

Preventing Cardiac Problems

By Robert Israel

Joe DeLamielleure, inducted into the 2003 NFL Hall of Fame, is considered one football's best offensive guards. Yet, several months after the Buffalo Bills drafted him, he was diagnosed with a heart malfunction that nearly prevented him from joining the team.

DeLamielleure remembered that while a student at Michigan State, "They just put a stethoscope on your chest and listened to your heart." It wasn't until he traveled to Cleveland for the NFL physical - where he was given an electrocardiogram (ECG) - that the test revealed he had a heart problem. The ECG test, which only takes a few minutes to administer, makes a tracing of the heart by using an electrocardiograph machine and is one method for cardiologists to determine the health of the heart.

"Joe D," as he is best known, underwent corrective procedures and the rest is history: he went on to play eight seasons for the Bills, and became a member of the famed "Electric Company" offensive line, which paved the way for O.J. Simpson's NFL record setting 2,003 yards in 1973.

This year Joe D was singled out to receive another distinguished award - this one from the American Heart Association. The former offensive lineman was nominated to receive a "Hero of the Heart" award because he has championed the importance for all athletes to routinely undergo a screening process to detect certain cardiovascular defects.

Many athletes who undergo a heart examination have what is referred to as "athletes heart," a common term that applies to a physiological, rather than a pathological, condition. There is usually no danger to an athlete's health arising from having "athletes heart." Essentially, "athletes heart" is an enlarged heart associated with repeated strenuous exercise. Due to the increased workload required of it, the hearts of most athletes increases physiologically by enlarging its chambers and muscle mass, thus augmenting the volume of blood pumped per stroke. As a result, the heart has

to contract less frequently. At rest, an athlete's heart will beat as few as 40 times per minute; the number of beats for a non-athlete's heart is 70 beats per minute.

Today, a healthy heart examination for athletes starts earlier than it did for Joe D. Young athletes on high school football teams routinely undergo heart screening for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM), a serious heart condition that is the leading cause of sudden cardiac death. HCM is an excessive development of the heart, so that it increases in bulk (a thickening of muscle fibers). It is often noticed when the athlete experiences an accompanying chest pain, or has palpitations, or faints. It has been called a "silent killer" because very often these symptoms are attributed to other causes, namely heat exertion or dehydration.

The good news is that HCM can easily be diagnosed by using a two-minute echocardiogram (ECHO), which takes a non-invasive picture of the heart through the use of ultrasound. A cardiologist uses an ECHO to examine and measure the structure and functioning of the heart and to diagnose abnormalities and disease.

A healthy heart examination includes being advised about the importance of fat in one's diet, in order to avoid atherosclerosis, which is a build-up of fat in artery walls. By controlling cholesterol levels, an athlete reduces his risk of heart attack and stroke. Sometimes an athlete may have a genetic predisposition to high cholesterol, inherited from their families. Cholesterol-lowering drugs can be administered and have been proven to be effective in lowering cholesterol levels.

Football players like Joe DeLamielleure prove that early detection of a heart malfunction need not be an inhibitor to achieving a fulfilling life on and off the playing field. In his career, which included five seasons with the Browns before he rejoined the Bills in 1985, he never missed a game. He was the winner of the Ralph C. Wilson Distinguished Service Award in 1987. He has served as an offensive line coach at Duke University. By undergoing a heart examination and taking corrective measures, he has functioned at top form and has achieved life-long success.