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Heart tests urged for student athletes

Advocates say EKGs can detect hidden health risks

February 08, 2012 | By Jack McCarthy, Special to the Tribune

Annie Martines never had a clue something might be wrong with her heart.

But several months into a senior year brimming with classes, sports and work, plus an intensifying college search, a routine electrocardiogram hinted that the 18-year-old St. Charles East senior might have a heart abnormality.

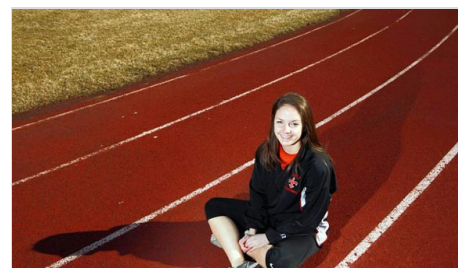
Days into the 2011-12 basketball season, the Saints' team captain and starting guard was abruptly sidelined and her life temporarily turned upside down.

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Annie Martines, 18, on the track at St. Charles High School (Michael Tercha, Chicago Tribune)

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"I was in basketball two weeks, played one game and then I was out," said Martines, who had an EKG screening at St. Charles East with other students. "I was definitely worried."

Further tests later determined her heart was healthy, but she said the temporary benching was a small price to pay for the assurance that she's OK.

St. Charles East is among an increasing number of schools joining with private groups to offer free or low-cost EKG testing. The objective is to catch previously undiagnosed heart problems for treatment and head off more serious conditions early.

The Oakbrook Terrace-based Midwest Heart Foundation estimates that as many as 30 young adults die each week nationwide from undetected heart problems.

In Martines' case, early tests indicated concerns with blood flow through her left ventricle. Since EKG readings can only hint at possible problems, follow-up tests were recommended.

Martines, who had just completed a busy cross-country season, passed a stress test with flying colors in November. She then underwent a more sophisticated MRI exam, which gave Martines and her heart a clean bill of health in January.

Martines' doctor cleared her to play, and she promptly resumed normal activities.

According to the American Heart Association, EKGs are noninvasive and painless tests using electrodes attached to the chest to record the heart's electrical activity. It's a standard tool to find abnormal rhythms, determine blood flow and indicate whether areas of the heart are abnormally thick.

A small number of tests — as low as 2 percent — report false positives, so follow-up tests are recommended.

In 2005, 20-year-old Max Schewitz died suddenly of an undiagnosed heart condition after moving furniture. The tragedy led his parents to fund research and pay for EKGs and other testing.

"There's nothing I can do to get my son back, absolutely nothing," said Mary Beth Schewitz of Lake Bluff. "I can't change the past, so all I can do is change the future."

The foundation has no paid staff, relying on volunteers to help perform the tests, which are run in two-year cycles at north suburban schools.

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"The tests are mostly free," Schewitz said. "I believe strongly in taking donor dollars and applying them back to the community from which they came. We can run practically on fumes. We're a small organization with great reach."

Volunteers set up in a gym and curtain off areas for tests while a paid cardiologist reviews results. In addition to EKGs, this year the group has added ultrasound echo tests, which use sound waves to provide images of the heart.

If an EKG indicates a need for an echo test, "we call them back and give them an echo for free that day," Schewitz said. "We can say, 'Yep, you're fine,' to them, or they need to go for even more evaluation."

This year, the Max Schewitz Foundation has supported testing at 10 north suburban high school campuses and the College of Lake County. They'll expand this summer with a pilot program in southern Wisconsin.

Since 2007, around 26,000 student athletes have been tested. Three more sessions are scheduled this school year: Wednesday at Lake Zurich High School, Feb. 29 at Warren Township High School's Almond Campus and March 7 at Warren's O'Plaine Campus.

Current testing approaches can be traced to Dr. Joseph Marek, a clinical cardiologist with Oakbrook Terrace-based Midwest Heart Specialists and founder and medical director of its Young Hearts for Life program.

Marek created and refined screening procedures used to examine around 70,000 students at nearly 50 sites since 2006. Young Hearts for Life has scheduled tests Feb. 16-17 at Glenbard West High School and March 1 at Lemont High School.

"For years, we've always been bothered — both (from) a standpoint as a parent and as a cardiologist who should be able to do something about this — about sudden cardiac deaths that occurred in these young athletes," Marek said.

Expensive ultrasound heart testing had been a standard procedure into the early 2000s. But Marek learned through newspaper articles that European physicians used EKG screenings to reduce sudden death rates among young adults.

"Echo (tests) are logistically difficult to do, but EKGs are easy," he said. "The machine is low-cost and simple to do. You could do the test in a couple of minutes."

A pilot program screened 85 junior high school students using health care personnel and demonstrated the program's feasibility. From there, Marek expanded the effort in 2006 to test more than 2,000 Naperville high school students, training parent volunteers to help administer screenings.

"They could be the workforce for this and I could do this in large scale," he said. "It worked beautifully. ... From there we've grown over the years and (are) still going strong."

Both Schewitz and Marek say all high school student athletes should get EKGs to detect heart conditions that could be missed without the tests.

"By just doing a history on the student and (a physical) examination, we have very little chance of detecting

them," Marek said.

Martines, a three-sport athlete and student council president, doesn't hesitate when asked if she'd recommend the test to others.

"There's nothing to lose," she said. "It's worth it if they catch something."

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