

REMEMBERING 'HAPPY THOUGHTS'

Bocce league opens in woman's honor

By Alexandra Fenwick
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NORWALK — When Rebecca DiPanni's doctors told her last winter things weren't going the way she hoped, she climbed out of her hospital bed and drew a smiling figure on the white board where doctors wrote notes.

The squiggly figure had a bubble with "happy thoughts" written inside.

Yesterday, at the opening of the bocce league that bears her name, her friends, husband, David, and 4-year-old son, Sean, wore T-shirts with the drawing.

Rebecca DiPanni died of cancer in January at 42, but not before founding the league that lives on in her name.

The first game of the Rebecca DiPanni Memorial Bocce League kicked off last night at Calf Pasture Beach, where Sean threw out the first ball.

"Our togetherness was nothing but happy thoughts," David said.

Bocce courts were installed at the beach three years ago, but the city's attempt to start a league didn't attract many takers,



Paul Desmarais/Staff photo

David DiPanni begins play last night in the opener of the Rebecca DiPanni Memorial Bocce League at Calf Pasture Beach in Norwalk. Before she died of cancer last year at 42, Rebecca DiPanni came up with the idea for the league.

Recreation and Parks Athletic Director Gerald Anastasia said.

Rebecca DiPanni kick-started it, and nine teams took to the courts last night.

Some players were friends or family, others were Please see 'HAPPY', Page A4

'Happy'

Continued from Page A1

strangers.

Rebecca came up with the idea for the league from her hospital bed, though she had never seriously played the traditional Italian game.

An all-FCIAC softball player in high school, she was an athlete all her life and played recreational softball into her 40s. But she and her friends were getting older and her illness slowed her down.

"She said, 'What about bocce?' You don't have to be athletic and, you know, a lot of our friends are kind of out of shape anyway. It's something I can do and en-

joy and still be competitive," said her friend, Maryanne Piorek.

She and Rebecca played softball together since their days at Warde High School in Fairfield.

The social aspect of the sport fits his wife's personality, David said.

"That's what my wife was about, bringing people together. She thought it would widen our friendship with a lot of people. Basically, the way my wife would want it is a night of fun, getting people together and enjoying the camaraderie."

Rebecca survived breast cancer, diagnosed in 2005,

when a bad stomach ache prompted David to take her to the Norwalk Hospital emergency room in April 2007. The doctors said she had liver cancer.

Over the next few months, Rebecca was able to get well enough to leave the hospital, but by October she was worse.

The bocce league was Rebecca's passion during her time in the hospital, Piorek said.

DiPanni never got to throw out the pallino to start a game, but she was able to see the courts one last time before she died. It was Jan. 14, the day of a chemo-

therapy treatment, and she wanted to see the water.

"I knew it was the last time we were going to be at the beach together because she was not looking good," said David, a New Canaan firefighter. "We walked the shoreline for a little bit and then we drove to the bocce courts. She was so excited telling her mom all about the sport."

Rebecca died on Jan. 29, her son's birthday.

But she wasn't far away last night, David said.

"I feel like she's watching over us. She would have done anything to be here tonight," he said.