

A dream come true

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Flashback ... September 1991

Cross-town rival Carver squares off against the Titans in the season opener for both teams. Young is a key weapon for West as a kick returner and punt back. With the game still in doubt in the fourth quarter, Young, who had scored a two-point PAT only minutes earlier, takes the ensuing kickoff after a Jackets score. He speeds up the gut of Carver's kick coverage, using the wedge that his mates had set up for him. Suddenly, he spots an opening to the right side, makes a quick cut, then falls to the turf in agony, without being tackled.

"I knew something wasn't right," Young recalled. "The knee just snapped. But I didn't think it was that bad. I really felt that I would be able to come back later in the season."

Young's hopes for a return to the grid wars were nixed after a medical diagnosis revealed that he had torn his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). Soon afterwards, he underwent orthoscopic surgery to repair the damage.

The gymnast could have resumed playing football. The doctors said that the knee would heal, but wouldn't be as strong as before, which meant not strong enough for gymnastics.

"After talking it over with my Dad [James Blackburn], I felt it was best to forget about football," Young said. "Had I gone back to playing, it would have been too much of a chance to take because the knee may have been damaged even more which would have kept me out of gymnastics for good."

Knee injuries are notorious for ending athletic careers. But ACL injuries have been particularly troublesome for even the world's top-flight athletes. In recent years, NBA headliners Danny Manning and Ron Harper (LA Clippers) plus Mark Price (Cleveland Cavaliers) have had torn ACLs and were forced to miss at least a year of competition in order to give the injury proper time to mend.

When you consider the stress and demands that gymnastics places on the knee, especially with an acrobatic performer like Young, you quickly understand how critical such an injury could be. And even though Young opted to leave the pigskin alone, it still appeared that he would have to forget about gymnastics - for '92 anyway.

It never occurred to Chris that conventional wisdom about ACLs could prevent him from regaining his form in time get another shot at the nationals. After all, too much was at stake. He couldn't let this injury spoil his chances to get a scholarship at a school that is renowned for developing Olympic-caliber gymnasts.

It was only days after the surgery that Young returned to the gym. Nah, he wasn't doing the usual routines. No way. The main aim was to keep him in touch with the equipment while maintaining his strength.

"Even if I had wanted to, I



Young is abundantly athletic. The 5-8 gymnast is a 20-foot long jumper who has personal bests of 45-2 in the triple jump and 6-4 in the high jump

Photo by T-Lee

couldn't do anything else other than work on strength," Young said. "But looking back on it, the injury was a blessing for me. It forced me to work on things that I wouldn't have worked on otherwise. When I'm healthy, I do a lot of tumbling. But since that was out, I did more with the apparatus - the rings, pommel horse and parallel bars, which were my worst events. Because of that, I got much better."

Recuperating from major knee surgery tends to be laborious, painful and tedious. For Young, however, it was a bit different. Fact is, it was unbelievable. In less than five months, Young was back in action and able to compete at a reasonably high level, in spite of wearing a cumbersome knee brace.

A lot of questions about Young's knee were answered in February, during his first competition since the operation. Sure, he still experienced mild pain on awkward landings. But even though he wasn't fully recovered, his physical skills and competitive nature enabled him to maintain his reputation as one of the nation's elites. "I remember that first meet and how concerned my Dad and coach [Bob Kohut] were," he said. "But I never really thought about it. All I wanted to do was have some fun. And that's what I did in my floor routine. I just made it up as I went along."

Chris Young does not fit the usual profile of a gymnast with world-class potential. Guys and gals who spend as many as six or seven hours a day in the gym

are the norm. But what's intriguing is that Young has excelled in this demanding sport while performing very credibly as a track athlete. This spring, Young was valuable to the Titans in the high jump, triple jump, long jump, and as the anchor for the 4 x 100 relay.

This may sound strange, to some, but competing in other sports has its benefits. One of those pluses is that competing in other sports helps eliminate the possibility of burn out, which isn't that unusual for gymnasts, swimmers, tennis players, or distance runners at the junior level.

Young makes gymnastics work for him when he's into track. For instance, there are a lot of similarities between the long jump and the vault. Both events have runways and both events involve the athlete hitting a board just prior to takeoff.

He even uses the same distance on his approach (81 feet) to the board regardless of whether he's vaulting or long jumping. Some of the body mechanics for doing back flips are transferable to the high jump, according to Young. In each case, the aim is to create sufficient lift to either clear the bar, or get enough height on flips to execute certain maneuvers before landing to complete a routine.

Chris possesses wondrous athletic gifts, but perhaps his greatest asset is an intense desire to meet any challenge. Competition has a way of pushing Young to a higher plane. Such was the

case at this year's Region VIII competition, which is a qualifying meet for the national championships.

The sequence of events at the regionals provided ample proof that Young is adept at handling the physical and mental stresses that go with competing against the best of his peers.

For starters, rival gymnast Andrew Manson issued a friendly warning to Young that he would prevail in the overall competition. Manson had good reason to be confident. In previous regional meets, Young had never beat him in the overall standings. On top of that, Young suffered a terrible spill on his dismount in the vault. The pain in his knee was so bad that it could've caused Young to stop competing.

In spite of those setbacks, Young was determined that he would not be deterred. The end result is that Young won three gold medals (overall competition, vault, pommel horse), three silvers (floor exercise, high bar, parallel bars) and one bronze (still rings).

"I guess you can say that I really hate losing," said Young. "When somebody tells me that they know they're going to beat me, I really get pumped up. I knew I had never beat Manson in the overall, so I finished with 111 points. I had the best meet of my life. As for my fall, all the coaches wondered if I would finish the meet. I really didn't know myself. But after talking it over with my Dad, I thought it was best for me to keep on going."

A lot of good things have happened in a short period of time for Chris Young. His future has unlimited possibilities. But the most important point, is that he is acutely aware that he can be his best friend or his worst

Evander Holyfield
Wrestler of Champions, No. 1, 37-0-0
Height: 6'3" Weight: 200 lbs. Boxer, USA

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