

HIS HEART MUST GO ON

When does hope turn to obsession? When does drive border on recklessness? Nick Knapp leaves those questions to others. He just wants to play basketball. He has wanted to play since his seventh birthday, the day his father marched him to the first court he could find near their home in Peoria, Ill., and taught him a jump shot. He has wanted to play through good times and bad, when the action moved from hardwood courts to legal ones. He has wanted to play even though, as some have contended, basketball puts his life in danger.

Knapp thought he had gotten what he wanted when he signed a letter of intent with Northwestern in the summer of 1995. So what if a year earlier, his heart had stopped during a pickup game at Woodruff High, forcing him to miss his senior season? But when he got to Evanston, he was told that although he could keep his scholarship, he couldn't take the floor for the Wildcats. Knapp sued, drawing national attention. But he lost the fight and transferred to Northeastern Illinois, which agreed to let him play. He did, until his career took another detour: Just three games into the 1997-98 season, his defibrillator, which had been implanted after the first attack, malfunctioned before practice. He again sat out the campaign, and then NEIU dropped basketball after the season.

Even now—three years, two on-court "cardiac experiences" and a pair of disappointing stints at Division I schools removed from the hype that heralded him as one of the country's top 50 high school stars—Nick Knapp fights on to show he's got game.

That's why, this winter, you'll find his name on the roster of Ashland University. At the tiny Division II school 50 miles south of Cleveland, the 6'5", 21-year-old swingman is getting one last shot. Some still wonder if it's a shot he should be taking. "I get looks, questions, all of that," he says. "People want to know if I'm ever scared. I tell them yes and no. No, I'm never afraid when I step on the court. But yes, there are lots of times when I'm afraid of how close I came to not getting a shot to live my dream."

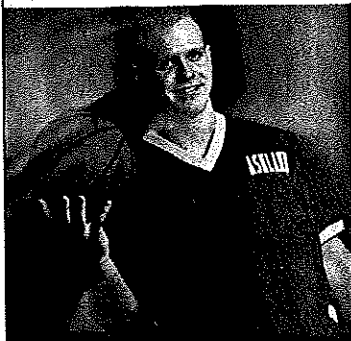
One more time, the doctors have said he can play. One more time, Knapp tries to prove he can. He may be the best shooter on an up-tempo team. Through 13 games, his 19 three-pointers lead the Eagles. But he still has a way to go: He averages just under six points a game in close to 12 minutes of play. "Nick's a shooter and he's really started to come on," says coach Roger Lyons. "In our offense, he's going to get his looks, and that's all he needs."

Meanwhile, Knapp laps up his latest opportunity. Though practice begins at 6:20 a.m., he's among the first to arrive at the gym and one of the last to leave. And during the fall semester, he posted a 3.9 GPA. His single-mindedness is an inspiration. "Numbers and stats never do justice to guys like Nick," Lyons says. "The other players see the way he works, his commitment, his spirit. All of that makes for great examples, things that rub off."

"You're talking to someone who's finally getting to do what he's always wanted to do," says Knapp. "Believe me, this isn't work for me. Having the chance to play and compete is about fulfilling a dream."

Dreams have a way of changing. Knapp once entertained serious thoughts of playing beyond the collegiate level. But now ... "I used to think like that all the time, getting to play professionally," he says. "But with all I've been through, just to be able to play ... I'm too caught up in the moment to think about much of anything else."

—Glenn Minnis



This year, game time is Knapp time at Ohio's Ashland University.

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