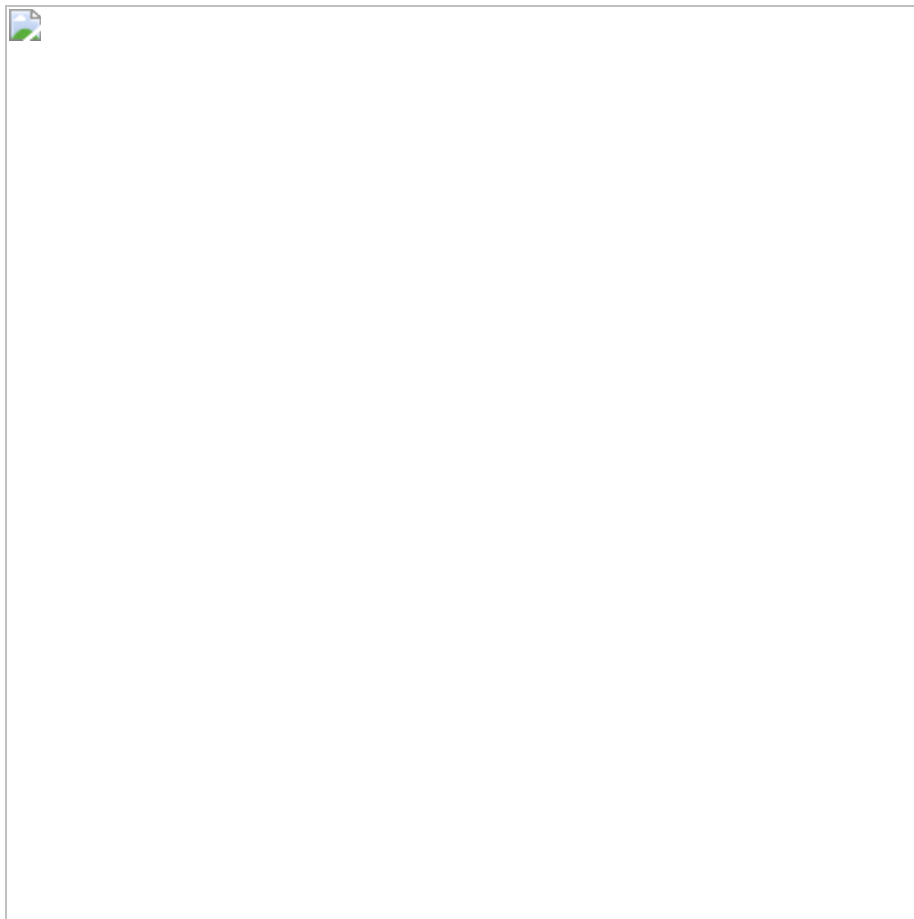


Kendall McGee, Benilde-St. Margaret's girls basketball standout, makes it back

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Alyce Brown

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Benilde-St. Margaret's girls basketball star Kendall McGee takes the court during player introductions before the Red Knights faced Chaska. (Jeff Wheeler/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

It was a great day for Kendall McGee.

She was wrapping up a blockbuster sophomore season, averaging 20 points, six rebounds and three assists per game. She was one of the top recruits in the state.

And, most important, she was playing against Alexandria in the [Class 3A semifinals with her team, Benilde-St. Margaret's](#).

Then — snap. She planted for a layup, and something went wrong.

No one knew it then, but that was the last step Kendall would take in a basketball game for the next 20 months.

“Us being in state, it’s like an all-time high,” she said. “And then just in one step, I dropped to the lowest point that you could probably get to.”



Kendall McGee stretches next to a poster of herself before a recent home game. (Jeff Wheeler/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

The long way back

A couple of months later, Kendall and her mother, LaReisha McGee, piled into their car at 5 a.m.

They were heading to an injury rehab class across town, a new three-times-a-week ritual to which Kendall wasn’t able to drive herself.

She was recovering from a four-hour surgical marathon on her left knee. The injury during that semifinal game turned out to be worse than anyone could have guessed — she tore her anterior cruciate ligament, her lateral collateral ligament, her medial patellofemoral ligament and her lateral and medial menisci. She also strained her medial collateral ligament and suffered fractures and contusions along her knee.

