

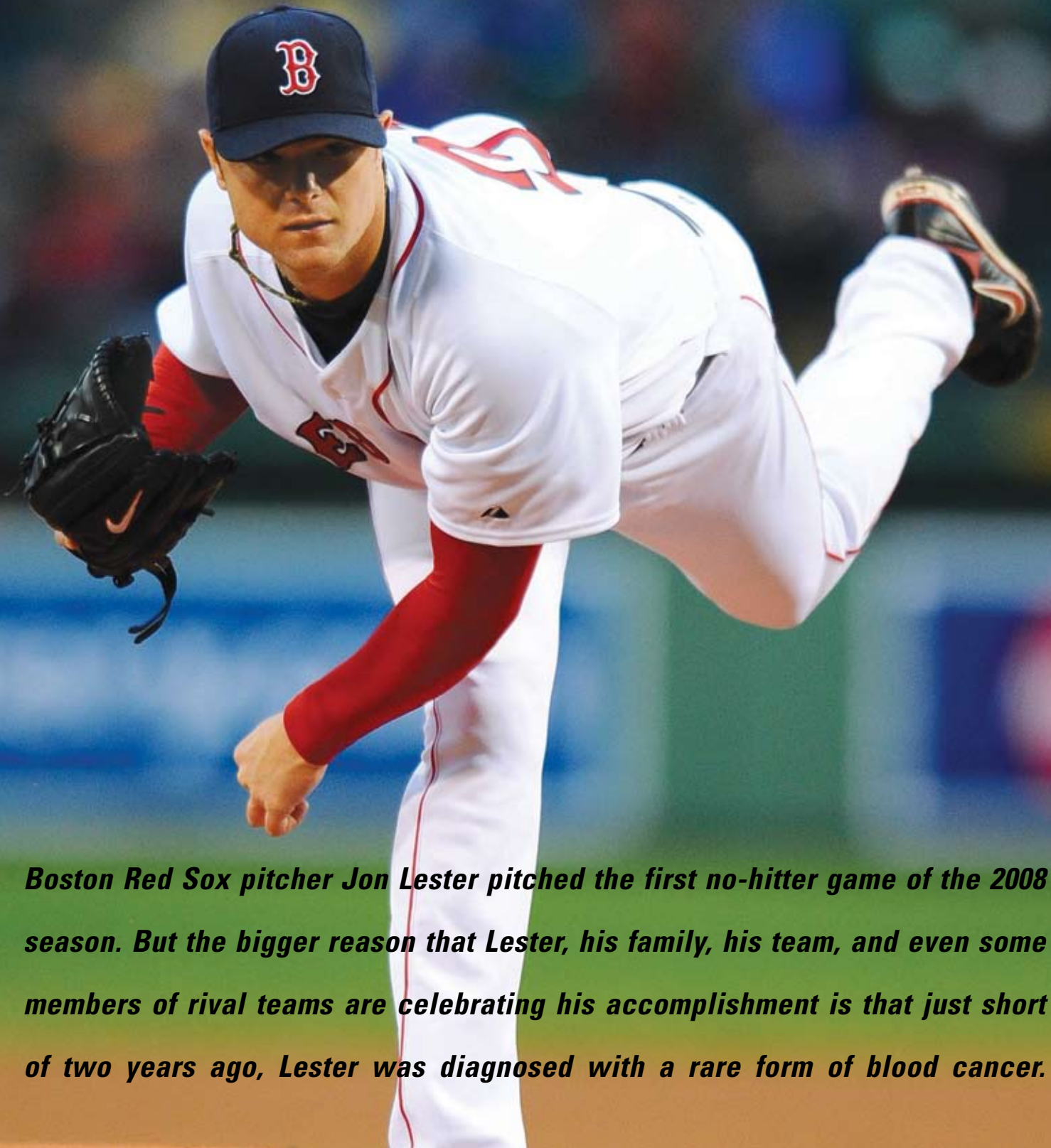
May 2008

# Virtue In Action

Red Sox Pitcher Jon Lester – the journey from cancer to no-hitter

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



*Boston Red Sox pitcher Jon Lester pitched the first no-hitter game of the 2008 season. But the bigger reason that Lester, his family, his team, and even some members of rival teams are celebrating his accomplishment is that just short of two years ago, Lester was diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer.*



Newscom

## The Journey from Cancer to No-hitter

**B**oston Red Sox pitcher Jon Lester pitched the first no-hitter game of the 2008 season on May 19th. But the bigger reason that Lester, his family, his team, and even some members of rival teams are celebrating his accomplishment is that just short of two years ago, Lester was diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer.

