

LARS lets wrestler get back in no time

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CLEARWATER -- Mike Flood was exhausted, sweat dripping down his face, as he completed two hours of drills, pushups and wind sprints during that first November day of practice inside the Countryside gym. He was slow on his feet. His legs didn't react as quickly as he would have liked. Yet there wasn't a wrestler or coach in the room who wasn't impressed. Flood was wrestling five weeks after reconstructive surgery on his right knee. Better still, he wore no bulky brace, had no swelling and asked for no aspirin. Everyone looked on in amazement at his quick return. "I wouldn't have thought it was possible," Countryside coach Dave Frayer said. In this country, it would not have been. To save his senior season, to repair his torn anterior cruciate ligament, Flood traveled to Canada for a revolutionary arthroscopic procedure, an operation so radical it has not been tested in the United States.

Flood had the LARS (Ligament Advanced Reinforcement System), a man-made, polyester-fiber ligament, implanted in the knee to repair the torn ACL. The synthetic and natural ligaments grew together, allowing Flood to recover from the injury in a fraction of the time conventional surgery would have allowed. "He told me he would be back on the mat the first day of practice, and it's astonishing to see what he's been able to do," Frayer said. "When I heard what happened to him, I figured his senior season was over. "A few years ago, I had a wrestler, Nick Ross, who tore his ACL and he was out all of that year and part of the next. That's what I expected with Flood, which would have been heartbreaking because he had come so far."

Flood was ready to take the next step in his career. After placing third in the state as a junior, Flood liked his chances at a state title this season. But his shot at winning one seemingly snapped when his right knee did. While practicing for a tryout for the Florida national team on May 20, Flood was locked up with teammate Dominic DeNunzio in the Countryside wrestling room when he was injured. Flood heard a pop and collapsed on the mat. "I could feel my knee pop and there was a sharp pain," Flood said. "I didn't know what it was. I just knew it wasn't good." In a fraction of a second, the ACL, a 1 1/2-inch-long ribbon of tissue that stabilizes the knee, ruptured. Flood did not realize the seriousness of the injury and tried to wrestle through it. He tried to let the knee heal on its own, but aspirin did not numb the pain. After a week, Flood had enough and went to see Dr. Brian Oliver, an orthopedic surgeon in Clearwater, for an MRI. The news was not good. Flood's ACL had shredded like a piece of paper. "Initially, there was some shock," Flood said. "I knew I would have to have surgery, and I figured it would take a while to get back to where I was."

At first, Flood had one option: His knee could have been repaired using a patellar tendon graft, which would require six to eight months of rehabilitation. Flood knew there was time to come back, but it would be a slow process. After three to six weeks, he could pedal a stationary bike. A few months after that he could jog on a treadmill. But wrestling? No one knew when, or if, he could return. When he did return, Flood would have two telltale scars on his leg for opponents to see, and a bulky brace strapped to his knee every minute he was on the mat. Flood could have persevered, sweating, grunting and groaning through the grueling stages of rehab. But with his senior year approaching, the meter was running. For the past seven years, wrestling had come to dominate Flood's life, his performance determining his disposition, touching everything he thought or did. He had a schedule, a plan, to earn a wrestling scholarship. But an injury such as this was just the sort of detail that could ruin his blueprint. Flood also knew he wouldn't be able to stand working behind the scenes while his teammates heard the cheers. He needed to recover fully, and as quickly as possible. His parents, Jayne and Jim Flood, pulled out all the stops. Jayne Flood, who has had reconstructive surgery on both knees, was well-versed on the subject but sought more information. She scoured the Internet for studies and kept detailed files. Jim Flood sought other opinions, but there were none.

They had exhausted all conventional means when Craig Turtzo, the father of Countryside wrestler Matt Turtzo, told the family about the LARS procedure, which made it possible to have full use of the knee in a short period of time. "I had heard enough good things about the operation that I was sold on it," said Turtzo, who owns several medical supply companies. "If it was my son, I'd do it in a heartbeat." Yet there were drawbacks. LARS is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration. It hasn't even been tested by the FDA. The United States experimented with artificial ligaments made of Gore-Tex in the 1980s and had mixed results. Some would loosen, others would break or fragment. "The synthetic fiber is like a rope, and the more you tug it's going to unwind and eventually fray," Oliver said.

There were other concerns. The Floods would have to travel to Montreal to have the procedure. Worse, their insurance did not cover the operation, meaning they would have to pay the bill of more than \$13,000. "Believe me, we're not wealthy," said Jayne Flood, who along with her husband works for an insurance company. "We'd have to pull from a lot of resources to do this. But we wanted what was best for Mike." The Floods were going to extremes for a sport that offers little reward. With such a big monetary decision pending, they wanted to be certain they were making the right one. So they did more research, seeking input from others who have had the surgery. They talked to the family of Morgan O'Hara, a senior basketball player at Kent State. O'Hara has had the procedure on both knees during the past three seasons. Both times she was back practicing in a month and playing in games after six weeks. "I just watched my daughter play a full 40 minutes the other day on two repaired knees," said Charlie O'Hara, Morgan's father. "She hasn't had any problems and the knees are as strong as ever."

The Floods were sold, but the reconstruction was not done right away. Mike was 16 and the surgery would have interfered with his growth. They waited until September. Mike and his father went to Montreal, where Dr. Pierre Ranger performed the surgery on Sept. 11. Flood was able to fully extend his leg two days after the operation. A week later, he was off crutches. Two weeks later he was running at full speed. Back on the mat, Flood did not worry about his knee betraying him again. He felt as strong as ever. He was undefeated the first two months of the season and was named MVP of the Hooters Invitational in December.

"His story is a success, as are many other athletes' who have had this procedure," said John Korah, president of J.K. Orthomedics, a firm that distributes the LARS ligament. But Flood's saga took a cruel twist three weeks ago. His door to a state title now swings on creaky hinges. On Jan. 4, Flood was preparing to face Brandon in the Challenge the Streak tournament when he went to the ground, grimacing and holding his leg. His screams echoed through the gymnasium. He knew what had happened: He partially tore the ACL and sprained the medial collateral ligament in his left knee -- the other knee. Flood was not about to let go of his senior season. Doctors gave him the option of finishing the season before having surgery. He now wrestles while wearing a knee brace. St. Petersburg High's Mike Albert has firsthand knowledge of Flood's grit. The two met in the semifinals of the Pinellas County Athletic Conference meet. Halfway through the bout, Flood went down in pain. He hobbled back and won by two points. "I knew he was hurt and in a lot of pain," Albert said. "I didn't know what had happened to him until his coach told me about his story."

The Floods hope the story has a better ending. They want Mike to have the surgery again if they can afford it, but another operation would push the combined cost to more than \$30,000. That means a scholarship is essential. "It's going to be awfully tough to do," Jim Flood said. "But this is an investment in our kid. We want him to be healthy and we want him to have the opportunity to wrestle in college." A college scholarship on two mended knees? That would make people stand in wonderment -- again.