

Erin Kuba of Jefferson: 'She's my hero'

Written by Tom Fruehling
Sunday, 20 July 2014 20:20 -



Erin Kuba was born with Jefferson baby-blue blood in her veins.

Her dad Mike, a longtime at-risk facilitator at the school, was on the baseball staff for 18 years (the last seven as head coach) before becoming old friend Brian Erbe's top assistant for the softball team last season.

"When she was 2 years old she'd sit on my lap at games," recalls Mike. "And when she was little, she'd pick two away games a year to go on a charter bus with the team and be the bat girl."

Now a 16-year-old sophomore star third baseman, Erin says, "I grew up a J-Hawk."

Named last week to the MVC all-conference first team and all-Metro first team, she's set to play in her second straight Class 5A state tournament when sixth-ranked Jefferson (34-6) opens with third-ranked Southeast Polk (28-9) in a first-round game at Fort Dodge Tuesday at 11:30 a.m.

It would have been her third state tournament if the J-Hawks had not been upset, 2-1, in the regionals two years ago by Davenport West.

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Under legendary former coach Larry Niemeyer, it was a rare and well-earned honor to make the varsity roster as an eighth grader. Only the best-of-the-best joined the storied J-Hawk program that young.

While still at Taft Middle School, Erin was tapped for the team. But on May 1 of that year she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer at age 14.

Both Mike and her mom, Tammi, have long had thyroid disorders that they treat with medication, so Erin and her younger sister Emily have always been at-risk, as well.

Checked periodically at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics since the fifth grade, Erin's blood tests in the spring of 2012 appeared abnormal. A biopsy revealed she had a cancerous tumor on her thyroid.

As she says now, "That news made me grow up real fast. It kind of put things into perspective."

Through it all, her dad notes, "She never complained once. She's my hero."

Erin had surgery two weeks later to remove the thyroid and seven surrounding lymph nodes. And three weeks after that she was back on the softball diamond.

"Her goal had always been to dress (on the varsity) as an eighth grader," says Mike. "Then her goal became to finish out that season."

"Coach Niemeyer was fabulous and helped Erin obtain that goal."

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She was used sparingly that season, mostly as a designated hitter, but came back full-strength last year as the starting third baseman. This year she sports a .364 batting average, is one of Jefferson's most dangerous clutch hitters and rock steady on defense.

"Erin's done an amazing job overcoming some curveballs that life has thrown her," says Erbe, who has known her since she was born. "But she has a great attitude with a fantastic work ethic who just works her tail off.

"I'm very, very proud of her. She's one of the very best."

Her dad says she's always been strong-willed and highly competitive. She dabbled in every sport as a child, including a short but painful stint in dance classes suggested by her mom.

"When I saw the outfits you had to wear, I did not want to do it," says Erin, a self-professed tomboy who was usually picked as quarterback by the guys on the Viola Gibson grade school playground.

"And I really did not want to go on stage. The bow in my hair kept falling off my head. I said I am not doing that again."

She found her passion when Mike signed her up for the Cedar Hills softball program when she was 6 years old. Erin made the all-star team the first year, along with current J-Hawk teammate Hannah Towns.

She's continued to play club softball ever since, starting with the local Blue Devils and this year hooking up with the elite Iowa Premier team out of Des Moines.

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Her dad says she's far from one-dimensional, however.

As a teenager who has faced the grim prospect of cancer, and still undergoes check-ups every six months, Erin has her priorities in order.

Last fall, she and Tammi on their own organized a Relay for Life cancer fundraiser outdoor concert at Bloomsbury Farms near Atkins.

"Mom and I just put our heads together to come up with something," says Erin of what they called "Concert for a Cure."

The event raised over \$7,000 and Erin was named as youth spokesman for the annual Relay for Life this June at Kirkwood.

"Erin has a lot of heart," says her proud father. "She's a great big sister, and she has always been a young lady with a kind heart. She thinks of others."