

# RIVALS SHOW

Dracut, Methuen teaming to raise funds in honor of local, young cardiomyopathy victims

By KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

DRACUT — Jack Middlemiss, at all of 2½ years old, was quick to show his passing skills to his new friends on the Dracut High girls basketball team. The basketball may have been half his size, but he quickly got in a groove with several Middies players, bouncing the ball to them with glee.

If you saw Middlemiss throw the ball with all of his might, or happily proclaim that his favorite baseball player is Tom Brady (even as his mom reminded him that he had his sports mixed up), you would have no idea that Middlemiss isn't just a regular toddler — he's a toddler awaiting a heart transplant.

"He looks great, but his heart is really pretty bad," said his mother, Kate Middlemiss.

Jack Middlemiss suffers from cardiomyopathy, as did his older brother, Joseph. The disease impacts the heart muscle, and in both children it made their heart muscles too thick. A transplant was also discussed for Joseph, but his health seemed to be on the upswing when he passed away suddenly in September 2013 at the age of 6.

His death impacted the Dracut community hard. Not only are Kate and husband Scott longtime Dracut residents, they and their family have been active in the area. Scott, his three brothers and his sister, Jill, now the coach of the Methuen High girls basketball team, were multi-sport athletes in Dracut and Methuen.



So when Dracut girls coach Peter Witts began to think about getting his team involved in a charity game, his mind immediately turned to the Middlemiss family.

"I had thought of it about a year ago," Witts said. "I thought this was going to be good timing for us, with Methuen coming to Dracut this year, and Jill being the coach there."

And so another page in the usually hard-fought rivalry between Dracut and Methuen will take on a special meaning Tuesday. Their Merrimack Valley Conference matchup will benefit the Joseph Middlemiss Big Heart Foundation, a nonprofit the family started, not just to raise research funds toward cardiomyopathy, but to spread joy and kindness, the spirit that exemplified Joseph's sadly shortened life.

The teams won't merely wage their rivalry on the court, but are challenging

each other in a contest for selling the most hearts to post on the gym wall during the game. The proceeds of the heart cards will join donations accepted at the door and a 50/50 raffle to benefit the Big Heart Foundation and be added to Scott Middlemiss' Boston Marathon fundraising, with all the proceed going to cardiomyopathy research.

## Genetic connection

Currently, some of that research is focusing on the genetic causes of the disease, an aspect in which the Middlemiss family and their supporters have a special interest. While pregnant with Jack, the Middlemisses were told that it was unlikely he would suffer from the same disease as his older brother. A test Kate underwent when she was 34 weeks pregnant showed otherwise. They have since gone on to have a third child — a



**HAVING A BALL:** Jack Middlemiss lines up a shot during a Dracut girls basketball practice at the high school last week. At left, the 2½-year-old cardiomyopathy victim gets a hug from Dracut senior Shaye Lane. At right, Jack excitedly points to the basket as he poses with his parents, Scott and Kate, and 4-month-old sister, Grace.

girl, Grace, born in August — who they describe as "heart-healthy."

Said Kate Middlemiss: "Some of the new research has identified a gene that may be disease-causing for Jack and his older brother, and Grace does not have that gene."

Cardiomyopathy's genetic traits are still a mystery to the medical community, but key to treating it in the future, according to Dr. Elizabeth D. Blume, Medical Director of Advanced Cardiac Therapies at Boston Children's Hospital.

"Research in the genetic causes of cardiomyopathy are one of the main focuses of research to understand cardiomyopathy," Blume said. "If we can decipher the genetic causes, then we can move toward finding a cure."



## Going all in for cure

A cure is what everyone involved in Tuesday's game fervently hopes for, especially for Jack, who captured their hearts during an early morning holiday break practice.

"I love little kids, so the fact that he just came into my arms melted my heart," said Dracut co-captain Shaye Lane, who gladly spent time passing back and forth to Jack. "It made my day."

"We're lucky enough to have the ability to play and be athletic and do things like this, as opposed to him, where he can't," said senior Julia Sanborn, who tried to help Jack dunk. "It's great

to be able to put the abilities and the skill that we have toward someone who can't do the same things that we can."

While his own family will have split devotions Tuesday — Jill Middlemiss, true to her Methuen crew, got a little "trash talk" going with her brother at the Christmas dinner table — Jack will just be happy to see his new-found friends on the Middies.

"He is a little joy," Kate Middlemiss said. "He is the happiest little boy."

For more information on the game and the Joseph Middlemiss Big Heart Foundation, go to [jmbigheart.org](http://jmbigheart.org).