

SPORTS

'I just wanted to crush it:' Memphis softball player overcoming ACL injury with a hot bat

Leah Peters rehabbed for over eight months following an ACL injury. Now she's helping the Yellowjackets with one of the hottest bats on her team.

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Memphis sophomore Leah Peters has returned from an ACL injury and is now playing third base for the Yellowjackets' softball team. *Bruce Kaltz Photography/Courtesy Photo*

It was just a typical practice for the Memphis girls basketball team in February 2020.

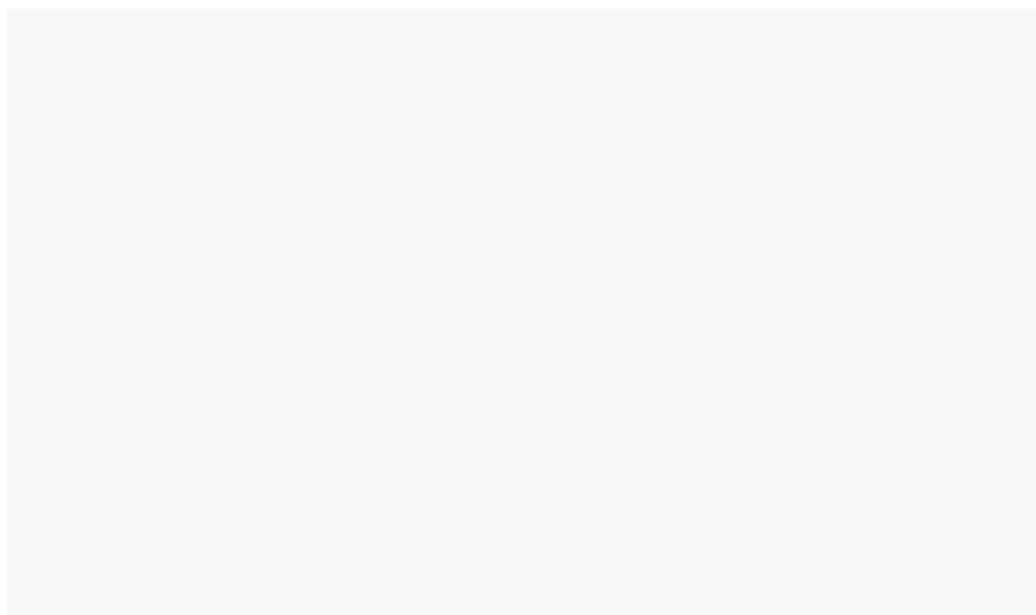
Leah Peters went up for a routine layup, but when she landed, she heard a popping noise in her left knee.

"Oh, that's not good," she remembers thinking.

At first, her doctor said it wasn't an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tear, which would have been a boon for her recovery. But then it was discovered she required surgery for an entire ACL reconstruction.

Peters missed over eight months while rehabilitating her injury but has finally returned and has made an impact with Memphis' softball team this spring. The Yellowjackets are 13-5 and she is batting .475.

Here's how she battled back and became a star for the Yellowjackets one again.



