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St. Bonaventure JV player, injured Friday while making tackle at practice, OK after surgery

A scary reminder of football's dangerous side

By Rhiannon Potkey
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Nic Justice's dream was to play football at St. Bonaventure High.

But the dream nearly turned into a nightmare on Friday morning during the first day of contact drills in fall camp.

After slightly dropping his head on a tackle, the sophomore junior varsity player fell to the ground and told the coaches he couldn't move his arms and legs.

"We thought he might be paralyzed and went into ER mode right away," St. Bonaventure varsity coach Todd Therrien said. "We called 911 and told him not to move anything and kept him until the EMT got there. We were all scared."

Justice was rushed to nearby Community Memorial Hospital, and eventually transferred to St. John's Regional Medical Center in Oxnard.

The doctors said a disk had bulged in Justice's neck and was placing pressure on his spine, according to Therrien.

Justice underwent emergency surgery at St. John's on Saturday at 1:30 a.m. to have a titanium plate and screws implanted.

By Saturday afternoon, he had regained full movement in his limbs and was scheduled to be moved out of the Intensive Care Unit.

"For a kid that went through four hours of surgery at 1:30 in the morning it is remarkable," said St.

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Bonaventure principal Marc Groff, who visited Justice in the ICU. "He was talking and smiling and had good color in his face and was moving all his limbs. He is a very, very lucky young man and had a great surgeon."

Justice grew up in Camarillo before his father was transferred to Florida for work. But the family moved back to Camarillo this summer, and an eager Justice enrolled at St. Bonaventure as soon as possible.

"The kid absolutely loves to play the game of football. He just loves it," Therrien said. "He comes early and stays late in the weight room all the time. You hate to see something like this happen to kids like that."

The incident is a sober reminder of the inherent dangers of contact sports, especially football.

Last season in the NFL, Buffalo Bills tight end Kevin Everett suffered a life-threatening spinal cord injury during Buffalo's opening game.

Everett was initially feared to be paralyzed from the neck down for life, but is now walking on his own.

"It is one of those risks that kids and families take with football and they know it going in," Groff said. "The kids here are well trained and well conditioned and well taught. We don't take these things lightly. The coaches spend a lot of time at coaching clinics to teach these kids the right technique and have them well prepared for those kind of situations."

In fact, "We had just talked about safety issues as a program and told them if you stick your head in and hit head-to-head you not be able to ever walk again," Therrien said. "The kids did a pretty good job, but the margin of error with these kind of injuries is so small."

It's much too early to even think about Justice's football-playing future, but Therrien already has a role for him at St. Bonaventure this season.

"He's going to be our defensive line coach for the JV," Therrien said. "If there is any way he can ever play the game again, he is going to find that way. But the important thing now is he is walking and talking."

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