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Minnesota Twins: Trevor May diagnosed with stress fracture in his back



Minnesota Twins starting pitcher Trevor May walks back to the mound in the third inning of a baseball game against the Cincinnati Reds, Wednesday, July 1, 2015, in Cincinnati. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

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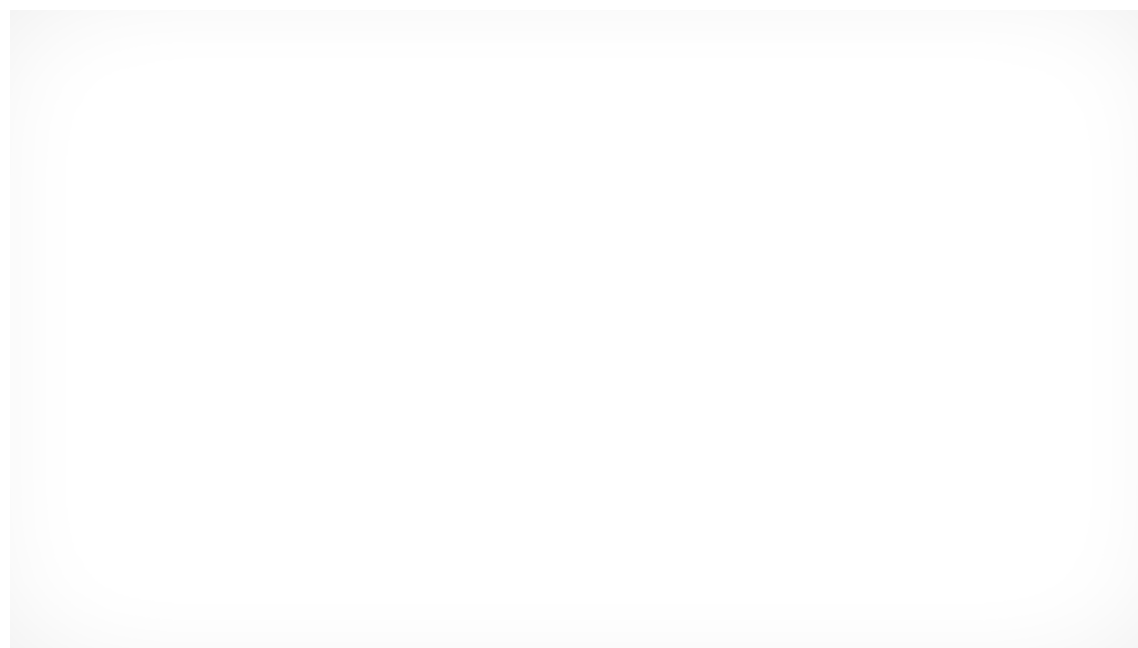
After three trips to the disabled list and a battery of tests over the past 13 months, Twins right-hander Trevor May finally received a definitive answer on his lingering back issue this week in Los Angeles.

Dr. Robert Watkins, a renowned back specialist, examined May on Monday and determined he had suffered a stress fracture in his L-4 vertebra. The condition is known as a pars defect.

“I think it’s just been there for awhile, kind of undetected,” May said Wednesday. “He said it’s been healing and it didn’t look new. I probably had just gone through cycles of healing without addressing the causes of it. I just kept pitching on it and probably shouldn’t have. It was an injury that was a little more serious than I thought it was.”

May enjoyed initial success after a midseason move to the bullpen in 2015, but by late August of last season he was struggling with intermittent pain in his lower back. Offseason visits to the chiropractor and regular rounds of yoga and pilates seemed to remedy the problem, but two months into this season the troubles started anew.

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May admittedly rushed back from a four-week DL stint in June but still managed to post 12 scoreless outings in his next 13 appearances. That run ended Aug. 6 with a shaky outing on the field turf at Tampa Bay, the same place that exacerbated his condition nearly a year earlier.

Placed on the DL for a second time, May visited the Mayo Clinic in Rochester and the Twins' medical diagnosis of a bone bruise in his back was confirmed. Unable to go on a minor-league rehab stint due to scheduling, he was able to return to the mound for one outing on Sept. 11 but threw just 17 pitches and retired one of four batters he faced.

Dr. Watkins diagnosed Mets first baseman Lucas Duda with a similar condition earlier this season. May was encouraged to hear the problem is "very common" and just requires time off.

"It's like any other bone; it needs to just heal," May said. "I anticipate coming back stronger than ever next year."

May, who turns 27 on Friday, posted a 5.27 earned run average in 44 outings this year. Interim general manager Rob Antony has already told him he should head home to Seattle with the idea of preparing as a starter this offseason.

A return to the rotation should lessen the strain on May's back, which ramped up with the increased velocity, shortened recovery time and other elements that accompany bullpen life.

"Changes in mechanics, high-intensity situations, coupled with adrenaline every time I pitched," May said. "It was caused by all the mechanical stuff and all the inflammation we saw. All that stuff was there. It was real stuff. It was just caused by something a little deeper than we could see."

In 2015, May was a revelation in the bullpen after stepping aside once Ervin Santana returned from an 80-game steroid suspension. He went 4-8 with a 4.43 ERA in 16 starts, but in 32 relief outings he posted a 2.87 ERA and saw his nine-inning strikeout rate jump from 7.9 to 10.6.

Now that Dr. Watkins has given him a program to follow this offseason, May is no longer discouraged and wondering. He was told he could resume treatments with a chiropractor along with pilates and yoga classes.

"Once it heals you go on a rehab program that strengthens your core and your muscles and gets everything working correctly," May said, "so you don't put so much stress on the area when you throw. It usually just goes away like nothing happened."

May won't resume throwing until the start of 2017 or perhaps shortly before New Year's Day. May typically likes to come into spring training with six weeks of throwing under his belt.

“In our search for starting pitching, one of the answers might be right here,” Antony said last week. “He’s big, he’s strong and he’s been durable as a starter.”

SANO UPDATE

Twins slugger Miguel Sano, out since Sept. 12 with pain in his lower back, was hopeful of returning to the lineup as soon as Thursday.

“I can decide if I want to throw him back in there against (Justin) Verlander,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said with a chuckle. “Righties hit him better. That’s what they say.”

After going through a full battery of baseball activity on Tuesday, Sano came in “bodily aware” on Wednesday that he had pushed the envelope.

“There’s probably a little stiffness,” Molitor said. “I don’t think it’s related to him trying to recover from that back thing. He tried to do a lot (Tuesday), I think, to try to make a statement that he wants to get back in there.”

Sano said he spent a lot of time in the training room on Wednesday but had not taken any swings as of late afternoon. He is 1 for 9 with four strikeouts against Verlander.

The Seattle series this weekend starts with a pair of left-handers for the Mariners, including James Paxton on Friday.

BRIEFLY

Antony sat for a lengthy meeting with Molitor and the coaching staff to discuss every player on the 40-man roster and a few that might need to be added in November to avoid being exposed to the Rule 5 draft. Among the latter group are right-handers **Ryan Eades** and **Aaron Slegers**, outfielder **Zach Granite** and catchers **Stuart Turner** and **Mitch Garver**. All were college draftees from the 2013 class.

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