

Kelley finds her calling

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Grand Haven freshman-to-be Krystal Kelley was diagnosed with osteogenesis imperfecta — commonly known as brittle bone disease — when she was two, and has been confined to a wheel chair nearly all of her life.

She has endured through more pain in her 14 years than most will encounter in a lifetime.

"There is no cure," she said. "It's tough sometimes because I've broken my legs 11 times."

She's also had eight surgeries over her lifetime so rods could be inserted in her legs for support. She'll soon require another surgery after a recent accident where she bumped into another girl in her wheelchair, causing the femur in her leg to compress and the rod to slip out.

"After her surgeries, she's in a cast, so we need to carry her a fair amount, because there's no weight-bearing," her father, Craig Kelley said. "Transportation becomes an issue."

Still, her family marvels at her pain tolerance and her generally happy-go-lucky outlook on life.



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"Krystal handles it pretty well," Craig Kelley said. "Seldom does she take more than a few Tylenol, and that's even after a fracture."

A condition such as brittle bone disease can often dictate one's life, so finding any kind of a distraction to take one's mind off of the condition is a blessing.

Playing wheelchair tennis has been Kelley's distraction, and her talents in the sport were on display on the national stage recently.

She was one of 25 children ages 12-18 who live with a permanent disabling condition that were selected to participate in the International Junior Wheelchair Tennis Camp in Mission Viejo, Calif. The camp, held July 11-16, is sponsored by the United States Tennis Association and the International Tennis Association.

This year's camp included athletes from 12 different states and five different countries. Kelley was the only representative from Michigan and was able to attend for free thanks to the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association. The Association picks one local athlete every year to attend the event.

Kelley was accompanied on the trip by her mother, Dawn.

The camp is geared towards fun and camaraderie, as well as developing tennis skills. Kelley only started playing tennis last winter, so the camp provided a crash course on skills for her to soak in and develop. Those in attendance learned from some of the top coaches in the sport, including the head coach and top assistant for the USTA wheelchair tennis national team.

"I learned lots of stuff," Kelley said. "Some of the things were I always have to keep moving and how to turn the right way."

Kelley faced some top-notch competition during the course of the camp in afternoon tournament play.

"There were kids on the U.S. Junior (Paralympics) team there, so in tournaments I didn't do to well," she said. "But I also played doubles and won."

Off the courts, campers had the opportunity to act like normal teenagers, including a visit to a large outdoor mall one evening, and a local community center, where new friendships were born.

Kelley said she was introduced to the sport by her father and plans on sticking with it in the future.

"I usually play at Orchard Hills (Sports Club in Grand Rapids) or I've played with my dad at the (Grand Haven) high school," she said. "In the summer, sometimes I get private lessons."

"There's really only a couple of sports she can do, but she can also swim," Craig Kelley said. "She did a swim club before, and she did OK. It was tough to be competitive because she couldn't use her legs. She basically had to pull herself through the water. But she held her own."

"With tennis, this is really the only outdoor activity she can do because it takes very little for her bones to break."

Craig Kelley said it's highly unlikely that Krystal will encounter any serious injury on the tennis courts.

"It's very uncommon," he said. "Maybe the adults that are playing and build up a lot of speed have a risk of tipping over."

He's just pleased his daughter has found an activity that provides exercise and she genuinely enjoys. Like the regular version, wheelchair tennis demands constant movement and players need tremendous upper body strength to excel.

Despite the All-Star teaching she received in California, Kelley remains very modest about her game, especially when asked what her top skill in the sport may be.

"I don't know," she said with a chuckle. "I am pretty fast. That helps."

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