Kevin White and Kelvin Benjamin arrived at training camp last July with big plans for their teams’ passing games. One year—and two nasty injuries—later, they finally have their shot.

By Ben Baskin
**ONE PLAYER** expected to be back quickly, the other wondered whether his career was over. One watched helplessly as his squad struggled, the other looked on while his team thrived. The stories of Kevin White and Kelvin Benjamin connect and contrast: Two promising young receivers who spent the last year stuck on the sidelines; two different injuries; two divergent paths back to the field. The same feelings of helplessness, doubt, pain and elation; the ebbs and flows of a year removed.

In a league in which 474 players were placed on season-ending IR in 2015, these two receivers’ experiences are indicative of the tenuousness of life in the NFL. Injuries are such an everyday occurrence that fans simply adjust their fantasy lineups and assume, He’ll be back eventually. The how of it is immaterial. Yet for so many players, the how is their everyday reality.

“I thought it would be a two-week break.”

At 22, Kevin White arrived at his first NFL OTAs, on May 27, 2015, in the best shape of his life. The Bears’ rookie sported a physique both sturdy and sinewy, with ab muscles that had their own ab muscles. As White went from unknown prospect at Lackawanna junior college in Scranton, Pa., to All-America at West Virginia to No. 7 draft pick, his work ethic had always headlined his scouting report. “The outside of his body looked like a chiseled sculpture,” says his father, Kevin White Sr., “but on the inside it had taken a toll.”

One week into OTAs, White felt discomfort in his left leg and noticed a bump on his shin. He figured it was just his new cleats—but then cornerback Tracy Porter pointed out his limp. On Tuesday, June 16, Bears general manager Ryan Pace asked White what was wrong. That was the first day he missed practice. “I thought it would be a two-week break,” White says.

X-rays showed a small black line down White’s lower leg, what appeared to be shin splints. If he stayed off the leg, doctors told him, the injury could heal itself.

After six weeks of rest, White reported for training camp and had a follow-up X-ray to see how the shin had progressed. He was so confident, he thought it was a waste of time. His family was in town. That night they all went to Dave & Buster’s and talked about how excited they were for Kevin to return. They played Pop-A-Shot and Pac-Man. “Then we get the results,” says Pace, “and nothing has changed. The line is still there. We’re like, F---.”

White now appeared to have a stress fracture, which could require surgery. He was incredulous. He persuaded Pace to let him try running—just once—before they made a decision. He ran well; he was encouraged. The next day, however, White woke up, took one step out of bed and felt the pain again.

On Aug. 15, Pace cornered the receiver outside the trainer’s room and told him to sit down. Sorry, Pace said, but surgery was the best option for the team. White sank into a chair and broke into tears.

Seven hundred miles away, 24-year-old Kelvin Benjamin showed up on May 26 for his second year of Panthers OTAs, nine pounds overweight. A few weeks before his arrival he had strained his left hamstring, and in mid-June he would strain his right one. Coach Ron Rivera would attribute both injuries to the added bulk.

But when Benjamin reported to camp on July 30 he was, by all accounts, a changed man. Rivera said the receiver was in “tremendous shape,” among the best-conditioned players on the team.
was getting regular massages, monitoring his sleep and stretching more. The frequency and intensity of his workouts had increased, and he’d hired a chef, who put him on a strict diet of lean proteins, leafy greens and complex carbs. Gone were the sugary cereals and fruit drinks that Benjamin kept around the house, along with the collard greens, neck bones and oxtails his mom had always made for him.

An ESPN report named Benjamin the Panthers’ “early MVP,” and in Carolina’s preseason opener he caught the team’s first TD of the year. Five days later, on Aug. 19, the Panthers and the Dolphins held a joint practice, and when they broke off into one-on-one passing drills, Carolina quarterback Cam Newton pointed at his top receiver to go first. Benjamin called for a “seven route”—a corner—and lined up against Miami’s Reshad Jones. As Benjamin attempted to speed-cut past Jones, his left knee buckled. It would be the first time he was ever carted off a field.

“When you’re getting carted off, you see practice going on without you,” he says. “Right there you know that you can be the past. You are the past.”

