

## **Jeff Jacobs: Wilton's Natasha Ring had long journey to play field hockey after paralyzing injury**

By Jeff Jacobs (CT Insider/Stamford Advocate/Wilton Bulletin/New Haven Register/Norwalk Hour)

When Natasha Ring stepped up to receive the FCIAC Field Hockey Coaches Courage Award on Thursday night, some of her Wilton teammates — let alone the school and town — didn't know all she has endured.

"Natasha would tell people she had a back injury," her mom, Chandra, said. "There was only a small scope of people who knew the extent of what she went through. This award was really putting herself out there."

"I think my friends know me well enough where if they felt bad for me, I'd be annoyed quickly," Natasha said. "I just didn't want to be treated differently."

So when the 17-year-old senior sat down before the award to write about her initial spinal injury, the ensuing setbacks, the physical, emotional and mental toll to complete a multi-year journey back to the field, it was frightening.

"It's the first time I had written it out all in one place," Natasha said. "I've done it in different pieces with college applications and all that. But this was definitely scary, seeing it all in one place and sharing my story. I tried very hard to hide it for a very long time."

This is Natasha's story.

In March 2018, a 13-year-old left wing jumped on the ice for her first shift of the second game of the day. Natasha chased the puck down the ice, took a hit, twisting as she hit the

boards. The rink in Simsbury went silent. Natasha was taken to Hartford Children's Hospital. During the ambulance ride, she twice failed a test for paralysis. The eighth-grader didn't hear the paramedic tell her dad Kevin there was a chance she might never walk again.

"It was part of the shock of the injury, I have very little memory of the immediate after-effect," Natasha said. "I think I was just so scared that my brain blocked it all out."

The tests continued in the hospital for hours. The official diagnosis wouldn't come until October 2018: SCIWORA, spinal cord injury without radiographic abnormality. Natasha made her mom a promise: She would play field hockey for Wilton High.

Her recovery would take more than two years. She had to learn to stand again. She had to learn to walk. She had to rebuild nerve pathways down both legs. One leg healed much more quickly than the other. There was a loss of proprioception. While no fractures or malalignment were found, her life certainly was fractured.

The recovery was brutally painful and exhausting. She wrote how her brain had forgotten how to use her right leg and, worse, was totally unaware that her left leg existed. Her physical therapist would compare it to what amputees go through.

"Even when she had regained some mobility and was using a cane to get around," Chandra said, "she'd leave physical therapy many times in a wheelchair, unable to move the rest of the day."

There was a point when Natasha couldn't even wear socks or pants. The fabric caused her too much nerve pain.

As time went on, medical professionals pushed Natasha toward adaptive sports like sled hockey. To them, she wrote, there was no chance she would ever walk without a cane or brace to support and move her left leg.

As a freshman, she was the kid with the cane. She wanted plenty — like balance to stop tripping — but the one thing she didn't want was pity. She hated when well-meaning people gave her that sad look.

Natasha became a student manager for the varsity and junior varsity field hockey teams.

"I couldn't step away from the sport," she said. "I love playing. If I couldn't play, I needed to be part of the team."

In February 2019, nearly a full year after her horrible fall to the ice, she started back with field hockey. That's an exaggeration. Natasha stood and moved the ball. She had to relearn how to move her legs at the same time she passed. Lot of tumbles. Lots of bumps and bruises. Much frustration. Still, she was cleared to play in late July before tryouts.

Her lowest point after all she went through and still would endure?

"Getting cut, hands down," Natasha said. "I was crushed. With the medical stuff, I'm one of those people who if you tell me I'm not going to do something, I'm going to do it to prove you wrong. But being cut was, 'OK, I've spent a year and a half working for this and maybe it's not going to happen.' That was the time I was most doubtful."

Crushed. Doubtful. And far from beaten. She was allowed to work out with the junior varsity. She served as team manager again.

Still, there were other demons.

“The mental impact the injury had on me was an ever-present invisible weight,” Natasha wrote.

The fatigue from physical therapy, seeing teammates quickly execute a drill that would take her weeks to master, closing her eyes and feeling as if she had no left leg. Only to open her eyes and see she did.

Natasha had a seizure on the sideline of a game.

“It was her left arm, primarily,” Chandra said. “It wasn’t a seizure in the epileptic sense. It was the way her body was handling the massive amount of stress and trauma. One doctor equated it to a PTSD response. What she went through at that pivotal developmental period in her life, identifying so heavily with her friends, family, school, as an athlete, the stress and mental fatigue of keeping that up was too much.”

After first going to Norwalk Hospital, Natasha was transferred to Yale. She lost the ability to walk, and briefly the ability to talk. She communicated by writing on a white board.

“Thinking physically she was in such a better place and then going backward,” Chandra said.

It was Mom’s low point.

More doctors, more tests. After five days, she was able to leave the hospital with a diagnosis of psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES). Natasha started anti-anxiety

medication. At first, Natasha wrote, she was resentful and thought she had failed, but therapy helped her put back pieces of her personality she had hidden after her injury.

COVID hit in March 2020 and forced students all over into remote learning. Natasha, who had missed so much class in her recuperation, was accustomed to learning on her own. Through all this, Chandra said, she didn't let her grades suffer.

Natasha used the time to practice in the driveway of the family home. Move the ball. Run. Move it some more. In June 2020 she realized her proprioception — the body's the ability to sense movement and location — had returned after the date doctors thought possible.

She would not be cut again.

Making good on a promise to her mom as an eighth-grader, Natasha Ring returned to the field as a varsity player on Oct. 2, 2020.

"I can't even explain how amazing it was," she said. "We were playing Ridgefield. I'm not going to say I played very well that game, but it was fantastic to get on the field and to know yes, I belong out here. I'm finally doing it."

She didn't start until halfway through her junior season. She would play all over the place: defense, midfield, forward. It didn't matter.

"I was so happy to be playing," Natasha said. "And I'm very proud of it."

"At the end of the day if I've been running a lot or if it has been a really back-and-forth game, my feet will hurt a little. I'll elevate them. I've been very lucky. Starting this spring is really the first time I haven't had real side effects."

As a senior she has continued to start most games. Wilton will face Staples in the CIAC Class L tournament Wednesday. She doesn't want the games to end. Pending acceptance to Bryn Mawr, she plans to play in college.

Natasha no longer plays ice hockey, but she does skate. Her one concession is staying away from the trampoline.

"I just want to thank everyone," Natasha said. "Even though my teammates and people may not have known the full extent of what I was dealing with, they all supported me through it, even thinking at the time I must have been a little crazy."

The first retelling of what led to the award Natasha received Thursday night at the FCIAC championship and recalling the support Natasha has received from her brother James and sisters Lauren and Juliette had Mom fighting to hold her emotions.

"The passion and commitment has amazed her dad and I and taught us lessons how to live our own life," Chandra said. "Natasha wants to double-minor in environmental science and elementary education. The perseverance and the strength with how she handled the physical, emotional and mental impacts of the injury, I can see in her empathy as a camp counselor and helping coach our youth field hockey program.

"She has a compassion and drive any adult would be proud to have."

And 10 times the courage and perseverance.