

Could operation benefit McNabb?

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ON FEB. 9, Chris Leitch flew to Munich for surgery to repair the sports hernia that had plagued him for the better part of a season.

On Feb. 12, he jogged.

On Feb. 14, he ran 5 miles.

And on Feb. 19, he began preseason practice alongside his MetroStars teammates.

Eight months and an entire Major League Soccer season later, Leitch has had no re-tears, no problems and best of all, no pain.

He is, without sounding too dramatic, cured.

"I feel great," Leitch, a defenseman out of North Carolina, says. "Never better."

As Donovan McNabb enters yet another work week with his sports hernia, the quarterback insists the pain he is feeling is pain he can stomach. Given a recovery period of 6 to 12 weeks, McNabb, understandably reluctant to have any sort of surgery, is even more hesitant to undergo a procedure that might shelve him for the better part of the Eagles' season.

But what Leitch - and thousands of top-level European athletes and a growing number of American soccer players - have learned is that should McNabb's injury progress to the point of intolerable, it doesn't necessarily mean the end of the quarterback's season and subsequently, the end of the Eagles' Super Bowl hopes.

There is an alternative.

"Look, I have no interest in this," Leitch says. "I don't know Donovan. What he does doesn't affect me, but as an athlete, I have to say if you need surgery and you don't have this done, you're cheating yourself. Fly over there and be done with it."

Over there would be Munich, home to the Hernia Center and its director, Dr. Ulrike Muschaweck, a woman who has revolutionized sports hernia repair. Using a procedure she developed called Minimal Repair Technique, athletes are returning to competition in 10 days to 2 weeks.

That's full competition with no limits, no restrictions and best of all, no re-tears. Her recurrence rate is an astonishing .002 percent.

Though many of Muschaweck's patients play professional soccer - it is, after all, Europe's version of the NFL - she says it doesn't matter what sport her patient plays because sports hernias affect motion. Contact doesn't alter the injury.

"It doesn't matter what they do - basketball, football, soccer, hockey," Muschaweck says, taking a break from her typical five-surgeries-a-day schedule last week. "After about 2 weeks, they can return. That's it. No risk."

The reality is, at some point McNabb will need surgery. Sports hernias don't go away. They must be surgically repaired.

They can, however, get worse as the internal organs that are pressing on the abdominal wall go from a partial to a full tear.

"You can't say exactly how fast, but yes, they do get worse," says Muschaweck's associate, Dr. Angie Everhorn. "These are pretty tough guys who can play through the pain, but the sooner you come and have this done, the sooner you're OK for the rest of the season."

During traditional hernia surgeries, doctors insert a mesh to help bond the muscle to the bone. It's a rather simple procedure but nonetheless requires a fairly lengthy recovery period.

Muschaweck, a hernia specialist of 12 years who tailors her surgeries based on a patient's age, occupation and needs, doesn't use mesh with athletes, preferring instead to keep the elasticity between the muscle layers after surgery. Instead Muschaweck only opens the defected area, leaving the surrounding muscle tissue intact.

Muschaweck also pays close attention to the genitofemoral nerve, which often is a source of hernia pain and, and if necessary removes part of it.

Afterward each layer of muscle is sutured separately, allowing for a less painful and speedier recovery.

"We don't operate on the intact structures; only the defect," Muschaweck explains. "That's the secret, minimizing the operating technique. It's only a small area that's causing the pain, so there's no need to open something more."

If it sounds simple, it sort of is. The reason no one in the United States is going this route is that, unlike Europe, doctors here are only starting to recognize and diagnose sports hernias with regularity. Muschaweck, on the other hand, has more than 12,000 hernia repairs on her resume.

In 1994 Brian Baldinger, the former Eagle and current Fox analyst, suffered a groin pain like he'd never experienced before. No one could tell him what was wrong. Finally he received a diagnosis, athletic pubalgia. The term sports hernia hadn't even been coined in this country.

