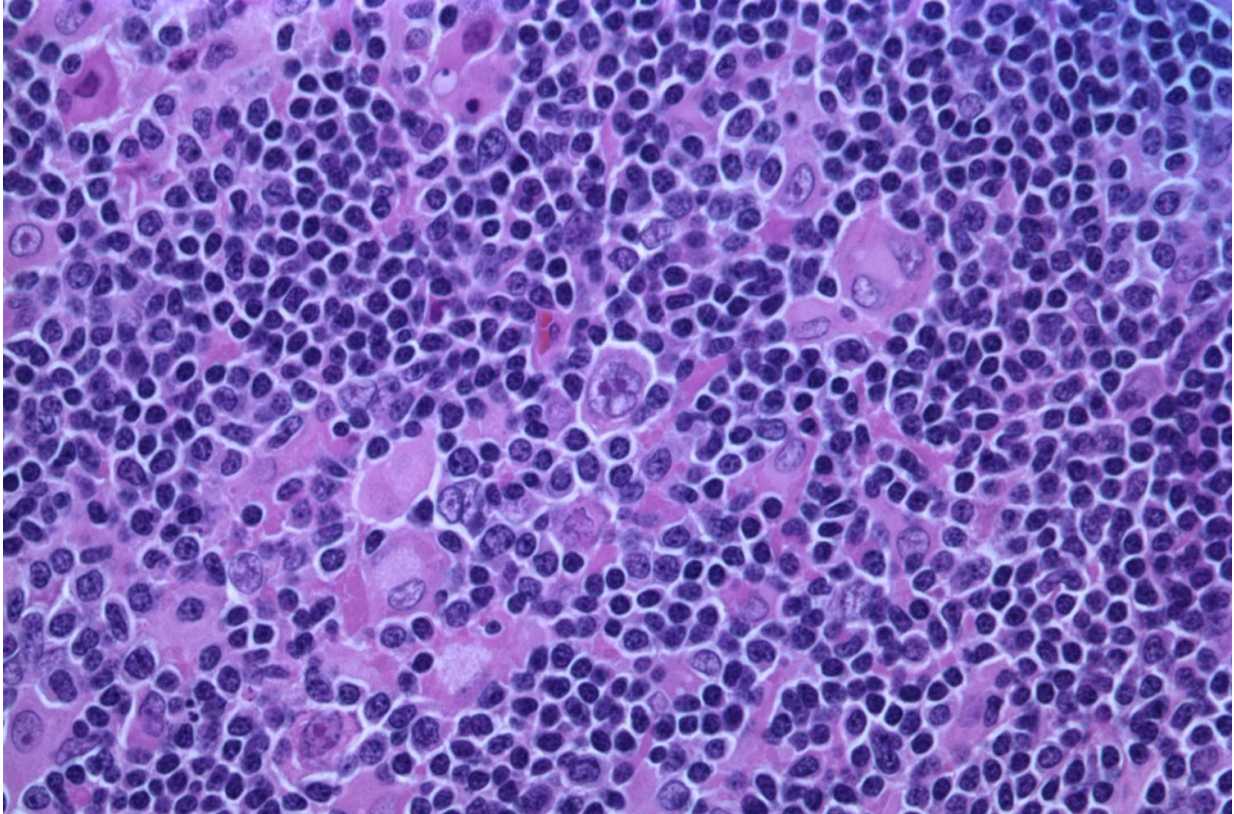


# Understanding athletes with lymphoma

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Hodgkin lymphoma, nodular lymphocyte predominant (high-power view) Credit: Gabriel Caponetti, MD./Wikipedia/CC BY-SA 3.0

One July evening, Allison Rosenthal, D.O., received a flurry of texts with exclamations like, "Yo, my doctor friend is famous!"

"What is going on?" she thought.

She soon learned that her patient, MLB pitcher Liam Hendriks, had just thanked her while accepting ESPN's Jimmy V Award for Perseverance at the 2023 ESPYs, with more than 2.3 million people watching the broadcast that evening.

"She is one of the main reasons that I am up here tonight," said Liam, who beat stage 4 non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in the 2023 off-season.

A few hours later, when the program aired in her time zone in Arizona, Dr. Rosenthal, a lymphoma specialist at Mayo Clinic, tuned in.

"It was emotional for me to watch," she says. "I was moved by his gratitude."

Dr. Rosenthal has a history of helping athletes like Liam return to sports. As a former Division I gymnast who also received a [cancer diagnosis](#) at a young age, she understands how much they want to get back in the game.

## **Motivation and medicine**

During her childhood, Dr. Rosenthal was certain of two things: She loved gymnastics, and she was going to be a doctor.

Her plan was to earn a college gymnastics scholarship and then study to become an orthopedic surgeon. "Sports medicine doctors patched me together time and time again," she says. "That's what motivated me to go to medical school. I wanted to give back."

She landed that college scholarship to Utah State University, where her rock-solid floor exercise and balance beam routines helped propel her team to a Big West Conference championship.

"It came with a lot of commitment," recalls Dr. Rosenthal. "I had to

work all of my prerequisites—my labs and everything you have to do to get into medical school—somehow around practice."

The effort paid off. Dr. Rosenthal was accepted into medical school at Midwestern University in Glendale, Arizona. But two years in, she started to feel sick. She went to the emergency room suspecting the flu. Instead, she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer known as acute promyelocytic leukemia. The care she received over the following two-plus years inspired her to shift to oncology.

Dr. Rosenthal now specializes in lymphoma, a [blood cancer](#) with many forms. But she still supports athletes. "For people under the age of 40, one of the most common types of cancer they get is lymphoma," she says. Because these patients are young, they are more likely to still play sports. Dr. Rosenthal has treated high school, college and professional athletes in baseball, wrestling, water polo, soccer and more.

"My [personal experience](#) as a patient with cancer has influenced how I approach [patient care](#)," she says. "My experience as a competitive athlete for my whole life definitely influences how I approach people who are active."

## Mental toughness

Dr. Rosenthal shares her story with patients to inspire hope, especially in those who see her as an athlete like themselves.

"She's been through something similar, she's still here now, she's happy, she's still pushing forward and fighting that fight," says Liam, who was so moved by his own care that he and his wife, Kristi, became benefactors of Mayo Clinic to support the clinic's cancer efforts.

In her patients, Dr. Rosenthal sees athletes accustomed to working

through discomfort without complaining, just as she did. While staying silent works in practice, Dr. Rosenthal needs patients to describe how they are feeling so she can give them the best possible care.

"It helps to know a little bit about the psyche and the mindset of a competitive athlete," she says. "This is not a test to see how much you can tolerate without speaking up and saying, 'I don't feel good.'"

## **Back in the game**

When patients do feel well enough, Dr. Rosenthal encourages them to return to sports, even during treatment. "It helps with managing this experience if you are able to have something that feels regular," she says.

That doesn't mean going all out right away. In many cases, lymphoma makes people feel tired rather than sick, so elite athletes might be tempted to push too hard through fatigue. She works with them to define limits that keep them active without setting back their treatment.

"We are keeping an eye on what is important to them," she says. "And helping them get back to whatever that may be."

Sometimes, Dr. Rosenthal says, what is important changes for a patient, like how she gave up her dream of becoming an orthopedic surgeon to pursue oncology.

And sometimes, that leads to the unexpected and maybe even a shoutout on national TV.

"I can't imagine doing anything different at this point," she says. "I am certain that this is my purpose."

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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