

VOLLEYBALL



“I don’t want to feel like I had this injury. I want to play like there’s nothing there”
Amy Roberts, outside hitter

Steel Brooks/Montana Kaimin
Outside hitter Amy Roberts practices before the Montana Invitational this weekend. Roberts suffered a season-ending injury in the tournament last year.

The return of Roberts

Spiker fights back onto the court after knee injury derails 2009 season

A.J. Mazzolini
Montana Kaimin

It was a volley like any other, a ball she’d hit thousands of times before.

The pass floated above the court, moving to the left side, her side. It was high, but not too high. She jumped, twisting slightly in the air, hoping to get more power behind the hit.

The strike was clean; the landing was not.

“I don’t remember where my hit went,” said University of Montana volleyball player Amy Roberts. “All I remember is I was on the ground afterward.”

When gravity brought an off-balance Roberts back to Earth, or rather the hardwood floor of a University of Montana volleyball court, her left leg buckled underneath her. Something was wrong, she thought, despite a lack of pain. There had been a sharp pop, a tearing feeling in her left knee.

She sat stunned on the floor, not quite knowing what to do. Tears began welling up in her eyes, more from disbelief and fear, than from pain.

“No,” Roberts muttered, clutching at her crippled joint. “No. No. No.”

As the training staff eased her to the

sideline and out of the game, the last game she’d see that season, the agonizing pain began to set in.

Her teammates surrounded her, an emotional wreck in the face of the disaster.

“I’m really close with Amy and to see her go down, I was devastated,” remembered senior outside hitter Jaimie Thibeault. “It was pretty hard to keep playing with tears in my eyes.”

That match, an eventual 3-2 loss to Arizona State in September 2009, was the last time Roberts played a game on the Grizzlies’ home court—until now that is.

After a medical redshirt season, surgery to repair a torn ACL, MCL and meniscus in the knee and a year of rehabilitation, Roberts will be playing again in front of the home crowd this weekend. The Griz host the Montana Invitational today and Saturday in the final pre-Big Sky Conference tune-up. It’s nearly a year to the day since the Arizona State game.

It’s been a year-long recovery for Roberts, who still holds junior status eligibility wise. After surgery, she couldn’t walk for months. By the time she could bear any weight on the leg, her muscles had deteriorated like a shriveled plant left out in the sun.

“You could visually see how small my quad was,” said Roberts, a Eureka native. “It was hard to look at.”

At that point, a return to the Griz lineup felt farther away than the moon. There were days that the load felt insurmountable, she said, and the effort too great. The inner workings of her knee had been decimated.

“Sometimes I had to talk myself through it,” Roberts said. “When I was on crutches it was hard to say I’m going to be able to play volleyball again. I have to keep working hard and can’t settle with where I’m at. If I were to think about things negatively, I wouldn’t get much farther.”

After missing all but 10 games of the volleyball season last year, Roberts has seen limited action on the court this season. She’s played most contests in the first two tournaments with the team posting a 2-5 record. But her return to the game didn’t come without struggles. The mental scar from the serious injury shone just as fiercely as the mark left by the surgeon’s knife.

“The hardest thing was getting my confidence back without being timid or tentative,” the 5-foot-11 hitter said. “I don’t want to feel like I had this injury. I

want to play like there’s nothing there.”

But she wasn’t doing it alone. A physical therapist fitted her leg with a brace, long and bulky but supportive. But even after months of wearing it, it still feels strange to put on, she said.

“Every time I put it on at the beginning of practice, I still think ‘Ohhh, this thing is so weird,’” she said.

Support came in a far more amiable package as well, in the form of her teammates and coaches.

“I think she needed people there,” said Thibeault, a three-year teammate of Roberts’. “At times, she didn’t know that it was going to be OK.”

Though she couldn’t compete, Roberts remained dedicated to the team. She attended every practice, except for the day of the surgery, playing the role of cheerleader and “Coach Amy.”

Roberts’ role has been reduced so far this year in an attempt to lessen the strain on her repaired ligaments. One game a day is all that’s advisable at this point, said Griz volleyball coach Jerry Wagner. The games Roberts has played have been some of the better one’s the team has put together.

“There’s only one more time we

See **ROBERTS**, page 8

Montana football prepares for Saturday showdown at Cal Poly. See more at montanakaimin.com

UM soccer looks to find groove tonight at home against Wyoming. See more at montanakaimin.com

ROBERTS

From page 5

won't have her services on the court," Wagner said, alluding to one of Montana's two games to be played on Saturday, the last such occurrence short of the postseason. "We're hoping she'll be with us each and every night for the rest of the season."

The positive attitude Roberts showed on the sidelines last year and in the back court during her playing time in 2010 is infectious, Wagner said. It's that same mindset that helped her through her trying year of recovery as well, he added.

During that time, while her body lay incapacitated, Roberts' mind never stopped working and preparing to get back with the team.

"That's all an athlete really needs is a goal," the coach said.

anthony.mazzolini@umontana.edu