

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz.— It was a regular Tuesday for freshman guard Ray Smith. Smith had been gearing up to make his official debut for the University of Arizona basketball team after waiting two years.

Arizona was playing the College of Idaho in an exhibition match which was the perfect setup for Smith to bounce back.

Ten minutes in, Smith went for a layup and landed on his knee wrong on an opposing player.

He knew right away that he tore his ACL for the third time. A few days later, Smith decided to medically retire and walk away from the game of basketball.



Courtesy of The Daily Wildcat, photo taken by Rebecca Noble as Ray Smith in pain from ACL tear

With high expectations and dreams being 29th overall recruit from Las Vegas, all went away in a moment's flash for a young athlete.

Smith had previously tore his ACL two separate times: as a senior in high school and a freshman at UofA which made him redshirt.

Smith described in a recent interview that he had to think long term outside of his childhood dream after his third ACL tear.

“I personally think my will was broken. When the third one happened, I was just starting to get my groove back in the game,” Smith said.

“I was thinking, ‘will I continue to tear up my legs and then one day when I’m 45 I can’t throw a football to my kid in the garden?’ It gets to a certain point where things are more important than basketball.”



Photo taken of a scar from an ACL recovery

Smith’s head coach Sean Miller shortly came out with a statement after he found out Smith was retiring.

“In the 25 years I have been a college basketball coach, I have never felt as helpless as I did when I saw him go down...No 19-year-old kid should have to experience three season-ending injuries in a 30-month period of time,” Miller said.

The ACL Solution Prevention and Recovery for Sports’ Most Devastating Injury was written in 2012 regarding ACL tears and the risk of returning after recovering from it in athletes.

It gathers previous research into a textbook on what athletes can do to recover and how to prevent future damage.

“In general, younger patients are more active in terms of cutting and pivoting sports, so their risk is much higher,” said Robert G. Marx and other authors.

Smith knew the risk when coming back for the third time which ultimately impacted his family after his third injury.

“My father won’t even watch basketball today, he just won’t. It was pretty devastating for him. My aunts and uncles never talk basketball with me anymore because they know it’s a sore spot in my heart,” Smith said.

Injuries are never easy to recover from especially with young college athletes. For Smith, it served as an inspiration to everyone around him.

One of his teammates, Mark Tollefsen, played with Smith when he first arrived to the team in 2015 before his second ACL tear.

Tollefsen expressed that he and the team were devastated when the news came that Smith would redshirt.

“You’re pretty shocked when it happens and it’s and it’s pretty devastating. I think our initial thoughts were let’s check on him and make sure he’s ok cause we know he just did it in high school as well,” Tollefsen said.

Tollefsen makes a valid point.

The immediate reaction to such a tragic injury is almost negative and disappointing. It’s hard for the athlete to bounce back as they may never be the same again.

Tollefsen also said that he hasn’t reached out to Smith in a while but is still an inspiration to him years later.

“I think that the thing with that that’s inspiring about people like Ray who can really turn those things into a positive. It’s so easy for people to say this is happening to me like this is happening to me and you can get so internal,” Tollefsen said.

“You don’t wish this on anybody, but unfortunately it happened to him (Ray). With him being who he is, I think there was no one better to be more inspiring in this type of situation.”

For Smith, it was a long journey to get back to a “normal life” as he went through rehab for the third time. He says there was good and bad with all he went through.

“It’s a rewarding and devastating situation. When all things considered, there’s a lot of good things about it. I was able to get my undergrad paid for. Some of the hardest parts are not being able to play and having to shift your focus into just being a student,” Smith said.

Smith graduated in 2019 with a bachelor’s degree in Social Development and Human Understanding and is working towards a master’s degree in Marketing back in Las Vegas.

Smith didn't say what he wants to do after graduating but has worked for the Utah Jazz as a generalist in 2022.

Smith also worked as a recruiter for Barton Associations Inc. between July 2023-24.

When it comes to hardships, Smith said that he is able to keep pushing himself through the difficult times as it still affects him today.

"I think the inspiration is the ability to keep going. When you have the spirit of nothing is going to stop me, perseverance is something that's important that I want to be a beacon for. If no one believes in you, believe in yourself," Smith said.

Not every athlete is lucky or fortunate when it comes to making a recovery and pushing forward.

Fans don't realize what athletes, especially young athletes in college and high school have to go through when it comes to recovering. However, it makes Smith stand out as he went through all the hardships.

"I would say that Ray Smith is a guy that has been through a ton. He's a guy that's been thrown in the fire but he's never let it break him...He always tries his best to stay a good guy," Smith said.

Because of that mindset, Smith continues his lifestyle after a traumatic experience.

Source List:

Ray Smith

https://www.linkedin.com/in/ray-smith-59785a132?lipi=urn%3Ali%3Apage%3Ad_flagship3_profile_view_base_contact_details%3BwXfA8JOGRz262dzZGGQRYA%3D%3D

Mark Tollefsen

https://www.linkedin.com/in/mark-tollefsen?lipi=urn%3Ali%3Apage%3Ad_flagship3_profile_view_base_contact_details%3BU1GkoGN%2BSKi6DwTQplnFVQ%3D%3D

Injured UA forward Smith to miss season

https://www.espn.com/mens-college-basketball/story/_/id/17965625/arizona-ray-smith-retires-third-acl-tear

<https://wildcat.arizona.edu/136895/sports/life-after-basketball-for-ray-smith/>

(Where I got the picture)

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