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## Student athlete endures more than broken bones

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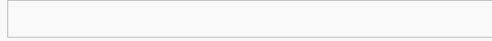


Photo by Bill Smith-Shippensburg University

When Shippensburg University volleyball player Courtney Malott jumped to punch the ball back onto the other court, she did not know it would be about a year before her next game. She did know immediately however, that her leg was broken.

“Tell me if there’s a bone sticking out,” Malott said as she lay on the volleyball court with her coach squeezing her fingers purple.

Her broken tibia and fibula in her right leg were in fact splintered like snapped twigs, but millimeters of skin kept bone from ripping into the stadium’s view under the harsh gymnasium lights. Although Malott doesn’t remember much of what she said in the adrenaline-fueled moments just after her fall, it is evident that one thought proceeded all others.

“As soon as it happened, I turned to coach and asked to redshirt, so apparently my first thought was to keep playing,” Malott said. She injured herself in early September, during the second game of the season, so Malott wanted to save her eligibility for another year by redshirting.

Malott was not even off the court, had not even undergone the surgery that would run a rod of steel from her kneecap to her ankle, had not even realized she would be wheelchair bound for three weeks, had not even started the months of rehab.

But she was already determined to get back in the game.

After about three months of rehab, and working every single day for two to four hours, Malott is now able to run. According to her athletic trainers, Malott is a month and half ahead of schedule on her recovery plan and should be playing in the 2017 season for her senior year. However, Malott has not just been fighting her physical injury, but also the emotions raging inside her head, the emotions she often tries to hide.

Photo by Bill Smith-Shippensburg University / The Slate

Courtney Malott examines her recovering fibula and tibia. She broke the bones while playing the second game of the volleyball season.

It took a few days for reality to strike, but accepting what had happened was like getting hit by a brick wall, Malott said.

“I was a little scared. Is this ever going to happen again? Am I ever going to be able to play again? Am I ever going to be where I was? There was a lot of doubt,” Malott said. “Other than that I would get very angry at the situation. There was a fear of the unknown, because I didn’t know the timeline, nobody knows the timeline. Everyone’s different with recovery. They would just say it could take a couple weeks, it could be a couple months. And to hear that takes its toll. So there was a lot of anxiety, because you don’t know where you’re going to be

in three months.”

The biggest emotion Malott felt, she said, was sadness. She couldn’t be with her teammates and friends on the court. She would never play another season with the graduating seniors. She lost her own season, which she had trained diligently for all summer. All of this was simply gone with a single bone-splitting snap.

“Because you’re grieving over where you were and what you once were. And now you’re stuck in this new place, this foreign place, and you’re not sure how to get out of it or how to carry on from there, just as if someone close to you passed,” Malott said.

The emotions that Malott experiences, are the same emotions that many, if not all, athletes experience after traumatic injury, said Samuel Forlenza, SU professor in the exercise science department with a background in sport psychology.

Symptoms such as sadness, depression, lack of motivation, changes in appetite and sleep, anxiety and frustration are common in athletes whose injuries keep them out of the game for long periods of time, Forlenza said.

“To be a college student-athlete, you have to devote a significant amount of time and energy to athletics. Being an athlete is a big part of one’s identity, so when that is threatened or taken away, as in the case of an injury, that can be a big blow to a person’s sense of self. That partial loss of identity can certainly cause negative feelings and thoughts,” Forlenza said.

Malott’s coach, Leanne Piscotty, understands what it’s like to be an injured athlete. Sometimes athletes become disconnected from the team because rehab separates them into a separate room for rehab. She sees athletes who lose out on seasons and even athletic careers.

“I think [injury] is devastating. People might think it’s silly if they don’t understand what it’s like to be an athlete. But if you’re an athlete you absolutely know 100percent that it’s not silly. Putting value and importance in something that you love and are predisposed at being good at...is very, very important. It’s part of who you are.”

Starting when she was 5 years old, Malott followed in her mother and sister’s footsteps onto the volleyball court. From the age of 7, Malott played in a volleyball league. Volleyball is a part of her identity, and the injury challenged that.

“I’ve played volleyball since I was little. I’ve always been the girl who could jump kinda high and hit a ball kinda hard, so to have that taken away from you, the one thing you’ve been known for your whole life and then you can’t do it, you physically can’t do...it does put you in an identity of ‘who am I now?’ Through all of this I’ve learned who I am without athletics.”

Through her injury, Malott said she has learned patience, to accept help when she needs it and to express her emotions instead of hiding them away from everyone. From the bench, Malott tries to be a good teammate by staying positive, being a good listener and filling in for whatever role her team needs her to be. Even though it’s difficult being unable to practice with her teammates, their support has brought them closer than she thought possible, she said. Because of her injury, Malott said she has learned that it is the people in her life that make it worth living.

Once athletes start recovery, their negative feelings turn to a renewed sense of appreciation for their sport, Forlenza said. They find a new role on the team, greater motivation to play, increased levels of confidence from regained fitness and courage from facing a severe injury.

Malott has a lot of good days, but she also has bad days, said Wesley Mallicone, director of sports medicine at SU. Mallicone, along with Miranda Fisher, assistant director of sports medicine, have worked with Malott during her rehab.

Malott said that somehow Mallicone always catches her when she's on the verge of an emotional breakdown. When she was first starting rehab, simply bending her knee was difficult and painful, so she took a break from her exercises to watch her teammates practice.

Wes walked into the gymnasium and asked Malott, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Malott said jokingly.

"Just let it out," Mallicone said.

That was all it took for Malott to cry in the gymnasium where she should have been practicing with her teammates.

"I've learned that keeping emotions in is not healthy, just to let it out and be around good listeners who give good advice. And [Mallicone] has done all of that."

Even after Malott was out of a wheel chair, off crutches and deep into her recovery, she still wrangled with the emotional impacts of her injury.

Fisher, who has worked with Malott for the latter parts of her recovery, said Malott sometimes gets frustrated when she can't see improvements to match the work she puts in every single day. Fisher suggested Malott make an entry in a journal after each workout so that she can look back and see how she felt. Not every day is great, and some days are better than others, but Fisher said she wants to give Malott perspective. Two weeks ago Malott couldn't run, and now she can, which was a huge step Fisher said.

"If anybody walked into the rehab room and watched her do her box jumps and stuff like that they wouldn't know in September she had a [tibia-fibula] fracture," Mallicone said. "She's a month and a half ahead of schedule and that's a testament not to myself, and not to Miranda but to Courtney and her efforts and her willingness to listen and do the right things."

From a coach's perspective, Malott is "gritty," Piscotty said.

"...she likes to push through the grind of being a student athlete, and that makes her special because she's the kind of kid where the harder the drill, the more she loves it."

Piscotty sees Malott as the kind of athlete willing to endure the pain that comes with rehab in order to play volleyball again. Some athletes use injury as an excuse, but not Malott, Piscotty said.

"Because of the way she's wired, I'm assured that she's going to make a phenomenal recovery because she's so dedicated to push through it," Piscotty said.

Acceptance, fear, doubt, anger, anxiety, nostalgia, bitterness and sadness have all ripped into Malott the same way that the impact of her fall splintered her bones.

Lying on the gymnasium floor after her injury, Malott asked her coach, "Can I redshirt?" It was the kind of question that only looks forward. Now, months into rehab, Malott is still resisting the one question she has avoided since the very beginning of her journey — the question of why, which is the kind of question that can only look backward.

"I don't like to ask the questions — why me? why now? — because I feel like that would just eat me alive if I just continued to ask why," Malott said. "I feel you just have to push through it and try to get to the next obstacle, try to get to the next milestone."