Practice mishap ends year for former Port star, who now faces long road to recovery

It only took a split second, on a move he has made countless times, for Josh Gasser to have his basketball season cut short.

Driving to the basket during practice at the Kohl Center last Saturday morning, the University of Wisconsin-Madison guard went up for a layup and felt a pop in his left knee. He knew something was seriously wrong.

“It all went so fast, I’m not sure what happened. I planted my leg to take a shot, and I think I stepped on someone’s foot,” said Gasser, who was tended to quickly by trainers and soon got the news no player wants to hear.

Medical tests confirmed the former Port Washington High School standout had a torn anterior cruciate ligament in the knee, as well as damage to the lateral collateral ligament, which was torn from a bone. The diagnosis means he will miss the 2012-13 season.

“At this point, I’m trying to go with the flow. There’s nothing else I can do,” Gasser said.

“You see this happen all the time to other players and you never think it’s going to happen to you, but then it does.”

For Gasser, who has seen his basketball career soar from all-state honors as a prep player to a starting role on a nationally ranked college team, the injury is especially tough.

Devastating is almost an understatement.

Only two days earlier, Badgers coach Bo Ryan announced that Gasser would be his starting point guard, a role the junior happily embraced with the graduation of standout Jordan Taylor.

After starting 66 games as a shooting guard and defensive specialist in his first two seasons, Gasser was finally getting his chance to be the backcourt leader of a team again pegged as one of the best in the Big Ten Conference.

He averaged 7.6 points and 4.2 rebounds as a sophomore and was expected to play a larger offensive role this season.

Instead, Gasser finds his dream on hold — with surgery on both ligaments scheduled next Tuesday, followed by months of rehabilitation. Right now, though, he's more disappointed about a lost chance than the discomfort of an unfortunate mishap.

"The physical pain was really bad, but the emotional pain is 10 times worse," Gasser said.

Even so, there are some positives in this story.

As a redshirted player, Gasser will have two seasons of eligibility when he returns. For now, he finds himself under expert medical care and surrounded by an outpouring of support from friends, family and even strangers.

"I'm in really good hands. The athletic trainer and medical staff are really great," he said. "They'll help me come back."

Even before the team issued an official announcement Saturday, word of Gasser's injury spread quickly. He began hearing from well wishers via Twitter, Facebook, text messages and phone calls.

"I've gotten hundreds and hundreds of messages," he said. "It's been overwhelming. I can't thank everyone enough for their support."

His parents, Pat and Joan Gasser, drove from their Port Washington home to Madison as soon as they got a call about his injury.

"You kind of hope it wasn't as bad as they told us. You hope it's going to be something less serious," Pat Gasser said. "But then you realize it happened, and you have to go forward."

Family members are doing their best to help, but the disappointment of a lost season carries a deep sting.

"Josh is kind of hurting right now. He was pretty geeked about being the starting point guard on a team that's going to be really good," his father said.

“He’s worked so hard to get where he’s at. I know that’s not going to change because of this. He’ll push himself again, that’s for sure.”

The team isn’t about to let Gasser sit idly on the sideline during his recovery. He said he expects to help by working with fellow guards, including freshman George Marshall, who’s likely to take over as starting point guard.

“I’ll talk to coach Ryan and help as much as I can,” Gasser said. “Whatever they want me to do.”

Gasser has no shortage of team support away from the court, either. He shares an apartment with players Ben Brust and Duje Dukan in the same building with players Jared Berggren, Mike Bruesewitz and Dan Fahey. They’ll be helping out by driving him to class and elsewhere when needed, he said.

Gasser, who’s been fitted with a brace and crutches, will undergo surgery after the swelling in his knee subsides. About a week later, he’ll begin rehabilitation in earnest.

Barring any setbacks, plans call for him to be ready to join his teammates for off-season training next summer.

Image Information: A KNEE INJURY will force Josh Gasser to miss the 2012-13 basketball season. Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Athletic Communications