

September 21, 2008

Justin McCray: North Forrest High School sophomore

Billy Watkins
bwatkins@clarionledger.com

His lucky number is 8.

"I've worn it since I was little," Justin McCray says. "No particular reason."

His teammates at North Forrest High School, near Hattiesburg, wear it now on wristbands every Friday night as a reminder of the struggles McCray is going through.

The 15-year-old sophomore suffered a spinal injury in a junior varsity game Sept. 9 at Purvis. According to McCray's mother, Marche Maye, the C6 and C7 vertebrae in his neck were damaged. The T1 vertebrae was crushed, and the T2 was fractured. He is paralyzed from the chest down.

"Doctors say he will never walk again," Maye says. "But when I told Justin that, this is what I said: 'The doctors say you will never walk again. But we know you will.'"

"I've just never been one to claim the bad things. Only the good. And Justin is the same way."

McCray didn't think anything was wrong. He brought down a Purvis running back who had broken into the secondary. While making the tackle, a teammate and a Purvis blocker also entered the pile.

"I didn't feel anything wrong," says McCray, propped up in his bed at Methodist Rehabilitation Center in Jackson with a neck brace restricting his movement. "A teammate started to try and help me up."

But McCray's legs wouldn't move.

"By the time I got to the field from the stands, I saw Justin's feet. They were pointed out, and I knew that wasn't natural," says Maye, a certified nursing assistant.

And he suddenly had a hard time breathing. "He kept telling them to get his helmet off," she says.

McCray was taken by ambulance to Forrest General Hospital in Hattiesburg and soon airlifted to University of Mississippi Medical Center. He was moved Thursday to Methodist.

McCray has bonded with Murrah's Lawrence Williams, who suffered similar injuries just 17 days earlier. Williams rolls his wheelchair to McCray's room every chance he gets.

"When Lawrence comes in, you can just see Justin's face light up," says Maye, who has arranged to have McCray continue his classes online. "I can't explain it. But Lawrence always tells him he's not alone in this, that he not only has a new friend but a new team. A lot of the Murrah players have come by to visit Justin."

The moms have bonded, too.

At North Forrest, coach Shannon White - whom McCray describes as "a cool dude" - is having a hard time dealing with the injury. There is no film of the game, so White is still not sure exactly what happened.

He describes McCray as "a good player with good speed and good football instincts ... not the biggest guy in the world (5-foot-5, 155 pounds) but well put together."

He pauses. "One of the things I like about Justin is that he has never walked around like a tough guy, but he's really competitive. He might be the most positive person in this whole thing right now."

White has refused to use the "win one for Justin" slogan in his pregame speeches.

"I've talked to the team about that," he says. "You hear it all the time, 'Win one for so and so.' But what if you don't win?"

"What we're trying to do is honor Justin every time we set foot on the field, whether it's a practice or a game. And there is a lot of prayer out there now. We know he can be healed."