“If someone had to throw a no-hitter against us, I’m glad it was Jon,” Kansas City Royals pitcher Brian Bannister told Chicago Tribune sports writer Phil Rogers. “That’s just an amazing story after what he has gone through. As a fellow pitcher, I can see just how amazing this is. It’s hard to get no-hit, but you think about what he did.”

Bannister’s unusual level of enthusiasm and support for a sports rival demonstrates just how much Lester has motivated others through his **perseverance**. The **solidarity** he has inspired among his peers and everyday people who call him a hero is a testament to his hard work, determination and ability to keep things in perspective.

In short, Lester’s amazing story is not just one of athletic excellence; it is a story of inspiration that can apply to anyone in any walk of life.

### **From promising pitcher to cancer patient**

In August of 2006, Lester began feeling back pain, but wrote it off as an injury from a recent car accident he was involved in near the Red Sox’s stadium, Fenway Park. But when the back pain refused to go away, Lester was forced to see a doctor, and after several diagnoses it became clear: the young pitcher had cancer, non-Hodgkins lymphoma.

The news could not have come at a worse time. Lester, formerly in the minor leagues, had worked hard since 2000 to earn a spot in the majors. Finally, in the summer of 2006, the left-handed pitcher had made it to the Red Sox, surprising his father John, who though supportive, had not been sure his son would make the big leagues. “All of a sudden, it’s holy mackerel,” an excited John told Seattle Post-Intelligencer columnist Jim Moore.

But with his son’s diagnosis, the mood went from

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celebratory to somber. Doctors found cancer cells in Jon Lester's body, including his lungs and collarbone. There was a bit of light at the end of the tunnel; Jon Lester had **anaplastic large-cell lymphoma**, a form of cancer treatable with chemotherapy. "He's got cancer, that's bad," John Lester said to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. "But it's treatable, that's good."

The **affable** pitcher, known for his **humility** and quiet sense of humor, wasn't so sure how "good" at first. "I've always associated cancer with death," said Lester, who had lost both his grandmothers to the disease.

Still, though Lester was frightened, he made a choice. He would persevere against the odds and get back on the baseball field.

### Adopting a winning attitude

But first, he needed to fight. Lester now frequently found himself in a place he dreaded: the hospital. As part of his aggressive treatment, Lester received six rounds of chemotherapy, the majority of which took place at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. Chemotherapy kills the cancer cells, but also kills many of the body's healthy cells, often resulting in severe illness and other side-effects. Lester, lost weight and suffered from **debilitating** pain as a result of the cancer,

"I hate hospitals to begin with," Lester told USA Today. "I hate needles. I hate anything related to doctors. Getting blood drawn every 10 days...it drags on. You're tired all the time. You want to do stuff, but you can't. You've got to watch where you go because of germs. It's not something you would wish upon anybody."

But Lester's parents say their son handled the harrowing experience with his usual no-fuss, positive attitude and **persevered** through the treatments and illness. "I can honestly say not once did he complain," John Lester told USA Today. "He didn't ask, 'Why me?' or say, 'I'm tired of this.' He made fun of it when he started losing his hair. And we affectionately called him our Chia Pet."

### Support and Solidarity

Lester had the advantage of receiving tremendous support from his family and teammates. He appreciated well wishes and cards pouring in, but still hadn't wrapped his head around how important he was to not only his family and his fans, but to others struggling to stay normal while battling cancer.



Jon Lester of the Boston Red Sox celebrates with the trophy in the locker room after winning the 2007 Major League Baseball World Series on October 28, 2007 (Photo by Jed Jacobsohn/Getty Images). Below: teammates Jason Varitek #33 and Mike Lowell #25 celebrate after Lester's no hitter against the Kansas City Royals at Fenway Park on May 19, 2008. (Photo by Jim Rogash/Getty Images)



That is, until he received a simple, but **poignant** letter from the mother of a young Boston boy, who struggling with cancer herself reached out to Lester in an act of **solidarity** that possibly only another cancer patient could do. The woman had cancer, but refused to let her chemotherapy sessions keep her from watching her son, a pitcher for his high school team, play. One day, he hit a game-winning home run, and he gave the ball to his mom. ‘This is for you, Mom for coming to my games,’ he said, according to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

The mother wrote in a letter to Lester: “When you get to Fenway again, make sure you save a ball for your mom.” Those words deeply impacted Jon and his father, and brought his mother, Kathie, to tears.

The most surprising support and act of solidarity from his fellow athletes came in the form of a big bouquet of flowers that read: “From the New York Yankees, Best Wishes.” Indeed, the Red Sox’s arch rivals were pulling for Lester’s recovery.

