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SHE'S FIGHTING ON

Jacki Gemelos' career at USC is over after her fourth major knee injury, but she's determined to play in WNBA

BAXTER HOLMES

That first night, she awoke startled. Just a bad dream, she thought.

Then Jacki Gemelos came to. "This was real," she told herself, "It happened."

Earlier that day, Dec. 18, she lay crumpled on a court, crying, the ligament that provides stability in a knee torn, again, her life unstable,

again, and her USC basketball career over.

"It's a shame people really didn't see this kid play at her peak," said former USC coach Mark Trakh, who recruited her. "She was really something."

In 2006, Gemelos was the No. 1 girls' basketball recruit in the nation, a guard who averaged 39.2 points per game and was considered a blend of Magic Johnson and

Pete Maravich.

USC Coach Michael Cooper thought she was good enough to bypass college and play in the WNBA.

Unfortunately, she played only 57 games in three seasons for the Trojans because of four torn anterior cruciate ligaments, two in each knee.

"Maybe I wasn't even meant to play college [See Gemelos, C4]



JD POOLEY Associated Press

INJURIES LIMITED Jacki Gemelos, in action last season, to 57 games during her career at USC.

Injuries cut short career at USC

[Gemelos, from C1]

basketball," Gemelos said.

On Tuesday, she underwent ACL reconstruction surgery. It was her fifth surgery in seven years, after one of the surgeries had to be repeated because of complications.

She'll rehabilitate for eight to 12 months, relearning to walk, to run, to trust her knees that keep betraying her. Her goal is to get healthy, then try to play in the WNBA.

In Stockton, at her family's one-story home that's the color of melted chocolate, the garage is filled with hundreds of trophies she won over the years.

Before her first torn ACL during her senior season at St. Mary's High in Stockton, Gemelos had never so much as jammed her thumb on the basketball court.

She sat out her first three seasons at USC because of the injury in high school and two more ACL tears.

Every time, the injury occurred within the first few months of completing rehab.

Gemelos' older sister, Johnna, tore ligaments in her left knee in high school, an injury that ultimately ended her basketball career, but Gemelos wouldn't let one end hers.

Still, when her dog, a cocker spaniel named Oliver, tore ligaments in both front legs a few years ago, Gemelos wondered whether she was cursed.

The only time she truly believed it wasn't meant for her to play basketball was about six months after her third surgery, when her body rejected the grafted ligament, meaning Gemelos needed another surgery and to start rehab over.

"After that, I started to wonder if God was telling me, 'Look elsewhere,'" she said.

To fight depression, she went to gyms to shoot. One night, she limped on crutches to USC's Galen Center, where a custodian was supposed to let her in. He never



JON EILTS Associated Press

JACKI GEMELOS is tended to by medical personnel after injuring her knee in USC's game at Texas A&M last month. It was her fourth knee injury since 2006.

came. She stood in the rain, crying.

At 15, she committed to powerhouse Connecticut, the youngest player to commit in the program's history. But she ultimately chose USC so that family and friends could see her play.

That didn't happen until Gemelos made her collegiate debut Feb. 4, 2010 at California, an hour-and-a-half drive from Stockton. In 26 minutes, Gemelos scored eight points and had five rebounds and five assists. More than 50 friends and relatives greeted her outside the arena afterward.

She didn't fear another knee injury. She was just happy to shed her black USC warmup sweatsuit.

But she set a goal: return to the player she was in high school. Her St. Mary's coach, Tom Gonsalves, often called her "the Pistol" after Maravich because she too made dazzling no-look passes.

Gemelos idolized Maravich. She watched his ball-handling, dribbling and passing videos daily. And just as he dribbled everywhere, even in a movie theater, so did Gemelos, even at a dinner table.

As she played the rest of the 2009-10 season for USC, her speed and athleticism started to return.

Because she had red-shirted once before and injuries had sidelined her, Ge-

melos was granted an extra year of competition by the NCAA. The additional season meant she'd have six years to complete the typical four years of eligibility.

In 2010-11, she played an entire season, averaging 12.4 points in 37 games and helping USC to the WNIT final. The following summer, Gemelos was on the United States team that won a gold medal at the Women's World University Games in China.

Coming into this season, she was on the Naismith Award watch list as one of the best players in the nation. Gemelos felt as though she was 90% back. But people still asked, "How are your knees?"

Female athletes are up to 10 times more likely to suffer ACL tears than males, said Dr. Robert Marx, an orthopedic surgeon at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York.

Among the reasons: Females have wider hips, weaker hamstrings and after jumping tend to land knock-kneed, with their knees pointing inward. Marx, who has operated on hundreds of torn ACLs, said he now sees more tears among female athletes because they're involved in sports at younger ages.

But trying to play after four tears?

"My personal recommendation to people like her is,

enough is enough," Marx said.

Gemelos' father, Steve, a 6-foot-5 former forward who played pro ball in Greece in the mid-'70s, pushed her to play basketball from a young age, partly, he said, because his own career fizzled out because of alcohol abuse.

"Looking back now," he said, sober since May 1984, "it might have been a lot of unnecessary wear and tear."

She disagrees. "I wouldn't have been the No. 1 player in the country if it wasn't for my dad," she said.

Gemelos believes she can overcome because of her parents: Steve has beaten prostate cancer; Linda, her mother, has beaten ovarian and breast cancer.

Her silver lining in so many years at USC is that she'll leave with two degrees, including a master's in gerontology, the study of aging.

She hopes to play again. She knows that may seem impossible, but doubt has always fueled her.

Once, in a high school game, she wasn't playing well and a player on the opposing bench called her overrated. Gemelos told that player and others nearby that she was going to score 40 points.

She scored 43.

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