

SPORTS

THE COMEBACK KID Washougal High's McKenna Jackson rebounds from injuries

By **DOUG FLANAGAN**
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Nobody would have blamed McKenna Jackson if she decided against turning out for the Washougal High School girls basketball team this year after sustaining full tears to her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and meniscus in her left knee in August 2020.

Instead of opting out of her senior year, however, Jackson decided she would work harder than ever just to give herself a small chance of getting back on the court.

"(The team) is like a family," said Jackson, who graduate from Washougal High in June. "They've done so much for me that I couldn't just leave them with nothing. It's unlike any other team I've been on in the past. We all take care of each other. They've always had my back, so I felt like I owed it to them to have their backs this season. And it's just so much fun being with that group of girls."

Jackson said she was elated when doctors cleared her to return to the court for the team's final three games of the season. She made her season debut during the Panthers' final regular season game of the year, against Ridgefield on June 4. She saw a few minutes of action in Washougal's first district playoff game, a 61-59 loss to Hockinson on June 8, and then closed her career with a flourish, tallying eight points, seven rebounds, five assists and two steals in a starting role during the Panthers' 66-36 win over Ridgefield on June 9.

"In the first game, I was expecting more from myself. I wasn't playing how I was used to playing. I didn't really feel like myself because I was so out of practice," Jackson said. "Against Hockinson, I knew I wasn't going to get minutes because they play so physically. But coming into (the last game against) Ridgefield, I felt a lot more comfortable. I didn't feel any pressure at all because it was the last game of the season for my senior year, and I was just out there to have fun. It felt like everything that I worked for started to pay off when I started to hit shots and get steals. It was satisfying for sure."

She was welcomed into the first Ridgefield game with a standing ovation, delivered by parents and supporters in the stands and her teammates, who "were going crazy, yelling for her and excited," according to Washougal girls basketball coach Britney Ervin.

"When I first found out that McKenna tore her ACL, I was heartbroken because that girl puts her heart and soul into the gym and is one of the hardest working people that I know," Jackson's teammate, Skylar Bea, said. "But she just has a mentality that when she wants something, she goes and gets it. It was really inspiring to see that if you fall, you can get back up if you set your mind to it. McKenna was a great example of that and really showed that during this past season."

Jackson displayed a tremendous amount of "loyalty" and "heart" during her comeback efforts, Ervin said.

"McKenna loves the program," she said. "I am lucky and the program is lucky that she decided to put her energy into basketball. She decided, 'These are my people. I get along with these people. I enjoy these people. I love these people. And I want to put

my energy into something that I love and care about.' And because she did that, she made a huge impact on the program and all the kids. She has been incredible. She has a tremendous heart and tremendous work ethic and grit. It was a great example for the younger kids who maybe don't understand the concepts of loyalty and 'team' and heart and how important they are."

Season delay an opportunity for comeback

Jackson hurt her knee while playing for her Portland-based club team, Columbia Cascades, during the summer of 2020.

Jackson had torn her ACL before, so she knew what it felt like.

"As soon as my mom came over, I was like, 'Mom, it's torn. It's torn.' I knew right in that moment, as soon as it happened," she recalled.

Jackson said she was disappointed and frustrated to learn about the injury, but still was not too worried about missing her senior year of basketball at Washougal High — mostly because she did not think there would be a season with the COVID-19 pandemic in full swing.

"I totally was not expecting to get to go out on the court again, because they told me that my recovery time was going to be nine months," she said.

Jackson started physical therapy at Washougal Sport and Spine on Nov. 20, 2020, just two days after her surgery. For the next six months she spent every minute of her free time rehabilitating her knee and conducting strength drills at a gymnasium.

The Panthers' delayed 2020-21 basketball season began in early May. Even though Jackson couldn't participate, she attended every practice and almost every game, offering advice and encouragement while "making her voice known," Ervin said.

