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Family tree: Alex Clark finishes strong after loss of her mother

BY BRANDON FOSTER *May 16, 2014*



Missouri's Alex Clark serves ball

COLUMBIA — She could see the tree.

On one side were her teammates, her coaches and her opponents. The other side: a dead end, a wall, a logo-by-logo reminder of conference foes her team had fallen to without her.

But through the fence on Court 5, Alex Clark could see the tree — a red sunset maple, recently planted and not yet in bloom.

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She ended the match with an inside-out forehand, and her coach, who predicted that very shot, jumped with glee and smothered Clark in a tearful hug. Her teammates followed and cheered and celebrated their first Southeastern Conference win of the year.

When they went inside, families and friends filed into the team room of the brand-new Mizzou Tennis Complex. They took pictures and reveled in the win over Mississippi State. But Clark went into the locker room and had a moment for herself.

It was sinking in. The reason for her coach's tears, the reason for this being her first home match of the season, the reason, perhaps, that Missouri's first conference win didn't arrive until mid-April. The reason that tree was planted.

Her mom, Ali Clark, wasn't there.

Mom's best friend

Ali Clark had always been there.

She was there when she and Alex Clark traveled to tennis tournaments in India, Africa and Eastern Europe. She was there every time Alex Clark looked up during a match, always giving her daughter her full attention. She was even there when she couldn't be there by texting coach Sasha Schmid in the middle of matches to ask why her live feed wasn't working back home in London.

"It was our thing," Alex Clark said. "She was like my rock."

When Alex Clark was about 7, her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She waited a few years to tell her daughter because she didn't want to worry her.

Alex Clark would look up in the stands and not see her mom, and now she knew why. Treatment had begun.

Although she would always come if she didn't have treatment that day, the absences were noticeable. Ali Clark made sure her daughter played, even if she couldn't come herself.

The absences became even more noticeable when Alex Clark came to Missouri and her mother was still in England, during her 12-year bout with cancer.

"I would look up, and she wouldn't be there, and I would know why," said Alex Clark, now 19. Ali Clark tried to make it to the States often for matches, but she had to stay in England when the cancer got worse.

When Alex Clark went home for winter break in December, her mom looked skinnier than ever. She had stopped chemotherapy, and the family believed she had six months to live.

But a few days after dressing up and going out with the family, Ali Clark began sleeping more than usual. She had always planned every detail for the family's Christmas festivities, but this time everyone else had to take over.

Less than two days after Christmas, Ali Clark died.

"We never really got to have any of those conversations, the important ones, about future and what to do and how we want things to be," Alex Clark said. "We didn't want to talk about it because we thought we had loads of time. And then before you know it, she wasn't waking up."

When Alex Clark returned to Columbia, the tennis team held a memorial for Ali Clark at Mizzou Arena. They read the eulogy from her funeral and shared poems and memories. Ali Clark had visited her daughter in the U.S. more than half a dozen times,

and the team got to know the woman who had been on the other side of the constant phone calls Alex Clark made her freshman year.

“Usually teenage girls and their moms can be catty or standoffish, but they never had that,” sophomore teammate Madison Rhyner said. “She was really just a great mom, and you could tell Alex was as incredible of a daughter to her as she was an incredible mother to Alex.”

In addition to the stateside memorial, Schmid asked Alex Clark if she would like to plant a tree in her mother’s honor as the landscaping for the Mizzou Tennis Complex was being completed. She said yes.

“We’re going to plant a tree for you to have somewhere to go,” Schmid told her. “(Your mom) loves the courts, she loves Mizzou tennis, and so we want her to be a part of Mizzou tennis forever.”

A reason to return

Alex Clark tried to return to those courts immediately. She felt strong, but struggled when the exhaustion of grief set in. She called her dad almost every hour and retreated from her friends.

After three road losses, she and Schmid decided she was not ready to return. Alex Clark spent spring break at home in England, and the plan was to re-evaluate her position on April 1.

