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Warkentin finally healthy for BU

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Chayse Warkentin of the Brandon University Bobcats warms up during the technical time-out during the Bobcats match against the University of Winnipeg Wesmen at the Healthy Living Centre on Sunday afternoon. Warkentin played the first CIS match of his career on the weekend after nearly getting killed in a car accident last October. (TIM SMITH/THE BRANDON SUN)

Nearly a year after escaping a head-on collision with a myriad of serious injuries, Chayse Warkentin returned to the volleyball court Friday.

The six-foot-seven middle from Gladstone didn't overpower the opposing The Kings University Eagles with game-changing blocks or vigorous

attacks but Warkentin was pumped to finally get his first taste of Canadian Interuniversity Sport men's volleyball action with the Brandon University Bobcats.

"It was pretty unreal for me," the 19-year-old said. "My first CIS game played. I was pretty stoked. I was pretty happy with being able to play again."

His parents, Alan and Michelle, and brother, Paycen, were among the spectators at the Healthy Living Centre to see Warkentin play.

"I was pretty happy for them to see me play again for the first time since the incident," Warkentin said.

BU head coach Grant Wilson described it as a "pretty euphoric moment" for the players and coaches.

But it almost never happened.

On Oct. 24, 2015, Warkentin was driving south on Highway 13 — on his way to a volleyball tournament in Morden — when a vehicle in the northbound lane darted into his lane. Warkentin tried veering into the ditch but the two vehicles collided head-on and in an instant his life changed.

He blacked out and upon waking up remembers people approaching him before an ambulance arrived. The driver of the other vehicle, a 17-year-old male, who was later found to be impaired, died on scene.

"The first thought when I woke up was, 'Wow, did this really happen? Did I just have a head-on collision?' And then I looked around and I felt fine because at the time I didn't have any pain," Warkentin recalled. "I felt fine and then I saw my (right) foot. I could see through my shoe; my whole foot was moved over to the left a lot."

Warkentin's right ankle shattered and he broke all five metatarsals in that foot. He also fractured the fifth metatarsal in his left foot and sustained

bruised lungs.

He was transported to the Health Sciences Centre in Winnipeg where he had three screws, three pins and a plate surgically inserted into his right ankle. He was released a week later.

Warkentin would be confined to his bed and a wheelchair for about a month but he had already transitioned to crutches by the time he returned to BU.

That first practice with his teammates was something special.

"I'm not sure who was more excited: Chayse or everybody else," Wilson said. "The team absolutely loves Chayse and there was a lot of concern when the accident happened for his personal well-being, mentally, physically and he has been just an absolute trooper about it and had a real positive attitude."

Left side Matt Powell made a similar remark.

"We just tried to be supportive," he said. "Obviously he could have died in the accident. I thought he handled it extremely well so just for us it's awesome to be around a guy that's just so positive all the time and I didn't hear him complain once."

"He's not a complainer, he's never going to make excuses for anything. He's just going to push through it and try to be better and it was just awesome to see."

Powell and Warkentin formed a close bond last season with the Melville, Sask., product suffering a broken left foot in practice four days before the collision Warkentin was involved in.

Unable to practise, they hit the gym together. Powell also drove Warkentin to classes, practices and workout sessions.

"I couldn't practice so getting stronger with my upper body is what I knew I

could do and keep my body moving so I tried to stay strong and take him under my wing," Powell said. "We weren't feeling too good about ourselves at the time. Mentally we just tried to keep ourselves going.

"Whenever either one of us was feeling down we just rallied around each other."

Not by any means a gym rat, Warkentin took strongly to upper-body workouts. Since January he has added 25 pounds of muscle — "it's ridiculous," said Powell — and looks much different physically compared to last fall.

"We started working out together because we were both injured — my right foot, his left foot," Warkentin said. "At the time he was physically stronger so it pushed me to be more active and get up to his level and from there I'd like to say I've surpassed him."

Warkentin said he is now addicted to working out and likes the feeling of being healthier and more physically fit.

It's also helped him in his quest to return to volleyball action with the Bobcats, something his head coach noticed, often seeing Warkentin in the weight room during the summer.

"His recovery has been spectacular," Wilson said. "He has worked so hard to get physically into the best shape he can and he's giving himself a great opportunity to get back. Will he ever be able to have the full range of movement and be able to athletically do the things he did before the accident? Only time will tell but he's definitely given himself the best opportunity to do that.

"He's come into camp in the best possible shape. He works his tail off every day and I couldn't be more proud of him."

And while his physical recovery has taken time, albeit shorter than even he expected, Warkentin's faith never wavered. His favourite Bible verse, found

in Philippians 4:13 — I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me — helped him get beyond the ordeal.

"My Lord Jesus Christ was the biggest rock for me," he said. "He pushed me and gave me the strength and courage to keep pushing through, working hard and he is the reason that I'm still here today and why I'm playing volleyball again."

And with aspirations of earning a travelling spot with BU this season, Warkentin is just grateful his life was spared that dark day.

"Not too long ago I thought back about it just seeing how far I've come since then," he said. "After it happened I was scared I wasn't going to play volleyball again. My foot was pretty messed up and it was a real scare for me. I thought there was a chance that I wasn't going to be able to play again but hard work pays off."

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