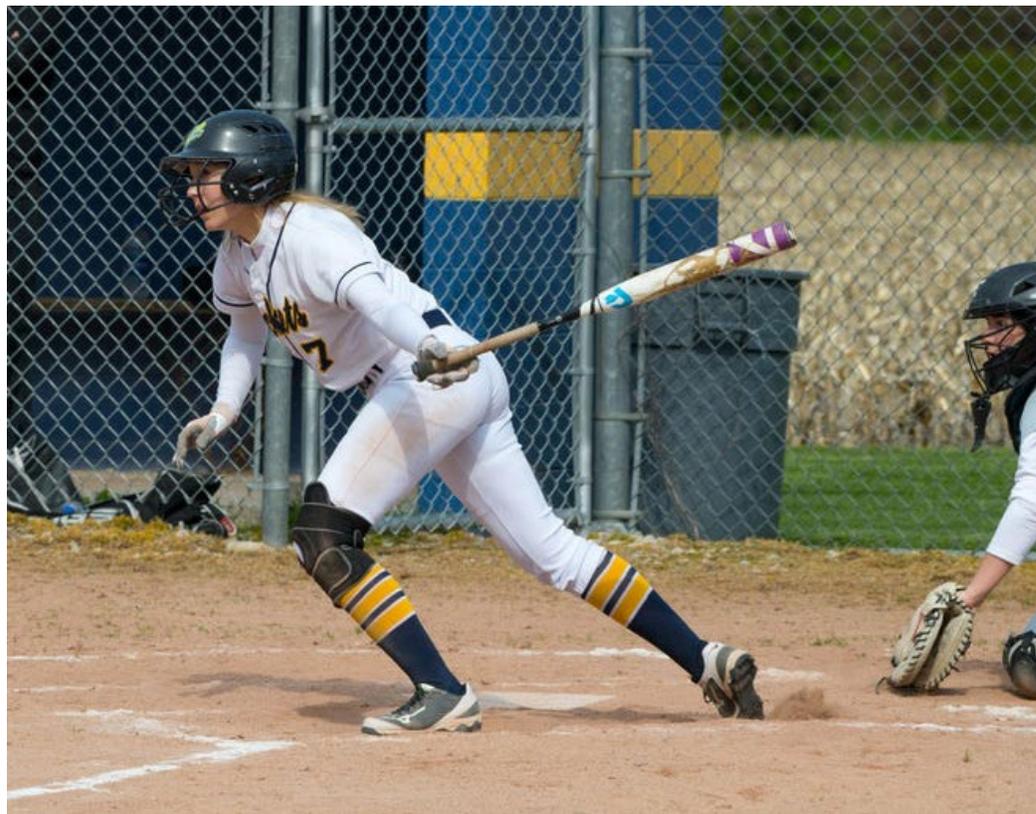
Rehabbing her knee

Peters sat out the final month of the 2020 basketball season with the left knee injury, forced to support her teammates as merely a fan from the bench.

She remembers the Yellowjackets' boys basketball team gifting her a signed ball as a "get well soon" gift right before she went in for her March 13 surgery.

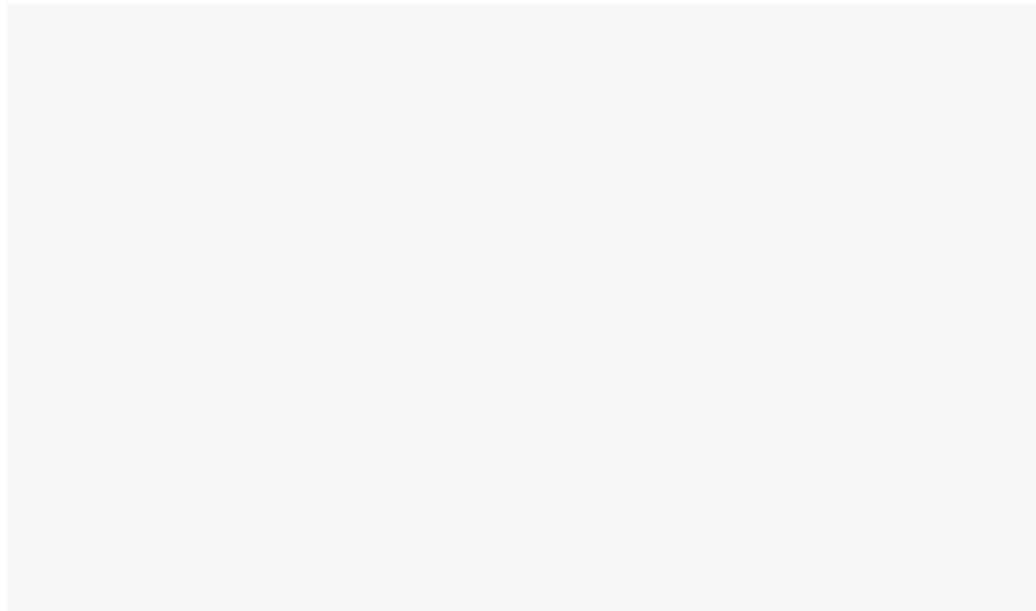
Mere hours after she went under the knife, the national pandemic reared its head and forced local governments to shut down businesses in an instant. That meant Peters, who was fresh out of the hospital, wasn't going to start physical therapy on time.

It wasn't until two months after her surgery she was able to visit Maureen Muzzarelli at Orthopedic Associates of Port Huron to begin her long road to recovery. She had built up so much scar tissue from not immediately starting physical therapy that her timeline back to her teammates was going to be eight months, minimum.



