JC SOFTBALL

Cuellar hoping to spark Hawks in playoffs

Cabrillo closes out regular season today v Hartnell

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APRIL 15 — Cabrillo College took the field March 15 for a doubleheader against Yuba College.

The Seahawks won the first game, 3-2, but ultimately took a huge loss in the process.

Their leadoff hitter and vocal leader, sophomore centerfielder Mikal Cuellar, suffered a partially torn posterior cruciate ligament (PCL) that took her out of the lineup. She was thrown out at home and her knee collided with the catcher’s shin guard in a play at the plate. She felt the pain and had to sit out the second game of the day.

After being diagnosed with the knee injury, doctors told her that her season was over. Instead of panicking, Cabrillo head coach Kristy Rosinger sent Cuellar to head athletic trainer Mark Ramsey.

The crushing news didn’t stop Cuellar from rehabbing to build up enough strength in her knee to make it back before season’s end.

Cuellar, who hit .480 and stole 31 bases as a freshman on her way to multiple postseason awards, was devastated to miss extended time for the first time in her life. Ramsey led her through exercises like static quad and hamstring holds and calf raises just so she could slowly start running again. Three weeks after the injury, and one week before she returned to game action, she picked up her bat and glove to practice for the first time since her injury.

“I worked so hard to come back before the doctor said I could play so that I could finish out the season with my team,” Cuellar said.

She missed just 12 games and made her return to the lineup in a 5-1 win against Monterey Peninsula College April 14. Currently, she isn’t as fast as she once was, but she says she is about “80 percent” and proved it by beating out a bunt single in her first game back.

“The recovery process was hard mentally because I had never sat out so many games being injured,” Cuellar said. “I was in the training room everyday for hours.”

In her absence, Rosinger moved freshman outfielder Kristina Mio into the leadoff spot, which is where Cuellar regularly hit. Mio excelled.

“She really filled in that spot nicely,” Rosinger said. “She is very similar, a complement to Mikal.”

Mio leaned on Cuellar for advice and they grew even closer than they already were. Cuellar helped her in center field, at the plate and on the base path.

“She taught me how to be the first hitter again,” Mio said. “She kind of reminded me of what it was like to do it again and how much pressure it is.”

In a way, Mio has been training for this moment since her days at Watsonville High. She was at the bottom of the lineup during her freshman year of high school and built her way up to the leadoff position her senior year. She started her Seahawks career by batting in the seven or nine spot in the order and never hit leadoff until Cuellar went down.

It was an adjustment that she made smoothly. The team won their first six with Mio in the leadoff spot and 10 of 12 total. She thrived and hit .378 with 14 stolen bases in Cuellar’s absence.

“She did really good,” Cuellar added. “I never doubted her, she stepped up and became a leader.”

Cuellar is being eased back into the batter’s box by hitting in the number nine spot due to her speed. Normally production from a player that deep in the order is unheard of, but that isn’t the case with the former All-American rounding out the Seahawks order.

“She will have a strong impact,” Rosinger said. “The whole league is aware of her. We have had teams calling us asking, ‘Is Mikal going to be back?’ She scares other teams with her speed. It puts a lot of pressure on the other team’s defense.”

Her hours in rehab paid off. The more progress she achieved in rehab, the harder it drove her to work her way back.

“It felt absolutely amazing to go from sitting on the bench and watching my team to actually see how the recovery process was going,” Cuellar said.

“They would always check in and ask, ‘How are you doing?’ or ‘When are you coming back?’”

She still Cheered in the dugout while the Seahawks are hitting, but now that she is back in the outfield she is more hands on—like before.

“It’s nice to have her back in the outfield,” Rosinger said.

Thursday against West Valley College, she was tested twice in center field and succeeded on both occasions. The first time, she easily tracked down a ball that was hit to deep center and the second time she had to sprint forward and reach out her mitt to make the nice catch.

CUELLAR

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