

Flood's scholarship earned with pain, grit

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To save their son's senior wrestling season, Jayne and Jim Flood made a big monetary decision. They paid more than \$13,000 to have their son, Mike Flood, travel to Canada in September to have the LARS (Ligament Advanced Reinforcement System), a man-made, polyester-fiber ligament, implanted in his right knee to repair his torn anterior cruciate ligament. The synthetic and natural ligaments grew together, which allowed Flood to recover from the injury in a fraction of the time conventional surgery would have allowed. It was a risky move. The LARS has not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration, and insurance did not cover the cost of the operation. After doing extensive research and seeking the advice of others, the Floods decided to pay for the surgery on their own. They knew the only way they would get a return on their investment was if Mike came back and wrestled well enough to earn a college scholarship.

The payoff came last month when Flood, who wrestled for Countryside and had to battle another grueling knee injury last season, signed with American University, a Division-IA private school in Washington, D.C. Flood received a partial scholarship that will pay for tuition. He has a chance to make it a full scholarship the following year. "I really liked American and just fell in love with the school when I visited it in May," said Flood, who also had an offer from Virginia Tech. "The coach at American (Mark Cody) is really trying to build up the program. I'm excited. "It's also nice to know that I'll be able to wrestle in college, and that the trials and tribulations of my knees are finally over." Flood's surgical detour started in May 2002 when he heard his right knee pop while sparring with a teammate. Because Flood was 16 at the time and surgery would have interfered with his growth, he waited four months before having the LARS procedure.

He was back on the mat five weeks after the surgery and did not worry about his knee 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. But Flood's comeback took a cruel turn the first week of January, when he partially tore the ACL and sprained the medial collateral ligament in his left knee. Still, Flood wasted no time turning that potential obstacle into a mere challenge. He opted to finish the season before having surgery and wrestled wearing a bulky brace. It didn't faze Flood. He won conference, district and region titles and entered the state meet with one loss. He ended it that way, too. Shaking off the pain, Flood showed his grit. Wrestling in one of the toughest weight classes, Flood, a 125-pounder, defeated three-time state champion Guy Gibson of Fort Lauderdale St. Thomas Aquinas in the semifinals and beat defending champion Stan Conley-Liberatore from Sickles in the final. Since ending his high school career with his first state title, Flood has been preparing for his future. Besides choosing a college, he also had to decide whether to have the LARS performed on his other knee.

Because another procedure would push the combined cost to almost \$30,000, the Floods opted to have Mike's other knee repaired using a patella tendon graf, a more traditional method which requires six to eight months of rehabilitation. "We simply couldn't afford to do (the LARS) again," Jim Flood said. "Plus, the other type of operation was covered by our insurance." Flood had the surgery in April and has spent the past few months working his knee back into shape. After starting off on crutches the first month, Flood moved well enough to use a shiny silver cane his father bought at a flea market for prom, where he was named king. Doctors should clear Flood to resume wrestling within the next few weeks. He will report to school Aug. 15. "I can't wait to start wrestling again," Flood said. "It's been a way of life for me and for a while, I wondered if I would be able to do it again. I didn't know if a college would want me. But all the coaches never had a problem with my knees and trusted that I'd be back."