

Headline: Michigan State hockey, Ian Anderson: A match made in hockey heaven

By Michael J. Lewis

Where do you start when talking about the special relationship between Ian Anderson and the college hockey team who plays about 80 minutes from his house in Bay City, Mich.?

Do you start with the letters? Maybe we should start with the letters. Last year Ian's mom Gina thought that, to pass the time between hockey seasons, it would be fun for her 7-year-old Michael Jackson-loving boy to write to his friends on the Michigan State hockey team, and maybe they'd write back.

There's now a board in the Spartans' locker room filled with letters from Ian, while at home he's got plenty the team has sent him. Maybe his favorite came from a player named Connor Wood, who, while noting how often women at Spartans games talk to women, wrote to his little buddy "Thanks for all the support you give our team, and P.S., maybe you can teach (teammate) Brent Darnell how to talk to girls."

Or maybe you start with the fishing discussions. Ian and current Spartans captain Michael Farrantino talk all the time about their love of the pastime on the water, and have plans to go to one of Ian's favorite fishing spots ("it's a honey hole," he says) after the season.

Or maybe you start with Gina Anderson's call list, after each of Ian's twice-yearly (now yearly) MRI's, to see if the awful tumor that was found in May 2009 on his spinal cord has returned.

When Gina gets the good news that Ian's scan is clean, as it has been for five years, she calls the MSU hockey office first.

Before calling her own mother.

Or maybe you really have to start the story of this incredible relationship in Dave Carrier's training room. The longtime athletic trainer for MSU befriended Ian immediately upon his Friends of Jaclyn adoption, and the two have become best buds. Before games Ian comes to Dave's office and for the next few hours, works as his top "assistant."

"Ian fetches pads, and tape, and helps keep everyone in a good mood while getting tended to," Carrier says. "First few times he came in, he didn't say two words. Now you can't shut him up. The best thing is," Carrier adds, "is I got him a little trainer's kit, and now he goes taping up people who don't even need it."

"He tells people he wants to be a trainer when he grows up," Carrier adds. "How great is that?"

Yep, there are plenty of places you can start the story of this remarkable bond between a now-7 ½ year old Ian and five years of MSU hockey players. But where you start doesn't really matter; it all ends up at the same place: These players, and coach Tom Anastos, are Ian's best friends. His whole world, his reason to be excited to come to East Lansing for games.

“Ian lives life one giggle at a time, and MSU hockey has given him so many laughs and wonderful times,” Gina says. “It pains me to relive our ugly years of treatment and long hospital stays of cancer, but if this is part of God's plan to give Ian the chance of a life time to be a part of the Spartan hockey family to spread awareness of pediatric brain cancer all while inspiring those around him ... It makes it all a bit easier to accept.”

Ian was first diagnosed with a brain tumor in May, 2009, and parents Gina and Dan were told he had an ependymoma at his spinal cord. After a 27-hour surgery on May 11, Ian underwent six weeks of radiation and multiple hospital stays.

In 2011 the Andersons found out about FOJ, and a match was soon made with Michigan State hockey.

“You come into this program as a freshman and you learn his story, and you just immediately become friends with him,” Farrantino says. “He’s such a happy-go-lucky kid that you really don’t even think about him being sick, until MRI (time) comes around. He’s somebody we count on to be there, wish us luck, and be one of our brothers.”

For Ian, being on the team isn’t just a respite from regular, everyday life, where he struggles with severe hearing loss and a growth hormone deficiency thanks to his tumor and radiation.

“I just feel really good around the guys,” Ian says. “They’re so nice to me, the coaches are really nice, too.

Then Ian lets out a little secret.

“During the third period of the games I go down to the players’ lounge and steal chocolate milk,” he says, a devilish smile stretching across his face. “And we sneak into Coach Anastos’ office and mess it up. He likes things really neat, but I like to move all the papers around.” (Gina says Ian left a note on Anastos’ desk last year reading “Coach, you’re my best friend.” – Ian.)

Ian’s relationship with the team goes beyond hockey; he’s gotten to meet legendary hoops coach Tom Izzo, and the president of the University, and got to go on the Spartan Stadium football field before a game once.

“It’s just been a wonderful, indescribably great relationship to us,” Gina Anderson says. “What these players and coaches have given to Ian, and to us, has meant more than we could ever say.

“They’re just the best.”