

Beginning the journey home

1st of Masche sextuplets allowed to leave hospital

Barbara Yost

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The first of the Masche sextuplets began his journey home Thursday.

Blake Nickolas Masche, just under 6 weeks old, weighing a beefy 4 pounds, 3 ounces and sporting a full head of brown hair, left the neonatal intensive care unit of Phoenix Children's Hospital after his mom, Jenny, passed her car seat check.

Until the remaining five babies are released over the next weeks, Masche and her family will stay at her grandmother's Scottsdale home.

Then they'll move back to their home in Lake Havasu City.

"I'm so excited," Masche said as she fed a tiny bottle of breast milk to baby Cole, who weighs 4 pounds. "I love you, mama loves you," she murmured into his tiny ear.

At birth the six weighed from 2 to 3 pounds each.

Masche carried the babies for 30 weeks and four days, premature but good for a multiple birth. Normal gestation is 36 to 40 weeks.

The babies were dozing on and off Thursday after a hectic day in the celebrity spotlight.

Early in the morning, the *Today* show featured them and their mother, followed by other TV and print reporters.

Later, the TV game show *Deal or No Deal* called asking the couple to be contestants. They're thinking it over.

Neonatal nurse Jane Hodges, who has been caring for newborns for more than 30 years, cradled Savannah, 3 pounds, 9 ounces, in one hand and said she'll miss the brood she has been tending since their births June 11.

"They did so well," she said.

Masche is also doing well, feeling "90 percent back to normal" after first suffering heart failure following delivery because of a rush of excess blood, and then a virus that left her disoriented and depressed, fearing she could not care for her children.

Until the virus was detected, "I thought I was crazy," she said.

Proper medication returned her to good health. Weakened after months of bed rest, she's now getting back in shape thanks to a diligent walking program.

Husband Bryan, she said, "is my trainer."

Other new moms will envy her rapid baby-weight loss, though it was her ordeal that took its toll.

Those hours when doctors worked to restore her heart function were terrifying for her parents, Bob and Sue Simbric.

Bob still tears up when he recalls that day. Sue can't talk about it and said she survived only through prayer.

But all the challenges are forgotten when they look at their six grandchildren, wriggling and cooing in their bassinets, bunking two by two for comfort. All are healthy.

"They're so small," Bob said. "I tried to change their diapers, but my hands are so big they don't seem to work. My fingers are as big as their legs."

The infants range in size from 3 pounds, 5 ounces (Molli) to Blake and Bailey at 4 pounds, 3 ounces. Blake is the first released because he's feeding the best. The others will follow when they can master sucking and swallowing. Some are fed through small feeding tubes.

All have distinct personalities, Masche said, and seem to recognize her face and voice. Masche will have help carrying for her half dozen. In addition to several family members, a professional Baby Nurse company (Exclusively Baby Nurses) has offered its services both in Scottsdale and at home in Havasu.

As she got ready to take the first baby home, she looked to the future. "It's the first day of the rest of my life," she said, "with six little ones