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A world of courage and connection

By Marty Dobrow
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Prelude

The Sports Grinch is beaming. And why not? The athletic landscape in early 2013 is a veritable carnival of cynicism. Beneath the pedestals are huge piles of rubble. Hope is dying. To the Sports Grinch, the bad times never seemed so good.



Londell Francis, 8, who has sickle cell anemia, cuts the nets with his LIU-Brooklyn teammates.

Manti Te'o playing his heart out for a dying girlfriend -- but the "love of his life" doesn't even exist. Lance Armstrong, Mr. Livestrong himself, seven-time Tour de France champ, finally admitting what we had feared all along -- that his athletic achievements were fraudulent. And Oscar Pistorius, the noble Blade Runner, lighting the torch of opportunity for everyone with a disability, only to have the story we all wanted to believe ripped apart amid the charges of murder he faces for shooting his girlfriend.

Didn't we learn our lesson from the darkness of Penn State? Didn't the stories of genuine student-athletes and wonderfully paternal coaches get discarded once and for all in the dumpster behind the Second Mile Foundation? Didn't Jerry Sandusky put the proverbial final nail in the coffin by preying not just on innocent kids but on our most basic belief that sports could be ... good?

But wait, what's this? A bespectacled boy who has dealt most of his life with the ravages of leukemia being escorted into church for his First Communion by a college hockey player? An angelic 7-year-old girl with strawberry blonde hair and a brain tumor heading into the locker room with college softball players?

Why, oh why, are these kids by the dozens, by the hundreds, being allowed onto college campuses, anyway? These are already the most vulnerable children of the families with the most anguished stories. Haven't they suffered enough already?

Why, the Sports Grinch wonders, are the Whos down in Whoville singing? How is it that here amid the

madness of March -- the month that is a verb -- there is, somehow, a crocus shoot coming through the snow?

That surge of green is known as Team IMPACT. It is, perhaps, the next big thing in sports, something that might make the heart of the Sports Grinch grow, and allow us -- maybe, just maybe -- to believe again.

Part 1: Londell Francis

For athletic overload, there is nothing quite like the NCAA college basketball tournament. In the opening rounds last week, there were games around the clock, a barrage of bracket-busters and buzzer-beaters. We heard a cacophony of clichés: one and done, backs to the wall, no tomorrow, do or die.

Like no other time in the sports calendar, we were teeming with teams. North Carolina, North Carolina State and North Carolina A&T. Saint Mary's and Saint Louis. Zags and Zips. Duke and the Dukes. Pacific and Florida Gulf Coast. Some place called Northwestern State. Just to name a few.

For Londell Francis, there was no team like the Blackbirds of Long Island University-Brooklyn. After all, as the effervescent 8-year-old with sickle cell anemia will be the first to tell you, he *is* a Blackbird -- having signed his letter of intent through Team IMPACT in the fall.

When the Blackbirds punched their NCAA ticket by throttling Mount St. Mary's in the Northeast Conference championship game earlier this month, Londell was out at half court, beaming from the top of the burly shoulders of 6-foot-7 senior forward Kenny Onyechi ("my most favorite," Londell says). Then, in time-honored tradition, he joined his teammates in helping to cut down the nets. He wasn't just on top of the ladder; he was on top of the world.



Londell Francis on the LIU-Brooklyn bench with Jamal Olasawere.

"I just felt great," he said. "I was very happy that we won that championship."

It certainly felt a million times better than his once-every-three-weeks blood transfusion at New York Methodist Hospital. With the arteries narrowing in Londell's brain, those transfusions are necessary to reduce the possibility of a stroke.

But even in that environment, Londell insists, he has found some joy from calls to fellow Blackbirds. "They make me feel happy when I'm in the hospital," he says. "They make me forget what's happening to me."

Londell says the players also have taught him a thing or two about basketball: "How to put the ball under my legs, how to spin the ball on my finger, and they're trying to teach me how to dunk."

There were plenty of lessons in the other direction, too, according to coach Jack Perri. The "adversity" of an ankle injury or a tough practice or a seat on the bench was put into sparkling perspective. "He helped us keep going," Perri said. "I'm so glad he's a part of us."

For Nedra Johnson, watching the joy of her son has been a revelation: "He loves sports. He plays sports on his Xbox. He watches sports on TV. But he's never had a chance to actually participate or to be a part of anything, any kind of team."

