

Timorese teen kicks goals after Aussie heart surgery

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Taking to the pitch with some of Australia's top women footballers only a week after life-saving heart surgery is a dream come true for East Timorese teenager Melinda Freitas.

Today Melinda, 17, celebrated her return to good health with a friendly kick with Melbourne Victory Women's captain Steph Catley and players Emma Checker, Gulcan Koca, Lisa De Vanna and Caitlin Friend

The Australian medical aid charity East Timor Hearts Fund brought Melinda to Australia for the operation, with assistance from Australian donors and corporate sponsors.

The secondary student was gravely ill with acute mitral stenosis, caused by childhood rheumatic fever. Worsening symptoms, including breathlessness, weakness and lack of appetite, had robbed her of her ability to pursue her passions – soccer and study.

"I feel like a new person now," Melinda said after her operation. "I can't wait to go back to school as my dream is to one day become a doctor. I would like to be doutora fuan (cardiologist).

"I am also looking forward to playing soccer again with my friends and team. I am a good soccer striker!"

When Melbourne Victory Women's heard about Melinda's story they organised a celebratory kick, and presented her with a team jersey with her name and favourite number, seven, the number of Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo.

East Timor Hearts Fund chair Ingrid Svendsen said it was a dream come true for Melinda and her family.

"Only a week ago Melinda's life was in danger and she was too weak and breathless to walk a block. It's very inspiring to see her running and kicking and to know that she can now go back to school and pursue her dreams."

"This is an experience that Melinda will remember for life, and I want to thank Melbourne Victory Women's for making it possible."

Melinda's mum, Olinda, who travelled to Australia with her daughter, also extended her thanks to the team, as well as Royal Melbourne Hospital and East Timor Hearts Fund.

"I can't believe that my daughter is a different person now," Olinda said. "She is now able to walk without feeling breathless, her appetite is back and she does not feel tired like before. From the bottom of my heart, my family and I would like to everyone that has made this possible."

To make a tax deductible donation go to easttimorheartsfund.org.au.

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