“It was really hard to find meaning at the beginning,” Alex Clark said. “I was kind of like, ‘Ah, well, she’s not here, so why tennis? Why is that important? What’s the meaning?’”

The team struggled.

Already missing junior Elisha Gabb because of a bulging disc, the team went 2-10 without Alex Clark. She came to all the home matches she could and cheered on her teammates. But it was a struggle, even as she convinced herself that what the team

needed most was for her to recover.

“There was nothing I could do except cheer, and it was kind of like, well, what does that do?” she said. “I was like, ‘Come on, guys. I love you so much.’ But they’d kind of be like, ‘Well, I love you, but we need you.’”

Schmid explained to Alex Clark that the loss of her mother left a big hole in her life, something that would take time and effort to fill.

“Having this amazing mom in her life was wonderful for Alex, and she took up so much space in Alex’s heart, which is all just tremendous, but now in the absence of that, it’s really kind of like, ‘How do I find my foundation?’” Schmid said. “She gave Alex the gift of tennis, and now, how cool it is to maybe see it as, ‘Now use the gift of tennis and use this sport as your vehicle to learn about yourself’?

"Maybe these are the conversations you would have had with your mom about working through tough times, about really getting to know yourself, about staying composed, about persevering. But now, through this sport, you can continue to learn those lessons and hear her voice."

With her mom gone, Alex Clark had to learn how to fill that gap.

"She loved me so much, and she gave me so much that it was almost hard for me to love myself, because I didn't need to," Alex Clark said. "So now, Sasha's trying to help me love myself and love tennis and love things that are giving back to me the amount that she did."

A fruitful finish

The time off helped.

Immediately after their April 1 meeting, Schmid called a travel agent to book Alex Clark a flight to the Auburn match.

Alex Clark felt out of shape against Auburn, and the team lost at Auburn and at top-5 Alabama two days later. But they returned home in good spirits. The Tigers' top player, Cierra Gaytan-Leach, had to sit out against Alabama, so Alex Clark jumped in the No. 1 doubles spot against the Crimson Tide.

Alex Clark, along with Rhyner, actually jumped out to an early lead in the No. 1 doubles match before Alabama secured the doubles point.

Alex Clark was ready to return to Columbia for her first home match of the season and her first-ever home match with the \$2.9 million complex at her back.

But first, she had a tree to plant.

"I honestly thought (Schmid) forgot about it because she hadn't said anything, and the building was so busy, and the season, and I was like, 'I'm not really gonna mention it,'" Alex Clark said. "And then one day she calls me up, and she's like, 'We're gonna plant your tree. The snow's gone.'"

On April 8, Alex Clark planted the red sunset maple with the help of Philip Dierker, a landscape gardener for Missouri Athletics.

Three days later, she clinched the team's first SEC win, just as Schmid had predicted before the match during a team visualization session. The Tigers won three of their final five games, including their first-ever SEC tournament win, hosted in Columbia.

The season ended with a 4-0 loss to Texas A&M;, but the momentum gained at the end of the year remained.

"You could see the importance of the progress, the way things go, not just wins and losses all the time. It's bigger than that," Alex Clark said. "We have a good group of people, a solid team, solid coaches, amazing facility.

"It's just up from here, man."

She made a late decision to go home for the summer and continue working on the mindset Schmid gave her.

“Lately there have been lots of things out of my control that are kind of falling,” Alex Clark said. “(I’ve been) seeking things that I can control and giving to those things — which is tennis, which is working hard, school, my family, which is why I’m going home.”

A week before her departure, Alex Clark spent Mother’s Day sitting by her mother’s red sunset maple with teammate Kelli Hine.

They ignored the confused looks from people walking by.

When Alex Clark returns to Columbia in the fall, the tree's leaves will be red. And as she, the lone senior, leads her team in the spring, the tree will sport pink blossoms — a nod to breast cancer awareness, in honor of Alex Clark’s best friend, in remembrance of her mom.

Supervising editor is Sean Morrison.

Brandon Foster