Tech cornerback ready for return from knee injury

Austin envisions great things

Larry Austin is at full strength after suffering a torn anterior cruciate ligament last year.

By AARON McFARLING
THE ROANOKE TIMES

BLACKSBURG — There were two days in Larry Austin’s football life when adversity struck unexpectedly. One is his best football memory. The other is his worst. In both cases, he reacted with extraordinary resilience.

Austin, a senior cornerback for Virginia Tech, is one of the team’s finest roncours. He tells both stories in elaborate detail. He begins the first one with a huge, amiable smile.

His best day had to be that game against Temple in 1999, he says. He was a redshirt sophomore and part of a regular rotation in the defense. The game was surprisingly close.

“I just pictured myself being back there on the field. I wanted to start right back where I left off,” says Larry Austin, who twice has been awarded the Iron Hokie for weightlifting excellence.

FROM C1

Austin

when he entered the lineup midway through the first half.

He recalls snaring his first career interception and racing 31 yards for his first career touchdown. The celebration with his teammates was overwhelming, so much so that Austin lost a contact lens in the end zone. Playing the remainder of the game with one lens, he notched a sack and several of his most memorable, ferocious tackles.

He didn’t really think about the contacts until after the game. When the adrenaline was flowing, his vision seemed clear.

Austin’s smile fades when he tells the second story. It began Sept. 30 of last year. The Hokies were playing at Boston College.

Late in the first quarter, Eagles tailback Cedric Washington bosted through the line and headed straight for Austin. A Boston College receiver was ahead of the play and blocking one of Austin’s teammates. Washington made a cut, and Austin began his pursuit.

Meanwhile, the BC receiver was thrown off his block. He landed on Austin’s left knee.

Austin felt a tingling sensation as he fell, like someone had hit his funny bone. He tried to get up and chase the play. Instead, he crumpled to the ground and was carried off the field. On the sidelines, trainers gave him a knee brace and asked him to walk a little. His knee buckled.

The following Tuesday, Austin’s worst fears were confirmed. An MRI exam revealed a torn anterior cruciate ligament, and he was probably done for the year.

Rehabilitation would be a long and frustrating process, and there were no guarantees.

None of that fazed Austin. Once again, his vision did not seem to waver.

“I just pictured myself being back there on the field,” he said. “I wanted to start right back where I left off.”

After months of arduous training, the visionary will get his chance. When Tech opens the season Saturday against Connecticut, a rejuvenated Austin will start at field corner, a demanding position that typically pits the defensive back against the passing strength of the formation.

Any questions about his readiness can be answered by the numbers. Before his injury, Austin bench pressed 340 pounds. He benches 340 now. His squat has improved from 500 pounds to 520. His power clean went from 300 pounds to 316.

Some people take the weight room for granted,” said Austin, a two-year recipient of the Iron Hokie, Tech’s award for weightlifting excellence. “I took it as a way to get back on the field.”

Austin has always felt at home in the weight room. Before he could go there, however, he had to learn to walk.

Austin saw a sports psychologist who helped him maintain a positive attitude through rehab. Working with trainer Mike Go forth, Austin set mini-goals: Bend the leg a little more each day, then worry about walking. Once you can walk, try to run. Got that down? Give cutting a shot.

By spring, he was back on the field, albeit wearing a restrictive knee brace. When fall practice began, Austin shed the brace and gradually regained his trademark quickness.

“He really depends on his speed,” said Banker Andre Davis, who works against Austin often in practice. “His whole thing is getting his hands on the receiver and being able to run with him.”

The injury vanquished, Austin can’t wait to get his hands on a Huskies receiver. Tech coach Frank Beamer, thrilled with his depth at the corner position, can’t wait to let him.

“He’s a player,” Beamer said. “He’s a guy that’s got great toughness, great speed, great quickness.”

Don’t forget great vision.

Aaron McFarling can be reached at 381-1673 or aaronm@roanoke.com.