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Sports

Former Lions standout working on recovery 10 years after his injury

By Chris Cornell | July 28, 2010

LAKE MARY - Sammy Hughes craved the physicality of contact sports. Whether it was football in the fall, wrestling in the winter or weightlifting in the spring, Hughes was active year round.

"Being able to hit someone and not get arrested for it," Hughes said of his a reaction to football with a coy smile. "It really helped get out some of my aggression and taught me how to take care of responsibilities."

Despite his diminutive 5-foot-8, 155-pound frame, Hughes developed himself into a lockdown cornerback for the Oviedo Lions, always guarding the opposition's best receiver.

"He didn't have the physical stature, but he was fast and, for his size, he was probably the strongest kid we had," said Greg Register, Hughes' former football coach at Oviedo. "He easily could have played Division II or Division III football. He had great skills."

But Hughes never got the opportunity to pursue his dream of playing college football.

On Sept. 8, 2000, the Lions were hosting one of their biggest rivals: Lake Brantley. Hughes went to tackle a running back after a pass down field. As he made the hit, he also collided with a larger teammate. The blow from the combined force broke Hughes' C4 and C5 vertebrae.

"Right away, I knew exactly what had happened," Hughes said. "When I made the tackle, all my muscles immediately tightened up and then released. My friend came to pick me up off the ground, and I tried to move my arm, and I couldn't do it. Right away, I was like, 'Call the trainers.' I realized I could have died out on that field. The pain was incredible. I've never felt anything like that."

Hughes was airlifted off the field in a helicopter and would spend the next eight months in the hospital. He had no feeling from the neck down and needed two surgeries.

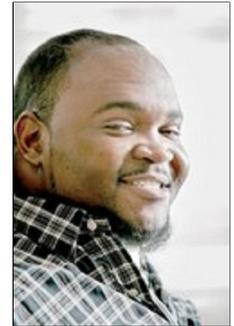
Doctors told him he'd most likely never walk, use his arms or breathe on his own.

"But me with my football mentality, you know I'm never going to give up," Hughes said.

According to the National Center for Catastrophic Injury Research, there have been 95 head and spinal injuries at all levels of football since 2000, including 79 at the high school level.

Last season, there were nine total spinal injuries, including seven at the high school level.

"Whenever a young person has permanent disability, they face the reality of being bound to a wheelchair for the



Former Oviedo Lion Sammy Hughes sits in his bedroom at his sister's home.

rest of their life," NCCIR director Dr. Frederick Mueller said. "It's a traumatic loss, not only for the person themselves, but for their family, the school and the whole community. The first-year medical expenses can be up to a million dollars. The individual has to adjust to a different lifestyle. There are a lot of things that are dramatically changed."

Mueller says the injuries are more prevalent on the varsity level because of sheer numbers, but also because of the experience factor.

A player lowering their head during a tackle was the leading cause of spinal injuries in football spine injuries, according to the NCCIR.

"The inexperience of tackling and blocking and being taught the proper fundamentals contribute to the rate of injuries," Mueller said. "The fundamental skills of blocking and tackling are incredibly important to avoiding injury."

Hughes - who is now 27 - says his injury was not the result of him lowering his head during the tackle, but rather a freak accident.

Register says his program took special care to teach the fundamentals of leading with the shoulder and never with the head.

"We teach correct hitting, individually and as a team," Register said. "It's just one of those things where you could fall in your shower and hit your head and be paralyzed. We did everything we could."

Hughes recovered the use of his hands and the ability to move his neck and breathe on his own after months of extensive physical therapy at the Shepherd Center for Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation in Atlanta.

He says he was able to get through the whole ordeal thanks to the outpouring of support he received from his grandmother and sisters - who provided primary care during and after the injury - and the Central Florida community and beyond.

"When a tragedy like this happens, I think everyone questions why," Hughes said. "I didn't ever really let it stress me out, because the community was amazing. It's difficult to describe that feeling - for the community to rally around you and help out. It was amazing for some good to come out of it."

The school and community leaders set up the Sammy Hughes Fund, started an annual golf tournament and organized several other fundraising projects to help pay for the costs of his treatment that weren't covered by the school's insurance.

At the golf tournament, Hughes got to meet NBA legend Julius Erving and several former NFL players and pro wrestlers. The Orlando Predators helped raise money for him.

While at the Shepherd Center, several Atlanta Braves players visited him, and he got an opportunity to go to Hawks and Falcons games and meet several players before the game.

"When I was in Atlanta, it like I was a star, because every week a new team was coming in," Hughes said.

His team and coaches were also able to come visit him in Atlanta.

And before he returned home from the hospital, Register and his coaching staff re-tiled his grandmother's carpeted house and painted Hughes' room in black and orange to show his Lions' spirit.

"Oviedo is my family; I'll always be a Lion," Hughes said.

Hughes goes back to Oviedo for games frequently during the season. The program set up an end-of-the-year

Sammy Hughes Award in his honor.

He says he still gets a special feeling every time he comes back to Oviedo's field.

"I get chills," Hughes said. "Football was my life; I loved it. That's all I wanted to do, all the way to the next level. It's still a big part of my life."

Hughes advises parents regularly to let their kids play football and says you're just as likely to get hurt driving home from work.

But Mueller says there are risks that come with playing the violent, collision sport and says he'd like to see the NFL and NCAA take the lead in spreading awareness about the dangers of spearing tackles.

"The bad part about the pro and college game is the high school kids watching them on a Sunday, and you still see a lot of the head-first contact," Mueller said. "And the kids say, 'Well if the pros can do it, I can do it too.' So the pros have to lead it and in some cases advertise the proper way to tackle and block."

Hughes resides in Lake Mary with his sister. His efforts to finish college have been sidetracked due to various trips to the hospital since graduating from Oviedo in 2001.

He dreams of getting his own place, finding regular employment as a music producer and getting married some day. He's extremely devoted to his faith and still hangs out with several of his friends from the 2000 Oviedo football team.

Through all that he's faced, Hughes has been able to stay upbeat and keeps a positive outlook.

"It's hard to find anyone that's handled what he's been through better," Register said. "Every time you see him, he's just as positive as can be. He's still the same old Sammy, very funny. The injury hasn't changed his mental aspect at all. He's just a neat guy to be around."

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