Benjamin was not yet aware that he’d become one of 37 NFL players who would tear an ACL before Week 1. After Panthers owner Jerry Richardson came into the locker room to speak with him, the receiver found himself alone. He checked his cellphone, already deluged with tweets about the injury and text-message prayers. He was helped out of his uniform and pads, and a trainer dragged a folding chair into the shower. There Benjamin sat silently, letting the water flow over him as thoughts flooded his mind. How is the team going to do without me? Is my career over? How am I going to feed my family?

“But mostly,” Benjamin says, “I was just hoping it was a dream.”

“It didn’t really matter no more.”

In the eight days leading up to his operation, White was haunted by a recurring nightmare in which various people told him his leg was injured and required surgery. He’d think, This is all a dream. This can’t be real. Then he’d wake up in a panic. White would reach for his phone to regain his bearings—and his heart would drop again. “It would hit me like, Oh, no, this is real,” he says. “I relived that every night.”

On Aug. 23, White’s parents drove him to a hospital in Chicago for the operation. He was nervous. He doesn’t like needles. Doctors began to describe the procedure: They would make an incision below his knee, drill a hole—but White cut them off. He just wanted to get it over with. As nurses wheeled him into the operating room, tears streamed down his cheeks.

When he eventually awoke, with a titanium rod stretching the length of his tibia and several metal screws inserted across the bone, White felt, he says now, “like a freakin’ robot.”

After his injury, Benjamin took “three personal days, to feel bad for myself.” ACL tears, which require one of the longest and most grueling recoveries in sports, tend to do that to athletes. Benjamin replayed the fateful cut in his mind, thinking that if he’d just dropped his hips and broken it down, like a comeback route, his knee might have been fine. He didn’t watch the Panthers’ second preseason game—“It didn’t really matter no more,” he says. He wondered what he’d done to deserve this.

Benjamin headed to Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte on Sept. 10, and when doctors began to explain his procedure—not only had he torn his ACL, which would be replaced with a patella tendon graft, but he also tore his lateral meniscus, which required sutures—he told them, “I don’t want to know.” Benjamin, too, was “just ready to get it over with.”

He awoke after surgery to the sound of his own screams. He tries but fails to describe the feeling of having one part of your body removed and attached to another—he just remembers it hurt. Throughout that first night he’d be yanked out of sleep by a burning pain, and he’d press the button on his IV pump, sending morphine coursing through his body.

At one point, in his sedated state, Benjamin called his mother, Christine, back home in Kissimmee, Fla. She missed the call but heard the voicemail later that night. “Mom, I’m in so much pain,” her youngest son pleaded through the phone. “You have to get here!”

“I’m with you guys—but I’m not with you.”

After White’s surgery, doctors told him not to do anything for two weeks, so he slept as much as possible (until his parents, who moved in with him temporarily, compelled him to get out of bed). He spent most of his waking hours watching movies, old favorites such as Titanic,
The days were exercises in pain tolerance, but White’s mother, Tammy, feared her son would become addicted to painkillers, so she slowly began cutting his meds in half, augmenting them with Tylenol. After two weeks passed, Kevin returned to the Bears’ facility. He was shocked by how skinny his quad had gotten, but still: When trainers asked him to lie on his back and lift his ankle even an inch, he thought, “I just want me to do that? Easy.” And then I’d try it,” he says, “and be like, Oh, shoot.”

Gradually White’s rehab moved outside. His limp subsided. But he could still feel the screws in his leg. His movements felt mechanical, unnatural, and when he finally set foot on the practice field, on Nov. 24—during a three-week window in which the Bears could weigh whether to reinsert him on season-ending IR—he labored through his sharp cuts downfield. The Bears were 5–8, and White felt he owed it to the organization to play. But when he asked Jay Cutler what he should do, the QB told him not to rush it, that he needed to be smart. In the end Cutler advised White not to come back. The decision wasn’t White’s to make. On Dec. 15, Pace gave him the news he already knew was coming. His season was over.  

When Benjamin left the hospital, one day after surgery, his mother was waiting for him at his downtown Charlotte condo; she’d taken the first flight from Florida and his receivers were using. He felt like a fan. Back in September he’d chosen not to be included in the team photo; he didn’t want to remember the season. But now he was watching his teammates make highlights after big plays, but quickly he learned: A full game “was just too much to see,” he says. The pain in his leg was excruciating, but he often skipped his medication, telling his mom that he didn’t want to get hooked. At night, as he lay in bed, she rubbed his leg until he fell asleep.

