

An expectant hush fell over the crowd filling the new Rinehart Room above Kates Gymnasium on Wednesday, as draft day commenced.

Ashland University's volleyball coaches and players beamed with excitement as they welcomed their newest player — a lively, red-haired 6-year-old named Kenley Miles.

“I think we knew from the moment that she came and we met her, that her enthusiasm, her energy, her just love for life, would be great for our program, for our team,” head coach Kevin Foeman said during the press conference. “An asset that we can't just find anywhere.”

Players Sophie Dahn and Lexi Lombardo were also eager to weigh in.

“Our coaching staff has been working very hard for a long time, trying to find someone as strong and determined as Kenley is,” said defensive specialist Dahn. “So you can imagine how excited and happy we were when we got in connection with her.”

“She always has a smile on her face,” added middle hitter Lombardo. “She's always doing something crazy, funky. So I just love the energy you have, and I'm super excited to see where it goes, and honored to have you on our team.”

Typically, 6-year-olds don't get to join a college-level volleyball team. But thanks to Team IMPACT, a nonprofit out of Boston that connects children facing serious illnesses with college athletic teams, a dream came true for the Perrysville girl.

Miles' family — parents Morgan and Mitchell — first became aware of Team IMPACT through a nurse during one of her hospital stays.

The family filled out an application online, hoping to give the little girl an activity to distract her from her illnesses and allow her to become her enthusiastic self again, Morgan Miles said.

Kenley Miles has pseudotumor cerebri, a brain condition that causes the same symptoms as a brain tumor — but no tumor exists.

The condition — which is incurable — usually hits women ages 20-50.

She also suffers from epilepsy and craniosynostosis, in which her skull sutures fused too early.

“Her brain can't grow anymore, because there's nowhere for it to go,” Morgan Miles said. “Though they'll have to expand her skull, eventually.”

She was first diagnosed with pseudotumor cerebri at age 4, when a spinal tap revealed pressure in her skull from intracranial hypertension, Morgan Miles said.

Akron Children's Hospital is treating Kenley Miles, but her prognosis is uncertain, given the condition so rarely affects a child, Morgan Miles said.

“She's holding up really well,” she added. “The only thing she's dealing with right now are headaches every day and some messed up vision. Medication is controlling it pretty well right now.”

Through it all, Kenley Miles' spirit has never dimmed, Morgan Miles said, thanks most recently to the volleyball team.

“It's just something she can look forward to,” Morgan Miles said. “It's really exciting and positive. Instead of ‘When's my next doctor appointment?’ it's ‘When's the next game?’ ”

Kenley Miles gets to hang out with the players, come to practices and games and has even lifted weights with them.

“Afterwards, she was like, ‘Feel my muscles, Mom!’ “ Morgan Miles said, laughing. “She just jumped right in. She wasn't shy or anything with them.”

The team, along with the university's cheer and dance team, cheered as Kenley Miles signed her National Letter of Intent during the press conference. She also was presented with her own jersey by Foeman, before they all had a pizza party.

“It shows strength on her part, and courage,” Lombardo said. “Because she told me, she's never even thought about playing volleyball before, but here she is, trying it out. That takes a lot of courage, especially walking into a college campus — huge volleyball team, huge, tall girls surrounding her. So I think it's just something that not a lot of people could do, especially being 6 years old.”

The new partnership affects the players as much as Kenley Miles.

“It also means a lot that we can see how great of a personality she has, and how outgoing and positive she is — although there are things she's going through,” Dahn said. “So I think we can learn from that and know that our little things that we're going through shouldn't put us down in life, because she showed us how positive she can be through everything.”