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Carter Sotheran's heart condition altered NHL dream. It didn't end it for the UNO freshman

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Carter Sotheran was playing mini sticks with his cousins when he started feeling dizzy. His chest tightened. He felt his heart pounding, beating faster and faster.

For a 15-year-old hockey player, that was abnormal for a lighthearted game.

He put on his mom's Apple Watch: 190 beats per minute flashed on the screen. It took two hours for his heart rate to drop below 100.

The family knew something was wrong, but this was during the COVID-19 pandemic and doctors in Manitoba were backed up. It could take months to get in to see a doctor. Living in Sanford, they were 30 minutes from the nearest hospital in Winnipeg.

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Do we leave the house?

“My dad was definitely freaking out,” Sotheran said. “I think it was a lot of shock.”

A couple of weeks later while playing hockey with friends, it happened again. He felt dizzy, like the wind was knocked out of him.

Getting to a doctor outweighed the risk of going to a hospital during the pandemic.

After further tests, Sotheran — now a freshman defenseman at UNO — was diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson White syndrome. The congenital condition means there's extra electrical pathway in the heart, and can cause episodes of fast heartbeats.

He has had two unsuccessful procedures since the diagnosis to try to remove the extra pathway. Doctors may never be able to fix his condition.

Despite being a fifth-round draft pick by the Philadelphia Flyers in 2023, concerns about his heart were an obstacle to his ultimate dream: The NHL. But giving up hockey was never a thought.

So he has figured out ways to deal with the racing heart. Like lying on the floor after physical activity or changing his sitting position on the bench.

'I enjoy being at the rink everyday'

“At about 2 years old, he would either have a hockey stick or a little golf club in his hand, so he went everywhere with it,” his mom Regan Windsor said. “We played a lot of hockey just with the little sticks everywhere, all the time.”

The family even built a 30-by-60-foot ice rink in their backyard, where Sotheran would practice before and after school, sometimes in sub-zero temperatures.

Sotheran even won a contest, and six players from the local minor league team came to play with him and his friends on the rink.

Carter Sotheran on the family's backyard ice rink. “At about 2 years old, he would either have a hockey stick or a little golf club in his hand, so he went everywhere with it,” his mom Regan Windsor said. “We played a lot of hockey just with the little sticks everywhere, all the time.”

Ryan Sotheran

“Hockey's an area where you can kind of get away from life in general and just enjoy, play games and work hard every day,” Sotheran said. “I enjoy being at the rink every day and playing with the guys every day, and so that's kind of why I keep playing.”

Sotheran joins the Mavericks after playing 266 consecutive games — since he was 15 to his last game with the WHL's Edmonton Oil Kings. That's impressive for anyone, especially someone whose heart rate often spikes above 200 beats per minute and has reached 243.

“He has that condition, but I don't think it's holding him back,” his dad Ryan Sotheran said. “When you play 266 consecutive games at that level, and to have that condition, I think that's incredible.”

Sotheran is a defenseman, but he can score.

“I think he has a unique ability to beat a forecheck and break the puck out clean,” UNO coach Mike Gabinet said. “He handles pressure extremely well, protects the puck while making plays. Very good on the offensive blue line, making guys miss and finding the next play, keeping the offense alive.”

He became the second defenseman in Oil Kings history with a hat trick. Those skills and his 6-foot-4 frame could have led him to the NHL already, if not for his medical history.

Hope, but procedures didn't work

Sometimes the extra pathway can be destroyed through a cardiac ablation.

That gave the Sotherans hope of a cure and a normal hockey career for Carter, who resumed playing while waiting to get the procedure.

In 2022, Sotheran was 17 and playing for the Portland Winterhawks when he met future UNO teammate Marcus Nguyen.

“I actually didn’t know right away. I was kind of wondering why this guy was always lying on the floor,” Nguyen said. “In Portland, we always wore heart monitors during workouts and practices, so seeing him and his heart rate, I’ve never seen numbers that high before.”

The next year, Sotheran was drafted by the Flyers.

“I don't think they knew or remembered (about the heart condition),” Sotheran said. “I think it was a little bit of an eye-opener when I arrived there for camp.”

A month after he was drafted, Sotheran had his first ablation procedure. He went to a hospital in Winnipeg, but the surgeon stopped partway through.

The extra pathway was close to his AV node, which sends electrical signals from the upper chamber of the heart to the lower chamber. If the AV node is destroyed instead of or along with the extra electrical pathway, Sotheran would need a pacemaker for the rest of his life to keep his heart beating.