Memphis sophomore Leah Peters has returned from an ACL injury and is batting .475 for the Yellowjackets' softball team.
Bruce Kaltz Photography/Courtesy Photo

When the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services lessened its lockdown restrictions, Peters was at physical therapy while her best friends were taking batting practice at the softball field or playing pickup basketball games at the park. They were able to hang out together and get carryout meals while she was traveling to Port Huron for three-hour sessions of physical therapy. Sometimes those sessions lasted as long as four or five hours, depending on how well she was doing in the recovery process.



Physical therapy was her life three days a week and, usually, a mountain of homework was waiting for her by the time she'd return home from Port Huron.

"That was really, really tough on me," Peters said. "I remember going to the beach with my friends and having to sit off to the side while they played beach volleyball. During the summer, I like to do 4-H, and I couldn't do that as well as I wanted to. I had to limp around with my calf and pigs. It was a lot to mentally deal with, and there were a couple of days where I just couldn't handle it and wanted to take a break."

Peters pushed on, eventually wrapping up physical therapy in December. She had missed her entire sophomore volleyball season, but she made it back for the start of basketball.

Bouncing back with basketball

Without having volleyball to get herself into shape, it took her a while to develop her basketball legs. And, early on, she was timid because she had a brand new bulky knee brace she was learning to play with.

"My coach (Mark Carlson) always told me to, 'Trust in the brace, it won't let you down,' and my biggest problem was I was always scared to go into contact because I could possibly reinjure my knee," she said.

Peters eventually found her confidence on the hardwood by season's end — just in time for the start of softball, and the Yellowjackets are enjoying their best start to a season under fifth-year coach Adam Walsh.

They're a young squad that relies on their seven juniors and three sophomores. Technically, they're a year behind schedule after losing the 2020 season to COVID-19, but they've burst onto the scene with big bats and stellar pitching.

"We have a lot of talent, and I've actually been coaching this group of girls since they were 8 year olds in our youth program," Walsh said. "We knew this group coming up was the one we were waiting for when I took this coaching job. Now that they're finally here, they've brought a lot of fun and energy to the program. They all have a big desire to learn and want to be here, and, definitely, Leah is on her way to being a star for us."

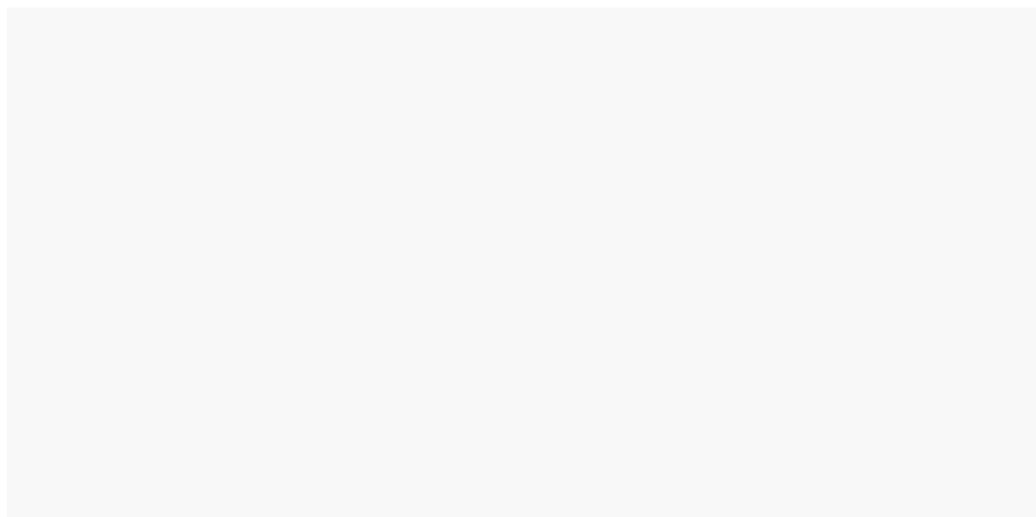


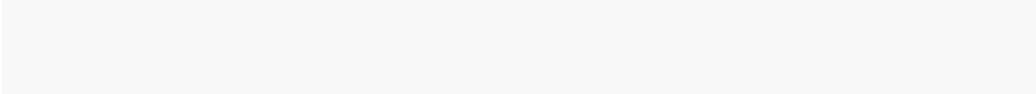
Memphis sophomore Leah Peters has returned from an ACL injury and is now playing third base for the Yellowjackets' softball team. *Bruce Kaltz Photography/Courtesy Photo*

Peters has experience playing shortstop, but Walsh has moved her to third base to limit her knee's range of motion in hopes of keeping her injury-free.

