

# ESPN guest columnist Sean Doolittle: Life on the DL is no picnic

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AP Photo/Ben Margot

*Buster Olney is on vacation this week, and in keeping with an idea borrowed from NFL writer Peter King, some folks with baseball ties will be filling in as guest columnists.*

*Today: Oakland Athletics closer Sean Doolittle, who has been working his way back from injury.*

Earlier this summer, my University of Virginia baseball Cavaliers defeated Buster's Vanderbilt Commodores to win the College World Series, and he was forced to hand over the keys to his blog. So if you're wondering why a guy who has spent essentially the entire year on the disabled list has this platform, that's why.

As I write this, I am sitting in a hotel room in Des Moines, Iowa. As John Kinsella asked in "Field Of Dreams," "Is this heaven?"

No, it's Iowa.

I am here trying to resurrect my season. I've been here for four days while rehabbing with the Nashville Sounds, our Triple-A affiliate. I've been here before -- not literally at this hotel, but figuratively. I've been down this road. This is my second time this year alone I've been sent out on a rehab assignment for a shoulder injury.

A year ago at this time, I was fortunate enough to be the closer on a team that had one of the best records in baseball and was in the heat of a playoff race. And a month before that, I was lucky enough to be selected to pitch in the All-Star Game. Life was good. And then *\*record scratch\**.

It's no secret that our 2014 season didn't end the way we had hoped. And when it came time to begin my throwing program in January, I found out that some of the wounds didn't heal as well as others.

There was a stabbing pain in the back of my shoulder. Every time you start throwing again after taking some time off, there will be some discomfort as you knock the rust off. But this wasn't discomfort. This was pain.

A few days later, I got an MRI. The news came back, and it wasn't good: interstitial rotator cuff tear. Or as the trainer put it, "your shoulder is pissed off, man."

So was I.

That meant getting an injection of my own plasma directly into the injury. That meant wearing a sling for a week or so. That meant eight weeks of shoulder exercises before I was even allowed to pick up a ball at the end of March. That meant not being able to pitch in spring training. That meant missing the first two months of the season.

It was only mid-January, and I already knew the 2015 season was going to be very different.

Unfortunately I am no stranger to the disabled list. I missed all of the 2009 and 2010 minor league seasons with knee surgeries, and then I missed the 2011 minor league season with a torn tendon in my right wrist. I almost didn't make it to Oakland. I might be a major leaguer on the disabled list, but I consider myself lucky to be a major leaguer at all.

The DL is a mental grind as much as a physical one. Often the exercises are actually the easiest parts of the process. The hardest part is not being able to be a part of the team and having to watch from the dugout -- while knowing you're physically incapable of contributing. Our trainers are as much sports psychologists as they are athletic trainers (Nick, Walt, Brian, I love you guys). As a competitor, though, it is a very helpless feeling.

Fortunately the A's let me stay in Oakland while I work my way back (some teams will send players back to their spring training sites if they are going to be out of commission for a while).

It helps being around the team, but one of the hardest parts is trying to stay out of the way. This means getting to the field extra early, like noon for a 7:05 p.m. game or 7:30 a.m. for a 1 p.m. game. That way I can get my work in before the guys come in. This also means trying to find a corner of the dugout or hiding in the video room, where I'm not in anyone's way.

But there are a lot of good things about it, too. Watching games from the dugout -- or from my couch when the team goes on the road -- has given me a unique chance to view the game through a different lens. Also, while I'm essentially an A's superfan and cheerleader on the bench, I am also trying to use this as an opportunity to continue to learn and develop. I eavesdrop on conversations between the pitcher and the catcher on the bench between innings. I watch film during the game to see how I might attack an opposing hitter when I come back. The game moves a lot slower when you watch it from the sidelines, without the adrenaline pulsing through your veins, and I've been able to learn a lot.

I have also tried to use this time to develop as a pitcher. You have a lot more spare time when you're on the DL, so I've tried to use it productively to keep my mind and body active. Extra time in the weight room and extra conditioning have helped me get in even better shape. I do towel drills to fine-tune my mechanics. I work on my secondary pitches and do long toss, all in hopes of strengthening my arm and finally clearing the mental hurdle of regaining full confidence in my shoulder.

Another reason I feel lucky to have been able to stay around the team is that I have the best coaches and teammates in the world. They come out early to watch my bullpen sessions and simulated games. They've helped me so much throughout this process by giving me feedback, tips and even criticism. I'm very grateful for it.

You have to throw yourself into the process, no pun intended. I have a quote taped to my locker by ex-Duke basketball player and current assistant coach Jeff Capel that says, "You have to fall in love with the process of becoming great." I guess that's been my mantra this year.

I've found that in this game, all you can ask for is a chance. I have a chance to come back this year, and I'm trying to give myself every opportunity to take advantage of that chance.

But even with the best trainers in the world, with the support of my family, with the invaluable help from my teammates, there is nothing fun about having to watch your own team from your couch or from the sidelines. I don't enjoy my time on the training table. The constant reminders of just how fragile this career can be are no longer welcome.

So what makes it all worthwhile? Why did I continue to work through years and years of injuries in the minor leagues? Why did I switch to pitching? Why am I traveling across the country to go on rehab assignments and pitch in the minor leagues? Why put in all this work for something that can change in an instant, something that offers no guarantees? Is it really all for three outs per night?

I do it because it has always been my dream to be in the big leagues and because I have hope that I will wake up tomorrow and my shoulder will feel just a bit better. And then I will get to throw off of a mound in a game in Iowa. And then I will fly to Tennessee and hopefully get to throw off another mound in another game a few days later.

And I will be incredibly grateful for the opportunity to do so because it means I'm another day closer to getting back to Oakland. It means one fewer outing away from pitching off a big league mound at O.co Coliseum again. And it means I'm that much closer to contributing to a win with the Athletics.