

An injury to a player brings out sportsmanship between Demarest and Bergenfield soccer teams



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PHYSICAL THERAPY

This was supposed to be Matthew Cabada's year to shine for the Bergenfield soccer team.

A senior forward and captain who had followed the team ever since his older brother played for the Bears going back a decade, he was the team's second-leading scorer last year after returning from an ACL tear which caused him to miss his entire sophomore season.

He started this year well, scoring two goals and adding an assist over the first two weeks of the campaign.

Then came a Saturday morning home match against Northern Valley-Demarest on Sept. 24. The game was close, it was early in the second half, and Matthew and a Demarest defender made a simultaneous bid for possession near the top of the penalty area. The defender's foot came in contact with the lower part of Matthew's left leg, and the worst possible thing happened - his tibia was broken. The play was clean, and was just an unfortunate occurrence.

Matthew was rushed to the hospital, and had to undergo emergency surgery to stabilize the leg. He spent the night there, and was released on Sunday.

That afternoon, he was resting at home when there was a knock on the front door. His mother opened it to see an unexpected visitor. It was Demarest coach Robert Romeo, who brought along a chocolate cake and, more importantly, the well wishes of his team.

"It was a crazy 24 hours," Matthew recalled. "We were both going for a ball, I got there first and we hit. I didn't see any malice in it. The moment I hit the ball, I felt a crack and I just knew something wasn't right. I was in shock. I knew it was a very important



Bergenfield soccer captain Matthew Cabada visited by Demarest coach Robert Romeo the day after his injury

game and felt like I was missing out and couldn't help my team."

As Matthew was being wheeled toward the ambulance, he gave a thumbs up to his teammates. But the Demarest player, a sophomore, felt devastated over what happened.

"Because I had the emergency surgery that night, I had to stay at the hospital," he said. "The next day, my mom heard a knock at the door, and it was Coach Romeo from Demarest. He had a cake for me, and it was great for him to do that. The injury was obviously unfortunate but I was glad to know that other coaches care. It definitely cheered me up. I was feeling a bit down, but he lifted me up. He let me know that sometimes it's bigger than just winning and losing. The cake was pretty good, too. I enjoyed that a lot."

For Romeo, going out of his way for an opposing player was simply a proper thing to do.



"We have a lot of respect for Bergenfield," Romeo said. "They are super competitive group of kids. I have known their coach for a while, and he's a great guy. They work hard. Unfortunately one of their forwards collided with one of our backline defenders. I emphasize a lot in our program to represent yourself, your school and your community, and that you are very fortunate to be here. Every one of my players wanted to send well wishes to the young man. Those that were on the field that day gave him a fist pump on the way off. The big thing was that I wanted to touch base with the coach, the school and the family to make sure he was okay. It also affects you mentally, when you go through a surgery like that. So I wanted to go and pay some respect to the young man, who is out to play soccer because he loves the game. When I got there, to see him sitting on the couch after surgery, in his soccer uniform, really hit me hard."

The two could also relate. Back in his playing days, Romeo had his knee severely injured during a game, suffering a dislocated knee with ACL, PCL and MCL surgery required.

"I could kind of relate to his injury and felt the pain that he was going through," Romeo said. "But I just wanted to have a conversation with him to let him know that we support him, wish for a speedy recovery and show that we care. High school sports are some of the most amazing times in your life, and when it's done, you look back and reflect on the memories you create with your teammates, and it's not all about the wins and losses. It's a club, it's a culture and great to be a part of."

The gesture was also appreciated by Bergenfield coach Michael Papapetrou.

"This was a great example of a sportsmanship," he said. "It showed how we can come together. It was a unique situation of how it happened. It wasn't considered a dirty play, it was just our kid took a shot at the exact same time their player wanted to stop it. Both teams came together, they were right there for us when it happened, and they kept reaching out that night and into the next day. They were awesome. I think it has to do with the relationship we have with them, and how our coaches association also brings everyone together. We're here for the

kids and to help everybody out. When the game happens, we are going at it against each other, but once the whistle blows, we all know what it's really for. It was a horrible that the injury happened. Matthew cares about this team so much, he grew up watching his brother, he set goals that he wanted to play on the team and be one of the top players. He earned it and he was a captain, looks after the younger players, and it just hurts. We're there for him, and we're really appreciative for Demarest and how they've supported him as well. This was a great way of showing the schools coming together. They're a class act."

"Sportsmanship is a topic that is at the forefront of high school athletics," said Michael Oppido, the Demarest athletic director. "Our athletic department prides ourself in Competing with Class. Acts of kindness and helping people in life are what makes a person a good leader. We have to show our kids in todays world what that exactly means and Coach Romeo did an excellent job of displaying that through his actions towards an injured athlete on an opposing team. We can never stop teaching our kids how to do things the right way in life."

As for Matthew, while the injury was awful, the support from the opposing team was gratifying. "The operation was to fix my tibia, they opened me up and put in a metal rod to connect because it was displaced by a lot," he said. "I just got off the splint and into a boot."

He'll also have a lasting memory of the gesture shown by the Demarest, and what it says about the importance of sportsmanship.

"I had no idea Coach Romeo was coming to see me," Matthew said. "I was really surprised and it was great to see. They are always one of our toughest opponents and we have a lot of respect for them. Every time you go into a game, you obviously want to win, but you always have that sense of respect for for the opponent, because it's more than just a game. They are guys doing what you also love, so there's a mutual respect. They showed that by caring about me."

