

Pulling Back the Arrow: A Q&A with Kendall Johnson

By Renae Bringman | September 14th 2016

Growing up in Soccer City USA and playing for the University of Portland, it's not a surprise that Kendall Johnson has quickly become a fan favorite of her local club. Now The Portland Thorns defensive midfielder discusses her long journey to getting healthy and back on the pitch.

You've been playing soccer for nearly your whole life, playing collegiate soccer at the University of Portland and now professionally for with the Portland Thorns. What is it about the game of soccer that made you want to turn it into a career?

Growing up I always had a soccer ball with me, my parents still tell people how a soccer ball was my favorite toy even before I could walk [laughs]. "I played my first game when I was 8 years old and from that day on I just fell in love. As the years went by and I kept playing, I started getting really good." In high school we went undefeated my junior year and I just remember that feeling, it was amazing and so rewarding, that's when I knew I wanted to play at the highest level possible for as long as I physically could. [Johnson lead her Lincoln High School team to state championships in 2007 and 2008. She was named ESPN First Team All-America and the Gatorade State Player of the Year in 2008.]

You mention you'd like to play for as long as you physically can, and you're now in your second season with the Portland Thorns, but unfortunately you haven't been able to play this season due to an injury. Can you share a little more about that injury?

Yeah, so this season definitely hasn't went as expected. During the off-season I was playing overseas in the Australian women's league when I suffered a head injury. I was diagnosed with a concussion and after weeks of rest I had little to show for it. As time went by my symptoms got worse, and about nine months in they were at their peak.

What type of symptoms?

Migraines, feeling nauseous for hours and hours, dizziness. Um, some of the worst one's were waking up in the middle of the night thinking there were men standing in my room or feeling like someone was "perpetually hammering a nail into my skull." On my blog [Arrow Liver] I wrote about how I felt stuck in a game of whack-a-mole and I was the mole.

Were you scared you might never get to play again?

I really was, but I think it was even more scary not knowing if the pain would ever stop. I couldn't do simple things I loved to do like write, read, explore the outdoors and spend time with my loved ones...yet alone play the sport I love.

At what point did you start to feel better, and the symptoms started to subside?

I had a personal revelation one day about four months ago. I decided to open up my blog and try to write something, really write anything at that point. Right on the home page I saw the words "An arrow can only be shot by pulling it backward. When life is dragging you back with difficulties it means it's going to launch you into something great. So just focus and keep aiming." In that moment I became motivated to just get through this. I faced my concussion one step at a time and I had a great support group between my family, my doctors, my team and the Portland Thorns fans. Gradually the symptoms just started to subside.

This past weekend you were removed from the NWSL (National Women's Soccer League) disabled list and became eligible to play again in the September 12 match against the Western New York Flash, in which a win or a tie clinches the club's firth ever home playoff match. It's been almost a full year. You're in your hometown eligible to play again, with a playoff spot on the line and a sold out crowd. What was going through your mind emotionally?

Wow, yeah [pause]. I was definitely emotional. Playing for Portland at Providence park is an emotional rollercoaster on its own, but in a good way [laughs]. The fans have so much passion for soccer and the support they show us as players is amazing. We really have the best fans in soccer. So being able to come back and play in front of those fans, in my hometown with so much support from my family, as well as the team and the staff members was an indescribable feeling. “In the locker room I got emotional just seeing my jersey hanging in my locker [laughs] so stepping out on that pitch in front of 21,144 fans was an experience I will never forget.” Getting the win and assuring I get to do it one more time this season, well that just gives me another special experience to look forward to.