

Headline: UConn women's soccer gets more than a mascot, they get a new best friend.

By Michael J. Lewis

It was a question that just about floored Alyssa Ostergren, and that's hard to do considering all the questions she's heard in her young daughter's life.

Quinn Ostergren, her adorable 5-year-old daughter, had just finished her last round of chemotherapy right before Thanksgiving in 2014. It had been an exhausting stretch of 18 months of chemo to treat Quinn's pilocytic astrocytoma, diagnosed when she was just 2 years old.

As the Tolland, Conn. residents were leaving Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford, Alyssa noticed Quinn was looking a little sad when she was told her treatment was finally finished.

Finally, the tyke looked up and asked her mom: "Does this mean I can't be on the UConn women's soccer team anymore?"

"I laughed and told her, 'no, honey, you're on the team forever,'" Alyssa recalled. "She was so scared that she wouldn't get to hang out with her best friends anymore, because the chemo had ended."

Quinn Ostergren's fears were certainly unfounded; the bonds she has made with Connecticut players like Miranda Tarpey and Gabby Charno will likely last forever.

To say the Huskies have adopted Quinn is a gross understatement, not doing justice to how completely they have enriched Quinn's life. The players have gone above and beyond to make their favorite child happy: They make videos to make her laugh. They come over the Ostergren house for holidays like Easter. They have attended chemo sessions, gone on family vacations with the Ostergrens; they also text Alyssa constantly for updates on how she and Quinn are doing, and they make Quinn a part of team practices.

"After the first practice when Quinn was running around doing drills with them, (assistant coach) Margaret Rodriguez came over to me and said 'I thought Quinn would be our mascot, but she's really one of the players!'" Alyssa said.

Maybe it's a coincidence, but last season, with Quinn on the bench doing her own special celebration dance every time a goal was scored, UConn won the American Athletic Conference title and advanced to the NCAA Tournament.

"I don't trust my child with a lot of people, but I have no qualms whatsoever about letting any of those girls watch Quinn," Alyssa said. "They have been ... just incredible to her, and our family. I can't be more grateful for what they've done."

Alyssa first heard about Friends of Jaclyn from a friend in November, 2013. She contacted FOJ and immediately and the Ostergrens were set up with Connecticut women's soccer.

Quinn was adopted in Feb. 2014, and immediately, a bond was formed. Players like Tarpey, Charno, Allison Saucier and Julie Hubbard took a shine to Quinn, and her infectious smile affected everyone.

“When she’s around those players,” Alyssa said, “her eyes just light up.”

During her long chemo sessions, Quinn would get visits from the Huskies players, and each week several players would call or text after they knew the sessions were over to see how Quinn was feeling.

Alyssa appreciated that as an only child, Quinn suddenly had new siblings. But she also was grateful for how interested UConn’s players were in the details of her daughter’s illness.

“These girls are 19, 20, 21 years old, and I never had to sugar-coat Quinn’s condition for them,” Alyssa said. “They were always there to listen and offer support.”

The whole team continues to support Alyssa; they attended the annual Friends of Jaclyn gala in April, and last spring, when Quinn signed up for her first soccer league, Charno and Saucier bought her all her gear.

A slew of Nike shin guards, shorts and shirts arrived, and no one was ever happier to be in uniform.

Quinn’s sports experiences have branched beyond UConn a little (she was part of FOJ Hope Week at Yankee Stadium last summer, though, Alyssa laughs, “I think my husband Tom was more excited about that than she was!”), but the Huskies still hold the key to her heart.

“This whole experience with UConn has been amazing, and life-changing for all of us,” Alyssa said. “The hardest part for Quinn is that some players graduate every year, but we’ve been so lucky that the new players care about her just as much.”

And who knows, maybe a UConn soccer scholarship will be in Quinn’s future. She’ll certainly have a few “alumni” to support her.

And what administrator or coach could ever resist that smile?