

Playing through the pain

MacPhee overcomes knee injuries to resurrect soccer career

By **Brian Hendrickson**
Staff Writer

As teammates celebrated his game-winning goal Sunday at High Point, Austin MacPhee's head was swimming with memories of the pain, hard work and his love for soccer that allowed that moment to happen.

By most doctors' accounts, he should never have even set foot on the field. They figured MacPhee's soccer career at UNCW ended two years ago when his knee exploded in a 4-0 loss to Wake Forest.

Until Sunday, MacPhee measured his career not in wins and losses, but by a staggering list of injuries and treatments: Four MRIs, three knee surgeries, three injections into those knees, two fluid drainages, two X-rays and one suspected blood clot that could've threatened his life.

This one game-winning goal – giving UNCW its first 2-0 start in three years – made it all worthwhile.

"I couldn't find anything else that gave me that buzz," MacPhee said of soccer. "It proved to me that you can do anything you put your mind to."

Now in his final year at UNCW, MacPhee has experienced just one season free of knee surgery – his freshman year in 1999, when the Scotland native was named the team's rookie of the year. But even that year was preceded by a minor surgery to repair cartilage damage in his right knee, and was followed by more surgery in the spring.

But neither of those procedures could compare to the one suffered against Wake Forest on Sept. 20, 2000, when MacPhee felt his left knee give way, and an MRI revealed a small tear in the anterior cruciate ligament – the most serious injury soccer players can suffer.

Doctors told MacPhee that he'd likely never play again. But Dr. Louis Almekinders at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill offered a slim chance through an experimental procedure for which he'd recently received a grant.

The surgery involved sawing off the bottom of MacPhee's kneecap, and would require at least nine months of recovery.

If it offered even the slightest chance of playing again, MacPhee was willing to try.

"I thought about this for about two seconds, and said 'Yes,'" MacPhee said. "Life without soccer was not too good."

But neither was the recovery.

The swelling doubled the size of his knee, and doctors twice



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Austin MacPhee has returned to the soccer pitch with the Seahawks after a tough two years of knee injuries and subsequent physical rehabilitation.

were forced to drain it without the aid of anesthetic. MacPhee's knee swelled up so severely on one occasion that the team doctor had to be called in from Trask Coliseum during halftime of a UNCW men's basketball game.

The swelling led doctors to suspect that MacPhee might have a blood clot – which could be fatal – and the complications extended his recovery period to more than a year.

By the time the 2001 season

began, MacPhee was still experiencing pain. The lack of activity had caused his leg muscles to degenerate, but he couldn't strengthen them until his knee recovered enough to exercise. Trouble was, the knee couldn't fully heal until the muscles recovered.

So in October, 2001, MacPhee returned to Dr. Almekinders and explained the problem. Almekinders offered another experimental treatment: A shot of growth hormones – designed to help children with stunted growth – directly into his knee to accelerate healing.

The procedure was so experimental that MacPhee was required to sign a waiver, giving up his right to sue if the injection led to other problems.

He signed without question, and was given the shot.

"This was the worst pain I have ever experienced," he said. "My T-shirt was soaked with sweat."

Within two weeks, however, MacPhee finally showed improvement, and a month later was given a second shot. By Christmas – almost a year after surgery – MacPhee finally began feeling like he could return to the field. During the spring – when he worked out overseas – it was obvious he was near a remarkable return.

"He's very, very passionate about the game," said UNCW men's soccer coach Aidan Heaney. "If there was anything he had to do this summer, he did it. There was no question."

"He could've been put on scholarship. He could've gotten an education – he's a bright kid. But he wanted to play soccer."

MacPhee had never played for Heaney until last week – he coached his first game at UNCW nearly a year after MacPhee's injury – but partly in recognition of his fight to return, Heaney named MacPhee a captain this fall with only general knowledge of his ability. But MacPhee quickly showed he deserved that honor.

Against Elon – his first game in nearly two years – MacPhee played all 90 minutes in UNCW's 1-0 victory. Against High Point, he scored the winning goal.

He's been through several painful procedures to reach this point, and each one came flooding back after scoring that goal against High Point.

The moment justified his fight to return.

Said MacPhee: "I'd go through it again, to play again."

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