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Rutgers football player in intensive care after injuring spine

By **John Bonifield**, CNN

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Eric LeGrand has no movement below his neck
- Doctors performed emergency surgery overnight Saturday
- His family is praying for a full recovery

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(CNN) -- A Rutgers University football player remained in intensive care Monday after suffering a spinal cord injury while making a tackle in the fourth quarter of a game against Army on Saturday.

Junior defensive tackle Eric LeGrand has no movement below his neck due to the injury at the C3 and C4 level of the spinal cord, according to a statement from the university's athletics department.

Doctors at Hackensack University Medical Center performed emergency surgery on LeGrand overnight Saturday to stabilize his injured spine, the university said, but hospital officials declined to comment Monday about LeGrand's injury or condition, citing patient privacy laws.

Generally, the higher up on the spine an injury occurs, the more the nervous system is affected. LeGrand's injury occurred in the middle of the neck. Doctors said Monday that with many spinal cord injuries, the first 72 hours after surgery give a good indication of how much function a patient may recover.

"Eric is in good spirits, and we are praying for a full recovery," LeGrand's family said in statement.

The Scarlet Knights' head football coach, Greg Schiano, affirmed the family's optimism.

"Eric, his family and the Rutgers Football family believe he will recover," Schiano said. "We ask our fans and the entire Rutgers community to believe and pray for Eric as he begins the recovery process."

One of those fans praying for LeGrand is former Penn State University football player Adam Taliaferro.

Ten years ago, Taliaferro made a tackle in a game against Ohio State that would alter the course of his life.

"Unfortunately, I had my head down a little bit," Taliaferro said, recalling the hit that shattered his C5 vertebrae -- slightly lower on the spinal cord than LeGrand's injury. "I went to roll over to get up, and nothing happened. I said, 'Doc, I can't move.'"

After his injury, Taliaferro says, he was mentally in shock. His family and teammates helped him stay positive, but his doctors were cautious. They never told him he wouldn't walk again, but they never said he would, either.

"They don't want to give you false hope, but I was under the impression that said, 'Hey, I am going to get through this thing,'" Taliaferro said.

The weeks went by -- no movement. Until finally, five weeks after his injury, Taliaferro wiggled a toe.

"When I got that movement, that's when I really started to believe that I was going to walk again," he said.

Four months later, Taliaferro took his first steps. Today, a decade later, he says he walks "pretty normally" and works out routinely to maintain the movement he has recovered. He says the benefit of being a football player aided his recovery.

"You're used to working hard. You're in the best shape of your life," he said.

On Sunday, Taliaferro watched the footage of LeGrand's injury sustained as he made an open field tackle on a punt return. Immediately after the collision, LeGrand is seen on his back with his legs sticking straight out at a 45-degree angle, unmoving except for a shake of his head.

"I watched him moving his head, and like myself, he was probably trying to get up," Taliaferro said. "I certainly 100 percent understand what he was going through laying there."

Last season, as a backup defensive tackle, LeGrand played in all 13 games, according to the Scarlet Knights online roster. In 2008, LeGrand played his first collegiate game against North Carolina. At Colonia High School in New Jersey, LeGrand was a starter on his high school football team.

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