

MERSEYSIDE "LITTLE STARS" MEET FOOTBALL HEROES

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TWO young cancer survivors from Merseyside enjoyed an action-packed adventure when they came face-to-face with their footballing heroes earlier today.

Thomas McManaman and Joel Hemans met England and Liverpool Football Club stars Steven Gerrard and Stewart Downing at Knowsley Safari Park as part of a special treat organised by Cancer Research UK and the England Footballers Foundation.

The two youngsters and their families, all huge Liverpool FC fans, got the chance to meet the two players and also helped feed the giraffes, before spending the rest of the afternoon enjoying the Safari Park.

The young fans each received a signed football shirt and football as a special memento of the day. Thomas McManaman from Walton was diagnosed with leukaemia in January 2008 when he was just 15 months old.

Chemotherapy treatment started immediately, but within weeks Thomas' condition had deteriorated and he stopped eating and lost weight.

Mum, Gillian Freeman, 41, said: "It was the worst feeling in my life. I felt like I had been hit with a tonne of bricks. He was still my baby.

"Thomas was taken into intensive care and, in the space of 24 hours, he had four cardiac arrests. I don't think the oncology team thought he was going to make it through – they called him a miracle when he did."

As Thomas recovered, he was moved to a high dependency unit, then the oncology ward, where he started chemotherapy again.

Thomas, now five, who has an older sister Rebecca, seven, completed his treatment earlier this year and in September he started Blessed Sacrament Junior School in Aintree.

Gillian added: "Thomas and Rebecca are huge Liverpool FC fans and had a fantastic time meeting the players."

Nine-year-old Joel Hemans from Bootle was diagnosed with leukaemia in January 2010.

Joel, who has a younger sister, Katie, 3, spent several months undergoing intensive chemotherapy treatment at Alder Hey Children's Hospital and will continue to have maintenance treatment until 2013.

Despite everything he has had to face, the Bedford Primary School pupil has continued to stay upbeat and positive, attending school as much as possible throughout his treatment.

Mum, Lynn Redman, 43, said: "Being told your child has cancer is terrifying and it's awful to watch them go through the treatment. But I'm so thankful that treatment is available for Joel and children like him.

“We’re all so proud of the way Joel has coped with his illness. He is such a happy and cheerful little boy and always has a smile on his face.”

Lynn added: “Joel is a huge football fan and loves Liverpool Football Club so getting to meet the players was a real treat for him.”

During their cancer treatment, Thomas and Joel were both nominated as Cancer Research UK’s ‘Little Stars’ in recognition of their courage and sparkle.

Steven Gerrard said: “It was an absolute privilege to meet Thomas and Joel. The work Cancer Research UK does to help beat childhood cancer is invaluable and we are delighted to be able support such a great cause.”

Stewart Downing added: “A cancer diagnosis is unbelievably hard for a child and their family to deal with and it was a real honour to spend time with Thomas, Joel and their families. It’s so important to recognise the bravery of children who have been diagnosed with cancer – every one of them is a hero.”