

Colts' Bradshaw risks neck in return from serious injury



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(Photo: Andrew Weber, USA TODAY Sports)

INDIANAPOLIS – Ryan Grigson was three weeks into his Indianapolis Colts general manager tenure, sitting inside owner Jim Irsay's suite at Lucas Oil Stadium. He was watching then-New York Giants running back Ahmad Bradshaw score the winning touchdown with 57 seconds left to defeat the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XLVI.

Now in Bradshaw's second season with the Colts, Grigson sees renewed explosiveness in the two-time Super Bowl winner a year removed from October 2013 spinal surgery to fuse two vertebrae in his neck.

It is the same surgery former Colts quarterback Peyton Manning underwent prior to his March 2012 release by the Colts to resume his Hall of Fame career in Denver.

Grigson sees a healthy, rodeo rider-tough runner driven by a brush with football mortality.

"He was a hard runner before who always had a purpose and with the way he is rolling this year – he even takes it a step further now running like every run could be his last," Grigson told USA TODAY Sports Thursday.



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"That's the kind of passion you see in his play where you see him juke and finish runs you just didn't think were there. He's found a way through his explosiveness to be a really complete runner with tremendous vision and instincts who has evolved as a pass catcher."

Bradshaw, who leads the Colts with four touchdown receptions and has 182 rushing yards, never spoke to Manning. But he got the reassurance Manning did that his career could resume by going to the same renowned spinal specialist after his season ended Week 3 last season against San Francisco.

"It was the C-3, C-4 vertebrae, the same surgery, same doctor -- Robert Watkins -- as Peyton," Bradshaw told USA TODAY Sports. "I'm 100% now."

Former Tampa Bay Buccaneers fullback Mike Alstott is the lone running back to have returned from similar fusion surgery. Alstott underwent the procedure in 2003 playing until re-injuring his neck in 2007.

Bradshaw wondered if he should literally risk his neck by continuing to play.



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"I thought about retirement at the time, but it went right out the window," Bradshaw said. "Because nothing was going to stop me from at least taking a shot, taking a chance to see if I could come back."

Considering his position and violent running style, there were doubts until he began erasing them one hit at a time during training camp.

"With Peyton and Ahmad, they're two completely different positions obviously," Grigson said. "The way Ahmad Bradshaw runs was another factor in this."

He's a 5-10, 215-pound battering ram.

"That's exactly what he is," Grigson said. "And you need a good neck to have that kind of style. So we took all that into account. But he's a special guy. We did our homework.

"I talked to Ahmad and his agent in a very candid way about it early on in the process. Because I wasn't real confident.

"You're going to go above and beyond with someone who has a neck injury. First of all, you can't preach that you're family around here if you don't care about a guy's health."

The 28-year-old got the thumbs-up from Watkins a couple of months before training camp.

"It was a blessing," Bradshaw said. "After about a month, I started getting my strength and motion back. Doctor Watkins told me it was much stronger than before."

He experienced soreness the first few hits, but it subsided.

Bradshaw signed a one-year, \$855,000 deal, a significant reduction from the \$3.75 million he was due when the Giants released him prior to the 2013 season after six injuries to his feet and ankle.

Starting back Trent Richardson, who rotates with Bradshaw, just arrived following a Sept. 26 trade from the Cleveland Browns when Bradshaw dropped to his knees vs. San Francisco.

"It was heartbreaking to see and a major concern for me since Ahmad's been a brother to me," Richardson said. "There's a chance he could be paralyzed, a chance he might not be able to move his neck after a game.

"And he's playing like a monster. You have to commend the guy. Ahmad's not about the money.

"He's a football player just built for the game."

Or rebuilt in Bradshaw's case.

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