

## **Rock Canyon softball gets a pair of new sisters, and their 2 new biggest fans**

**By Michael J. Lewis**

The song was belted out loud and proud, with absolutely no concern for how the teenage girls in the audience would react.

This was back in May, 2014, on a night when the Rock Canyon (Colo.) High School softball team met two spunky kids who would soon become their new best friends, and biggest fans.

Sammi Starkey, then 9, and her sister Brooklyn, then 7, were in a school auditorium getting introduced at their Friends of Jaclyn adoption, when suddenly, the spirit of Katy Perry moved them.

The two girls went on stage and tore into the female megastar's tune "Dark Horse" at the top of their lungs, delighting and entertaining the team.

"It was awesome; we could tell they had the kind of personalities we'd love being around," said Rock Canyon first baseman Lauren Cohn. "Their parents told us that when the girls came home that night, Sammi said 'that's the most fun I've had in a really long time.'"

If anyone deserved to have some fun, it's Sammi. The pediatric brain cancer patient had recently had surgery to remove part of her tumor, and her life, like so many FOJ children, was filled with doctor's visits and painful therapy. She suffers from as many as 100 seizures per day and has trouble talking, and very soon she will be undergoing a major surgery called a functional hemispherectomy, wherein portions of one hemisphere of the brain are removed, and portions of her brain stem are cut.

Given all that, the Rock Canyon team, led by head coach Deb Kortbawi and assistant coach Mike DeSimone, has done all they can to lift the spirits of Sammi and Brooklyn. (The Douglas County Jaguars, a summer team run by the two coaches, also adopted the Starkey girls.)

There have been numerous trips to Rock Canyon games for Brooklyn and Sammi, appearances at practices, and visits from the team at the hospital.

“I knew our girls on the team would be able to handle dealing with someone like Sammi, because unfortunately kids these days are exposed to so much,” DeSimone said. “As soon as we approached the team about becoming a part of FOJ, they were very excited about it.”

For the girls on the team, having Sammi and Brooklyn around has been a blessing.

After an initial awkwardness about how best to interact with Sammi, the team fell into a rhythm.

“We knew once we met Sammi that she’d always be with us, and we’re always texting her and letting her know we’re there for here,” said outfielder/infielder Alyssa Tafoya. “Sammi is very giggly and enthusiastic when she’s at games and practices; I don’t know how much softball she’s learning, but she seems to be having a great time.”

For Cohn, who said Brooklyn and Sammi “are definitely the loudest fans at our games,” having them around has been a major mood-booster for players who are having a tough day.

“We talk about them all the time, and what Sammi goes through,” Cohn said. “If one of our players is having a bad day, there’s always one person on the team that says ‘Remember, we have a little girl that can’t be out here and play, but she’s out here doing what she can to support us.’ That picks all of us up.”

DeSimone, who also videotapes and live-streams FOJ adoptions through the Coaches Aid organization, said that he sees the team’s adopting of the Starkey girls as a big help to parents Chris and Christine Starkey, and that the family has been “incredibly appreciative.”

Cohn now plans to study neuroscience in college thanks to her relationship with the Starkeys, and added the girls have been talking and worrying about Sammi’s upcoming procedure.

Until then, there are sleepover parties and pool hangouts to plan with the Starkeys.

And, inevitably, some more Katy Perry singing in Rock Canyon’s future.