



Katy's Special Athlete *Taylor Hodge*

This member of the Katy Wolf Pack represents the epitome of a dedicated athlete despite challenges

Written by Lacey Kupfer Wulf | Select photography by Sara Isola

Taylor with some of her teammates and coaches after an event



Taylor with head coach, Don Wolf



With over 170 registered athletes, the Katy Wolf Pack Special Olympics team enables those with mental and physical disabilities to compete at their ability level, develop physically and socially, learn the value of teamwork, and feel the pride of achieving their goals. Many of these athletes have to overcome overwhelming challenges and work hard to win, all for the love of their sports and their teammates.

An Exceptional Athlete

When Taylor Hodge first joined the Katy Wolf Pack in sixth grade, her parents wondered if she would succeed or benefit from competing. "I didn't think she could keep up, but boy was I surprised," admits Taylor's mom, Cathy. Since joining the Katy Wolf Pack, Taylor has won many medals and awards. She currently participates in softball, track, and bowling. "Taylor has accomplished way more physically than we ever thought she could. I didn't feel like she had it in her, but she does," her mom says.

Defying Cancer

Taylor's hard work and success aren't the only things that set her apart. Taylor was diagnosed with a rare and extremely aggressive brain cancer at 21 months old and became one of the first survivors of her kind. Because of the brain tumor and the harsh treatment to eradicate it, Taylor has the intellectual ability of a 5-year-old.

After 15 years, Taylor's cancer returned, bringing with it more treatment, four bone marrow transplants in six months, and a severe illness. At one point, her heart stopped, and after seven long minutes, doctors managed to revive her. "It was a miracle," says Cathy. Once again, Taylor defied all expectations as she regained her physical strength and maintained her powerfully positive attitude. Even during her recovery, she thought of others. "When Taylor was barely able to walk, she would come out to our practices to support her teammates. Her beautiful smile was always present," says Sandi Dancel, Taylor's track coach.

Making a Comeback

As a result of this last battle with cancer however, Taylor struggles to maintain her balance, making both her immediate family and her Wolf Pack family worry when she competes. Returning to sports in the 2015 season, she shocked everyone by winning gold in her walk at the state games. "There wasn't a dry eye. We knew it was a miracle that she was even alive, much less the recipient of the gold," Dancel shares. In the same year, Taylor played a softball game wherein she ran to every base and made it to home plate. "Each base was like a crescendo. Everyone stood and cheered...everyone in the stands was in tears," Cathy says.

Early in the 2016 track season, Taylor was disqualified for taking off running after the starting pistol in a walking event. "We asked her to walk. She ignored us and kept running. She did not want to lose. She simply doesn't quit," Dancel recalls.

Although they won't be competing in Brazil this summer, we can admire Taylor and her teammates for pushing beyond their limitations and exemplifying true strength and dedication. **KM**

LACEY KUPFER WULF is a writer who loved her time volunteering at the Special Olympics. She is a wife and mother of twin toddlers.



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