

Steve's Story: Putting His Heart In Good Hands



New York Jets punter Steve Weatherford knows all too well what it feels like to have a racing heart. Last year, after warm ups at the first playoff game against the Cincinnati Bengals, Mr. Weatherford's heart rate skyrocketed.

"It was 10 minutes before kick-off and my heart rate escalated from 115 to over 200 in a matter of seconds," he says. "It stayed that way for an hour and a half. It left me exhausted and I couldn't play." The maximum average heart rate for 27 – his age at the time – is about 193.

After flying home with the team, he checked into Morristown Memorial and received medication to relax his irregular heart beat. Unfortunately, this occurrence was nothing new to this elite athlete.

An Indiana native who ran ultra competitive track as a child and earned 13 varsity letters and All-State recognition for football, soccer, track and basketball, Mr. Weatherford began experiencing heart palpitations at age 18. That didn't stop him from going on to set the Decathlon school record at the University of Illinois, where he was also named All-American Punter and the Special Teams Player of the Year.

During his sophomore year, Mr. Weatherford underwent his first heart operation, and things were fine until that playoff game on Jan. 9, 2010.

Two months later, at Gagnon Cardiovascular Institute, cardiac electrophysiologist Jonathan Sussman, MD, performed a cardiac ablation, a procedure that corrects structural problems in the heart to improve heart rhythm irregularities.

"I'm a professional athlete and I've had lots of experience with injuries, and my surgery at Morristown Memorial was by far light years away from any other hospital I've dealt with," he says. "Dr. Sussman is fantastic. He did a great job." During his 24-hour hospital recovery, the nurses were attentive with ice packs and pain medication, he says. And since the surgery, he's noticed that his body performs more efficiently.

An NFL player, Mr. Weatherford had his pick of arenas for the surgery. "I explored my options: I mean, it's surgery on my heart and that's a serious organ – it's not toe surgery," he says. "I made a few calls and the team doctors referred me."

But by then, Mr. Weatherford had already had a life-changing event at Morristown Memorial. On Nov. 9, 2009, as the Jets faced the Patriots at Gillette Stadium, Mr. Weatherford's wife, Laura, went into labor with their second child. As he flew home, obstetrician Robert Steer, MD, was caring for his wife.

"The police escorted me from the tarmac at Newark to Morristown Memorial," he says. "I arrived 15 minutes before the birth. Dr. Steer did his best so that my wife didn't have my daughter until I got there. He helped make it an awesome experience. I remember more about our baby being born than my heart surgery, but everything about both experiences was great."

-Alice Roche Cody

Photo credits: New York Jets/Lee Weissman (left) and New York Jets/AI Pereira (right)