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Girl's Super Bowl dream a reality

By Debbie Black

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Twelve-year-old Katie Miller has everything she needs for the Super Bowl, including an all-expenses paid, four-day trip courtesy of UPMC Health Plan and the Children's Hospital Foundation of Pittsburgh.

"I am very excited to get to go," said Katie, the daughter of Tina Miller and Louie Shupe of Clarksburg, Indiana County. "I want the Steelers to win. Big Ben is my favorite. I'm going to wear my Big Ben jersey."

The Saltsburg Elementary sixth-grader has a big heart for the Steelers, any of whom would be inspired by the knowledge that she has already survived 18 surgeries, all related to the birth defect spina bifida. Miller came first to mind when her case manager, UPMC's Pat Perkins, was told she could select someone to get the trip through the Children's Hospital Foundation.

"Katie was my pick, not just because she is a Steelers fan, but because she could make the trip," said Perkins. "The physicians were very excited for this to happen. When I got to speak with Katie on the phone she said, 'I love you!' "

The package, Perkins told them last Friday, is for two. Katie's mother also will make the trip while brothers Cory, 16 and Dillon, 14, will have to settle for watching the game with their dad and grandmother, Ruth Gochenour.

"Everybody is pretty excited about it," Tina Miller said. "I wondered about going. How was I going to do everything? Were they just going to drop us off or what? We were going to be all alone there. I told Pat I didn't know about doing this myself. They decided to send her with us. She will be with us but not at the game."

News quickly spread to friends and teachers at Saltsburg Elementary School, where Katie was on the cheerleading team and had attended classes until two years ago when she became a homebound student.

"My best friend, Shawna Senick, told everybody," Katie said. "My friend, Timmy Dunlap, called and said, 'I hear you're going to the Super Bowl. That is so cool.'"

She will leave her home today in Clarksburg to catch a "Wings for Kids" flight out of Allegheny County Airport, West Mifflin. A chauffeur will drive them to a hotel in Detroit, just 10 minutes from Ford Field, and will be assigned to them as they dine, shop and tour the city. Katie will also receive spending money.

They will return Monday.

"I hope the Steelers win," said Katie, who was not home when the first call came from Perkins. "My grandmother told me I was going to the Super Bowl. At first, I thought she was pulling my leg. Then, I thought, 'This is pretty cool.'"