In Londell's 8 ½ years of life, Johnson says, the longest stretch without a hospitalization has been two

months.

Londell is Johnson's only child. At team dinners the night before games, though, it didn't seem that way. On several occasions, she felt a lump in her throat watching Londell interacting with the players.

"It brings tears to my eyes to see him truly happy," she says. "He never wants to leave."

Though LIU fell to James Madison in a play-in game last week -- with Londell watching on the big screen from campus -- the littlest Blackbird is raring to go for next season.

"They're great," he says. "They treat me like I'm a little brother. I get to sit on the bench with them during games, even away games -- and I'm very close to them."

Part 2: The Mission

The goal is simple. Team IMPACT seeks to improve the quality of life for children suffering from life-threatening illnesses -- or, in the words of executive director Dan Walsh, "kids who have been through hell."

Team IMPACT does not focus on the medical aspects of these illnesses, saving those for the heroes in the hospitals. Instead, the Boston-based nonprofit works with the often-overlooked double whammy that accompanies such conditions: social isolation. Kids with cancer and other major illnesses are often taken away from their peer group for weeks or months at a time. When they return to school, sometimes they do so bald and in a wheelchair. It is not a recipe for cool.

But it gets cool in a hurry when kids are paired with college sports teams. Under the Team IMPACT (Inspire, Motivate, Play Against Challenges Together) model, kids are "drafted" onto teams. They sign letters of intent. They get lockers and team gear. They are included, to the degree that is possible, in team practices. They get great seats at the games. Sometimes they show up in the dorms, in classes, at team breakfasts. The athletes start expanding their range, too. They show up at Dairy Queen, at Little League games, at birthday parties, at Build-A-Bear shops in the mall. In hospital rooms.

Priority No. 1 is that children who have been taken, as Walsh says, "off the social grid," are given a real sense of connection. That is the fundamental mission.

But there is another side of the equation: Athletes are given a huge opportunity for perspective. It is something that is sorely lacking in college sports in modern-day America. College athletes typically are humming along at the prime of physical health. They know they are not immortal, but many feel that they are significantly insulated from the dark.

Many come to believe that they are special because they can throw a ball 90 miles an hour or stick a pull-up jumper or pancake a defensive tackle. Those skills may not elevate the species, but enough humans care about them that self-importance often accompanies the talent.

College athletes often live in an insular, privileged world -- a jock culture -- that is all too often a breeding ground for bad behavior. And that's by no means confined to the college ranks, as we have learned collectively -- and painfully -- in the last week in Steubenville, Ohio.

While the fundamental mission of Team IMPACT is to help children with life-threatening illnesses, the ancillary benefit for college athletes is clear.

According to TI board member Mark Plansky, a financial services executive who played on Villanova's national championship basketball team in 1985, "It gets a bunch of highly skilled and privileged student-athletes to take half a step back and understand how lucky they are."

If all goes well, the children get a sense of belonging. The athletes get a sense of deeper purpose. In the hypercompetitive world of college sports, Team IMPACT provides the rarest of jewels: a win-win.

Part 3: Benjamin Roy

On Mother's Day 2011 in Manchester, N.H., 7-year-old Benjamin Roy was hiding behind his mother's legs. With dark hair and dark glasses, unsteady on his feet, Ben sat on the ground behind his mom and near-constant companion, Jennifer.

He was slated on this day to become a member of the St. Anselm Hawks, even though he didn't know the first thing about hockey. Outwardly at least, he was not exactly gushing with enthusiasm about being the first child ever drafted onto a Team IMPACT squad.

"He didn't want to have anything to do with it," Jennifer Roy said last week, chuckling at the memory. "He was very, very shy."

That was perfectly understandable, of course, when you consider Ben's anguished medical history. At age 3 ½ in the summer of 2007, he was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. It's a daunting diagnosis, but rarely a killer -- more than 90 percent of kids with ALL survive. But for those rare cases that include something called the "Philadelphia Chromosome," the rate drops below 10 percent. Ben was in that category.

