

Boozer's son, battling sickle cell anemia, shows dad how recovery is done

By DOUG ALDEN AP Sports Writer
Article Date: Thursday, April 3, 2008

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Carmani Boozer can barely get his little arms around a basketball.

The 22-month-old hugs the ball to his chest as he bounces around the room before his dad sweeps him up for a father-son grin and giggle.

Carlos Boozer has had to recover from a host of injuries that come with being a power forward in the NBA, yet he can only imagine what his son has endured in the last year.

Carmani has had chemotherapy, made countless trips to the doctor and spent weeks in the hospital before and after an umbilical cord blood transplant that his parents hope wiped out his sickle cell anemia.

Six months later, Carmani is still free of the blood disorder, but Boozer and his wife, CeCe, have another six months of angst before knowing whether the procedure was a success.

"We're just looking forward to that day when he's clear completely," Boozer said.

They just aren't sure when or if that day will come. If it does, the Boozers will know that they made the right call in a series of difficult choices that ultimately led to deciding on a transplant and a search for the right donor. They found one by producing their own through in-vitro fertilization.

Two of the healthy embryos they created were implanted and CeCe Boozer had twin boys last July. After Carmani had chemotherapy to attack the diseased blood cells, he was injected with stem cells from one twin's umbilical cord. If the procedure goes as planned, the new cells will help Carmani's bone marrow regenerate new, healthy blood.

Sickle cell is a devastating inherited disease of deformed red blood cells that can't carry enough oxygen, common among people with ancestors from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

The abnormal red blood cells — shaped like a sickle or crescent — and have difficulty moving through the blood stream. Complications can include intense pain, stroke, organ damage and death.

Killing the cells with chemotherapy wipes out the immune system, leaving a 1-year-old like Carmani in extreme risk.

"We decided we would rather do it now while he is still healthy and the disease hasn't affected him that much, rather than wait five or 10 years down the road when he's already had kidney failure or a stroke," CeCe Boozer said.

The Boozers have been encouraged by Carmani's recovery so far. Six months ago, the chemotherapy had left his skin discolored and blemished and caused his hair to fall out. He spent almost six weeks in the hospital, getting scrubbed down twice daily to eradicate germs.

It was miserable for Carmani and even more difficult for his parents.

"It was just a hard process to watch him. You just wish it could be you," his mother said.

Carmani's jet black hair has grown back and his skin is healthy again, leaving him looking like any other toddler. He's certainly as active as any of his little peers and loves attending Jazz games.

During one recent game, his mother paused as she was taking Carmani back up to his seat, just long enough for him to get a quick kiss from his dad at the end of the Jazz bench.

For CeCe Boozer, it's especially gratifying to see her son healthy. She pushed for the transplant after spending months learning everything she could about the disease and possible treatments.

She discussed transplants, but was told they were considered elective procedures and usually happened later in the patient's life. She didn't want to wait that long.

Because both parents are carriers for the sickle cell trait, they wanted to be sure their next child would not have the affliction. CeCe Boozer had read about genetically screening embryos for conditions like Down syndrome, but not sickle cell. She spoke to a geneticist, who came up with a test to spot the sickle cell trait.

The couple went through in-vitro fertilization and found two embryos that were perfect, healthy matches. Both were implanted to increase the chances of survival and CeCe Boozer learned a couple months later that both had taken and she would be having twins.

The Boozers also learned Carmani could have the procedure done at Miami Children's Hospital in Miami, where the family lives in the offseason. On the eve of Carmani's transplant, his parents shared some second thoughts.

"There were days you see kids that didn't make it — families of the kids that didn't make it," Carlos said. "That was in the back of our mind. That could be us if it doesn't go right."

They decided it was better to take a chance now rather than later.

Carmani had the procedure on Sept. 5, shortly before training camp was to begin. Jazz coach Jerry Sloan, who puts only family ahead of basketball, told Boozer to take his time and report when he was ready.

"All we could do was tell him we'll support him any way we can," Sloan said. "He's handled it tremendously. He said 'I'll be ready to go when I get there' and he was ready to go. That tells you a lot about guys. He's got a lot going on."

CeCe Boozer was surprised how little she could find out about getting Carmani a

transplant. Most doctors suggested prolonged treatment with medications, which may not have been effective if Carmani's anemia was too severe.

Because of Carlos' status as an NBA player, she knows people are paying attention to Carmani's story. Through Boozer's Buddies Foundation, she is letting others know everything she has learned.

The foundation's Web site is still developing. After all, Cece Boozer has her hands full with a toddler and twins Cameron and Cayden. There are also routine trips to the doctor for Carmani, who has to get checked out at the hospital for even a common cold because his immune system is still weak.

"Every little thing that happens to him, we fear the worst," his father said.

Despite Carmani's health problems, Boozer has been having his two best seasons in the NBA. He leads the Jazz in scoring and rebounding, and was selected to the Western Conference All-Star team for the second straight year.

He said the last two months have been even better because his wife and children were finally able to move up from Miami in January when Carmani became healthy enough to handle the altitude.

"You go through the tough times and when things start to get sweet, they're that much sweeter," he said. "It's so much fun right now. My whole family is back together."

On the Net:

<http://www.givingback.org/BoozersBuddies/BoozersHome.html>