"In my opinion, the pain sometimes is misunderstood," Muschaweck says. "Doctors don't know the reason of the sportsman's groin [her term for sports hernia]. If you know the reason, you handle it. It's over. There's no more pain, no risk for a new hernia."

Baldinger underwent traditional hernia repair, putting him out of commission for nearly 3 months.

Told of Muschaweck's procedure, Baldinger was dumbfounded.

"That's amazing," Baldinger says. "Sure I would have tried it, but I can see where people might think, 'Wait, everyone else says 6 weeks and now they're saying 2 weeks.' It sounds like you're going to see... someone who's not even a real doctor."

His is not an unusual reaction. It all does sound too good to be true, like some sort of infomercial of false promises.

Leitch understands the skepticism.

He wasn't immediately sold, either.

Plagued by groin pain through the entire 2004 season, Leitch knew he had to do something when the pain resurfaced prior to training camp in 2005.

He spoke with his athletic trainer, John Gallucci, who offered a solution. During the offseason, Gallucci was one of a number of MLS medical personnel to attend a MLS Medical Conference in Los Angeles where

Muschaweck made a presentation. Impressed, Gallucci spoke at length with Muschaweck and learned more about her procedure.

"In Europe she does basically all your big-time clubs," says Gallucci, who recently wrote an article for the *National Athletic Trainer Association's News*. "She's really incredible."

Hesitantly and with Gallucci alongside him, Leitch flew to Germany where Muschaweck gave him an ultrasound - just like the ones used on pregnant women - and immediately found the hernia.

"I was a little sketchy," Leitch says. "I was the first American to go over and do this and if it's my body having surgery, I'm going to worry. I couldn't understand why in the U.S. it took months to recover and she was telling me I'd be back in days. I thought, 'There's no way. It's not possible.' Even my orthopedic surgeon was like, 'Seven to 10 days? I don't know about that.' "

But then Leitch saw the wall of photographs, patients of Muschaweck's who also happened to be among the best soccer players in the world. To soccer-phobic Americans the photos would be meaningless. To Leitch, a former Ohio Player of the Year, it was like walking the hallways of Canton or Cooperstown.

Those photos, plus his own research, reassurance from Muschaweck and that .002 recurrence rate gave Leitch the courage for the leap of faith.

"I remember the day before the surgery, I was walking down the hall with a guy from a premiere league over there," Leitch says. "We were laughing at the idea of playing in 10 days because it just hurt so much.

"But right after we got out of surgery, we walked around Munich. The next day, I was pedaling a stationary bike. By the third day I was jogging and around Day 5, I ran 5 miles."

Leitch, who played every MetroStars game this season and logged the second-most minutes (2,344) on his team, has started a pipeline of American soccer players to Munich. He convinced his friend, DC United forward Bryan Namoff, to meet with Muschaweck. Namoff had surgery on both sides of his abdominal wall in July and returned to play in early August. Chivas United forward Matt Taylor missed only seven games after his procedure this season, and on Aug. 14 Ante Razov followed his teammate's flight to Munich.

The league's fourth all-time leading scorer, Razov came back to work on Sept. 3.

"I had surgery on my groin last October and then the pain came back," says Razov, who's been plagued by some sort of groin pain for the better part of 15 years. "The first surgery I had there was 3 months of unnecessary waiting. Now I feel 100 percent normal. This is a no-brainer. I was ready to come back even earlier. We just didn't have a game."

Muschaweck hopes it's just a matter of time before other American athletes follow the trail blazed by the soccer players.

But she needs another guinea pig, another Leitch who is willing to become the first American non-soccer player to take the leap. It's a tough sell. In this country soccer still doesn't get the respect it does in Europe and so the natural skepticism of the surgery is only heightened by the fact that Muschaweck's wall of honor doesn't include an NFL or NBA or MLB face (though it does include hockey's Dominik Hasek).

"If it were someone like David Beckham, I think that would help," Baldinger says.

How about a Donovan McNabb?

"After the first successful American soccer players, I'm seeing more and more," she says. "Nobody believed this before. Now they believe."