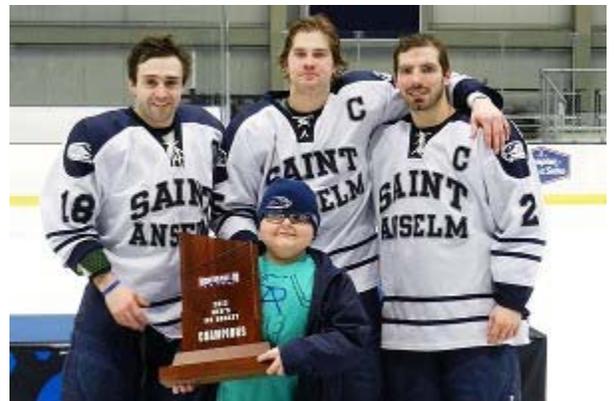
The years since have been a story of tenacious and exhausting survival. A single mom, Jennifer set to caring for her only child. At Boston Children's Hospital, he lived alongside other high-risk children, many of whom died while he was there. When Jennifer was told Ben was unlikely to survive the bone marrow transplant his condition required, she was advised to take a "Make a Wish" trip with him.

Over six days at Disney World in October 2007, Ben could muster the strength to go on just three rides. Mostly he stayed in his room, occasionally having a large mouse or duck read him a bedtime story.

The bone marrow transplant took place four days after his fourth birthday in December 2007. When Ben was discharged three months later, it was with 28 required daily medications. Ever since, there have been a parade of complications: reconstructive leg surgeries (one of which had him wheelchair-bound for more than a year), deteriorating vision, issues with his lungs, bladder and endocrine system, cognitive challenges Jennifer believes stemmed from his radiation.

Proper socialization amid such a narrative was next to impossible. "Four- and five-year-olds shouldn't have to deal with thinking all of their friends are going to die," Jennifer says bluntly. "That's not a healthy way of living."

New adults in Ben's life also were greeted with extreme caution after so many in the past had poked him with



Ben Roy holds the Northeast 10 trophy. "We had to win," team captain Tucker Mullin (left) said. "I don't think any of us wanted to let Ben down."

needles and given him pills that made him nauseous. Jennifer admits that by the time she signed up for Team IMPACT, even her own tenacious care was providing an obstacle. Ben was "lacking social interaction with anybody but myself," according to Jennifer.

That first day, St. Anselm forward Tucker Mullin took the lead. He escorted mother and son into the locker room, where Ben was given his own locker -- soon bearing the name plate of Batman. (Ben is a huge fan.) Some of the players got down on the floor with him and started rolling a tennis ball back and forth. Soon it became floor hockey.

In the two years since, the relationship has blossomed. The Roys became regulars at St. A's games, sitting in the front row, right behind the glass. ("He gives us high fives when we go down the tunnel," Mullin says.) Over the course of several practices, Ben learned to skate, in a manner of speaking, pushed first on milk crates, then in a scooter, then -- with some wobble and short-lived panic -- on blades.

Jennifer was amazed at the team's commitment. On more than one occasion, she saw players who already had showered and dressed change back into hockey gear to take a late-arriving Ben on the ice.

In time, Ben ditched his Pokemon backpack for a St. Anselm's hockey model. Jennifer reports that he won't wear any coat besides his St. A's hockey jacket. Occasionally, on very cold days she tells him it's not warm enough, and he grudgingly trudges back into his room, only to return with a smile, wearing the same coat over his St. A's hockey sweatshirt.

Tucker Mullin helped escort Ben into his First Communion. He has cheered him on at adaptive tee ball games and shown up at Ben's birthday parties -- while Ben has been a fixture the past two years on campus at the team's Super Bowl shindig.

"They have taught him how to be a friend," said Jennifer, who is going back to school with an eye toward becoming a nurse practitioner. "They just make him feel like he's the king of their world."

It's not just a partnership of fun, either. One day Ben arrived from school ready to skate. Tucker asked him if he had finished his homework.

"Not yet," Ben said, motioning to his backpack.

"Oh no, no," Mullin said. "That's not how we roll here."

Just like that, the locker room became a study hall.

Earlier this month, St. Anselm's was getting ready for its season finale, a Saturday night battle against Franklin Pierce for the Northeast 10 championship, trying for its fourth title in a row. During the week, Ben had to go down to Boston Children's Hospital to check on a shunt that was draining fluid from his skull. But on the Friday night before the Saturday contest, he arrived at the rink for a team dinner in a jacket and tie, just like the rest of the Hawks.

"You're not coming, Mom, right?" asked Ben, donning his new Batman fedora. Jennifer shook her head, a lump in her throat.

Then he was off, in the backseat of Tucker's black 2002 Jeep Grand Cherokee for the trip to Fratello's in Manchester, N.H. At the restaurant, he kept cracking up during the "straight face game."

