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Injury Report

Questions hound Bulger, Delhomme, Rudi Johnson, Ward, Burress



Plaxico Burress, who is tied for the league lead with five TD catches, is suffering from a serious ankle sprain.

AP

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By Will Carroll, Special to SI.com

As much as I've worried about concussions over the past year, I'm just as worried by the apparent uptick in cervical spine injuries in football. We've had four major injuries, most notably **Kevin Everett** and **Cedric Killings**, and all were injured on kickoff coverage.

I'm no expert on special teams or on spinal injuries, so I talked to people who are. [Dr. Robert Watkins](#) doesn't think there's much more to be done. "It's a matter of technique," he said. "Dipping the head is poor technique and players are taught from Pop Warner on up to keep their heads up when tackling. There's nothing more that I think can be done to prevent them." So if the technique is known, is that strategy the problem?

A current NFL coach said the problem is partly the fault of the planning. "Some coaches teach the lead 'gunner' to get down there and throw himself cross-bodied at the wedge," he said. That's hardly leading to spinal injuries, which have invariably been caused by high-velocity head-to-head collisions. What we're left with is that kickoffs are a lottery, a perfect storm of circumstance that leads to 40 mph collisions (no, that's not a typo) that can often be made out of position. Unless we're willing to change the game, we're going to see these injuries again.

Now, let's look at the injuries that will affect the games of Week 4:

-- **Marc Bulger** has been playing with broken ribs, not sore ribs. That's not an insignificant difference if you're Bulger. For fantasy purposes, there's really no difference. Both injuries hurt and need additional protection. Both injuries will be affected by the depleted offensive line in front of Bulger.

Bulger can play through pain, but we don't know how many more hits he can take before enough is enough or additional damage is done. He's now far too risky to rely on as a starting fantasy QB. Hopefully your team has better backup options than the Rams, though **Gus Frerotte** might be a decent pairing if you have Bulger now.

-- **Jake Delhomme** isn't practicing, giving us more to go on with his elbow injury. It appears what the Panthers insist is a strained elbow, not a sprain -- the more likely injury -- will keep Delhomme on the sidelines. No matter the actual injury, the short-term impact is the same: Delhomme will sit in favor of David Carr on Sunday, sources tell me, barring a "Kitna-style miracle."

If the Panthers don't think Carr can handle it, they're not giving any signs of it and the same source tells me that the offense looked "just as good" in practice with Carr under center as they have with Delhomme. Carr won't gamble as much, meaning that **Steve Smith's** value may take a slight hit. We'll need more information before figuring out just how long the elbow will keep Delhomme out, meaning Carr -- available in a majority of Yahoo! leagues -- is a must-pair.

-- Beyond his chronic knee problems, which don't seem to hurt his fantasy production in the least, **Brian Westbrook** has also developed a new problem. He jukeed his way to an abdominal strain. While not serious, the injury is painful. He missed practice on Wednesday, but that's his normal pattern for resting his knees.

Normally, the thinking is that Westbrook would be somewhat limited, giving some extra carries to **Correll Buckhalter**. Unfortunately, Buckhalter is hobbled by an ankle sprain. This should be a wash for the running game. Given the way the offense looked last week, I'd expect them to change as little as possible.

-- Does it matter that we now know that **Steven Jackson** has a 40% tear of his groin? (I'll pause while you cringe.) Yes, because it lets us know both how badly he was injured and how weakened he will be for the near-term. The muscle will heal it will not be at full strength but likely will limit him much longer than the team initially indicated. Two weeks with this type of tear is not going to make any significant change and it's unlikely that he'll be able to get through the season without a flareup, which is sure to limit his explosiveness and lateral movement. Add in the St. Louis turf and it's a recipe for re-injury.

-- The Bengals aren't saying much about **Rudi Johnson** and with no practice reports Wednesday -- the team was off because they're playing Monday night -- we're left with uncertainty. While Johnson initially said he was simply sore and expected to play, statements from **Marvin Lewis** jibe more with what my sources have been telling me. Johnson's hamstring hasn't changed much since Sunday despite "aggressive treatment," putting **Kenny Watson** in line to take on a load against a tough Pats run defense. Neither back has much fantasy potential this week given the matchup, but Johnson would be the better option if he's able. We'll know more once we see how the team practices on Thursday and Friday, so call this one a game-time decision for now.

-- A trip to a foot and ankle specialist didn't change things for **Plaxico Burress**. He has a high-grade ankle sprain, something that will only heal with rest. With the Eagles up this weekend, the Giants will keep working on Burress to see

whether they can keep him available. Given his production last week, Burress seems likely to play this week. But with the Giants not having a bye until early November, the team's medical and field staff may need to pick a week before then when they think they can get by without Burress.