"She was always there to support us," said Jackson's teammate, Skylar Bea. "She definitely brought a lot of energy to the team. She was one of the captains even though she didn't get to play until later. She brought a lot of leadership when she was on the bench and at practices. She was a coach, pretty much. She's always been a really good friend, someone who will talk to everybody and lift you up when you're down."

By late May, Jackson had regained strength in her left leg and could do "basically whatever (she) wanted to do." Her physical therapist even told her



McKenna Jackson speaks during Washougal High School's graduation ceremony on June 12, 2021. Jackson intends to study biology in college with the goal of becoming a pediatric surgeon.

that she looked "fantastic." For the first time since her surgery, she said she became genuinely optimistic.

Then, her surgeon broke the bad news: she was not cleared for competition.

"When they told me I couldn't (play), that was pretty bad," Jackson said. "That's when I was like, 'Well, I don't get a season after all. ... I've spent hours putting in work, and it's for nothing? I don't get a season and everyone else does?' That's kind of when everything hit."

Everything changed during her next doctor's appointment on June 3.

"We had practice that day and a game the next day," Jackson said. "I didn't think (my surgeon) was going to clear me to play. I was kind of joking around; I was like, 'We have a game tomorrow. It's the last league game of the season. Are you doing all these tests so you can clear me?' He was like, 'Yeah, that's the plan.'"

Incredulous, Jackson asked her surgeon: "Wait, what? Are you actually going to clear me?" and he replied in the affirmative.

"It happened so fast. I wasn't expecting him to clear me two-and-a-half months early," Jackson said.

Injuries provide inspiration for future plans

The tears were the third in a series of potentially career-ending injuries Jackson sustained during her high school career. She tore the ACL in her right knee after two teammates landed on top of her leg during a practice session when she was a freshman. Then, every bone in her ankle broke after she was pushed to the ground during a game at the Hoop-Fest 3-on-3 tournament in Spokane during the summer of 2019.

Because of the injuries, Jackson never had a traditional offseason, which is when most other players put in time to improve their individual skills. In order

to heal, Jackson had to cram an entire offseason's worth of work into the span of several months, working with trainers at the Shoot 360 training facility in Vancouver and Jesse Norris, a former Washougal High junior varsity coach who is now the head coach of the Columbia River girls basketball squad.

That hard work paid off. She became a key player during her time at Washougal High, a respected starter who didn't need to score 20 points per game to make an impact.

"Her main role was to guard the best player on the other team," Ervin said. "She was our defensive stopper. She would help bring the ball up. And she worked on her shot a ton. It was going to be really exciting to have her on the court and see how much her offense was going to come along this year. I really think she would've been a kid who would've gotten eight to 10 points a game, and that's not even considering all the 50-50 balls she would've been on and her battling inside for rebounds."

The injuries may have taken some things away from Jackson, but they did give her the inspiration she needed to determine



Washougal High School basketball player McKenna Jackson (left) recovered from a serious knee injury to return to the court for the Panthers' final three games of the 2020-21 season.

what she wants to do in the future. Specifically, she hopes to become a pediatric surgeon, specializing in orthopedics.

"Every time (I visited a surgeon), it was always interesting because they were telling me what my injury was and everything like that, and I just thought it was so fascinating," she said. "I always wanted to be a doctor, but I didn't know what I (specifically) wanted to do."

After watching a video of her own ACL tear surgery, Jackson decided surgery was in her future.

Jackson graduated as one of Washougal High's five valedictorians on June 12. She also earned an as-

sociate's degree from Clark College, where she will return in this fall to take several science classes required for the biology degree that she wants to attain. Then she hopes to transfer to the University of Portland or Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, to continue her studies.

"I'm sad to see her go, but I'm excited for her to move on to college. She wants to be a pediatric surgeon. What kid do you know says, 'I want to be a pediatric surgeon?'" Ervin said. "She'll be successful. She's highly motivated in anything she does. She wants to do it to the best of her ability."

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