

# Free physicals for teen athletes can save lives

**Rebecca I. Allen**  
Special for The Republic  
Apr. 21, 2006 12:00 AM

Two years ago, 17-year-old Doug McWhorter stopped by Sunnyslope High School for a free physical on his way to a championship baseball game. He never made it to the dugout.

Doctors sidelined the three-sport varsity athlete after diagnosing him with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a genetic abnormality that can cause sudden death in athletes.

"The doctors said they were surprised I hadn't died yet," McWhorter said.

The condition is detectable, treatable and it runs in families.

More testing showed McWhorter's father, Gene, and his then 11-year-old brother, Steve, also have the heart defect. Within six months of the diagnoses, they each had surgery to implant a combination pacemaker/defibrillator the size of a Zippo lighter below their left collarbone. The "personal and portable paramedic" as Gene McWhorter calls it, records everything their hearts do and can automatically pace the heart's rhythm or "shock" them if something is wrong.

Giving up competitive sports was tough for Doug, who had been playing baseball, soccer and football since he was 5. "Right then and there, I was thinking I wish I hadn't known. But then looking back, I'm really glad," McWhorter, now 19, said from the campus of California State University, Fullerton, where he is a freshman. "I did save my dad's life and my brother's life, not directly, but indirectly. There's a lot of comfort in that."

The physical McWhorter's coach made his players get was through Team of Physicians for Students. Dr. Paul Steingard, of the Steingard Medical Group in Phoenix, started the free program about 20 years ago. One day a year, volunteer medical professionals amass at Sunnyslope High School in Phoenix to offer free physicals to high school students playing in any type of organized athletics, from basketball to soccer, gymnastics to ballet. This year's event takes place from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at Sunnyslope, 35 W. Dunlap Ave.

Steingard decided to add the electrocardiogram and echocardiogram tests to the arsenal seven years ago after reading a study about heart defects in high school athletes. American high schools do not require the heart tests as part of mandatory physicals for sports. In the Glendale and Phoenix union high school districts, it's up to the coaches whether they want the tests done.

"This is not even done at the university level yet," said Dr. William Rappaport of the Arizona Heart Institute who joined the TOPS team when the heart-testing component was added.

"You have big time programs, ASU, UofA, and you read about someone dying, yet these kids still do not have EKGs or cardiac ultrasounds," Rappaport said. "The athletes don't want to know. In many cases, this is their way out, their living in the future. They don't want to know if they have a problem. And schools don't want to know - they want them to play."

While post-secondary athletic programs may not require the heart testing, most professional sports organizations do, including the NBA. "For the few players that actually get to the next level," Rappaport said. "If you can prevent the death, why should a young person sacrifice their life to play for a school?"

The Arizona Heart Institute, Philips Corp., Arizona Osteopathic Medical Association, Midwestern University and several other sponsors participate in the daylong event.

"It's free, it's painless and it's the sort of thing your child needs to have to make it safe for him or her to play sports," Rappaport said. "You save one life you make it worthwhile."

Last year, more than 300 volunteers processed 1,897 students from 56 schools across the state at the TOPS event. Since its inception TOPS has found many students with medical problems, such as high blood pressure, Wolf-Parkinson-White syndrome, heart blockage, mitral valve prolapse and other abnormalities.

"We find a number of things," Steingard said. "They don't know they have it, and they may not be symptomatic for 20 or 25 years. If they get treatment early it's a good way to keep them from having problems later."

Since discovering and getting treatment for HCM, the McWhorters have gone back to life as almost normal. All three visit their doctors about four times a year. They cannot use their cellphones on their left sides, they have to rush through magnetic fields at the entrance to department stores and avoid metal detectors all together. This means they must get a pat down every time they go through airport security. But, they all play golf, can join pickup basketball games and Doug plays on an ultimate Frisbee team in California.

"The best thing now is I can exert myself as hard as I want and know I'm going to be OK," he said.

Gene McWhorter credits TOPS with their saving lives.

"It was horrifying to find out," he said. "I played sports all through college. Any given day at any given practice or game I could have gone down."

Reach the reporter at [rebeccaallen@cox.net](mailto:rebeccaallen@cox.net).