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Lauren Collins back with TKA volleyball after serious accident

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TKA's Lauren Collins (15) celebrates with teammates following a point Aug. 31 against Alcoa at Heritage High School.

Paula Collins didn't know why her 17-year-old daughter, Lauren Collins, would be calling her from the gym.

A standout on The King's Academy volleyball team, Lauren had left to go work out with a friend a little earlier that afternoon. Paula assumed they were still there.

When Paula picked up the phone, she was further confused to hear a man's voice on the other line.

"He said, 'There's been an accident,'" Paula recalled, to which she responded, "Did a weight fall on her?"

The man clarified. "Your daughter was in a car accident," and that's when panic began to set in for Paula.

"I asked, 'Is it bad? If you're calling me...'" The man interjected. "He said, 'Yes, I'm going to be honest with you. It is.'"

On June 16, Lauren Collins and her friend, 20-year-old Taylor Blythe, were involved in a head-on collision on John Sevier Highway. Blythe — a middle blocker at Tusculum University and former teammate of Collins' at TKA — was driving the car.

All three involved in the crash — including the 17-year-old boy in the other vehicle — survived, but with varying degrees of physical and mental trauma.

While Blythe is still in a wheelchair as a result of her injuries, Lauren was more fortunate. Last week, she was back on the court for TKA, competing for the first time in two-and-a-half months.

"I missed it way more than I thought I would," Lauren said. "I know this is so cliche, but I genuinely appreciate everyone around me more. I just appreciate getting to play volleyball."

Lauren and Blythe were both on the TKA squad that made program history in 2017 by advancing to its first state tournament. Blythe went on to thrive at Tusculum the next two years while Lauren helped TKA notch another milestone in 2019 – when the team advanced past the state quarterfinals for the first time.

A year removed from making their deepest postseason run yet, the Lions had their sights set on taking it a step farther this year. Lauren was expected to be key in accomplishing that. The stability she provided on the back line had also earned her attention from college recruits, including Tusculum.

"Her serving and passing – honestly, I don't think anyone can match it," TKA coach Kelly Peterson said. "She reads the game so well. There are a lot of people who react to what's happening on the other side of the court. She sees it before it happens."

That talent could have been taken from the world far too soon.

The last thing Lauren remembers before waking up in a ditch, pinned against the passenger seat, was a flash of color.

She and Blythe had just been cruising with the windows down, on their way to grab a post-workout bite to eat. Their final conversation before everything changed in an instant is one Lauren thinks about often.

"We were literally talking about how good life was," Lauren said. "That's why it was so weird."

That's when a car heading in the opposite direction veered into their lane.

When Lauren came to, there was blood and glass everywhere. She took it all in through a dream-like lens.

The car had caved in on them – more so on Blythe's side, which took the brunt of the hit. Lauren felt heavy pressure on the left side of her face. She thought she had lost her eye.

Struggling to see, Lauren looked to Blythe and observed her legs were smashed in the wreckage. Blythe wasn't conscious. Lauren tried to reach for her friend only to find she couldn't feel her own left arm.

"I couldn't see Taylor's legs," Lauren said. "I thought she was dead."

It was a nightmare – one particularly personal to Lauren.

"Lauren has always worried about dying in a car crash," said her dad, Matt Collins. "She really has a phobia of that."

It's a fear stemming back to 2004, when Matt got into a bad car accident on that same highway less than two miles away from where Lauren sat, trapped and desperately trying to wake her friend.

Matt was on his way to pick up Lauren's older sister, Lydia, from preschool when his crash occurred. The other vehicle instantly caught on fire. Everyone survived, but Matt suffered third-degree burns all over his upper body — the evidence of which lingers on his arms.

Lauren was 2 when she saw her dad in a hospital bed at University of Tennessee Medical Center, about to be airlifted to Vanderbilt following the accident.

"She saw me wrapped up and everything, and I just remember her holding Paula's leg," Matt said. "She was just a toddler. She was scared."

