

The ACL Epidemic: True Inspiration!

By Sharon Wentworth, DPT, MSPT, ATC Elite Sports Physical Therapy

Part 3 of a 4-Part Series

Since I started Elite Sports Physical Therapy, I have rehabilitated over 600 of the Jersey Shore's young athletes. Some injuries are minor and recover in a few weeks. Others are major and take months of pain, hard work, dedication, and perseverance. The ACL tear falls into this second category.

As mentioned in the previous two articles, the ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) is a large ligament in the knee that provides the main source of stabilization to the knee joint. When this ligament tears, it must be surgically reconstructed. The recovery from this surgery is not an easy one. It requires up to six months of grueling, three-hour long physical therapy sessions in which the athlete becomes stronger in every way imaginable - physically and mentally.

My job is to simply provide the guidance for these young athletes as they go through the most difficult experience they have encountered thus far in their short lives. Their job is much harder. They have to put in the time, effort, sweat, and tears without dwelling on the fact that their athletic careers are put on hold and they will have a scar down the front of their knee forever to remind them of their injury.

Since I predominately work with teenage athletes, I already know that physically, their bodies are resilient and their healing powers are in full force. What constantly surprises me is their amazing ability to mentally cope with such a difficult situation. In one millisecond, as

they fall to the ground grabbing their knee, they are forced to cope with a traumatic experience that even adults find difficult to handle. I am truly inspired by these young people who show strength above and beyond their age and come through this experience better and stronger than before their injury. The following is a story about one of the most amazing athletes I have had the privilege to work with.

Everyone who follows Shore athletics knows that Red Bank Catholic girls basketball has a tradition of being one of the top teams in the state. I have been honored to work with many of

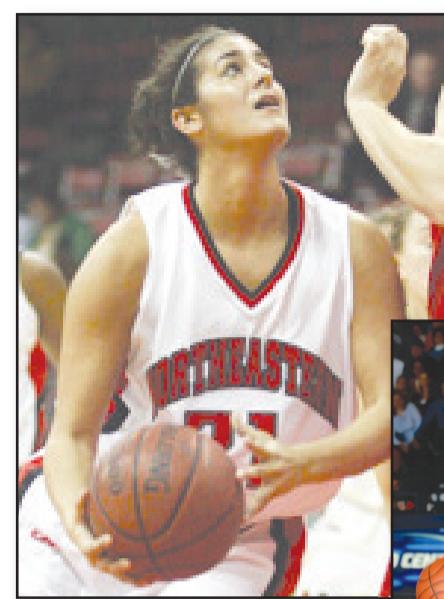
these extraordinary athletes, but there will always be one who holds a special place in my heart.

When Kristina Coppolino (*pictured on the right & below*) was a freshman at RBC, she was already a dominant force on the basketball court. She was experiencing some minor knee pain so I worked with her for several weeks and resolved her issues with stretching and strengthening. As a sophomore, Kristina suffered from a disc herniation in her lower back, but with hard work, she was able to avoid surgery and continue on as one of the Shore's top players.

Her junior year is when it happened - she tore her right ACL. Her rehabilitation went smoothly and she returned to the court to be a real force on a terrific RBC team. Then, in the beginning of her senior year, I was eating dinner when my cell phone rang. I looked down at the caller ID and it said "Joanne Coppolino's cell." By this point, the Coppolinos were like

family to me but I knew right then something was wrong.

I answered my phone with a sinking feeling in my stomach. Sure enough, Kristina had torn her right ACL again. I felt sick. I



couldn't finish my meal. But I bounced back and got to work and, as I knew she would, she worked harder than ever and arrived at Northeastern University in the fall ready to play her freshman year in college.

The call came on a Saturday afternoon. Kristina and I had kept in touch throughout her transition to college, so I thought nothing of it as I answered her call. The first thing she said was that she had torn her left ACL. The first thing I said was that it wasn't nice to joke about that with me. There was silence on the other end.

Then I realized she was not joking. There was that sick feeling in my stomach again. But I can honestly say that I never once thought that Kristina would give up. She loves basketball. It is a part of her. So, sure enough, she had the surgery, and is currently three months into the rehabilitation of her third ACL tear. I have no doubt that Kristina will play basketball at Northeastern University with her tenacious style and will ultimately end up being all-conference. That is just the type of person she is.

She has been through more hardship than anyone at the tender age of 19 should ever have to experience in a lifetime. Although I know Kristina would say that she owes a lot to me, I actually believe that I owe more to her. She has taught me what true strength is really all about.



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