



Rebecca, with love. David Beckham

Surprise phone call brightens dark times for teen fighting cancer

By Scott Radley
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The caller spoke in a soft voice, thick with an English accent. Brenda Johnstone thought it sounded familiar, though she couldn't quite place it.

"Can I speak to Rebecca Johnstone please?" he asked.

Brenda didn't think it was a good idea. These are rough days for her daughter. The kind you pray you -- and especially your children -- will never see.

Her beautiful 19-year-old has cancer. Three years ago, a mole on her collarbone that doctors kept telling her was nothing turned out to be melanoma. By the time the truth was discovered, it had spread. Soon her body was fighting a losing battle against an enemy with no soul.

Heartbreak doesn't begin to describe the resulting anguish to those who love her. Particularly since doctors have told the family that, without some kind of miracle, time is now being measured in days rather than weeks or months.

So when that call came last Wednesday morning, Brenda wasn't about to disturb her sleeping child. Especially the day after surgery to remove a cancerous tonsil had made her girl even more uncomfortable.

No problem. The caller politely said he understood. He even offered to call back later at a better time. Then he dropped the bombshell.

"It's David Beckham," he said.

Long pause.

"I just kind of went quiet for a second," mom says. "Then I said, 'You've got to be kidding me.'"

It was no joke.

As it happened, Rebecca's aunt knew her niece is a huge fan. Has posters on her walls. Reads everything she can about him. Follows the English star's career. Loves the way he plays. Even shares a moniker. When she plays, her teammates strap an M onto the end of her nickname -- Becca -- and make her sound just like her soccer idol.

So, searching for something she could do to lift some spirits, Aunt Jenny had done a little digging on the Internet



The signed David Beckham jersey sent to her by the international soccer star this week.



Rebecca Johnstone, front, playing the game she loves so much.

and found one of the star's representatives. Then made arrangements for a call, though she was never convinced it would actually happen.

Yet here he was on the phone. The same voice Mom had just heard on TV as news of him signing with the Los Angeles Galaxy leaked out.

By now she was excitedly almost running through the family's east Mountain house. Her husband, Tom, nearly fell off the couch as he caught wind of what was happening. A former semi-pro player, he couldn't believe the call wasn't a hoax and started grilling her with questions even as they walked into Rebecca's silent room.

Their daughter was asleep. Gently rousing her, she said she didn't want to talk to anyone. Her surgery-ravaged throat was raspy and sore and she was in no mood for socializing.

"How about David Beckham?" Mom asked. "Her eyes kind of popped."

And so she did. After three years of hell during which everything had seemed to go wrong and every attempt to make things better had only made things worse, the moment she put the phone to her ear, the dark clouds parted and a beacon of light flooded into her life.

In the most strained of voices, Becca and Becks talked about soccer. He asked how she was doing. Told her he'd heard she was a big fan. Even mentioned that he liked her nickname. He asked if there was anything he could do for her. When she said no, he asked if he could send her something. She didn't say no to that. Then he told her to get in touch if she needed anything.

Four minutes after saying hello, she wished him good luck this season and hung up.

But the story doesn't end with the dial tone. The buzz from the call gave the entire family a jolt of positive energy it hadn't had in months.

"The house was electrified for the whole day," Dad says.

And the next. And the one after that. Even now as he talks about it and repeatedly expresses his gratitude for Beckham's "touch of class" that brought his daughter such a lift, he lights up. Until reality bites again.

Rebecca isn't well enough to talk about the call now. Once a promising sweeper who made the elite Hamilton Sparta soccer club at 12 despite having never played the game before, -- and who was often the best player on her team after that -- she's struggling. She has almost no voice and has been suffering through a few horrendous weeks.

But just when she needed it most, Beckham intervened again. On Monday, a parcel arrived from Madrid, where Beckham plays. Inside was one of his authentic Real Madrid game jerseys. On the back, next to the number, he'd written: To Rebecca, With Love, David Beckham, 23.

Eventually it'll be framed and hung in her room. But not yet. She wants to be able to touch it still. To have a connection to the hero who made a difference in her life.

Dad's using it differently. As a motivation for her to continue fighting.

"I told her, 'You get better and we'll go see him in person so you can thank him.'" She liked that idea.

Pray that she'll get the chance.

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Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator

Tom Johnstone holds a jersey signed by David Beckham for his daughter Rebecca.

How you can help

Within the next few days, Rebecca's family hopes to drive her to Kentucky for some aggressive cancer treatment not available in Canada. Her mom and dad say the costs could be as high as \$100,000. To help defray the expenses, a bank account has been set up in her name. Anyone wishing to make a donation may go to any TD Canada Trust and use account No. 178-6302023.

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