

Keeping MS in check



Former professional hockey player Bryan Bickell brings a positive outlook to living with the disease that ended his career.

by Mike Knight

It was mid-November, 2016. Bryan Bickell, a professional hockey player with the Carolina Hurricanes, was at his Raleigh, North Carolina, home enjoying a rare day off with his wife, Amanda Bickell, and their two young daughters, Kinslee and Makayla. Life as a professional hockey player is lived at a breakneck pace of play, practice and travel. Time off during the season is rare, and the couple was determined to make the most of it.



Bryan Bickell gives back by sponsoring service dogs for people with MS. Photo courtesy of Devin Caskenette

But first, Bryan had to drop by his team doctor's office for what the couple assumed would be a routine visit. "We weren't really that nervous about it," Amanda remembers. After all, professional hockey players skate across the ice at speeds reaching nearly 30 mph, roughly as fast as a horse runs at top speed. Brutal collisions—into one another, into the walls around the rink—are a big part of the game. Concussions, along with head, arm and knee injuries, are common, as are MRIs and trips to the team doctor's office.

Bryan, who began his professional hockey career 12 years earlier, was no stranger to the routine.

"Honestly, I don't really understand why I decided to come with the kids," Amanda says. But Bryan had been traveling for an extended stretch, and she didn't want to waste the time together. "I thought we'll go grab lunch [afterwards] or something like that," she says. And if she didn't quite understand why she decided to go, she felt she needed to. So she loaded the girls into the car.

Soon they were in the physician's office parking lot. Bryan went in alone while Amanda waited with their daughters in the car. Ten minutes later he walked across the parking lot, eyes locked on Amanda's as he opened the car door.

"I was in the driver's seat, and he just opened the door and said, 'Can you go and talk to them?'" Amanda recalls.

Amanda was beginning to realize it was more than just a routine trip to the doctor. “I went and talked to the doctor,” she says. “I just said, ‘It’s OK, just say it, say whatever you have to say, I just want to hear it.’ And then they said, ‘MS.’”

The couple had heard of the disease but knew little about it. “When I came out, he was just standing outside the car, watching me coming towards the car, waiting to see my reaction to figure out whether or not he should react and to figure out how he should be feeling in that moment,” Amanda remembers. “So I just hugged him and said, ‘Don’t worry, it will be OK, we’ll be fine.’”

Life on the ice

Born in 1986, in Orono, Ontario, Canada, a small town of about 1,800 people, all Bryan ever wanted to do was play hockey. “When I was a kid, that was the thing that you wanted to do, you just wanted to play hockey and have fun,” he says. “It was everything.”



Bryan Bickell was drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks franchise in 2004.

Bryan began his career playing for the Ottawa 67’s, a Canadian Hockey League junior league. While traveling with the team through Ottawa he met his future bride, Amanda Caskenette. Drafted by the Chicago Blackhawks franchise in 2004, Bryan was called up to “the big leagues” in 2007, scoring a goal in his debut against the Detroit Red Wings in a 3-2 victory. At 6 feet, 4 inches tall and weighing 220 pounds, Bryan was an imposing figure on the ice, known for his physical, aggressive play. He played on three championship (the NHL’s Stanley Cup) winning teams (2010, 2013 and 2015) with the Blackhawks.

In game six of 2013’s Stanley Cup game against the Boston Bruins in Boston, Bryan scored a

game-tying goal with less than two minutes left in the game. Seconds later, teammate Dave Bolland scored the go-ahead goal for the victory—and the Stanley Cup. In a career full of special moments, Bryan remembers that one most fondly. “If I had to pick one [highlight], it was probably the tying goal in game six against Boston,” he says.

By 2015, Bryan was suffering from a string of physical issues, including dizziness, imbalance and pain and numbness in his right shoulder, arm and leg. He experienced fatigue like he’d never known. After he passed out during game five of the Western Conference finals in June 2015, he knew something was wrong. Though he saw several doctors, whatever was causing his problems remained a mystery.

The 2015-2016 season was a tough one for Bryan. The Blackhawks sent him to the minor-league American Hockey League’s Rockford, Illinois, team twice. In June 2016, he was traded to the Carolina Hurricanes.

Bryan’s health—and game—continued to decline.

He played his last game of the year for the Hurricanes in October 2016, just two weeks before his MS diagnosis. He took time away from hockey to work on his health, resuming practice with the Hurricanes in January 2017.

But his return to the Hurricanes was short-lived. Bryan announced he was retiring from professional hockey, a game that was once “everything” to him, so he could focus on his health.

The skate beyond

At first, Bryan struggled to fill the void in his life left by the loss of his career. “I started from playing hockey when I was a kid to [receiving] the news where obviously I can’t play at the level that I used to play. And now moving on after hockey, that’s probably the scariest thing,” he says. “You know, what’s next?”

