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A new tradition? Iowa Hawkeyes fans give wave of support to childrens hospital patients after first quarter

Mom: 'I've got to tell you, it was really something'



Fans in the stands wave to patients at the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital after the first quarter of Saturday's Iowa Hawkeyes game at Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City. (Stephen Mally/The Gazette)

IOWA CITY — Battling a lung infection following a serious case of pneumonia, 8-year-old Zack Poe, on Saturday, really wasn't feeling well. He was in the hospital, for starters, on a first home football game for the Hawkeyes.

But his family took him anyway to the 12th floor in the new University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital, which towers over Kinnick Stadium, and they joined dozens of other

pediatric patients and families for a “press box” view of the action.

That was cool. And then the first quarter ended. And 68,000-plus fans turned and looked at him. They smiled, and they did a wave — not the typical wave you see at football games.

“I’ve got to tell you,” his mom, Leigh Ann Kennedy, said, “it was really something.”

With the Hawkeyes kicking off their first football season since the university opened its new 14-floor, \$360 million children’s hospital — fans via social media months ago began circulating the idea of a coordinated midgame wave to the children watching over their collective shoulder.

The idea spread — largely through a “Hawkeye Heaven” Facebook page — and UI Hospitals and athletics administrators were supportive. Thus, a game announcer had planned to call for fans to wave at the kids after the first quarter — and he did.

But fans spontaneously began waving even before the announcement.

“They were very eager, apparently,” UI Hospitals and Clinics spokesman Tom Moore told The Gazette.

Parents and patients could see fan faces, and they could tell, according to Kennedy.

“To see so many people participating — this wasn’t like some of the people stood up,” she said. “This was the entire stadium, and we could see it all, and it was amazing.”

Kennedy’s little boy — the one who hadn’t been feeling well — waved back. They all did.

“And Zack kept waving, even after they turned back around,” she said.

Because their family lives in Iowa City, some friends at the game knew the Kennedys were in the hospital at the time.

“We had a few people texting us saying, ‘We’re waving at you,’ ” Kennedy said. “That was fun, too.”

And, perhaps, her family might soon get to be on the giving end of the wave — as the athletics program plans to make the post-first quarter wave a new tradition, Moore said.

Inside the hospital, university officials are doing their best to simulate a tailgate-game time atmosphere for some of the state’s most vulnerable fans.

Up to 81 people can fill the spacious hospital press box, with other nearby seating available. About 60 were in the room during the Saturday wave, according to Moore, and up to 100 cycled in and out throughout the game.

The kids received Hawkeye favors and snacks — think cookies and cupcakes — and they were offered the chance to play games, like cornhole.

And even though many fans attending the game Saturday knew the wave was coming, 11-year-old Melissa Derby didn’t. She was in the hospital over the weekend for back surgery, and her mom said the gesture caught her daughter off guard.

“I didn’t tell her it was going to happen,” Cassandra Derby said. “So she was excited about that.”

Since its Saturday debut, the gesture has continued to ride the social media wave that launched it — catching the attention of ESPN and the Today Show, for example, both of which aired features of the fan initiative.

“The Iowa Hawkeyes have the newest tradition in college football, and it’s already one of the best,” the Today Show shared on Facebook.