Doctors referred him to Mayo Clinic, but he had to wait another year for the procedure.

“That one was supposedly, I think it was 95% going to work,” Ryan Sotheran said. “I think he was told before that procedure even sometimes it takes five procedures to actually get it right.”

Sotheran’s mom was in the hospital with him for the second ablation, which was supposed to take between 30 minutes to an hour.

“It was hours,” Windsor said. “For me, it felt like days.”

Since they didn't prep for a longer surgery and he wasn't under anesthesia — he was awake the entire time — Sotheran had too much carbon dioxide, so he couldn’t breathe. Doctors fixed that but his eyes, having been open for much longer than planned, became dry.

He was in immense pain.

But the procedure, they said, was successful.

“A few weeks later, after I was all healed up and training again,” Sotheran said, “it started happening again.”

Sotheran couldn’t participate in training camp with the Flyers in 2024, and the team consulted with doctors. In June 2025, the Flyers officially cut ties with Sotheran.

“The Flyers were trying to protect him and themselves, because they hadn't seen it before and been around it as much,” Ryan Sotheran said. “His initial reaction was disappointment, like everybody's. But like he said, it happened. It is what it is, and you can't really control it, right? It's their call.”

Path leads to UNO

It’s Sotheran’s dream to play in the NHL, and this wasn’t the end.

He went to training camp with the Las Vegas Golden Knights last summer before committing to UNO last March.

“It’s been a long road, so it’s just another piece of motivation,” Sotheran said. “The heart condition was a factor, but I also could have developed a bit more than I should have maybe with some of the stuff I was going through.”

Sotheran is on medication to help with his heart rate, though it has side effects.

The medicine can make him feel exhausted. He’s on a low dose now, so he can continue playing hockey.

Last year, he tried a medication that made anxious and depressed. He felt sad skating and lacked the motivation to practice and play.

Sotheran started losing hope that the condition would get better.

“But it's just kind of battling through everyday life,” Sotheran said. “And trying to find a way to play hockey.”

That wound up being in Omaha.

Sotheran already knew Nguyen and teammate Joel Plante from Portland, but he didn’t plan on playing college hockey until UNO reached out.

He got offers from other places but ultimately chose Omaha, where he would be the closest he has been to his family since he was 17. Sanford is a nine-hour drive almost directly north of Omaha, with Interstate 29 turning into Manitoba Highway 75 at the Canadian border.

“I said to him like, in all of his hockey life, his biggest thing is the people,” Windsor said. “They want you to come. They believe in you.”

UNO — which opens the season with a two-game series against No. 15 Augustana on Thursday and Saturday — will continue to monitor Sotheran’s heart. But he plans to play as many games as possible. Then, maybe, sign with another NHL team.

“Seeing Marcus and Joel where they were at coming in, and then where they are now, you just see big growth. And so I think what they have built here and what they're continuing to grow here has been super cool to see,” Sotheran said. “And obviously, talking with them, seeing how much they like it, really lined up with what the coaches said.”

Sotheran is still consulting doctors to see if another ablation procedure is possible. But for now, he doesn’t let it affect his play.

“It's something he deals with every day and I’m just very proud of him for how he deals with it,” Nguyen said. “He moves the puck well. He's very offensive, and he creates a lot for the team and the guys on the ice. I just think he’s a resilient person.”

Sotheran and his family hope his time with the Mavs shows that his heart condition doesn't define him.

“(My family) is my motivation to keep going and keep pushing through it all,” Sotheran said. “Everyone has different pathways, different roads to the NHL.”

Said Gabinet: “Watching him play, you could never tell there was an issue.”

Big (scoring) moment

Windsor was sure her son would score a goal. It was her first time seeing him play in a Mav uniform in the team's exhibition against Manitoba Oct. 7.

Despite a scoreless first period for UNO, her confidence didn't dwindle.

Sotheran soared down the ice. Focused on the Mav forwards, the defense left Sotheran open. About 15 feet from the goal, he shot, sending the puck over the goalie into the back of the net.

The horn went off. A fist to the bull on his jersey and a high-five and hug from teammate and roommate Vincent Desjardins punctuated the moment.

There'll be no taking it easy for Sotheran. No watching games from the bench or hanging out behind the blue line.

He's here to play. And will spend every game showing why quitting hockey was never an option.

Photos: Omaha hockey hosts Denver