

Headline: Hudson Valley CC baseball gets a big boost from a little teammate

By Michael J. Lewis

It's a rule parents learn almost immediately upon raising a toddler: Little kids imitate everything they see older people do.

But college kids usually aren't parents, so the Hudson Valley (N.Y.) Community College baseball team can be forgiven for being surprised at what 5-year-old Evan Fronk started doing last spring.

Little Evan was diagnosed very early in his life (at age 3) with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), and was adopted by HVCC coach Alex Jurczynski and his team last spring.

"He was a little shy around us for a while, at least the first five minutes," says former HVCC outfielder Zach DeThomasis. "Then, he just ran around talking to everyone and wanting to be a part of everything we're doing."

Including being a part of team encouragement in the dugout during games. Much like many pro and college squads in the past year, the HVCC Vikings have adopted "Keep Eating" as a motto, with players miming a person scooping up food with a spoon to encourage a teammate doing well to keep it up, and "keep eating." (Eating, in this case, means "keep hitting," or "keep shooting," or whatever the sport is. Hey, athletes are weird.)

After a few games in the HVCC dugout, Jurczynski recalls with a smile, during the middle of a rally he looked over at Evan.

"He's sitting there going 'Keep Eating, Vikings,' which of course sounds hilarious coming from a little boy," Jurczynski says. "He just fit in with us immediately."

In less than a year, Evan has become an indispensable member of HVCC, and the Friends of Jaclyn community. Along with parents Laura and Dave, Evan has had an impact on each of the Vikings players, maybe none more than Brennan Strovink.

Strovink spent part of the 2016 season recovering from a serious back injury, a fracture of the L5 vertebrae in his back. It was the second time he'd suffered the injury, and he was understandably down. He served as a designated hitter for much of the year, so he got to spend lots of time with Evan.

"He's just so funny, with the faces he'd make or the comments he'd say out of nowhere," Strovink says. "He just has so much energy. If he saw me looking away at something, not at the game for a minute, he'd smack me on the side and say 'hey, are you paying attention?'"

"He totally changed my perspective on my injury, knowing what he'd gone through with cancer," Strovink said. "Just being around him made me feel so much better."

Coach Jurczynski was hoping for just such an effect on his team he went out and looked for an FOJ child to adopt. With help from the Albany Medical Center's Melodies Center for Childhood Cancer, Jurczynski was hooked up with the Fronk family.

"I just feel like it's so important for our players to realize how good they've got it, and that there are people who've gone through so much who could use our help," Jurczynski said. "And as soon as I told our kids about FOJ and Evan, they were all fired up to do it."

DeThomasis, who along with Strovink have since moved on to four-year colleges, said Evan's ability to cheer up struggling players was much appreciated.

"Maybe you'd go 0-for-4 and then he'd say something funny and you were like 'why am I so upset?'" DeThomasis said. "He was just so much fun to be with."

Maybe the highlight of the relationship so far was when several Vikings players went to Evan's pre-school all dressed up in their uniform.

"I think he was super proud that all these big guys coming to school were there to see him," Jurczynski said. "He was so happy that we all came to see him."

Evan and his family will get to know a new group of Vikings this fall, and the returning players will surely pass along stories of their little friend who's having a big impact.

"I miss him already," Strovink said. "I friended his Dad on Facebook just so I could keep in touch with him. He's a really, really special little guy."

