

Headline: Otterbein women's lacrosse decides its favorite flower is, definitely, Violet

By Michael J. Lewis

There are two obsessions that are universal among the Otterbein (Ohio) women's lacrosse team.

One is, of course, the wonderful sport of lacrosse, that most of them have spent decades playing and improving at.

The other passion is a little unusual for 19 and 20-year-old college students.

"They are completely obsessed," coach Stephani Schmidt said with a sigh, "with Disney princesses."

Yep, the "mature" Division III team of strong young women just about melts at the thought of Pocahontas or Ariel.

And so when it came time to adopt tiny Violet Murphy, then 2 ½, back in February of 2014, Otterbein junior Annie Kelly thought of a fabulous idea: Welcoming Violet to the team with a Princess Ball.

"I'm the biggest Disney fan on Earth, and what little we knew about Violet then was that she loved Disney, too," Annie says. "So we thought, to make her feel comfortable with us right away, that it would be fun to have a princess party."

So on the appointed night Mulan, Elsa, Sophia, Belle and all the beautiful ladies of the Disney kingdom gathered at the Otterbein lacrosse practice facility, and when Violet walked in ...

"I think she was kind of amazed and so, so happy," Coach Schmidt says. "She was nervous for the first few minutes, but then she flitted around to all of her favorite princesses the whole rest of the night."

From the make-believe world of Disney has sprung a real-life wonderful friendship between Violet, now 4, and the Otterbein squad.

The bond that quickly developed is incredibly strong, as Otterbein players babysit Violet, take her out for special occasions and playdates at the park in Westerville where Otterbein is located, and use her struggle with a brain tumor as inspiration.

"We do a 'Violet Strong' cheer before every game," Cardinals senior Jami Aufderbeck says. "We are so, so lucky to have her on our side. She's the greatest thing that's happened to all of us."

Violet was diagnosed, at 16 months old, with a choroid plexus carcinoma, a massive brain tumor that required immediate surgery and five rounds of chemotherapy.

By the time she was ready to be adopted by Otterbein lacrosse, she'd developed a fear of adult strangers, since so many of them she had met wanted to prick her with needles or some other medical procedure.

“I think we scared the heck out of her, because there were so many of us,” says Courtney Hilfiger, one of Violet’s closest friends on the team. “But after a little while, she started to trust us and realize that we just wanted to help her, and hang out with her.”

Coach Schmidt has noticed that when Violet shows up to a Cardinals game, her squad suddenly starts playing better. And besides all the outings to a local apple orchard and to her cheer practice, the fundraisers for Violet and the constant good wishes sent during Violet’s semi-annual scans (happily her recent tests have all been clean), the Otterbein squad feels so incredibly fortunate to have gotten to know this little bundle of joy.

“I can’t imagine our team without Violet on it,” Jami says. “She has made our whole team closer, just by her incredible personality and how everyone feels about her.”

“It’s really shocking that a little 4-year-old could change your whole thinking about life,” Hilfiger adds. “But she has, for all of us.”



