

“Healthy” Liddell Eager For NBA Return



On July 11, 2022, E.J. Liddell saw his rookie campaign come to an unfortunate screeching halt.

Just two days after logging 24 minutes in his professional debut, the former Ohio State forward fell to the Cox Pavilion floor in Las Vegas during the third quarter of the New Orleans Pelicans’ Summer League matchup with the Atlanta Hawks, clutching his right knee before being helped off.

Liddell had suffered a torn ACL, a significant injury that would require him to undergo reconstructive surgery on July 26 and miss his entire rookie season.

Although it was a major setback, the now second-year Pelicans forward is “100 percent” healthy again after an almost-year-long recovery, and is eager to return to live game action.

At 4:30 p.m. on Friday, Liddell will compete in the same arena where his season-ending injury occurred when he takes the floor for the Pelicans’ in their Summer League bout with the Minnesota Timberwolves.

“I’m blessed, man,” Liddell told reporters after practice on July 5. “Just how far I’ve come. Like last month, I wasn’t able to play five-on-five, but now I can. This is awesome to be out there. Awesome to play with some of these guys who have been playing for a minute and just get back on the court. It’s about to be one year now since the last time I’ve played, so there (are) a little nerves, but I’m excited.”

Liddell, who reportedly signed a three-year, \$6.2 million contract with the Pelicans on Thursday, told the media that he feels fine “physically.” However, he knows that a return to live game action will not be easy, as it will take some time to reacclimate himself to the pace and speed of an NBA game.

“I feel good physically,” Liddell said. “(I) just have to get my game conditioning back, (going) up and down (the court), there’s nothing you can prepare for on the bike or on the treadmill or anything.”

Although the Pelicans forward has worked hard to regain his footing throughout the year-long recovery,

he has struggled to reach the level of explosiveness and aggression he had before his injury — two traits that allowed him to earn two first team All-Big Ten nods as a Buckeye and be selected by New Orleans with the No. 41 pick in the 2022 NBA Draft.

“I have to build that confidence back up,” Liddell said. “Like going in the lane, playing in traffic, and what not. That’s normal when you come off an injury, because there’s learning curves. If (I) do something once, I’ll feel comfortable doing it again. That’s been my whole rehab process.”

Although these struggles are new for the 2022 second-round draft pick, Liddell has worked through them by leaning on the guidance of two Pelican teammates who have gone through similar types of adversity.

Liddell said veteran point guard C.J. McCollum and third-year floor general Kira Lewis Jr. have each offered him advice on how to navigate through significant lower body injuries as an NBA player. In 2013, McCollum was forced to sit out the first two months of his rookie season after refracturing a bone in his foot during training camp. Kira Lewis Jr. sat out over a year after suffering a torn ACL and a Grade 2 MCL sprain in his right knee on Dec. 8, 2021.

“(McCollum) told me a story about how he broke his foot before his rookie year, he broke it in college,” Liddell said. “How he went through mental things. And also Kira Lewis, he just got done doing rehab, just got back on the court last year. It was good to have guys like that to talk to me and just say, ‘Hey, it is a learning curve. Some days you feel good, some days you don’t.’”

Although Liddell faced a multitude of challenges while rehabbing his knee, he has taken some positives out of the year-long process.

With the injury limiting his range of movement, Liddell said he focused most of his offseason training on stationary shooting, particularly from the corner. This, according to the forward, allowed Liddell to improve his shot-making ability from all areas of the court, a skill he said can earn him more playing time with New Orleans in 2023-24.

“That’s all I’ve been doing,” Liddell said. “Spot up shooting in the corner. Because I’ve never been in the corner in my college career, so it’s definitely different. But I’ve been working on it.”

In addition to his attempts to improve his shot, Liddell also used his time away from the floor to gain a unique perspective on the daily commitment NBA players must make to achieve extended professional careers. This was something the 6-foot-7 forward said he picked up on while being with the team both on the bench and in the locker room.

“Obviously, I wanted to be out on the court,” Liddell said. “But it was a really good opportunity to learn from the guys who were playing my position. Just see guys on the opposite team. Being in the locker room for scouting reports and just knowing what it takes to prepare yourself for the long season.”

With a newfound basketball perspective and increasing development as a shooter in hand, Liddell now looks to shake off the rust from his injury and emerge as one of the Pelicans’ top young players.

According to Summer League head coach Casey Hill, who reiterated that Liddell is at “100%,” the second-year forward is well on his way to achieving that feat.

“Right now, he’s worked his butt off on his shot,” Hill told the media Wednesday. “His shot’s getting better. Defensively, he’s very fluid. We can do a lot of things with him. We can put him in coverage, we can do a lot of switching, he can guard a lot of positions. And then offensively, he’s a quick decision maker, that’s what we’re looking for him to do, is facilitate offense in secondary moments. If he catches the ball off of a pick and roll, (he should) make a play right away, and let his instincts kind of take over from there, and he’s done a really nice job so far of doing that for us.”

As Liddell gears up for a return to the Cox Pavilion one year after his season-ending knee injury, he continues to face an uphill climb in his rehabilitation. This will not phase the former Buckeye, however, as, in his mind, he is primed to persevere.

“I always knew I could overcome adversity,” Liddell said. “Life is tough. You know, you always ask the question, ‘Why? Why did it happen to me?’ But why not me? It’s just another experience, because I’m not the first person who is going to get injured, and not the last person who’s going to get injured.”

(There will be) a lot of nerves,” Liddell said. “But just know I’m super excited to be back out there. To be able to play, be in front of the lights again. So I’m excited.”