

Twice As Strong - The Margaret Hussman Story



Written by Lenny Jurado

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Some people go an entire lifetime without leaving their mark. They float by unnoticed or simply have nothing to offer. And then there are those such as Margaret Hussmann, whose vivacity and strength belied her 15 youthful years and transcend even death. Margaret died Jan. 24 of complications of cancer, but her name brings smiles and fond memories to those who knew her.



MARGARET HUSSMANN: May 13, 1993 – Jan. 24, 2009

A little over a month since her passing, Margaret's teammates on the El Paso Wildfire volleyball club team are not mourning the loss of a unique spirit and a sensational athlete. Rather, they are celebrating her memory and drawing inspiration from her experience.

"She was the strongest person, which makes me want to be strong, as well," said Rocio Gutierrez, a member of the Franklin and Wildfire teams. "People think it's so hard, but what she dealt with is so much harder. People have relationship problems, stupid problems like that, and they don't even know what can actually happen, so enjoy life to the max every day. Live the way you would want to live, as if you were dying."

That is exactly how Margaret lived her life, making sure to keep the atmosphere a notch above hilarious.

The Franklin High School student's battle with cancer was a struggle, yet she constantly maintained a positive demeanor and made the most of her final weeks.

"It was like she never was diagnosed with cancer," Wildfire teammate Jillian Davis said. "She was never the victim. She was like, 'Well, I have cancer – so what? I'm going to continue to play and do my best to live life.'"

Ask people who knew Margaret, and they will speak of a girl with endless enthusiasm and a zest for life, the type of youth who loved playing ding-dong-ditch at 4 a.m.

"She did not take herself too seriously, and Margaret was always happy and sort of the team clown and always making the girls and coach crack up," Wildfire club director/parent Will Brown said.

Her positive energy was infectious, even before she was diagnosed with a Wilms' tumor at age 13.

During her 2-year battle, Margaret took the situation in stride and never once asked, "Why me?"

"She's the strongest person I've ever known," Wildfire teammate Caroline Brown said. "She was strong through the whole thing. She was down sometimes, but she always kept her head up and thought positive and didn't want anyone to pity her."

Of course, Margaret very well could have shaken her fist at fate, especially given the fact that she was quite the exceptional athlete.

Rising star

Teammates and Wildfire head coach Al Rosen describe Margaret as a promising volleyball player with the physical tools and attitude that would have made her a Division 1 college prospect.

Margaret stood a slim-yet-powerful 5 feet, 11 inches and was versatile enough to play both outside hitter and setter effectively.

Even more rare - and desirable - she was left-handed.

Then, there was her trademark mental fortitude on the court.

"It's hard to find kids with that type of toughness and fight in them these days," Rosen said. "She's a throwback, in that sense."

She was a hard-nosed competitor, a blue-collar worker with no complaints and the kind of work ethic you just can't coach.

Her dream was to play D-1 ball, a goal her parents Amy and Harry Hussmann facilitated since her early playing days as a sixth-grader.

It didn't take long for Margaret's talent to rise to the surface.

At age 13, she was selected to the USA National High Performance program.

Even sweeter, her team won the USA Volleyball High Performance Championships in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Then came the news of the Wilms' tumor, a rare form of cancer usually found in young



Teammates remember the happy times with Margaret.

children.

It first appeared in Margaret's left kidney, then reappeared last

February in her right hip and right lung.

Throughout the cancer recurrences, Margaret played volleyball when she could, twice working hard to return after treatments.

Her lone high school season was a memorable one, as she helped lead Franklin's freshman team to a District 1-5A title.

"She played well going through the chemotherapy," Rosen said. "And in this last year, she was out with us (Wildfire) practicing with a chemo port in her. She was going through radiation, and she was playing right with the other girls, trading blows with them. She'd lost some of her hops, but she looked strong."

Margaret spent roughly four years with the Wildfire, and the experience was a priceless one, Harry Hussmann said.

"Club enabled Margaret to compete with people all over the country and in High Performance," he said. "It showed her that not only can I compete, we also can be successful at that level. Both of those programs, they really sparked a fire in Margaret and gave her the dream of playing D-1 and that she could play D-1. It's a way for girls to find their true potential."

Honoring a "rock star"

Margaret liked to call herself a rock star, and she was treated as such during her battle with cancer.

Friends, teammates, family, even the El Paso community, showed their support in various ways.

On her volleyball teams, players have made T-shirts, bracelets and tied ribbons to their shoes.

"At Franklin, our team made T-shirts for everyone that said, 'Margaret, My Hero,' and on the back it said, 'Twice As Strong But Ten Times As Sexy,' said Victoria Foster, a member of the Franklin and Wildfire teams.

"They were orange, her favorite color. And for here at Wildfire, we have warm-up shirts that have her little rock-star symbol, and they have her initials on it, and they're orange, as well."

To this day, many people still can be seen wearing "Live Strong" bracelets made famous by Tour de France cyclist Lance Armstrong, as well as Margaret-inspired ones that read, "Twice as Strong," Margaret's motto.



From an early age Margaret was a rising star.

"I think she's taught everybody so much," Caroline Brown said.

