

# Fisher Is a Father First, and a Jazz Player Later

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By LEE JENKINS  
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OAKLAND, Calif., May 10 — Derek Fisher had 30 minutes Tuesday morning to decide whether to remove his daughter's left eye.

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Fisher, a point guard for the [Utah Jazz](#), sat in an office at [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#) in New York, across from Dr. David Abramson and Dr. Pierre Gobin, asking them how to cure the cancer that had formed in his baby girl's retina.

"He really had three choices," Abramson said. "Remove the eye, remove the eye or remove the eye."

Last week in Salt Lake City, an advanced case of retinoblastoma, a cancerous tumor of the retina found in about 300 children a year, was diagnosed in Fisher's 10-month-old daughter, Tatum. Removing the eye is the most common way to remove the tumor.

There was one other option, but it seemed too risky. Last year, Abramson and Gobin developed a procedure called intra-arterial chemotherapy, which allows them to treat the disease without removing an eye.

Fisher asked about intra-arterial chemotherapy. "I'm not sure how he knew about it," Abramson said. "He must have done a lot of homework."

Abramson and Gobin have used intra-arterial chemotherapy on only 14 patients. They have not published anything about the procedure. Abramson planned to present it at a scientific meeting next month in Italy.

Their secret is out now. Fisher and his wife, Candace, made a joint decision to go ahead with the procedure. The doctors explained that they would have to inject a high dose of

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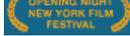
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chemotherapy into the artery that leads to Tatum's left eye.

"They wanted to try this new technique," Gobin said. "Anywhere else in the world, this would not have happened."

The procedure was scheduled for Wednesday morning at [New York-Presbyterian Hospital](#), but Abramson knew that the Jazz had a playoff game Wednesday night. Abramson is no basketball fan, but he was an alternate on the 1960 United States Olympic swim team, so he understands the pull of athletic competition.

Abramson asked Fisher whether they should try to push the appointment back. "Absolutely not," Abramson recalls Fisher telling him. "Just do what's best for my child. How many games I miss in the playoffs is totally irrelevant."

Abramson was still not convinced. "I understand," he remembered telling Fisher. "But this is the pinnacle of what you do. Maybe we can make some adjustments."

Fisher was unmoved. "Absolutely not," he said again.

The procedure went off as scheduled. Abramson and Gobin said they did not rush, but they were aware of the clock. Gobin, who grew up in France, spent nine years at U.C.L.A. Medical Center, rooting for the [Los Angeles Lakers](#) when Fisher was their point guard.

Abramson and Gobin told Fisher late Wednesday afternoon that the procedure was a success, clearing the whole family to fly back to Salt Lake City. On the Jazz's private jet, Fisher started to visualize Utah's opponent, the Golden State Warriors.

Fisher had a police escort from the airport to the arena. He got a standing ovation when he walked through the tunnel in the third quarter. Instead of going to the bench, he strode right to the scorer's table, and then onto the floor.

"You're talking about Willis Reed walking in," Golden State Coach Don Nelson said.

Utah's starting point guard, Deron Williams, had just picked up his fourth foul. Another Utah point guard, Dee Brown, was at the hospital being treated for a neck injury. Fisher, who skipped Game 1 to be with his daughter, could not miss another minute.

It had been four days since Fisher shot a basketball, but he caused a key turnover in the fourth quarter and sank a clutch 3-pointer from the corner in overtime, sealing the victory and putting the Jazz ahead, 2-0, with Game 3 on Friday in Oakland.

"Sometimes you don't want to offend people who don't believe in the Lord," Fisher told reporters Thursday. "But I definitely think last night was some form of divine intervention."

The doctors were most interested in what Fisher did after the game, when he stood in front of a national television audience, describing the dangers of retinoblastoma and urging parents everywhere to get their children's eyes checked. Fisher found a way to make an obscure disease part of the playoff subtext.

"We could have lost my little girl if we waited any longer," Fisher said.

It was a vintage moment for a basketball ambassador. Fisher has been in the N.B.A. for 11 years, has won three championships and has served as president of the players union. He spent the past two seasons in Golden State, before being traded to Utah, so even the Warriors seemed a little bit happy for him.

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"Derek was a great teammate and a great leader," Golden State's Jason Richardson said. "Everybody looked up to him, trying to find out how to get to his level."

Fisher has made plenty of momentous shots in his career, most notably a turnaround jumper for the Lakers with .04 of a second left at San Antonio in the 2004 playoffs. But he has always been best known for his poise and decision making.

Tatum will return to New York in three weeks for another eye exam. If the tumor is shrinking, as Abramson and Gobin predict, she will undergo another treatment of intra-arterial chemotherapy. Most patients require two or three treatments.

Fisher cannot relax just yet. He still has doctors' appointments to schedule and basketball games to play and one unique new cause to rally around.

*Howard Beck contributed reporting.*

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