She used to play third base as a middle school travel player with the Marysville Xtreme Synergy, but it's been over two years since she's called that position home.

"It came down to her having a really strong arm, basically a cannon for an arm," Walsh said. "Having her at third has been safer for us, and she's done really, really well at it."





"The one thing that impresses me about Leah is she always comes to practice with a smile on her face and is asking questions. Anytime she thinks she makes a bad play, she asks how she can do it better, and she's never once used her knee as an excuse. She's just been a hard worker."

Becoming a big bat in the lineup

Walsh said Peters' workman-like attitude has made her dangerous at the plate.

During the winter, she'd often visit Walsh for voluntary hitting instruction after two hours of basketball practice.

"When she's here, it's not work to her," Walsh said. "She's always here with a smile on her face and has a great attitude."

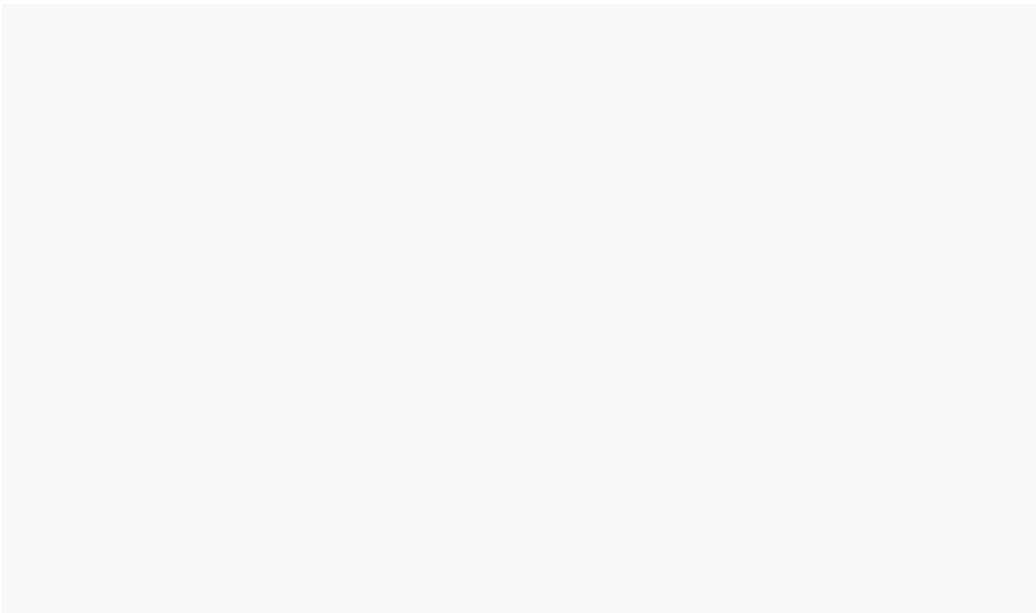
Peters has developed a quick bat and powerful swing, Walsh said.

Entering this week, she was batting .475 with three home runs, seven doubles and two triples.

"You wouldn't have known she hadn't picked up a bat in two years unless you asked her," he added. "Even though we were out for COVID-19, we were able to get into the cage, but she still missed that, which was a full 14 or 16 months without her swinging because of that knee. And she looks like she hasn't missed a beat."

Like basketball, Peters said she came into the spring nervous about returning to softball, but she was eager to get active in sports again.

She was sick of sitting on the couch at home. She was ready to contribute to her team again and move on from her knee injury.



"During my first at-bat, of course, I was a little scared that the pitcher could hit my knee," Peters said. "But I just wanted to hit the ball because it had been so long. I just wanted to crush it. And I guess I have been ever since."

Brandon Folsom is the sports reporter at the Times Herald. Do you have a story idea? Email him at bfolsom@gannett.com. [Click here to follow him on Twitter](#).