



**Headline: UNC-Wilmington soccer's biggest fan follows the team everywhere (and they follow her right back).**

By Michael J. Lewis

It happens, Paul Cairney figures, about once a week during the fall season.

Cairney is the fiery, Scottish-born head coach of the UNC-Wilmington women's soccer team, a squad he's led to great success over the past two decades.

But in addition to his coaching and motivational acumen, Cairney has a bit of a language problem. As in, much of what comes out of it during practices and games is foul.

"I can't help it," he says. "I try hard, but sometimes..."

Referees and Cairney's Seahawks players have gotten used to his swearing, but there's one set of little ears for whom it's unacceptable.

So at least once a week, little Baylee Adkins walks up to Cairney at halftime and tells him he's grounded, shaking a little finger in his direction.

"And I feel shame when she does it," Cairney says. "She's such an incredible little girl, that I don't want to make her mad."

"He knows he's not supposed to say those words," Baylee says with a smile.

Baylee Adkins is 9 years old, with a giant toothy smile and a disposition that belies the awful amount of chemotherapy and treatment she's had to undergo since May, 2012.

To say she's become an integral part of the Seahawks since her Friends of Jaclyn adoption in the summer of 2012 is an understatement.

Earlier this year UNCW senior Morgan Leyble told the *Wilmington Star-News*, "She's laughed with us, she's cried with us. She's one of us."

"I don't think you can possibly understand how close Baylee is with these girls unless you see it up close," said Tracie Thocher, Baylee's mom. "It has been a huge blessing, because these players make my daughter feel special, and important, and that means everything."

Baylee's journey to UNCW began almost four years ago, when Tracie and husband John (who have three other children as well) noticed some developmental issues with Baylee. They took her to the University of North Carolina medical center where doctors diagnosed Baylee with pilomyxoid astrocytoma, a rare disease that involves a mass on the brain. This news hit the family hard, of course, but even more so because Tracie had just completed, two weeks earlier, her final treatment for non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

Baylee immediately underwent an eight-hour operation where doctors discovered it was too dangerous to remove the mass (it began bleeding during surgery) so a course of chemotherapy was recommended.

Nearly four years later, Baylee has pretty much been on chemo ever since, taking occasional breaks. The tumor has, thankfully, been stable for the past six months.

Soon after the original surgery, the Thochers were told by a UNC surgeon about Friends of Jaclyn; they live in Richlands, about 90 minutes from UNCW's campus, but the Seahawks had been waiting 18 months to adopt a child from FOJ and all parties agreed it was worth a try.

"I was really nervous at first, because they were all so much older and I didn't know who they were," Baylee recalls. "But I was also really excited."

The first meeting went "amazing," Tracie says. "I knew this would be a special relationship right away."

The players and Baylee soon grew very close. The team takes her out to lunch, and comes to barbecues over at the Thochers (remember, they live quite a distance from campus). Seahawks like Leyble, Maddie McCormick and Jenna Baratta came to the Thochers for Halloween and attended Baylee's birthday party. There are sleepovers and Chuck E. Cheese visits too.

The team texts Baylee constantly, and if she's having a down day all it takes is a quick email or text from Tracie, and Baylee will hear from her "sisters" immediately.

Baylee's chemo appointments in Greenville, N.C. or in Chapel Hill are regularly attended by Seahawks players as well.

The Thochers return the love whenever they can, and took the extraordinary step of driving from North Carolina to New York in October to watch UNCW take on Hofstra in the Colonial Athletic Association championship.

"That was great, to see them all the way up in New York cheering us on; it meant a lot to the girls," Cairney said. "This relationship has been so great for us; FOJ is part of our culture now, as a program. It's who we are."

"UNCW," Tracie says, "feels like home. It has been such an extraordinary blessing."

