

Headline: Colorado State, Part 2: The players and coaches who make up the “Ramily” come to embrace FOJ

By Michael J. Lewis

“Where’s Crystal and Alex? Where’s Crystal and Alex?”

One day last May, that was all 10-year-old Sara Robinson could say after suffering one of her regular seizures.

But this wasn’t a “regular” seizure experience for the Colorado State volleyball team. They were hosting an all-day camp at the school, with dozens of spikes and digs taking place across the university’s three indoor gymnasiums.

The CSU team had adopted Sara just a few months earlier, and now wanted to host her at the camp.

But Sara often has seizures all day, and if Jay and Mary Robinson were going to leave their daughter with her new friends, alone, they had to know what to do.

So before the camp, the Robinsons went over with the team’s coaching staff, trainers and players what to do if Sara had a seizure while with them.

And wouldn’t you know it, early on during a camp session at Moby Gym, Sara suffered a seizure in front of some terrified players and coaches.

“We had placed Sara strategically near our athletic trainer, Amy Prince, just in case,” said CSU assistant volleyball coach Brook Coulter. “It was very scary, even though Amy got to Sara within 15 seconds.

“I think everyone was shook up, and all Sara could say was ‘where’s Crystal and Alex?’”

That’d be Crystal Young and Alex Reid, who had quickly become more than friends to Sara; they’d become her sisters.

“I was in one of the other gyms and (teammate) Acacia (Andrews) comes running in and says “You’ve got to get to Moby, Sara just had a seizure,” Crystal recalled.

“Alex got there first, and by the time I got there Sara was doing better, but she kept saying ‘Please don’t leave me, please don’t leave me.’ And I told her we’d never leave her.”

“You got to see,” Alex said, “what Jay and Mary go through every day. They’re amazing people.”

It was a major dose of reality, and one of the few times an FOJ team has had to literally help save a life. But Sara’s calling for her new friends in her time of need shows just how quickly the CSU volleyball team had become so vital to her.

With three athletes, in three different sports, Colorado State’s programs have embraced FOJ in a major way. Last week we told you how the families felt; now the athletes and coaches talk about how they’ve been impacted.

For Crystal, Alex and the rest of the volleyball team, befriending Sara has changed their lives in many ways.

“Right from the beginning we knew it was super important to let this girl know she’s got a bunch of new sisters, and that we’re her family,” Alex recalled. “And I think Sara understood that right away.”

One of Alex’s favorite memories is going to Sara’s school with her, and having Sara “parade” her pals around.

“One girl came up to me and was like, ‘oh yeah, you guys are Sara’s sisters, she’s always talking about you,’” Alex said with a laugh. “Then she said ‘you guys are so tall and so awesome.’”

Coulter said a big reason the team has gotten so close to Sara is her “amazing” spirit; cheering and standing for entire games and being such a positive force. “She’s been a joy and inspiration to us in every way,” Coulter said. “We’ve gotten way more out of her than she’s gotten out of us, I promise you that. That little smile and her courage goes a long way.”

The Rams’ swimming and diving team feels the same way about their FOJ athlete, Abby Holbrook. CSU adopted Abby last April and quickly fell in love with her spirit and enthusiasm.

“She’s so courageous and brave; I don’t think I could be as brave as she is if I were in her shoes,” said swimmer Gabby Morley.

Head coach Chris Woodard said his team has done its best to take Abby’s mind off the Transverse Myelitis and Chiari Malformation diseases she suffers from. The squad has taken Abby to Build-A-Bear stores, hosted her on a campfire outing, and even went swimming with her in a community pool near her home in Loveland, Colo.

“To watch Abby smile, and to see her bounce back from the health issues she suffers from, is wonderful for our team to see,” Woodard said. “She’s really been ingratiated into the loves of her players.”

Morley said that when she and Abby talk, it’s mostly fun stuff designed to take her mind off her problems. They try to open up with her as much as possible to make Abby feel comfortable.

“It’s stressful for her to deal with so many surgeries and hospital visits, and we want her to be stress-free when she’s with us,” Morley said. “She’s just a fantastic little girl, and am so glad we’ve gotten to know her.”

And finally, there’s the huge bond that’s formed between the CSU football team and young Jack Miller.

For former Colorado State football star Bernard Blake, who graduated last spring, the FOJ association has been life-changing as well.

Blake remembers when former CSU coach Jim McElwain first told the squad in 2013 that they’d be getting a new teammate, and giving them Jack Miller’s medical history.

“Every day our staff would do something to remind us that football was more than a game, that it could be our way to help people,” Bernard recalled. “And when we heard about Jack, I knew it was something I wanted to be a big part of.”

Blake and Miller developed an iron-clad bond. They were buddies on game day and on the other days too; on game days Jack would always email Bernard good luck, and after the game, well, after the game was both of their favorite parts.

As the band played the CSU fight song, Jack would come down to the field and Bernard would pick him up and put him on his shoulders, then walk over with the rest of the team to sing with the band.

It’s a tradition that happens at a ton of colleges, but rarely is a little boy at the center of it.

“I was more excited to have him on my shoulders than he was,” Bernard said. “He taught me a lot about life, and about myself, just being his friend.”

Even though he’s moved on from the football team, Bernard still gets emotional talking about his friendship with Jack and his parents, Darin and Jody Miller. They all ran into each other a few weeks ago and Darin Miller told Bernard how upset Jack was that CSU didn’t get a preseason Top 25 ranking.

“I’m absolutely staying with them; they’re part of my family,” Bernard said. “My superhero is in the form of Jack Miller. He’s the epitome of a warrior.”