

PEDIATRIC ORTHOPEDICS

Teen Golfer Back on the Links



Danielle Elia was the first girl to make the varsity golf team at Pineland Regional High School in Little Egg Harbor, N.J. The leading player on her team and a solo competitor in tournaments, Danielle was ranked the number one high school golfer in Ocean County in 2012. The 16-year-old is also an avid surfer at the Jersey Shore.

When Danielle tore her ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) though, she was not playing golf or surfing. It happened when she was jumping hurdles for fun with a friend. "I tried getting up but I fell again. I was in excruciating pain," said Danielle, who was 15 at the time. The ACL is a strong band of tissue that connects the thighbone and the shinbone and helps stabilize the knee. Teens, especially girls, often tear their ACL during sports.

"You can live a long and healthy life without the ACL, but if you want to play sports, that usually requires surgery," said Heather W. Harnly, MD, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon at The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital (BMSCH) at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. Dr. Harnly is part of the only team in the region of pediatric orthopedic surgeons providing care 24/7, including emergency room coverage.

Surgery involves replacing the torn ACL with a graft made of tendon (tissue that connects muscle to bone) from the patient's hamstring or knee, or from a deceased donor. Since Danielle's goal is to become a professional golfer, she chose surgery. She and her mother liked Dr. Harnly because she is an orthopedist who deals only with children and because she does not use donor tendon, which sometimes does not work in young patients.

"Dr. Harnly sympathized with what I was going through. She explained everything in a way I could understand," said Danielle, who chose to use her hamstring to replace her ACL. As a rower in high school and college, Dr. Harnly understood how important it was for Danielle to be able to safely return to golf.

After preparing Danielle and her parents for what would happen during and after surgery, Dr. Harnly replaced Danielle's ACL during a same-day procedure at BMSCH. Dr. Harnly made a few tiny incisions in Danielle's knee, each about the size of a buttonhole, and used a narrow instrument with a video camera (an arthroscope) to see inside the knee. She inserted tiny instruments into the other incisions to replace the ACL.

"From the minute we walked into the door, everyone at the hospital was phenomenal," said Danielle's mother Grace Elia. "They not only made Danielle feel comfortable, but my husband and me."

Danielle started physical therapy within a week of the surgery, working hard so she could be back on the golf course in March and she was. That summer, Danielle also returned to surfing. "I feel like I have more flexibility now, and my leg feels as if it's stronger than before."

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