

Damaging week sheds light on football's dark injury side

Sep. 23, 2008

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Adam Gunn can't wait to get back on the field.

This is the same [Pittsburgh](#) linebacker who was knocked unconscious in the season opener against Bowling Green. Waking up in the locker room with tremendous pain in his neck was the luckiest thing that could have happened, as it turned out. When doctors found the crack in his C-5 vertebrae they told him he was less than a centimeter away from being paralyzed.



Stories immediately broke that the fifth-year senior's career was over. After undergoing surgery eight days ago to repair that broken neck, Gunn is suddenly not so sure. Despite a fracture of the anterior cervical spine, he wants back in. Gunn says he will petition the NCAA for a sixth year of eligibility in 2009.

"If the doctor says I'll be fine, I trust what he has to say," Gunn said. "I love the game that much. Not to say it defines my life, but it does."

That's why Gunn was tempted to contact [Washington State](#) quarterback Gary Rogers this week. Rogers was one of three players carted off the field Saturday with head, neck and/or spine trauma. Rogers and [Ball State](#) receiver Dante Love had their careers ended. [South Florida](#) linebacker Brouce Mompremier will miss at least two games after his head collided with a teammate.

WSU QB Gary Rogers was taken off the field in an ambulance after a non-surgical spine fracture. (AP)

Upon reflection, it was one the darkest, most debilitating days in recent college football history. If they're lucky, Rogers, Mompremier and Love will end up at the bottom of the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury

Research annual report.

That's where you will find a box labeled "Catastrophic Injuries 2007, complete recovery," in the massive report overseen by North Carolina Ph.D. Frederick Mueller, who annually tracks every catastrophic football injury from sandlot to the NFL.

In that report, there were seven college players all of last year with significant head or spine injuries who made complete recoveries. The aforementioned three similar injuries occurred in one day last week.

Should three in one day raise some flags, or is it just football as usual?

"It's a little bit of both," Ball State coach Brady Hoke said. "It's a part of football and it's the part no one likes. It's the ugly part of it. When you see any young man go down at all, your heart sinks."

The injury to Love might be the most serious. Love was leading the nation in receiving when he collided with Indiana's Chris Adkins. After lying motionless on the field, Love was taken to a hospital and underwent surgery for a spine fracture. He is expected to lead a normal life after rehabilitation. He could move his arms and legs on Monday.

Mompremier was airlifted to a nearby hospital before being released Sunday.

Rogers' injury was most similar to Gunn's. The senior backup quarterback suffered a non-surgical spine fracture after being hit by a Portland State player.

"To be honest, I thought about contacting the guy," Gunn said. "Stay positive, that's the only thing you can do."

This isn't some blockhead football player, although there is a lot of the sport's gung-ho attitude involved.

"My next emotion (after being injured)," Gunn said, "was trying to get back."

Gunn is in grad school pursuing a master's in public administration. He doesn't need football, but his pursuit of it is almost religious. His brother Sanford was paralyzed "for a day or two" after suffering a similar injury while playing at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

After Gunn was injured he received a letter from a University of Buffalo assistant coach expressing sympathy. Receivers

coach Juan Taylor suffered a similar injury, according to Buffalo. Gunn has become a cheerleader/coach as he holds out hope that his career can resume. "It's rough I can't be out there with the guys," Gunn said. "I almost came to tears in the press box when they were running out (onto the field)."

Some level of physical attrition always seems to be acceptable in our football culture. The NFL didn't shut down when the Bills' Kevin Everett suffered a spinal injury last season. The story of the three players injured on Saturday will last a couple of news cycles -- maybe until kickoff Saturday -- and then die out.

However ...

"There's no question that the speed and strength of players in this day and age have really changed things," Northern Illinois coach Jerry Kill, who knows a little something about the sanctity of life, said.

Kill beat kidney cancer when he coached Southern Illinois.

It has been six years since a college player died as a result of a game injury. In fact, the numbers tracked by Mueller are trending downward. From 1977-2000 there were 29 cervical cord injuries in college, according to Mueller's numbers. Since 2001 there have been only four.

That doesn't mean another tragedy isn't around the corner. Despite tremendous advances made in equipment technology, player safety is always a process. There are fewer helmet manufacturers these days because of liability concerns. Helmets weren't even required by the NCAA until Joe Paterno was 13 (1939).

"There's no doubt (players) are getting bigger and stronger," Mueller said. "But the numbers have been low, compared to 15 or 20 years ago. There is a dramatic decrease, especially the fatalities."

Washington's Curtis Williams was the last college player to die as a result of a football injury. Williams was paralyzed during a game in 2000. He died 18 months later.

Two other notable injuries have rocked college football this decade: Penn State's Adam Taliaferro shattered his fifth cervical vertebrae in 2000 making a tackle against Ohio State. He eventually walked again after spinal fusion surgery. Ohio State walk-on receiver Tyson Gentry was paralyzed during spring practice in 2006.

The latest player to die, as tracked by Mueller, was a Greenville, N.C. high school running back. The player collapsed and died over the weekend while on the sideline shortly after being hit and fumbling.

"I definitely think we're protected enough," Gunn said. "How much more can you be protected? Gymnasts and cheerleaders are hurt like this more than football players. ... The way it happened last week is just unfortunate."

In that season opener, Gunn collided with teammate Scott McKillop. That's the difference in two lives after that chance collision. McKillop led the NCAA in tackles last season and continues his career. Gunn's career is, at best, on hold.

"Scott's helmet actually cracked and his facemask bent," Panthers coach Dave Wannstedt said. "You'd like to think players aren't hitting any harder than they did 10 years ago, 20 years ago. I don't have the answer."

The NCAA and coaches' associations continue to stress that the head not be used in tackling. Spearing is being pinpointed by officials. Sometimes it just comes down to young adults colliding violently. We know this much: More defensive players are injured catastrophically than offensive players, specifically defensive backs.

Hoke added: "To some degree they're freakish things that happen. When you look at angles on impact. It's still something that is a big part of the game."

So is intimidation. Hoke was asked if Love's injury might have the same affect as a baseball player who is reluctant to step back in the batter's box after being hit in the head.

"It sure didn't appear that way the rest of that game," said Hoke, whose Cardinals beat their first BCS conference opponent. "Our kids are educated enough that it's part of the game that happens. It's not the part that we all like, but there is a passion and love that we all have for playing this game."