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8-year-old signs letter of intent with SMC women's basketball team

By Jon Kingdon



Head coach Paul Thomas with Ayla Zawadski after she signed her letter, with parents Mark and Reigen watching from the table. Photo provided

Whether it's to replace an injured player or add a player to try and improve the team, as a rule, it's only professional teams that can bring on a new player during the season. Once again, the Saint Mary's Gaels have pushed the envelope, in this case with the women's basketball team.

On Feb. 4, at the University Credit Union Pavilion, witnessed by family, friends and the entire women's basketball team, head coach Paul Thomas signed 8-year-old Ayla Zawadski to her official letter of intent, which also required the signatures of Ayla's parents, Mark and Reigen. Ayla was then presented with her own Gael jersey No. 3 with Ayla on the back. This was all brought together by Team IMPACT, Saint Mary's and the basketball team. Team IMPACT's goal is find children with chronic or life-threatening illnesses and connect them with college athletic teams and the local campus community. Team IMPACT has matched over 2,000 children with more than 700 colleges nationally and 300 throughout California.

Ayla was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes four years ago, along with celiac disease. According to her father, Mark, it has not slowed Ayla down: "Even with all of this other stuff going on, these devices that she has to put on her body and the things she has to do because of her condition, she still has the goals that she sets for herself that are typical and even above typical. This past year, when she was 7 years old, she had a goal of running four miles ('I did it and I was faster than Daddy and my next goal is six miles,' Ayla interjected).

"We are very proud of her for attacking the conditions that she has and for staying strong for who she is and also for just being a child so we give her a lot of credit to that," her father added. "Ayla still has the ability to impact people in a lot of different ways. Team IMPACT has been a very positive influence to us and our family. Through them, we were introduced to the Saint Mary's women's basketball team which has been far and above the best experience we've had as a family and an extended community."

Thomas made it clear how happy he is with the program that brought Ayla to his team and what he is looking forward to from Ayla: "We want to say thank you to Team IMPACT for making something like this happen and working with Saint Mary's College. It's extremely important that both communities work together and to make positive influences on all of our young people. We like people with positive attitudes, people that like to smile, people that are fun to be around, people that wake up and like to have a good breakfast and whether it's after a tough loss or an exciting win, they're always happy people. Ayla, you really fit that bill and we want to make sure that you continue to do that."

Ayla, who attends Rheem Elementary School and whose favorite basketball players are Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson, likes to play other sports like soccer and swimming and readily accepted the "standards" set by Coach Thomas: "I am happy to be here. I want to thank my coaches and my team. I am glad that I joined this team. It gives me a great opportunity to make new friends."

Ayla's mom, Reigen, was appreciative of everyone that connected Ayla with the team: "We're so grateful for this opportunity. The people that we interacted with through this program have been amazing. The team that we have gotten to know, (assistant coach) Allyson (Fashnicht) and coach Thomas have been great to work with and the team that we hope to continue to get to know. It's been so much fun to go to the practices and the games and most importantly to see the joy and happiness it brings to Ayla. She's my inspiration with what she deals with on a day-to-day basis. Ayla's a very strong individual and this opportunity is only going to make her that much stronger."

Ayla has been very much welcomed, said sophomore forward Sam Simons: "She has brought a lot of energy, heart and toughness to our team and I think it's good to have her as a part of our team to show we're really lucky people and we're able to impact a young person in a great way. She comes to practices and into the locker room before our games. A couple of the girls have gone over to her house for lunch. We have yet to work on her game but that will be upcoming."

Team IMPACT stays involved with the players and the teams, says Pamela Sullivan, the West Coast Regional Director for Team IMPACT: "Ayla is going to bring a lot of strength and courage to the team. There is lots of

caretaking with a case worker who will track the progress of the young person and they will constantly check with the parents to see how things are going, along with constantly staying in contact with the coach."

Shari Coskey, a board member with Team IMPACT, has a son who has been a match with the University of California men's water polo team and personally speaks to the benefits of the program: "It's a two-year match, which is the amazing feature of this program. The point of this program is to create lifelong relationships. It's been phenomenal for the kids whose confidence grows with this program."

Ayla's influence was quick in coming. Just four days after her official signing, in front of the home crowd, the Gaels defeated the 11th ranked Gonzaga Bulldogs 70-60.



Photo provided

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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