### Back on the baseball field

As Lester struggled to recover from the cancer and chemotherapy treatments he knew that he didn’t have a guaranteed spot in the major leagues and would have to earn his way back both into the majors and within the Red Sox. Lester not only worked his way back into the majors and on the Red Sox, but in October of 2007 pitched in the last, and deciding game, of the World Series contributing to the win against the Colorado Rockies.

That accomplishment would have been awe-inspiring enough until this month’s no-hitter. That’s when the left-handed pitcher, with the help of what the Boston Globe called a “remarkable diving catch” by teammate Jacoby Ellsbury, threw his no-hitter and led the team to victory in a 7-0 win over the Kansas City Royals.

The celebration for Lester’s accomplishment – just as for his recovery – crossed team and fan lines. In fact, the badly beaten Kansas City Royals even expressed **solidarity** with Lester, as did the head of the Red Sox’s top rivals.

“Anybody would be touched by what that kid has gone through,” Yankees Co-chairman Hank Steinbrenner told the Tribune. “Great performance. You tip your cap to that.”

Minnesota Twins general manager Bill Smith added to the admiration being expressed.

“It was a great thing for Jon Lester, a great thing for the Red Sox and a great thing for Major League baseball,” Smith told the Tribune. “The thing that stood out for me was the incredible emotion that he had and that his teammates had for him. Those weren’t just pats on the back and ‘good job.’ There were guys who I think had tears in their eyes...”

But more importantly, the win brought back the normalcy that Lester so sorely missed.

“I think people will now remember what he did tonight on the mound as something special, instead of he’s a young kid who had cancer,” said Red Sox teammate and third baseman, Mike Lowell. “It shows his ability has come full circle.”

### Inspirational Athletes: Looking Ahead

Jon Lester and his perseverance in the face of a huge challenge, can serve as an example to us on how we can deal with the **inevitable** adversities that come in life. Lester’s fighting spirit, love of the game, and the support and solidarity he received from others are important factors in his success in the 2007 World Series.

Doubtless, we will be able to find more examples of inspirational athletes as we watch and read about the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, set to begin in Beijing on August 8. Among the qualities we can watch for are perseverance, discipline, tenacity and solidarity. Many athletes are searching for ways to express their solidarity and unity those suffering throughout the world by using their popularity and media coverage to highlight the needs of others. Be on the look out for inspiring stories from the Olympics, as we will revisit this topic in

### Vocabulary

**Perseverance:** trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

**Inevitable:** sure to occur or happen, impossible to avoid or prevent

**Affable:** pleasantly easy to approach and to talk to; friendly; cordial; warmly polite: an affable and courteous gentleman

**Debilitating:** to make weak or feeble

**Poignant:** keen or strong in mental appeal

**Solidarity:** a shared common interest; unity with others, active loyalty within a group

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### Discussion Questions:

1. How did Lester react to the news of his diagnosis that he had cancer? What initial factors encouraged him? What initial factors discouraged him?
2. How did the diagnosis impact Lester's career with the Red Sox?
3. Give some examples of the different types of support and acts of solidarity Lester received as he was going through Chemotherapy and recovering.
4. How have Lester's accomplishments affected others?
5. Lester persevered through the obstacle of a serious illness. What other types of obstacles can we and others face in our lives?

### Journal Writing Options:

1. Have you or a family member ever been faced with a serious health issue? How did you and your family deal with it? What did you learn from your experience?
2. What do you find to be the most inspirational aspect of Jon

Lester's story? Explain how you think his experience could help others inside and outside of baseball.

3. Write about the different ways we can offer support to others facing obstacles in our community.

### Extended Learning Activities:

1. MVP Exercise: Break students into small groups and have each find an athlete, to be titled "Most Valuable Player" that exemplifies the perseverance of Jon Lester. Have them give a brief biography of the player, what challenge they faced, and how it affected that player's life and the lives of others.
2. Ordinary Hero Exercise: Have each student do a 2-minute presentation about a family member or friend who has faced adversity and won. Have students explain what they learned from that individual's experience.

### Internet Resources:

Seattle Post-Intelligencer: "Go 2 Guy: Lester Went from MLB to Cancer Ward and Back Again." [http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/moore/305005\\_moore24.html](http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/moore/305005_moore24.html)

The Hartford Courant: "Lester Still Basking In No-Hitter Afterglow." <http://www.courant.com/services/newspaper/printedition/sports/hc-lester0521.artmay21,0,4695812.story>

The Chicago Tribune: "Lester, Davis Stellar after their Bouts with Cancer." <http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/columnists/cs-25-rogers-inside-baseballmay25-column,0,4204992.column?track=rss>

