

The Biggest Fight of Their Lives

By Farhan Shah

Standing in the red corner, weighing a combined total of more than 300 pounds is the Sirucek family – Cole Sirucek, Grace Park and baby Rand – and in the blue corner, at just a few grams, is the scourge of biliary atresia.

I am sitting across Cole Sirucek – former investment professional with Temasek Holdings, founder of EPIC MMA Club, one of the largest fighting gyms in Asia, and co-founder of DocDoc, a revolutionary online healthcare concierge – and he is slowly unbuttoning his shirt in front of me. A few heartbeats later, I see the giant angry scar running vertically down his chest where the surgeons carved him open. The scar is a permanent reminder of perhaps the most painful episode of his life, and one he willingly signed up for.

But, the genesis of the scar was about a year back, the culmination of a series of events that led Cole to that moment, naked from the waist up while lying down and looking at a bunch of silhouettes in operating scrubs, wondering how he found himself in this situation.

Cole and his wife, Grace Park, had brought their newborn daughter, Rand, for a routine medical appointment. Rand had just turned two-months-old and, by all accounts, was happy and healthy. “I thought the hardest part, the delivery, was already over. Rand had passed the APGAR test and had almost reached the 100-day mark. In Korea, where I am from, this is a landmark occasion. It is a throwback to a historical period when a baby’s survival rate dramatically increases after the first 100 days and we would celebrate it with feasting and parties,” says Grace.

Unfortunately, when the medical test results came back, the doctor had bad news. Rand was suffering from biliary atresia, a rare congenital liver defect that occurs when the common bile duct between the liver and the small intestine is blocked or absent. As a result, Rand’s body could not safely transport the bile – a waste by-product – away from the liver, which would eventually result in liver failure. Children who do not have this condition rarely survive beyond their second birthday.

The clock was ticking down for Rand and her parents. Babies with biliary atresia only had a small window of opportunity to undergo the



Kasai portoenterostomy, a surgical treatment that helps to drain bile from the body, before the prognosis becomes bleak. The later the operation is done, the lower the baby’s chances of survival.

“Let me tell you, the first thought that went through my mind when the doctor broke the news to us was: ‘Second opinion!’” Cole says, laughing loudly. It was a brief moment of levity in an otherwise grim situation and it would prove useful in the coming fight ahead as Cole and Grace moved quickly, calling everyone in their phonebooks to find out who the best surgeon in the world was for this delicate and risky operation.

Everyone they knew in the medical industry told them that their best bet was to head to Japan and find Dr Koichi Tanaka, a leading pioneer in living-donor liver transplants and one of the central figures who helped advance liver operations to its current state today. The only problem was getting hold of such a busy and influential figure. Salvation came in the form of a family friend, a Singaporean surgeon who worked alongside them for a charitable initiative a few years back. “Cole and I ran 250 kilometres across the Gobi Desert once for charity. We managed to raise about US\$75,000, all of which we used to fund heart surgeries for children in Vietnam and China who could not

afford it. The doctor whom we worked with helped us get in touch with Dr Tanaka,” Grace reminisces.

Dr Tanaka agreed to carry out the procedure and a whirlwind plane ride later, Cole and Grace found themselves in Japan on 26 March 2013, pacing outside the operating theatre while Dr Tanaka and team operated on baby Rand.

To understand the difficulty and magnitude of this operation, imagine opening up the chassis of your laptop computer and looking at all the small parts that make it function. Now, imagine all of these parts moving and pulsating as though they are alive, and you have to make your way through all of them without accidentally dislodging any of them to get to a minute wire, no more than 6 millimetres in diameter. Then, you have to carefully move this wire and attach it to another vibrating part before withdrawing your hands and putting everything back together as it once was.

Baby Rand was wheeled out of the theatre, none the worse for wear thanks to the skilful hands of Dr Tanaka. Yet, that was not the end. The Kasai procedure is only a temporary stopgap measure to allow the baby’s body to function normally for a short period of time and most importantly, to grow bigger, so that a liver transplant could be carried out in the near future.



The only question was who would be the donor.

“Grace and I actually competed to see who would get the opportunity!” Cole recalls with a smile, “we were training hard before going through the tests that would determine who would be a better donor. The doctors want someone with high VO2 max scores (a measure of how efficiently your body uses oxygen) as it means you’ll recover faster. Of course, the size and shape of your liver, and your blood type also matters.”

