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## HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PLAYOFFS

## Zack's back

69 days after tearing ACL, PA receiver returns to field

By Jeremy Muck

This article was published November 26, 2015 at 2:33 a.m.



PHOTO BY STEPHEN B. THORNTON

Pulaski Academy's Zack Kelley defied the accepted standard of recovery from a torn anterior cruciate ligament, returning 69 days after surgery. Normal recovery can be anywhere from six months to a year.



Zack Kelley had 67 catches for 1,013 yards and 20 touchdowns for Pulaski Academy last season, but a severe knee injury in August left his senior season...



Class 5A high school football bracket.

## PULASKI ACADEMY AT LR CHRISTIAN

WHAT Class 5A semifinal

WHEN 7 p.m. Friday

WHERE Warrior Field, Little Rock

RECORDS Pulaski Academy 12-0, Little Rock Christian 12-0

TICKETS \$6. Advance tickets available from 10 a.m.-noon Friday at Pulaski Academy and from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at Little Rock Christian. A total of 1,250 tickets remain.

Kelley game-by-game

DATE OPP. REC. YDS TDS

## Comments

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The thought of missing his senior season didn't sit well with Zack Kelley.

Less than a month before he was to begin his final fall camp at Pulaski Academy, Kelley injured his left knee in a 7-on-7 tournament in Vienna, Va., just outside Washington, D.C.

Kevin Kelley, Pulaski Academy's coach, thought his son had sprained his medial collateral ligament. Zack Kelley thought he was fine, so he went back on the field at wide receiver in the championship game later that day, which is when things took a turn for the worse.

Zack Kelley ran a vertical route and turned to try to catch a pass from quarterback Layne Hatcher, but when he caught the ball in the end zone he landed on his knee.

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 \*5A-Central game \*Class 5A playoffs

Zack Kelley remained on the ground after the play. He had torn his anterior cruciate ligament, and Kevin Kelley immediately went from coach to dad.

"All the emotions hit me at once," Kevin Kelley said. "I thought he was done."

The Bruins went on to win the championship in the 7-on-7 tournament, but it was a bittersweet. The Bruins flew back to Little Rock the next day wondering if they were going to have to defend their Class 5A state championship without their leading returning receiver.

Zack Kelley was the Bruins' second-leading receiver in 2014 with 67 catches for 1,013 yards and 20 touchdowns. That included 12 catches for 166 yards and 3 touchdowns in the Bruins' 38-28 victory in the state championship game.

The Kelleys, father and son, arrived back in Arkansas and met with Dr. Bill Hefley, an orthopedic surgeon at Arkansas Surgical Hospital in North Little Rock and a family friend, at a Wal-mart parking lot.

Kevin Kelley said he was hoping Zack's injury was limited to his medial collateral ligament, which wouldn't have been as serious as an ACL injury, but Hefley's assessment wasn't what the Kelleys wanted to hear.

"I hated telling Kevin and Zack the news," Hefley said.

It was an emotional trip home back to the Kelley house.

.

"I've got Zack in the car and we're driving home and he's crying," Kevin Kelley said. "He said, 'Dad, this is my senior year. We've got to find out something to do.'"

"I said, 'It's an ACL. I don't know what we can do. It's season over, 100 percent of the time.'"

"He said, 'We've got to do whatever we've got to do.'"

'IT COULD BE DONE'

Kevin Kelley is always looking for an advantage on the field and often employs unconventional methods, whether it's rarely punting or preferring to onside kick in attempt to get more offensive possessions.

Trying to help his son get back on the field wasn't going to be any different.

"I'm not the kind of guy where because things are always done that way, that's the way it's got to be done," Kelley said.

So he went on the Internet and typed in "fastest ever recovery from ACL surgery" on Google.

He found Italian soccer player Roberto Baggio, who was injured Jan. 31, 2002, while playing for Brescia in Serie A. Baggio underwent surgery on Feb. 4, 2002, and came back in 77 days, playing April 21 against Fiorentina.

"Now we found it could be done," Kevin Kelley said.

Kelley found several methods that could be used for Zack's surgery, including platelet-rich plasma injections and stem cells. Hefley followed up on Kelley's research and concluded that the coach might be on to something.

"He needed something," Kevin Kelley said of his son. "He was down and depressed. We've had some tragedies in the family the past couple of years, with my mom dying.

"I wanted a glimmer of hope of him to get him out of his funk."

Zack Kelley was on board with his dad's plan.

"I put my trust in Dr. Hefley and my dad," Zack Kelley said. "They said everything was good."

Once the swelling went down in Kelley's knee, which was not straight because of a meniscus medial tear, the surgery was set for July 23 at St. Vincent. Instead of using a cadaver tissue on Zack, Hefley used zone tissue on him. He did not do a nerve block and limited the tourniquet time for Zack.



