

MEMPHIS TO MANU: A FAIRY-TALE LOVE STORY

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The wedding was set, arranged down to the last detail, and all Laura Cianciola had to do was wait for Nov. 29, 2003, to arrive.

The wedding dress had been bought and sent for alterations. The flowers were chosen, the photographer booked. Lindenwood pastor Roy Stauffer would lead Laura and her fiancé, Tim, through the vows and they would celebrate at The Racquet Club.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the altar. Several funny things, actually. Funny and wonderful and magical and, to hear Laura tell it, filled with the presence of the God she allows to guide her life.

Fate conspired to cancel the dream wedding for this quintessential Memphis woman.

Love has created a fairy-tale life, anyway.

There was no shower this past weekend. Nor a bachelorette night. Instead of preparing for a wedding, Laura was in England, watching her man do something no American has ever done, and that is to play goalkeeper for Manchester United, the biggest, wealthiest, most powerful sports franchise on the planet.

She was in Manchester, her new home, at one of the world's most famous soccer stadiums, a place the Midlanders call Old Trafford. Laura was trying not to mangle her nails while her husband, Tim Howard, continued one of the most remarkable sporting stories of 2003.

How big is ManU, as the club is known the world over? Its stock is worth approximately \$1.08 billion. A Google search on Manchester United yields 744,000 hits, or nearly 100,000 more than the New York Yankees.

Tim, a rangy bundle of fast-twitch muscle, has become a crowd favorite. When he makes one of his ridiculous, goal-defying saves, Laura hears the terraces come alive in song as thousands of ManU supporters serenade the man she loves.

It happened again on Saturday, in ManU's shutout of Portsmouth.

Tim-Timminy, Tim-Timminy!

Tim-Tim Ter-eee!

Tim-Timminy, Tim-Timminy!

Tim-Tim Ter-ooo!

Every time it happens, Laura's skin prickles and her heart jumps and she knows everything happens for a reason.

"If I step out of it, it's amazing, but to me, I'm just married to an unbelievable man," Laura says. "It's icing on the cake because it's fun to go to watch his games and he gets to do what he loves."

Only 12 months ago, Laura was a loan officer for NBC, living in a condo at Audubon Square, working out at 6 every morning at AC Fitness, visiting her baby niece every evening. She had never been to another country.

Now she's living in a house in Wilmslow, a town outside Manchester, finding a new gym, hitting the local Starbucks and learning to live as the wife of an international celebrity.

"If you would've told me two years ago she would make a big move like that, I wouldn't think anything in existence could do that," says Jerry Cianciola, the older brother responsible for turning Laura into a tomboy.

He hadn't counted on love, hadn't figured his cousin, Ross Paule, would introduce Laura to a man she would follow anywhere.

When she was an all-metro point guard at Harding Academy in the mid-'90s, Laura filled out a questionnaire for The Commercial Appeal Best of the Preps and listed her goals.

One was to wear No. 10 and play college basketball, specifically at the University of Memphis, like her hero, Andre Turner. How Memphis

is Laura? She was only a third-grader at St. Louis elementary at the time, but remembers throwing rocks at a fence after Turner and the Tigers lost to Villanova in the 1985 Final Four.

In part because the Lady Tigers gave her number away to another player, that dream never quite worked out. She played at St. John's, in New York, for a season, but her 10-year-old sister's death from a neuromuscular birth defect and her parents' divorce generated unbearable homesickness.

"It was hard, it was the turning point," Jerry says. "She went through a lot."

The other goal? "Go overseas and play professionally."

Funny how things work out.

"I told (Tim) a long time ago that if he goes to Germany or wherever, I don't care," says Laura, who doesn't regret not getting to play out her own athletic fantasy. "I know about dreams, because I had a dream since I was 3 years old. I'm so happy for him."

Love finds Laura

They met in August 2002, at a party in New York thrown by Clint Mathis, one of the few U.S. soccer players to appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated.

Her cousin, Ross, played midfield for the New York/New Jersey MetroStars, and Tim Howard was the team's spectacular 23-year-old goalkeeper. Something about Tim made Ross want to introduce him to Laura, his 25-year-old cousin visiting from Memphis.

Understand, Ross is like a brother to Laura. It was the 4-year-old Ross who married the 4-year-old Laura in a ceremony that included 7-year-old Jerry, her brother, as the preacher.

"If there's anybody I know who has the type of values and exemplifies the type of person I would want for Laura," Ross told Jerry, "it would be Tim."

Maybe it was the way Tim was out front with his lifelong battle with Tourette's Syndrome, serving as an advocate for others afflicted with this disease, often overdone in movies, that can involve tics and compulsive behavior. Maybe it was how comfortable Tim, whose father is black and mother Hungarian, was in his own skin, and how he could get along with anyone he met.

And it didn't hurt that the former high school basketball star from New Jersey was tall and handsome.

Laura and Tim found an instant attraction, and as they began sharing their deep Christian beliefs with one another, they created a connection.

"She came back and said, 'I really do like him; I'm gonna have to see him again,'" recalls her mother, Carol.

Says Tim: "She had all the attributes and tendencies I look for. She just had a natural beauty about her and her personality was so real."

When the MetroStars played at Dallas three weeks later, Laura talked Ross's brother, Ryan, into driving over.

"We stayed up until literally 7 in the morning, just talking," Laura says. "We talked every day after that."

Laura was on the phone with Tim the day last winter when Manchester United made its first contact, beeping through on his cell phone. Laura did not quite comprehend Tim's initial excitement.

