

Three letters that spell heartbreak

A torn ACL means a demanding physical and emotional recovery

By Paul LaTour

plamour@scn1.com

It was a simple pivot, one Bri Rodriguez performed countless times on a soccer field.

But she'd never heard that noise before, a sound she described as knuckles cracking. Or felt pain flare up from her left knee like that.

She buckled to the ground and crawled toward the sideline. Her body told her the injury was serious — her anterior cruciate ligament had torn.

Rodriguez wasn't listening.

In a day and age when almost all athletes, especially female ones, know the symptoms of an ACL tear, Rodriguez refused to let that prospect cross her mind. She had never been injured before, so she figured a serious one would hurt more than this did.

"I didn't think (it was the ACL) at all," she said. "That was the last thing I thought."

Already the pain was receding. It was 15 minutes into a Class AA state quarterfinal and Waubonsie Valley was locked in a scoreless tie with Maine South. Not being able to help the Warriors in their quest for a second consecu-



Rodriguez



Kate Szrom / Staff photographer

Waubonsie Valley midfielder Bri Rodriguez, second from left, prays with her parents Mary, left, and Jim, right, and Dr. Richard Erickson before going in for surgery to repair a torn ligament in Rodriguez's left knee Monday.

something Rodriguez didn't want to consider.

So she got up. With a trainer's help, Rodriguez began walking along the sideline, heading around the field to the bench area. Soon she was walking on her own, the limp dissolving as she broke into a jog. She told Waubonsie coach Julie Bergstrom she was OK

minutes later.

When Rodriguez crumpled to the turf a second time, this after a corner kick shortly upon her return, the reality began setting in. With tears streaming down her face, she rode off on the back of a golf cart, still clinging to the possibility it wasn't a major injury.

when Rodriguez heard a conversation between her father, Jim, and the Waubonsie athletic trainer that Rodriguez first heard the letters A-C-L in reference to her left knee. The next afternoon an MRI exam confirmed she had torn the ligament, which stabilizes the knee and attaches to the thigh bone and

"When I found out, I cried for like two hours," Rodriguez said five days later. "I'm still bummed. Everybody's been telling me it happens for a reason and I'll be stronger when I come back. So I guess I'll just have to work hard."

PREVENTING INJURIES TO THE ACL

Athletes can take three steps to reduce their risk of ACL injuries:

■ Training and conditioning should be year-round activities. Skill drills and strength and flexibility exercises will enhance balance and coordination so you will be ready when the season starts.

■ Strength training for hamstring and quadriceps muscles should be a regular part of your conditioning program. To stretch the quads, stand and use a wall or table for support. Lift one leg and pull your foot toward your buttocks. Hold for five seconds, then release the foot and stand straight. Repeat six to 10 times on one side, then turn and repeat on the other side. To stretch the hamstrings, sit with one knee bent and the other leg extended, toes pointing to the ceiling. Lean forward until you feel a stretch. Hold for five seconds, then return to your original position. Repeat six to 10 times on each leg.

■ Practice proper landing technique (from a jump) and learn to do cutting maneuvers in a crouched posture with a slight bend at the knee and the hip.

Information from the Center for Sports Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.