Matt's burns required numerous surgeries involving some 300 staples. Doctors removed skin from his thighs to use on the upper half of his body. It was a long, painful recovery, and it stuck with Lauren.

"This has been my biggest fear ever — to get in a car wreck," Lauren said. "Emotionally, it was definitely a lot worse than physically for me. I was so scared."

Fortunately, the man driving behind Lauren and Blythe pulled over to help. He was the one who retrieved Lauren's phone and called Paula.

Clad in pajamas, Paula instantly ran out of the house and sped to the scene just over a mile away. She called Matt, who was at work about an hour away in Morristown.

"She said there was an accident — a bad accident, possible fire," Matt recalled. "So I'm driving recklessly to get home."

That is, until Matt got another call. This time, it was Lauren on the other end. With her mom by her side, holding her hand, Lauren groggily told her dad to slow down.

"The only thing she really said was, 'Dad, don't rush, I'm OK — just be careful,'" Matt said. "That's what she was worried about — me."

Blythe eventually came to, but she wasn't fully there. Lauren remembers her repeating the same line over and over.

"She was so out of it," Lauren said. "No matter what they asked her, all she would say was, 'I want out, I want out.'"

Lauren also had a concussion. Her left eye was swollen shut, prompting her to ask her mom if it was still there. Paula assured her that it was.

Paula then watched as first responders draped black blankets over Lauren and Blythe and started cutting into the vehicle. Both were extricated and rushed by ambulance to the hospital.

On the left side of her body, Lauren suffered a broken hand that required surgery involving a plate and four screws, and she had a gash on her elbow that needed 35 stitches. She also suffered a hemorrhage in her eye.

Lauren was bruised from head to toe and unable to move for several weeks.

Blythe's injuries were much more serious. On her left side, she broke her hip as well as her ankle in two places, and her femur snapped in half. She also suffered a broken right knee, and her right foot was completely crushed. It had to be entirely reconstructed with nine screws and a rod.

When Blythe awoke in the hospital days later, she was confused.

"My dad told me the first thing I said when I woke up was I apologized I wrecked my car," Blythe said. "I don't remember saying that. I still don't remember the first week of being at the hospital."

Blythe doesn't remember the accident either, and she has had to learn of her own near-death experience secondhand. Now, she's grappling with the unknown of what the future holds for her in volleyball.

Blythe can't walk yet, though she's working on it with a walker three times a week in therapy.

"Volleyball is the one thing that I love to do, and it's basically been taken from me," Blythe said. "In my head, I'm still going to work to try to play. I try to be positive but also realistic."

"I've just tried to be strong, and I've realized through this that I'm really strong."

The day of the accident, Blythe's Tusculum coaches visited her as well as Lauren in the hospital. Matt watched his daughter tear up when they entered Lauren's room. While volleyball certainly wasn't the first thing on her mind in the immediate aftermath of the crash, Lauren feared her injuries might put her college career in jeopardy.

"I went ahead and told them, 'She's just worried you're going to be concerned about her,'" Matt said. "They told her, 'No, we still want you.'

"That just made her feel they really wanted her."

Lauren committed to Tusculum the following week, joining her sister Lydia on the Pioneers squad.

While she experiences pain every time her hand contacts the ball, the gratitude Lauren feels about being able to compete is palpable to her coach.

"There was seriously true joy when she practiced with us the first day last Monday," Peterson said. "You could just see it was good to be back."

With the return of Lauren in the lineup, TKA volleyball has another reason for optimism about a third state tournament appearance. Now, they may also spot Blythe on the sideline. She's been to three of Lauren's matches over the last few weeks and — even though she can't be out there with her — Blythe loves to watch her play.

"My goal mentally is to push through the pain so I can be here," Lauren said. "I've already faced my biggest fear, so that's something."

Follow @TaylorVortherms on Twitter for more from sports reporter Taylor Vortherms.

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