The next night, after St. A's rolled to a 5-2 victory, Ben told Jennifer, "I'm going out there." In a second he was out on the ice hoisting the trophy with Tucker Mullin and the team's two other captains.

"We had to win," Mullin said. "I don't think any of us wanted to let Ben down."

Just last week, Jennifer informed her son that some of his St. A's teammates would be showing up the next day at McDonough Elementary School to see Ben's project in the third-grade science fair.

"They're going to be at *my* fair?" Ben asked, incredulously. "I want to win first prize in front of them, so I can share my trophy with them."

Part 4: Origins

Back in his college days in the mid '80s at Tufts University, Dan Walsh used to deliver for Espresso Pizza on Boston Avenue in Medford, Mass. In a rush, with a smile, he'd snare a couple of pepperoni pies and plop them down in the cluttered passenger seat of his unique vehicle, salvaged from a creative body shop. A hybrid before there were hybrids, "It was part Chevy Malibu and part Dodge Dart."

The car would prove an apt metaphor for the man himself, someone who is forever cobbling things together to move them forward. He seems to fuse contradictions as a hobby, talking, for instance, about people being in "violent agreement." At once relaxed and restless, he is driven by Martin Luther King's dictum about "the fierce urgency of now."

As a college student, Walsh knew nothing about retinoblastoma or bronchopulmonary dysplasia or any of the other multisyllabic menaces that now crowd his days. He was a scrappy kid from Chelmsford, Mass., who entered college in the ROTC program and wound up majoring in economics.

His best friend was Dan Kraft, a goalie on the Tufts lacrosse team. They were "Walshy" and "Krafty" -- monikers that haven't melted away even in middle age. Occasionally, Kraft's dad, Robert -- not yet the owner of the New England Patriots -- would show up at their Psi Upsilon fraternity and take a couple of swings with the whiffle ball bat.



Team IMPACT grew, in part, from the Tufts University friendship of Dan Walsh, TI's executive director, and Dan Kraft, TI board member and son of Patriots owner Robert Kraft.

Their social group contained mainly athletes. They were tight with Jay Calnan -- eventually the captain of the Jumbos' football team -- and with his teammate, Robert Tishman. They spent some time with Kris Herman, a standout on the school's first varsity softball team. Walsh didn't play varsity sports himself, but kids that he was a "three-sport Division III intramural All-American."

A quarter-century later, they comprise five of the eight founders and board members for Team IMPACT.

Board members insist the organization had no discernible Big Bang. Walsh says, "The idea was not ours." Kraft says that Calnan was "kind of the visionary," but Calnan, the CEO of a major construction company in Boston, swats that pass out of bounds. "It's an age-old concept," he says, pointing to a series of examples of teams partnering with sick kids for mutual uplift.

(One such story, he admits, involves his late brother, Chris, with whom Calnan shared a room growing up in

hardscrabble Bristol, Conn., in the days before a little startup called ESPN came to town. Chris, who died at 21 in a car accident, was born with a fully formed skull that required a series of surgeries. He had learning disabilities, a speech impediment and minimal strength and stamina -- except when it came to his duties as batboy for the then-Bristol Red Sox, a Double-A farm team. "That became his identity," Jay says. "He was so proud to wear that uniform. That was who he was.")

A few years ago, Calnan got involved briefly with an organization called Friends of Jaclyn, named for a girl with a brain tumor who partnered with the Northwestern University women's lacrosse team. During that time he reconnected with another FOJ advocate, Kris Herman, by now the softball coach and a top women's athletics administrator at Williams College.

Both loved the FOJ concept -- focused entirely on what Herman calls the "brain tumor community" -- but saw an immensely well-intentioned nonprofit weighed down with red tape. Reluctantly, they wound up pulling away, with Herman resigning from the board in 2010, but saying to Calnan, "Let's not let this get away from our lives."

In time they reconnected with Walsh, who had founded two successful technology services companies in the Boston area. The man Calnan refers to as "an operational genius" had determined long ago that success in business was only part of the plan. He was ready to pour his energy and skills into something that, he felt, mattered in a more fundamental way.

In the early stages, the founders were the funders to get the organization up and running. They were determined that families would never pay a cent to participate in an organization that they considered a fusion of Make A Wish and Big Brothers/Big Sisters. They were aiming for deep relationships, ongoing relationships, relationships that mattered. They wanted to harness the power of team.

