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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Zuber playing through the pain

Former Parkland star, now at Buffalo, is back on the court after two hip surgeries.

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OF THE MORNING CALL

January 20, 2010



Ashley Zuber grimaced in pain with every movement on the court for two weeks in October 2008.

But when that pain spilled over into the simple steps she took off the court, she couldn't hide it from her coaches at the University of Buffalo any longer.

"I knew it was really bad," she said. "It was a sharp, grinding, shooting pain [in the hip/groin area]. You can only imagine how that would feel playing."

Zuber, who led Parkland's girls basketball team to the 2006 PIAA Class 4A title, knew something had to be done. An orthopedist, physical therapist and podiatrist all came back with the same news: the pain simply was caused by overuse.

So Zuber, a junior at the Division I school at the time, followed the doctors' advice, sat out and rested for several weeks.

The layoff didn't sit well with the competitive Zuber, who started 28 games the previous season and led the team with 3.5 assists per game. She got more antsy as the days wore on and she didn't feel any improvement.

Finally, coach Linda Hill-MacDonald had no choice but to redshirt Zuber for the 2008-09 season.

But Zuber was still in search of another opinion from the original diagnosis and, most importantly, a cure for her pain.

"She all along was saying, 'I think it's my labrum. I think it's my labrum,' " Hill-MacDonald said. "Nobody would listen to her."

Last March, Zuber saw a hip specialist. By April, she learned she had a torn labrum and bone spurs. On May 19, she had surgery.

The 5-foot-4 point guard went through all the physical therapy and was preparing for the 2009-10 season when, in September, the pain in her other hip started becoming more and more noticeable.

"The doctor suggested playing through it and maybe do the surgery after the season," Zuber said. "But I started running and then I couldn't even walk. I thought it was best to get it done and be back this season."

So in September, Zuber had the same surgery done on her other hip. In addition to the physical recovery, she had to figure out a way to mentally handle being out for another four months.

"It's pretty devastating to do all the work the doctors tell you that you have to do and you get to the point where you're released, and now you're feeling the same symptoms on the other side," Hill-MacDonald said. "But Ashley handled it extremely well. Disappointed? Absolutely. Frustrated? Absolutely."

"But the good thing about her is she is not going to let it get her down. She's going to overcome it. If she's had down days, we haven't seen too many of them."

Zuber doesn't have that terrible pain anymore, although she isn't 100 percent yet. She returned on Dec. 28 and has played in six games. She is averaging just less than 10 minutes a contest for the Bulls, who were 5-12 going into Tuesday's game at Kent State.

Hill-MacDonald can't wait for the day when she gets to have Zuber starting and playing the 31 minutes she averaged as a sophomore. Since Zuber's return, Hill-McDonald has used her when she saw her team get flustered. The redshirt junior enters as the team's calming influence.

"I am very eager to have her back," said Hill-MacDonald, whose team plays in the Mid-American Conference. "She really knows the game. She knows how to set her teammates up. She doesn't get rattled. When things begin to unravel, she can settle people down and get them into their positions and talk them through it. Her basketball IQ is very, very high."

Zuber isn't sure when she'll feel like her old self again, but right now she appreciates just being able to play.

"I'm just so happy to be on the court and play the sport I love," she said. "When that love is taken away from you, it's really, really hard. I'm sure you can see my excitement when I play. My first game back was in a tournament in Florida and we were playing American [where former Parkland teammate Ashley Yencho plays]. With six minutes left, she's guarding me and she said she was so happy for me that she was ready to cry. That was amazing."

The excitement of having Zuber back extends beyond herself, Hill-MacDonald and Yencho, though.

"The fans love her," Hill-MacDonald said. "That's the first question people ask Â... when is Ashley Zuber coming back? They are so excited. The men's team is excited, too. They were at her first game back and the guys were going nuts."

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