

Box Seats

CHEERING SECTION

When a Rivalry Can Enrich, Enlighten And Save a Life

By MIKE TIERNY

Blood is thicker than not only water, but also pinstriped jerseys and rose-colored noses.

Mike Welling and Steve Karas are the unlikely of friends. Welling, of Port Chester, N.Y., worships the Yankees and the Giants with a passion that is almost matched by his disdain for the Red Sox and the Patriots. Reverse those love-hate feelings and you have the Bostonian Karas.

They are inextricably bound through a 2-year-old named Matthew, who was given life by Welling, his father, and whose life was extended by Karas, a stranger. The adults met in January, more than a year after Karas donated bone marrow to Matt, who had a potentially fatal genetic condition.

With glee, Karas taunts, "Matt now has Red Sox blood in him." Welling winces, then reminds Karas of the Yankees' glorious legacy and of the Red Sox' Johnny-(Papelbon)-come-lately status. Then he pays tribute to his son's savior.

Sports played out via the Big Apple-Beantown rivalry have injected levity into a grave situation, one that dates from Matt's infancy. Matt, Mike and Susie's firstborn, barely ate. Myelofibrosis, which can progress to leukemia, was suspected.

But after his eyes began quivering, Matt received a diagnosis of osteopetrosis, an illness that prevents recycling of bone matter. Matt's skull had become abnormally dense, pressing on his eyes and ears and threatening permanent loss of his eyesight and hearing.

Soon, a registry that collects and stores information on bone-marrow samples was sending urgent messages to a 49-year-old father of three in Boston. Fifteen years earlier, Karas had signed up at his synagogue's donor registration drive.

Donor candidates are ranked for compatibility on a scale of 1 to 10. Karas scored a 9 with Matt. Of the more than 10,000 people who contract life-threatening diseases and whose only cure is bone marrow from a nonrelative, only 30 percent receive a transplant.

At Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, Matt underwent chemotherapy to prepare for the infusion of fresh blood. Two-hundred miles away, Karas went through a gauntlet of procedures, one of them with a psychiatrist to determine whether he could emotionally handle the possibility that the recipient would die.

In November 2006, 13 days after his first birthday, Matt was wheeled out of a hospital room with a homemade sign reading "Positive Vibrations Only" and bedecked with Yankees and Giants items sent by the teams to someone who, well, was going to bleed Red Sox and Patriots.

The transplant had mixed results. It eased the stress on Matt's eyes and ears but did not eradicate the disease, leaving his prognosis uncertain.

Plans for a second dose from Karas did not pan out, partly because he was bedridden with facial injuries sustained while playing hockey.

Amazingly, another match was found for Matt. In April 2007, two months after the second transplant, Matt was released from the hospital in reasonably good health.

Karas, in accordance with donor regulations, remained anonymous to the Wellings for a year.

E-mail: cheers@nytimes.com



SUZY ALLMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mike Welling is a fan of the Giants and the Yankees. Steve Karas supports the Red Sox and the Patriots. Karas provided the bone marrow for a transplant for Welling's son, Matthew, 2.

Last November, with the blackout lifted, they exchanged e-mail messages, and Karas learned of the Wellings' sports allegiances. He thought, "This could be trouble."

They were introduced in Karas's home, a week before the Super Bowl between their teams. Welling discovered that the donor was a Red Sox devotee who wore Manny Ramirez jerseys, hauled his sons to spring training and road games (except at Yankee Stadium, with its negative vibrations) and cherishes their Father's Day gift—a ball signed by Carl Yastrzemski.

Karas, in turn, became acquainted with someone who wears cufflinks made from materials from the old Yankee Stadium and who leaves "The Imperial March," Darth Vader's theme from "Star Wars," on other people's telephones, a reference to the Yankees' frequently being referred to as the evil empire by Boston fans.

"We were entering enemy territory," Mike said of the Wellings' visit. They hit it off with Karas "once we got past the fact that Steve was a Red Sox fan."

Karas chides Welling about Alex Rodriguez, saying Matt, learning the finer points of whiffle

ball, "is more of a clutch hitter than A-Rod." And that a certain T-shirt popular in Boston should now read, "Yankees Irrelevant." Welling returns fire, asserting that Tom Brady's knee injury was a "residual effect" of a pounding from the Giants.

Mindful that about half of the two dozen families he befriended at Memorial Sloan-Kettering have had their children die, Welling had hoped to mark his family's good fortune with a game at Yankee Stadium. But Matt, still with imperfect sight and balance, had not sufficiently recovered.

Instead, they were scheduled to toast Matt's health at a gala with supporters in Rye, N.Y., on Saturday, the middle day of the season-closing Yankees-Red Sox series. For his part, Karas has inspired his employer, Aflac, the insurance company, to promote bone-marrow donations by its staff and customers.

The Wellings must wait until next season to give Matt — whose red hair smacks the footwear color of Karas's favorite team — his first bite of big-league baseball. As the friendly foes trade insults, Karas offers to break him in at Fenway. To which Susie Welling blurts, "No, thank you."

My cheers@nytimes.com e-mail want to pusidun my