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Hefley said he also talked to Dr. James Andrews, a noted orthopedic surgeon who has worked on numerous professional athletes, who told him that he had used stem cells on several NFL players. Hefley had the stem cells harvested from Kelley's bone marrow and spun them down.

"Think of the stem cells as the seed and the [platelet-rich plasma] as the fertilizer you put on the seed," Hefley said.

The surgery lasted an hour and a half. Hefley apprised the Kelleys of the risks of a hurried recovery, which included the possibility of fracturing his patella or rupturing the graft.

"His knee wasn't having a lot of pain and he was feeling good, so he could have an early rehab," Hefley said. "Zack's an unbelievable athlete. He's a physically tough kid. He's determined, and he said, 'I'm coming back.'"

'IT WAS ALL HIM'

It wasn't the first time Kelley had to rehabilitate an injury. He injured his shoulder before his junior season in 2014 and had to miss the Bruins' first three games.

"By all standards, Zack should not have played after his sophomore year," Hefley said. "We tried hard and got him back. But an ACL tear in mid-July, right off the bat, it's season done. You don't even think about playing that year."

Hefley did one round of stem cells and two rounds of platelet-rich plasma during the surgery.

"We had the right candidate," Hefley said. "He's a mentally and physically tough guy. You put all of that together and he came along pretty quickly."

Zack Kelley was running the 40-yard dash in 6.1 seconds two weeks after the surgery, and once he was fitted for a brace he trimmed his 40-time into the lower-5s.

Kevin Kelley made sure not to push his son too hard.

"It was all him," said Kevin Kelley, who had decided not to let his son return to the field this season if he couldn't get his 40-time down to 4.8 seconds. "He'd get halfway through with some of the stuff and he'd be crying. I'd say, 'Zack, you don't have to do this. The football team will be OK without you. We'll find a way.'"

"He said, 'I want to do this.'"

Six weeks after his surgery, Kelley hit 4.8.

"It stopped hurting," Kelley said. "I could run."

'WELCOME BACK, ZACK'

Pulaski Academy began the 2015 season 2-0, with victories at Highland Park in Dallas and Wynne.

The Bruins ended Highland Park's 84-game home winning streak that dated to 1999, a victory that was considered one of the program's best, even for a school that has won four state championships.

Zack Kelley, meanwhile, was getting ready to make his 2015 debut. He returned to the field Sept. 18 for Pulaski Academy's home opener against defending Class 4A state champion Warren, which also was 2-0.

Pulaski Academy led 7-6 when it got the ball with 7:34 left in the first quarter. Junior running back Jaren Watkins carried 6 yards on the first play of the drive to set up a second-and-4 play at the Bruins 45.

Then, 69 days after injuring his knee, Kelley stepped back on the field.

Hatcher took the snap and found a wide-open Kelley at the Warren 40, and he ran untouched into the end zone for a 55-yard touchdown.

"Touchdown, Bruins," public address announcer Chris Amsler yelled. "Welcome back, Zack."

Hefley, who was on the Bruins' sideline, hugged Kelley's mother Dana, who was wearing one of her son's jerseys with the No. 10. But Hefley said that he had been a nervous wreck leading up to Kelley's return.

"I was holding my breath," Hefley said. "Every time he made a cut or people caught him, my heart would stop."

Senior Tre Bruce threw a two-point conversion pass to Cole Jones to extend the Bruins' lead to 15-6, and Pulaski Academy improved to 3-0 with a 71-40 victory.

Kevin Kelley didn't get to enjoy the moment for long.



"I'm not thinking like a dad," he said. "I'm thinking like a football coach. I can't allow myself to win every time he gets hit or win every time he catches a ball. Once we made the decision, we had to separate coach from dad."

'BACK TO BACK'

Zack Kelley hasn't slowed down since.

He is Pulaski Academy's leading receiver entering Friday's Class 5A semifinal game at Little Rock Christian with 61 catches for 1,255 yards and 18 touchdowns. He had a season-high 12 catches for 224 yards and 3 touchdowns in the Bruins' 78-44 rout of Hope last Friday in the second round of the Class 5A playoffs.

Pulaski Academy has never won back-to-back state championships, having won state titles in 2003, 2008, 2011 and 2015.

Zack Kelley hopes to change that.

"We want to win back to back," Zack Kelley said. "Everybody is determined to beat Little Rock Christian and get to that next level, to win the championship."

Hefley, for one, won't sell Kelley short.

"I wouldn't say every kid returns from an ACL after eight weeks," the surgeon said. "Not every kid can do what Zack did. I'm really glad it worked out for him and Coach Kelley."

*Print Headline: Zack's back*

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