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Young goalie a battler, both on and off the ice

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Young goalie a battler, both on and off the ice. STAYING POSITIVE: Nine-year-old Julia Benoit, a goaltender for an Oakville Hornets house league team, hasn't let Crohn's disease prevent her from playing hockey. *MICHAEL IVANIN / OAKVILLE BEAVER*

With her team up 2-1 late in the third period, Julia Benoit is being counted on to make sure no comeback is made.

The nine-year-old goaltender for the Teal Tigers, an atom squad in the Oakville Hornets Girls Hockey Association, has already made one breakaway stop earlier in the frame against a forward from the opposing Winter Hawks.

Now another player is coming in all alone, but Benoit refuses to get flustered.

She keeps her eye on the puck and, as the player tries to deposit it into the right side of the net, the Teal Tigers netminder sticks out her left pad, preventing the game from becoming tied.

Benoit’s club scores two more goals before time expires, making it a 4-1 victory at Joshua’s Creek Arenas’ red rink on a Sunday afternoon.

Her head coach is impressed by the goaltending performance, but isn’t all that surprised.

“She saves us a lot,” Teal Tigers bench boss Tony Nicholls says. “Believe me.”

But anyone who knows Benoit is aware she is just as much a battler off the ice as she is on it.

In February of last year, at the age of seven, Benoit was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, a form of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). According to the Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation of Canada (CCFC), one in 250 Canadians have IBD and at least 25 per cent of these cases are diagnosed in childhood and adolescence.

Benoit began having stomach pains in the fall of 2009, but by January she felt herself growing “sicker and sicker every single day.”

“She started to get very pale and tired and then she was having some blood in her stool,” says Liz Benoit, Julia’s mother. “So we got a referral to Sick Kids (The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto) and within a few weeks, they were able to diagnose her.”

Upon hearing the news, Julia was uncertain about the long-term ramifications.

“At first, I didn’t know what it was, but then they started to explain it and I got pretty scared,” she says.

Crohn’s disease is not something the Benoit family is unfamiliar with. Julia’s grandmother was diagnosed with it at the age of 25, and she died of colon cancer shortly after Julia was born. But the news of Julia having Crohn’s disease still came as quite a shock to her parents and both her older siblings, none of whom have IBD.

“As a parent, you’re worried about the long-term prospects because Crohn’s disease is not something that can be cured,” says Liz Benoit. “You’re worried about what limitations she could have, how she’s going to handle it as a child and then as an adult.”

After learning of her diagnosis, Julia missed several weeks from hockey, but she began playing again towards the end of the season and during the summer.

However, she experienced multiple flare-ups after starting to play last fall. Around Thanksgiving, Julia learned she would have to begin using a feeding tube for her nutrition and did so for seven weeks without eating anything.

“She said it was really hard to not be able to eat any food and to see other people eating,” Liz says of her daughter’s reaction to first using the tube, “but she knew this was going to make her stomach feel better.”

Despite missing some more time away from hockey, Julia’s desire to return to her favourite sport never wavered.

“She didn’t want to have to give it up because she was sick a couple of weeks,” Liz says.

When her team travelled to Barrie for a hockey tournament in November, Julia knew it was something she didn’t want to miss. She attended the tourney and, despite having the feeding tube stick in her throat on occasion and needing numerous water breaks, she became accustomed to playing with it.

“When I had to put it in (the first time), I was scared,” Julia says. “But when it’s in, it doesn’t hurt.”

So far this season, she hasn’t missed any games and no longer requires a feeding tube. She’s merely focused on becoming a better goaltender.

“She gets better every game, but she was a good goalie to start with,” Nicholls says. “She gets to the rink and she’s pretty focused. She’s always ready.

“I haven’t seen (it) affect her. That kid gets out there. She’s got a lot of game.”

Earlier this fall, Julia attended the first annual P.U.C.K. Paediatric Ulcerative Colitis and Crohn’s Hockey Event at the Air Canada Centre. Dr. Aleixo Muise, a gastroenterologist at The Hospital for Sick Children and one of three doctors Julia sees, created the event to raise awareness for children dealing with IBD and show how they can lead normal lives with right treatment. He is impressed with Julia’s composure while dealing with the disease.

“She has a great attitude,” Dr. Muise says. “She goes on treatments, she listens to what her doctors tell her and is able to perform in school and hockey and life in a great way.”

Today, Julia is treated through Remicade, an intervenus infusion every eight weeks and other medications. And no matter what she’s gone through, her mother offers the same message.

“I’ve always tried to tell her this disease isn’t going to limit who you are and what you can do,” Liz says.

That fits fine with Julia’s motto when it comes to Crohn’s disease, one that she encourages anyone else dealing with it to believe as well.

“Stay positive, not negative.”
