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Meet Matt Iseman

He turned in his
stethoscope, headed
to Hollywood – and
got diagnosed with
RA along the way

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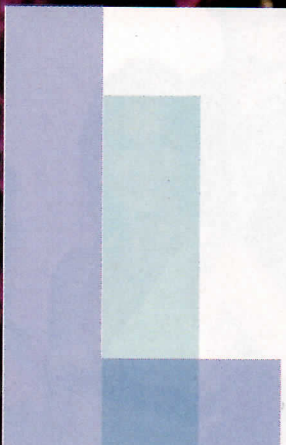
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THE JOKER

BY MARY JO DILONARDO



Matt Iseman quit his medical career just for laughs. When he got rheumatoid arthritis, he thought the joke was over.

LOTS OF PEOPLE SWITCH CAREERS. BUT NOT MANY GO FROM PHYSICIAN TO COMEDIAN, LIKE MATT ISEMAN DID. He made the crazy turn while he was doing his residency, just a year after he graduated with honors from a prestigious medical school.

Being a doctor just didn't feel right to Iseman. As much as he liked knowing he was helping people and following in his doctor father's footsteps, he wanted to entertain people. So he sat his parents down for a chat and told them he was turning in his stethoscope and heading for Hollywood.

"The first words out of my dad's mouth were, 'Life is short. Do what makes you happy,'" says Iseman.

Within days of leaving his Denver home for Los Angeles, Iseman was working the crowds seven nights a week at open-mike nights. He ended up as an extra on "The Drew Carey Show," which led to commercial work and his current hosting jobs with The Style Network's top-rated show, "Clean House," and Versus network's "Sports Soup."

One major glitch along the way was some nagging foot pain – exacerbated, he thought, by long hours and an erratic schedule. For nearly a year, he tried acupuncture and chiropractic and went to see several doctors, including a rheumatologist and podiatrist, but had no luck getting to the root of the ache. It wasn't until he was back in Colorado, visiting his parents over the holidays in 2002, that his dad dragged him to an orthopaedist friend for X-rays, and he got his diagnosis.

The then-32-year-old former college athlete had rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

"He had four joints completely gone," said his dad, Michael Iseman, MD, a pulmonologist at National Jewish Health in Denver and one of the country's leading experts on tuberculosis. "I'm not a rheumatologist, but I knew enough about it to know that young males with erosive RA had a pretty dismal prognosis historically. So, my heart sunk."

For the younger Iseman, however, the diagnosis wasn't a completely terrible thing.

"It was the first time I had a concrete diagnosis, and that, in a way, was a relief," he says. "It was far worse having my body crumble day by day and not know what was going on. While you certainly never want the diagnosis of a chronic debilitating disease, it was good to just say, 'All right, now I know what the problem is. Let's attack it.'"

He started treatment – a regimen of infliximab (*Remicade*) and methotrexate – and the battle was quickly under control.

"Within a couple weeks it was as if a veil had been lifted," he says. "Even as bad as it was, I didn't appreciate how debilitating the disease had become and how my energy had just been sapped. When I started the treatment it was as if I had been given my life back."

BACK TO WORK

With his RA being managed, Iseman was able to bring new energy to his successful entertainment career.

As host of "Clean House," he became part of a team helping people rid their overstuffed homes of Vesuvian mounds of clutter. He was called to fill in for a few episodes but is now on his fourth season with the network's most popular show. Besides adding to his resume, the series has taken away from his own personal mess.

"I had been something of a packrat. But it's been amazing how many trips to Goodwill I've made since being on the show," Iseman says. "When you're asking someone to give up their eighth-grade bowling trophy and then you go home and see yours sitting above the bed, you think, maybe I should practice what I preach."

Although he's now organizing messes, Iseman originally entered the television world via sitcoms. He got his first big break a decade ago right after he landed in Hollywood when a friend suggested he audition for "The Drew Carey Show." Because the show needed extras to act as baseball players, Iseman, a former college ballplayer, gave it a shot and got the job. From there, an agent signed him and he began landing jobs on commercials, hawking everything from foot-fungus cream to video games and bug spray.

"I kind of look like the all-American guy," he says. "I've been pretty good at going into every audition and bringing a smile to it. And I think that's what they respond to. I'm not gonna be the guy who's doing the tear-jerking soliloquy from Hamlet. I'll be the guy who's having the good time."



The "Clean House" cast:
(from left) Matt Iseman, Trish Suhr,
Niecy Nash, Mark Brunetz

"Because of foot pain, my podiatrist said, 'I'm going to make you wear wooden clogs.' I was single. If you want to stay single, wear wooden clogs."