And so on Mother's Day 2011, with Benjamin Roy hiding behind Jennifer's legs, Team IMPACT was born.

Part 5: Hailey Olson

Jordan McDermott was mystified, not in a good way. A star center fielder for the Bridgewater State University softball team, McDermott was gearing up for her blaze of glory last spring. She had been playing on school teams for as long as she could remember -- middle school, high school, college -- and this was her last chance. She wanted to get every last drop out of the end of this precious part of her life.

So what exactly was her previously respected coach, Lori Salvia, doing? Announcing that there was going to be a new player on the team, willy-nilly, just like that, like it was nothing, like being part of a team wasn't a privilege, something that you earned through hard work and commitment? Without so much as a tryout, this new kid, Hailey Olson, was getting a roster spot.

"Listen up," Salvia demanded. "She's 6 years old. She loves SpongeBob. She has an inoperable tumor on her brainstem."

Whoa, whoa, whoa, McDermott remembers thinking. Come on, Coach.

"My initial reaction was, 'I don't want to get attached to this girl because if something bad happens, I'm going to be devastated,'" McDermott said.

Her heart began to soften during the first meeting of family members and a few players at an area

McDonald's. "I saw this little girl walk in," McDermott says, her voice catching just a bit. "She was wicked shy."

Salvia tried to break the ice, asking Hailey what her favorite color was. She looked at the ground. Then Jordan McDermott said, "Mine's green."

"Well, mine's green too."

Moments later, Hailey Olson found out that Jordan's favorite number was 12. Lo and behold, Hailey loved 12 too!

Hailey's grandma, Jeannie Olson, watched the whole thing play out with a sense of wonder. She knew Hailey could be a spirited kid -- mimicking pop stars, barking at her little dog, Princess -- but with strangers, she tended to clam up. Now here she was, sitting on Jordan McDermott's lap. "They were like best friends," Jeannie says. "Hailey loved her. It was amazing."

Just a year earlier, Jeannie had noticed that when Hailey smiled "it was kind of funny." Funny in an asymmetrical way. There were headaches and giggles, popsicles and cocoa, wincing, Curious George and snow angels and then, on the first of December 2011, cancer. "Your life changes in a second," Jeannie says, her voice shifting to a whisper. "It's awful, awful, awful."

One minute Hailey is a first grader at the Mary K. Goode School in Middleborough, Mass.; the next, she is hooked up to tubes with chemo drugs coursing through her veins. The diagnosis was grim, a diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma. "It's through the tissue," Jeannie explains. "There's nothing they can do with it. And it's right on the top of her brainstem."

Hailey missed a ton of school. Parents of friends, however sympathetic, often recoiled in their own fear. "Some parents are afraid to have Hailey over," Jeannie says. "I don't blame them. They just don't understand."

Enter Team IMPACT. On Hailey's "draft day," she was met at the field by the entire team, given a uniform, softball equipment, a locker and, of course, a SpongeBob cake.

From there she became a steady presence, showing up for team meals and gatherings in the dorms. She became the Bears' No. 1 fan at games. At practice, she would take a few swings at Nerf softballs, then, according to McDermott, hang out in the dugout "wearing a helmet and eating like 16 packs of Gummi Bears."

There were meetings with Hailey at the Middleborough Dairy Queen, and at Build-A-Bear in the mall. When she turned 7, her luau-themed party was crashed by college softball players.

"She has these people who are all over her, and laugh with her, and include her," Jeannie Olson says.

It goes both ways. "What Hailey has given us is just immeasurable," Coach Salvia says. "She's just so brave. She's like a little inspiration to all of us."

Salvia says her players have "fallen in love with this little girl," and while they all yearn for a medical miracle, they are braced for the worst. "I know it's going to get hard," she says. "I know there's going to come a day where it may seem gut-wrenching, torturously hard for everyone. I know that. But I think the benefits



Despite some initial reluctance, Bridgewater State softball player Jordan McDermott connected with Hailey Olson from the very start.

outweigh the difficult times ... The goal is to embrace this whole experience and live it."

Jordan McDermott is trying to do just that. She still can't bring herself to go to chemotherapy, but even after her graduation, she makes it a point to frequently hang out with a young girl who is "one of the strongest people I've ever met in my life."

The wallpaper for her iPhone is a collage of Hailey images: tongue sticking out here, covered with packing peanuts there, brandishing a Monarch butterfly temporary tattoo in a third. At a Valentine's dinner, Hailey gave McDermott a jewelry box and a necklace with a bunch of hearts on it. "She told me," McDermott says, "how happy she was to have me in her life."

