

'I lost my wife to cancer, just like Rio'

Following the tragic news that Rio Ferdinand's wife, Rebecca, has died from breast cancer, dad-of-two Paul Verrico reveals how he lost his wife, Anna, to the same awful disease...



Rio's wife Rebecca died of breast cancer aged just 34

Our hearts went out to footballer Rio Ferdinand last week when he revealed his beloved wife, Rebecca Ellison, had died from breast cancer. She was just 34. "My soulmate slipped away last night," he announced. "Rebecca, my wonderful wife, passed away peacefully after a short battle with cancer."

Tributes poured in as everyone from David Beckham to Wayne and Coleen Rooney expressed their sympathies. For Paul Verrico, the news brought back agonising memories of when his own wife, Anna, lost her life to breast cancer in November 2013. Here, Paul, 38, a lawyer from Epworth, North Lincolnshire, tells **new!** how he's piecing his life back together...

When I heard the sad news about Rio Ferdinand's wife Rebecca, my mind was flooded with memories of my own wife, Anna. The similarities were many. She was my soulmate too, and we'd been together since we were just 18. When she died at 36, also from breast cancer, in November 2013, it was as if the light went out in my world.

When I met Anna on July 16, 1995, at a football stadium, sparks flew. She had such an incredible energy, it was easy to fall in love with her. We got married 11 months later.

We lived happily in a flat in Scunthorpe and worked together cleaning windows, before Anna trained as an accountant and I became a lawyer. We moved to Epworth in 2005.

We worked hard and played hard, going to festivals and travelling the world. Anna loved diving and running. She absailed down a skyscraper to

raise money for Macmillan and climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge to raise money for a deaf school.

After our beautiful children came along – Lucia in February 2010, and Alessandro, who we call Ally, in May 2012 – Anna adored the routine of teatime, bath time and bedtime. But on a holiday to the Algarve in October 2012, while she was breastfeeding Ally, he suddenly rejected one breast.

Anna went to the doctor and was referred to a breast unit. That's

when our world came crashing down – she was diagnosed with breast cancer. "Why is this happening to us?" I wondered, feeling numb.

The cancer was stage one, meaning it had been caught early and was hopefully treatable. But soon doctors realised it was an aggressive type of cancer called "triple negative". Anna had a mastectomy, followed by six rounds of chemotherapy. "I want to have chemo at home so I can read the children a bedtime story," she said.

The cocktail of drugs made her sick and tired but in April 2013, Anna was delighted to be told she was in remission. She started training for a half marathon, determined to raise money to sponsor a doctoral student to research triple negative breast cancer.

But after a ten-mile training run, she called me. "I think I must have a chest infection," she said. "It's slowing me down."

TERMINALLY ILL

After check-ups, we were devastated to learn the cancer had spread to Anna's lungs. Worse still, on September 19, doctors broke the news that her cancer had gone from stage one to stage four. My darling wife was terminally ill.

Typically defiant, Anna completed a fun run instead of the half marathon and raised £20,000 for charity. She bravely went without

Anna with Paul, Lucia and Ally, three weeks before she died



'My heart is filled with pain'

When Anna was told her cancer had spread, she wrote to her daughter, Lucia...

"My darling little girl, my heart is filled with pain as I write this. You are the light of my life, my Lucia. I only want to hold you and kiss you and tell you everything will be OK. We have had bad news tonight and I will get poorly, not better. This is devastating as I dream of nothing more than my future with you by my side. I'm so sorry that I will not be there when you want me to be. Every moment has been precious with you. I love you forever and always."



Anna and Paul married in 1996

In September 2014, the race that Anna was unable to run was renamed in her honour – the Anna Verrico Half Marathon. Lucia, then four, decided to complete the task her mum had been unable to do, so some friends and I pushed her along the route in a running buggy, raising another £2,000.

When I heard the sad news about Rio Ferdinand's wife, his words brought everything back. If I could tell him anything I'd say there's no right or wrong way to grieve, and there will be ups and downs. You feel guilty even for smiling for the first time after the loss of your soulmate, but one day there will be a new normal. Big boys do cry, and that's OK.

It was through WAY that I met my new partner, Fleur, 42. Her husband died of cancer a week after Anna and she has two children too. We're currently in the process of creating a crazy, loving, forward-thinking, amalgamated family.

Sometimes when you're bereaved you have days when you're completely lost. When that abject grief strikes, you just have to write that day off and start again the next day. But I'd like anyone suffering to know that, however dark the night, the sun will rise again tomorrow.

REMEMBERING ANNA

My friends and family have been amazing and, since Anna died, the fundraising efforts that we named Team Verrico achieved official charity status. The actress Sheridan Smith comes from our village and she's lent us her support.

We're determined to help families ripped apart by these terrible diseases, to bring hope where it feels like there's none and to create a lasting legacy in Anna's name.

For more info on Team Verrico, log on to Teamverrico.org or tweet Paul @paulverrico. To find out about WAY, visit Widowedandyoung.org.uk

CAROLINE BENJAMIN



Anna led Scunthorpe United out onto the pitch days before she passed away



Anna, one month before her cancer diagnosis