“At the beginning, I was just trying to think of only the best possible scenarios, rather than being real with myself,” McGee said. “And I knew it wasn’t going to be easy. But I just underestimated how hard it was going to actually be.”

And in those early days, it was hard.

McGee was barely able to move. She had to switch to online school for a month after the surgery because of her immobility. She needed help to sit up, roll over and eat. LaReisha said it was “almost like having a newborn again.”

When she did start to regain mobility, her court time was replaced with rehab — early classes, daily at-home physical therapy and gym drills to make sure she didn’t “lose my touch.”

But Kendall’s timeline for return was shaky. Dates given by the doctors for when recovery would be complete kept coming and going. As months passed, it started to become clear that the player who had been on such a high at the end of sophomore year was going to miss her entire junior season and then some.

“It was a hard pill to swallow,” McGee said.

Those around her watched it weigh on her — but never stop her.

“With all the obstacles that she had to overcome, it would have been easy to just give up. And sometimes, I don’t know how she didn’t,” LaReisha said. “But she just kept going.”



Kendall McGee, right, defends against Chaska's Addison Schneider during a recent game. (Jeff Wheeler/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

A return — and a change

As her time away from the game stretched toward two years, the pieces started inching back together. A long year and eight months after that fateful state semifinal, McGee was able to step back onto the court last November for the start of her senior

season.

As her court mobility slowly came back, her confidence had to follow suit. After such an impactful injury, that was difficult.

“The toughest thing was seeing her doubt [her competitiveness] coming off of injury,” Benilde-St. Margaret’s coach Tim Ellefson said. “Like, I’m not sure if I can do the same things. Can I be powerful? Can I be great?”

“And then the trusting of herself. Can I jump off of this leg, and do I want to go back to that same gym where it happened, or play against that same team?”

But her skills and leadership were coming back, in a slightly different way.

Ellefson said that earlier in her career, McGee and Olivia Olson, her then-teammate and now a freshman at Michigan, were “a two-man show.” The stars would just take turns scoring and, given their talent, that was enough to win.

But McGee’s time on the sideline introduced a new perspective, Ellefson said. She saw her teammates’ capabilities from a new viewpoint and, as Ellefson involved her in game-planning and play-calling on the bench, she started to learn that she didn’t have to be scoring 20 points on the court to be able to lead.

“That was kind of hard to learn,” McGee admitted. “But that’s helped me know what being a leader feels like. Using my voice rather than just leading by my play out there.”

When she finally hit the court again, she didn’t lose that perspective.

“If you look at our team now, we have four girls averaging double digits, and she’s a big part of that,” Ellefson said. “She’s distributing the ball, trusting her teammates to make shots and make plays, and she doesn’t have to do it all.”

Perhaps nothing illustrates this shift better than her highest-ranking stat this season through the Red Knights’ first 20 games: 88 assists, landing her in the state’s top 15. Her scoring average: 13 points.

“She’s found much more joy in winning games and being involved in a team than I think she ever has,” Ellefson said.



Kendall McGee (3) shares a laugh with her teammates before a recent game. (Jeff Wheeler/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Becoming a Bluejay

Her basketball story isn't over.

McGee committed to Creighton last October, after the Bluejays stuck with her through her injury.

"You can tell that they care a lot about basketball, but they also care about their kids more than everything else," she said. "They have a sense of family over there." On Creighton's campus in Omaha, they took a risk for a player they "really liked as a person."

"There's a little bit of a leap of faith on our behalf," Creighton coach Jim Flannery said. "But there's probably a little bit of a leap of faith on her behalf, too. When it takes that long to come back, I'm sure she was struggling with, 'Am I ever going to get back?'"

Flannery is thrilled she did — and McGee always knew she would.

As she looks toward her Division I career, the injury that could have ended it all continues to push her forward instead.

"Before, I appreciated basketball," she said. "But now it's a different sense of appreciation, because I had it taken away from me. I have a newfound love for the game."



Kendall McGee shoots during warmups before a recent game. (Jeff Wheeler/The Minnesota Star Tribune)