

Beating the Odds

By Kevin Fritz

Her diagnosis of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis put Madison Holfeld's lifestyle into a whole other gear.

Living with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (JRA) has taught 17-year-old **Madison Holfeld** a lot about herself in the past two years, but probably the most surprising lesson from her diagnosis is discovering she is a pretty good lacrosse player. Prior to finding out she had JRA, Madison didn't have much interest in playing sports, much less playing lacrosse. But her doctor advised her to be more active and with fate by her side, this year Madison made the junior varsity lacrosse team at Lake Brantley High School in **Altamonte Springs**.

Madison is proof that suffering from a rare disease does not have to run your life. She's a champion of her cause, serving as co-host of the Jingle Bell Run/Walk for Arthritis the past two years. She's not looking for attention, though. Modesty is one of her notable qualities. "I don't want people to feel bad for me," she says. "I don't want people to look at me differently."

According to Nemours Hospital's KidsHealth.org, it is estimated 300,000 children suffer from some form of arthritis in the U.S., the most prevalent being JRA. Research shows it is an autoimmune disease, in which white blood cells lose the ability to tell the difference between healthy cells and harmful ones, like bacteria. **Tony Ward** of the Arthritis Foundation's Florida Chapter says 1,500 children in Florida are dealing with some form of JRA.

Nonetheless, few people are aware of the condition, and what makes matters worse is that it's so difficult to diagnose. Madison's father, **Mike**, says parents don't know they are dealing with a painful immune disorder and are often at a loss. Indeed, Madison's condition baffled doctors for months before she was officially diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis, a form of JRA that affects the skin and the joints. JRA is an affliction that is usually found in younger children, not a fun and



Madison Holfeld took her doctor's advice to become more active and joined her high school's junior varsity lacrosse team.

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popular teenager ranked in the top 30 of her class.

"She is the girl next door with a certain charm and personality that makes me very proud to be her dad," beams Mike.

For Madison, her journey started a couple of years ago when she began waking to blood-red eyes that would gradually get better throughout the day. Allergies were thought to be the culprit. An ophthalmologist believed it was an immunity problem with her eyes. Another eye doctor disagreed. By now, Madison's arms, legs and hands were getting stiffer, and it was a challenge just getting down the stairs. The heat of the summer would make her knees swell. Finally, she was diagnosed by a rheumatologist in Tampa.

There are no known causes for JRA, but it is treatable, and in Madison's case treatment has worked well. She recently stopped taking medication and has experienced no pain. For a disease that can last a lifetime, in many cases it dissipates over time. "It [JRA] can go into remission, or it can just go away," she explains. "Right now, I feel great."

Madison has defied her condition by not only playing lacrosse, but she also joined the high school marching band her freshman year, and added chorus to her resume as a sophomore. As it turns out, music is her true passion. "I want to be a singer," she says about her life ambition.

Looking ahead, Madison has her sights set on college. She already knows that Florida State University has a prestigious music program, as does the University of Michigan. And that's the thing about Madison Holfeld. She's committed to always looking ahead and embracing whatever new and exciting adventures life may have to offer. **L**

To learn more about juvenile rheumatoid arthritis visit our website at CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.