

Analysis: Pitt's frontcourt situation after Luther's injury

By [Chris Mueller](#) December 18, 2017

Pitt will be without senior forward **Ryan Luther** for an extended period of time due to a stress reaction to the third metatarsal bone in his right foot.

How long?

We're not quite sure yet. **Kevin Stallings** said after the McNeese State game that Luther will be re-evaluated in "a couple of weeks." From Friday, two weeks would be on Dec. 29, which obviously puts Luther's availability for the Panthers' ACC opener against Miami on Dec. 30 in severe jeopardy.

Luther suffered a stress fracture to the second metatarsal bone in the same foot last season. Though it should be noted that a fracture is considered worse than a reaction, Stallings' initial timeline back then was similar to his statements this time around. He said, at the time, that Luther would miss a

couple of weeks, but it ended up being a month and a half.

Luther is undoubtedly the most important piece to the potential success of a team containing seven freshmen and nine first-time Division I players. Just watch a game. It's obvious. Stallings summed it up pretty well.

“He's our best offensive player, he's our best rebounder and he's by far our best post defensive player,” he said after the McNeese State game. “You take away one of your best ballhandlers, one of your best passers, one of your best shooters, one of your best scorers – your best scorer, maybe – your best rebounder, your best pick-and-roll defensive player, a guy with all the experience ... it all feels different.”

Whoa.

Luther was posting 12.7 points and 10.8 rebounds per game at the time of his injury, which made him only one of three in the ACC to average a double-double. Pitt will need to attempt – key-word *attempt* – to replace him through a by-committee effort. It will take all nine players left in Stallings' primary rotation to give the Panthers at least a fighting chance of keeping scores relatively close against conference opponents. Let's explore some options as to how they can move forward.

Stallings has used Luther – averaging 36 minutes of a possible 40 minutes per game – in nine of his top-10 lineups over the last five games, per KenPom.com. **Marcus Carr, Khameron Davis, Jared Wilson-Frame, Shamiel Stevenson** and Luther have played together 14.6 percent of the time. **Jonathan Milligan Jr.** and **Parker Stewart** have been the top two off the bench.

KenPom uses a specific formula to measure a single player's impact by assessing team possessions.

In Luther's case, it looked at 20-24 percent of Pitt's possessions on both ends

of the floor. He attempted a field goal on 24.9 percent of its offensive possessions, dished an assist on 19.4 percent of them and collected an offensive rebound at a 14.2 percent rate. On the other end, he's rebounding at 20.3 percent, registering a steal on 2.9 percent and a block on 2.3 percent of Pitt's defensive possessions.

Again, whoa.

Okay, so take Luther out of the equation and Stallings has Stevenson, Brown and Chukwuka primarily left in the frontcourt. Add **Peace Ilegomah** into the mix, who registered a season-high 16 minutes against McNeese State in Luther's first game out. Samson George will likely receive an increase in playing time, but not too much.

SHAMIEL STEVENSON

Stallings has recently used Stevenson – listed at 6-foot-6, 230-pounds – mostly at power forward over the last five games with some small forward mixed in. But that might not last, considering he'll regularly face a size disadvantage on a nightly basis once ACC play comes around, which can lead to issues in rebounding and foul trouble. Stevenson wasn't relied on as much from a rebounding standpoint while playing alongside Luther, considering the latter averaged 10.8 boards per game. Now? He can't afford to neglect the glass. He's clearly talented, though, and will need to step into a larger, more important role until Luther returns.

Stevenson's averages through 11 games:

- **Minutes:** 26.2 per game
- **Scoring:** 10.8 points per game
- **Field goal percentage:** 52 percent
- **Free throw percentage:** 60 percent
- **Rebounding:** 5.4 per game
- **Assist to turnover ratio:** 0.76 percent

- **Blocks:** 5
- **Steals:** 6

Top areas of needed improvement: Free throw shooting and ballcare. Stevenson is strong enough to get to the rim while driving, but teams often resort to fouling, knowing his struggles at the line. He's ranked first on the team with 51 foul shots this season. Turnovers have sometimes been an issue for him, as well.



