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Re-starting from scratch

New Jersey City goalkeeper's biggest save may have been his own

By Leilana McKindra
The NCAA News

New Jersey City University goalkeeper Andre Viola has been a key ingredient in the Gothic Knights' run in this year's Division III Men's Soccer Championship.

But more than talent is driving the freshman from St. Joseph's Regional High School in New Jersey. After surviving a brain aneurysm that temporarily robbed him of his ability to talk or walk, Viola knows he's already successfully faced far worse than any shot an opponent could unleash.

In the early morning hours of June 12, 2005, Viola's father awoke to find the then high school junior screaming in pain on the bathroom floor, gripping his head but unable to speak. A desperate 911 call and a terrifying trip to the hospital revealed that a six-centimeter blood clot had burst in his brain. After emergency surgery, Viola was put into a medically induced coma to further spur his recovery. He awoke nine days later, and though he recognized his parents and the host of concerned friends and family surrounding him, he couldn't speak and had no idea why he was in the hospital.

"That hurt the most. I knew who they were but I couldn't say it," Viola said.

For one with such a bright future that included hopes of playing soccer at the NCAA Division I level and professionally, the outlook was suddenly grim. As a result of the aneurysm, Viola was forced to relearn everything, including essential life functions such as talking, walking, reading and writing. Physically, his right side was weak and he lost about 20 pounds of muscle through the ordeal. Soccer, doctors informed him, was out of the question, at least for the foreseeable future. As distressing as the early prognosis was, Viola never ruled out a return to the pitch.

An extensive rehabilitation effort ensued. After 14 days in the hospital, he spent another three weeks at a



New Jersey City goalie Andre Viola has turned in a sparkling freshman campaign after a brain aneurysm two years ago temporarily impaired his ability to walk, talk, write and read.

rehab center beginning the long process of reclaiming basic skills. Viola progressed quickly enough to return to school in September. As for soccer, days after emerging from the coma, Viola was kicking a ball.

Cristain da Silva, Viola's high school coach who is now in his first season in charge of the Gothic

Knights program, said initially the concern was simply for Viola's survival. However, by mid-August, Viola was already jogging, talking and able to recognize people.

"He worked hard on the field and, most importantly, in his studies," said da Silva, who was encouraged enough by what he saw to insert the

hard-working goalie into the final minutes of a game in October 2005.

Viola wanted to play. He had even asked to do so if the opportunity arose, and when the time came he said he was happy, but nervous, scared and anxious, too. Allowing a shot from 40 yards out roll right through his legs didn't do much to alleviate those feelings.

"Right away he wanted to come off," da Silva recalled. "I told him these things happen in life and I kept him in there. After that, things just started changing."

His game, Viola said, wasn't the only thing that changed as a result of his experience. "Before, I was always joking around and I didn't try as much. But now that I've seen and gone through so many things, they've shown me I should try as hard as I can, but at the same time have fun."

Viola credits his family and da Silva for the supporting roles they played in his recovery.

After a standout senior high school campaign, he followed da Silva to New Jersey City, where he has embraced the role as the Gothic Knights starting goalie after one of the senior netminders went down with an ACL injury before the season began. Viola has gone on to post seven shutouts on the year. He became the first Gothic Knight freshman soccer player to earn New Jersey Athletic Conference defensive player of the week honors.

The first in his family to attend college, Viola is finding success there, too, even as he continues to receive additional tutoring and counseling to support his recovery from the aneurysm.

"I'm very happy for him and his family," da Silva said. "I know how hard it was for them to see him through the aneurysm and the coma, then to go to that first game and see the ball go through his legs. Now he's playing in college and having a great year. It's very rewarding for them."

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