

Early amazed by his journey to Final Four

BY JEFFREY LUTZ
The Wichita Eagle

LOS ANGELES — Cleanthony Early's ankle has never felt better.

Sure, he may hobble a few days. He'll probably need to ice it every day before Wichita State plays its first Final Four game on Saturday.

Yes, a Final Four game. Against Duke or Louisville. That has Early feeling completely healthy — mind, body and spirit. A 70-66 over Ohio State win in the West Regional final is the best antidote.

"Last year we were watching this," said Early, a transfer from Sullivan College, a Division III junior college in New York. "I was playing D-III juco watching it on TV. Just watching it. Now I'm looking at a hat that says 'Final Four Atlanta 2013' with my team on it. It's crazy."

Early rolled his left ankle with about 11 minutes to go when he fell awkwardly fighting for a rebound. He moaned in pain as the Shocker fans behind WSU's bench fell silent.

It looked worse when Early headed to the locker room for

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Cleanthony Early

X-rays. At that point, Early was WSU's greatest worry because the Shockers led by 20 and were on their way to a seemingly easy win.

But seeing Early writhe and moan in pain clearly jolted the Shockers, and it coincided with OSU turning up its defensive pressure. That formula produced a major threat to WSU's lead, as the lead began to dwindle and continued to even after Early checked back in minutes later.

"We weren't concerned," WSU junior Nick Wiggins said of the mood on the bench when Early went to the locker room. He's bounced back, he tweaked his ankle a couple times (during the season). He's a warrior and we knew he was going to fight back. We weren't worried about it, we were just worried about how soon he was going to be able to come back."

On a damaged ankle, which

he called a sprain, Early never provided the value that he did in the first 30 minutes.

Before his injury, Early made several important shots and played well defensively against Ohio State's dynamic forward, Deshaun Thomas.

Early has seen his playing time suffer occasionally this season because of his defense, but he was as good as anybody has been against Thomas, who scored in double figures in every game this season and finished with 21 on 7-of-19 shooting on Saturday.

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While Early's injury was the most serious, it's not the only Shocker ailment that might require attention during the week.

Carl Hall took an elbow to

the face on an OSU drive to the basket early in the second half, Ron Baker came up rubbing his neck after taking a hard fall in the first, and Fred VanVleet massaged his elbow after falling on what became a crucial three-point play with 7:03 to go.

The Buckeyes lived up to the rough reputation of the Big Ten, but the Shockers showed they could fit into that conference, too.

"It was a physical game," Hall said. "It's been like that the whole NCAA Tournament, though. We're a quick, physical team, they're a physical team. It's amazing. Anything can happen."

Early said he would play Saturday. Of course he will. He's been thinking about this game for a year, since he was at an anonymous junior college in his home state, and the thought of it is what brought him out of the locker room on Saturday.

"I should be fine," Early said. "No concerns. Give it a couple days, maybe a week. I've got time to heal and chill out and rest. It doesn't feel too bad. We're basketball players, it happens all the time."



Jaime Green/The Wichita Eagle

Wichita State athletic trainer Todd Fagan checks forward Cleanthony Early after Early turned his ankle during the second half Saturday. Early left the game briefly, but returned and helped the Shockers beat Ohio State.

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