

## THE BLOODLINE WITH LLS

A PODCAST FOR PATIENTS AND CAREGIVERS

### ***Episode: 'Together in the Fight Against Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML): Roman Reigns' Story'***

#### **Description:**

We will be speaking with WWE Superstar, actor, and former professional football player, Joseph Anoa'i, who many may know as Roman Reigns. Apart from fighting opponents in the ring, Roman found himself fighting his biggest opponent yet after receiving his leukemia diagnosis back in 2007. Listen as Roman Reigns explains his cancer journey to our very own President & CEO, Dr. Louis DeGennaro.

#### **Transcript:**

**Alicia:** Welcome to *The Bloodline with LLS*. I'm Alicia.

**Edith:** I'm Edith.

**Lizette:** And I'm Lizette. Thank you so much for joining us on this episode.

**Alicia:** Today we will be speaking with WWE superstar, actor, and former professional football player, Joseph Anoi's, who many may know as Roman Reigns.

Apart from fighting opponents in the ring, Roman found himself fighting his biggest opponent yet, after receiving his leukemia diagnosis back in 2017.

On this episode, Dr. Louis DeGennaro, President and CEO of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society will be speaking with Roman about his leukemia diagnosis and what that journey was like for him.

Dr. Lou, take it away.

**Louis DeGennaro, MD:** Thank you. Roman, it's so great to have you here today. I'd love to talk to you about the experiences you've had in your life and as a patient, so that our patients can benefit from that.

Lot of curiosity about what motivated you to become a WWE superstar. I've always wondered that myself. I wonder if you can share it.

**Roman Reigns:** Well, you know it's kind of a family business for us. My father was a wrestler along with my uncle, and before him, before those guys, they were mentored by the high chief, Peter Maivia, which is, I mean, he was huge way back in the day, his name was really brought to life whenever his grandson, The Rock, Dwayne Johnson, hit it big and made a name for himself. So, he was kind of as a huge mentor for my father and uncle and really brought them into the business.

And then from there it was just countless cousins all the way to my brother and then my cousins, the Usos, who also wrestle currently with me, to myself, and then we have a few more cousins that are younger than us that are also in line who can also do some special stuff. So, hopefully we're just continuing the tradition and building the legacy for even more of our family tree to partake.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** That's fantastic. I always knew that family was important to you, and now I can see why and how extensive it is. It's absolutely a fantastic story. You got off to a great start in your career. And then I know you were surprised with a cancer diagnosis, with the diagnosis of leukemia. I wonder if you could share what that diagnosis was and a little bit of the signs and symptoms that you had.

**Roman Reigns:** Yeah, once my career got going, I had a bit of a relapse with CML and diagnosed with CML, which is chronic myeloid leukemia. And mainly, I think a huge part of it was just the fatigue. And one thing, sometimes I forget just because, we're so used to, you know, being sports entertainers and performers and just how physical our job is, we kind of can just mow over the little injuries and the bumps and the bruises, but one thing that I didn't really take full notice of because I just felt like, I'm supposed to be sore. When you're wrestling, sometimes five matches a week, three to four nights a week, you're just beat up, you know, and you have all these nicks and bruises and you just kind of get used to feeling sore all the time, along with training, being in the gym as well.

But my spleen had enlarged and that was something that I think was kind of one of the more, short term, serious side effects that I had to deal with, just involving the physicality of being in the ring and, God, you know, I'm so lucky that fortunately nothing happened. Thank God that I work with some really, really talented performers and some, just great professionals. Just, guys who, as violent and as physical as our job can be, they're very good at what they do and no one hit me, you know, in the wrong place and caused a rupture or anything like that because, as I'm sure you know, that being out of town in an arena, on the road, away from your family, something like that happens and you get rushed to the emergency room.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yep.

**Roman Reigns:** Going to surgery. It just can, you know, along with how serious it is, it could just cause such a crazy, you know, just an emotional roller coaster for everybody. So that was something that we had to really, take into account and get me out of the ring. And that's why it just all started to happen so abruptly.

But I think the main thing I was feeling was the fatigue. Always feeling tired, not quite sure why. Even if I were able to get good nights of rest, even have a couple days of recovery, being off the road, it just, it never felt like it got off of me. It was just that monkey on my back at all times.

