

Sutphin's second chance

By Brian Miller
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It's been close to five months since Brittan Sutphin nearly died.

That's not a statement designed to shock or an over-exaggeration; it's simply the truth. The Wheat Ridge junior had just started swim practice Dec. 5 at the Wheat Ridge Recreation Center when events began to unfold. To get a true feel for what happened, it's best to let Sutphin's own words tell the story:

I have no memory of getting into the pool the day of my tragic accident. I do not remember the strong stench of chlorine or the loud echoes of the swimmers' splashes. I have been told I only swam a lap when some of my teammates saw me violently flopping around in the water. Most of my teammates assumed I was joking and fooling around. Fortunately, one of my teammates knew it was no joke and pulled me from the water. The lifeguards at Wheat Ridge Recreation Center performed CPR with no success. The facility was equipped with an automated external defibrillator, which was used to revive me.

The preceding was an excerpt from an essay Sutphin wrote titled "Second Chance." It's a fitting title since the junior was given just that, thanks to the AED that the center had owned since 2002.

Those same devices have been brought into prominence since the death of Daniel Lunger, a standout swimmer at Standley Lake, in 2006. Lunger went into heart failure while visiting a friend after school, and attempts to revive him proved unsuccessful. The incident brought the importance of AEDs into the spotlight, with Lunger's parents establishing the Daniel J. Lunger Memorial Fund. The intent was to raise awareness and provide funds to purchase AEDs for schools, public buildings and athletic facilities. An AED was used just last year to save the life of a student at Standley Lake who had a seizure during a class.



Photo by JUSTIN SAGARSEE
Wheat Ridge junior Brittan Sutphin's life was saved by an automated external defibrillator, or AED, after she suffered a seizure while swimming last December. Sutphin is campaigning to raise money and awareness for the Daniel J. Lunger Memorial Fund. The fund purchases and donates AED devices to schools and sporting venues.

Sutphin, who plays No. 1 singles for the Farmers' tennis team and is also on the golf team, has endured a whirlwind ride since that fateful day. After having a seizure in the pool, she was pulled from the water by senior Katrina Fedak and revived with the AED. She was rushed to Exempla Lutheran Medical Center, where it was discovered that she had fluid in her lungs, and transferred to Children's Hospital.

Sutphin's mother, Kim Plotkin, was on a business trip to Washington, D.C., when she heard what happened. The plane had already left the gate and the pilots couldn't turn back, so Plotkin had to wait out the flight, then promptly catch another plane back to Denver to be with her daughter.

"It was a long flight," said Plotkin, who at least had been informed after landing in Washington by her husband, John, that Brittan was stable. "You envision the worst. But I was quite relieved once I saw her ... she said, 'Mom, don't cry.'"

The ordeal was just beginning. The initial diagnosis was Long Q-T Syndrome: a rare heart defect that causes abnormalities in the heart's electrical system that can cause very fast and potentially fatal heart rhythms. A cardiologist at Children's was rather blunt in the opinion that Sutphin would never play sports again.

That doctor obviously couldn't understand Sutphin's resolve. She spent a week in the hospital before returning to school to take her first-semester finals. A trip to the Scripps Heart Institute in California enabled Sutphin to have an internal defibrillator implanted Jan. 12, and the junior was back on the tennis court not long after.

"She's the most competitive tennis player that I've ever had on one of my teams," Wheat Ridge girls tennis coach Chuck Sprague said. "She'll do anything and everything. She was back on the court two weeks after having surgery."

An AED was donated to Wheat Ridge, and the Plotkins also donated one to the tennis team; Sprague keeps the device in his car so that it is on-hand, whether at a practice or meet at Everitt Middle School or at a tournament.

The hits kept coming for Sutphin though. It was discovered that the initial diagnosis of Long Q-T wasn't the case, and two days before the family was slated to leave for spring break, the internal defibrillator began to shock Sutphin, necessitating its removal.

More genetic testing is currently under way, and after the season Sutphin will return to California.

In the meantime, Sutphin, her parents and Sprague are taking all the necessary precautions. Anytime she feels the slightest hint of being ill, the 5-foot-1 junior takes an injury timeout, and if necessary, will forfeit the match.

But she won't stop playing.

"She plays with a lot of heart," Plotkin said. "I try for her sake not to show any concern."

Sutphin is taking a proactive approach to the situation. She has become an ambassador for the Lunger Memorial Fund and is trying to raise money to supply AEDs to more schools and athletic facilities. She's been a guest speaker for the Brianna Foundation — Brianna Badger died of Long Q-T at the age of 4 — and has more guest speaking appearances in store over the coming months. Sutphin is also working with high school tennis teams from around the state to pledge money for each match won throughout the season.

She wants to ensure that everyone is aware of the importance of AEDs at every school and athletic event, but Sutphin also refuses to let her own health issues get in the way of living her life:

Several years ago, I had the honor of meeting Erik Weihenmayer. Erik was the first blind person to summit Mt. Everest. Erik has said "You don't just deal with adversity; you use it to propel you forward." I will propel myself forward and continue to excel in everything I do. You can observe the true character of a person by how they handle adversity. I may not be able to play college tennis but being a tennis player does not define who I am. I am a curious, intelligent, funny person. I am going to achieve great things in life. I love life and I am grateful for a second chance!