Tech’s Faulkner: Mental Pain Toughest Part of Injury

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BLACKSBURG — At the Virginia Tech football team shuffled through its lunchroom earlier this week, Mike Faulkner was easy to distinguish from the players who hadn’t had knee surgery this fall.

Faulkner was the one who wasn’t limping.

Teammates hobbled because of twisted ankles, winced because of cracked ribs, tilted their necks to ease the pain from pinched nerves. Several stopped by to tease Faulkner, who found time for a smile, although he might have had to force it.

“I remember when I used to see injured players and how I used to feel sorry for them,” said the big defensive lineman. “Now, I’m not sure who suffers more. They work harder and harder and have less each week (the Hokies are 1-6-1) to show for it.”

The last thing Faulkner expected was that he would miss this, his junior season, with an injury. He’d had pinched nerves in high school and suffered a broken hand to start his sophomore year at Tech, but the Washington, D.C. native had never come close to missing a game before.

Admittedly, he had almost begun to feel invincible. “I remember talking to Billy Hardee (now with the New York Jets) when I was a freshman,” he said, “and Billy used to pride himself on going his whole career without an injury.”

“I was beginning to feel the same way myself; I thought I had the system beat. There were little things I’d do to keep from being injured. Like whenever I was in a pileup, I’d always try to be conscious of my legs, to keep them from getting hurt.”

The one time Faulkner forgot it was a late summer afternoon and the Hokies were in their last scrimmage of a two-day drills. Hurdling teammates to make a tackle, Faulkner felt his legs go out from under him as he collided with the man who eventually would replace him, Danny Hill.

Faulkner remembers his cartilage tearing as the most excruciating pain he has ever experienced. “It felt like five minutes, but I knew it couldn’t have been more than 30 seconds,” he said. “The only time I possibly could have felt worse was when I left the hospital.”

After two weeks, the pain finally subsided, and Faulkner’s biggest problem became maintaining his cast. There was no shortage of instruction, since Faulkner’s roommate (Mike Roy) had gone through knee surgery three times himself.

It was his mental state that caused Faulkner the most worry. “My initial feeling was loneliness,” he recalled. “I was depressed. I kept asking myself, ‘Why me?’

To fill the time, Faulkner plunged into his studies with renewed intensity, although he has always found it difficult to concentrate when reading books. He also bought a camera, partially, he says, to relieve the boredom.

Mostly, there has been time to think. Faulkner made several freshman all-American teams and the 6-2, 250-pound tackle was chosen for the Frank O. Moseley Award for improvement as a sophomore. Yet, the articulate communications major thinks that, if he had to pick a season to be injured, now might have been the time.

“Psychologically, I might have been in a rut,” he explained. “I had worked hard and, as far as my body was concerned, I was in shape. But I lacked that mental edge.”

“I wasn’t doing the little things…like during the summer, I used to run in the afternoon, but if it were Friday afternoon and I wanted to do something else, maybe I wouldn’t run. Everybody cuts corners; maybe I won’t cut as many in the future.”

Faulkner has already started lifting weights and can bench press 320 pounds again, the same as before the injury. He does not attend practice regularly, although he has been to all the home games.

“At the beginning, I was running around like a chicken with my head cut off,” he grins. “I was always telling guys ‘do this, do that.’ You should have seen me before the Texas A&M game. I was drenched, I was so nervous. I’d never watched a game before.”

“That was one of the reasons I bought the camera…to give me something to do during the games. When you’re used to playing, not playing is like watching somebody eat with your hands tied.”

In keeping with the analogy, following away games on radio is like listening to a person eat over the phone. For the most part, Faulkner will go to friends’ houses off campus, but once he and Roy listened to the game in Hallow, the players’ dorm.

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Faulkner

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“You wouldn’t have known anybody was there; it was really deserted,” said Faulkner. “Once in a while, though, we’d score or make a big defensive play and you could here a guy here, a guy there, cheering.”

Conceivably, Faulkner could have been ready to play by now, but there never was any sentiment other than to red-shirt him. As it stands, he will be eligible next year and again for a fifth season in 1979.

“I’ve talked to scouts and they say that, with the same injury, the pros would have me back in eight weeks,” he said. “In college, that just isn’t worth it. I’ve known guys who got injured in the fall, went through rehabilitation, and still re-injured themselves in the spring.

“This spring, I’d like to set up some sort of program with a lot of conditioning, but not that much contact. I’d have to get in a little contact, though, to get the feel of it.”

If Faulkner has one abiding fear, it is the threat of a recurrence. There is always the specter of Roy, who came to Tech at the same time as Faulkner and actually won the starting tackle spot as a freshman, but has been injured constantly since.

“How much that will affect me, I don’t know,” Faulkner shrugged. “I’m hoping it won’t cross my mind once I start playing again.”

It probably won’t, but by then, he’ll be too busy limping.

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Tech’s Faulkner Bought a Camera Recently… Just To Keep Busy