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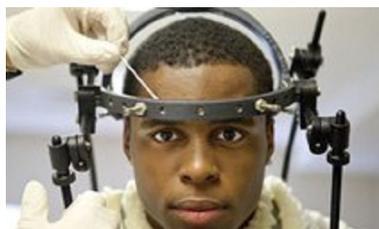
## WSU's Daniels copes with broken neck

Deals with end of his football career

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The Spokesman-Review

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**WSU safety LeAndre Daniels has his halo neck-brace examined by Bill Drake, WSU's Assistant Director of Athletics for Athletic Training Services last Thursday. Daniels broke his neck last spring, but did not know about the break until August. (TYLER TJOMSLAND The Spokesman Review)**

PULLMAN – LeAndre Daniels finally felt it was all behind him.

The streets of Oakland, Calif., where he grew up and where being a young black male is dangerous in and of itself.

The sitting and waiting he endured redshirting as a freshman at Washington State University.

The broken leg that ended last season, his first competitive college year, before it really began.

All that was behind him. It was the 20-year-old's time to shine. After all, he had it all.

The size – a strapping 6-foot-2 and 206 pounds, a good build for a safety – the speed – he didn't run a 4.3 40, but he could run better than most of the tight ends and slot receivers he was called on to cover – and the ability to deliver a blow.

It was one of those blows – even he doesn't know which one, just that it occurred last spring – that led to the one thing LeAndre Daniels loved above all others, playing football, being put behind him. Forever.

A crick in his neck last April that went away by May. A typical fall camp drill that left his neck a little tender. A soreness that subsided but returned. X-rays that turned out negative, a few missed practices, ice, heat, another try at practice and finally, when the stiffness just wouldn't go away, a CAT scan.

“Immediately after getting the CAT scan, the doctors and the nurses start panicking,” Daniels said last week, sitting with WSU's director of athletic training Bill Drake as he talked with a reporter. “There were ‘Put this neck brace on, we don't want you to move, we want you to lie on this gurney.’ You know, I'm not really able to take them serious. I was like ‘I've been walking around for a week, I'm fine.’ “

He wasn't. There were two stable fractures in his C1 vertebra. In layman's terms, he had

broken his neck in one of the worst places possible, right at the top of spine. But he was lucky. The stable part was crucial. There was no effect on the spinal cord. He should not suffer any permanent damage. After he healed, which could mean his neck is surgically repaired down the road, he should live a normal life.

But there was one thing.

His football career was over.



Growing up in Oakland isn't trouble-free. The city of 447,000 people has a murder rate 3.5 times the national average. And only six percent of cities in America have a higher violent crime rate.

Blacks, who make up just 33 percent of the city's population, were, from 2001 to 2006, 77 percent of the murder victims. And 30 percent of the murder victims in that period were 18- to 24-years old.

LeAndre Daniels describes growing up there as "not the best. I've been in bad situations growing up," and leaves it at that.

But when he was 10, he fell in love. The object of his affection: football.

"It was an outlet for me," he says, "it was my way to release anger, to relieve stress. Football was always a sense of security for me. It was always there for me when I need to lean on something."

It led him out of Oakland in high school, when he moved up the road to San Leandro to play. It led him to work harder in school, to "make sure my grades are perfect for football," he says. And it led him to college, out of California, north to Pullman, where he felt safe and he could spend more time with his beau, football.

Three years in and, as he calls it, "the tornado hit."

"It's sad for me to see a kid who came from Oakland, Calif., and didn't have a whole lot growing up," says WSU co-defensive coordinator Chris Ball, Daniels' position coach, "come out of high school after earning the grades, be such a great person, and then not be able to go on to pursue his dream as a football player."

And that's the pain of it. The fractures may not leave lasting damage to his body, but they've already done a number on his emotions.

Daniels says he never was much for crying, but since Dr. Ed Tingstad told him the news about his future, he's found himself tearing up at odd times. It's not the pain from the steel halo he must wear for a few more weeks – though that does hurt, especially when

Drake tightens it – or from the fractures – they've stopped hurting.

It's something deeper.

"For it to be over in a blink of an eye, it's just crazy," Daniels says. "I've never taken football for granted. I've always worked hard, stayed in the summer, just to get the upper hand, and for all that work to feel like it went to rubble, it hurts. A lot."



When Daniels first learned his fate in August, he almost couldn't take it.

"Those initial days, that was the hardest part of the injury," he says. "Everyone supported me, my mom flew up here, but I felt like no one really understood it. I just kind of felt alone, I guess."

But he wasn't alone. A friend on the women's track team, Brittnay Crabb, stepped in and "been there through thick and thin, the good times, the hard times, helping me," Daniels says.

Crabb has known Daniels since they were freshmen together. She knew him as a vivacious, outgoing, independent guy who rarely stopped talking. He's still those things, Crabb says, but he's different too.

"He feels like he needs to find another path," Crabb says. "He was telling me the other day he looks at life a whole different way. It's like a new pair of eyes."

And those eyes sometimes show his soul.

Crabb tells a story of walking into the apartment he shares with teammate Tyree Toomer and hearing Daniels talking to his grandma. The call ended and the tears flowed. So did the words.

"I'm his shoulder to lean on," Crabb says. "I just try to help him take his mind off it."

She's also his ride, though her Toyota Yaris isn't the biggest car in the world. Daniels enters head first, ducking his halo under the opening and rotating the rest of his body inside.

Despite the inconvenience of living with a metal halo on your head, despite the loss of the sport he loves, despite it all, Daniels knows one thing. He's lucky.

He's talked with Cory Mackay, the former WSU football player who fractured his spine in a traffic accident and is currently confined to a wheelchair. He's heard of others who suffered the same type of fracture as he and knows how different life could be.

"This might be the most uncomfortable thing in the world," he says, pointing to his brace, "but I'm still able to go through my world feeling fine because I know what a good situation I'm in. It could have been a lot worse."

Daniels is still in school and says he's already thinking about his life without football. His past has given him goals for the future, from helping out with the WSU football team until he graduates to developing a business model that helps underprivileged children through sports.

"I learned a lot about being a man through football," he says.

And he's learning a lot about life without it.

"I'm doing better than I think most would," he says. "It's definitely challenging at times. I still break down and cry by myself or with a friend and it still haunts me.

"But I'm still able to smile and still able to enjoy my life right now."

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