

A Sweet Escape: Softball Helped Mathis Overcome Hardships

The Record

April 20, 2007

By KIMBERLEY A. MARTIN

STAFF WRITER

Rosie Mathis sat at her mother's Valley Hospital bedside, unable to contain her excitement.

If there was one game to have circled on her summer softball calendar, it was the Emerson game. And the following afternoon the bitter rivalry would play out on the field.

"I said to her, 'Mom, we've got to win,' " the Park Ridge catcher said. "And at that point, she had an oxygen mask on, but she gave me the thumbs up."

Mathis knew she had to play. But she never got the chance.

The game was rained out, and that same afternoon -- July 10, 2003 -- Marybeth Mathis lost her four-year battle with breast cancer.

Had the game gone on as planned, though, Mathis says there's no question she would have been on the field.

Since the first grade, softball has been her outlet. Blessed with a strong arm, she excelled at shortstop and pitcher as a youngster before the "cool" catcher's gear eventually drew her to the gutsy position. One of the first Park Ridge girls to participate in summer leagues, the 18-year-old perfected her skills with the New Jersey Pride, Force and Blazers.

Last season Mathis batted .554 for the Owls and led Bergen County with 41 RBI, earning first-team all-league and second-team All-County selections, and the nickname "Captain Crunch."

With every ball she ripped into the outfield and every baserunner she threw out from her knees, her confidence grew. So did her need to play.

Softball also provided relief from adult responsibility. Mathis was in the fourth grade when her mother was diagnosed. She watched helplessly as chemotherapy, hair loss and sickness became a part of her mother's daily routine.

Her death forced Mathis -- then 13 -- to become a mother to her 11-year-old brother, Kyle. There was no time for school dances. No time for hanging out with friends on a whim. There was just enough time for family and the sport she loved.

Mathis' father, Greg, has since remarried and now the family is a "Brady Bunch" of eight. But with her older step-brother, Bruce, away at college, Mathis remains the oldest sibling at home.

"I did miss out on a lot," said Mathis, who was also captain of the Owls' basketball and soccer teams. "I do wish that I could have a lot of those times back. I had to be home, I had to cook, or I had to do this or that. And then with softball, I missed out on a lot, too, because I played it so hardcore."

This season, Mathis is 7-for-11 with three home runs and six RBI in five games.

"We have kids [who] love the game, but Rosie -- she eats, sleeps and breathes it," said Owls coach Frank Baldino. "She's our leader."

"Every at-bat, you can just see in her face that she wants to crush the ball and she does," said teammate Lauren Keith, who's known Mathis since kindergarten. "Just by watching her, she has the ability to motivate me and the team to play better."

Mathis' competitive play has made her a well-known figure in her hometown. People stop her in the deli, on the street and in the school hallways to praise her play. A newspaper clipping with her photo is tacked on the sports wall at the ice cream parlor where Kyle works.

"A lot of people look up to me, not just because of sports, but because of everything that's happened in my life," Mathis said. "I think even adults admire that. It's very flattering and humbling."

Though she has put every ounce of herself into softball for more than a decade, the Fairfield University-bound Mathis -- who plans to major in biology -- says she will hang up her cleats and catcher's equipment at the end of the Owls' season.

But until that time comes, she will continue doing what she's always done: play for her teammates, her school, her town, and most importantly, her mother.

During every game, Mathis talks to her mother. When she gets on base, she stops, looks up and points to the sky.

"I know she's watching because she would always come to games," said Mathis. "I just wish she could have seen something, because varsity sports are totally different."