

Headline: Jess Russo and Jaclyn Murphy, a friendship that endures

By Michael J. Lewis

They first met on Long Island in 2006, when Jess Russo was just a high school sophomore excited to watch her future Northwestern lacrosse teammates in action, and Jaclyn Murphy was a middle-schooler battling a pediatric brain tumor.

They liked each other immediately. They found they had much in common, both being from New York, both having gregarious, fun-loving fathers, and both sharing a passion for lacrosse.

“We bonded right away, like, from the first time we met,” Jaclyn recalls all these years later. “She comes from an amazing family, with amazing hearts. And Jess ... Jess has a gold aura around her. She’s such a great person, and I was immediately excited to get to know her better.

“I knew about her already, because the other girls on the team, when we were on our recruiting trip, would talk about her,” Jess says. “It was just like, ‘this is Jaclyn, she’s our friend, she’s on our team, and here’s what she’s gone through, and they would talk about how much they’ve gained from their relationship with her.

“You have to understand,” Jess says, “these (Northwestern) players were my heroes. And so when they said that, I was dying to jump in and meet her, and see what she’s all about. And when I did, it was fantastic.”

The story of Jaclyn Murphy is, of course, the literal bedrock upon which the Friends of Jaclyn Foundation is built. But of all the thousands and thousands of children she’s inspired, and the thousands and thousands of athletes she’s met, only one has become her best friend.

That’s Jess Russo of Port Jefferson, N.Y., who in 2008 joined the Northwestern team that adopted Jaclyn and started it all.

Jess and Jaclyn, Jaclyn and Jess. Two friends who laugh, cry and think together, and have nearly a decade of memories and a bond that’s stronger than steel.

“I felt like she was the type of person who could be a great sister, and a real close friend,” Jaclyn says, chatting with Jess at an NYC Starbucks in July. “The other (players) like Shannon Smith and Casey Donahoe set the bar really high. But Jess went far above.”

As the two best pals talk about their relationship, the reasons they connect become clear, since they keep coming back to the same themes: Family. Being able to lift each other up during the down times. A love of teamwork and team spirit and everything that comes with college sports.

When Jess arrived on campus at Northwestern in 2008, her relationship with Jaclyn started slowly.

“There’d be times when you’d be hanging around the locker room after a workout or practice, and someone would be like, ‘Hey, let’s Skype with Jaclyn,’” Jess recalls. “And then a bunch of people would get into the background and start messing around with costumes and doing weird stuff.”

“They’d call me at school,” Jaclyn recalls, and I’m like ‘Guys, thanks, but I’m in fourth period right now!’”

As Jess’ college career rolled along, she found herself calling Jaclyn more and more, and spending lots of time with her when the Wildcats would play games on the East Coast. The youngest of six kids, Jess (now 25) liked having a younger friend, for once.

As both girls matured, Jess began to see Jaclyn as much more than just the “celebrity face” of a Foundation in its infancy. She saw a smart, confident kid who was beating a brain tumor.

“Seeing what a positive person she is, and what confidence she has, really inspired me,” Jess says. “I started to understand her in a real way, and when you do that you can be more compassionate, and love them even more.”

Jess had an illustrious career at Northwestern, helping that dynasty win three more national championships before she graduated in 2012.

But unlike some players who, once leaving Northwestern, let Jaclyn slip out of their lives, Jess tightened the grip. She moved back to New York and started talking to Jaclyn even more, helping her transition from high school to Marist College.

Now, the two talk about everything, and hang out together as much as possible. On this day, they were off to the new Whitney Museum, and maybe a walk in Central Park.

“Jaclyn is just one of those special people who knows how to be compassionate, and empathetic, and she’s a pillar to so many of what’s still possible,” Jess says, as her friend blushes. “She’s this light for all those young kids who are with Friends of Jaclyn.

“She’s a power source that shows them they can still have wonderful lives.”

Jaclyn, now 20, is quick to throw credit back to her pal, saying that it’s because of athletes like Jess who “get it” that so many children’s lives have been improved through FOJ.

“I’ve lost a lot of the friends I had growing up, so to have Jess, who’s been such a rock for me, is so important,” Jaclyn says. “I can talk to her about anything, and if I call her, she always answers.

“She’s seen me go through dark times and good times, ups and downs.

“It’s so good to have that one true friend.”