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Alive and dreaming

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By **Tricia Garner**

Sporting News

"You wanna see me dribble?"

I'm standing on a practice court adjacent to Cameron Indoor Stadium on the campus of Duke University. Thirteen-year-old Chris Wilson is looking at me expectantly. "Yeah, let's see you dribble," I say.

He begins tentatively but grows more confident as he walks the length of the court. Right hand on the way down, left hand on the way back. He crosses the baseline and checks for my reaction. "Nice!" I exclaim, slapping his outstretched palm in a high-five.

Remarkable? Consider that Chris underwent radiation treatment for an inoperable brain tumor just four hours earlier. Or that as of a few weeks ago, Chris could dribble only from the baseline to the first block under the basket.

Chris is one of 45 kids who benefits from Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy, the creation of Duke Brain Tumor Center co-director Dr. Henry Friedman and Mike Zeillmann, a former high school basketball coach. The free program is open to children of all ages who are being treated for chronic illnesses at either Duke's or the University of North Carolina's medical center. The kids get to bring their brothers and sisters, too. The program was started in August 2003 with four girls being treated for brain tumors, and it has grown so quickly there now is a waiting list. The organization, which holds group practice sessions each Saturday as well as special one-on-one practices for kids who come into town during the week for treatment, is trying to raise \$3 million to build its own gym so it can accommodate more children.

Zeillmann runs the practice sessions, and you'd be hard-pressed to find a coach more beloved. One parent, Karen Gunter, says he has the patience of a saint. The kids absolutely adore him. He teaches them how to dribble two, then three, basketballs at a time. He challenges them to shooting games. The drills help to restore mobility, hand-eye coordination and balance, all of which are affected negatively by medical treatments. For most of the kids, this is the only exercise they get. Many are unable to play team sports because they are too weak or because of the danger of being bumped and jostled. "I used to play soccer before this happened," Chris says. "Now the only thing I can do is play basketball."

But ask anyone, and they'll tell you the best thing about Hoop Dreams isn't the physical benefits. It's the sense of normalcy the program provides to kids who live anything but normal lives. Nobody teases you at Hoop Dreams. Nobody shies away because they're afraid to catch what you have. Nobody avoids you because they don't know what to say. For one blissful hour, everyone is completely, utterly ordinary.

"I had half of my head shaved, and it took a long time for it to grow back," says Emma Peebles, 17, who is in remission after having a brain tumor and travels an hour each way to attend Hoop Dreams every week. "I felt very self-conscious about it. I just wanted to be treated like everyone else."

"Sometimes people are mean without trying to be," adds Cheryl Perry, 12, who also was diagnosed with a brain tumor. "The tumor affected my vision, and they don't realize I can't see that well. Before, when I could see better, I used to play basketball on a team. When it comes around to December, all of my friends are playing, and I can't. Sometimes it makes me feel left out. But when I come here, I see people who are just like me. I'm not the only one."

I'm sitting on a wooden bench against the wall when I spot a little boy scooting toward me across the hardwood floor. His head is shaved in spots, and I can make out a scar running along his scalp.

"My name is Jake," he announces. His smile is pure joy. I can't help but smile back as I move over and sit next to him on the floor.

"My birthday's March 29," he adds. "I'm going to be 4."

My birthday's March 29, he adds. "I'm going to be 4."

My eyes widen. "Four? You're almost a whole hand!"

He holds up four stubby fingers and considers my point. "Yeah, I'm almost a whole hand!" He grins. "My mom's going to bring in cupcakes for my birthday."

"Oh, yeah?" I reply. "What kind?"

He pauses. "I don't know. Mom, what kind?"

Mom: "Oh, chocolate or vanilla."

He turns to me. "Chocolate or vanilla."

"Mmm, yummy," I say.

He beams, and I'm sure that nowhere in the world is there a more beautiful sight. "With sprinkles."

Jake is undergoing chemotherapy for a brain tumor he was diagnosed with when he was 15 months old. But at this moment, the only important thing is that, in just a few weeks, one excited little boy will get to eat cupcakes on his birthday. Just like every other 4-year-old.

Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy will be profiled during CBS' NCAA Tournament national semifinals doubleheader April 2. For more information or to make a donation, go to hoop-dreams.net.

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