But along with that, I just always thought it was, when you're working hard and you're chasing your dreams and you're busting your tail every single week trying to, you know, get the job done, especially when you're performing at an elite level, at the very top of the biggest company in the world as far as sports entertainment. These are just, you know, the rigors that come with the schedule and the lifestyle. So, I tried not to, as we would say in the wrestling world, tried not to sell it, but thank God, we were well taken care of, between the company, and then my doctors, my oncologists doing our blood tests and our CBCs and then keeping track of that stuff and they could see my white blood cells getting out of whack again.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** So, that's how you really discovered the diagnosis again was through your blood counts and seeing if the white blood cell count was abnormal.

**Roman Reigns:** Correct, yeah. Yeah, and I mean, you know better than anybody, that's kind of the beauty with blood cancer is it's one of the easiest cancers to test and, you know, do research and labs on, because it's not invasive as far as having to cut out a tumor, you know, take a slice of tissue and sample that. So very, very lucky in that regard.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yes. So, when I talk with cancer patients, they frequently tell me how cancer has changed their lives. So, has it changed it for you, Roman?

**Roman Reigns:** Oh, absolutely. You know, I've always been one to take care of myself, especially being an athlete. But I think especially now, as I've gotten a little bit older and matured over the years, I really go out of my way to live a healthy lifestyle and to live, to put my nutrition and, you know, put my fitness first because, at the end of the day and, you know, sometimes as a young man you can be hard headed and that's a light statement there, you can be very hard headed.

I think over the years you've seen, and I'm not sure why. I'm sure you know better than I would, you're seeing younger patients, you know, diagnosed with this, and I think as young people can be resilient, you know, very prideful, sometimes arrogance. They don't think even in the face of something as serious as leukemia that, well this isn't going to stop me, I'm going to continue to live my life and I'm going to continue to fight for my dreams and live out my goals. But there are some concessions that need to be made.

You know, you have to really take into account, your fitness, your exercise, what you're putting in your body, the nutrition, and the rest that you're getting. And sometimes all of those things are not checked off by a 20-year old.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** So, were there special places you went for resources to learn about what to do? Did you rely on your doctor or some healthcare professionals? Did you ever come to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society for advice?

**Roman Reigns:** Actually, yeah. You know, a lot of it early on was mainly through my doctors and my oncologists at the time, but it was something that I did with, you know, just doing some research and visiting LLS.org. You know, at the time it was just a website and I didn't have any names or cases or resources or true contacts, but it was something as far as just getting information. And, even now to this day, which a lot of times just a simple Google search will revert you right to the website.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yep.

**Roman Reigns:** So, I think it's not only just the information but getting good information, getting a reliable source. That way you can have those connections and then the understanding of what you're going through and what's essentially attacking your body. And, to also understand that you're not alone. I think that's, you know, and especially with leukemia. That's one of the hardest things to understand because sometimes you don't see a major change. Sometimes it can be like a silent assassin attacking you and you don't know what's going on, and sometimes that can be worse when your brain can wonder and you can mentally go insane thinking how can this happen to me, you know. I look healthy, I feel healthy, other than being tired and maybe a few small things here or there. You're just not quite sure why this is happening to you.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yeah.

**Roman Reigns:** So, if you can rely, and tap into a reliable resource, man that would make it so much easier for you mentally which, obviously connects emotionally and for some spiritually.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yes. You know, we pride ourselves in having extremely high quality information and having it available in any way a patient wants to consume it, right on the web or by phone or by text or any way, so that we can help patients.

It's interesting you paint a very vivid picture of what living with leukemia is like. Everything from not only physical challenges but even the way it affects your psyche as well. It's pretty amazing.

You have a leukemia that is treated, where you can treat it at home just taking one of these modern precision medicine drugs. I wonder if, you know, whether it colors the way you think about it at all.

**Roman Reigns:** Yeah, that was one of the biggest blessings I guess is, and, you know, all of this kind of happening, during my original diagnosis, all the way, and then to see the advancements, and that's a huge god send is the oral chemotherapy. And to be able to do it and not have to go through true chemotherapy and radiation, and just have the advances of research and to be able to benefit from the hard work of so many great organizations like LLS.

It's definitely something that I think about often, just how lucky and you have to be able to go full circle, because you are dealing with those things and some people are, especially early on. Years ago, I felt like I had had a huge – being an athlete – a huge asterisk next to my name. You know, now I think, as my story has kind of come out, and then you've seen a few different professional athletes along the way over the last five to ten years, their diagnosis has become public and, their fight, and then their comeback as well.

