



Dan Phelps: From **Knee Transplant** to **running 5K**

Dan Phelps, age 33, is an Assistant Principal at Hononegah Community High School in Rockton, IL. He has been active his whole life, and enjoys basketball, running and strength training.

In high school, Dan first began noticing that his left knee felt less stable when he was playing sports. It progressively got worse and finally, in 2007, he got a meniscal knee transplant at a hospital in Chicago. He was told that the expected “life” of the transplant would be approximately 10 years.

“Sure enough, in 2015 I began noticing that my knee did not feel as stable as it used to, especially when I was exercising,” says Dan.

Dan knew he would need to address the issue, but decided to wait until after his upcoming wedding to get treated. When he and his wife began planning to expand their family after they were married, Dan realized he had a short “window of opportunity” to take care of his knee before a baby was born.



The First Steps Towards Care

When considering where to go, Dan knew of several high school athletes who had been treated at OrthoIllinois, and had gotten good results and had positive things to say about the care they had received. He also liked the fact that OrthoIllinois was nearby, so he wouldn’t have to travel far from home to continue with his care and the on-going rehab he knew he would need.

At OrthoIllinois, Dan met with **Geoffrey Van Thiel, MD**, a sports medicine orthopedic surgeon for the organization. Although Dan already had firsthand experience with knee surgery from his experience back in 2007, he realized much had changed and improved in the past decade since his last procedure.

After doing x-rays and MRIs to get a better “read” on the state of his knee, Dr. Van Thiel and Dan met to discuss Dan’s goals, expectations and treatment options.

“He explained everything in a way that I could understand,” says Dan. “I never felt rushed, and he took the time to answer all my questions. I felt like he really wanted to help me find the solution that was best for my circumstances.”

About More Than a Knee—About Life and Family

One option was to have a meniscus transplant. The knee meniscus is a C-shaped cartilage structure that helps cushion the joint, and a transplant replaces this damaged structure with donor cartilage. Another option was “scoping” the knee to clean out the torn pieces and have a transplant later, or the other option, do nothing.

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“I knew this was about more than my knee—it was about my quality of life and my family,” says Dan. “I wanted to put in the time and do the work now so I could help take care of our baby, due in March 2017, as well as continue to participate in the sports I love.”

Dan and Dr. Van Thiel decided on a meniscal transplant, even though it would require the longest recovery time. They also made the decision to lengthen his femur, which would help take pressure off the lateral side of his knee.

“Although they are not for everyone, for active people younger than 55 like Dan, meniscal transplant surgery can be an excellent option and offer significant pain relief,” says Dr. Van Thiel. “However, if a patient is older or already has arthritis, it might not be as helpful. Whenever a patient comes to us needing help, we assess them individually, talk about their lifestyle and goals and come up with a treatment plan that is best for them.”

Surgery, Then a Good Night’s Sleep

Unlike some patients who are worried prior to surgery, Dan was not, and was in fact eager to move forward. In February 2016, he had the surgery. “It went well,” said Dan. “With this surgery, you do not stay overnight in hospital, and I was able to sleep well that night.”

What surprised Dan most post-surgery had nothing to do with his physical condition.

“I have had other surgeries in my life, so I know generally speaking you’ll get a call from the doctor’s office the next day to see how you are doing,” says Dan. “But I was blown away when my surgeon called me himself to see how I was. I really appreciated that he took the time to contact me in person.”

Therapy Took Time, But Was Worth It

Dan spent about six weeks on crutches—three at home recovering, then three at work. Fortunately, he was able to drive to work and physical therapy appointments, he explains, since the surgery was on his left leg.

Initially, he met with his physical therapist, Monica Hall, twice a week. Over the following months, the appointments were needed less often.

“The work was extensive, but I had a great physical therapist. She was able to see where I had limitations and made adjustments every week. We increased my strength and range of motion and worked together,” he says. “All together, my physical therapy lasted eight months, but it was worth it.”

Challenges That Led to Milestones

What was the biggest challenge for Dan?

“When I was still on crutches and went back to work, I had to wear a backpack, so that was challenging—being the only principal with a backpack,” he chuckles. “But seriously, the hardest part was patience. There’s no getting around the fact that it does take a long time.”

But was it worth it?

“Absolutely,” says Dan. “I’m 33 now, and when I’m 43 I may have to do this again, to stay active.”

A milestone for Dan was running a 5K race eight months after his surgery, at the Illinois State University homecoming celebration. And after that, he says, he’ll be ready for an even bigger milestone—becoming a father.

**To schedule a consultation,
please call 815-398-9491.**



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