

Uncle Dirk and Little Tatum

[Dwain Price](#) / July 25, 2017



DALLAS – With his unique kind and gentle touch, Dallas Mavericks forward Dirk Nowitzki has had such a heart-warming and impactful influence on Tatum Teague that the six-year old leukemia patient from Richardson fondly refers to him as “Uncle Dirk”.

Teague first met Nowitzki in December of 2015 when she was just four years old and a patient at Children’s Medical Center of Dallas battling a myriad of medical problems. Nowitzki, as is his custom, visited Teague at the hospital, and since it was Christmas time, he came with some special gifts.

“He came in and was just grinning from ear-to-ear,” Tatum’s mother, Whitney Teague, said. “He was all smiles and extremely upbeat with a very positive attitude. The nurses had spoken about a 7-foot tall man that may be coming

Back then, Tatum Teague didn't know who Nowitzki was. But that certainly has since changed.

"She had been really, really sick, and so it was kind of hard to explain to her," Whitney Teague said. "We told her he was a basketball player."

"Ever since then she refers to him as if she knows him and talks to him all the time. Any time she sees a billboard, if we're in line at the grocery store and she sees a magazine, or any commercial – or anywhere we are – she says, 'Oh, there's Uncle Dirk.' It just lights her up and she gets so excited."

Thresa Belcher, the director of childlife and social work for Children's Medical Center of Dallas, helped arrange Dirk's visit with the Mavs. And since Tatum Teague is a huge fan of the Disney movie Frozen, Belcher passed that tidbit along to Nowitzki.

"We thought that her seeing Dirk would be a great way to lift her spirits and encourage her during her hospitalization," Belcher said. "We shared her information with Dirk, and Dirk bought an amazing Elsa doll for her."

"He entered the room with this life-sized Elsa doll and sat with Tatum at her bedside. They unwrapped the gift, they talked about the movie Frozen, and he had great interaction with the family and with Tatum."



Nowitzki's hospital visit offered a ray of sunshine for Tatum Teague.

"I wasn't feeling very good in the hospital," Tatum Teague said. "But the visit from Uncle Dirk made me happier."

The hospital visit and impending friendship with the Mavs' superstar notwithstanding, Tatum and her family also got to attend a game between the Mavs and Golden State Warriors this past March as part of the Dallas Mavericks Community Ticket Block program. That was set up by the Mavs in conjunction with Bridget Asheim, the executive director of HopeKids North Texas.

"We receive donated tickets and fill them with families with children struggling with life-threatening medical conditions," Asheim said. "Right now we serve over 700 families all around the Metroplex...and we get those tickets in the hands of these families that wouldn't otherwise be able to enjoy a game."

An outing to a Mavs game like the one Tatum and her family enjoyed is invaluable.

Whitney said they were able to take Tatum and that they could go see Dirk actually play. I just thought that was a perfect tie-in to actually go see him play and cheer him on,” Asheim said. “So what a wonderful partnership, how everything kind of circled back around and just to be able to give her something to look forward to when she wasn’t in the hospital.”

“They see Dirk play on TV, they see them in the news, and then all of a sudden to not just see them play, but to meet them in the hospital and to have that one-on-one interaction, the fact that Dirk took the time out of his schedule to go and spend that moment with Tatum, it’s hard to put into words because I feel like it’s just such a priceless moment. To be able to allow our families like Tatum to be able to go to a game and to see somebody that she met, it’s a true picture of a hope.”

A picture of hope which made Tatum Teague feel special.

“The basketball game was really fun,”

Tatum Teague said. “I had a great time with my family watching the Mavs and can’t wait to see Uncle Dirk play again!”

In October of 2015, Tatum was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia after what was initially a routine visit to the doctor for a fever turned into a visit to the emergency room. That quickly turned into a 28-day hospital stay for the induction phase of chemotherapy treatment, because Tatum could not walk since she also developed osteomyelitis (inflammation of the bone caused by infection) in her right leg.

Shortly thereafter, Tatum was diagnosed with typhlitis – an inflammation of the large intestine, also associated with infection – and had to have her colon removed. Tatum was finally discharged from the hospital in January 2016, and will be attending kindergarten in the fall.

“She thankfully is in remission, but she still goes to get chemo once every 30 days and she will receive chemo treatments through the end of the year,” Whitney Teague said. “Her last doctor’s appointment with her oncologist is December 1 and her last day to take chemo is December 28. She’ll probably have two corrective surgeries in the spring because her colon was removed.”



“It’s very important to him to make an impact on the child’s life, to connect with them, to understand something that the child is very interested in, that the family or the child is struggling with so that he can lift their spirits and encourage them with what they are facing,” Belcher said. “He just does an amazing job connecting with the children and helping them when they’re here.”

Belcher also likes the fact that Nowitzki isn’t in and out of the sick child’s room in a matter of minutes.

“He doesn’t just walk in and hand them the gift,” Belcher said. “He walks in, he plays games with them and he makes the connection.”

Another thing Nowitzki does that’s also very meaningful to kids like Tatum is he makes them reveal their competitive side.

“We’ve had some pretty big Uno tournaments or some Connect 4 tournaments, and as you know he’s a big competitor and he doesn’t let the kids win easily,” Belcher said. “When you interact with Dirk, it’s a competition, so the kids like that. He’s not going to just let you win. You’re going to earn it.”

“He’s definitely an amazing ambassador for our community and I’m so glad that he’s wanting to stay here with Dallas because he’s very important to us and to our patients, and a great contributor to our hospital and to our patients’ emotional health.”

That was very evident during the Teague’s family visit to the game between the Mavs and Warriors.

“We were eating dinner at our seats and the warmups hadn’t even started yet, and there was a video on one of the big screens,” Whitney Teague said. “Tatum saw Dirk on it – my husband and I weren’t really paying attention – and she went crazy and said, ‘Mom, mom, there’s Uncle Dirk.’ We just kind of laughed.”



seconds left in the fourth quarter.”

Whitney Teague also said that hospital visit by Nowitzki was “pretty cool” and will always resonate with her family.

“My husband and I were in the room that day and Tatum wasn’t feeling her best and we were trying to encourage her not to be too nervous, and (Dirk) was super patient,” Whitney Teague said. “He stayed and hung out with us for a while, he wasn’t in a rush.”

“It really meant a lot and really showed his true character and clearly what he’s meant to the Mavs all these years under (owner) Mark Cuban. He’s definitely a diamond in the rough. We were really fortunate that we were part of his schedule that day because it definitely made an impact on Tatum and our family, and we’re forever a Dirk fan for sure.”

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