

Niekros

and the *Knuckle Ball:*
Going to Bat for Aneurysm Research



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When Natalie Niekro was a little girl, she often accompanied her dad to work, where she played with the kids of his co-workers in the world's biggest playground. With the crunch of turf under their feet, they played in the cavernous Houston Astrodome while their fathers worked nearby.

Natalie and her playmates shared some of the most renowned last names in Houston sports history — Niekro, Ryan and Cruz, among others — but if she had any sense that any of this was unusual, it was only that she felt they all belonged to a close and very large family.

“Those Astros were more than just a team,” she recalls. “They were a brotherhood.”

Natalie's father, Joe Niekro, was one of the greatest pitchers in Houston Astros history. During his 13 years in Houston, he became the team's first 20-game winner and led the Astros to their first playoff berth. Even today, he remains the all-time-leader in wins among Astros pitchers.

At the peak of his career, Niekro was famous — and feared — for his command of the knuckleball, a crazy corkscrew of a pitch that befuddles hitters and catchers alike.

After leaving the Astros, Niekro played for the

Yankees and pitched for the Twins in the 1987 World Series. He retired the next year to end a 22-year career with 221 wins, making him one of the most successful knuckleball pitchers of all time.

But like a knuckleball, life can take an unpredictable path. In 2006, just as Natalie and her family were making preparations for her wedding, her father Joe died of a brain aneurysm.

“Dad always looked out for the other guy — a teammate, a friend, a family member,” recalls Natalie. “He was never too tired or too busy to avoid helping other people.”

So, in her father's memory, Natalie has set up an organization with the goal of educating people about brain aneurysms. Through the Joe Niekro Foundation, she also aims to support aneurysm patients and their families, as well as to raise funds to help research into this almost-always-fatal condition.

She chose to work with The Methodist Hospital and its Neurological Institute, where doctors see and treat aneurysm patients and conduct research. And she plans to kick off the fundraising with an appropriately named event.

“The Knuckle Ball ... A Pitch for Life” will be held on Monday, Sept. 22, at Minute Maid Park. A number of Astros players from past and present will be on hand to help Natalie, her uncle Phil and others raise funds for brain aneurysm research.

Natalie, who lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, is traveling to Houston more often since creating the Joe Niekro Foundation. She is rapidly learning about the work that Methodist doctors and researchers are doing to better understand brain aneurysms.

Joe Niekro was one of the approximately 30,000 Americans to experience a brain aneurysm that bursts, usually resulting in sudden death. As many as one in 15 people in the United States will develop a brain aneurysm.

Cerebral aneurysms are caused by a weak spot in a blood vessel that balloons as it fills with blood. It can occur in anyone at any age, but it is more common in women than men, in adults than in children.

The Methodist Hospital treats more patients with brain aneurysms than does any other hospital in the region. Dr. Richard Klucznik is the director of Methodist's Brain Aneurysm Center and an interventional neuroradiologist who uses minimally-invasive techniques to treat brain aneurysms.

Klucznik was part of a team at Methodist that studied and perfected a technique to close brain aneurysms in the early 1990s. Physicians thread a wire from a small incision in the leg to the site of the aneurysm. The wire coils into the aneurysm, filling it and stabilizing the weakened vessel.

“For years, we've used platinum coils but lately we've seen a trend in the use of bioactive coils to



Natalie Niekro, center, is preparing “The Knuckle Ball ... A Pitch For Life,” in memory of her late father, former Astros pitcher Joe Niekro. Funds raised by the event will benefit brain aneurysm research conducted by physicians at The Methodist Hospital, including (from left) neurosurgeon Dr. Todd Trask, interventional neuroradiologist Dr. Richard Klucznik and neurosurgeon Dr. James Rose.

“Dad always looked out for the other guy — a teammate, a friend, a family member,”

promote healing and better blood clotting,” Klucznik says. “With this kind of technology we may be able to offer patients a more permanent cure.”

Many people with brain aneurysms can go through life undiagnosed, but a rupture can cause serious trouble, including sudden, severe headaches; numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg; trouble speaking; vision problems; and sudden nausea and vomiting. Smoking, family history, diabetes and high blood pressure can also lead to a higher risk of cerebral aneurysms.

Dr. Todd Trask, a neurosurgeon with the Methodist Neurological Institute, specializes in treating cerebral aneurysms. “Everything we do at Methodist centers around understanding each patient’s situation and providing a rapid response that will best mitigate the damages caused by an aneurysm,” he says. “Any time there’s a rupture, we have a more immediate threat.”

If a rupture cannot be closed with a minimally-invasive procedure, Trask may recommend surgery, which involves “clipping” the aneurysm. To do this, the neurosurgeon opens the skull and directly places a small clip across the neck of the aneurysm to stop or prevent further bleeding.

“Treatment is continually evolving as our understanding improves about the natural history of aneurysms. We’ve improved surgical techniques, as well as imaging to see the location of the clip,” explains Trask. “We’re

continually making changes to better manage patient recovery.”

There is plenty of work to be done before Natalie Niekro’s first “Knuckle Ball” in September. She is spending time with Klucznik and other doctors at Methodist. She is enlisting the help and participation of many of her father’s teammates and fellow players, including Nolan Ryan, Larry Dierker, Jimmy Wynn, Jeff Bagwell and others. And there is one person who will most certainly be there: Joe’s brother, Phil Niekro.

Phil is a member of the Baseball Hall of Fame in recognition of his years with the Atlanta Braves and other teams. The Niekro brothers combined for 539 wins over their respective careers, making them the most successful brother-combination in Major League history.

And they both figure into one of baseball’s most interesting statistics: In his two-decade career, Joe Niekro hit only one home run. Guess who threw him the pitch?

“There was some bragging after that,” recalls Natalie Niekro. “Phil may be in the Hall of Fame, but my dad always said he had two things Phil didn’t: a World Series ring and a home run off his brother.”

To learn more about “The Knuckle Ball” and how to get tickets, go to www.joeniekrofoundation.org or call 832-667-5856.

