Putting Her Best Foot Forward
ELITE SOCCER PLAYER OVERCOMES TARSAL COALITION, RETURNING TO COMPETITIVE PLAY WITHOUT MISSING A STEP

By Sandi Constantino-Thompson

In sports, sometimes the toughest challenges occur beyond the playing field. No one knows this better than Grace Lynn-Lato, a rising 10th grader at Marvin Ridge High School. Just 15 and 5’2” tall, Grace has the tenacity and competitive drive of an NFL linebacker, on and off the soccer field.

At age four, Grace started playing soccer and quickly developed into one of the region’s premier players. Known for agility and exceptional speed, she manages a demanding soccer showcase schedule and an equally challenging school curriculum with ease.

Currently, Grace plays on CSA’s Elite Club National League (ECNL) U16 team with teammates she’s been with since age eight. To date, she’s participated in tournaments across seven states with her parents, Kevin and Jessica, and brother Max cheering her on. So it’s difficult to imagine that not long ago, Grace’s balancing act teetered on the verge of collapse.

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In February 2012, during an Atlanta soccer match, Grace incurred a right ankle injury that initially presented as a bad sprain. She rested for the remainder of the spring season and started working with Alan Tyson at Architech Sports to improve her range of motion. By summer, she returned to play, helping her team win the North Carolina state tournament. Yet despite physical therapy and constant medication and icing, her pain and lack of flexibility continued.

By autumn, Grace could barely run or move the soccer ball, so Tyson recommended she visit Dr. Hodges Davis at OrthoCarolina. Kevin recalls, “Dr Davis said, ‘I have good news and bad news. The good news is it’s not a sprain. The bad news is it’s a coalition.’” A series of X-rays and an MRI revealed that Grace suffered from symptomatic middle facet coalition commonly known as tarsal coalition.

Not uncommon, tarsal coalition occurs when the bones of the foot (or in some cases both feet) don’t form a proper connection during gestation. Instead, they eventually fuse, slowly limiting the foot’s range of motion. Symptoms rarely appear until the bones start to mature, usually around age 9–14, and mimic that of a sprain. Thus, the condition is difficult to diagnose until puberty and often not discovered until adulthood.

**COMMON TARSAL COALITION SYMPTOMS**

- Mild to severe pain, particularly when walking, standing or running
- Ongoing stiffness in the foot or ankle
- Muscle spasms or cramps in the foot
- Flatfoot or a foot that turns inward when walking

Hoping to avoid surgery which would sideline Grace from the sport she loves, Dr. Davis initially suggested Grace wear a boot for six weeks and ordered cortisone therapy. “We liked that he didn’t jump to surgery and considered more conservative treatment first,” Kevin stresses. “Unfortunately, Grace’s pain continued, so we all agreed surgery would be her best option.”

In November 2012, Dr. Davis performed a resection of Grace’s foot, separating the tarsal bones and removing tissue that obstructed her ankle movement. Now the real work began. “We were surprised how little Grace worried about the surgery. She was more excited about the experience,” notes Kevin. Grace laughs at him. “The big surprise for me was after surgery. I was surprised how less mobile I would be and how my whole life had to change.”

Grace learned to use crutches to maneuver at home and school but needed an outlet for her boundless energy. She had already missed several months of gym class due to pain and had to sit out months more during recovery. “It was so tough not being able to play,” she recalls. “I went from practicing three times a week to doing nothing for months.” Still, she found a silver lining. “Since I wasn’t on the field all the time, I had more time to study. I had all A’s and became a better student.”
For physical therapy, the Lynn-Latos’ returned to Alan Tyson and Architech twice weekly in addition to Grace’s therapy at home. “It was so hard to get my stamina back,” she affirms, “but physical therapy really helped.” She started with balance exercises to strengthen her leg and regain muscle lost while her foot was in a cast. Soon, she progressed to jumping side-to-side and light running.

By the spring 2013 season, Grace was ready to return to soccer, only to find a new player in her position and a new coach who didn’t know her pre-surgery. She had to prove herself again and find her place on the team. Before surgery, she played as a forward, but she was asked to be a defender. “Our new coach saw her strength and speed and thought she might be better suited for defense,” Kevin adds. “This position plays to her strengths and proved to be a blessing because now she plays both ends of the field well.”

Grace rapidly switched to the new skill set and was thrilled to be back on the field, but a few weeks later while dribbling, she cut to her right foot, felt her ankle pop, and fell over in agony. At first, her family thought she had broken her ankle or torn a muscle. Instead, she had inadvertently broken through scar tissue. With a few weeks rest, Grace was back on the field with even more ankle flexibility and finally, no pain.

That spring, the team went on to win the state tournament, Southeast Regionals and attended Nationals in Richmond where they placed 14th in the US. “But the real win for Grace,” Kevin emphasizes, “was playing again. We all underestimated how difficult it would be to come back but saw how hard she was willing to work to get results. We’re
so proud of her and so grateful to Dr. Davis and Architech. Dr. Davis is a wonderful doctor and a wonderful person. When we met, he talked directly to Grace, which made her feel comfortable.”

Last summer, Grace participated in an elite soccer camp at the College of Charleston (“a great experience,” she says) and would be interested in attending a school for both soccer and academic study when she graduates in 2017. For her field of study, she received inspiration from a familiar source. “Dr. Davis was great and really got me interested in sports medicine as a career. I also like Greg Sanders, the PA I worked with at OrthoCarolina. Working with them made me realize I’d like to be in the medical field someday.”

Most recently, Grace’s team finished second in their division and qualified for a 2014 regional event held in Seattle during June. Despite the cross-country demands of her sport, Grace takes it all in stride. “Soccer is such a big part of who I am. I love everything about the sport—the competitiveness, the strategy, the social part. Now I don’t hurt anymore so I can concentrate completely on the game. While the surgery was a challenge and tough working through recovery, it all pays off on the field.” Spoken like a true athlete.

OrthoCarolina is a proud sponsor of the Charlotte Soccer Academy and wishes its teams another great season!