

BOYS BASKETBALL

NO MORE 'WHAT IFS'



With injuries behind him, Washington Township's Banker is leveling up

SAM BEISHUIZEN
Times Correspondent

Kyle Banker loves basketball but for years he played scared.

Banker, a junior guard at Washington Township, was born with osteochondritis dissecans (OCD). It's a genetic condition in which bone underneath the cartilage of a joint wears away due to a lack of blood flow. The phenomenon ate at Banker's left knee to a point where by middle school he faced nagging pain.

Playing basketball was like ice skating on a pond you acknowledge probably isn't thick enough. Banker knew in the back of his mind one wrong step could end his season or worse yet his basketball career. That wore on him.

"I had a huge fear of jumping and running," Banker said. "You're just always thinking 'What if?'"

Those what-ifs are gone now. With a series of surgeries behind him, Banker averages about 11 points, 3.4 rebounds and 3.4 assists per game for a Senator team ranked No. 11 in the Class 1A AP Poll.

"I knew with him being well we were going to see this version of him that we thought we'd see one day," Washington Township coach Scott Bowersock said.

Banker underwent two knee surgeries his freshman year to alleviate his growing pain, but doctors then recommended a major cartilage transplant that would sideline him for months. Not wanting to miss out on a full season of high school basketball, Banker chose instead to play his sophomore season hurt. He essentially carried on with growing holes in his knee where bone met bone.

Practices were painful. The swelling

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 **LOOK:** To see additional photos from Friday's game, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

Washington Township's Kyle Banker hits a 3-point shot on Friday in Valparaiso.

JOHN J. WATKINS, THE TIMES

Potential

From C1

was constant. Banker started some for varsity early that year but as the pain increased his confidence fell. He got demoted to JV around the midpoint of the season but worked his way back onto the varsity roster by the time sectionals began.

Just mere weeks after Washington Township lost to Kouts in the opening game of the playoffs, Dr. Brian Cole performed surgery in which part of Banker's tibia was removed to alleviate pressure on new cartilage inserted into his knee. Cole performed a similar surgery on Chicago Bulls star Lonzo Ball.

Weeks of rehab followed. Banker watched from the bench as his teammates went through summer practices but earned a captaincy position for the way he supported them. Doctors cleared him to return to the floor in September, just in time for his junior season.

"He's a special kid," Bowersock said. "You never want to see any athlete go through any type of injury where all of a sudden they could potentially end their career. But to have the fortitude to not just respond physically but mentally and emotionally takes strength. I give Kyle a lot of credit for what he did."

Banker hit three 3-pointers on the way to scoring 17 points in Washington Township's 65-35 Homecoming win against Tri-Township on Friday. You wouldn't know just by watching that he's only now getting used to being explosive again on the floor the way he elevates for a jumper or lunges into a passing lane. The only remaining sign of the pain he went through comes via a scar running up his left knee.

Is this what normal feels like?

"It's crazy, right? I've actually asked myself that," Banker said. "It feels great. It's an amazing



Washington Township's Brogan Banker is fouled by Tri-Township's Hector Osornio on Friday in Valparaiso.

experience to not feel fear on the court and to be able to make any step I need. Like I used to not be able to Euro step without a fear of injuring it. I'm finally able to do that. I hit one tonight. I'm happy. It makes me so happy."

Bowersock reckons this is the first time Banker has been able to show his true self. He could tell that as a sophomore Banker played with a limiter on, not wanting to cause irreversible damage. That, Bowersock said, taught Banker craftiness that now combined with his unhampered athleticism

makes him an entirely different player.

"It's cliché to say but when you work your tail off, good things happen," Bowersock said. "You could see last year he was playing contained. He didn't have the same lift. Now he's free. He's able to explode again."

Brogan Banker, Kyle's freshman brother who leads the Senators in scoring, helped push his elder brother throughout recovery. The support was invaluable, Kyle said. The two are now able to play off one another in a way they've never

been able to before.

"It's really cool to see how you can bounce back from doctors cutting open your entire knee and putting screws in and coming back and playing basketball the way he is," Brogan Banker said.

The Banker brothers and the rest of the Senators (8-1, 4-0) host Kouts (8-1, 3-0) Friday in a battle of the last remaining PCC teams still undefeated in the conference table. The winner will have the inside track for winning the regular-season title and will be the favorite in the PCC Tournament



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