

Senior finally healthy after playing through knee injury

By Brian Howell Buffzone.com Boulder Daily Camera

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Before Ashley Wilson ever played her first game as a Colorado Buffalo, she was told that her college basketball career would be short.

Three years later, Wilson is not only still playing, she's healthier than ever and eager to take over a leadership role for what could be one of the nation's top 25 teams.

"I'm really excited," said Wilson, who helped the Buffs to a 25-7 record and a trip to the NCAA Tournament last season. "We've been working hard the whole offseason. I'm excited to see how we play as a team and really get after it and just to see the outcome of our season."

As a senior at Long Beach (Calif.) Poly High School, Wilson tore the ACL in her right knee on Feb. 5, 2010. A few months later, she and her twin sister, Brittany, arrived at CU, and doctors examined Ashley's knee. (Brittany is now a starting guard for the Buffs).

"When I first got here, the doctors told me I wasn't going to be able to play up to four years and pretty much it was the worst knee injury they had ever seen before," Wilson said. "They didn't think I would make it four years at this level."

Her mother, Tasha Anderson, told her to keep her head up.

"She said, 'Just keep working through it and whatever is meant to happen will happen,'" Wilson said. "Here we are four years later."

Wilson's arrival coincided with that of Linda Lappe, who was named the Buffs' head coach on April 12, 2010. Former coach Kathy McConnell-Miller recruited the Wilsons to Boulder, so Lappe didn't know much about them. When she heard about the doctors' evaluation, Lappe didn't figure to get much out of Ashley.

"We had no expectation for her in terms of being able to play for four years," Lappe said. "It was always very questionable as to whether she was going to be able to practice hard and be able to play. Everything that Ashley has been able to do has really been a bonus for us. She's just a tough kid. She never acts like she's hurt."

It certainly has not been a pain-free career; far from it, in fact. Yet, for three seasons, the 5-foot-8 Wilson has been a sparkplug off the bench for the Buffs, giving them an energetic burst every night.

"I think her role the last few years has been really, really significant," Lappe said. "I think she's had a great role for the last few years."

Despite the initial prognosis, Wilson missed just five games during her first two seasons, and only three of those because of injury. Eventually, fighting through the pain caught up to her, though.

In late November of last year, the constant pain became too much. She opted to have arthroscopic surgery to clean up some loose cartilage. She missed a month (six games) while recovering from that procedure.

As it turned out, that was a turning point for Wilson.

"I think it was very important that I did have that surgery," she said. "It was needed. I'm glad I went ahead and got the surgery. Now it feels pretty much better than it's ever felt since I've been here."

Wilson eased her way back into the lineup after surgery, but by season's end last year, she was feeling good and back in her usual role. She even played a career-high 32 minutes against Washington on Feb. 24.

With her senior year about to start next month, Wilson is looking at fulfilling a little bit of a different role. On the court, she will likely have the same job as a key reserve. But, off the court, she has already shown a great deal of leadership for the Buffs.

"We've seen her definitely step up into more of somebody that we can count on for a lot of different things," Lappe said. "I think she's really matured over the last three years and she's always been somebody who has worked very, very hard individually and takes care of her own business."

Her teammates have watched her struggle with pain for three years, and that has surely earned her some respect. Captains have yet to be named, but Wilson is a good candidate.

"It means a lot, just knowing my coaches respect me enough to put me in that position," she said of the leadership role she has fulfilled to this point. "It means a whole lot."

It also means a lot that, finally, she is able to go into a season without having to visit the training staff every day. She's healthy, she's happy and hoping to have the best season of her career.

"I have to be better," she said. "I just have to be better. I just need to take my game to another level, and being healthy is going to help a whole lot. I've got to be ready to go. I need to bring even more energy, even more offensive rebounds. I just need to be better in every aspect."

Much to the surprise of those who saw her three years ago, she's on her way.

Contact staff writer Brian Howell at howellb@dailycamera.com or twitter.com/BrianHowell33.