"Can I just tell you I did not know who Manchester United was?" Laura says. "I had dinner at Jerry's house that night, and he was like, 'Laura, you idiot. That's only the best team in the world.' "

From there, everything is almost like a blur.

For her birthday in April, at a hotel in Times Square, Tim spread rose petals around the room, ordered up champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries, played a Freddie Jackson CD and asked this woman he'd known for seven months to spend the rest of her life with him.

Anyone who'd seen them together knew the answer would be yes.

Then Manchester United worked a deal to buy Howard's contract from Major League Soccer, for \$3.7 million, and the next thing Laura knew, she and Tim were flying back from Manchester with his official working papers and a contract paying him \$1.4 million per year.

Tim would complete his obligations for the U.S. national team, join ManU for its tour of the U.S. and move to Manchester in August for the

beginning of the English season.

The wedding in Memphis was off.

Tim and Laura made tentative plans for a Sept. 7 ceremony in Manchester, but they didn't like the idea of living together before getting married. So as they talked on that flight back, they made a bold decision.

Forget that it was Wednesday and Tim had to be in Portland by Saturday. They would get married in Manhattan, before he left.

Tim's mother, Esther, suggested Central Park, and by Friday morning, both of Laura's parents made it, along with Laura's best friend, Mary Martin, who caught the red-eye from Colorado.

There was Tim's brother, Matthew, and the MetroStars chaplain and everyone gathered in a circle not far from the Tavern on the Green, near one of those big Central Park boulders.

"Love is patient, love is kind," read Rev. Joseph Hooper, pastor of Mt. Zion Methodist, Tim's church in New Jersey.

Tim's father, Matthew, took pictures, and the couple glowed.

Laura had taken some baby's breath to a random beauty shop and had them put up her hair. She wore a white sundress, Tim wore a white suit without a tie and the rain stopped just long enough for Rev. Hooper to pronounce them man and wife.

"We know God was on our side," Laura says. "It was the most perfect day."

Getting settled

Just the other day, Laura's mother picked up her daughter's unused wedding dress. A nurse in Le Bonheur's pediatric intensive care unit, Carol figured she'd spend the month of November fretting over the wedding plans.

Instead, she's leaving the country for the first time, to visit Laura and Tim in Manchester on Nov. 21.

There are plans for a reception in Memphis sometime next summer, but they must wait until the end of ManU season, which the club hopes is after May 26, 2004, the date of the European Champions League final in Germany.

"Playing in England as an American is an honor but to play at Manchester United is mindblowing," Howard says. "I try not to comprehend it. I just try to enjoy it."

Man United's manager, Sir Alex Ferguson (the Scotsman was knighted after ManU's unprecedented triple championship in 1999), awarded Tim the starting job over French World Cup champion Fabien Barthez.

That earned Tim a \$1 million bonus, and he has more than exceeded expectations. The early tabloid headlines that focused on Howard's Tourette's Syndrome now deal only with his magnificent play.

Though he could walk down Beale Street without anyone recognizing him - unless it's an English tourist - Tim is a celebrity in the soccer-speaking world. And so is Laura.

One tabloid ran a photo of Tim and Laura out shopping. The kids in the neighborhood come to their door, asking for Tim's autograph. Folks in cars next to them will wave or roll down their windows to wish Tim well.

Laura has settled into a routine. She and Tim hit Starbucks in the morning for breakfast, then Tim drops her off at the gym while he goes to practice. They often spend the afternoon playing with their 4-month-old Hungarian hunting dog, Clayton, at an immaculate park near their house.

Every Thursday, they do a Bible study together, just the two of them, and they have attended a different church every Sunday, trying to find a home. Sunday afternoons and evenings are all-American - Laura uses the Velveeta her mother ships from the States to make Rotel, they order Domino's pizza and watch American football.

The hectic first few months are finally behind them, and now they have visitors lined up through the spring.

"Most people just get married," Laura says. "With us, he signs a contract, we get married, move to a new country, get a puppy, find an international CPA, set up pension plans, go to Liverpool to buy a computer. Everybody calls and says, 'What do you do?' You have no idea."

As for the matches, Laura tries to explain to friends that it is like a Tennessee football game at Neyland Stadium, only louder, more festive, more intense.

"It's deafening," Tim says. "There is so much history and so many legends made on the field at Old Trafford, there is kind of a mystique. You feel part of that. It's surreal."

ManU in Memphis

Early most Saturday mornings, a Memphis family connects to Manchester via satellite, to cheer for a man they've grown to love.

"I couldn't have told you any player on that team," says Frank Cianciola, Laura's father and president of Renaissance Bank. "Now I know every one of them by heart. It's a lot of fun."

Jerry, the brother-in-law, becomes so consumed he sometimes leaves the room. For Laura's mother, Carol, the nerves are similar to the ones she felt when she watched Laura play basketball and Ross play soccer.

Caroline, the 2-year-old niece whose middle name, Christine, honors Laura's late sister, dresses in her red Manchester United uniform - jersey, shorts, socks, cleats - and lights up whenever the camera finds her favorite player.

"There's Timmy!" she yells. "There's Timmy!"

And somewhere in the stands, they know, a young woman, made in Memphis, is drinking it all in.

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• Caption: photo (2)Photo providedMemphian Laura Cianciola met Tim Howard in New York in August of 2002. Soon, she was engaged to the man who is now the goalie of England super team Manchester United.CAPTION: By Jan Pitman/APAs goalie of Manchester United in England, Tim Howard has become one of the most recognizable faces in Europe. ManU is the most famous sports franchise on Earth.

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