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Justin Morneau: On balance, he's better

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PHOENIX — The sun had just appeared on the desert horizon last week when Justin Morneau climbed into his white Chevy Suburban for a 30-minute drive from his home in Paradise Valley.

Using side streets to avoid Phoenix's plodding freeway traffic, the Twins first baseman zipped past the airport and pulled into an obscure industrial park filled with faceless gray buildings.

Here, a concrete contractor and an electrical engineering firm share the same driveway with another repair establishment. Morneau parked at Fischer Sports, a physical therapy and conditioning center to which ballplayers such as Joe Nathan, Carl Pavano and Kerry Wood have turned to rebuild their careers.

Morneau knew this was where he must turn after a miserable 2011 season that can be summed up like this: four surge and a concussion. It sounds like another bad Steve Guttenberg sequel, but that was Morneau's life in a year that brought many surgeries as home runs.

Now, after three consecutive seasons derailed by injuries -- including the past two because of concussions -- Morneau widespread doubt that he will ever regain his MVP form. But after sweating through a five-hour workout Tuesday, he described how far he has come from the dark days of last winter, when he himself wondered if he was finished.

Even now, a month before spring training, he has questions. He hasn't felt concussion symptoms since December, but wonders how his head will respond once he's back on the field. He also wonders about his surgically repaired left wrist. Resting on a training table, as he iced his left knee, Morneau called himself cautiously optimistic.

"I wouldn't say the head's perfect yet," Morneau said. "I'm not going to declare that until I go through fielding ground ball playing catch, taking batting practice, doing all the baseball stuff. But what I was able to do today is miles ahead of what I was at this time last year."

He has also gained a certain peace, knowing he is controlling the things he can control.

"I've had food-allergy testing done, I've seen chiropractors, I've done acupuncture, I've seen massage therapists, I've seen specialists," he said. "I've done everything I can humanly do to make myself feel better, so I don't have to go through this again."

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Morneau's biggest achievement last year was proving he could return from the concussion he suffered July 7, 2010, in Toronto. But just when these concussion issues seemed behind him, he suffered another one.

This time, on Aug. 28 at Target Field, Morneau didn't even hit his head. He dived awkwardly for a ball down the first-base line, bringing his momentum to a quick halt, jostling his brain.



Justin Morneau worked with physical therapist Brett Fischer in Phoenix last week. Fischer has been working with Morneau since 1999, and many major leaguers can be found working out at his facility over the offseason. "It's just great to see him out here with the other guys, having fun," Fischer said.

The symptoms -- headaches, fogginess and fatigue -- came and went into December. Imagine you are riding a bus traveling 65 miles per hour, Morneau said. When you look out the side window, the landscape races by. When you look out the front window, it shouldn't seem as fast. But at his worst moments, he's looking out that front window and feels like he's looking out the side.

"I've had problems with focus," Morneau said. "Your mind kind of wanders, I guess, because your brain's so exhausted trying to interpret what your eyes are seeing."

He worried more last winter. On the worst days, he called Dr. Michael Collins, his concussion specialist in Pittsburgh, wondering if he would ever play again. Morneau understands concussions better now. He knows the brain has its own timetable.

In November, Morneau went to Pittsburgh for a check-up. He took the ImPACT test (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Testing), which tracks a patient's attention span, memory and problem-solving skills. Then, in a more extensive version of that test, he traveled to Los Angeles.

"It was a long, brutal day, but it was good," Morneau said. "The [results] were finally back to normal."

While making the medical rounds last fall, Morneau also took the ALCAT (antigen leukocyte cellular antibody test) to see if he had food allergies. He learned that his body was sensitive, if not allergic, to sugars, gluten and dairy.

So he basically cut them cold turkey. In early December, the 6-4 Morneau weighed 242 pounds. After dieting through the holidays -- eating nothing but meat, rice, vegetables and fruit -- he dropped to 228.

"It's not like I'll choke or die from eating those things," Morneau said. "But my body reacts poorly to them. It treats them as something I'm allergic to and fights that inflammation instead of the inflammation from an injury."

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Morneau played 69 games for the Twins last year, but even then he was a shell of himself. He batted .227 with a .285 career batting average and .333 slugging percentage. Those numbers for the 2010 season were at .345/.437/.618 when he suffered his concussion.

"He had no strength," Twins hitting coach Joe Vavra said. "He saw all those other guys going down and tried gutting it out, but it actually did more harm than good. The more he played, the worse he became mechanically."

