**John Clark finds ways to battle back and impact his team, despite a slew of injuries**

John Clark began a promising basketball career at St. Gregory’s in 2009. As a freshman, Clark started at the point guard position and was averaging 30 minutes per game. After a successful freshman season, Clark tore the ACL in his left leg in September 2010 at the beginning of the first day of practice.

 “It wasn't but 20 minutes into practice that I suffered the injury,” Clark said. “It was a one-on-one drill. I went to shoot a 3-pointer, like I have done thousands of times before, and my defender slid underneath me while I was in the air and I landed on his foot. I heard a pop and my knee immediately felt unstable.”

An MRI confirmed that the ACL was torn. Two weeks later, Clark underwent surgery on his left knee. Clark had to rehab his knee for six months before taking a back to sports test. Despite the test being one of the most physically enduring tasks he’s ever done, he passed the test. Two weeks after the test, Clark was able to return to the court.

In April 2011, Clark suffered his second torn ACL in his left knee.

 “I was playing pickup with the rest of my team and I was on defense at the time,”

Clark said. “A screen was set on me by one of my teammates and his knee crashed into mine and I immediately heard a pop. Even with an ACL knee brace on I knew I tore it again.”

 Clark underwent ACL revision surgery in May 2011, his second knee surgery in a year. After the surgery, Clark was determined to make the knee stronger than it had ever been.

 “I felt like I might have not done enough after my first surgery,” Clark said. “I didn't want that to be the case the second time around.”

 Six months of rehab passed, and Clark was ready to take the back to sport test for the second time. The second time was equally as challenging as the first time. Clark returned to the court with his teammates on Nov. 12, 2011, for his first game in more than a year.

 “Words can’t describe how amazing it was to get back out on the court,” Clark said.

 That season, Clark started 19-of-23 games while averaging 28 minutes per game. He knew once the season ended he needed to keep doing rehab on his knee so he would be ready for the upcoming season. Clark said he found himself in the best shape of his life.

 In July 2012, Clark was playing a pickup game at a church in Moore, Okla., with his teammates. He did a jump stop move, and his knee completely gave out.

 “I heard that same familiar pop and knew immediately that it was torn,” Clark said. “For the third time, I had torn the ACL in my left knee.”

 Clark underwent ACL revision-revision surgery in August 2012. Six more months of rehab, plus his third back to sports test, allowed Clark to return to his team in January 2013. He assumed the role of backup point guard, while averaging 14 minutes per game.

 Once the season ended, Clark was determined to make his senior season his best season yet.

 “I knew I had to continue rehabbing so I could come back for my senior year stronger than ever,” Clark said. “Everything went well that offseason, and leading up to the first practice I knew I was ready.”

 During the second day of practice his senior season, Clark jumped to make a pass, which also made his defender jump. Clark, while attempting to avoid his defender, landed awkwardly on his left leg and heard a pop.

 “I thought to myself, ‘there is no way I just tore it again for a fourth time,’” Clark said.

 The MRI did not look promising initially. Clark visited multiple doctors, and each gave him different news. One doctor said it was completely torn, while another doctor said it was only partially torn.

 “I honestly thought my basketball career was over, but I took a month off and attempted rehabbing it,” Clark said. “While it didn’t feel 100 percent, I couldn’t go out without one last fight.”

 In November 2013, Clark returned to practice and finished his senior season. He played in 32 games while averaging eight minutes per game.

 These injuries showed Clark that people have more fight in them than they might think. The injuries taught him to never give up, even when the odds were stacked against him.

 “After tearing my ACL for the third time I remember having to tell my parents that I knew I had torn it again,” Clark said. “Lots of tears and lots of hugs that day. I just remember thinking to myself there is no way I can do this again. I didn't want to have surgery, didn't want to rehab, didn't want to have to learn how to walk again, didn't want anything to do with another ACL surgery. But I did, and it amazed me how much fight I had in me, even when everything was against me.”

 Clark’s coach, John Martin, spoke about his journey and what it taught him about Clark as a person and a teammate. Martin said the example he set couldn’t have been any better.

 “I’m not sure how many student-athletes would physically and mentally make it back on the floor after THREE major knee injuries/surgeries,” Martin said. “The example that John set for other student-athletes here at St. Gregory’s, across all sports, with regard to injury, rehabilitation and then subsequent participation has been second to none.”

Despite all of his injuries, Clark found ways to help his team get better. He wanted to be a part of the team, and to invest himself in the program that had done so much for him.

 “ I was the biggest cheerleader my teammates could ask for during the times I was out,” Clark said. “I kept stats, filmed games, assumed water boy duties, ran the shot clock in practice, rebounded for teammates, and coached guys on what they might be able to do better.”

 Coach Martin spoke volumes about Clark as a teammate. He made his presence known, and he made sure to be the best teammate he could be.

 “Even when John was not participating as a player in games,” Martin said. “He was still a strong presence in the locker room and on the bench. He also took on the role of being a team leader.”

Clark did not have to look far to find inspiration to keep battling back from his knee injuries. His perseverance stemmed from his love of the game of basketball.

Basketball was something Clark would not allow himself to give up on.

“Basketball has always been my entire life,” Clark said. “My father, Kenny Clark, has been a basketball coach for more than 25 years, so basketball has always been a constant in my life. For me to give up the game of basketball would be me giving up a piece of my life. I just couldn't live with that.”

 Beyond basketball, the people who are close to Clark were able to push him further than he thought he could ever go. His parents, grandparents, girlfriend, teammates and coach all motivated him to battle back from his knee injuries. They gave him the power that he needed to battle through the darkest times.

 “My parents, Kenny and Debra Clark, were affected just as much as me if not more,” Clark said. “They hurt for me and wanted to take my pain away, but there wasn't much they could do except watch and motivate me to keep fighting. They were an integral part to me coming back from each injury.

  “My grandparents, Robert and Pat Clark, have been my biggest basketball fans since I started playing. My girlfriend, Ashley Anderson, had to put up with so much from me, I can't even think of a way to pay her back from all her support. She stood by my side the whole time though through thick and thin and I couldn't thank her enough. My coach, John Martin, who could have easily given up on me, taken my scholarship away and given it to some healthy basketball player with good knees, never gave up on me and kept resigning me each year. Lastly my teammates, if it wasn't for them, I don't think I could have found a way to come back each time. Those guys are my soldiers and I'd do anything to be out there fighting with them each and everyday.”

 Four knee injuries to the same knee, four unique rehab stints, each being harder than the one before, never deterred Clark from playing the game that he loves most. He is a warrior who found inspiration from the people closest to him, and used the inspiration to return the favor.

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