

“My heart was beating 300 times per minute”

Felice Natalino was just 18 when made his Serie A and Champions League debuts for Inter Milan, but a heart defect soon forced him to hang up his boots for good.

It all started on a Wednesday evening in February 2013, when I was playing cards with friends in my hometown of Lamezia Terme. I had plenty of time on my hands back then. One year earlier, in the spring of 2012, I'd been temporarily banned by the Italian Football Federation after the doctors had discovered a heart defect which can cause heart rate disturbances.

I was 20 years old and had a tough time accepting the ban, especially as my career had got off to such a flying start. I'd made my Serie A and Champions League debuts for Inter Milan at the age of 18 and I still felt physically fit after the diagnosis.

However, while we were playing cards that evening, my heart suddenly started racing. I went straight to the emergency department at the local hospital, but they just tried to send me back home. “Get the defibrillators ready!” I screamed at them. Ultimately, it was my knowledge of my heart condition that saved my life that night. Over the course of the next three hours, the doctors gave me dozens of electric shocks because my heart wouldn't stop beating at a rate of up to 300 times per minute. After three electric shocks, the doctors administered an anaesthetic. When I came to, I found myself lying in a larger clinic with a pacemaker in my chest. But I was still scared. When the next attack occurred just days later, the pacemaker had to give me six shocks in the space of 10 minutes before my heart responded. It was like a horror film. The first real improvement came when I underwent a procedure in Milan, which involved inserting a tube into one of my femoral arteries and burning the parts of my heart that had caused the heart rate disturbances.

The heart attacks certainly helped to put my career into perspective. I was soon completely

banned from playing in Italy and announced my retirement on 30 October 2013. I had no desire to risk playing abroad, where some leagues still allow footballers with heart defects to play.

My ambition may have faded, but my passion for the game is as strong as ever. So it was a relief when I was told that I could still enjoy a game of football with my friends. I also want to continue to be involved in football professionally. I've already started working at my father's football academy and I study law during the daytime. One day I hope to negotiate contracts with clubs as an agent, or coach a professional team.

I've also stayed in close contact with Inter Milan and my former team-mates, and I'm still a *Nerazzurri* fan too, of course. The picture of me kicking a ball as a four-year-old fan decked out in the blue and black strip has now been joined on the kitchen wall at home by one of me as a real Inter defender. When I look at it,

I sometimes feel nostalgic. But life goes on, and for that I'm truly grateful. ❄️

As told to Elio Stamm

Name

Felice Natalino

Date and place of birth

24 March 1992, Lamezia Terme

Position

Defender

Clubs

**2010–2012 Inter Milan
2011–2012 Verona (loan)
2012 Crotona (loan)**

Italian national team

43 appearances at U16, U17, U18 and U19 level

In Turning Point, personalities reflect on a decisive moment in their lives.