Morneau traces his other health concerns in 2011 to spring training, when he was so focused on clearing his head that he couldn't prepare the rest of his body. He didn't start playing exhibition games until mid-March, and though he was in the Opening Day lineup, pitchers quickly sensed this wasn't the same hitter.

"I wanted to be back so bad," he said. "As athletes, sometimes our desire wins out over common sense."

His left wrist began bothering him in May. In June, he underwent surgery to relieve a pinched nerve in his neck, which was causing weakness and numbness in his left arm. When he returned two months later, the wrist was still a big problem.

"I was never comfortable at the plate because I was never healthy," Morneau said. "If they threw a fastball on the inside corner, I never had confidence that my wrist was going to be able to get to it."

Finally, after the Aug. 28 concussion, Morneau shifted into 2012 mode, with a goal of getting as healthy as possible for training. On Sept. 19, he went through two surgeries -- one to remove a cyst in his left knee, and another to chisel a bone spur from his right foot. Eleven days later, he had another procedure to stabilize a tendon in his left wrist.

He left Minnesota full of fresh scars, returning to a place where he could finally heal.

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Underneath the reception desk at Fischer Sports, there's an autographed picture of Nathan in a Giants jersey, circa 2006 after he had rotator cuff surgery.

"To Brett," it says. "Thanks for getting me back on track."

Brett Fischer is a physical therapist for the Arizona Cardinals whose other clients have included five-time Cy Young Award winner Randy Johnson, New York Jets All-Pro cornerback Darrelle Revis and three-time Grand Slam tennis champion Lleyton Hewitt. When Diamondbacks shortstop Stephen Drew suffered a horrific ankle injury last July, he planned his recovery inside Fischer's 20,000-square-foot facility.

Morneau has known Fischer since 1999. This past fall, Fischer urged him to be patient as his body healed, leading him through a long series of light workouts, designed to restore his focus, balance and core strength.

By Tuesday, Morneau had graduated to a much more vigorous program, joining fellow big leaguers Drew, Mark Reynolds, Chien-Ming Wang, J.J. Putz, Rene Tosoni and others for various strength and agility drills. At one point, Morneau flashed a big smile as he lugged 160 pounds behind him on an aluminum sled.

"It's just great to see him out here with the other guys, having fun," said Fischer, who also helped Morneau heading into his 2006 American League MVP season. "To me, this is more rewarding [than 2006] because of what he's been through. With the concussions and the wrist [injury], we didn't know what was going to happen."

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With his workout finished, Morneau plotted the rest of his day, wondering what adventures his wife, Krista, and 15-month-old daughter, Evelyn, had planned for him. The Barrett-Jackson car auction was in Scottsdale, and Morneau hoped to add to his collection of vintage cars.

His garage already holds a 1972 Chevelle, a '65 Mustang and a '33 Ford. Later that day, he landed a '68 Camaro convertible with a \$38,500 bid.

Car collecting has become a fun hobby, but Morneau isn't ready to give that his full-time attention. Far from it. He said he hopes to play seven or eight more years.

"I know if I'm healthy that I'm a good baseball player," he said. "My only issue has been staying healthy. There's no way anyone can know if they can do exactly what they've done in the past, but I'm still 30 years old. I'm not 38 or 39."

Still, the concussions have become a very real concern. His outstanding 2010 season was derailed when his head collided with Blue Jays infielder John McDonald's knee as Morneau slid into second base. He also suffered a concussion in April 2005 when he got beamed by a Ron Villone fastball in Seattle. Asked if he worries about that happening again, he paused.

"I think it'll take some time to build some confidence back," he said. "Just to prove I can dive for a ball and everything will be all right. I can slide into second base and break up a double play."

"I have faith that the guy's a major league pitcher. It's very rare that somebody gets hit in the head. They have a new helmet out this year that will help protect me."

"I have faith that if I'm healthy I should be quick enough to be able to get out of the way. Hopefully, everything goes well in spring training and we start to move past that stuff."

Most of all, Morneau trusts his doctor. Collins is one of the country's foremost concussion experts. Another one of his patients is NHL star Sidney Crosby.

"The doctor's not going to put me in a situation where I have a chance to have long-term issues," Morneau said.

Last September, Morneau told manager Ron Gardenhire he would be willing to be a designated hitter this year to lessen risk of another concussion. But the better Morneau feels, the more determined he gets to play first base, the position he slated to start in the All-Star Game only 18 months ago.

Will he ever regain that prowess? Morneau tries not to sweat it. After leaving the gym, the Vancouver native stepped in 67-degree Arizona sunshine and smiled.

"Whatever happens," he said, "it won't be from lack of effort, and it won't be from a lack of desire."

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