

Amazing recovery drives Navy gymnast
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Published 03/12/09

Just over a year ago, Andrew Faulk was lying on an operating table with most of his internal organs sitting in a bucket alongside. Freshman Andrew Faulk recovered from three major surgeries to return to Navy's gymnastics team and excel as the Mids' most accomplished competitor this season.

A seemingly routine procedure had gone horribly wrong and Faulk's life hung in the balance. During arthroscopic surgery on Faulk's pancreas, surgeons had accidentally cut a major artery within the stomach.

By the time doctors realized the mistake, Faulk had lost eight units of blood and was in serious danger of dying. "They told me later there was an hour window when I could have died if they hadn't stopped the internal bleeding," Faulk said.

It was the latest, and most serious, health issue that had threatened Faulk's career as a Naval Academy Midshipman and collegiate gymnast. It began just before Thanksgiving in 2007 when Faulk was rushed to Anne Arundel Medical Center and doctors found that a gall stone had lodged inside his pancreas. They quickly removed his gall bladder, but the pancreatitis that had developed would cause further problems.

So it was that Faulk wound up back home in San Antonio, Texas, having a second operation to drain a cyst that had developed inside his pancreas. Initially, doctors thought the fluid that had been released was from the cyst, but soon realized it was blood pouring from the severed artery.

"The head of the gastroenterology unit at Brook Army Medical Center knelt down beside my wife with a very grim look on his face and said 'We're very sorry,'" Emmet Faulk recalled. "I thought the next words out of his mouth were going to be 'We did all we could.' "

Fortunately, another surgeon was able to find the damaged artery and stop the bleeding. It was during that operation that Faulk had his intestines and other organs removed.

When Andrew Faulk awoke, saw that he was stitched from sternum to abdomen and was told all of what happened, his initial thoughts involved gymnastics. "I was really worried I wouldn't be able to get back into gymnastics. The doctors said I would never regain full abdominal strength and that is crucial in my sport."

Remarkably, Faulk is not only competing in gymnastics again, but excelling. Re-classified as a freshman at the Naval Academy, the San Antonio resident has one of the top all-around performers for a men's team that is ranked 13th nationally in NCAA Division I.

"That this young man could come back and complete his duties as a Midshipman is a miracle. To also return to gymnastics and perform at a high level is absolutely amazing," said Dr. Sho Fukushima, the 18th-year head coach at Navy.

Faulk, who was re-classified as a freshman at the Naval Academy, is currently 18th nationally in the all-around and 20th on the vault. He won the vault and the all-around competition at his first career meet against Army (Feb. 7), helping Navy capture the N-Star with a 330.05-318.3 victory.

Faulk followed that up with a first-place performance on the vault at the All-Academy Championship on Feb. 14. His score of 16.05 points was one of the five-highest marks in the nation at that time.

Most recently, Faulk was named National Collegiate Division Gymnast of the Week and ECAC Rookie of the Week in recognition of winning the all-around competition in Navy's final home tri-meet against William & Mary and Springfield. He scored higher than 13.5 on all six events to accumulate a career-high score of 85.15 in the all-around.

"Andrew is totally committed. He knows what he wants and is willing to work hard to achieve those goals," Dr. Fukushima said. "He is certainly one of the finest freshman performers we've had at Navy. He is a very quiet, intelligent kid with a positive outlook, but whenever he gets on that equipment he competes like an animal."

Emmet Faulk is not that surprised his son recovered so quickly from the near-death experience and total of three surgeries to resume gymnastics.

"For the past 10 years, Andrew has been focused on two things - academics and gymnastics. When he was home recovering, all this kid could talk or think about was 'When can I get back to gymnastics,' " the elder Faulk said. "As parents, my wife and I are in awe about what Andrew has accomplished this season. Considering what Andrew has been through, he shouldn't even be competing."

Faulk took up gymnastics at the age of 10 at the recommendation of a family friend who saw the youngster perform a round-off handspring. Naturally flexible, dexterous and strong, Faulk had taught himself the difficult skill.

Training at Alamo Gymnastics under the direction of head coach Yuejin Sun, Faulk achieved the highest ranking (Level 10) possible and placed 15th in the all-around competition at the Junior Olympic Nationals in 2007.

Faulk credits his development to Sun, a former member of the Chinese national team and co-author of the 2008 U.S. Gymnastics Developmental program. Sun coaches the Junior Olympic National Team coach and recently served as liaison to the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics squad that competed in Beijing, China.

"Coach Sun was very supportive and always pushed me. He saw I had potential so he had me practice with the older kids so that I could see the seriousness of the sport," Faulk said.

Navy assistant coach Craig Holt spotted Faulk at a meet and convinced the three-time Junior Olympic Regional team member to choose the Naval Academy over scholarship offers from

Nebraska and Minnesota. Needless to say, the Navy coaches are ecstatic to see such a top-notch recruit back with the program.

"Andrew has been instrumental to our success this season and he is only going to get better. I am very excited about his future," Fukushima said.

Faulk has developed a vault that has a very high degree of difficulty - a Kasamatsu with one twist. He has a difficult floor exercise that features a double somersault with a full twist and half twist with a double front on the initial two passes.

"Every time I get out on the floor I think about how fortunate I am to be able to come back and compete. It's a thrill to still be able to do what I love and I'm very grateful," said Faulk, who is a good bet to qualify for the NCAA Division I National Championships as an individual if Navy does not do so as a team.