

Botkin cleared to play after heart procedure

Written by Jim Ecker

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Stephanie Botkin is averaging 10 points and 6 rebounds for the Kennedy girls basketball team, which are excellent numbers for a freshman in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

There's no telling what she'll accomplish now that her heart ailment has been repaired.

Botkin had a problem with her heart conduction system, which functions as the body's pacemaker and keeps the heart beating at a normal rate of 60 to 100 beats per minute. At one point, her heart beat was monitored at 230 per minute.

"I had gaps in my conduction system," she said Thursday. "They froze them to get the flow back to normal. It wasn't like a hole in my heart and blood coming out."

Botkin noticed a problem in November. It surfaced at practice a few times and happened once during a game in December.

"I had a really, really fast heart rate," she said. "If I kept going, I had light-headedness.

"It would happen for a few days in a row, and then I'd have a couple of weeks where it didn't happen and then it would come back."

Botkin told her mother, who is an anesthesiologist. They went to see a cardiologist, who diagnosed the problem.

"It was frightening when I first heard and realized something was wrong," she said.

They quickly scheduled the procedure to fix the problem. "I was excited to get it over and keep

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playing. I didn't want to stop," she said.

Botkin told Kennedy Coach Dennis Roloff that she would have to miss a few days of practice, but downplayed the situation.

"Two weeks ago she came to me and says, 'Coach, on Friday I'm going to have surgery,'" Roloff related.

"Oh, on what?" he asked.

"My heart," she said. "But it's OK, don't worry, I'll be back in two days."

Roloff marvels at how calmly Botkin delivered the news. As it turned out, Botkin was cleared to practice on Thursday, Dec. 29, six days after the procedure.

Roloff let her do some light running Thursday, but did not let her participate in drills even though she had permission to play. "We're going to take our time and make sure she's healthy," he said.

"What a terrific kid," he said. "She came in today (Thursday) and wanted to run and run and run. I said, 'No, let's slow down.'"

Kennedy visits Dubuque Wahlert Tuesday night, but Roloff has not decided whether he'll let her participate or not. "We'll make sure things are correct before she plays," he said.

Botkin speaks clinically about the problem, using big medical terms to describe the gaps in her conduction system and where they were located.

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"My mom is a doctor, so she uses big medical words around me all the time," she said. "I'm kind of used to it. I pick it up pretty easily."

The operation was performed at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics on Dec. 23. She arrived at 9:30 a.m. and was discharged about 10 p.m. that night.

Botkin said they gave her an EKG, installed patches to monitor her heart, performed a chest X-ray and gave her an IV. Then she met with her doctors and talked about the procedure.

She said they administered drugs to put her to sleep about 1 p.m. and remembers waking up about 5 p.m. after the operation. She went home about 5 hours later. The surgery was performed arthroscopically, without incisions.

Less than a week later, she was running around the court again, although gently.

"I felt great," she said after Thursday's light workout. "At the beginning of practice I felt a little tired because I hadn't run in about a week, but I'm really anxious to get on the court."

Botkin doesn't think she had a birth defect. "I'm honestly not sure," she said. "They didn't really tell me."

In any case, she does not think it was a rare ailment. "I think it's pretty common," she said. "That's what my cardiologist told me."

Botkin understands Roloff's plan to proceed slowly and carefully. "He doesn't want me to overwork myself," she said.

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Botkin is a 6-foot post player who skipped the freshman and sophomore teams and went straight to the varsity as a ninth grader. Roloff said it's only the sixth time in 20-plus years that he's promoted a ninth grader to the top club.

Roloff said Botkin is learning rapidly and takes minor setbacks in stride.

"She gets more determined," he said. "If they block her shot or they take something away from her, she's always thinking, she's always making an adjustment."

Botkin said she's overcome an initial bout of nerves that came with making the varsity as a freshman.

"It's exciting. I really like it," she said. "I feel it's gone well, but I can do better."