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Minnesota Crookston Senior McWilliams Overcomes Injury-Plagued Journey with Help of Amazing Support System

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CROOKSTON, Minn. - Our lives can change in a split second. For [Stephanie McWilliams](#), a senior on the University of Minnesota Crookston women's basketball team, that split second came Fri., Feb. 9, 2018 against Northern State University. McWilliams, the team's defensive specialist was guarding one of the Wolves' top scorers and in that split second her knee gave out. She was optimistic that it wasn't her ACL because she was able to get up and walk off, but the whirlwind turn ended up being her worst fear. Her sophomore season had come to an end and she wouldn't be able to finish out her second year in the Minnesota Crookston women's basketball program.

"I went and had surgery at the end of February and spent the next eight months recovering," McWilliams said. "It was awful. The pain was awful but it was more because it was Emily Gruber and Micaela Noga's last year and that is what stung the most. Not being able to finish the season with the girls that I had come in with. I knew that I had eight months before the next season began. I wanted to come back, just as strong, if not stronger than I was."

Now looking back on that moment, it was just a glimpse of what would turn into a topsy-turvy journey. McWilliams would come back from her first ACL tear and play 21 games of her junior year. But, fate had other plans for her rather than finishing out her junior year, her ACL gave out again. This time it happened on the road during a game at Southwest Minnesota State University.

"It worked out because I came back earlier than most people do," McWilliams said. "It was great. Right away it was tough because I hadn't played in eight months. I came back and I was pretty strong. Defensively I was still good. It sucked because I think I was just getting back to where I was just as strong as I was. It went downhill and things didn't feel great and then at the end of my junior season, my ACL went again."

McWilliams went through a wide array of emotions, as can be expected. Here, she had come back from a terrible injury and made it back on the basketball court to play the game that she loves and just when she was feeling great and she was back to being the defensive specialist she was recruited to be, her knee had given out again.

"It was a wide range of emotions," McWilliams stated. "When it gave out this time it felt different and I was just praying that it wasn't my ACL. We were at Southwest Minnesota State and when they did the ACL test it wasn't as clear-cut as before because it was still hanging on. Because they could still feel it, they thought I had dislocated my knee-cap. So right away, it was like this sucks but I can handle that. So I kept trying to play again and it kept giving out. When I finally found out that it was partially torn it was awful. After finally getting back from the first ACL tear, it was devastating. We didn't really know what that meant. I found out that I could do rehab and get a good brace and hopefully make it through my senior year."

McWilliams attempted to come back from not just one ACL tear, but two ACL tears. She had a great knee brace and was cleared to start playing basketball again at the end of this summer. It was during a captain's practice earlier this season that the proverbial nail in the coffin would happen during this crazy injury journey.

"The very first captain's practice we had, it gave out and something popped," said McWilliams. "I knew it was my ACL but I wasn't ready to be done yet. I had a little bit of denial but I kept playing into October and trying to make it work. It was okay for a while, but I didn't trust it because I knew it was going to give out and my other knee started having issues. It wasn't going to hold up, so Coach Roysland and I sat down and I decided to be done. That was a super hard decision. It wasn't fun at all. It was definitely the right choice. If I wouldn't have stopped, I think mentally I would have been drained and physically I don't think my other knee would have lasted much longer because I was overcompensating a lot."

To understand how someone gets through such a traumatic series of injuries like McWilliams has you have to put it in perspective of what she has. It has been difficult, but she has been able to overcome the obstacles because of a truly amazing support system that has roots with two of the most amazing, loving, and caring people you will meet, her parents Mary and Bob McWilliams. You see, Mary and Bob aren't just supportive parents, they might be two of the most supportive parents you will meet. They are at as many games as they can possibly make it to, whether right down the road from their home in Grand Forks, N.D., when Stephanie is playing at Lysaker Gymnasium, or miles away at an NSIC opponent's gym. You will find Mary with her giant bag of snacks for Stephanie, her teammates, and really anyone who is lucky enough to meet her and Bob, an incredibly supportive father.

"Throughout my life my parents and my brother have been at everything they possibly can be," McWilliams mentioned. "I think continuing that is a big reason I liked Minnesota Crookston so much. It is nice to be able to go home, but it is more important for me for them to be able to come here and watch the games. I think that is what was so appealing about this conference is that a lot of the schools are in the area with Bismarck, Minot, and Moorhead. We play a lot of schools that are fairly close, and even the ones that are further aren't terribly far. Every other year they have been at basically every game. Having that support has been incredible. I think it has been big for my friends that are here, as well. All the girls on the team know my parents."

On top of her parents, she has had the support of her teammates, her professors, and her boyfriend Chase Johnson, who plays on the Minnesota Crookston men's basketball team.

"I missed the end of my sophomore, my junior, and all of my senior year," McWilliams stated. "It has been hard but I think if I didn't have that support system I don't think I would have been able to stay with the team this year. Having the girls that are on the team and such strong friendships and the coaches being as supportive as they have been and wanting me to be there. They have made me feel like a part of the team and an important part of the team. They always tell me that I am making a difference. I feel like my time is being spent well with the team. My faith has obviously been huge. Trusting that there is a reason for it and trying not to question why it happened. My family and brother and Chase have been great. Having everyone that has been there for me. Being at Crookston with my professors that I am close with because it is such a small campus. I know everyone here and I know that they want what is best for me. I think especially in the last two months because my surgery didn't go as planned and still knowing that everyone is thinking of me."

