

Rash of knee injuries plague athletes

Players relate experiences with recovery

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It's the third quarter of the quarter-final football game.

Archrival Hamlin is desperately trying to end Albany's 2014 football season.

Then junior Charles Carter takes the handoff for the 11th time during the game.

He makes a cut, jukes out a defender, and hears a pop.

"I didn't stop running," Carter said. "I finished the play, but afterward I knew something wasn't right."

The following week Carter was told that his MRI revealed the worst scenario for athletes: an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tear.

Carter is one of several Albany athletes who have suffered knee injuries over the past three years, all of which include an ACL tear. Most have endured a long recovery process and continued playing sports.

Some in Albany have questioned why there is a rash of knee injuries, and if they can be prevented. "During a basketball game my sophomore year, I landed on my knee wrong after taking a shot," senior Tobi Nall said. "I didn't think anything was wrong at all. I just thought I landed weird and that's why it was hurting. About five minutes after I was helped off the court to the bench, I was ready to play again."

Nall learned later after an MRI scan that she had torn her ACL. Once she underwent surgery, she began the four-month-long recovery process.

"I went to physical therapy twice a week for four months," Nall said. "My therapist put me through different types of workouts to help strengthen my knee to prevent future injuries."

She returned to sports, but played differently because of her injury.

"I played more timidly in volleyball the next season and quit playing basketball all together," Nall said. "I felt like I might hurt it again if I played basketball, and



Senior Levi Britting watches the game after being helped off the field with a serious knee injury. Britting was upset, but still managed to cheer his team on for the remainder of the game. He will be out for the season. Several players have had to deal with the same thing. PHOTO BY CURRY WILSON

I didn't want to risk another injury before softball."

Based on her own experiences, she believes that athletes can help prevent such injuries.

"I think athletes should take stretching more seriously before playing, or even consider wearing knee braces before they get injured," Nall said.

The same year, Nall's teammate also suffered an injury to her ACL.

"During basketball practice, I strained my ACL," junior Rachel Hill said. "I also tore my MCL during a basketball game my sophomore year."

Hearing audible noises and feeling pain in her knee, Hill knew she had done something to her knee.

"When I landed during practice, my knee hyperextended and popped and I couldn't walk on it," Hill said. "When I heard the pop, I knew something happened."

After her second injury, it was evident she had torn a ligament.

"The second time, a teammate came down on me and I twisted," Hill said. "My knee turned to the inside and I felt painful stretching and lots of popping. Once again I knew I had damaged my other

knee."

Hill's trainer offered an explanation of why she had hurt her knees.

"I went to PT once a week for three months," Hill said. "The therapist said my injuries were due to weak hips that threw my knees out of alignment, so I worked on balancing drills and hip, ankle strengthening exercises."

Hill's injuries were noticeable during sports the following year, and she is hesitant to continue basketball.

"My knee bothered me all through volleyball and even into track my sophomore year," Hill said. "I had to delay hurdle preparation until I was completely healed. I'm really nervous about playing basketball this year because I hurt both of my knees during basketball and I don't want to risk my track season."

Her advice is similar to Nall's in that she believes athletes "don't stretch enough before practice and games."

The Lions have had several of ACL tears happening to multiple players.

"I hurt my knee during football practice on my birthday during my sophomore year," senior Tyler Mill-

er said. "The second it happened, I knew something went wrong. I heard a loud popping noise."

Miller later found out that he had torn his ACL, MCL, and meniscus. This type of injury required a more complicated surgery and more rigorous physical therapy.

"I now have to wear a brace when I play football," Miller said. "The brace makes me forget about the injury so I can play the game without worrying. I don't feel pain in my knee anymore."

Miller believes that his tear was something that cannot be prevented, saying "it was a freak accident."

During his junior year, in the first game of the season, senior Caleb Masters suffered a blow to his knee during a tackle that tore the cartilage in the joint, requiring a complex surgery.

"Immediately, I thought that my season was over," Masters said.

Now that he is healthy and playing football again, his mindset has not changed.

"I'm still more than willing to put it all on the line for my team" Masters said.

Last year, as the Lions were trying to punch their ticket to AT&T

Stadium, another player injured his knee.

"We were playing Seagraves in the semi-finals," senior Ben Hawkins said. "During the third quarter, I pulled down the line to block, and my knee gave out."

Immediately, his mind went to his teammates.

"I'm not gonna be able to finish the year and help my brothers advance to state," Hawkins said.

He had torn his ACL, MCL, LCL, and meniscus. On the road to recovery, Hawkins said all he needed was "hard work and dedication" in order to play football again.

The injuries Hawkins has experienced may have a long-term effect on his knees.

"My knees have never been the same," Hawkins said. "They are weaker now than before the injury."

Hawkins believes that all athletes are in danger of injuring themselves when they step onto the football field, but "the greatest athletes are the ones that take the risk."

This season already has seen two starters go down with knee injuries. Carter tore the ACL in his opposite knee during a game against Roby.

"My leg was extended and someone hit me from the side," Carter said. "I heard it pop and knew immediately something was wrong."

Carter tried to maintain his composure after the injury and looked to scripture to find peace of mind.

"Instead of getting mad, I referenced myself to Job in that I had everything, and the finer things in life were taken away to test my faith," Carter said.

The injury has shown Carter that nothing is guaranteed.

"It has made me realize that I need to go 110 percent every play because I know the next play could be my last," Carter said.

Senior Levi Britting tore his ACL during a football game against Canadian. During the game, Britting was hoping that his injury was not severe.

"I thought, 'Please just be a hyperextension,'" Britting said. "I still want to keep playing football."

With the abundance of these injuries, Carter sees only one solution.

"Nothing can prevent knee injuries," Carter said. "If something could be done, we would be doing it."