That week might be Week 5 or 6, when **Brandon Jacobs** comes back. Jacobs is making good progress and while he's out again this week, he's starting to show signs that he could be back in practice soon and playing games not long after that.

-- The Texans won't have **Andre Johnson** -- who's still a couple weeks away from returning from his knee sprain -- but they should have **Ron Dayne** back for Week 4. The big back was inactive for the Colts loss, and once **Ahman Green** went down, the Texans' running game vanished as well. Dayne is still feeling the chest pain and could be felled by a big hit, so **Samkon Gado** needs to be on your radar if you're desperate for yards. Green is very doubtful to play given the continued pain and swelling in his knee. I'm sure I'll be updating this situation Sunday morning with the Last Minute Med Check.

-- **Kevin Jones** made it back on the field in Week 3. More importantly, it looks as if he had no problems after that cameo appearance and the Lions will expand his role in the offense. The foot showed no signs of swelling or pain after his season debut, though he figures to continue to be limited both in the amount of plays he'll see and the shift to more of a "change-back" role, which sources tell me is a bit different than a third-down back. Jones will be used in more passing situations, giving the nearly TE-less Lions a de facto five-receiver set at times while maintaining the threat of a run or draw. Jones becomes less risky as each problem-free week passes, meaning that he's a great pickup in the 75% of Yahoo! leagues where he's available.

-- We won't see **Hines Ward** in practice this week; that much we know. What we won't know until Sunday is whether we'll see Ward in the game. Ward has a knee problem that is alternately described as a bone bruise and a knee sprain, though the team said that an MRI came back with no tears. (We know that teams often use the word "tear" interchangeably with "rupture" when it's actually more of a synonym for "sprain.") Ward is known for playing in pain but this one could slow him down, and as we saw last year, he loses a lot of his value when he's a step slower than normal. Even if he plays, he's not a great option even with **Ben Roethlisberger** establishing himself.

-- **Kellen Winslow** must like being in my columns. He seems to find new and interesting ways to show up. Coming back from microfracture surgery isn't enough to keep him here since he's shown no problems at all early this season after the procedure. Instead, he's banged up his shoulder. Actually, it's a bit more than a bang, it's a subluxation. It's the same sort of injury that **Eli Manning** had in Week 1 and bothered **Clinton Portis** much of last season.

Manning came back quickly and without effect because there was little damage to the soft tissue -- ligaments and labrum -- while Portis needed surgery later to repair his. Winslow has played with some pain in the past and given his position, the biggest concern is that he falls on it again, causing further damage to a weakened shoulder. I'd play him without reservation.

-- **Josh McCown** is out with what the Raiders are now calling a broken toe. Along with the poor play of the Raiders offense, switching to **Daunte Culpepper** makes sense here. McCown is battered beyond the toe, and it won't be much better for Culpepper. His surgically repaired knee will be tested quickly by **Jason Taylor** and the Dolphins pass rush. From what we've seen in practice, Culpepper looks much the same as last year, losing some explosive movement and having a less stable base for throwing, making him less accurate.

-- The Bears defense is just a mess now. After losing **Mike Brown** and **Dusty Dvoracek** in Week 1, the Bears now have injuries to seemingly everyone else. Lance Briggs has a mild strain of his hamstring. **Adam Archuleta** is playing with a broken hand. **Tommie Harris** sprained his left knee, which is the same side where he had off-season hamstring surgery. Both corners, **Nathan Vasher** and **Charles Tillman**, have leg issues. Total it up and the Bears defense is a risky start against the Lions. It comes down to whether you believe this defense is really about **Brian Urlacher**, the one healthy component, and the Tampa-2 system, or whether you feel this is a defense that's succeeded on talent, as I feel.

-- **BUMPS AND BRUISES:** **Steve McNair** is expected to play, but the groin problem will keep **Kyle Boller** close on the sidelines. ... **Anquan Boldin** is very sore due to a hip pointer. He'll miss most, if not all Cardinals practices

this week and looks to be a gametime decision on Sunday. ... If you're waiting on **D.J. Hackett** to return from his high ankle sprain, you'd better be deep at WR. He could be out until November. ... The Vikings think there's about a 50/50 shot of **Tarvaris Jackson** taking back his starting role this week, even with continued mobility problems and more solid play from **Kelly Holcomb**. ... The Vikings also think it's a coin flip on whether **Chester Taylor** will be available this week. If available, he'll start despite **Adrian Peterson's** quick start. ... Why is no one asking why **Vince Young** had to have an IV after injuring his wrist?

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