While injuries have dominated the story line for McWilliams over the last two years, it isn't the only aspect of who this amazing young woman is. McWilliams came to Crookston from right down the road in Grand Forks, N.D., where she competed at Grand Forks Central H.S. for the Knights. She was a multiple-sport athlete, who originally had ambitions of playing multiple sports. It was during her visit that her plans of possibly playing basketball, volleyball, and softball, or some combination of the two, veered off in a different direction.

"When I was looking at schools for sports I was looking for basketball, softball, and volleyball," McWilliams said. "I was looking at possibly playing multiple sports at a smaller school. When I came here Coach Roysland said if you play for me, I want you to only play basketball. Most people, maybe would have been turned off by that but to me it was a sign because basketball was always my favorite and most schools wanted me to play volleyball and softball because they were opposite seasons. I wanted to play basketball. It was nice that he wanted me to just play basketball and the girls that were here were awesome and the coaches were, as well. Everyone I met was so welcoming."

McWilliams credits playing multiple sports with helping to make her well-rounded and helping her to handle the adversity that she has been dealt in recent years.

"I wouldn't have any of the experiences I have had if I would have only played basketball growing up," McWilliams said. "I had so many other teammates and coaches that changed the way I look at things. I am glad that I stuck with everything all the way through."

McWilliams had etched a role for herself on the Minnesota Crookston women's basketball team before her world got turned upside down. She had become the team's defensive specialist, a role that she relished.

"Being the defensive specialist was exciting for me," McWilliams said. "I think a lot of people might not want that role. A lot of people want the headliner, because they should. We obviously need points to win games. I think the dirty work is what I thrived on. Getting the big defensive stops or taking a charge it got the adrenaline going."

McWilliams earned her spot on the court standing next to teammates that were upperclassmen, but she belonged on the court as she took a message to heart during game from her teammate Micaela Noga. "I started a few games as a freshman, and I remember Micaela (Noga) one game telling me 'show them that you should be out here,'" McWilliams said. "The upperclassmen believed that I should be on the court. That is big for any freshman to know that the upperclassmen believe in you. That is one of the biggest things that pushed me to want to be on the court, because I wanted to play with them."

Another important aspect of McWilliams, is the academic success she has had in the classroom. McWilliams is a near 4.0 student-athlete, who cringes when thinking about those two A-minuses she has racked up in her collegiate career.

"With my mom being a teacher, I have always wanted to do well in school and I enjoyed school," McWilliams stated. "I was kind of a nerd. I think that I was always pushed to put my school first and I think that is how it should be. It is hard sometimes with athletics and sometimes school gets pushed under the rug a little bit. I always knew that if I did well I could hopefully earn more scholarships and that has paid off. Being here, if I am going to be a teacher and want my kids to push themselves then I should be able to say the same. I don't think it is fair to push my students if I can't say the same."

Though it has been a crazy, whirlwind journey McWilliams has been on, she hasn't been alone through it all. Especially at the end, as her fellow teammate [Paige Weakley](#) also suffered an ACL injury this season. While they have had each other to lean on, McWilliams got emotional when thinking about what Paige has grown through. She wished with all of her heart that Weakley would have been able to finish out her senior season.

"I was in the hospital when Paige tore her ACL and knowing what I went through it has really helped me to understand what other people are going through," stated McWilliams. "Obviously I am not the only player that has had to miss part of her career for injuries. I think understanding my own emotions has helped me to understand what Paige is going through. If I wouldn't have gone through this I would have felt bad but I wouldn't have known what she is going through. We have always been close but this has brought us closer together and not in how we wanted that to happen. I would do anything to make it so she could play the rest of the year. I know she has gone through it before and it is her other leg now. For anybody trying to understand why it is happening, you have to find the light at the end of the tunnel. I haven't played for two months now and you would think watching practice every day would get easier, but it doesn't. Both of us wanted to play so badly and have that drive. Having each other to lean on and push each other has been comforting."

McWilliams' time at Minnesota Crookston will soon come to an end, as she steps out on the Lysaker Gymnasium court one more time with her teammates and fellow seniors Weakley and [Amber Schoenicke](#). It has been a journey that she never expected and one that will help her understand adversity as she leaps into her career as an educator of young minds.

"I have gone through some stuff in life but overall I have had a really amazing life," McWilliams said. "Before this I have lost people I was really close with, but compared to other people I have had a really great life. Working with kids in the future that haven't had those same experiences and haven't had that support system, I think that I will be able to identify with them better and help them to get through their troubles. Without all of this, especially the last two months, I have gone through more than I have my whole life. It will help when I am working with kids that didn't have it easy and didn't have parents that supported them the whole way. There is a reason for everything and I don't know what it is exactly. I would have done anything to play this year, but there is a reason for it."

That reason will one day become clear, but McWilliams has become a better person for everything she has gone through and more importantly we have all become better people for getting to know this amazing young woman. Great things are in store for her life and while this has been a challenging part of her journey, it will be an important one and one that will frame the rest of an epic story that is to come.

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