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Quarterbacks Have A Hard-Knock Life

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Tuesday, November 19, 2002; Page D01

SAN DIEGO, Nov. 18 -- Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Tommy Maddox was healthy enough to get on a plane and fly back to Pittsburgh today after what team owner Dan Rooney described as "a very frightening thing for a while" when Maddox was injured in his team's 31-23 loss to the Tennessee Titans on Sunday in Nashville.

Maddox suffered what has been determined to be spinal cord and cerebral concussions after what appeared to be mild contact from Titans linebacker Keith Bulluck. Maddox was unconscious on the field for about five minutes, was placed on a backboard and taken to a trauma unit by ambulance. It took 45 minutes for him to regain feeling in his extremities.

It was a brutal day for other quarterbacks and their first-place teams, all very much in the playoff mix with six games to go. Eagles starter Donovan McNabb broke his ankle in a victory over the Arizona Cardinals and is expected to be out six to eight weeks and could possibly miss the playoffs. And Denver's Brian Griese is likely to miss as many as three weeks after spraining his left knee in a victory over Seattle.

It been a tough season for quarterbacks in general. Through last weekend, there have been 51 different starting quarterbacks around the league, and 10 starting quarterback changes have been made because of injury. That list includes Kurt Warner in St. Louis (broken finger), who started the Super Bowl for the Rams last year, and Trent Dilfer (snapped Achilles' tendon) of Seattle, the winning quarterback for the Super Bowl champion Ravens after the 2000 season.

Until this weekend, only 17 of 32 teams had started the same quarterback all season and, with Griese and McNabb out, that number shrinks to 15.

"It's getting very tough out there," San Diego quarterback Drew Brees said today. "It's part of the game, but you always have to be concerned about it."

Maddox's spinal injury is the league's second this season. In the preseason Hall of Fame game, Houston Texans safety Leomont Evans bruised his spinal cord making a tackle. He was placed on injured reserve and the club said he would not be allowed to play again after doctors told him he risked paralysis with another hit. He moved back to his native South Carolina, and plans to open a day-care center with former Redskins teammate Stephen Davis.

Maddox flew back to Pittsburgh today and was admitted to a hospital, where he will undergo more tests in the next few days before a determination is made on his playing future. He definitely will not play this weekend against Cincinnati; the man he replaced, Kordell Stewart, will start.

According to Rooney, Maddox was "doing okay and definitely out of danger" today, but it was "too early to say" what the timetable will be for his return. Rooney said Maddox will be treated by Joseph Maroon, a Pittsburgh neurosurgeon who specializes in the sort of injury Maddox suffered.

Maddox's parents, team physician Anthony Yates and Rooney's son, John, were with him in the hospital and stayed overnight in Nashville. Titans Coach Jeff Fisher and running back Eddie George also came to the hospital to see him. His parents had driven to the game from Texas to watch their son play for a 5-4-1 Steelers team he had taken to a 4-2-1 record since replacing Stewart.

In a news conference today in Pittsburgh, Yates said the initial diagnosis had been changed from a spinal cord contusion to a concussion of the cord. A contusion involves swelling and perhaps hemorrhaging, he said. The spinal concussion was what he

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described as "an electrical phenomenon" and was the less serious of the two injuries.

Steelers trainer John Norwig said "it was not a life-threatening thing. The airway, the breathing, the circulation, it was all there. But we were treating it [on the field] as a cervical spine injury."

Yates said if the latest series of tests turns out to be negative, "it may come out that he may be of no further risk. Maroon, who has been able to see some of the film from his home, thought there was a twisting of the neck in a certain fashion that a jolt occurred to the cord without actually any injury. That is the mechanism of this concussion of the cord."

McNabb was hurt on the third play of the game when sacked by Arizona defenders Adrian Wilson and LaVar Woods. McNabb limped to the sideline but returned to the game, thinking he had sprained his ankle. He had it re-taped several times, managed to complete a career-high four touchdown passes and played until the final 4 minutes 49 seconds.

Only after X-rays were taken in the locker room was the fracture discovered, and McNabb was still deciding today whether to have surgery or place the ankle in a cast.

"I'm looking at it like we don't have Donovan this season," Eagles Coach Andy Reid said yesterday in his news conference. "It's somewhere in the six-to-eight week area, but that still has to be determined."

McNabb, a Pro Bowl quarterback who is clearly the most valuable player on his team, will be replaced by journeyman Koy Detmer. McNabb had a streak of 53 straight starts for the Eagles, and said after the game he had never been hurt in college or the pros until Sunday.

Griese has often been sidelined by injury in Denver and now will be out with what was described as a second-degree sprain of the medial collateral ligament in his left knee. He'll be replaced by 37-year-old backup Steve Beuerlein, who last started in December 2000. He finished for Griese on Sunday, completing the only two passes he threw, both for touchdowns in Denver's 31-9 win over Seattle.

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