

Monroe's Shannon Fretz trying to overcome injuries to play

A little over two months after she was seriously injured in a car accident, Monroe's Shannon Fretz is on the mend and has one promise: She'll be back -- this season

*By Scott M. Johnson
Herald Writer – March 9, 2008*

MONROE -- Curt Eskebeck first realized that there was a chance his 18-year-old centerfielder was at the opening practice of the season when he saw her walker leaning against the fence near first base.

Eskebeck, Monroe High School's softball coach, turned to assistant Mike Birch in disbelief, asking: "Is Shannon here?"

The date was Feb. 25, when the Bearcats would take the field for their first practice of the upcoming softball season. It was also less than two months after the day that Shannon Fretz almost lost her life.

When Eskebeck looked toward the group of players gathered in the outfield grass on an unusually sunny afternoon, his eyes soon settled on Shannon Fretz.

"When I saw her at practice," Eskebeck said a few days later, "it was like a miracle."

If the Monroe softball team needs motivation in its chase for conference, district and -- quite possibly -- state titles this season, the players need look no further than teammate Shannon Fretz.

If they're looking for evidence of life's miracles, they can find that too in the 18-year-old senior.

"She's our miracle child," senior infielder Tessa Degel said of her teammate.

After suffering two broken legs, a fractured hand and a torn aorta in her heart in a Dec. 28 auto accident on Highway 2, Fretz was close to death and staring at the real possibility that she would never walk again. And yet when she showed up for Monroe's first softball practice less than two months later, the first thing Fretz told Eskebeck was that she planned on playing for the Bearcats at some point this season.

"I looked at the schedule, and districts are not until May 17, so I think I could be back by then," Fretz said in a phone interview a few days later, having ditched the walker after six weeks of intense rehab. "It's my senior year, and with so many good players gone -- we lost our No. 3 and 4 hitters to graduation -- I think I could really help the team."

Fretz is still weeks, if not months, away from even practicing with the Bearcats. But she has been attending practices for the past two weeks, doing anything she can to stay involved.

"We love her being here," said senior pitcher Jordan Birch, The Herald's 2007 player of the year. "It's motivation -- to us and to her."

The only immediate visible signs that Fretz has been through a traumatic experience are the scar on her forehead, the swollen left hand and the slight limp. She's not shy about the other injuries, offering visitors a chance to feel the lump on her right thigh that remains after her femur was snapped in two. At her first Monroe softball practice, she lifted her shirt partway to show teammates the scar from her heart surgery.

As if that's not inspiring enough, the Bearcats have motivation to make a third consecutive trip to state because of the way the 2007 season ended. Monroe went 23-3 last year, winning its first game at the state

tournament before losing back-to-back games later that day. In a 3-2 loss to Olympia, the speedy Fretz was thrown out at home trying to stretch a triple into an inside-the-park homer in the bottom of the seventh inning.

With Birch and four other starters back from that team, the Bearcats can shoot for a state title without any need for hyperbole. Birch posted a 23-2 record and 0.36 ERA last season, while the Bearcats also return solid offensive hitters like catcher Briar Stanley (.425 batting average and four home runs last season) and Degel (.278, 12 RBI in 2007).

But Monroe does have to find replacements for the four graduated seniors who combined for 10 home runs and 53 RBI last season. And the Bearcats are also looking for a temporary help in centerfield and at the top of the lineup, from where Fretz batted .375 with a .574 on-base percentage last season.

"If she got on," Eskeback said, "we knew we were going to score."

Fretz's motivation to return to the field has helped fuel a remarkable recovery.

She suffered major injuries and lost one of her friends in the Dec. 28 accident on Highway 2 near Gold Bar. Classmate Loren Lloyd was driving a Jeep Cherokee back from Stevens Pass, where Lloyd, Fretz and another friend named Thomas Turner had been snowboarding. Police said that Lloyd's SUV crossed the center line at around 2:30 p.m. and hit a full-size pickup truck head on.

Fretz does not remember the details of the accident, but she does recall waking up in the backseat 45 minutes later and knowing something was wrong. She stared at her mangled and bloody left hand, which was the only thing she could feel, and forced herself to move her toes to make sure she wasn't paralyzed. She could hear Lloyd screaming in pain as well as the sound of an emergency crew trying to pry its way into the totaled car with a hydraulic rescue tool.

After 10 more minutes, the medics reached Fretz and shot her up with pain medicine. The next memory she had was waking up at Seattle's Harborview Medical Center in a haze.

"My first thought was: I hope I can still play softball," she said last week. "And: Thank God it's my left hand, so I can still throw."

Only later did she learn that one of her snowboarding buddies -- Turner is a close friend with Fretz's boyfriend, Vince Ruden -- did not pull through. Two months later, the impact of that news still had not set in.

"I feel extremely lucky," she said on Feb. 28. "Not all of it has really hit me yet. It hasn't really hit me that he's gone."

After returning to school on March 3, Fretz met the tragedy head-on while eating lunch with a group that included Ruden and Turner's longtime girlfriend, Camby Smith.

Later that day, Fretz said the experience was surreal.

"I think I feel more sad for the other people who were affected than I do for myself," she said, "if that makes any sense."

During her two-week hospitalization, Fretz spent 10 days in what she called a "medical coma" that was induced by the doctors so she could manage the pain. Fretz was mostly unconscious through New Years Eve and her 18th birthday five days later.

The first full day she remembers is Jan. 8, five days before she was released from the hospital. After she returned home, Fretz was visited by her softball teammates and Eskeback, who often brought scones from his family's bakery in Monroe.

Fretz was getting around with the use of a walker until Feb. 26, when she ditched the walking aid far ahead of schedule. With the help of a physical therapist, Fretz was walking again much earlier than expected.

"She's accepted it," Shannon's mother, Nancy Fretz, said of the tragedy. "Obviously, she's frustrated because she loves to play ball. But I have no doubt she'll be back."

As improbable as it sounds, Shannon Fretz is convinced that she will play for the Bearcats at some point this season.

When a practice visitor wished her luck on returning to the field, Fretz looked at him with conviction in her eye and said: "I will be back for districts. I will."

But that's not what is most important. What matters most is that Shannon Fretz is still here.

"The whole thing is that she's alive and mending," Eskeback said. "She's lucky to survive that. And she's still got the bounce and the smile, just like she always had."

"Life's pretty good when you see someone who's got so much going for them."