

Headline: USC quarterback Cody Kessler embraces FOJ and the Rodriguez family
By Michael J. Lewis

It was to be a typical AYSO youth soccer banquet at a restaurant called Souplantation in Culver City, Calif. last November.

You know the kind; parents and kids show up, have a little dinner, walk off with a little trophy, and go home knowing they had a fun season out on the pitch.

There was to be nothing remarkable about it.
Until 9-year-old Joey Rodriguez walked in with the USC starting quarterback.

Yep, mixed in among all the pint-sized fullbacks and forwards, the moms and Dads and youth coaches, was a guy who just might win the Heisman Trophy this fall.

Cody Kessler, No. 6, was asked by his new friend Joey Rodriguez to come to his banquet.

And Cody said yes, of course I'll come. And as you can imagine, quite a commotion was caused among all the other parents and kids.

"Here's a kid who looks up to me and who has battled so hard against his brain tumor, and all he wanted was for me to come to his banquet," Kessler said in a recent phone interview after a Trojans practice. "I'm so fortunate I've gotten to know Joey and his family. Plus, the banquet was fun!"

If it was fun for Cody, imagine how it felt for Joey. Wait, don't imagine it, here's Joey talking about it.

"It was so much fun having him there," Joey said. "I have liked Cody a lot ever since we met; it feels like he's my cousin or a relative or something."

Joey and his family have very quickly become very important to Kessler, and vice versa. After Joey was diagnosed with a pilocytic astrocytoma in 2012, his mother Liz heard about Friends of Jaclyn from a brochure at the hospital where Joey was being treated. Finally last summer Joey was paired up with USC football, introduced and signed up to the team and it has made a dramatic difference in the little guy's life.

"Just walking onto the (USC football) field for the first time, I really had butterflies in my stomach," Joey said. "But the players were really nice."

Cody and Joey text each other all the time, mostly just saying "hi" and "miss you", Cody said. One of the many things Cody said he appreciates about Joey is how he just wants to be friends, that's all, and doesn't care that Cody has the weight of a football program on his shoulders.

"If I was the backup kicker or the starting quarterback, he would treat me the same way," Cody said. "He just wants someone to talk to and hang out with. "He's a great kid, and it's always meant a lot to me to genuinely get to help people, and make a difference in their lives."

The two buddies have gone to lunch together on the USC campus, and last season Joey attended four Trojans home games. They talk about Cody's love of his dog, and about how Joey's doing in school, but rarely about football.

Liz said the effect Cody has had on Joey has been enormous.

"The support he and USC have given us is amazing," Liz said. "I could never have imagined that a simple text, or us going to a game or practice, how much that would mean to Joey."

Take, just as one example, one day last fall when Joey woke up not feeling great.

"He said 'Mom, I don't feel so good, I feel like a rock, I can't get out of bed,'" Liz recalled. That same morning I had a text from Cody asking some detail about the soccer banquet, and I told Joey about it, and suddenly he jumped out of bed, and went into the bathroom and came out feeling so much better."

Joey's health is on the upswing as well; after a surgery in May he's begun a clinical trial, and Liz says he's been feeling much better, energy-wise, in recent months.

For Cody and other Trojans players like Teddy Baker and Anthony Nayer, Joey has been a good-luck charm. USC is expected to be a Top-20 team this year, with hopes of a PAC-12 title in their sights, and Kessler, in his 3rd year as the starting QB, just may win the Heisman Trophy.

But to hear him talk, Cody would be just as happy hanging out with the Rodriguez clan.

"I'm so fortunate to be in a position to make a kid like Joey feel a little better, and it certainly reminds me to always set a good example," Cody said. "Joey and his family, they're such great people, always smiling, and always bringing us up when they come around."

"He's a part of our family, and I hope he always will be," Liz said. "We can't wait to see him do well this year."

If he does win that Heisman Trophy, then man, that soccer banquet will be mobbed next years.