

Headline: Heather Braswell's bond with Florida softball: The strength that kept her going

By Michael J. Lewis

It was a simple, innocuous question asked by a 12-year-old girl who'd had a rough year.

In the fall of 2009, Heather Braswell of Apopka, Fla., had been battling a brain tumor for more than a year, but she had been doing better and was about to be adopted by the Friends of Jaclyn Foundation and the University of Florida softball team.

It all sounded great, except ...

"We're pretty huge, die-hard (Florida State) Seminoles fans," says Terri Braswell, Heather's mom.

The Seminoles and Gators are heated rivals of course. So Heather asked her mom and Dad Scott Braswell a question.

"Do we have to take all of our Seminoles stuff off the car?"

Terri Braswell recalls that question with a little chuckle. Because at that time she had no idea how enormous the Gators softball team was going to become in her family's life.

Over the next five years, through chemo and radiation, through good health and joyful times, UF softball was inextricably bonded to Heather's life. They bucked her up, celebrated her milestone checkups and cried with her in the tough times.

From adoption day until Heather earned her wings on March 25, 2014, the Gators went far, far above and beyond their duty as an FOJ team, so much so that more than two years later, everyone involved gets emotional talking about it.

That's why we're breaking up this FOJ Experience story into two parts, as we've done a few times in the past. Today, the story from the Braswell family point of view, and in two weeks, you'll hear from the Florida players and coaches whose lives have been forever changed by the little girl who always brought Twizzlers and Sour Patch kids to games.

"I thought I knew how much the team meant to Heather, and that was wonderful for us," Terri said recently. "But to hear them talk about her (after she died), to see how much she affected them, and what she did for them, was just so incredible. It was an amazing group of people that came into Heather's life."

The relationship began not slowly, as most FOJ team/child relationships do, but with a bang. Heather, normally a shy child, was effusive and chatty around her new Gators friends. She immediately bonded with players like Francesca Enea, who encouraged Heather to play hackey-sack with the team before games.

Terri remembers the Gators players constantly texting and Snapchatting with Heather, keeping her spirits up through good times and bad.

By the time she met the Florida softball team, Heather had been through so much. Diagnosed with a medullablastoma in her brain in January, 2008, she'd had surgery at Arnold Palmer Children's Hospital in Orlando (the Braswells live in Apopka, an Orlando suburb), and later underwent excruciating radiation

and chemo at St. Jude's Hospital in Memphis, Tenn. For months, then then-11-year-old Heather suffered severe stomach and leg pains, spending almost all her time at the hospital. One day she saw the HBO Real Sports story on Friends of Jaclyn, "and she ran to her computer after it was over and said 'Mom, I want to get involved,'" Terri remembers.

For the first few years after the adoption, Heather and the Gators were inseparable during softball season. Terri and Heather went to around 75 percent of home games each season, and sometimes for practices as well.

"She would feel so much better when she knew we were going to Gainesville," Terri says. "They were her girls. She'd sit in the dugout and talk to them the whole game. I'd ask her what they all talked about it, and she'd say 'Mom, I can't tell you.'"

Sanctity of the dugout aside, Terri learned plenty. She knew that Heather always had to bring Twizzlers and Sour Patch Kids to the games, to share with UF. She knew that Lauren Haeger and Aubrey Munro became constant companions, texting, emailing and calling Heather to buck up her spirits. Kelsey Horton, a Gators player, came to Apopka to hang out with Heather one time, while other players made videos and sent photos to inspire their biggest fan.

Whenever Heather had a doctor's appointment, Gators head coach Tim Walton would alert the team, and start a texting chain letting them know Heather had gotten the "all clear."

But in the summer of 2013, the Braswells got the horrible news that the blastoma had returned in the exact same spot. This was very rare, Terri recalls the doctors saying.

"We knew it wasn't promising because Heather had already received her lifetime dose of radiation," Terri says. "There was nothing we could do except get radiation again."

During Heather's ordeal at St. Jude's that summer, she was overwhelmed with love from the Florida family. Every few days a care package would arrive: a jersey from the baseball coach, a signed ball from the football team, and of course her favorite gift: A video of the softball team made to inspire her, set to Katy Perry's song "Roar."

But despite all the love and support, Heather's body just got worn down by the cancer's return. A January, 2014 checkup showed that it had spread to her spine. Heather passed away three months later, at age 17.

The Braswells held a "Celebration of Life" shortly afterward for Heather, making sure it was scheduled around when the Gators team could make it.

"Just the little things they did, just meant so much," Terri says.

The story didn't end there, of course. UF went on to win the College World Series in 2014, honoring Heather by wearing yellow sunflowers in their hair all along. The players spoke about Heather frequently, and when Terri and her family went to the World Series in Oklahoma City, it was "painful, but therapeutic," Terri says. Heather's story was told, by the team and the family, repeatedly as the victories piled up, helping everyone grieve in their own way.

The Gators won the World Series again in 2015, and now have an award named the "Heather Braswell Award" given to the player who goes above and beyond to help the squad.

“It seems like something so simple, but it has become something so remarkable,” Terri says of her daughter’s relationship with the team. “They do things from the bottom of their hearts, and they’re just an amazing group of young women and coaches. We were so fortunate to have them in our lives.”

