

## One Sharp Fencer

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Jenn Kostialik can't control what's going on inside of her, so she knows there's no point in trying.

At 8, she was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a life-threatening genetic disease that in most cases causes mucus to build up and clog the lungs. CF makes it difficult to breathe and can result in infections and lung damage.

What the disease hasn't done is keep the Wayne Valley senior from putting her energy into the things she can control. And it hasn't kept her from excelling.

Last year, the Indians' fencing co-captain won the saber gold medal at the Passaic County tournament, finished 12th at the State championships and was named to The Record's All-North Jersey fencing team. Thanks to her speed and precision, she's off to a 19-2 start this season.

"She really does go above and beyond what's expected," said Wayne Valley fencing coach Chris Awad. "Whatever she wants to do, she does it. Even if she's not feeling good, she puts in her all. It's very cool to see someone who has more off days than the rest of us, pulling it together and being strong for us at times."

Kostialik relishes the strip, not only for the wins, but for the moments where everything -- the medications, the doctor's visits, the worrying -- disappear. She's even more grateful for the perspective she's gained through the sport.

"Fencing has helped me to become a better person," she said. "I used to cry if I lost and now I'm fine with it. It kind of takes my mind off of my condition because it's something I'm still able to do."

It's not the only thing she does. In addition to being an Indians' cross-country captain, she runs spring track and is president of her school's Latin club. Her mother said Jenn will graduate with a GPA higher than 4.0.

Keeping up her strength hasn't been easy, though. Kostialik was sidelined during the fall of her sophomore year with her first lung infection, and in her junior year, she underwent an unsuccessful sinus surgery to remove polyps in her nasal cavity that had caused her to lose her sense of smell. This fall, she battled a second lung infection.

"When I am sick, it just wears me down," said Kostialik, who likely will join her older sister, Jamie, at Rutgers to major in pharmacy. "I just get more tired."

But even when she's at her lowest, she keeps on fighting.

"She's overcoming the odds and doing it well," said her stepfather, Joe Lapari. "She's facing her own mortality at such a young age and she's a fighter. She just wants to be as good as she can because of this [disease]. She overcompensates with everything else because of what's going on inside of her. If half the athletes had her heart, they'd succeed a lot more than they do."

Kostialik has remained relatively healthy since her last lung infection, but her parents know the damaging effects of the disease aren't always visible.

"CF is 100 percent progressive," said her mother, Janet Kostialik, a private duty registered nurse. "It never gets better. Today is the best day she'll ever have. That's how [the doctors] described it to me. Ninety-nine percent

of kids with CF die from CF, so you kind of know what your child's fate is. They all end up the same. It's just a matter of when."

When Jenn heard the diagnosis, she didn't understand the magnitude of her disease. The only thing she knew was that she'd have to be strong for her mother.

"The doctor called my mom out of the room and told me first," she said. "I was the calm one. [My mom] feels guilty because it's genetic, but of course it's not her fault. ... She still gets upset about [the disease], but I'm good with it. It's something I have to deal with, so whatever. I do what I have to, but it gets tough sometimes."

"When she was born in 1989 the life expectancy was 10 years old, now it's mid-30s," said Janet Kostialik. "I cried for a couple of years. She knows I have moments where I don't handle this well and she'll console me by saying, 'Mom, I'm OK.' She's become my hero. If I think I'm having a bad day it can't compare to what she's going through every day."

Remarkably, Kostialik refuses to see her illness as anything more than an unfortunate inconvenience. Her biggest challenge is fitting in her medications between school, fencing practice, private fencing lessons, homework and hanging out with friends.

Twice a day she does airway clearance therapy to loosen up the mucus in her lungs. She wears a vest that inflates and deflates at various speeds to apply pressure to her chest, and uses a nebulizer that administers three different medications in the form of liquid mist into her airways. Kostialik drives home during her 40-minute lunch break to take her first medication of the day and repeats the procedure when she gets home at 9:30 p.m.

But as tiring and time-consuming as her schedule is, Kostialik refuses to let CF stop her from living a "normal" teenage life. When she's not fencing, she spends as much time as she can with family and her inseparable best friends and teammates, Gabby Minervini and Kylie Maloney.

"We just make fun out of the most boring situations," said Minervini.

Those closest to Kostialik follow the bubbly teenager's lead by refusing to dwell on her condition.

"It's so hard to deal with on a daily basis, but on the other hand, we don't waste a moment," said Lapari. "We laugh, we talk -- because you know how precious life is when you're facing [this disease] on a daily basis."