So, I think it's something that's known as being a lot more manageable and it's not just such a dream shatterer. But, you know, back then, when I was just 21 years old, it shook my world because, since I was seven years old, I put everything into athletics. I put everything into football. And, you know, like most young men, I had all my marbles in that one basket, and it just, it really did a number on me. But, I'm so thankful that A, I was involved in athletics, I was involved with really key organizations that put you through these physicals and put you through these different tests and exams and blood work and, you know all these extensive, tests to make sure that you are healthy and that they can invest money in you.

And, so for me, it was just huge to be able to deal with something that was starting, the tide was turning for leukemia at that point.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yes.

**Roman Reigns:** You know, 15 years ago, maybe even before that, when the medications were starting to come out. But to be right there on the forefront of it, even before people really understood, like they do now, and, you know, as we continue to get good information out there and raise awareness because still, to this day, not enough people know. But I just felt like the timing was, it was very lucky for me. As I was going through that, through this emotional roller coaster, I still felt like, research and the world had my back in a small sense, that not so much as it is now to where literally, it feels like the world has my back now and support of so many people, you know, when it, became public a couple years ago. But even then, I just felt like the doctors, science, research, I was just in really good hands.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Well, Roman, I think you should give yourself a little credit here too. Clearly, you're a resilient guy and I'm betting, you know, take us all the way back to what you said at the beginning, having your family around you and having their support was really helpful. Can you say a little bit, too, about the role of the caregiver in all of this, how I'm sure your family was there supporting you along the way. That must have been important to you.

**Roman Reigns:** Oh, it's huge because I think, and I think about it now, and the first thing I thought about is, when I do a hospital visit, or I get to do a Make a Wish, or meet someone who is sick. When you see the family around them, and you see the loved ones, the friends, you know, the mother, the father, the siblings. When you see the struggle that they're all going through, and especially in a situation, you know, when you have a little bit of impact to make a, turn a bad day into a good day and you can put some smiles on the faces and just really see how much it changes, you know, the people that are surrounding the patient, and just how, you know, that's not just the patient going through the struggle, it's the whole family. It's, anyone that they've affected or created a relationship or a bond within their life.

And that goes all the way from family to friends to the, you know, the caretakers within the hospital. All the way, from the nurses to the doctors, to the ladies that just take you back and draw your blood. You build a rapport, you know, when you're going in every single week you end up building relationships with all these people. And they get to see you, from day one when you're beady eyed and your terrified, got a fear in your heart. It's all the way to where you say, okay, you see your white blood cells

coming down, you see some normalization happening. And they all get to go on their roller coaster ride with you which, you know, obviously we always want it to be, the safe finish, the comeback story. And I think, everyone involved in research and the science behind pushing these medications and these drugs to help and save lives. They definitely see that process get stronger and stronger as the years go along.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Yes.

**Roman Reigns:** It's all about surrounding yourselves with people you love. That way you're reminded what you're fighting for every single day. You know, every single day you have to remind yourselves, the beauty of this world and why it's so important to have another day.

**Dr. DeGennaro:** Well I was going to ask you what advice you'd have for other patients, but you just gave it. It's fantastic. You're, paying it forward, Roman, and thank you for doing that. You're paying it forward by doing recordings like this that I know will be impactful when other patients hear it.

I've got one last question for you. So, on our patient podcast homepage, we have a quote that says, "After a diagnosis comes hope." Based on your cancer journey and everything you've experienced, what word would you choose to complete that sentence, after a diagnosis comes?

**Roman Reigns:** Not as pretty as hope, but I think the fight. After a diagnosis comes the fight. And I think that means a couple different things. Obviously, you know, fighting for your life and fighting for tomorrow, and earning tomorrow.

But, also knowing what you're fighting for, like we just spoke about, the family. The things that you love, the opportunity to live and to pursue your dreams. And fighting for that tomorrow isn't just necessarily the 24 hours that we expect every day, but the opportunity to whether, create, to love, to respect, to honor, to show loyalty. Anything that comes along with it. The opportunity to struggle. Sometimes that as big as, you know, thriving is understanding the struggle and how we bond through that.

So, I think, yeah, after the diagnosis, for me, was the fight. And then, even to this day we continue, not only to fight, for my opportunity to live tomorrow but, for others as well. And you continue to fight to raise awareness and to continue to push this thing forward to make it as easy as possible for future patients and anyone who finds themselves in the same struggle one day.





**Dr. DeGennaro:** Well thank you, Roman. As always, whether it be in the WWE ring or here on the patient podcast, you're an inspiration to all of us. Thank you again for joining us and for telling us this story.

**Roman Reigns:** Thank you, Doctor, and appreciate you for having me.