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Houston ready for takeoff

Junior point guard returns from torn ACL

By Cheng Sio on October 28, 2009

Sadness. Pity. Frustration.

Those were some of the words Colorado Buffaloes junior point guard Whitney Houston used to describe her emotions about not being able to play basketball last year.

Houston isn't always this way, but she tore her anterior cruciate ligament in her left knee during the women's basketball team's individual workouts on Sept. 24, 2008.

With medical advances nowadays, a torn ACL is no longer considered a career-ending injury. But it doesn't mean Houston can't feel sadness, pity or frustration, not when the Buffs went 11-18 last season and all she could do was watch or feel the pain in her left knee.

Today, Houston is in better spirits. But she says she couldn't do it without hard work and some help from her basketball family.

Even though some people who have torn their ACL said it usually takes two years — one to rehab and one to be mentally comfortable — to recover from the injury, Houston said she feels confident and thinks the 2009 season will be great.

During the season

In October 2008, Houston had successful surgery, but that was just the beginning of her long journey back.

After surgery, Houston was placed in a straight leg brace. Since her surgically-repaired knee was out of commission, all Houston could do was work on the rest of her body while watching her teammates on the court.

"There were days where I came in and I was just sad and pitied at myself," Houston said. "I had to think about some people that's not going to be able to come back from a lifetime injury or just be fortunate to come back off an injury or things that I went through. I had to get over the fact that the season is over. When the season was over, I can't look back. Like when I got hurt, I can't keep on dwelling on that."

Six weeks after being fitted for the straight leg brace, a couple of developments occurred.

Houston was able to get out of the straight leg brace and begin her rehab, working on regaining her left leg's range of motion.



On April 2, 2008, point guard Whitney Houston attempts a lay-up against Marquette in the Buffaloes 86-72 loss. After successful ACL surgery, Houston will return to the court for Colorado this season. (CU Independent file/Matt Wessels)

Upon hearing the good news, head coach Kathy McConnell-Miller decided on a course of action that would change Houston's spirits and outlook on basketball, possibly forever.

"We required her to do her rehab out here so she wasn't spending hours back in the training room while everybody else was playing," McConnell-Miller said. "She was a part of it, she could be a part of the coaching, she could hear the other coaches being instructive and some tactical decisions that we were making throughout the practice and how the practices changed throughout the year."

An exercise bike was set up on the practice floor, and exercises to test leg strength and explosiveness were placed around the sidelines.

But regaining one's range of motion isn't as easy as singing, "A B C, easy as one, two, three."

"Every day, you're only getting like centimeters and sometimes, on a good day, you'll get inches of range of motion back," said assistant athletic trainer Nicole Makris, who oversaw Houston's rehab. "Range of motion is something that probably from a week to six months, you're still working on that."

In addition to not spending her rehab in isolation, McConnell-Miller had Houston observe how a point guard should conduct a team during games.

"We would move her up to the first four seats where the assistants sit as opposed to sitting at the end of the bench and watching like a spectator," McConnell-Miller said. "We put her up with the coaches so she could hear us talking and talking to her as well about when you're out there, this is what we need from you."

McConnell-Miller said her goal was to get Houston to understand the game such as time and score, tempo, changes in the offense and defense and flow of the game.

Although the education had a purpose, it also caused pain to both player and coach.

"I feel like those moments where I was just sitting on the bench watching, it was hurting me so bad inside that I was automatically thinking if I was out there, what I would be doing," Houston said.

McConnell-Miller added, "It was very difficult. It was more difficult than I had anticipated coming in. You just take for granted somebody that has been in that position for two years and having Big 12 [Conference] experience. When you're putting the ball in somebody's hands who doesn't have Big 12 experience, it's hard to simulate. It was just about every game, I'd look down and wished she was out there."

As the winter snow turned to a spring breeze, losses piled up as the team went 3-13 in the Big 12 and was ousted in the first round of the Big 12 tournament. During that same time, however, Houston progressed and said she felt part of the team again, which included the losing.

"Being around my teammates, seeing how hard they were going out on the court in practice and stuff, it was very competitive," Houston said. "So I want them to see me going hard too. I'm going to go hard just like they are. It really motivated me being out there with them. I love that. I feel like I was an extended coach off the court."

Houston's motivation to work hard included imitating her best Rocky impression as she ran up the steps of the Coors Events Center when her knee grew stronger.

"Everybody was, 'Good job Whitney, keep it up,'" McConnell-Miller said. "She had made progressions in her injury. She went from limping to walking to jogging to running. All of her rehab progressed in the floor. We watched her go from surgery to full-out sprint. And we were a part of her rehab as well."

After the season

While the season ended for her teammates in March, Houston was nowhere near done.

Houston's rehab was originally scheduled to end in April, but it was extended by two months because she didn't want to worry about sitting out and being sore when the 2009 season began.

Makris said Houston was the best ACL rehab subject she's had because Houston worked hard every day, was determined and focused and she didn't hit any speed bumps along the way.

"Everything just worked smoothly," Makris said. "Every ACL is a little bit different. Some people have problems getting their range of motion back and that stops the rehab from progressing. She never hit any of those things. Sometimes, there's too much swelling or too much pain or different things can stop a person from their rehab. It was smooth the whole way. Everything worked out really good."

When Makris told Houston her rehab was over on a June summer day, Houston's emotions ran wild.

"When we came in and she was like, 'Last day of rehab,' I was overwhelmed," Houston said. "I couldn't wait because we were getting a break to go home. I couldn't wait to get that break to go home and start playing pick-up [basketball games] because every time we get a break, we'd go home. Girls from my high school and girls all around Memphis, [Tenn.], we get together and we play pick-up. I was so excited to play."

Looking ahead

Houston has a two-inch scar on her left knee and she still walks with a limp. She attributes her limp to Boulder's climate changing from scorching hot in the summer to windy and cool in the fall.

But when she's running on the court, there's no limp. In fact, teammates say she's still the fastest player on the team.

"One of the most amazing things about her is that she has torn her ACL only a year ago and yet she still is the quickest person out there," senior guard Bianca Smith said. "She's lightning fast up and down the floor in less than four seconds."

When Houston was hurt and couldn't move like she could, she worked on the weaker areas of her game such as dribbling and shooting. In her first two seasons, Houston shot 37.5 percent from the field and 25.8 percent from three-point land.

"I remember Whitney coming in and her shot did not look like it did now," Smith said. "I think she's put in a lot of work and work with the coaches and put in a lot of overtime to get her shot to where it is today. It wasn't what it is. It wasn't pretty. That's the best way to put it. I don't even know how to demonstrate it. It was a weird one but she put in work. Anybody puts in as much as she did over the summer can change her shot."

Of course, the biggest improvement in Houston's game is what she learned with the coaching staff when she was hurt. After about two weeks of practice, both Houston and McConnell-Miller say they see a difference in Houston's play already.

"Being able to know where everybody is, keeping my head up so I could locate everybody and make sure they know their spot," Houston said. "I think I've gotten better at that because I use to go one way always. Now, I can go both ways and I can see everybody."

McConnell-Miller added, "In the past, there were times where she would leave her feet quite a bit, make the decision in the air as oppose to making the correct decision by reading the defense. Just her command of the offense is superior to what it was a year ago."

As she reflects back on what she endured, she said she now sees how a tragedy could turn into a gratifying experience.

“I feel like I have become better as a person, as a better teammate and as a better point guard,” Houston said. “I feel like if that never happened to me, I probably wouldn’t have learned how to be a better teammate or a better point guard because I was always thinking about what I need to do to go fast. Now, it kind of slows me down, but I feel like I still have everything.”

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