"Before each game we play, we get in the middle and cheer, and we say '1-2-3, Margaret!' Like, 'Let's do it for Margaret.' She wanted to play volleyball, wished she had more time to play volleyball, so we need to play it like we're never going to play it again. We definitely play for her.

And, indeed, then have

Last season, her battle helped inspire a run that saw the Wildfire 16s win its first national qualifier, Colorado Crossroads.

The team dedicated their victory to her and brought her back a medal and team-signed volleyball when they visited her in the hospital, Will Brown said.

Regardless of whether Margaret was on the court, she still was part of the team.

"(Being on the team) gave her a feeling of belonging, and the girls treated her the same," Harry Hussmann said. "She felt normal when she was around the team."

This season also has been dedicated to Margaret.

The Wildfire 17s have won three of their five tournaments, including regional qualifiers in Albuquerque and El Paso.

One recent highlight came Valentine's Day weekend, when the 67th-seeded Wildfire finished 13th in the 17s-Open division of the prestigious Las Vegas Classic.

As expected, Margaret was their most staunch supporter.

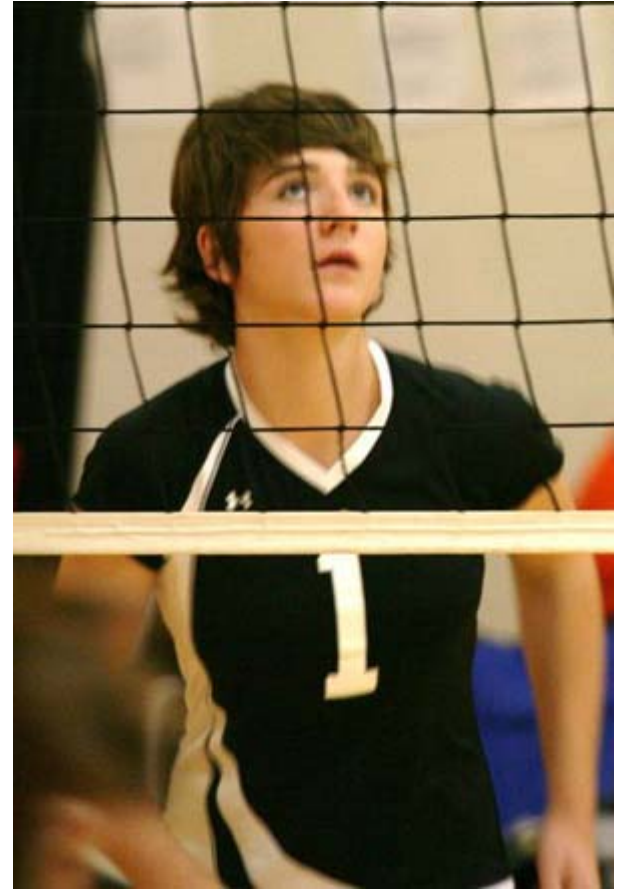
"She still was there on the sidelines when she could be," Gutierrez said. "I know she wanted to play so much, so she would go to practice, cheer us on, even though she couldn't do much. She was always there – always – in our hearts, always talking to us, texting us from bed when she was sick."

Never forgotten

Margaret's final weeks were eventful ones.

After discovering in December that her cancer no longer could be controlled, she created a fun list, or "Bucket List," of things she wanted to do in her remaining time.

Among her accomplishments was a trip to New York and writing a children's book titled, "Hope is Here."



Margaret was on the court as much as possible despite the cancer.

And when it came time to end her fight, Margaret did so on her own terms, choosing to return home from a hospital and be among friends and family.

She leaves behind a legacy of courage and commitment, life lessons that likely will affect numerous lives for years to come.

"It means a lot for me to keep her memory living on because she was just an awesome person, and she will never be forgotten and will always be in our hearts," Foster said.

"I was too scared to ride the rollercoaster at the New York, New York hotel (in Las Vegas), but I was like, 'You know what? Margaret would ride it, so I'm going to ride it.'"

Margaret's memory has been immortalized in print, as well.

In mid-February, she posthumously was selected a Flo Hyman award-winner, an award named after an Olympic silver medal-winning female volleyball player and gender activist who died of Marfan Syndrome in 1986. Margaret, who earned a nomination from John Kessel of USA Volleyball, was the first to receive the award posthumously, according to the El Paso Times newspaper.

Margaret's story has garnered national attention, as well.

U.S. Olympic men's volleyball coach Hugh McCutcheon penned her motto "Twice as Strong" on the Olympic Team poster that recently was mailed to the "Margaret Room" at Hospice El Paso hospital.

Meanwhile, Margaret's No. 11 jersey at Franklin is planned to be retired, while her No. 1 Wildfire jersey is displayed on the Wildfire Web site.

"We honor her so much," Gutierrez said. "She's the strongest person."

A rare form of cancer took the life of an even rarer type of individual, yet with each passing day, her memory and inspiration continue to thrive ... twice as strong.

"We love you, Margaret," Gutierrez said with a broad smile. "We miss you."



Margaret and her dad share a moment.



Teammates say good bye during a parade to honor Margaret's life.

[El Paso Time's Coverage Of Margaret's Battle With Cancer](#)

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