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BY BOB FLORENCE, THE STARPHOENIX FEBRUARY 4, 2013

The palms of Erica Gavel's hands look like barn siding. Skin is blistered. Calluses at the base of her fingers could be knotholes. Because she is new to wheelchair basketball, pushing her chair on the court leaves her hands ripped and weathered. Fine with her.

Wheelchair basketball is different, a transition. But she knows basketball. Gavel, 21, is in her fourth year with the University of Saskatchewan Huskies. She was in 33 league games in her first two university seasons.

She could only train with the team the past two years due to injuries, especially to her left knee. She last played in a game in March 2011, yet kept practising every day. She lifted weights. Although she has three years left of university eligibility - she is a kinesiology student with a major in resiliency - doctors said her days with the Huskies seemed done after another knee surgery earlier this season. So 2½ months ago she switched sports.

"I am classified as not being able to run, jump and cut," Gavel said. "What I do is smash people and get rebounds, exactly what I like to do in stand-up basketball."

She first played wheelchair basketball in November. The game takes angling and positioning and speed, basketball skills she already knows. What changes is shooting when sitting. Passes become hook passes. She has to learn how to pivot and curve in the chair.

Gavel develops fast. She competed in Calgary last weekend. This weekend she goes to Regina. People see her court sense and high-rev personality. Even the national team notices. She could be carded by Sport Canada to help pay for training and become world class.

"Up until two weeks ago, deep down I didn't believe this could happen," she said. "This is so cool."

Gavel, 5-foot-11, played sports 40 weekends a year growing up in Prince Albert. She was a second baseman in softball and a setter in volleyball. She made it to high school provincials four straight years as a point guard with Prince Albert Carlton's basketball team. She had a full plate. Universities in Canada and U.S. were interested in having her on the team, whatever sport she picked.

She wanted to go to the U of S since she was 15. She pushed herself. This is her style. She sets a goal, then sweats and scrapes.

Gavel was the only university rookie on the Huskies in 2009-10. At practice, Gavel asked questions. She wanted to see basketball the way head coach Thomaidis and assistants Ali Fairbrother and Jacquie Lavallee see it.

When Gavel could not play the last two years because of injuries - when doing rehab limited even her drills in practice - she rode a stationary bike in the university PAC.

"I wanted to see how high I could get my heart rate," she said. "One day I hit 188 (beats per minute). I went as hard as I could. I couldn't eat for eight hours after."

She was determined to play for the Huskies again. Her left knee had other ideas. She felt it tweak last fall. Although her knee had swollen and derailed her before, this time it drained her spirit.

Going to kinesiology classes for lectures about fitness and activity hurt. Profs talked about what the body can do. She felt hers couldn't. She cried doing homework.

"In mid-November I was at the lowest point in my life," she said.

"I analyzed the situation. I realized here is my problem, what do I need to solve it?"

She met a dietitian. She talked with a sports psychologist. She dropped a class, taking four courses instead of five. Curious, she asked Sara Brown on Saskatchewan's wheelchair basketball team if the team is interested in new players.

Gavel went to a wheelchair basketball practice on a November weekend. She was at a Huskie practice the following Monday, then at another wheelchair basketball practice later the same Monday.

"Tuesday I couldn't get up to walk I was so sore," she said. "But practice was so much fun."

Decision time. She could try to play for the Huskies or she could take a new direction with wheelchair basketball.

She went home to Prince Albert for the weekend and talked with her dad Glen. She had written a list of the pros and cons of picking basketball or wheelchair basketball. She asked him what he thought.

"I read a statistic that said only two per cent of people reach their potential because most are scared they'll fail," she said the other day. "It would be selfish and foolish of me not to do everything I can."

"I dedicated six years of my life to basketball. I am upset my Huskie dream is over. But regrets? No. I think of the people I've met on the team, the opportunities I have."

"I've learned a lot about myself. My (academic) average is the highest it's been in university. I have gone from a career about to finish to one just beginning. I can look back and say I picked myself up and got myself through this the most positive way I can. It's such a good feeling to say I've given it my all."

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