

MDC pitcher Robert Evans endures heart surgery, family tragedy to help team reach JUCO World Series

By Walter Villa
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Miami Dade College pitcher Robert Evans had open-heart surgery 18 months ago. Evans helped lead MDC to the JUCO World Series.

Miami Dade College freshman left-hander Robert Evans had open-heart surgery 19 months ago. But that wasn't even the most stress his heart has endured recently.

On May 2, Evans was told that his father had been rushed to the hospital for unspecified reasons. When Evans got there, his father, Robert C. Evans Jr., a boat mechanic with a history of genetic heart issues, had a pulse but was unconscious.

Clinging valiantly to life, his heart stopped four times that day, and doctors revived him each time.

After the fifth time his heart stopped, his son had to make the hardest choice of his life.

"As the next of kin," said Evans, 20, "I had to make the decision to let him go peacefully."

His father was 51.

"At first, I didn't know how I was going to get through this," Evans said of the loss of his divorced father, who also had another son, Ryan, 18. "I missed practice for a couple of days, but being able to go back on the field is what's keeping me together."

The next time Evans steps on the field will be Sunday night, when MDC (35-15) begins play in the 10-team Junior College World Series at Grand Junction, Colorado.

The double-elimination tournament includes the top six teams in the country as well as four unranked teams, including MDC, which opens against No. 6 Spartanburg (South Carolina) Methodist (44-16).

MDC, which won national titles in 1964 and 1981, is making its first World Series appearance since 2001, and Evans — against all odds — is a substantial reason why

Two days after his father's death, Evans was joined by his entire team at a mass honoring his dad.

"I couldn't have asked for more from them," Evans said of his teammates and coaches, led by coach Danny Price and pitching coach Kevin Long. "They were all texting me to make sure I was OK. They've been the best."

Five days after the mass, Evans and the rest of the MDC team went to Lakeland for the double-elimination state tournament, the winner of which qualified for Colorado.

MDC split its first two games, sending the Sharks to the losers' bracket. But after three consecutive wins, MDC battled back to the state-title game.

By this point, dangerously close to being out of pitching because of six games in five days, the Sharks had no option but to turn to Evans, who is still working his way back from the six-hour, open-heart procedure performed in October 2012 to repair an enlarged aorta.

The surgery left a 10-inch scar on Evans' chest that he wears with pride.

"It keeps me from taking anything for granted," said Evans, who as a senior at Coral Gables High was told by doctors that he could never play baseball again because of his condition. "I had stopped playing, and now that I have baseball back, it's a blessing."

Still, Evans, who at 6.06 has by far the highest ERA on a team that averages 2.84 in the category, is, in essence, the 10th pitcher on a 10-man staff. He had only pitched 12 1/3 innings all season going into the final.

"We just wanted him to give us four innings and keep [Polk State] to two runs, and that's exactly what he did," Long said. "What a tough kid. He gave our team a huge emotional lift."

Jonathan Bermudez got the win in that 4-2 game, and Kyle Carter earned the save, getting the final eight outs, seven of them by strikeout.

Evans, a civil engineering major who lives with his mother, Clara, and his brother, still takes blood-pressure medicine, which will be part of his life forever.

He said he is now throwing close to 85 mph, which is the same velocity he had before his surgery.

Evans obviously misses his father, who had a passion for surfing.

"He wasn't materialistic," Evans said of his father, who also had open-heart surgery, in 2007. "When he was younger, he would go surfing in Hawaii and Costa Rica. He loved nature and the beach."

Despite the loss, Robert Evans has endured his own battles with heart illness. He said he is excited to be in Colorado, competing with his teammates for a national title.

And his teammates feel the same way.

"This team has always been close," Bermudez said. "But after what happened with Robert, we became more like a family."

“Nobody thought Robert would throw like he did so soon after his surgery. It surprised me, but we are all really happy for him.”

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