

Simon Keith got a second chance at life, and now he's paying it forward with the Nevada Donor Network and his own foundation.

ONCE MORE, WITH HEART

FORMER PROFESSIONAL SOCCER PLAYER **SIMON KEITH** IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S LONGEST-LIVING HEART TRANSPLANT RECIPIENTS, AND SOON THE VEGAS RESIDENT WILL BE SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT ORGAN DONATION ON ESPN. **BY BARBARA PECK**

ESPN knows a great story when it sees one. This spring, an episode of its newsmagazine show *E:60* will feature Simon Keith, the former professional soccer player and charismatic Las Vegas businessman who heads the Nevada Donor Network. Keith's sports career may not seem particularly compelling—he competed for the UNLV Rebels and for a few years as a pro—but that's not why ESPN wanted to profile him. It's because he was the first person to play professional sports after a heart transplant.

The story begins in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1984, when Keith, at 19, was diagnosed with myocarditis, a heart ailment that can lead to sudden cardiac death. He stubbornly continued playing soccer, gradually his condition worsened, and two years later his parents were told he had only weeks to live. The search for a donor heart led Keith and his parents to England, where he was born and where he would be given a second chance at life with a transplant at age 21. Back then, life expectancy for a heart-transplant recipient was seven years.

Amazingly, Keith returned to being a hard-charging forward on the field, and in 1987 he moved to Las Vegas and joined his brother Adam on the UNLV soccer team. Two years later he was the number-one draft pick in the



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Major Indoor Soccer League and went on to play for the Cleveland Crunch and teams in the Canadian Soccer League.

Keith retired from soccer in 1992 and finished his degree in education and sports management at UNLV. “My instincts told me I needed to be in Las Vegas,” he says. “It’s really a place where opportunity abounds.” A born entrepreneur, he began launching and selling companies—financial and sports management, staffing, promotional products, and more—in quick succession. At first he kept his transplant story private. But he came to realize that if he opened up about his surgery, he could help other transplant recipients and patients waiting for donor organs.

Keith now focuses on “bringing the entrepreneurial spirit into the organ donation space,” he says. In 2011 he established the Simon Keith Foundation, which aims to increase awareness about organ donation and help transplant recipients and their families. He also became the COO of the Nevada Donor Network, an organ procurement organization. As a motivational speaker, he addresses corporate and medical groups about being prepared for success and uses the proceeds to provide athletic training to transplant recipients who want to return to an active lifestyle. Revenue from sales of Keith’s 2012 book, *Heart for the Game*, also goes to the foundation.

It was the book’s coauthor Jason Cole who encouraged him to close the loop on his story by learning about his heart donor. In 2011, Keith traveled to the UK with his wife, Kelly; their two daughters; and their son. “Meeting [the donor’s father] Roger was an overwhelming experience,” Keith says. “Think of it: Twenty-five years later, his son’s heart is beating inside my body.”

As one of the world’s longest-living heart transplant recipients, Keith has plenty to celebrate on his 50th birthday in May. “I live life to the fullest,” he says, which means not denying himself the occasional heart-unfriendly indulgence. “I stay fit—but not because of the transplant. It’s just who I am.”

Asked about pro soccer’s future, Keith says he’s “bullish,” adding, “I believe I’ll see the US take the World Cup in my lifetime.” A bold prediction for a team that’s never finished better than third, but Simon Keith knows all about exceeding expectations. thesimonkeithfoundation.com **V**

VIEW FROM THE TOP

FAVORITE PLACE TO HIKE: “I love Red Rock, but even better is the area behind my house in Southern Highlands, with 20 miles of uninterrupted trails.”

FAVORITE WAY TO RELAX: “I do love to play golf with a beer in one hand and a cigar in the other. For years I kept it a dirty secret. Then I figured, why hide it?”

LAS VEGAS HAUNTS: “My favorite restaurant is Triple George Grill, an old-school steakhouse downtown. Their porcini-crusted rib eye is unbelievable. But my all-time favorite meal is steak and eggs at the Peppermill at 3 AM. As for bars, it’s the FireSide Restaurant & Tavern on East Cactus Avenue—a clunky little spot that only locals go to.”

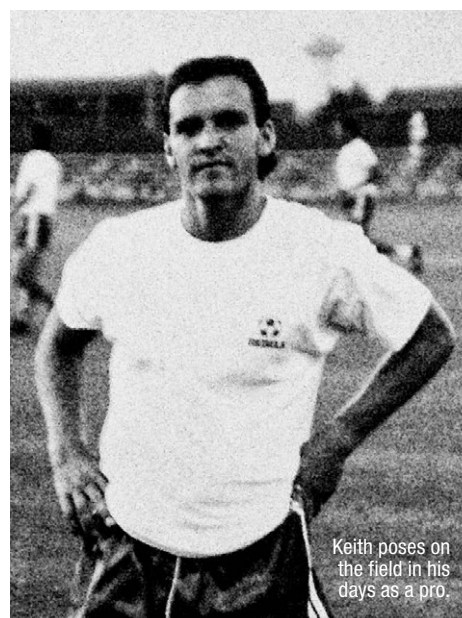
THE ONE ATTRACTION THAT VISITORS SHOULDN’T MISS? “I recommend seeing a world heavyweight boxing match. I don’t even follow the sport, but seeing a fight in Vegas is just electric.”

HOW OFTEN DO YOU GET TO A REBELS GAME? “Not as much as I’d like. But as the saying goes, ‘Once a Rebel, always a Rebel.’”

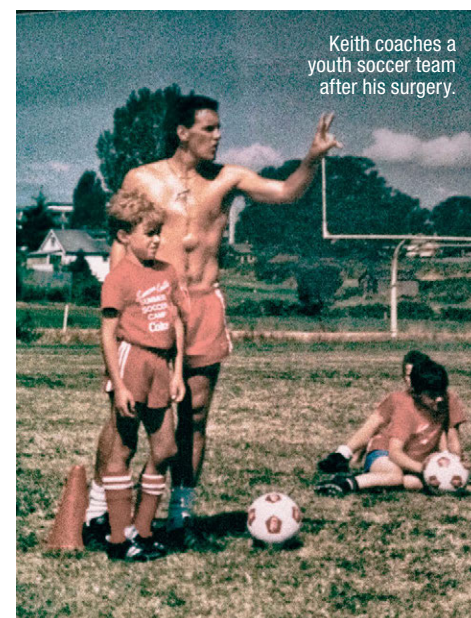


Simon Keith competing with the UNLV Rebels, his team from 1987 to 1989.

“MEETING ROGER WAS AN OVERWHELMING EXPERIENCE. THINK OF IT: TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER, HIS SON’S HEART IS BEATING INSIDE MY BODY.” —SIMON KEITH



Keith poses on the field in his days as a pro.



Keith coaches a youth soccer team after his surgery.