

LITTLE LEAGUER'S HEART BACK IN THE GAME

The allure of Little League opening day lies in the possibilities that come with each spring's new season: crisp jerseys yet to be grass-stained, a new group of teammates to grow close with and a clean slate of a record.

For Lake Forest teen Alex Puck, who started the season a shade over six months after his second serious heart surgery, just being back on the field was enough.

"(It's) good," Puck said, "because I didn't know that I was going to play baseball again."

On Aug. 22, surgeons at Children's Hospital of Orange County replaced a deteriorating valve in Alex's heart.

On Saturday night, Puck and the rest of the Nationals team took the field for their first game of the Lake Forest Little League Intermediate Division season.

BAD HEART

Alex, a quiet 13-year-old with a round face and a wide grin, was born with a pulmonary valve that did not open and close properly because of fibers that grew over it.

Three months after being born, he had to have open-heart surgery to replace the faulty valve. While Alex was too young to remember the surgery, he still has a scar down the center of his chest from where he was opened up.

The replacement, however, would not last forever — they wear out, deteriorate and begin to leak.

Alex's parents Kristi and Steve Puck knew another procedure would be needed. They learned about a less-invasive treatment — Melody Transcatheter Pulmonary Valve therapy — from CHOC's Dr. Farhouch Berdjis, who took over Alex's care in 2003.

Berdjis, who lives in Mission Viejo, said the side effects of a deteriorating valve like Alex's, one that fails to pump enough blood and leaks, are fatigue and limited exercise ability.

"You're OK at rest, sit-

ting at a desk, playing a video game, but when you want to run, bicycle, swim, etc., your heart can't keep up," Berdjis said. "I didn't push them, but I explained to them that you can't expect him to enjoy sports with that failing valve."

At an annual cardiology checkup in early 2012, Alex and his parents decided it was time to go ahead with the new valve. They decided to wait until summer, when there was plenty of time to recover.

"From the time he said he wanted to do it to summertime he was really getting weaker," Kristi Puck said. "Just getting winded and stuff, his body wasn't tolerating it."

NEW VALVE

The Melody TPV procedure uses a long catheter inserted through the leg to place a new valve into the patient's heart. The procedure takes up to two hours and, after a one-night hospital stay, patients can be released.

Berdjis likened the invasiveness of the procedure to having a large IV inserted, and said within a week patients are able to return ful-

ly to exercise and activity.

The procedure was used in Europe before being tested in the U.S. and receiving FDA approval in January 2010. According to Berdjis, who oversees CHOC's cardiac catheterization laboratory, there are about three dozen hospitals in the U.S. certified to use the Melody valve. Alex's surgery was the 25th time Berdjis has performed the procedure.

"We weren't too nervous," Kristi Puck said. "Alex was a little unsure of everything because ... to his memory he's never been in the hospital and never had anything broken or even as much as a cavity. So to go in and have heart surgery is a little bit scary, but CHOC was great and Dr. Berdjis was great, just keeping him informed but calm, and he did good."

'MAKE HIM SWEAT'

Six months after the surgery, Alex is almost nonchalant about the whole thing. His doctor encouraged him to return to baseball.

"Absolutely," Berdjis said. "He can play every day as far as I'm concerned and the coach can make him sweat every day. I have no reservations; there are no restrictions on him."

There is one precaution, however: Alex wears a

chest protector — a small vest Alex wears under his shirt while playing.

Berdjis said while he's not aware of a baseball ever injuring the Melody valve, "it's just an extra precaution, it's an extra layer of safety. And after everything went so well, I wouldn't take that risk."

During his first game back, Alex occasionally tugged and adjusted the top of the protector, which isn't noticeable under his jersey and long-sleeved undershirt. While it's clear he's not thrilled about wearing it, it's better than his parents' alternative: not playing.

"It kind of messes up my throwing, but I just have to get used to it," said Alex who said by the end of the game he felt more comfortable with the gear. "When I play in a game ... I just forget about it."

Alex played four innings, at third base and in the outfield, and struck out in his two at-bats. The Nationals led, 7-2, in the bottom of the seventh inning when the field's lights suddenly shut off and play was suspended; an abrupt end to a long-awaited opening day.

"It was fun," Alex said after the game. "It felt great to be back and playing."



Alex Puck smiles as he proudly stands with his team.