Now, before you dismiss this as an uneven match-up, you must understand Grace is no slouch herself. The former managing director of a Fortune 500 company is a product of the prestigious West Point military academy and was one of the very few Asian women in her cohort. And do not let her gender fool you, Grace was the second-fittest graduate, losing to a male compatriot by only 0.001 point. At her peak, she was hitting 114 push-ups and 109 sit-ups in two minutes and ran two miles or 3.2 kilometres in 12 minutes 36 seconds.

When the both of them went through the tests, Cole was deemed to be a better candidate for the transplant operation, which was pencilled in for 24 September, about six months after the Kasai procedure.

That was the day Cole found himself looking up at Dr Tanaka and his band of surgeons in their scrubs and was, in his own words, “scared shitless”. Dr Tanaka, sensing Cole’s heightened, fearful emotions, held his hand. At this point in the interview, Cole stops momentarily, tears welling up in his eyes as he recalls that fateful day. Here is a man who handled investment portfolios worth hundreds of millions of dollars and who fought Muay Thai professionally, overwhelmed by a flood of emotions at the mere thought of his daughter and his selfless deed. “It is heavy,” he says quietly.

Fifteen hours later, at 1030 pm, Cole and baby Rand were wheeled out of the operating theatre into the grateful embrace of a worried Grace. Rand had literally been cut into half but had emerged unscathed and alive from the life-threatening operation. As for Cole, well, Cole just wanted to crawl into a dark corner, so bad was the pain. “It was gnarly. A transplant is one of the most painful procedures a male can endure; doctors compare it to childbirth. Coughing, even breathing, hurt. I kept trying to relate the pain I felt to other injuries that I have had in the past and I kept thinking to myself, ‘My goodness this is a thousand times worse’.”

And while his friends and family were carefully patting him on the back and lauding his selflessness and heroism, Cole felt differently about the entire experience. Being a hero was not someone he aspired to be and even though he is being adulated as one up till this day, he still doesn’t see himself as someone special. It is not false modesty but, rather, humility coupled with the realisation of the temporal nature of life.

“You are not a hero until the situation presents itself and you do something about it. And when the situation does present itself, you’re not thinking about becoming a hero. You’re just thinking about making the situation better. I don’t feel like pounding my chest or telling the world, ‘I DID THIS! LOOK AT ME!’”

He turns contemplative, trying to find the words to articulate an intense emotion that, one might say, can only be fleetingly felt with the soul, an emotion that countless philosophers and authors have tried to distil into their works of literature.

“Heroic acts are innately selfless and, at the same time, overwhelming. Humility is what is most often found in their wake independent of the ultimate outcome. I finally understood why many of the brave heroes that we read about are often humbled. The experience definitely gives you a different perspective on the idea of heroism and on life.”

Six months after the operation, Cole and baby Rand are in the pink of health, with only the scars on their bodies serving as a memento of their time on the cold surgical tables. And even though baby Rand will be on medication for many years to come, Cole and Grace are just thankful that their bundle of joy is able to experience the joy of living.

The taxing ordeal has also solidified Grace’s vision for DocDoc, affirming that the portal is not just a tool to connect families with doctors but to empower them with the two most important things in today’s digital age – information and resources. She acknowledges the crucial role her extensive network played in helping to save baby Rand and she now hopes to put that same power in the hands of every family. “I have a greater conviction of my purpose in life. The experience that the three of us went through; my business; everything is somehow connected. It gives me motivation to be a messenger of hope to all the families out there who might be going through the same predicament that Cole and I did,” says Grace.



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Cole too wants to be a messenger for families, only he comes bearing an entirely different but still purposeful message. “I strongly encourage all families who are about to undergo a major operation to secure the financing they need from their insurance companies as early as possible. Specifically, what you will need is a Letter of Guarantee. Though we finally ended up having full coverage for Rand and myself, I was amazed at the amount of time, effort and energy it took to enforce our policy,” shares Cole, alluding to

the struggles he had with his own insurance company.

Ultimately, Grace and Cole want to spread their story and help other families overcome a seemingly insurmountable medical obstacle. The both of them are also in the midst of setting up a charity foundation for this purpose, just one project in a laundry list of initiatives to help disadvantaged families overcome the bad hands life has dealt them. No, they are not heroes and they would not want the tag foisted on them. They would say that they are just being...human. 🌸