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Menafra has persevered through two surgeries

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To say the past few years of Kim Menafra's life, especially as they relate to her time on the soccer field, have been a rollercoaster ride wouldn't do proper justice to the extreme highs and lows she's experienced.

Menafra, who recently completed her sophomore season as a member of Princeton's women's soccer team, is on an incline right now. She's enjoying every minute of it, too, because she's seen how quickly the ride can lurch in the opposite direction.

Major obstacles in her life recently have often been the results of movements equally as sudden on the soccer field, movements that caused Menafra to tear the anterior cruciate ligament in her right knee twice between December 2006 and the summer of 2008.

Through multiple surgeries and hours of physical therapy, though, and with the help of orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Gregg Foos and athletic trainers in both high school and college, Menafra's still managed a fruitful soccer career.

She scored the game-winning goal on a direct kick on Oct. 27, 2007, about seven months after the third surgery to repair her first tear, to give Jackson Memorial its first Shore Conference Tournament championship.

Most recently, Menafra, who missed her freshman season after reinjuring the ligament while playing for her club team at a tournament in Maine, started all 17 games for Princeton this season. She played 1,606 minutes, second on the team only to fellow defender Melissa Seitz, and had no issues with her knee.

"It can definitely be a lesson for girls to look at and see it's not the end of the road for them," Menafra said. "If they work hard and put in the time, they can get right back where they were before, if not to the next level.

"As painful as the experience is and as trying and exhausting as it was, in the end you walk away a better person with a sense of satisfaction about yourself."

Menafra's story is like so many others in the world of female soccer players, where ACL injuries, the majority of which are non-contact injuries, can at times seem as ordinary as the common cold.

Menafra, who credits much of her recovery to the work of Jackson Memorial trainer Scott Royer and Princeton trainer Cheri Drysdale, said she noticed ACL injuries affecting more of her peers as she got older. She knows six girls who have had problems, some, like her, more than one.

John Crowley coached boys soccer at Toms River East for 22 seasons and never had a player tear an ACL on the soccer field. In three seasons as the head girls coach at Toms River South, he can remember four or five girls tearing the ligament.

One of his players, Sami Raymond, suffered her third tear this season.

"I think we've all gone through it," Crowley said. "I'm pretty sure if you go to every coach in our league, they'll give you at least one kid and maybe more."

Royer said female athletes are anatomically predisposed to ACL injuries due to their naturally wider hips. He said the angle from a woman's hips to her knees narrows the notch in which the ACL sits, forcing the ligament to maneuver in a tighter space.

The relative lack of off-season conditioning compared to men's sports and subsequent weakness in leg muscles is also a factor, Royer said, as are the sudden movements and quick changes of direction required of soccer players.

Athletes can help guard against ACL injuries, Royer said, by strengthening their lower body and using plyometrics, exercises that can improve techniques for decelerating and making sudden movements, like jumping or turning.

"The more your body can rely on large muscles around the knee for stability, the less your body relies on ligaments," said Royer, who had three Jackson Memorial athletes, all female, tear ACLs this fall. "Off-season strength and conditioning is not stressed as much for women, especially at the youth level."

Crowley, at least before games and practices, is taking steps to help combat another rash of ACL problems. He said the school's trainer, Debbie Morante, developed a warm-up for the team that is geared toward flexibility and ACL-injury prevention.

The demands on an athletic trainer, especially at a large high school, don't leave much time for seminars on injury prevention, but Royer does believe he's made some corrections in athletes' movements that might have guarded against future injury.

It's impossible to prevent every injury, however, and that's when an athletic trainer can be invaluable to a high school or college athlete. An athlete like Menafra, who approximately a year after her second injury won a national title in Boston with her club team, the FC Bucks Vipers, before finally taking the field for Princeton this fall.

"It was great to be able to step out there and contribute after having to watch all season last year," Menafra said. "It was very rewarding. It makes you feel so much better about what you went through."
