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## Prep player severely injured

BY STAN CALDWELL • SEPTEMBER 11, 2008

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A North Forrest High School football player faces the possibility of never walking again after being injured in a junior varsity game Tuesday night.

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Justin McCray, 15, a sophomore wide receiver and defensive back, suffered a spinal cord injury while making a tackle during the contest at Purvis High.

McCray underwent surgery Wednesday night to realign the vertebrae in his neck and is in serious condition in the intensive-care unit at University Medical Center in Jackson.

"I think it's just the classic case of tackling and having your head up and getting rolled up," said North Forrest head coach Shannon White, who was coaching the junior varsity squad Tuesday night.

"It's something we see more times than we'd like to see. You cringe when it happens and try to correct the players when it does."

Although McCray's family remains hopeful, the initial reports on his injury were not optimistic.

"Right now, his prognosis is they do not expect him to walk again," said Marche Maye, McCray's mother, from the ICU waiting room at UMC. "He's got some sensation in his arms and upper body, but there's no feeling and no movement in the lower part of his body."

"I was devastated when I got the news that he might not walk again, but I'm thinking positive. I feel like God is the higher power, and He has the final word."

Teammates described McCray as an upbeat player who played some for the Eagle varsity.

"He's always happy, a fun person to be around," said junior linebacker Kelton Vaughn following Wednesday's workout. "I was shocked to hear about it. The first thing I did was talk to my mama about it and pray about it."

Maye said she was at the game Tuesday, and it was the realization of her worst fear as a football mom.

"I did (worry about him getting hurt)," Maye said. "I never missed one of Justin's games. I wanted to make sure I was there in case something happened."

Eyewitness accounts say McCray was making a tackle when a teammate trailing on the play hit McCray and rolled over on him. He was alert and moving his arms immediately after the play, but he was unable to move his legs.

McCray was taken by ambulance to Forrest General Hospital, then flown by helicopter to Jackson

"It's a coach's nightmare," White said. "I can tell you all of our coaches are feeling something right now. The most important thing is I can't imagine being in his parents' shoes."

White said he got a message of encouragement from Oak Grove High offensive coordinator Tim Heldt, who has been through two similar incidents.



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One occurred in 1991 while Heldt was head coach at Sumrall, when Kevin Graham was paralyzed in a game. The other was the 1997 incident in which Heldt's nephew, Joseph Parker, was left paralyzed after making a tackle for Purvis in a game against Forrest County AHS.

"He really helped me," White said. "He just told me he'd been through this more than once. We'll probably talk some more a little later."

McCray is the second Mississippi player to suffer a paralyzing football injury this season. Murrah's Lawerance Williams suffered a similar injury during a preseason scrimmage.

Although the injury to McCray dampened enthusiasm at the Eagles' practice session Wednesday, players say it won't change their approach to Friday's game at Purvis.

"All we can do right now is pray," said senior quarterback Snoop Rollins. "I think it will bring us together as a family, bring us together as one. We'll dedicate this game to Justin, and I think it will make us want it more."

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