Part 6: The Medical Perspective

Sarah Brand doesn't exactly shy away from the tough stuff. A staff psychologist at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston and an instructor at Harvard Medical School, she once researched the lives of women who were pregnant when they were in the vicinity of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. She later worked with veterans coming back from Iraq, people whose stories were "beyond horrific." Then she found her calling: working in pediatric oncology.

In the resource room at Dana-Farber, Brand says, there are brochures from all kinds of well-intentioned organizations. A little more than a year ago, one from Team IMPACT caught her eye. "It was really a new organization at that point, and not a lot of Farber providers had worked with them," she said.

Brand is a former athlete herself, having played hockey at Connecticut College. The TI model, focused on what she calls "social belongingness," just made intuitive sense to her. "My first thought," she says with a chuckle, "was, 'Why didn't I think of this?'"

"When a child is diagnosed with cancer, it immediately changes the lives of the entire family, as well as the child," she explains. "There is obviously the medical impact of cancer: the disease, the chemotherapy, radiation treatment, lengthy hospitalization.

"The broader consequence is that it prevents children from doing the things that children should be able to do. Children should be able to go to school. They should be able to have friends. They should be able to play on a sports team. Those are what we think of as rights of a child."

After calling Maura Mahoney in the Team IMPACT office to assess the structure of the organization, Brand was ready to make a referral. Her first of many was for an 8-year-old from South Hadley, Mass., named Riley Roman, who was in the latter stages of brain cancer. He was paired with the Tufts University football team.

"It was one of the highlights of my career," Brand says of Riley's draft day. "He was part of a team. His only request was that they play his favorite song and the guys dance to it. So we got to see 60 huge football players dancing around this kid to 'I've Got a Feeling,' from the Black Eyed Peas. The look on his face was absolutely priceless."



Sarah Brand of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (with Michayla Mathis at her "draft day" with the Northeastern women's basketball team) says of Team IMPACT's work, "It's much better medicine in some ways than anything we can do."

Medical outreach has been a big piece of the puzzle. Led by the efforts of another Team IMPACT sparkplug, Bryan McDavitt, the organization has cultivated good working relationships with a slew of social workers, psychologists and child life specialists. Dan Walsh salutes the work of organizations like Camp Sunshine in Maine and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, employing language that his old fraternity brothers might have used to describe supermodels: "beautiful" and "dreamy."

The crush is required. Sarah Brand says that as much as she admires the medical wizards at Dana-Farber, Team IMPACT is "much better medicine in some ways than anything we can do."

Part 7: Michael Eden

In some ways, it looked like a celebration of the beginning of the world. One group of players skated around in gold uniforms, all of which bore the name "Eden." The players on the other team represented a school called "Sacred Heart."

In the stands at Bentley University in Waltham, Mass., Vicki Bomba couldn't hold back the tears. She knew that Bentley coach Ryan Soderquist would be wearing the dragonfly necklace. She knew that her daughter, Alyssa -- her one living child -- would be dropping the ceremonial first puck to begin the 2012-13 hockey season for the Bentley Falcons. And what she felt deeply as she looked out at the Bentley team, *what she knew*, was that the spirit of her late son, Michael Eden, was powerfully present.

For more than three years now, Bomba's world had been a blur. It started innocuously enough on a summer day in 2009 when her rugged 12-year-old said, "Mom, you know what? My back kind of hurts." She gave him a couple of Advil and a heating pad, and drew a warm bath. The symptoms went away for a while. But then one night the sound of Michael's vomiting woke her at 2 a.m., leading to surreal hours of "acute renal failure," an ambulance, emergency surgery.

Bomba became an expert in things she never wanted to know. She has no problem spelling "rhabdomyosarcoma." She can give you a crash course on bilateral nephostomy tubes. Without a trace of self-pity, she can recite statistics that tell a wrenching story: "52 rounds of chemotherapy, 7 weeks of radiation, 6 months and 6 days of remission."

By the time high school freshman Michael Eden's name was brought to Ryan Soderquist's attention in late 2011, it was pretty clear he wouldn't be around for long. The tumors were back. The bloodwork wasn't good. He had some weeks, perhaps a few months, of functional health remaining.

