

Relieved of pain, Arizona State's Mickey Mitchell returns to basketball

By Michelle Gardner, azcentral.com/Jan. 9, 2020

Mickey Mitchell got up from the Arizona State bench and went over to the scorer's table to check into a non-conference tune-up the Sun Devils were playing against Prairie View A&M with 4:06 remaining in the first half.

Before he took his first step on the court, the crowd at Desert Financial Arena gave him a standing ovation.

It was a moment that Mitchell admits really touched him. He was surprised the Sun Devils faithful knew who he was, let alone what he had gone through. A crippling back injury not only kept him off the court for a year but away from the team as well. He couldn't so much as sit on the bench and support his teammates because the pain was too intense if he remained in one position longer than five minutes.

The crowd continued cheering as the 6-foot-7 senior forward trotted on to the court. He played only three minutes in that game, but it marked a triumphant return.

"The crowd was unbelievable. The loudest ovation I've ever had," Mitchell said, after a practice at Weatherup Center earlier this week. "That was a shock because I was gone a year. A lot of people didn't know the extent of it or where I was or what was going on. Just hearing that reaction was crazy. I was so happy to be out there. There were a lot of emotions."

Mitchell, who transferred to ASU from Ohio State in January of 2017, played sparingly early last season as a junior with a total of 53 minutes over the first six games. The last of those came on Dec. 7 when he managed four rebounds, two points and two assists in eight minutes of a loss to Nevada at a showcase game at the Staples Center in Los Angeles.

The next game was a much-anticipated home showdown against perennial title contender Kansas, whom ASU had defeated the previous year on the road. It was the pain Mitchell felt in practices leading up to that game that finally derailed him for the season.

"I kept working out and it got worse," Mitchell said. "We were getting ready for Kansas. The second practice back I just went to the floor, couldn't move my legs."

Reporters asked ASU coach Bobby Hurley about Mitchell frequently during the season, but the coach was vague as to his players' status. Mitchell didn't know when he would be back, so his coach had no way of knowing.

Therapy and rehabilitation did little to provide relief. The fact that he was not with the team in any capacity added to the mystery because even when players are injured they are typically on the bench or seen around practice. But Mitchell says the only time he felt any better was if he were to lay on the floor on his stomach.

He video chatted with parents Ken and Candy who live in Orlando. He also chatted with siblings Missi, Mandi, Monte, Matt, Misha, Mike, McKinley and Morgan who are scattered across the country. All did their best to keep his spirits up.

"It was life, even outside of basketball," he said, "I couldn't do anything. I couldn't drive, couldn't go walk and get something to eat. I just had too much pain in my back and down my leg. It was painful just living."

His teammates were supportive, but admit it was hard to see Mitchell's health struggles.

"It was tough seeing him go through that," said junior forward Romello White, Mitchell's roommate.

"He was in so much pain and there wasn't really anything we could do to help but try and keep his spirits up. We all just tried to be positive and keep encouraging him."

In July, Mitchell finally had a discectomy, a surgery to remove a herniated disc that was pressing on a nerve in the spinal cord.

He found immediate relief and was able to function again. The next task was to lose the 45 pounds he had gained while being inactive. He cut out junk food and soda and stopped eating late at night.

Despite how bleak it looked, Mitchell didn't have any thoughts of hanging it up.

"I never had those thoughts. I just had to tell myself to be patient. I knew it wasn't going to be an overnight thing," he said. "I never told myself that was going to be it because then it would be negative with myself. I knew it was something that wasn't going to be easy."

Mitchell, who will graduate with a master's in liberal studies this spring, and the Sun Devils (9-5) are now in the Pacific Northwest for Pac-12 games against Oregon State on Thursday night and then at No 9 Oregon on Saturday.

Down from 260 pounds to 215, Mitchell can now provide valuable minutes off the bench in relief of White.

Hurley didn't factor him into the rotation to start the season because his status had been so up in the air. Now he can turn to him when needed. As a former athlete who has gone through his share of injuries, including the much-publicized automobile accident that cut short his professional playing career and nearly killed him, Hurley can empathize with his player.

"My hope was just that he would get healthy and feel good," he said. "As a former player that went through injuries, I understand the frustrations he had, just knowing he was heading into the unknown with the surgery and whether that was going to change his situation. The main thing is his health and how he feels, and he's been able to play pain free. He's contributing. He's certainly in our plans moving forward."

And Mitchell isn't necessarily worried about playing time. He's just excited about getting to end his athletic career on his own terms.

"One of my personal goals is just to be as healthy as I can and do what I can to help the team win," he said. "I'm excited for myself just to get the opportunity to be put in a position to play again. Being able to practice every day is great. Waking up and being able to lift and run feels great."