Within a week of surgery, Benjamin was back in the Panthers’ facility full-time. To regain extension in his knee he lay supine as two trainers pushed down on his leg, straightening it past the point of comfort, an exercise Benjamin equates to torture. He dipped in the HydroWorx therapy pool, held on to a metal bar and lifted his knee up and down, again and again.

Because he’d torn his lateral meniscus, not just his ACL, Benjamin stayed on crutches for six weeks, during which he wasn’t allowed on the sideline for games. He refused to watch from a box, so he hardly watched at all. He didn’t attend receivers meetings all season. “I wanted to give them their space,” he says. “They were out there balling.”

As the Panthers raced to the best start in franchise history, Benjamin noticed that he no longer knew the hand signals Newton and his receivers were using. He felt like a fan. Back in September he’d chosen not to be included in the team photo; he didn’t want to remember the season. But now he was watching his teammates make history, dabbing their way to a 15–1 record. He felt angry that they were succeeding without him, then guilty for feeling angry. “I had always been the guy,” Benjamin says, “but this [experience] made me more of a team guy. It helped me get some of those selfish feelings out.”

When Benjamin shed his crutches, which had made his underarms perpetually sore, he felt reinvigorated. He went through all of the same single-leg balance and strength exercises that White did, incrementally adding weight. Roughly 10 weeks post-op, Benjamin started an upper-body lifting program, heading to
the weight room every afternoon following rehab. Those around him say they had never seen him so dedicated, so driven.

Finally, in mid-January, four months after surgery, as the Panthers entered the playoffs as the NFC’s top seed, Benjamin began jogging on land. He did light runs on the field before games, stalked the sideline during games and posed for pictures after games. He became the team’s most spirited cheerleader as Carolina mollywhopped its conference opponents.

He thought, *Man, if we win the Super Bowl, I get a ring too.*

“I have to go. I’m ready.”

For White the most difficult part of a year away from football was regaining his confidence, learning to run without being conscious of the hardware in his leg. So shortly after the season ended he had another surgery, this time to remove the screws. Once those were excised from his body, he says, he finally felt like his old self.

Still, he needed to know for sure. In March, White went home to Macungie, Pa., and joined his two brothers, Ka’Raun and Kyzir (who both play for West Virginia), and his best friend, Devon Blake (a teammate at Lackawanna), for some light training at a high school. White had planned to watch, but soon he was lacing up his cleats. As the workout wound down, White and Blake caught each other’s eyes.

The two friends have a long history of racing. Blake asked White if he still had it; White nodded. They lined up on the goal line, and “Kev just took off,” Ka’Raun says. “The race was over from the first step. He gave me that look like, *I’m back, baby.*”

Last week, on his first day of training camp, White lined up both as an outside receiver and in the slot and didn’t drop a single pass. “If I woke up today and had no memory of the last year,” he says, “I wouldn’t know that there was ever anything wrong.”

In the week leading up to Super Bowl 50, in which the Panthers would play the Broncos, Benjamin was able to work out with his teammates at San Jose State; he was cleared to do cuts and jukes, lateral slides and shuffles, backpedals and karaoke drills. Then, in the big game, he watched from the sideline as Carolina’s offense sputtered. Afterward he heard all the pundits: *If Benjamin had been out there, the Panthers would have won.* He couldn’t help but ponder the possibility.

In the off-season Benjamin worked more with Carolina’s strength coach, less with the training staff. He was cleared to join the team’s conditioning program on April 26 and was a limited participant in OTAs. He didn’t wear a brace because he thinks it is a mental hindrance and he does not want to “baby” the knee.

In June, back in Charlotte, Benjamin sat in the cab of his black pickup truck alongside his mother, on their way to grab something to eat. Christine remembers how excited her son was to finally play again, how his eyes lit up as he rattled off Carolina’s schedule. Eventually he mentioned that on July 28 he would have to start training camp in Spartanburg, S.C., on the same field where he’d torn up his knee. Christine was apprehensive. She couldn’t handle seeing him go through another year like that.

“Mom, don’t worry, it’s going to be all right,” he said. “I have to go. I’m ready.”
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