Soderquist said, "It doesn't take you long as a human" to be touched by such a story, but he wasn't sure he could impose the partnership on his team. This was, after all, a serious Division 1 hockey club at an academically rigorous university; distractions were to be avoided. "If one guy has a problem with this," he told the team, "then we're not going to do it."

The first meeting with Soderquist and a few players took place at Michael's house in Framingham, Mass. They sat in the living room as Michael patted Rocco, the family black lab, and spooled out some of his story: losing 35 pounds and all his hair, playing baseball with nephrostomy tubes in his back, running cross country that fall even after getting chemotherapy. On his bucket list, he said, was learning how to skate.



Members of the Bentley hockey team present Michael Eden, in his hospital bed, with the "beat-down stick," which is given to the player who has sacrificed the most for the team.

When Soderquist and his players left, they were silent for several minutes. One thing was clear, he says: "This was going to be a *real* relationship."

And so it was. At the rink, Michael laced up skates, got on the ice and went tearing down to the other end, tumbling hard into the boards. "Don't worry, Mom," he said to an aghast Bomba. "I've been through worse."

In the weeks to come, he returned again and again. The Falcons came over to his house to play Xbox. One day they went out fishing with Michael and his dad. They kept his cell phone forever buzzing.

"He didn't want the pity party," Vicki said. "He didn't want to be Mike, the kid with cancer. He just wanted to be Mike. And they treated him like a friend, like a brother, like a teammate."

One day in the hospital after the season ended, captain Dan Koudys arrived with a gift. By Bentley tradition, at the end of each game, the player who "sacrifices the most for the team" gets to hold onto the "beat-down stick." He has to sign it, and then holds onto it until the next game, as if it were a kindergarten hamster. At season's end, the player who the team thinks sacrificed the most for the squad throughout the year gets to keep the stick. The players wanted Michael to have it.

At Michael's wake in May, the beat-down stick was in his casket.

Toward the very end, Vicki told her son, "When you decide that it's your time to go, you need to give me a sign. You need to come back. You need to let me know that you're still with me."

"Don't worry, Mom," he managed. "The dragonflies will come."

For a while in the summer, Vicki wore a dragonfly necklace with a clasp containing some of her son's ashes. On opening night in October, before Bentley's 7-1 victory over Sacred Heart, she saw the framed picture of Michael in Bentley's team room. "It will stay there forever," Soderquist told her. "We want to remind the guys of him always."

Vicki told the coach, "There is no place Michael would rather be than here tonight." She then asked him if he would wear the necklace.

Ryan Soderquist is not a big one for jewelry, but throughout the 2012-13 season, he wore it every game.

Part 8: The Deep Dive

It's one thing to take the plunge. It's another altogether to take the "Deep Dive."

At 8:15 a.m., five days a week, religiously, the Team IMPACT staff gets into full scuba mode. In the office in Quincy, Mass., Dan Walsh metaphorically cannonballs into the water. The Deep Dive -- which Walsh sometimes refers to as "morning calisthenics" -- is the organization's daily 45-minute run-through of all children "in the pipeline," meaning somewhere between referral and placement.

It is a ruthlessly disciplined process that again and again asks the question, "What is the status of the match?" Walsh's younger alter egos -- Maura Mahoney (2009 Boston College lacrosse captain) and Bryan McDavitt (2007 Tufts graduate, where he captained both football and baseball) help move things along by checking off a litany of information.

Are the on-campus ambassadors set up at UConn? Does the Vermont hockey team have a team advocate from

every single class year? Has the Mount Ida football program spoken with the child life specialist from the Floating Hospital for Children at Tufts Medical Center? Have the parents signed the memo of understanding? Have the athletes gotten their core training that spells out the post-Penn State guidelines: never be alone with the child, all visits and interactions must be with a minimum of three players, and so on?

"What else can we do?" Walsh asks once. "What else? What else?"

Across the state in Williamstown, program director Kris Herman smiles on her end of the conference call. Her former classmate, Walshy, has this unique gift, she says: "a tremendous ability to see the big picture and the most minute details at the same time."

Every two weeks there is another version of the Deep Dive -- a deeper one -- for kids who already are "under management." Are players bonding with the older brother? (Siblings, the "shadow survivors," routinely are part of the Team IMPACT focus.) Are there pictures from the birthday party? What are the platelet counts this week? No pebble is left unturned. It's not enough to see how many players are actively engaged in the relationship with a child -- exactly how many text messages have been sent?

For the team at Team IMPACT, it's not the devil that's in the details. It's the angel.

