



Schwarber comeback: One man's determination combined with Cubs modernization

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(First in a two-part series about the re-emergence of Kyle Schwarber in the Cubs' world-championship universe.)

Kyle Schwarber offers up the comeback that never ends.

A smart, stout-hearted, hard-hitting former football player whose startling recovery from a devastating knee injury suffered in April 2016 almost overshadowed the World Series itself, Schwarber was cleared to catch as spring training got under way in Mesa, Ariz.

But a baseball analyst would advise Schwarber to forget about squatting behind the plate unless an emergency transpired. Just getting Schwarber up and running enough to swing a bat in five of the seven Fall Classic games was a near-medical miracle unto itself. His left-handed run-production bat potential is too precious right now to wear down from catching, Schwarber's preferred defensive position coming out of Indiana University.

Cubs management is getting with the desired program, putting strict limits on how much Schwarber can get into a catcher's crouch. Let him simply become a competent left fielder, learn a leadoff hitter's nuances if Joe Maddon slots him at No. 1 and serve in the rarest of Cubs roles – a second southpaw-swinger with power adding to the more established Anthony Rizzo. Cubs history really has to go as far back as 1961-62 to Billy Williams and George Altman for a pair of left-handed bats with as much overall offensive potential together as Rizzo and Schwarber.

As he took his first swings in camp after a busy off-season, Schwarber's compressed comeback last season when he was projected out until this spring training is still the talk



Kyle Schwarber (left) with CBM historian George Castle as they discussed the former's amazing rehab from two serious left-knee injuries. Castle could attest to the efficiency of modern-day orthopedic surgery and rehab, throwing aside the cane less than a month after hip replacement surgery.

of the baseball world. He surely was the top pro sports comeback story of the year after completing tearing his anterior cruciate and lateral collateral ligaments in an outfield collision with Dexter Fowler April 7 at Chase Field in Phoenix. Against all odds, Schwarber back to serve as designated hitter in the four World Series games in Cleveland while adding a pinch-hitting appearance at Wrigley Field. He amassed seven hits and three walks in 20 plate appearances, impressing all with his acuity despite only two Arizona Fall League games to warm up.

Orthopedic surgeons at the time hung crepe hearing of the severity of the injury. A six-to-nine month recovery window was forecast, pushing his return into 2017.

“It’s a very serious one,” said Dr. Rodney Brenner of the Shelbourne Knee Center in Indianapolis told CBSSports.com. “Multiple ligament knee injuries that involve the lateral (outside of the knee) structures can even injure the peroneal nerve, one of the main nerve structures supplying the lower leg, ankle and foot. These injuries can result in a foot drop and threaten the athlete’s return to sport ever happening at all. Luckily, we have no indication, at least in the media reports, of any nerve dysfunction complicating an already difficult injury.”

The Cubs immediately proclaimed Schwarber out for the rest of 2016, period. Only a slight glimmer remained via the opinions of the sawbones.

2016 return required ‘absolutely perfectly’ rehab

“While it is not completely out of the question that he could return for the end of the regular season and postseason, everything would have to go absolutely perfectly,” Brenner said. “However, I’m not sure that’s even something that I would encourage the athlete to do, and I definitely would not promise that. The main goal for this injury is to have the athlete ready for next season, and if his recovery happens to progress with that kind of timetable for the end of the season, that’s icing on the cake.”

One physician had hope, though. Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum, said at the time he believed Schwarber could return by the end of September partly due to the dramatically improved training facilities in Wrigley Field’s new underground clubhouse. Fletcher was off by one month – Schwarber returned for Game 1 of the World Series on Oct. 25.

Fletcher, who is board-certified in occupational medicine, was the first physician to predict in writing that Schwarber would be back in 2016. After he went on the media tour of the new Chicago Cubs clubhouse on April 12, 2016 and was impressed with new



Kyle Schwarber getting some extra swings during the 2016 World Series. Photo Credit: [Arturo Pardavila III](#).



The Cubs' new trainer's area features several pools used in player rehab. The new facilities were credited as a big factor in Kyle Schwarber's faster-than-projected recovery

facility, Fletcher wrote a [sports medicine critique on the CBM web site on May 19](#) of the facility that ATI Physical Therapy runs for the Cubs.

Fletcher's lead two paragraphs were as follows:

“Kyle Schwarber underwent surgery on Tuesday, April 19, for an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and lateral cruciate ligament tear (LCL) reconstruction on his left knee after his season-ending collision with Dexter Fowler in Arizona 12 days earlier. The surgery was performed in Dallas by Cowboys-affiliated orthopedic surgeon Dr. Daniel Cooper.

