

The FOJ Experience

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Headline: Georgia Tech volleyball falls in love with a 5-year-old, and hopes for more time with her

By Michael J. Lewis

It was unfair. It was so, so unfair.

For the Georgia Tech volleyball team and Bianka Kucelin, it was love at first sight.

Back in March this 5-year-old grandmaster of spunk barreled into O'Keefe Gymnasium on the school's Atlanta campus and melted the hearts of the ladies on the team. She smiled at them, she oozed happiness, and she immediately to her delight decided that outside hitter Ashley Askin looked just like Princess Elsa from "Frozen."

So of course, the Yellow Jacket players adored Bianka, because everyone who meets her feels that way. The adoption was held and Bianka, who in February, 2014 had been diagnosed with a supratentorial neuroectodermal brain tumor (or SPNET), quickly became a part of the Georgia Tech family.

For the first month or two of their relationship, head coach Michelle Collier, assistant Marcela Oliveira and the players visited her at home, continued to have sing-alongs to "Frozen" and went about building a friendship.

"She has this beautiful, infectious smile unlike anyone else," Collier said. "She had such a way about her, such a positive energy, that you would never ever know she had a brain tumor."

But just as the new friends were getting close, Bianka suffered a heartbreaking relapse. According to her Mom, Ana, on Bianka's Facebook page and personal blog, on May 19th Bianka's tests showed that her original tumor had returned and a new tumor was discovered.

The Yellow Jackets were "heartbroken. Devasted," junior London Ackermann said. "We constantly were talking to each other about what we could do for her."

"I was so angry because we adored and loved this little girl, and there was so much more living she could do," Askin said.

The team sent cards and pictures and inspirational messages, and made a video of themselves in a circle singing "Let it Go," the iconic song from "Frozen."

But for several agonizing weeks it looked like Bianka's fight would soon be over.

"Our girls handled it OK, but I reached out to them and said to stay engaged with Bianka as much as you can, but don't overdo it because her family would need privacy," Collier said.

It looked bad. But miracles happen every day, as Friends of Jaclyn supporters know. And just when things looked bleakest, Bianka began making a stunning recovery. Her health improved rapidly, to the point where she's been able to do some of her favorite things again, like hang out and eat pizza with the Yellow Jackets players, who came to her house on July 13.

“We were jumping up and down and screaming and hugging, when we heard she had come back,” Askin said. “It was one of the greatest days, ever.”

This kind of emotion for a girl they had barely gotten to know; that’s how special Bianka Kucelin is. On their last visit Askin and her teammates gave Bianka a brand-new Georgia Tech jersey with a No. 1 on it, and a locker emblazoned with her name is sitting in the Yellow Jackets locker room.

The first game of the season is August 28. The Yellow Jackets are hoping and praying their smallest teammate is on the bench right next to them.

“We want to be there for her always, and she’s a huge part of our team,” Collier said. “Anything we can do to make one day of a child’s life better, we have to do it.”