Part 9: Bobby Taggart

Perhaps Villanova's first-round loss to North Carolina in the NCAA tournament on Friday night was merely a function of the Tar Heels being the better team. Then again, it could have been because Bobby Taggart was not in the house.

A gangly 15-year-old with a slight limp, Bobby joined the Villanova basketball team on the night of Jan. 22. The Wildcats were coming off three straight losses, and tipping off against mighty Louisville, then the fifth-ranked team in America, currently the top overall seed in the NCAA tourney. That night at the Wells Fargo Arena was the first college basketball game that Bobby had ever been to, and he was transfixed by the atmosphere: the electricity in the crowd, the storming of the floor after Villanova pulled the upset. "The energy there was just crazy," he said.

Afterward in the locker room, Villanova guard Dylan Ennis dubbed Bobby the team's "good luck charm."

It certainly didn't seem that way a year ago. Villanova was trudging through a 13-19 season, and in suburban Philadelphia, Bobby Taggart started feeling some pain in his right leg when playing on his middle school basketball team. His father, John, who owns a small auto repair shop, was not that concerned. "He had been X-rayed a million times before," John said. "It was always nothing."

This time it was osteosarcoma, a bone cancer that strikes just five out of a million people under the age of 20. The Taggarts' world turned upside down. There was chemotherapy with Cisplatin ("basically a derivative of mustard gas," John says. "It's poison.")

Then came nausea. Radiation. Hair loss. Something called limb salvage surgery, where Bobby's right leg was amputated from just above the knee. It was a wrenching ordeal, but the results look promising so far. There has been no spread of the cancer.

John Taggart filled out an application for Team IMPACT on Facebook. Not long after, he got a call from Maura Mahoney in Boston: "We've got Bobby hooked up with Villanova basketball. Would that be OK?"

Coincidence or not, Villanova went 7-0 in games Bobby attended this season. Four of those games were against ranked teams, three of them against teams in the top 5. But the larger victory had nothing to do with the scoreboard.

Bobby says he connected deeply with the Wildcats and is looking forward to an ongoing relationship with the team. He has a genuine bond with Dylan Ennis, someone Bobby describes as "a good friend."

Ennis states flatly that Bobby is "a part of the team" and "more tough than anyone on the roster."

Villanova coach Jay Wright suggests that the toughness of Team IMPACT kids can actually give teams an advantage. He points out that coaches can counter any resistance about hard work and dealing with adversity by simply pointing to the youngest player on the roster.

Even if the team had gone 0-7 with Bobby Taggart in attendance, Wright feels the partnership would have been worth it many times over.

"It's always good for all of us to stop and think about the impact we can have on other people's lives, rather than thinking about whether we're winning or losing games," he said. "And then there's the impact a guy like Bobby has on our lives, to see his attitude and courage in battling his disease.

"These types of relationships are really rewarding to both sides. That's what a good relationship is all about."

Part 10: 'One More Kid'

In the United States alone, there are more than a half-million children coping with life-threatening illnesses. Team IMPACT is hoping to reel in as many as possible.

"The core of what we're doing every day is trying to get one more kid," Team IMPACT board member Jay Calnan says. "One more kid will always be the goal."

Not even two years old, the organization already has placed 250 children on 245 teams at 115 schools in 18 states. The numbers are soaring. In the first quarter of 2013, Team IMPACT is on pace for 120 new family referrals, one-third of the total the organization has received since its inception in May 2011. Media coverage -- including this concise little story -- has been exploding.

On some campuses, Team IMPACT has become a veritable phenomenon. Babson College and the College of the Holy Cross have five Team IMPACT partnerships. Merrimack College has eight. The organization now is partnering not just with college teams and individual schools, but with entire athletic conferences. The ball is decidedly rolling.

It is a world of heartbreak and hope, of courage and connection, of trying to create some light by sharing the darkness. Sometimes that happens with a beat-down stick. Other times it involves eating Gummi bears in the dugout or celebrating first place in the science fair (congrats, Benjamin Roy).

The team behind Team IMPACT knows that these diseases are awful. They know that the Sports Grinch is a formidable foe. But they persevere nevertheless, trying to make that heart grow by seeking not a match made



Bobby Taggart was a good luck charm for Villanova basketball this season, with the Wildcats going 7-0 in games he attended.

in heaven, but the best one possible here on earth.

Marty Dobrow is a regular contributor to ESPNBoston.com.
