

A HOME RUN FOR HOPE

Pinstripes push patient

Inspire her fight vs. cancer

ON THE WALL to her right is a brightly colored calendar for July, one that gives Beth Maria a schedule for everything except leaving Babies & Children's Hospital at Columbia-Presbyterian and going home. A schedule for everything except being a normal kid again. There is a day to have her nails done and a day to write thank-you notes and even a day to play a board game called "Raise the Titanic" with her sister.

This is what passes for summer vacation when you are about to turn 16 and trying to beat Hodgkin's disease, once and for all.

There was a bone marrow transplant at the beginning of the week, technically called a blood stem cell transplant. There were three days of chemotherapy right before, that was Beth Maria's big Fourth of July weekend. Now she tries to get strong enough in this 10th-floor room so she can get back to her own room in White Plains for a couple of weeks, before there is more chemotherapy in August, the second stage of her transplant.

"You know what I really want this summer, more than anything?" she said Thursday afternoon in a small voice, trying to build a smile from underneath her worn pinstriped Yankees cap. "I just want this all to be done by my birthday."

She nodded and looked over at all the rainbow colors on the wall, one of the only places in the room where you do not see a New York Yankees logo, or a signed photograph of a Yankee, or a banner or schedule, or newspaper clipping.

Really, Beth Maria tried to look all the way through July and out the other side.

"I turn 16 on August 27," she said. "I don't want to be in the hospital."

Her sister Christie, sitting next to her, smiled. "Why don't you tell where you really want to be," Christie said.

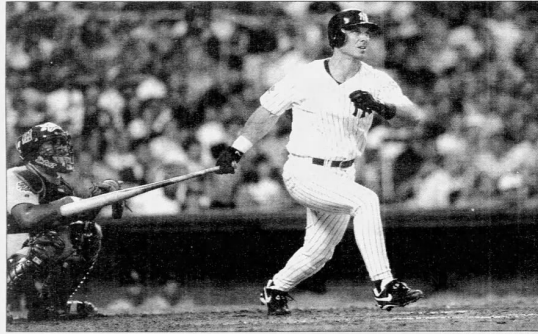
Then the two of them together, as if one cue, said, "The mall."

Beth Maria is not the only teenager fighting cancer this summer, in this great New York hospital where fighting cancer in children is the whole ballgame. Right next door to her, on the other side of the Yankees World Series banner covering the window, is another "marrow room," and a friend about to undergo the second step of her own stem cell transplant.

But this is what it is like to be a teenager and have cancer instead of a real summer, in this bed next to the IV machine, attached to the IV by a



SUSAN WATTS DAILY NEWS



LINDA CATAFFO DAILY NEWS

YANKEES fan Beth Maria is coping with a recent bone marrow transplant. And it helps to have Bronx Bombers star Tino Martinez (l.) in her corner.

well. In the meantime, she counts off the days on the calendar, looking for her own brief summer, between sets of chemotherapy and the infusion of her own bone marrow, harvested in the spring when the Hodgkin's disease came back.

And while all this goes on, she watches the Yankees as fiercely as the doctors watch her.

"I have more time to watch the games," she said on Thursday. "I just try to look at it that way."

ON THE BED is a pinstriped pillowcase she sewed herself. There are pinstriped drapes for the big window to her left. Next to the window are the autographed pictures from David Cone and Joe Torre and Tino Martinez, of course. Somehow in these weeks when he has come to know Beth Maria and she has come to know him, he has gone on this big hot streak with the bat, reaching 30 homers on Friday night. There was also a three-run homer the day she was at the Stadium. There was the home run derby he won at the All-Star Game. Then another three-run homer, on Hideo Nomo's night on Thursday.

It was a swing that did more than turn a game around. "This hadn't been much of a day for me," Beth Maria said over the telephone on Thursday, "until he hit that ball."

Even before the home run, it was another day closer to going home. Maybe August will be better.

thick forked tube known as a double lumen broviac, feeling all the side effects of having used her own bone marrow to try to make herself well again, feeling sick to her stomach all the time, having a throat so sore she can barely swallow. Trying to make herself better before the Yankees will play the Tigers on television.

This is where she is, a month away from 16, instead of at the mall, or planning to go to Jones Beach with her friends for a summer concert, or watching the Yankees from her family's own seats at the Stadium. Or taking driver's ed classes. Or watching her father race a Formula One car in the Pecos. Or sitting in her own room on a summer night, watching the Yankees game there, pulling for Tino Martinez, who is not just her favorite player now, but her



MIKE LUPICA

friend. The other Sunday she got to go on the field during batting practice. She met Martinez, who is donating money to the Children's Cancer Center at Columbia-Presbyterian for every RBI he gets. They posed for pictures and then Beth Maria sat in the dugout for an hour or so, before watching the game from the Yankees radio booth with John Sterling and Michael Kay, Sterling and Kay even put her on the air.

That was a dream Sunday when she got to be a normal kid all the way, when Colum-

bia-Presbyterian felt as if it were on the other side of the world.

"She acts as if you're the one who's sick," Tino Martinez says. "She acts as if she's there to try to make you feel better, instead of the other way around."

At the hospital on Thursday, Beth's mother, Kiki, said, "I can't imagine what this summer would be like for her without this connection she has to Tino now, to the Yankees. Somehow baseball is a way for everything to be the way it's supposed to be."

The doctors measure blood counts, platelets and hemoglobin. They measure a white blood cell count that is so low these days, around 100, the result of all the chemotherapy. Her body is fed electrolytes through the IV, the electrolyte count monitored closely as

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