

GWSF Courage Award: Natalie Schneider

BY MARK SCHWANINGER/Star City Sports

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Natalie Schneider grew up around the game of basketball. In fact, she was born on a game day.



“My dad (Dennis Nelsen) coached the Crete High School boys’ basketball team, and he was an assistant coach for the Doane College women’s basketball team,” Natalie said. “When I was born, dad had a game to coach that night.”

Growing up in Crete, Natalie trained at basketball camps every summer. She played for YMCA Spirit League teams. She started as a freshman on the girls’ varsity basketball team at Crete High School, and she received All Conference and All State Honorable Mention honors after her sophomore season.

“I was 16, and I had big plans to play basketball at the Division I college level,” Natalie said. “I had been training hard in the off-season for my upcoming junior year.”

She was flying high. Division I college coaches were watching her progress. But then, suddenly, her basketball world came crashing down.

Natalie’s right leg started to hurt whenever she ran and switched directions while playing basketball. Her family doctor ordered X-rays and recognized a dark spot as a possible tumor.

He referred her to UNMC in Omaha, where a day of testing – blood work, X-rays, MRI and CT scans, a biopsy – confirmed malignant cancer. The tumor in her right femur (upper leg bone) was honeycombed, which made the bone fragile.

“They gave me crutches that day,” Natalie said. “They said the bone was fragile, so I shouldn’t walk on it. When they told me it was a malignant

tumor, I was less concerned about cancer than about not being able to play basketball. The doctor told me that I wouldn't be running or jumping ever again – that I'd have to find new outlets for my competitiveness. The risk of breaking my leg is too great, and if I did, it would most likely mean amputation.

“I was devastated.”

Natalie spent her junior year of high school in and out of the hospital. After five months of chemotherapy, doctors surgically removed the femur tumor and performed a total knee replacement. They cemented a rod far into her tibia and femur bones. Five more months of chemo followed the surgery.

Natalie assumed that her basketball playing days were over. It wasn't until her senior year at Doane College, where she was earning a bachelor's degree in math and computer science, that she learned about a sitting volleyball team. She joined, and “some guys on the team recruited me to play wheelchair basketball for the Madonna Magic,” she said. “I've been playing wheelchair basketball ever since.”

Since she was able to walk, Natalie was surprised to learn that she qualified to play with the Magic. According to the National Wheelchair Basketball Association's rules, she qualified because of the knee replacement and her limited range of motion in her right knee – she can't bend it beyond 90 degrees.

In Natalie's first season of playing wheelchair basketball with the Madonna Magic, she learned that the game's fundamentals were quite different from traditional basketball.

“The whole concept was pretty different because having wheelchair position is everything,” she said. “In able-bodied basketball, I could always use my speed and jumping abilities for positioning.”

So, she signed up for a wheelchair basketball camp at the University of Arizona. Coaches noticed her athletic ability and asked her to play on the university's women's team. The team made the Women's Nationals after the 2007-08 season and finished third.

“A couple of coaches from the U.S. Paralympic team saw me play and invited me to try out for the national team with 24 other women,” Natalie recalled. “So I went to Birmingham, Alabama, and spent three days playing basketball non-stop and made the team.”

It was official: Natalie was among the elite 12 women’s wheelchair



basketball players who would represent the U.S. in the Paralympics in Beijing, China. She sent a text message to her mom, Nancy: “I’m going to China.”

“Going to Beijing was so much fun, and it was so amazing playing against the best in the world and playing with the best players in the U.S.,” she said. “I got to be a

celebrity in China for two weeks, and that was fun. Then I was glad to come home and not be a celebrity.”

The U.S. team played in such venues as the National Indoor Stadium, where Olympic gymnastics competition also took place.

“The venues we played in were huge, and they were packed with people,” Natalie said. “It was fun to play in front of thousands of fans.”

The team overcame a 12-point first-quarter deficit in the opening game to beat Germany, and then sailed through the next three games, beating Australia, Great Britain and Brazil. The gold medal game was a rematch against Germany, which the U.S. team won again, this time 50-38. Natalie was in the middle of the jubilation when the buzzer sounded the victory.

“We were all screaming, celebrating and shaking hands with Germany,” Natalie recalled. “At the gold medal ceremony, I could not wipe the smile off my face.”

Natalie played in front of her husband, Daniel, as well as his parents and her parents. The family found time for some sightseeing – Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall, and Olympic competition such as track and field in the Bird’s Nest and swimming in the Water Cube.

“But mostly we focused on basketball every day,” Natalie said. “We played a game almost every day. We were really well-prepared by the U.S. Olympic Committee on what to expect with jet lag and the 13-hour time change. It didn’t hit me until I got home. I had adrenalin going for me the whole time in China.”

Natalie continues to practice with the Madonna Magic men’s wheelchair basketball team on Tuesday evenings. She also plays monthly in training camps and tournaments for the closest women’s team, which is based in Denver.

She will travel to Japan in February to play in the Women’s International Wheelchair Basketball Friendship Games. In April, she plans to try out again for the national team. If she makes the team, she will play in Birmingham, England, in July at the world championships.

Natalie holds a master’s degree in statistics from UNL and is a statistician for ACTON Marketing in Lincoln.

