

ACL Tears: An Old Foe that is Becoming a Growing Trend

By Joe Flaherty

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He knew something was wrong. He knew that the pain he was feeling wasn't just from a hyperextended knee. A trip to the x-ray room inside TD Garden confirmed his fears. This was no hyperextension, this was a fully torn ACL.

Now Rajon Rondo, all star point guard for the Boston Celtics, will have to sit and watch the rest of the NBA season from the sidelines as he rehabs from one of the sporting world's most hated enemies. His injury reflects a growing trend in professional sports in the United States.

Four NBA players have torn their ACL in the first three months of the regular season according to protransactions.com. Compare that to the six ACL tears that occurred over the course of the entire 2011-12 NBA regular and postseason, and it seems like ACL injuries are becoming a more frequent occurrence on the hardwood.

Basketball isn't the only sport with a rising rate in these injuries. Football players are experiencing ACL tears even more frequently than what is believed to be one of the most commonplace injuries in football: the concussion.

According to footballdb.com, there were 34 ACL tears in the NFL this season in comparison to 32 documented concussions. As athletes get bigger, faster and more explosive with their style of play, more and more of their ACL's are paying the price.

The ACL, or anterior cruciate ligament, is one of the four major knee ligaments. It attaches the lower leg to your femur, and its main function is to keep your knee stable. By tearing the ligament, you lose almost all stability and mobility in that knee, and it can only be properly repaired through surgery.

“This kind of injury will severely restrict an athlete from any physical activity involving the lower body,” says Andrew Peters, a NSCA Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist with a B.S. in Exercise Science. “The rehab can range from a few months to over a year depending on the severity of the tear and how well the athlete responds to treatment.”

If that wasn't enough, Peters went on to say that even though all the necessary steps may be taken during rehab, there is no guarantee that the athlete will ever return to 100%. The most common obstacle is reoccurring problems with the same knee for the rest of the athlete's career. But the mere thought of re-tearing that ligament can weigh heavily on an athlete's mind and completely change their approach to their game.

In short, an ACL tear is like a Pandora's Box. Adrian Peterson, running back for the Minnesota Vikings, did his best to smash that box to pieces. Only nine months after tearing his ACL and MCL (medial collateral ligament) in his right knee in December of 2011, he was back in the starting lineup for the Vikings in week one of the 2012-13 regular season.

Not only did Peterson return, he returned better than ever. He racked up 2,097 rushing yards, a career high which was only nine yards shy of the NFL record for rushing yards in a season. His immense impact on the Viking's playoff berth this season makes him a shoe-in for this season's NFL MVP.

But Peterson's bounce back season should be considered an anomaly. Surely advancements have been made in the medical field to help treat this type of injury and speed the rehab process. But to respond and recover at the rate Peterson did and to

perform at a higher level than before the injury should be considered a borderline superhuman feat.

And for every Peterson-like success story, there are dozens of players who have had their careers derailed by similar injuries.

“We'll always wonder how good Mickey Mantle, Joe Namath, Bobby Orr, Gale Sayers and Dick Butkus could have been on healthy knees,” says Dan McGrath, former head sports editor for the Chicago Tribune.

That is the dilemma that is currently weighing heavily on the minds of Chicago Bulls fans. Derrick Rose, Chicago's homegrown superstar point guard, is set to return from his torn ACL in his left knee in the coming weeks. He suffered the injury during the first round of last season's NBA Playoffs in April, and the Bulls quickly bowed out in Rose's absence.

The Bulls have been extremely cautious with Rose's return. Though he has recently returned to full contact participation in team practices, the Bulls will continue to keep him on the injured list until after February 17th's NBA All Star Game.

Though it may seem like an eternity to Bulls fans, Rose put in enough effort and responded well enough to his rehab process to be on schedule to return just over nine months since the initial ACL tear, just like Peterson. Bulls fans can only hope that his level of play matches Peterson's as well.

If Rose does manage to return to his former self, it is no secret that it will benefit the team dramatically. McGrath says every team will suffer losses to injury, but no matter how hard the team tries to compensate by uniting with an “us against the world” attitude, it all boils down to talent.

Rose simply gives the Bulls the best chance to win. Even though Rose's backups have done enough to help the team to a surprising 3rd place standing in the Eastern Conference so far, the team's confidence will rise when they get their marquee player back on the court. Even though Bulls legend Michael Jordan wasn't rehabbing from injury when he returned to the Bulls from retirement in 1995, McGrath can see a parallel between his return and Rose's.

"The Bulls did a good job of keeping it together and remained a playoff team in Jordan's absence, and when he returned they immediately went from a playoff team to a championship-caliber team," said McGrath. "They surely have a better chance with [Rose] than they do without him. Once again, it gets back to talent. Kirk Hinrich and Nate Robinson simply can't do the things Rose can."

Rose's long journey back is just wrapping up while Rondo's equally long journey is just beginning. From this point forward, question marks will constantly swirl around two of the premier players in the NBA regarding their health. A torn ACL on their resume will hang over them like a dark cloud, forever inciting at least a little bit of doubt that general managers, coaches or fans would've never had before.

It will be up to both players to prove the doubters wrong and to not allow this injury to define their career. Fortunately, a lot of that will come through hard work, something both players are completely willing and capable to do on their own. Unfortunately, the biggest deciding factor will be luck. A mistimed jump here or an awkward pivot there could land either player right back at square one.