



Headline: Johns Hopkins lacrosse just keeps on adopting, and loving

By Michael J. Lewis

After the heartache of losing an incredibly special little boy that was a big part of their team, Johns Hopkins head men's lacrosse coach Dave Pietramala thought it best to wait a little while before his team got invested in adopting another Friends of Jaclyn child.

The Bluejays squad had already enjoyed relationships with two wonderful FOJ boys, and didn't know quite what to expect when 6-year-old Connor Dergin arrived at the Cordish Center (the team's training facility) in late September.

The first thing Connor did when he and his family brought him to the campus in Baltimore? He ran up to Pietramala and shouted, 'What's up dude?'"

Then a few minutes later, when Connor was introduced to the team, a perennial powerhouse in Division I, he stood up and announced, "I kick cancer's butt."

"And he got me within five seconds," Pietramala says. "I knew right away he was special."

"Connor lights up our day when he comes into our locker room," says senior Derrick Kihembo. "His awesome personality just makes us feel so much better."

"He's the Energizer Bunny, is what he is," Pietramala adds with a laugh. "He just runs up and down every aisle here high-fiving every player and talking to everyone. He's like a jolt of electricity entering the room, and it's so great."

Their new relationship with Connor has been a shot in the arm for Johns Hopkins, and is their third FOJ adoptee. Pietramala is one of the biggest advocates of FOJ in the country, as he has his players wear FOJ stickers on their helmets for games, and constantly stresses the importance of staying involved in their adoptee's lives.

"The difference between a coach and a leader is that a leader develops young men and women, and Dave is the ultimate leader," said FOJ co-founder Denis Murphy. "What he's done for all three kids is just tremendous."

Johns Hopkins' first adoptee was Nick Martin in 2007; the team stayed involved with Nick for several years, Pietramala says, and as his health improved and he got older, he gravitated back toward his school and friends and such, and away from the team.

But Hopkins would get back into the adoption business in 2013 with a special 5-year old named Marquise Long. Marquise was signed to a National Letter of Intent on Nov. 21, 2013, got his own locker in the team's locker room, and became a fixture around the team when he wasn't in the hospital getting treatments.

"He was just awesome to be around, just had a wonderful smile and loved being with us," Kihembo says. "We knew he was going through a lot, so just to see him have fun for a few hours while he was here was great. He was an honorary captain and he loved running out onto the field before the game."

John Crawley, now a junior at Johns Hopkins, says he loved seeing Marquise emerge from being a shy child at first to becoming "one of the guys."

"He was sick the whole time we knew him, but he was really positive and gave us a really good perspective on our own lives," Crawley says.

On Nov. 13, 2014, Marquise passed away and earned his Angel wings. The team was devastated; Kihembo said it was "a huge wake-up call to stop complaining and enjoy your life, because so many people don't get the chance to do what we get to do."

Pietramala said going to Marquise's funeral and viewing was "a life-changing experience."

"To see a casket that small ..." Pietramala says, his voice trailing away. "Just awful."

Two months later a freshman lacrosse player named Jeremy Huber died of complications due to pneumonia. At that point Pietramala says he felt emotionally, his team needed to heal a little bit, and was uncertain about adopting another child right away.

Then last summer the opportunity arose to adopt Connor, and it's been a wonderful tonic for the squad. The Star Wars-obsessed boy ("this kid seriously loves light sabers," Crawley says with a laugh) has been around the team a bunch already, helping psych the team up before scrimmages and being the last person out of the locker room before practices.

"Working with Marquise, and Connor, is wonderful for a lot of reasons, including that it gives our guys some humility," Pietramala says. "We think winning or losing is the worst thing in the world, but having a chance to help a young guy and his family's lives, is so much more important."



Connor Durgin



Marquis & Armon Long