

White Sox pitcher Jennifer Feret-Brear says she was never going to let two knee injury setbacks get in the way of her Olympic Games dream.

The 33-year-old Aucklander will be a key pitcher and hitter for New Zealand at the world women's softball championships in Japan this week.

Despite rupturing her ACL last year and tearing knee cartilage last January, Feret-Brear "never had any doubt" she would keep her diamond date in Chiba.

"I knew I would be ready for the worlds," she said. "The hardest part was not knowing if Coach [Kevin Gettins] would have that same confidence and wondering if I had done enough to make the initial team, considering I didn't play this season.

"But I was continually sending Coach updates videos of my training. When he named me, I felt I had a duty to prove I had a right to be here and to prove that Coach made the right decision by backing me."

Feret-Brear - an American college graduate who has lived in Auckland for almost a decade - was right back into her groove at last week's Canada Cup tournament near Vancouver. She hammered five home runs and was New Zealand's best pitcher and earned a place on the tournament all-star team as a designated player.

It was rich reward after a punishing rehab programme following her first knee injury in April 2017.

"I've been playing softball for 25 years and something I've noticed as I've gotten older is that specialising in softball has really limited me. I grew up playing variety of sports, volleyball being one of my favourites. I felt it really helped with my lateral movement, shoulder strength and leg drive (which is great for pitching)."

So Feret-Brear signed up to play volleyball at the World Masters Games in Auckland. She trained for months for the tournament and played every game.

All went well until she was warming up to play the former New Zealand volleyball team in the gold medal game. "I misjudged my hangtime and landed, twisting my knee and fully rupturing my ACL".

Many sporting veterans may have called time on their career, but Feret-Brear was having none of that, opting for surgery in May 2017.

"The road to recovery was nothing more than a blessing in disguise. I knew I had the choice to feel sorry for myself and retire or take the time to rebuild myself both physically and mentally.

"Ask anyone and they'll tell you I like a challenge. I accepted this one for what it was and it helped put the fire back in my belly."

Feret-Brear was back running two months after surgery and was able to spend "two to three hours in the gym, five to six days a week".

"Normally, you're not fully cleared until the 12-month mark but by January [2018] I was confident and feeling great.

"Two days out from joining the White Sox at the Asian Pacific Cup I decided to push myself in my gym session."

At the end of a two-hour workout, she "decided to finish with a few box jumps". "Unfortunately, I sank too low on my landing and tore the cartilage in my knee."

It took five weeks of "challenging the doctor to get the diagnosis".

Once confirmed, it was "a massive setback, as I was limited to biking for about six weeks".

"I still have two 'bony bodies' floating around in my knee. Somedays, it feels like razors inside my knee, other days it's fine.

"I didn't have time for surgery and three-month recovery so I'm just dealing with it for now."

Feret-Brear said the injury made her seek "alternative training options" and had "really added to my mental edge".

"I have seen physiotherapists, chiropractors, a neurotherapist, personal trainer ... all out of my own pocket.

"I have invested countless time, money and energy into coming back better than ever.

"This was my opportunity to be the best I've ever been and the only way to get there was with positive vibes, focused effort and fire within."

Softball is back on the Olympic programme for the 2020 Tokyo Games. Up to two teams from the world championships will qualify automatically for the Olympics with the remainder set to play off in a series of regional elimination tournament.

So, while the world championships were Feret-Brear's first focus the Olympics are also a major career goal.

"What high performance athlete hasn't dreamt of going to the Olympics? I've given my life to this sport and there is no higher level than the Olympics.

"Every times I watch the opening ceremony I imagine what it would be like to walk in knowing you are among the finest athletes in the world. Then I proceed to cry like a baby."

On top of her rigid rehab schedule, Feret-Brear has also had to work hard on her pitching and batting as a genuine two-tool player. She is a key power hitter in the White Sox lineup whether she's on the mound or in the offensive lineup as a designated player (DP).

Asked if she saw herself as a frontline pitcher who hits or a hitter who pitches, she said: "I am whatever the teams needs me to be. I have the ability to do both and the dedication and commitment to train for both."

Finding somewhere "dry" to train in daylight hours during an Auckland winter was "a challenge", she said.

"Finding batters to face was hard. Sometimes it meant dirivng to the other side of Auckland in rush hour traffic - from work in Manurewa to the cages on the North Shore took about one and a half hours.

"Having my loyal catcher Brian available was also vital. He is without a doubt the most important person in my training world. Without him, I'm throwing into a net. I've done it before, but he deserves a lot of credit for my success."

Feret-Brear, an Ohio native, was a college softball standout at Mercyhurst College in Pennsylvania whre she is the programme's all-time leader in innings pitched, strikeouts, complete games and shutouts and is second all-time in home runs, fourth in RBIs (runs batted in) and fourth in total bases.

She says she has been both pitching and hitting for so long, "that it's nothing new".

"The work goes on in the lead up. Before the game, you talk to your catchers and coaches about the game plan. All we need to do is check in between innings to make sure we are still following our plan.

"We might decide one pitch is working and I want to throw it more or we might talk aobut how we want to set up a specific batter or a a pitch."

Then, there's the challenge of facing the opposition pitcher from the batter's box.

"I feel my best when I'm hitting and pitching," she said. "I'm fully involved in the game and can help my team in multiple facets.

"Although the DP position is growing on me."

After missing the New Zealand domestic season, Feret-Brear was confident it would all come back to her at the Canada Cup - her first competitive softball outings in over a year.

"I keep telling myself it's just like riding a bike. I've played for so long and have pitched and batted so many balls, I have a lifetime of training behind me.

"Being able to put that into action is definitely a confidence booster.

"I think I'm a realist though. Those were warmup games and now I have to perform on the main stage.

"Yes, I did some good things at the Canada Cup, but I also have a lot to work on."

Feret-Brear has been in the White Sox since 2011 and this will be her third world championships since 2014.

"This team, hands down, is the best yet," she said. "There is something special about these girls.

"Coach Gettins has done an outstanding job of getting the right people 'on the bus' and building this programme. Everyone is accountable and wanting to put in the extra effort.

"It's evident everyone has come back in top form and through the help of our management we have collectively tapped into another level.

"This team has the potential to do great things."