

Los Angeles Times

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Future Is Bleak for Griffin's Back : Dodgers: Shortstop has degenerative disk. A career-threatening operation might be needed.

 February 24, 1991 | [BILL PLASCHKE](#) | TIMES STAFF WRITER

The pain that Alfredo Griffin attempted to hide last season was made public Saturday when a doctor revealed Griffin is playing with a severely degenerative disk in his lower back that can be helped only by spinal fusion surgery.

That surgery, which has not yet been recommended, would probably end the Dodger shortstop's career.

"He is in a great deal of pain, and we aren't sure how much better it will get," said Dr. Robert Watkins, who performed surgery on Griffin's back Jan. 8. "The X-rays of his condition show such an abnormality, you can see it from across the room.

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"He is plainly a very, very courageous player."

Griffin acknowledged Saturday for the first time that the pain is so bad, he cannot sleep on his back or stomach. He cannot sit comfortably in an automobile seat.

The worst part of it, he said, is that he cannot bend properly to field ground balls.

This could be why the former all-star committed 26 errors last season, equaling the major league high for shortstops. He also batted only .210, the lowest average among National Leaguers with at least 502 plate appearances.

"I remember one time at Dodger Stadium last year against Cincinnati . . . it was a ground ball in the hole," said Griffin, 33. "I could have caught it. I should have caught it. My glove was right there.

"But when I tried to bend over and make the catch, I just couldn't. I couldn't get down. The ball went through for a hit. It was terrible. I was so angry."

The Dodgers, who were unaware of such pain, became angry for a different reason. Figuring Griffin's

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skills had declined, they tried to trade him late in the season before bringing up Jose Offerman and installing him at shortstop.

Griffin's condition probably will prevent him from challenging Offerman for the starting job this spring and may even land him on the disabled list at the beginning of the season.

"I would think the problems with his back would change some things," said Tom Lasorda, Dodger manager.

Griffin said he never discussed his back problems with Lasorda because he was afraid of being placed on the disabled list and missing the remainder of the season.

"Tommy would call me in the office and say, 'Alfredo, you are killing us, we have to get you out of the lineup,'" Griffin said. "And I would beg him. I would say, 'Please, I will do better, give me one more chance.'

"He would give me that chance. But my back would not get any better."

Said Lasorda: "Anybody could look at him and tell something was wrong. But I love the guy, he's such a competitor. So I kept saying, 'OK.' And I would keep throwing him out there."

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After the season, Griffin approached Watkins for help.

"I told him, 'Please, can we take care of this back thing?'" Griffin said. "I told him I would do anything."

Griffin was placed on a rehabilitation program that required him to remain in Los Angeles and away from his home in the Dominican Republic for all but three weeks.

"It is the longest I have ever stayed in L.A. during the off-season, but I didn't think I had a choice," Griffin said.

Griffin said he hoped that the surgical procedure in January, designed to rid the disk of some inflammation and tissue, also would ease the pain.

But Watkins said the surgery was mainly diagnostic.

"We wanted to make sure there wasn't any infection in there, and there wasn't," Watkins said. "In terms of it helping him with the pain, we didn't anticipate much of that. It helped only like a series of cortisone injections would help."

Griffin understands that now. Since the surgery he has been unable to bend over.

He was able to field ground balls Saturday for the first time since the surgery. But even then, he only handled balls directly at him or close by.

"I felt a little better," he protested. "I will be OK this year. You watch."

Said Watkins: "His chances of being pain-free are pretty slim. But last year he told us, 'Pain doesn't bother me.' He told us it didn't hurt any more to play than it hurt to sit down.

"And he is not hurting his condition by playing. So if that is what he wants to do. . . ."

Watkins said there is only one way Griffin can end his suffering.

"A spinal fusion operation is the only thing we can offer as a cure," Watkins said. "But that is a big operation, and he would be out for 12 to 18 months. It is serious stuff.

"And right now, we cannot recommend it if Alfredo still feels he can stand to play."

About that, there is no question.

"This game, this game . . . I am just crazy about it," he said. "I will do anything to play this game."

He added, "If I don't feel any better, this is my last year. But it will be very hard to quit. It is very hard to even think about quitting.

"I have seen other guys from my country, when they quit, they are crying," Griffin said. "That's the way I will be. This game is my family. I know nothing else. I will fight to the end."

Because Watkins found no infection in January, he said the Dodgers could give Griffin painful cortisone shots this summer to assist in that fight.

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