



Couch: MSU's Schilling, Carter try to be helpful while eyeing 2017-18



Injured MSU big men Ben Carter (left, top) and Gavin Schilling (right, top) watch as their teammates warm up prior to their game with Wisconsin on Feb. 26 (*Photo: Kevin W. Fowler / for the Lansing State Journal*)

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EAST LANSING – The mere presence of Gavin Schilling and Ben Carter is almost cruel to Michigan State’s basketball team. Especially these days, when the Spartans’ two injured big men appear to be fairly able-bodied.

They aren’t yet. Even if they can walk and dunk and shoot.

“Probably every day at some point during practice, you see them working out on the side and you’re like, ‘Man, it’d be nice,’” MSU associate head coach Dwayne Stephens said of Schilling and Carter, who both suffered knee injuries not long before the season.

“It is tough to see them over there. You feel bad for them. And then there’s always that what-if.”

MSU's entire season is different if Schilling is healthy. Perhaps Carter, too, though it's less certain how the graduate transfer by way of UNLV and Oregon would have fit in.

Looking through the games where size burned the Spartans this season and Schilling would have likely been enough to flip the outcome, MSU is at least five games better if it had its 6-foot-9, 240-pound senior center — winning games against Arizona, Northeastern, at Ohio State, the first matchup with Purdue, and at Illinois. A 19-14 record is 24-9, a 10-8 Big Ten mark is 13-5, a 9-seed this week in the NCAA tournament is a 5 seed at worst.

Schilling isn't a complete player, but he's what MSU is missing most — size, strength, experience, quick feet defending ball screens.

The hard part for Schilling is he knows it.

“Not being able to play with the seniors, especially Alvin (Ellis), that's been hard for me,” Schilling said Tuesday evening. “Just watching the games from the bench, not being able to help out physically when our team really needs it (has been hard).”

Schilling will be back next year. He played as a true freshman, so he has the redshirt year to take. Carter is hoping to be back, too. His hopes are at the mercy of the NCAA. He's applying for a sixth year (the application, he said, is filed) — he played two at Oregon, sat out one after transferring to UNLV, was injured in the 25th game of last season with the Rebels, then left for East Lansing as a graduate transfer. Based on the rule as I understand it, it's a long shot. To get a sixth year, you have to miss most of two years due to injury. He missed all of this season and the end of last season, but his other missed year was his own choice due to his first transfer.

“I looked at some similar cases, and there are some cases out there that kind of relate to mine,” Carter said Tuesday evening. “I'm really hoping the NCAA sheds some positive light on my situation, sees that I've been through a lot. Obviously the last two years being injured and throughout my college career, it's been quite the roller coaster. I'm hoping I get to finish it strong and get to play for coach (Tom) Izzo.”



Michigan State forward Gavin Schilling, here against Purdue's A.J. Hammonds (34) works in the post for a shot against Purdue senior center A.J. Hammonds last season, missed all of this season with a knee injury. (Photo: Dave Wasinger/Lansing State Journal)

Carter said he originally approached his time in East Lansing as a one-season business trip. He didn't realize he'd get so attached.

“When I first got here, I expected to be here eight months, and I didn't really expect to get as close to the people here as I have,” he said.

One of those people is Schilling, who's grateful he's gone through this with Carter at his side. The two can be seen together at every game and practice — rebounding the layup line, shooting free throws on the other practice court at Breslin Center, going through their rehab, observing, trying to help where they can, even if somewhat removed. Always together. two 6-foot-9 what-ifs.

“I still have a great relationship with all of my teammates, and they still have a level of respect for me, as well,” Schilling said.

“But not being able to be on the same court in practice and in games, obviously, you don’t go through the same things.”

Where Schilling tries to help most is with freshman center Nick Ward. He sees Ward’s offensive fouls on ball screens and remembers making the same mistakes frequently in his first couple of seasons.

“I try to get in his ear and tell him the right thing to do or how to correct himself,” Schilling said.

He can tell him. But he can’t show him. Had he been healthy, he and Ward would have platooned at center, instead of Ward and sophomore Kenny Goins, a reserve forward playing the role of makeshift center.

Schilling knew that wasn’t in the cards as soon as his right knee bucked during a late-October practice. MSU kept faint hope alive he’d return. Schilling, though, preferred to sit the season rather than rush back to play the last month at less than 100 percent. “Mentally, I would say yes (I’m ready),” Schilling said. “Physically I don’t think my body is 100 percent there yet.”

“Just yesterday, he was jumping and shooting for the first couple of times where he’s really jumping,” Izzo said. “The knee is really coming along.

“Gavin Schilling, I think, has become a much better leader going through this. (I’m) maybe as proud of anybody that’s been injured. He sat out a year, and what I watched him do physically in the weight room and now what I’m starting to see him do on the floor and when I’m seeing him in meetings, this kid has grown in leaps and bounds.”

Schilling doesn’t want MSU to lose this weekend, but you can tell he’s looking forward to being part of things again and to what next year might bring. The Spartans could have a loaded frontcourt. And Schilling thinks he’ll be better for the time away.

“This year really helped me out confidence-wise, learning the game more,” Schilling said. “It did happen with perfect timing. I don’t have to rush back for anything. I’ll have the whole summer to get better, work on my game ... and start a whole season fresh and healthy.”