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Sports Article



(Victor Carroll/The Cougar)

FROM ACL INJURY TO THE FINAL FOUR: A HOUSTON FORWARD'S RETURN

How Fabian White Jr.'s recovery and mindset led to one of college basketball's most inspiring comebacks

FABIAN WHITE JR.
DISCIPLINE: BASKETBALL
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: UNITED STATES
BORN: 11/29/1998



BY PRESLEY PERAZA | NIKE BASKETBALL

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The Setback

Before Fabian White Jr. was a pro basketball player for Galatasaray S.K. in Istanbul, Turkey, he showed the world one of the most inspiring ACL recovery stories in all of sports.

In late May of 2020 while attending the University of Houston, White was training in a private, individual workout, when he felt a slight discomfort in his knee. He was not alarmed at first; he thought it was just a tweak.

After taking a few days of rest, he went back to training and noticed he had knee swelling. After getting an MRI, White was informed he tore his ACL.

White was devastated. After his junior season got cut short due to the outbreak of COVID-19, he realized he would be sidelined for nine to twelve months. Now, his focus would have to shift from basketball training, to learning how to walk and strengthening his knee again, but setbacks aren't what define athletes.



White lines up to shoot free throws for Galatasaray S.K.
(Zafer/Wikimedia Commons)

The Rebuild

ACL recovery doesn't start with a highlight reel; it starts with the basics of movement. It starts with:

- Swelling management
- Activating the quad
- Gaining range of motion
- Building an elite mindset

This is where real ACL recovery begins, long before the return to competition.

White's ACL surgery was on May 29, 2020, nine days after the injury.

White had to go from dunking and sprinting on the court to starting over from square one. Just weeks removed from ACL surgery, even bending his knee was progress.

The University of Houston's men's basketball Director of Sports Performance Alan Bishop said, "Fabian had a phenomenal mindset from the beginning. The thing about Fabian is that he is a mature individual ... He was ready to train coming out of surgery."

Many people would think an athlete coming off an ACL surgery would sulk and mope around, but not Fabian.

He developed a hunger from sitting on the sidelines. That hunger fueled his ACL recovery every single day.

White attacked his injury rehab hard like a game, but rehab tests patience more than competition ever will.

There is no crowd in rehab. No applause for regaining quad strength. No student section chanting Fabian's name. It was just him and his exercises.

A great athlete isn't great for what they do in front of the crowd; it's what they do when no one's watching.

White didn't let the sidelines overcome him. He showed up for his team by passing in drills, rebounding, and giving his teammates advice.

"Fabe was so instrumental in helping those guys along the way. Helping them emotionally. I call him Uncle Fabe. Just being a big brother and uncle to those guys," Lead Assistant Coach Kellen Sampson said when asked about White's involvement while hurt.

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The Return

As months stacked on months, Fabian had passed the final tests from the doctors for him to be cleared for practice.

It started out slow for White. He began as a scout player, simulating other team's players as Houston prepared for games.

"Fabe was mentally locked into those days," Kellen said. "They weren't (lazy) days to him. He was really locked in and focused. Competitive. (What) was a mental day for the team, was a game day for Fabian and he took it as a game day."

Little by little, White regained confidence in cutting, jumping, and playing with contact.

When White started getting back into his rhythm and finding comfort in his game again, he knew he would be ready to play soon.

On Feb. 18, White made his season debut on the road against Wichita State. 347 days since he last played a game, he returned to the hardwood.

The Payoff

With White back in the rotation, the Houston Cougars had their eyes set on the March Madness tournament. But for White, this wasn't just a postseason.

This was proof.

Proof his ACL recovery worked. Proof his rehab mattered. Proof he could do anything.

White's biggest victories weren't the stat lines; they were every cut. Every plant. Every single step he took was a sign of a comeback.

Heading into the tournament, Houston was ranked the second seed in the Midwest region.

As Houston advanced, racking win after win, the comeback became undeniable.

From ACL surgery to basketball's biggest stage, Fabian White Jr. helped lead Houston Cougars basketball to the Final Four.

Houston's run ended in the national semifinal game against the Baylor Bears, but White's presence on the floor was a win in itself.

With 18 minutes of action, White recorded five offensive rebounds, giving his team multiple second chance opportunities.

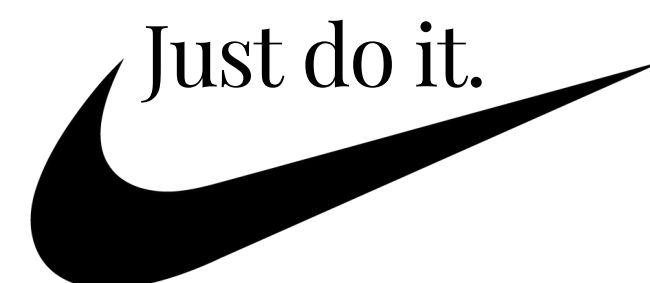
The box score doesn't capture the journey it took for him to be back on the floor, but his ACL recovery will be remembered as one of the most determined comebacks in college basketball.

Fabian White Jr.'s comeback wasn't just about basketball. It was about resilience, determination, and defying the odds.

Fabian's story shows discipline when no one's watching, perseverance amidst challenges, and faith during uncertainty.

Long before he signed a pro contract, he proved something far greater.

Setbacks don't define athletes, their response does.



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Author Bio



Presley Peraza is a strategic communication student and journalist who writes for NIKE's Athletes* section. Focused on the resilience of athletes and the elite mindsets they have, Presley excels in the sports storytelling and media journalism world.

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