As host of "Sports Soup," Iseman takes an irreverent look at some of the low-lights in sports on cable's Versus network, formerly the Outdoor Life Network. And this summer he played a soldier in

the blockbuster movie "Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen," a pretty big splash for his first big-screen role.

Earlier in his career, he made an appearance on the soap opera "General

Hospital" but laughs that although he is an actual doctor, he didn't play one on the show. Iseman says, "They thought I was more credible as a thug than a doctor!"

THE MEDICAL SIDE

Technically, Iseman is still an MD. He keeps his medical license current and is able to practice in California, but he doesn't. Friends still occasionally ask him for a diagnosis when they have aches, pains or the sniffles, but he's more likely to treat them

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with a joke or a smart-aleck response (“Go see a real doctor!”) than ever whip out his now-dusty stethoscope.

He limits his “medical work” to speaking engagements in front of health care industry groups where he wisely cracks about how much fun it is to use a

ALWAYS LAUGHING

Iseman’s RA doesn’t slow him down on the road. He performed for the athletes at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (“I don’t think the Jamaican bobsled team found me as funny as I thought they should.”) And he has trav-

“I tried acupuncture. I was having troubles with my neck, my back, my hands and my feet, so of course he put needles in my face.”

defibrillator and how women in Los Angeles want to date actors playing doctors, not real doctors.

Iseman has also spoken at several Arthritis Foundation events, and especially loved speaking to kids with juvenile arthritis. “Kids are so resilient, but I think it means a lot for them to see that they’re not alone in their condition,” he says. “I marvel at their positive attitude. The one thing I never see in these kids is self-pity.”

As far as his arthritis, nearly seven years after his diagnosis, the same combination of medications continues to be successful. Iseman takes methotrexate weekly and gets a *Remicade* infusion every eight weeks. “They put the needle in, I fall asleep and two and a half hours later I’m done.”

The illness, he says, so far has only had minimal impact on his life thanks to his successful treatment. “Although I’ve given up anything that really pounds on the body, I still ski, play golf and I’m doing yoga. It’s been a pretty amazing reversal of fortune thanks to the medication,” he says.

“Having been in medicine and having been on the other side of the stethoscope, I have such appreciation for the people who are dedicated toward helping treatment and find new cures for arthritis, because I realize it’s certainly always going to be part of my life.”

eled the world entertaining the troops in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

“When you’re over in Iraq and you see some 18-year-old kid who’s just been been shot at that day and you look at his face and you see him laughing and he’s not thinking about where he is, it’s such a privilege to perform there. It’s so humbling,” he says. “I realize you’re not changing lives with comedy, but you’re really making a difference in somebody’s day when you’re performing for the troops.”

These days, in between shooting his two television shows and various commercials, he still finds time to perform at comedy clubs.

“When they call my name to go up on stage I still get the butterflies,” he says. “I love doing this. I love entertaining people and being the cruise director of fun. I get such a kick out of it.”

THE BIG DECISION

Hardly a surprise, the kid who became a comedian was the class clown growing up. “I was the youngest child and I think my mom probably just lavished me with too much attention, laughing at everything I did,” he says. He was more into sports than the arts in high school and college, becoming a fairly accomplished baseball pitcher.

Matt, his mom and his older brother tagged along to South Africa when his father gave a lecture and his dad says he believes that was a defining moment that set his son on his brief path to medicine. “It was certainly an interesting and aspiring trip. He came back thinking medicine was an interesting thing to do.”

So, after graduating with honors from Princeton University and medical school at Columbia University, he went home to the University of Colorado for his medical residency. Only a few months into it, he knew things weren’t going to work out.

“As I got into it I realized


I liked the cerebral aspect and challenge of it, but my heart just wasn’t in it,” he says. “It was just that sensation that while going to the hospital I didn’t feel like I belonged there.”

He decided to move to Los Angeles, take one year off and try something completely different from what he was doing. He knew he wanted to entertain people, and so he left for Hollywood with the total support of his mom and dad.

“Matt gave medicine a great shot,” says his father. “He just knew it wasn’t where he wanted to be in the future.”

And right now, Iseman feels like he’s there. Or kind of there. He’s happy with his television work and his comedy and his first movie. But he’d like to do more sitcoms and more films and maybe have a late-night talk show. He’d like, he says, to be the next Will Ferrell or Craig Ferguson or Jay Leno.

But he doesn’t see himself returning to medicine.

“Medicine is not a job. It’s a calling. It’s not something you do halfway. If it is, it’s a disservice to you and your patients,” he says. “There are a lot of people who don’t have the luxury to switch careers. I was very fortunate to at least be able to give it a shot and even more fortunate that it worked out.” 

Mary Jo DiLonardo is a freelance writer in Atlanta.