

Unfortunate Agonies

Sean Moeller | The Quad-City Times | Posted: Thursday, December 15, 2005 | 12:00 am

Glancing down the line of black plastic chairs that made up the Bettendorf High School girls basketball team's bench last Friday, any onlooker would have spotted two sets of crutches on the floor.

Neither of them belonged to Lizzie Solveson, but six months ago they could have.

The junior Bulldog basketball and soccer player, in chocolate and tan dress clothes, was acting as a courteous teammate, hefting Megan Lovich's crutches out of the way before the start of their team's game against North Scott. There's a bond between the two juniors that goes beyond their inactive status. They have similar scars that they can point to and discuss. They can commiserate with each other about the unfortunate agonies that they share.

"When I talk to Katie (Voigt) and Lizzie, they understand," Lovich said. "They understand more than my parents do."

Lovich is the fifth female athlete in Bettendorf's junior class to tear her anterior cruciate ligament — one of the two central ligaments that support the knee. Solveson was the fourth, sustaining hers in August while playing for the Quad-City Strikers soccer team. Along with fellow junior Voigt, they make up a trio of Bettendorf girls basketball players that have been downed by the injury in the last two years, but just a small fraction of the number of female athletes that have suffered the injury in recent months.

Solveson knew what a broken ankle felt like and she broke her wrist three times — from swing set to rollerblading accidents — but those are all overshadowed.

"None of those injuries cross my mind after this one," she said.

A well of determination

The number of athletes who have overcome the dreaded ACL injury has grown sizably in the past five years, providing the newly diagnosed with stronger support systems and the kind of inspiration that trumps any video or pamphlet.

Friends and family gravitate to the injured, helping them through the painful first week after the reconstructive surgery. They change ice packs, administer pain medication and even relocate to a couch to sleep closer to the injured parties. They give them as much encouragement as possible throughout the five-to-six months of grueling rehab.

One of Voigt's friends gave her a letter, shortly after her tear happened in a soccer game in September, 2004, ending it with the line, "No hill is too high for a climber."

Most girls, despite their initial fear and skepticism have found out that they're climbers.

"When I found out that I tore my ACL, it was devastating. It was the hardest time, but it was the best experience," Voigt said. "I learned so much from it. It changed me as a person and it allowed me to grow spiritually."

Voigt has an identical twin sister, for whom she said the injury was difficult to deal with.

“It was almost harder on her than it was on me,” she said. “It really affects the family a lot.”

Finding role models

Davenport North soccer player Kirstin Perkins said she never expected to suffer anything like an ACL injury.

“I thought it only happened to girls who weren’t in shape,” she said. “When it did happen, I didn’t think I’d be able to get through it. I didn’t think I had the courage to get through it. I was angry at first. Maybe it was fate, maybe not. It was amazing how much better I felt just after the first week.”

Perkins had two other soccer teammates undergo ACL surgeries last year. Davenport Assumption basketball player Kim Thissen, a second-team all-state player last year, has had her senior season dramatically shortened because of an ACL tear that happened in the summer. She has had former teammate Mandy Crino — who endured the long road back last year — to look at as an successful case of recovery.

The role models are out there. Everyone knows someone else who cut through the nightmare to get to the clearing on the other side. Oftentimes, the injured become their own best boosts of confidence.

“The whole process is a mystery time. I’ve never for sure what I might be able to do tomorrow,” Thissen said. “But I can feel myself getting stronger. I can feel my cardiovascular getting back to where it was before I got hurt.”

“That’s what helps me to get through. It’s seeing those changes from week to week. It’s been almost six months, but it seems like just two weeks ago that I tore it and had surgery.”

Thissen, who is scheduled to return to the court sometime near the end of January, forced herself into a short grieving process, said Davenport Assumption athletic trainer Bob Cunningham.

“I was the first person to tell her that she had an ACL tear,” he said. “There were tears. She was crying and her mother was crying. I checked it and re-checked it. I told her, ‘I’d like to be wrong.’”

“But Kim’s been extremely positive from the very beginning. Her devastation period was probably days. Not weeks, but days. I see kids right when the injury first happens and I tell them, ‘You will get back from this.’ I try to plant that seed early. I can tell them, ‘You know, so and so did this,’ and I can name someone that had one, came back and is playing college ball now. Most kids do come out changed by it. They dig deep and go through it.”

Prone to it

Dr. Peter Rink of the Orthopaedic & Rheumatology Associates in Davenport, who performed surgeries on Lovich and Solveson, estimates that he has done 20 to 25 ACL surgeries in 2005. He said that a national trend shows that more and more girls are incurring ACL injuries.

This is due partially to the rising participation numbers in female athletics, but he said their highly competitive nature serves them well in returning from this injury, which 20 years ago meant a full-leg cast that eroded existing muscle to strings and was frequently career-ending.

“There’s a tremendous focus right now on why this is happening,” Rink said. “When they come to me, they and their families tend to be upset. There’s great apprehension about the surgery and once they get through that, things are a lot better. Most are goal-oriented people and they can start to see results and improvement immediately.”

Cunningham attended a physical training conference, in Iowa City two weeks ago, at which attendees were informed that there’s a chance that girls athletic participation could overtake that of boys in the coming years, creating an even higher probability for ACL injuries.

The ACL, found at the center of the knee, is the primary stabilizer and the most commonly torn ligament in the knee. According to varying numbers pulled from medical studies and doctors, girls are anywhere from four to seven times more prone to tearing an ACL.

“Women usually have weaker quads than men. When they come down, they’re not as stable,” Dr. Charles Cassel of ORA said. “When they land, their knees go in and they don’t have as good of muscle control.

“I usually see five to 10 girls every high school season for an ACL. The diagnosis is usually very easy to make clinically.”

According to some recent research that was offered at the Iowa City conference, up until around the age of 10, girls jump very similarly to boys but then something happens to change that. Emphasis is being placed on prevention programs — one, in particular, is called Jump — that work to strengthen hamstring muscles to equalize the difference in strength between those and the quads.

A study done at the Cincinnati Sportsmedicine Research and Education Foundation and Deaconess Hospital in 1999 was the first to report the effects that proper neuromuscular training had on the reduction of ACL injuries in females.

Hormones, anatomy and length of sports participation are factors that lead to ACL tears, but the study showed an almost 3-to-4 fold decrease in the injury in women trained through the plyometric and training program. The training essentially brings females even with males in their likelihood of suffering the injury.

All the way back

Randy Boldt, a physical therapist for Rock Valley Therapy, tore his ACL in 1988 as a high school wrestler in north central Iowa.

He didn’t make it back to competition. He re-tore the ligament when he tried to return. He knows the test of mind and body that the recovery process takes and he becomes personally attached to every hobbling boy or girl that comes through the doors to go through the one or two-hour rehab sessions. His own experiences with the injury are what led him to physical therapy school at the University of Iowa.

“I think the fact that I went through that emotional component of this injury allows me to connect with them,” he said. “I push them, but I want to make sure they’re safe and ready to get back. I’ll try to get to a game or two and watch them play (after rehab). I always check out the box scores in the Quad-City Times to see if they participated and to see how many points they had.”

On Tuesday, Perkins was getting ready for her first soccer game since she was cleared to play. It was the start of her second soccer career.

“I’m a little nervous about it,” she said. “I don’t really know how it’s going to go, but I’m not scared.”

After what she’s been through to get to this game, there was no reason to be. The scary part was already over.