

OPINION

# Maggie Mulqueen: Getting back on my skis after cancer was a triumph



Maggie Mulqueen on the slopes with her husband. (Family photo)



By **MAGGIE MULQUEEN**

March 22, 2024 at 5:00 a.m.

“But is it fun?” one of my friends asked as I told her of my plans to head to the mountains for a few days of downhill skiing. “Fun” is not the word that first comes to mind when I think of skiing. Why do I still get up at the crack of dawn, lug my gear to the bottom of a mountain and break a sweat before even reaching the chair lift? Because it’s important to me.

One of the byproducts of aging is distilling what is important from what is not. Sometimes, due to a change in circumstances, this clarification comes not from choice but necessity. As soon as one starts measuring time in terms of what is left rather than what is ahead, there is a reckoning about priorities.

I started skiing when I was 45 years old, a result of raising three active boys in New England. At the time they were learning to ski, I determined I was too young to sit in the lodge all day. I am not an especially athletic person, but what I lack in skill I make up for with competitiveness. After some lessons, I became a solid blue trail skier. Now at 68, I envy young children who bounce up after their falls and ski down the mountain with abandon. But the chance to be with my family outdoors for the day was reward enough.

I am always nervous the first day out on the mountain at the start of the season, wondering if I will remember how to ski. Unlike riding a bicycle, which I have done since I was a child, skiing never similarly turned into muscle memory for me. It takes my full concentration to get down the slope. In my mind’s eye, I am standing tall and my skis are parallel. On the days when the sun casts a shadow of my figure, I am inevitably disappointed to see how far off I actually am from good form.

But I persevere. My sons and my husband ski all over the mountain, making multiple runs for every one of mine. When we meet for lunch at the lodge, there is great camaraderie as we share stories about the snow conditions and the sights we saw. Despite my competitive nature, I don’t think of myself as coming in last but more as a member of the team. I can still make the cut.

And then in December 2022, I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and so there was no skiing for a year. A trip to Colorado was canceled, and a very expensive ski pass sat unused. During cancer treatments, there is a lot of time to rethink priorities. I hated how much ground I lost physically as I napped most days and lost my conditioning. There is an insidiousness to a cancer diagnosis that disrupts the ability to trust one’s body. Grit alone could no longer carry me through my former routines.

So, when my body healed, I decided to give skiing a try again. Even though many of my friends hung up their downhill skis years ago, I wasn't ready to call it quits. My usual first day jitters were worse than ever as my husband and I headed to the mountain. I kept telling myself that I could stop whenever I wanted to. Even if I just did one run, that would be enough.

We started on a green trail just to be safe. I was terrified about whether I had the strength to rise up from the chair lift, but my quadriceps kicked in, and I found myself standing at the top of the mountain. As I made my way down, ever so slowly, I kept reminding myself that a year ago, my body was being pumped with chemicals and here I was outside participating in the world.

When I came to a stop at the bottom of the run, the tears began to flow. I had done it. It wasn't fun, but it was ever so important.

*Maggie Mulqueen, Ph.D., is a psychologist who has written for outlets such as CNN Opinion, NBC NewsThink and The Boston Globe.*

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com).

## TRENDING NATIONALLY

- 1 World's First: Mass General transplants pig kidney into a 62-year-old man**
- 2 Born to die: Florida's infant mortality crisis | A special report**
- 3 Lawsuit to stop Virginia Beach offshore wind farm claims project is a danger to whales**
- 4 Endangered ape surprises keepers with new baby**
- 5 March Madness: Latest news and bracket standings**

2024 > March > 22