“While Schwarber is predicted to be out the rest of the 2016 season, this writer suspects the Cubs may get some immediate return on their mega-investment for building a new 30,000-square foot clubhouse. A state-of-the-art sports medicine facility is one of the highlights. As the first beneficiary of this fabulous new in-house rehabilitation facility, Schwarber may surprise everyone. It's a long shot, but state-of-the-art training area could allow a Schwarber late-season return to the Cubs...”

Several of Fletcher's fellow health professionals doubted his opinion and bold prediction.

“I saw on the tour Schwarber hobbling around on crutches and could see the determination in his face that he had the will to come back and surprise everyone,” Fletcher said of the slugger's startling comeback. “I knew that having this new state-of-the-art facility in his workplace where he would see his co-workers when they were on homestands would accelerate his recovery as he would stay connected with his teammates. And it did. Hats off to ATI Physical Therapy and the Cubs medical staff that made this October surprise possible. It was occupational medicine at its best!”

Everything did go “absolutely perfectly” for Schwarber, by Brener's definition. So much so that Schwarber may have set an awfully high standard for such injury rehab processes even in an era of dramatic sports-medicine advances.



Dr. Charles Bush-Joseph

“Most sports medicine surgeons were proud of Kyle’s return — but also nervous that his genetics played a very large role in his recovery. Kyle may have set the bar too high for the average patient,” was a candid analysis from Dr. Charles Bush-Joseph, a professor in the department of orthopedic surgery at Rush University Medical Center on Chicago’s near West Side. Bush-Joseph is also a part of the White Sox medical team, serving as a managing member of the Midwest Orthopedics firm at Rush.

Schwarber indeed is both a physical and mental-skills specimen, a true student of baseball even if his physique looks more like a linebacker. He confirmed in a recent interview that he benefited from a true team effort, between his fellow Cubs and the dramatically upgraded Wrigley Field training area.

Schwarber gave the edge in all his recovery factors to “the support system I had from my teammates to the coaches to the manager to the front office to my family and my girlfriend, things like that. It was a lot of behind-the-scenes work and these guys wanted to keep me in Chicago. I’m grateful for that. If I didn’t (stay in Chicago), I don’t think I’d have the opportunity to come back.”

Staying in Chicago speeded recovery

As Fletcher noted, Schwarber was able to stay in Wrigley Field, both rehabbing and keeping his mental outlook current by watching games in uniform from the dugout, thanks to the new clubhouse. His spirits were buoyed from the get-go when he limped out on crutches to be introduced with his teammates for the 2016 home opener.

Making his big-league debut in 2015, Schwarber was no fan of the 1984-vintage clubhouse, a long, narrow space, running north-south under third base, now serving as the Cubs’ indoor batting cage. That is how cramped the old space was. The Cubs had to move the umpires’ dressing room to under the right-field stands a few years back to convert the space to a weight room. Modern workout regimens require space larger than a broom closet. In turn, the vacated old weight room was turned into the Cubs’ first players’ lounge, also a standard in ballparks built from the mid-20th century onward.

When a player at Wrigley Field was injured and had to get X-rays to determine the severity prior to 2016, he had to be ferried to Northwestern Memorial Hospital, four miles to the southeast. That was a challenge in promptly getting diagnosed and initial treatment on most afternoons, especially on Fridays, due to the North Side traffic gridlock. The small trainer’s room, without diagnostic equipment, could only provide first aid and rudimentary treatment.

And when a player started his physical rehab program, he had to journey 1,500 miles to the Cubs’ Fitch Park facility in Mesa. There would be no camaraderie and support from

teammates in the process, no mentally staying in Clark and Addison games to prepare for a comeback.

“I don’t think so,” was Schwarber’s response when asked if he could have pulled off his comeback in the old facilities. “I’d have been mentally away from the team (in Arizona). That’s the part where I put a lot of time in learning the game mentally, and taking a step back just watching. I think I gained a lot in the game of baseball mentally.”

Schwarber did meet up with Fletcher in Champaign recently. Fletcher informed Schwarber about his prediction that he would be back in 2016 despite the fact that he both ACL and LCL ligament tears.

“I am glad someone else believed I could do it,” Schwarber told Fletcher. The latter, who recently sold his own rehab business in November to the same ATI Physical Therapy company that had treated Schwarber, asked Schwarber some details about his rehab.

