

Louisville's Brown Jr. won't play at the ACC tourney

He hopes to be ready for March Madness

BY AARON BEARD
AP BASKETBALL WRITER

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Mikel Brown Jr. is focusing on rehabbing the back injury that is keeping him out of the Atlantic Coast Conference Tournament. Louisville's star freshman and high-end NBA prospect is hoping the time off will have him ready for March Madness.

"Yeah, it's hard," Brown said while sitting at his locker after missing the 24th-ranked Cardinals' second-round victory over SMU on Wednesday. "But I can't rush God's plan. Can't rush his plan. And I trust him every day."

It's an unwelcome repeat of back issues that sidelined Brown for eight games earlier this season, then again for the last two games of the regular season. Louisville announced Tuesday that Brown won't play in Charlotte, at least creating some question about his status for what could be his lone NCAA Tournament trip if he goes the one-and-done route.

Asked if he was 100% sure he'd play in the NAAs, Brown said: "Right now I'm just focused on my rehab more than anything. And when the time feels right, I'm going to talk to the coaching staff and we're going to come to an agreement."

The 6-foot-5 freshman has shown explosive scoring potential this year, notably when he shook off a slow start in his return from the first bout with the back injury to have an ACC freshman single-game record 45 points against N.C. State in early February. He followed immedi-

Louisville guard Mikel Brown Jr., watches the action as he stands behind forward Khani Rooths (9) during the second half an NCAA college basketball game against SMU in the second round of the Atlantic Coast Conference tournament in Charlotte, N.C. on Wednesday.

Nell Redmond | Associated Press



ately with consecutive 29-point games against Baylor and SMU, and had 20 of his 29 points in the first half of a December win against in-state rival Kentucky.

When he's on, Brown is capable of stretching and stressing defenses with shooting range and off-dribble moves. But he's only able to watch his teammates play without him and try to contribute from the sideline. "In the game he's talking to us, in the timeouts," guard Ryan Conwell said. "We definitely miss him and his presence on the floor, but he's still there making a huge impact."

Brown didn't offer specifics when asked whether he's dealing with pain, saying he's battling "the normal thing I had before." He said his back "aggravates me throughout the day,"

and he's focused on rehab such as needling treatments and soft-tissue massages.

He's been getting some shooting in and riding a stationary bike to keep his wind up, hoping to make steady progress.

But he knows time is short to be ready for March Madness.

"It's always been a childhood dream, watching it every single year," Brown said. "I enjoy it just because I feel like it's the best basketball in the world. Obviously, you've got the NBA Finals and NBA playoffs, but I think the atmosphere in March Madness is just different because it's sin-

gle-elimination so everything's on the line.

"Like Coach (Pat) Kelsey said in his interviews: we're just looking for me to get to 100%."

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