Back on the Field
An injury endangers a striker's season.

On a hot July afternoon in Harvard Stadium, just three months after surgery, Michael Fucito '09 took off running at the base of the stands, barely breaking his stride as he kicked a soccer ball to himself against the wall. About three-quarters of the way around the field, he slowed down, and trainer Stacie Barlow motioned him back. He arrived red-faced and dripping with sweat, to tell her that the toughest part of his rehab would be just getting back into shape—as if a doctor hadn't operated recently on his hip and told him he might miss almost all his senior season.

Barlow asked if Fucito had mentioned that he was way ahead of his rehab schedule. "Months ahead," he added.

On paper, each of Fucito's years in crimson has been better than the last. As a freshman, he won the Ivy League Rookie of the Year award; as a sophomore, Rookie of the Year; and as a junior, second-team all-American honors. He has tallied 23 goals and 19 assists. Along with fellow standout André Akpan (see "Powers of the Pitch," September-October 2007, page 74), Fucito has led Harvard to one Ivy

“Sometimes my daily push to understand my surroundings when I feel so out of my element seems Sisyphean.”

I just smiled, wanting to avoid yet another person's reaction to my admission of being a foreigner—a newly arrived, not-quite-employed New York rookie. I am at the bottom of a very large learning curve, and sometimes my daily push to understand my surroundings when I feel so entirely out of my element seems Sisyphean. Yet I remember a time when I felt just the same. As a freshman in college, the cloud of confusion around me would lift occasionally, like a morning fog, and something perhaps quite simple would become clear to me. Those small moments of understanding would be strangely sweet, a very specific feeling that deserted me after I became more versed in my environment. There are benefits to finding yourself at the very bottom of what you must climb, and rewards to throwing yourself into something entirely new: like speeding through the New York Harbor and seeing it all for the very first time.

Liz Goodwin '08, who has completed her Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellowship with this column, will leave New York in September for a four-month newspaper internship in Costa Rica.

SPORTS

www.gocrimson.com

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746.
League title and two consecutive national tournaments. But even as public accolades accumulated, Fucito's injuries grew worse. He has suffered a separated shoulder, a slipped rib, back spasms, and compartment leg syndrome (swelling that results from unhealed bruising). He has also had surgery to remove an extra ankle bone. He once spent a night in the cardiac ward after a ball hit his sternum hard enough to make his heart bleed. His hip had bothered him for six months when he finally decided to go in for surgery.

These injuries have not been freak accidents. Fucito admits that they are, at least in part, a consequence of how aggressively he plays. His greatest weapon is his speed, and he likes to run directly at defenders, the ball at his feet, rather than waiting to receive a pass in the penalty area. When defenders "can't keep up with me running," he says, "they tend to kick me or drag me down in some way to try and stop me." He separated his shoulder when he charged a goalie who was coming out to collect a loose ball. Fucito poked the ball into the net, but the goalie, barreling in a step behind, sent him flying. At only five feet, eight inches—small for a forward—"he takes his share of abuse," says Jamie Clark, Welch head coach of men's soccer. "But he probably gives out as good as he gets. You won't find anyone physically stronger."

His hip problems are not the result of a single, dramatic play. In soccer, the torque necessary for rifling a hard shot places an immense amount of pressure on the hips. Years of twisting his body before his bones had developed fully made them grow out of shape. His doctors had to repair torn cartilage, grind down a bump on his femur, and reshape his hipbone. "You never used to see these [kinds of] injuries," says Barlow (who left Harvard over the summer). According to her, young athletes used to play a different sport every season, giving their bodies a break from the particular rigors of each. But Fucito began playing soccer early ("as soon as I could walk") and, after giving up baseball (he broke his wrist twice), devoted himself entirely to the beautiful but often brutal game.

As a young speedster in Westford, Massachusetts, Fucito (pronounced Jew-seh-tee) caught the attention of John Kerr, then head coach for both Harvard (he moved to Duke after the 2007 season) and the Boston Bolts club team. Fucito started for the Bolts during high school, then decided to continue playing for Kerr at Harvard. Because all the teams in the Ivy League are more or less evenly matched, says Fucito, each game is a "hard-nosed battle rather than a game of pretty soccer." Without a year-ending tournament, a single loss can dash a team's title hopes. In these conditions, Clark says, winning is often a matter of "finding one or two players who can pull you through tough games."

It was Fucito's toughness that impressed Clark when he was still a candidate for the head coaching job. "Mike was one of the guys I interviewed with," he recalls. "He was one of the reasons I knew I wanted to coach here." Clark had seen Fucito's statistics but hadn't known about the young striker's dogged, competitive personality.

"I hate sitting out more than anything," says Fucito. (After his night in the cardiac ward, he showed up the next day expecting to practice.) The hip operation in May left him unable to lie completely flat or sit up, but he went from being unable to pull on his socks to running almost full speed in three months. "He jumps back on the field so quickly," Clark marvels. Fucito dreams not only of returning to top form in time for the season, but also of receiving an invitation to the Major League Soccer Combine, where professional coaches scout draft prospects.

"I think he's pushing harder than anyone I've ever seen," says Clark, not only to come back, but also "to make it a special season."

～Paul Gleason