Schwarber said he never used the new salt water floatation tank of which fellow Cubs strongman Anthony Rizzo was very fond. He also said he did not use an Alter G anti-gravity treadmill (www.alterg.com) that uses suspended air to lower the body weight when one rehabs.

Fletcher had urged Theo Epstein to purchase an Alter G after telling the Cubs president how the Alter G was in use in other MLB clubhouses and had assisted Cardinals pitcher Adam Wainwright in recovery from his Achilles tendon injury in late 2015. Schwarber did benefit with the new water therapy pool the Cubs had installed in the new clubhouse.

The Cubs now had the facilities to match those enjoyed by patients of Bush-Joseph at what is now Guaranteed Rate Field, built in 1990-91.

The advantage of the South Side ballpark for players was summed up two decades ago by now-Cubs bench coach Davey Martinez. Then a Sox outfielder, Martinez explained why he and his teammates were slow to come into the clubhouse to talk to media after games.

Martinez said the Sox typically played long games, and took advantage of the spacious facilities of trainer Herm Schneider and staff. Some no doubt hid from the media in that off-limits area, or took post-game dips in the whirlpool. Thus the one advantage — for the media — at Wrigley Field: the players had few places to go other than their lockers, and thus were usually available to reporters relatively quickly.

Player’s work ethic key factor

Still, what the player does with good facilities and rehab process is crucial in how fast he recovers. Schwarber was the kind of guy who in the minor leagues who was adept enough to change his stance in an at-bat if necessary. So he would attack his rehab as skillfully as working a pitcher.

“While the new facilities are great and a much more pleasing environment for the players to recover and train, it is really more the knowledge and skill of the training staff and the work ethic of the player,” said Bush-Joseph.

As an example, Hall of Famer Andre Dawson be-moaned slacking off in rehab as a teen-ager after his first knee surgery, a complete cut job prior to a long series of arthroscopic surgeries. Forced to work hard to return to the lineup as a big leaguer, Dawson learned to attack his rehab aggressively.

Schwarber’s own work ethic dictated going with the flow and making changes on the fly, anyway.

“I think during the rehab process, there’s a lot of ups and downs,” he said. “There’s going to be a lot of adjustment periods you’re going to make. You’ve got to be mentally tough, because it’s going to be a grind. You’re going to be doing the same thing over and over again. You’ve got to be able to perform. That definitely helped.”

If orthopedic surgery available to the general public is any indication, athletes are benefiting from a golden age in sports medicine.

This writer had right hip-replacement surgery Oct. 3. Within a month, I had tossed aside the cane and walked unaided, thanks to an “anterior” incision on the front of the thigh, not a more traditional “posterior” cut behind the area. I had no post-surgery restrictions of movement in the hip. The newer technique speeds recovery.

Similar advances for the thoroughbred athletes are being applied.

“There has been considerable advancement in the surgical techniques and the biologic enhancements that make Kyle’s response to treatment much better than what it would have been five or certainly 10 years ago,” said Bush-Joseph.

“The methods of how ligaments are repaired and reconstructed are scientifically based on basic science and clinical research. Also, there has been great advancement as to the rehabilitation techniques that allow faster healing and muscle recovery that allowed Kyle to play in the playoffs as effectively as he did.”

Schwarber’s take on his own journey was to not put any limitations on a rehab process, even if the nay-sayers do so.

“I was in a different situation,” he said. “I got hurt really early. For me to be able to work my way back, I think anything’s possible. Don’t let people tell you, you can’t do anything. This just adds fuel to the fire.



As a Cubs minor leaguer at Kane County in 2014, Kyle Schwarber’s stated ability to make adjustments on the fly would prove helpful two years later.

“I didn’t really have a timetable. I had my monthly visits to the doctor, where he said we were looking at winter ball. But that didn’t change my demeanor and how I would rehab. I wanted to attack it and be ready as soon as possible. I didn’t know what that timeline was until I took that last visit to the doctor, when he said I’m not going to hold you back.”

Mentally bursting at the seams, Schwarber took some quick swings in the Arizona Fall League, jetted off to Cleveland and stunned a worldwide TV audience with his hitting rhythm despite little practice. Some might say Schwarber could hit in a wheelchair. He made sure he could do far more than that.

(Upcoming in this two-part series: A special rooster revives the 1989-vintage Shawn-O-Meter and applies the concept to Schwarber.)