

Lifelong Athlete Gets Back to Action After Major Knee Surgery



A competitive athlete since she was a kid, Gretchen Girgenti could do it all – swimming, soccer, cycling and even competing in triathlons. She powered through sports-related knee injuries throughout the years, until one day, at age 34, the young, fit personal trainer from Toms River could barely walk without her knee giving out.

“I was at the beach with my husband and stepdaughter and my right knee began to bother me. When I stepped off the boardwalk onto the sand, I heard a ‘pop’ and felt it at the same time. I told my husband, ‘my knee just completely blew apart,’” said Gretchen, who knew immediately where to go for treatment – Erik Larsen, DO, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon and Chairman of the Department of Orthopedics at Community Medical Center.

Dr. Larsen, who had previously performed Gretchen’s shoulder surgery to address an unrelated injury caused by swimming and weight training, ordered an MRI to determine the cause of her pain, then an OATS procedure to correct it.

“Gretchen’s years of activity led to a chronic problem and damage to her ACL and, in particular, she experienced persistent instability that couldn’t be regained,” said Dr. Larsen. “Gretchen knocked off a piece of cartilage on the tip of her femur bone. I used bone and cartilage from another part of her knee that doesn’t bear as much weight – a procedure known as osteoarticular autologous transfer system, or OATS – to repair the knee and joints.”

Physical Therapy Program Helps People Get Back on Their Feet

CMC’s Rehabilitation Services Department offers a full gamut of physical therapy services. The staff of highly-skilled, licensed physical therapists – with advanced training in their specialty – provides individualized care and treatment programs for teens to seniors. On any given day, physical therapists work with individuals requiring post-operative care, young athletes and “weekend warriors” suffering from sports-related injuries, and those suffering from orthopedic issues like back, neck and shoulder pain.

Treatment for:

- Back & neck pain
- Dizziness and balance
- Joint replacement
- Motor vehicle accidents
- Sports injuries
- Sprains & strains
- Vestibular rehabilitation
- Work-related injury

While performing the OATS procedure, Dr. Larsen noticed a partial tear in Gretchen's arterial cruciate ligament (ACL), one of four major ligaments that comprise the knee. He recommended physical therapy as the first course of treatment, but when Gretchen continued experiencing pain without making much progress, she went back to Dr. Larsen to discuss the next steps.

"Dr. Larsen gave me options – an ACL brace with continued physical therapy or surgery. He didn't push the surgery, but because I've been an athlete for so long, I wanted the surgery right away so I could get back to my active lifestyle," said Gretchen.

"Often, people who want to maintain a high level of activity require ACL total reconstruction. Although there are more conservative options, surgery made sense so Gretchen could get back to doing the activities she enjoys," said Dr. Larsen, who performed Gretchen's second surgery using a cadaver ACL in January – just three months after her first surgery.

"Dr. Larsen was positive and reassuring. He told me to give it time, but that his goal was to get back to my normal activities," she said.

Following surgery, Gretchen spent several months in physical therapy.

"I'm finally back to running and cycling," she said, adding that she has no plans to slow down her active lifestyle. Gretchen's long-term goal is to be able to participate in the Ironman Triathlon in two years.

"Amazing doesn't even begin to describe Dr. Larsen. His bedside manner sets the bar so high for any physician. He's so kind and compassionate. He makes you feel not like a patient but like his family – he cares that much."

For a referral to an orthopedic surgeon, call **1.888.724.7123** or visit **barnabashealth.org/community**.



Erik Larsen, DO
Board Certified in Orthopedic Surgery
Chair, Department of Orthopedics

Therapies

The physical therapy team develops individualized programs- including a variety of modalities -based on the individual's injury, occupation or sport.

Manual Therapy – stretching, massage, and hands-on strengthening exercises to reeducate the body into proper movement and mechanics

Joint Mobilization – a treatment technique used to manage musculoskeletal conditions

Cold Laser – a treatment where low level laser is used to relieve inflammation and pain, cold laser treatment can be highly beneficial for patients with arthritis, joint pains, sports injuries, soft tissue injuries, plantar fasciitis, and tendonitis

Cryotherapy (ice packs) – the use of cold in the treatment of acute and sub-acute injury and to decrease discomfort after athletic reconditioning; used for injuries involving inflammation and swelling such as tendonitis

Heat Therapy – used to relieve joint pain and residual swelling associated with injury, reduce muscle spasms and tightness, and help increase flexibility of tight muscles that are a result of skeletal muscle (eg., hamstring, quadriceps) strain

Ultrasound – to generate heat deep in the body, ultrasound therapy can help loosen up tissues in preparation for manual therapy or exercise

Physical Therapy Crucial to Sports Injury Recovery

Physical therapists and physical therapists assistants help individuals not only recover from injuries but work to prevent future injuries. Common injuries include: Achilles tendonitis, ACL tears, golfers elbow, shoulder pain and instability, and shin splints.

"We see a large number of middle and high school athletes with sports-related injuries – typically due to over use. It's too much, too soon, too often," said Ray Howard, PT, DPT, OCS, Regional Director of Rehabilitation Services at Community and Kimball Medical Centers. "With proper therapies and a commitment to adhering to a physical therapy program, we can help these young athletes regain their strength and mobility and get them back to play."

Free Sports Injury Prevention Seminars

As a public service, CMC's Physical Therapists are available to provide sports teams with injury prevention tips, screening for knee injuries, balance screening, and more. For more information or to schedule a free seminar, call 732-557-8046 and select prompt 5.

For information about Community Medical Center's Rehabilitation Services Department, including physical, occupational and speech therapy, call **1-888-724-7123** or visit **barnabashealth.org/community**.