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Injured Rutgers football player Eric LeGrand showing improvement

Paralyzed student makes progress after spinal cord injury, breathing on his own

By KEITH SARJEANT • STAFF WRITER • November 23, 2010

PISCATAWAY — Rutgers football player Eric LeGrand remains paralyzed from the spinal cord injury he suffered in the Scarlet Knights' Oct. 16 game against Army, but the junior defensive tackle has made significant progress.

Word of LeGrand's progress came today in an announcement made by the LeGrand family in a statement released by the Rutgers athletics department.

LeGrand was removed from a ventilator this week, meaning he is able to breathe on his own for the first time since suffering the injury.

And perhaps the better news for LeGrand's long-term prognosis is his C3-C4 vertebrae fracture recently was reclassified from a complete injury to an incomplete spinal cord injury.

The latter development is significant because an incomplete injury means LeGrand can regain movement below the fracture site, according to a renowned spinal cord surgeon.

Dr. Andrew Hecht, the director of spine surgery at Department of Orthopedics at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, said incomplete spinal cord injuries vary "wildly in terms of outcomes," but it is a better classification than complete.

"Complete means that there's no motor or sensory function below the level of the injury," Hecht said, speaking generally about spinal cord injuries.

"Incomplete means you have to have something below the level of the injury."

Hecht, the spine surgical consultant to the Jets, said the American Spinal Cord Injury Association (ASIA) defines spinal cord injuries by four classifications: A, B, C and D.

"ASIA A is bad; ASIA A is complete," Hecht said. "ASIA

B means sensory incomplete, but there's no signs of motor movement below the level of injury.

"ASIA C means you have some sensory and you have some motor, but the motor that you have is so weak that you cannot move a muscle against the resistance of gravity.

"ASIA D means you have some motor (function) below the level of injury, and those muscles are functioning close to normal."

While LeGrand's classification is not known, Hecht said a reclassification to incomplete from complete would be a positive development.

"ASIA A, the likelihood of having meaningful function is not realistic," Hecht said. "It's much better to be an incomplete B, C or D. If you're ASIA B at the C3-C4 level, you have some percentage to regain motor (function) or even walking."

That LeGrand is off the ventilator should be perceived as a positive development as well, according to Hecht.

"It takes three nerves to power your diaphragm (a key muscle for breathing located at the base of your lungs)," Hecht said. "Usually you need one of those C3, C4 or C5 (vertebrae) to work. So that would be a good sign."

LeGrand, who underwent spinal cord surgery at Hackensack University Medical Center as a result of the headfirst tackle that left him paralyzed Oct. 16, has been receiving treatment since Nov. 3 at Kessler

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Institute of Rehabilitation in West Orange.

"Eric continues to make some progress," Rutgers football coach Greg Schiano said. "He is a fighter through and through. He has continued to push the envelope with the doctors and everybody (in regards to) what he can do (and what) he wants to keep doing."

Speaking at length on LeGrand's injury for the first time in several weeks, Schiano said Tuesday's announcement "is a great milestone for him right now in his recovery."

"His spirits are good," Schiano said. "He is an incredible person. He amazes me day after day with his outlook and his attitude. Until you are put into a position like that, no one knows how they would respond. Eric has been amazing."

"He has a lot of work ahead of him; he knows that. We are all here to support him. I just ask for the continued prayers of everyone because our prayers are being answered."

The LeGrand family, which has given Rutgers permission to announce updates on Eric's condition when appropriate, said the support has been overwhelming.

"We want to thank everyone for all of the love and support for Eric," the LeGrand family said. "It has really been beneficial to his recovery. Please continue to keep Eric in your prayers."

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Rugby player Eric LeGrand warms up during practice in August. The junior was paralyzed by an injury he suffered during the Army game Oct. 16. (STAFF PHOTO: AUGUSTO F. MENEZES)

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