

ACL Comeback: Ally Sentnor

After tearing her ACL as a college freshman, VIS Mentor Ally Sentnor leaned on consistent rehab, a strong support system, and a resilient mindset to return stronger than ever. Her story highlights the realities of recovery, trusting the process, and rising to the top of the NWSL and U.S. national team pipeline.

Sometimes, ACL tears are out of our control. We can prepare relentlessly, strengthen every muscle group, and rehearse a movement thousands of times—and still, in one split-second, the knee buckles.

That was the reality for VIS Mentor Ally Sentnor in August of 2021. In a preseason match during her freshman soccer season at the University of North Carolina (UNC), she attempted a routine turn she'd done her entire life, only to feel something in her knee that wasn't right.

An MRI confirmed what she already feared: a torn ACL, and with it, the loss of the season she'd spent years preparing for. For the star midfielder/forward who had never been away from soccer for more than a couple weeks, the injury marked the beginning of a completely different kind of challenge—one defined not by minutes on the field, but by resilience, identity, and the slow, disciplined work of coming back.

And come back she did.

Sentnor attacked her recovery and earned a spot on the United States U-20 Women's World Cup team shortly after her return. Now, she plays for the USWNT U23 squad and is called up to the senior national team on occasion. In the NWSL, she was selected first overall in the 2024 NWSL Draft by the Utah Royals. Sentnor now plays for the Kansas City Current and clinched the NWSL Shield in 2025.

Treatment Plan

Sentnor had a patellar tendon ACL reconstruction. This surgery fixes a torn ACL by using a small piece of the athlete's own patellar tendon to make a new ligament. The surgeon takes the tendon piece, places it through small tunnels in the knee bones, and secures it so the knee can be stable again.

Sentnor opted to have her surgery in Chapel Hill because she wanted to be around her teammates during her recovery. Her recovery timeline was nine months.

“Everyone was so supportive,” Sentnor [told Chapelboro in 2022](#). “My coaches still invested in me. My teammates were probably the best part of it. I decided to do my surgery [in North Carolina], because I just wanted to be around them and I wanted to be around the team. As much as I knew I was gonna miss the game and wanted to be on the field, I just wanted to be around the happiness and the supportiveness. The resilience from my teammates rubbed off on me.”

Initial Feelings

Sentnor described her initial feelings as “shock, anger, sadness, and confusion.”

“When I got the news, I was obviously devastated,” Sentnor [told Chapelboro in 2022](#). “But my first mindset was, ‘this is an obstacle. It’s a bump in my road. It’s not gonna be a perfect, straight arrow to the top.’ And I just put my head down and decided I was gonna do the rehab to the best of my ability and work as hard as I can to get back to where I was.”

When Sentnor heard her diagnosis, she couldn’t use soccer—her normal outlet— to calm her mind. Instead, she turned to the weight room.

“I ended up doing an hour upper body lift because I needed to take my mind off of it and move my body,” Sentnor said. “Soccer has always been my mental outlet as well as my physical one, so it was the first thing I thought to do.”

Sentnor’s Road to Recovery

Beginning the Process

For Sentnor, consistency with rehab was key early in her recovery process.

“Every knee slide down the wall and knee extensions with weight was super hard and didn’t feel very productive, but I know in the long run those small 10-15 minute sessions multiple times a day really helped,” Sentnor said.

Another key was having a positive mindset.

“I was ready to tackle the recovery and knew I couldn’t change my reality, so might as well crush the recovery,” Sentnor said.

Building Strength

Through Sentnor’s process, the middle stages—rebuilding strength—were the toughest and longest.

“There were days where it felt like it might be never ending, and I would never do anything besides a front squat ever again in my life,” Sentnor said.

Sentnor emphasized that specific rehabilitation techniques and exercises are personal to every individual. She found a physical therapist that specialized in ACL recoveries and they tailored each phase of the recovery process to Sentnor’s body, goals, and timeline.

“The evolution is really slow, but every time I was able to add another exercise or run more felt like the biggest win and it was important to celebrate all those wins,” Sentnor said. “I had a little wins journal that helped me with that.”

Back in Action

Sentnor’s knee hurt running at first, so she had to slow down and build more strength before ramping up again.

“The setbacks hurt because all you want to do is get back on the field, but trusting the process is important,” Sentnor said.

As a forward, Sentnor returned to shooting on the goal first. Since you can do shooting without contact, she would join the goalkeeper sessions and practice with them. As her training became more intense, she navigated fear of reinjury by relying on professional support.

“I had a sports psych that really helped me, and I would just ask my PT a ton of questions,” Sentnor said. “I relied a lot on the facts and trust that I had put in the work to be strong and recovered.”

Return to Play

As Sentnor returned to full form, she leaned on her support system, gave herself grace to reintegrate to her team, and just had fun.

“I trusted the return to play tests and my comfortability on the ball in training,” Sentnor said. “I just needed to get that big crunching tackle out of the way at training.”

Sentnor managed nerves by reminding herself how thrilled she was to get back to playing.

Lessons Learned

Sentnor took away three lessons from her injury:

1. You can learn and grow from an experience, even if it feels entirely negative
2. Being a good teammate and well-rounded person is important—and even key—to being a good player

3. Overcoming adversity is rewarding

She also credits her support system for helping her through the recovery process.

“I leaned on my parents so much, physically for the first week but throughout the whole process,” Sentnor said. “They were nothing but positive and supportive and I truly could not have done it without them.”

What began as a moment entirely out of her control became a defining chapter in Sentnor’s growth and revealed her deepest resilience. Her comeback proved that setbacks don’t stall greatness—they shape it.