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The old joy returns to Stewart's game

INTERCOUNTY LEAGUE: The London Majors centre fielder is battling back from the effects of his beloved mother's sudden death from a brain aneurysm

By RYAN PYETTE, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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Chris Stewart is back playing with the London Majors. (SUE REEVE/THE LONDON FREE PRESS)

Nancy Stewart was a fixture at her son Chris's baseball games.

She was that kind of mom.

When a boy is a talented athlete and has family encouragement, there really are no limits. Chris was playing ball at Lake County College in Illinois two years ago and mulling over scholarship opportunities when he got the call that changed his life.

Nancy had passed away.

"It happened suddenly," said the 23-year-old Brantford native now playing centre field for the London Majors. "She had a brain aneurysm. I left school and came home."

Stewart said no thanks to the U.S. schools who had shown interest. Last summer, he stayed home to work and suited up for the Guelph Royals in the Intercounty Baseball League.

"Last year in Guelph, I would get a grounder hit to me in the infield and get anxious," the 6-foot-1, 170-pounder said. "I had a lot of anxiety. I didn't feel right. It felt like something was missing."

Anxiety and panic attacks often rob sufferers of the joy they feel for their favourite activities. When the Royals opted not to field a team this year over a stadium dispute, Stewart agreed to play in London after Majors co-owner and manager Roop Chanderdat

called him.

"But the same things I had been feeling came back again this year," Stewart said. "I went to the hospital (in Brantford) and was admitted. There's a liquid in the brain that affects happiness and the doctors found I didn't have enough.

"I'm on pills for it. I'm feeling a lot better now. I'm still talking to the doctors. I called Roop and told him I could play again and he's been great about the whole thing."

Because Stewart doesn't have enough at-bats, the Majors requested a commissioner's exception so he could start the playoffs next week. Joe O'Neill approved it along with two other special cases for Kitchener and Barrie this week.

Stewart hit .391 for Guelph in the playoffs last year and he's the Majors' leadoff man now. The London club has been waiting for his skill set.

"I remembered Chris because you always remember the fast guys who get on base and they can cause havoc on the base paths even if they don't steal," Chanderdat said. "We've tried a lot of different things in the No. 1 spot this year. We tried (league leading hitter) Alan Catrysse there. We've moved guys around in the order but Chris gives us that element we've been missing.

"He's been through a lot and we're happy he's back."

On Tuesday in Kitchener, Stewart led off the game with his first hit for London - a high fly ball that carried over the short right-field fence for a home run. It doesn't take much to poke one out there, but it took a ton to work his way back into that batter's box.

Stewart has much more than baseball on his plate these days.

He's engaged to be married to fiancée Casey next year. He bought a house in Brantford, has been toiling for adidas and has a plumbing apprenticeship in the works.

"I stopped baseball but I kept working," he said. "I have a house to pay for. I don't know what's going to happen with ball next year. I'd like to play but if I do, it'll be different because I won't be trying to get drafted."

For now, these next few weeks are enough.

The old joy has returned and the Majors have, at long last, found their catalyst.

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