

**Headline: Bennett Nester finds “love” with the Rice University tennis team
Brande Nester, mom of 5-year-old Bennett:**

She knew her son’s best friends cared.

But she couldn’t quite grasp how much until they all came to the hospital to wish him luck.

Bennett Nester is 5 years old, and he’s already seen enough of doctor’s offices and MRI tubes to last a lifetime.

Bennett, from Houston, was diagnosed with a pineal juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma when he was just 21 months old; in layman’s terms, he has a tumor that causes brain cancer.

In 2012, Bennett’s mom Brande and her husband Randy were searching online for support with this horrible situation and found Friends of Jaclyn, and Bennett subsequently was adopted by the Rice University men’s tennis team in Houston.

To declare it a perfect match would be like saying peanut butter is kind of fond of being in a sandwich with jelly.

Since the adoption the Rice team has given Bennett his own locker in the locker room, have welcomed him to matches and practices, and hung out with him in the swimming pool and anywhere else he wanted to go.

But in September, 2014, that’s when Brande really “got it,” when she had the clarity of just how much the Owls cared about her son.

“Every single person on the team came to see him getting ready (for surgery),” Brande said. “It was really emotional, for us, to see how much they cared. And some of them were emotional, too. It’s been just such a wonderful blessing to have them.”

For Bennett, who is too young to really understand tennis, his mom said, the Rice athletes have been a godsend. Players like Tommy Bennett and David Warren have spent hours and hours of time with him, with Warren particularly forming a powerful bond.

“Bennett calls everyone on the team ‘David,’ because David’s his favorite,” Brande said with a laugh.

When he’s well enough, Bennett attends practice and team matches, sitting in a covered area where he won’t get sunburned.

The Rice players are always careful not to overtax Bennett’s frail body, constantly asking the Nester’s what he’s allowed to do, and is it OK if they do such and such with him.

And happily for everyone, Bennett’s most recent doctor’s visit went outstanding; following a long round of proton therapy designed to shrink the tumor, in mid-June Bennett’s physicians reported that the tumor did shrink a bit.

The FOJ experience has been so great for the Nesters that they’ve encouraged several other families they’ve met during Bennett’s treatment to join, and the Rice athletic department is looking into adopting more kids as well.

“Getting to see Bennett play with the guys has been so great,” Brande said. “He’s not allowed to be around other kids a lot of the time, so it’s so important he gets the friendship and companionship the guys give him.”

The Nester family has also generously started a non-profit in Bennett’s name, called Bennettsbears.org, raising money to buy teddy bears for sick children. Already, Brande said, they’ve given away 3,000 bears.

“We decided if we were ever able to leave the hospital (after Bennett was first diagnosed), we would give back to the kids who need support,” Brande said. “It’s just a way of showing our gratitude for all who have helped us.”

The Rice tennis team will surely tell you that Bennett Nester has helped them plenty, too.

