

Headline: Andrew Silsby, an unlikely hockey fan, meets his perfect match with UNH hockey.

**By Michael J. Lewis**

Ever since he was 5, Andrew Silsby's life has been a series of challenges.

It all started, of course, like with almost every Friends of Jaclyn adoptee, with the awful diagnosis of a brain tumor; the Exeter, N.H. native underwent one surgery and then endured years and years of physical and speech therapy, all to try to regain some semblance of normalcy.

Andrew loved sports, especially the Boston Red Sox, but he wasn't usually able to play them with his friends due to a tremor relating from the tumor.

Then in 2012, life changed, and things have been pretty great since then.

"Yeah," Andrew says with a smile, "my life would be a lot less happy without those guys."

Those guys are the players on the University of New Hampshire hockey team, who play their sport (at a very high Division I level, mind you) just a few miles away in Durham.

Since the now-15-year-old Andrew was adopted during the 2012-13 season, the Wildcats have embraced him like a cat with a ball of string: wholeheartedly, and with enormous excitement.

Ever since the day of Andrew's adoption, when Wildcat Justin Agosta came up to the boy and told him he would teach Andrew how to skate, with lessons every Wednesday before practice, Andrew and his mom Sue have become not just part of the UNH family: they've become a major piece of that family.

"I'm a single parent, so to have these male role models who care so much about him, it's just wonderful," Sue says. "These guys ... they're huge hockey stars with busy lives, and I've been blown away by how mature and responsible they've been with my son."

Andrew says he's formed great relationships with players on each UNH squad since he started, from Connor Hardowa on that first team taking a special interest, to ex-Wildcat Kevin Goumas getting his whole minor league team to sign a stick for Andrew, to Chicago Blackhawk Stanley Cup winner Trevor van Riemsdyk sending Andrew pictures of him with the Cup last summer.

Andrew and his buddies meet for dinner on campus, they play golf together, and sometimes just hang out on campus, playing board games and playfully teasing each other as all men seem to do.

Andrew has carte blanche at Whittemore Center, UNH's home arena; he sometimes skates with the team at practice, and sometimes rides the team bus with the players to away games. The team's relationship with profanity around Andrew has shifted, and is a source of amusement to Sue and Andrew: When he was younger, a stray curse word around him would result in the player having to do 10 push-ups.

Now that he's a little older, "they try to get ME to curse," Andrew says with a laugh. "They're always pushing me and pushing me."

As much fun as the team has with Andrew, they're there for him in serious times as well. Last year, Andrew's Golden Retriever, George, was hit by a car and died. Within 24 hours, Andrew had gotten a text or call from every member of the team, including Coach Dick Umile.

"To see how much they cared, when Andrew was really broken up, was something special," Sue says.

Andrew admits that being around the UNH team gives him confidence he previously lacked, and he now plans to go to college there in a few years, perhaps to study athletic training.

"This relationship with UNH hockey gives him something special that other kids don't have," Sue says, with emotion in her voice. "Because school and other things are so hard for him, it's been great to know these guys are supporting him 100 percent, to achieve his goals, go to college, and do what he wants to do."