

Heart Throws Pitcher a Curveball

A year ago JCCC pitcher Emily Dye, 20, was at the top of her game. Through grit and will power, Dye is determined to control a

newly diagnosed life-threatening heart condition and stay on the mound.

"Pitching has been my life since I was 8 years old," Dye said. "I don't want to pitch forever, but I want to be the one to make the decision as to when I quit. I don't want it decided for me."

Recruited by Frank Barnes, softball coach, Dye signed on to play at JCCC in the fall 2006 semester. Her freshman year, she received the Dutton Brookfield Award at the University of Missouri-Kansas City for the female athlete showing "great potential" and, earlier at Raymore-Peculiar High School, she was named first team all-conference and all-district 2004 and 2005 and first team all-regional and all-sectional in 2005.

Dye's first day of fall practice at JCCC in August 2006 is a blur. She's been told that she had a normal practice and conditioning workout, but when she started the 3/4-mile cool-down walk, she collapsed. Her left arm cramped, and she experience extreme pain in the left side of her neck. Taken by ambulance to Overland Park Regional Medical Center, her heart rate was normal so doctors told her she was probably dehydrated and recommended a cardiologist consult.

Then began a battery of tests with the cardiologist, like echocardiograms and EKGs that were normal, and a neurologist to look for seizures.

"I was terrified," Dye said. "Nobody could give me answers and I knew something wasn't right."

A stress test showed that Dye's heart rate was erratic. A conditioned athlete, Dye couldn't last 10 minutes on the treadmill. More tests followed: a three-part blood pressure test, 64-slice CT scan of the heart and a tilt-table test, which exacerbated her symptoms. The definitive test was a catheter threaded from Dye's groin to her heart to measure the heart's electrical activity. The diagnosis was "vasovagal response," meaning with exercise, Dye's heart slows, blood vessels over expand and blood pressure drops, causing her to pass out. Tests also revealed that

her heart is abnormally situated inside the body.

"I've had to completely change my lifestyle," Dye said.

Dye has changed her diet, limits workouts, rests more, takes five pills a day and makes monthly visits to the cardiologist, who gave her the okay to play ball. When she does experience heart symptoms, she lays down and clenches her fist to constrict her blood vessels.

"I'm going to beat this problem. I'm in control of this. It's not in control of me," Dye said referring to her rare heart condition.

Dye admits that the stop-and-go activity of pitching is harder now. She can tell when she's having heart symptoms and so can her coach. Dye's face turns white and her lips turn blue.

"I'm going to meet difficulties in my season, but they'll be stepping stones to better things," she said.

Even early in the season, assistant coach Kelly Gartner said she had no doubt Dye would go on to become a Division-I pitcher. After May graduation from JCCC, Dye plans to complete her four-year softball eligibility and bachelor's and master's degrees, hoping to work in special education with autistic and Down's Syndrome students. And she wants to coach softball; she already teaches open pitching for girls 8-15.

"I've appreciate things a lot more since my heart diagnosis," Dye said. "I've grown more sympathetic toward other people."

