

**ND** from B1

Jesse Rice had to see for himself if the rumors were true. Was Nicki Derrick really that good of a softball pitcher? Rice, the head softball coach at North Douglas, decided to stick around after practice when Derrick's eighth grade team came to play.

"I watched her pitch that first time," said Rice reflecting on seeing a player who would soon turn this consistently good softball team in to a great softball team "and said, 'Wow, she really is as good as they say.' She really was."

Growing up, Derrick didn't meet a sport she didn't love. First there was gymnastics then a brief soccer stint but by second grade it was all the same sports she plays today: volleyball, basketball and softball.

"I would start volleyball and be, 'Oh, this is my favorite sport.' Then I would get into basketball, 'Oh, love this.' And then softball and it'd be, 'Oh, by far favorite sport,'" she said.

Regardless of favorite, Derrick especially excels in softball. In her freshman year she was named starter and Rice's only concern was that she was, well, a freshman.

"She was only 14-years-old. I was thinking, she's got all this talent but I was concerned about her maturity level. You know, being young. Freshmen are freshmen and you expect them to make mistakes," he said.

Rice soon found with Derrick, it was not an issue at all. Determination to win met with an often-unhittable fastball – while also being the team leader in homeruns – was a combination that helped the Warriors win a league and then, ultimately, a state title. The team's playoff-run saw Derrick throw a no-hitter followed by 10 strikeouts in the state championship to help give the school its first-ever softball title. Derrick was named to the 1A first-team in addition to being named pitcher of the year and player of the year.

But last season, sidelined by injury, she was forced to watch from the dugout.

"That was the (season) I was most excited for and because it hadn't fully hit me, it wasn't as hard on me as I thought it was going to be," said Derrick. "When they started games, it was like, I cannot wait to be recovered. It was hard for me mentally to watch them. Especially the (other sophomores at the time) because we've been playing together



Nicki Derrick back in the lineup with her teammates against Yoncalla.

since second grade. So to see them play without me, I was happy for them but I wished I could be out there with them."

She attended practices and games and did what she could to help the team. Her and Rice would discuss strategy from the bench and she would give tips about particular players she had played against growing up in ASA. She offered advice to teammates going through hitting slumps and even called pitches for one game when the North Douglas pitching coach, her dad, was unable to attend the game. But while her teammates got to focus all their energy on the season at-hand, Derrick was focused on the rehab process.

"Going from month-to-month I would get excited about stuff like walking and if it was just a normal year I would get excited about softball wins. It was a really hard adjustment and as an athlete you feel so defeated and I was not used to it at all," said Derrick.

After suffering the injury in February, Derrick had surgery in March. Between the time she was injured and the procedure, she had been moving somewhat-fine and had convinced herself surgery was no longer necessary. Her doctor knew otherwise and provided an ultimatum: if she did not undergo the surgery, she would never be able to play sports again. After undergoing surgery, things didn't get better right away; it was intense pain for the first week and discomfort for the next month.

"You lose so much muscle in the span of two weeks after surgery. So my first day of rehab was probably the hardest days of my life because they

told me to lift my leg and I would look at it and I'd be like, I'm trying to. It's just not moving," said Derrick.

An athlete as soon as she could walk, Derrick was now without part of her identity. She had suffered through injuries before – a broken foot, nerve damage, a minor knee injury – but this was different. This was touching on all parts of her life.

"A lot of my relationships happen through sports and so I struggled with having relationships with people without sports. And so that took me awhile to be like, we don't have the sports relationship, I'm going to have to find a way to connect with them in a different way and it took me a couple months to realize that," she reflected.

After pulling herself away from reading story after story online about various ACL injuries – both the inspiring and frightening – she made progress both physically and mentally. And once back at school, things started to feel almost normal again.

"When I came back with crutches everyone was like, what can I do to help you? And it was just something that, I was just so part of everything that it didn't really make me feel like I was injured because people went out of their way to make sure I was included," said Derrick. "So honestly, just the people I had around me got me through this. Because if I was alone, I can tell you, I would not have made it through."

After a summer of gaining back strength, it was time for volleyball season. Now a junior, Derrick started the season by being able to run but was unable to participate in scrimmage or drills that forced her to move side-to-side.

"I would go to physical therapy once a week, so every single week I would come back with something new I could do and something exciting to tell the team," said Derrick. "And that would just make my day so much better. To see the excitement in their faces when I tell them, it was like okay, they care about me. They are waiting for me to come back. So I really loved that."

Not only waiting, but excited for her to come back to the starting lineup.

"She's got a great work ethic and she wanted to come back as soon as possible," said head coach Anne Campbell. "But one thing that she had to be was patient which I am sure was frustrating for her and also for us because we just knew that getting her back would change our game."

With Derrick out as setter, North Douglas's Abby Whipple and Arianna Helgren, a pair of lethal outside hitters, spent the summer learning to be setters for the first time. All season they took up the new position in order to help the team. The addition of Derrick back into the team would not only relieve them of this new position but would open up the team's offense. After being cleared for games, she came back to practice at the start of this month.

"It was (nerve wracking)," said Campbell. After a first practice where she thought Nicki might have been favoring her knee. The next practice featured a guest-coach who was ready to, literally, dive right in.

"Right off the bat we had a guest coach come in and work with the girls and she started having them do these lateral movements and I was like biting my nails as Nicki was shuffling side to side," said Campbell. "Then (Nicki) just started diving and she was running all over the place and she was just Nicki again so I could tell that she was comfortable."

Derrick played in her first game on October 4 and is working her way back to full strength as the fourth-ranked Warriors now prepare for a playoff run.

"I forget how much I love volleyball because it is my least favorite sport. But...it's fun being out there with the girls," Derrick said after North Douglas defeated Yoncalla on October 9. "Volleyball has a different energy than sports like basketball and softball: you get to celebrate every single point with your team. That environment is just really neat to be back. I love it."

Volleyball will turn into basketball season which will then bring the start of softball. A returning cycle that for Derrick, was incomplete over the last year. But now she's back and ready for everything that is coming her way.

"I love sports and these last six months made me realize it and I want to be doing this for as long as possible," said Derrick.

"It's just not something that I'm ready to give up yet."

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