

Published: Dec 7, 2004  
Modified: Dec 7, 2004 5:47 AM

## Sick kids stay in the game



Andreas Belton, 10, practices the pretzel dribble during Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy, a program for children with chronic illnesses. Nearby, Corey Davis waits his turn Saturday morning in a gym on the Duke University campus.

**Staff Photos by Robert Willett**

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By SARAH AVERY, Staff Writer

DURHAM -- Leigha Martinelli wants three basketballs for Christmas so she can hone the fancy triple dribble she learned this year.

"I need to practice," said the 11-year-old from Burlington, who is battling a form of bone cancer. "It's something I can do while I'm at home."

Leigha's health is fragile -- too fragile for the weekly basketball sessions she attended before she went through a bone marrow transplant in June -- but she wants to keep working on the skills she gained at the Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy in Durham. When she's well enough to return, maybe next spring, she'll be as sharp as ever.

"I like learning new tricks and having fun -- it's like being my normal self again," Leigha said.

Hoop Dreams is an athletics program that aims to return a bit of normal routine to the lives of children fighting illnesses that often prohibit participation in typical childhood activities, much less sports. Children have fought cancer, sickle cell anemia, asthma, diabetes and other diseases.

The program is the creation of Dr. Henry Friedman, a neuro-oncologist at Duke University Medical Center. He thinks physical activity promotes stronger bodies and, more important, the confidence that makes fighting an illness easier.

"A number of kids have said they're afraid to pick up a basketball at their regular school because they're mocked," Friedman said. "We're able to show them that they have skills they never thought they possessed."

A sports junkie, Friedman got the idea for Hoop Dreams when Mike Zeillmann became his daughter's school basketball coach. Friedman said he was struck by Zeillmann's talent with the kids and approached the coach with a proposition for merging their shared passions for sports with the desire to help chronically ill children.

"We started talking about how we could give back to the community and expose other children to athletics who might not be able to play in normal circumstances," Friedman said.

Hoop Dreams was born about 18 months ago, serving a handful of children being treated for brain tumors and other cancers at Duke University Medical Center, where Friedman is co-chairman of clinical neuro-oncology programs and his wife, Joanne Kurtzberg, heads the pediatric stem cell transplant program. Other participants were steered to the program from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill.

Now, about 30 youngsters attend the Saturday-morning sessions, at intramural gyms on the Duke campus. Friedman said the program hopes to raise money to build a 22,000-square-foot, stand-alone gym in Durham, enabling Zeillmann and other trainers to offer a wide variety of athletic programs to the children, their siblings and parents.

Already, Hoop Dreams has received a \$20,000 grant from the Lance Armstrong Foundation and \$5,000 from the NBA. But that's a fraction of what's needed. Friedman said the nonprofit organization has launched a \$3 million campaign to raise money for the gym; it has put dibs on a parcel of land in Durham at South Roxboro and Martin Luther King Drive.

And Friedman is working to raise the organization's profile. An energetic, enthusiastic spokesman, Friedman scored an article about Hoop Dreams in this week's People magazine and has gotten interest from "60 Minutes."

"It's a feel-good story," he said.

For participants, it's a feel-good program. Emma Peeples, a 17-year-old high school senior from Greensboro, was among the first to join Hoop Dreams. She had been in a support group with four other girls who had been treated for brain tumors at Duke -- her tumor was diagnosed 10 years ago -- and all of them started together.

None could participate in regular sports, nor could they play contact basketball. Zeillmann crafted a series of ball-handling skills that he showed them, turning the girls into Globetrotters.

"It's really great that we have learned how to do all these tricks with multiple basketballs," Emma said. "It's so fun. He teaches us really cool new tricks to do, all this really cool stuff. I never realized how much of a challenge I can give myself, until Mike pointed it out. I can give myself that much more confidence and really step up to the level."

Emma's dad, Ralph, said the program has helped his entire family. Her tumor, he said, devastated the family 10 years ago, and the challenges continue.

"The hard part at first was just try to arrest the tumor," Ralph Peeples said. "Then equally difficult was life after the tumor. This was a program to help kids whose lives had been saved, but who now had to deal with a very different body and new limitations on what they could do."

He said Emma has gained confidence and friendships. The only downside, he joked, is the Duke connection: "I teach law at Wake Forest University, and I have to put up with Emma's infatuation with all things Duke."

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