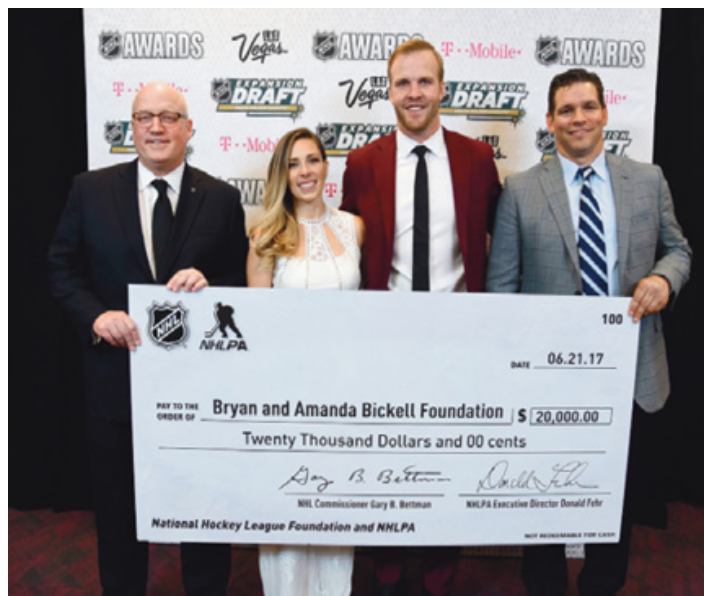
Amanda noticed her husband’s downward spiral. A previously scheduled visit from Bryan’s sister and brother-in-law not long after the diagnosis underscored his struggle. “He didn’t really want to join us in any activities,” she says. “He was pretty stressed, and I knew stress brings on symptoms. He started not being able to pick up our children and bring them up or down the stairs because he thought he was going to drop them. So right after finding out, he did go downhill.”

Amanda was determined to find the positives in their lives wherever she could. “I kind of thought that that was my job,” she says, “to stop the downward progression and to help him the best that I could.”

She scoured Bryan’s daily activities, looking for ways to turn what might otherwise be negative events into positive ones. “Every chance I got, I started pointing out the good things that can come out of this,” she says.

When Bryan was scheduled to go to New York for tests, she suggested she and the kids join him there for a short vacation, something they never could do while he was playing hockey.

“I had to make up a positive outcome out of a negative situation versus him just going to New York and just being all sad and depressed to get tests for MS and then fly home.”



Amanda and Bryan Bickell receive a donation for their foundation from the NHL at the 2017 NHL Draft.

Slowly Bryan began to rebound. “We started doing things a little differently, and if I saw him being down about something, I tried to spin something in some way to find a positive about the whole situation,” Amanda says. “Once we started doing that, his headaches weren’t as bad, he started feeling a little bit better and started feeling like, ‘OK, my life’s not going to end,’ and things just started to look up from then,” she says.

Working together with Bryan’s doctor, the couple learned more about MS. Diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS, Bryan was prescribed an infusion treatment to help slow progression of the disease. With the disease in check, he turned his attention to his family. And to giving back.

While living in Ontario, the couple adopted Bailey, a 5-week-old Staffordshire Terrier, commonly known as a pit bull. Only a few weeks later, the city banned the dogs because of their perceived violent and aggressive nature. Soon the Bickells learned that Bailey wasn’t allowed in dog parks or puppy classes and couldn’t even go for a walk unless she was muzzled. “I’m like, ‘I don’t understand. This dog’s never done anything to anyone, it’s just this little tiny puppy,’” Amanda remembers.

After relocating to Chicago in 2012, they learned the city also was planning to ban the dogs.

The Bickells decided to take action through “Chicago Loves Pits.” A citywide campaign meant to raise awareness about the misunderstood dogs, “Chicago Loves Pits” emphasized proper treatment and care for the dogs, and through rescue and adoption, to reduce the number of pit bulls that are abused, abandoned or euthanized. The campaign also sought to create a human-animal bond by pairing pit bull therapy dogs with children victimized by abuse and bullying.

The Bryan & Amanda Bickell Foundation sprang from the campaign. The foundation began training pit bulls as service dogs for people with MS. Based in Bowmanville, Ontario, Canada, where the Bickells live, the foundation delivered its first MS service dog to a Florida family in March 2018.

In 2017, Bryan teamed up with Biogen, maker of MS treatments, as an ambassador to share his story. When he’s not chasing his daughters around the house and yard, he gets back on the ice. “I play with some friends who played at the junior level with me and some other local recreational players,” he says.

No matter what, the couple stays positive in the face of an unpredictable disease. “You may not be able to control what’s happening,” Amanda says, “but you can control how you view it and how you react to it. I think that we’ve realized that, and we can apply that to many different things in life, not just MS.”

Mike Knight is a freelance writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in December 2013.

To learn more about the Bryan & Amanda Bickell Foundation’s service dog program, visit bickellfoundation.org/msservicedogs.

Learn more about service dogs and how you can obtain one by reading [The buddy system](#).