Shamiel Stevenson – MATT SUNDAY / DKPS

KENE CHUKWUKA

Chukwuka brings a lot of positive qualities to the floor with his energy and tenacity on the defensive end. Often, his impact doesn't show up on the stat sheet. His issue has been offensive consistency. He failed to register a point in Pitt's first six games – 47 total minutes – before appearing to get back on track offensively with six points against Oklahoma State, seven against

Lehigh, nine against Duquesne and five against Mount St. Mary's on only 19 total shot attempts. His size would seemingly allow him ability to score in the paint, but he hasn't quite put his offensive game together yet. Though, in fairness, he hasn't exactly needed to alongside Luther, Carr, Stevenson and Wilson-Frame on the court. Chukwuka has also struggled to stay out of foul trouble. In six of 11 games, he's registered at least three fouls in limited minutes, including four against Montana, Penn State and Oklahoma State.

Chukwuka's averages through 11 games:

- **Minutes:** 14.3 per game
- **Scoring:** 2.9 points per game
- **Field goal percentage:** 40 percent (on 27 attempts)
- **Free throws percentage:** 40 percent (on 10 attempts)
- **Rebounding:** 2.9 per game
- **Blocks:** 4
- **Steals:** 3

Top areas of needed improvement: Offensive efficiency. Chukwuka will likely receive more shots during Luther's absence. Plus, rebounding and foul rate.



Kene Chukwuka (15) and Khameron Davis (13). – MATT SUNDAY / DKPS

TERRELL BROWN

Brown hadn't played more than 11 minutes in a game since Pitt's loss to Penn State on Nov. 20, but received a season-high 24 minutes of floor time against McNeese State. Although he started five of Pitt's first six games of the season, I think Brown has proved to be raw and more of a developmental project than Stallings originally anticipated. He's the Panthers' lone player above 6-foot-9, but struggles to defend the pick-and-roll, where to position himself on box-outs and finish layups around the rim. He ended with seven rebounds, two points and two blocks against McNeese State, albeit the Cowboys' frontcourt wasn't exactly a barometer of the competition Brown will face in the ACC.

Brown's averages through 11 games:

- **Minutes:** 7.6 per game

- **Scoring:** 1.9 points per game
- **Field goal percentage:** 43 percent (on 16 attempts)
- **Free throw percentage:** 71 percent (on seven attempts)
- **Rebounding:** 1.7 per game
- **Blocks:** 5

Top areas of needed improvement: Brown's defensive presence will be critical without Luther. The Panthers don't necessarily need him to score, but would benefit from better activity around the rim offensively and on the boards. Also, maybe he can finish a couple more layups.

PEACE ILEGOMAH

Ilegomah's potential to be a physical force in the frontcourt down the line is evident by watching him play. However, so is his obvious inexperience and lack of basketball IQ. Ilegomah was a considered a development project by Stallings entering the season, but he'll now be called upon to step into an increased role with Luther out. Against McNeese State, he posted three thunderous blocks that provided the Panthers with a spark defensively. But he also committed four fouls. He has trouble with knowing when/where to slide for help-side defense and position himself accurately when defending the pick-and-roll. If he can improve in those areas, he should have an easier time staying out of foul trouble and – in turn – make a larger impact in the short-term.

Ilegomah's averages through 11 games (6 appearances):

- **Minutes:** 3.27
- **Scoring:** 0.8
- **Rebounding:** 1.7
- **Field goal percentage:** 50 percent (on two attempts)
- **Free throw percentage:** 50 percent (on six attempts)
- **Blocks:** 3
- **Steals:** 1

Top areas of needed improvement: Maintaining better positioning on the defensive end to avoid foul trouble. Also, as all of the Panthers' bigs in the frontcourt, a better offensive efficiency rate.