



Houston Texans Football

Before the injury, the Texans were expecting big things from Charles Spencer.

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Texans fear Spencer is gone for good

Unique knee injury jeopardizes tackle's career

By MEGAN MANFULL

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Texans rookie Charles Spencer has a metal plate and about eight screws in his knee. The fracture that ended his season after just two starts has healed.

That doesn't mean the Texans will have their starting left offensive tackle back any time soon, though. In fact, what appeared to be a bright NFL future for Spencer is now in question because of cartilage around his knee that was damaged as a result of the injury.

"It's certainly an injury that threatens a guy's career, especially a guy like Spencer," said Dr. Walter Lowe, the team physician who performed Spencer's surgery Sept. 18.

Among the 17 players who landed on injured reserve this season, Spencer has the injury — a fracture of the tibial plateau — that most concerns the Texans. Most fractures of the tibial plateau aren't serious, but Spencer's is unique in the way it occurred.

"We have combed the land as far as athletes go, and it's an injury that's not common," Texans athletic trainer Kevin Bastin said. "Doctors see them, but not in professional athletes. When people jump from a high building and land on their feet, this is what happens."

Spencer was a pleasant surprise during training camp, making exceptional progress and winning the starting job. The Texans were confident they had finally found a young player to take over a position that has been a revolving door since the franchise's inaugural season.

But Spencer was injured against the Indianapolis Colts in Week 2.

"It is like if you would drive a spike through the top of your leg bone and you split the cartilage," Bastin said. "The fracture has healed, but typically there is not blood supply to our cartilage. So that is the concern going forward. When Dr. Lowe brought it back together, were we fortunate enough for that cartilage to continue to survive and live, or did it die off?"

"When it dies off, it's gone, and we can't put that back. So that's what we're in limbo with."

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It will take another month or so before the doctors can determine how the cartilage is doing. Arthritis could develop on the joint surface, leaving Spencer with an arthritic knee. Some football players continue to play through such pain, but the Texans have taken a number of measures to try to prevent such problems.

Either way, the uncertainty leaves the Texans looking for a left tackle. Coach Gary Kubiak made it clear the team will not go into the offseason expecting any of its injured players to return.

Last offseason, the Texans made the mistake of waiting for running back Domanick Williams (formerly Domanick Davis) to return from a knee injury. They bypassed Reggie Bush in the draft and didn't seek a starter in free agency. Before the season, Williams was placed on injured reserve.

"I'm sure counting on Charles, and I hope he's there ready to go full speed. Because if he is, we're going to be better," Kubiak said. "But we've got to operate assuming that may not happen."

Spencer, who's running on a treadmill in the pool and lifting weights, weighs 320 pounds — more than 30 pounds less than when he started the season.

"This was a big disappointment," Spencer said. "It was kind of a weird fracture. But it happened for a reason. I'll be out there next year."

Lowe and Bastin said Spencer is an exemplary patient, as diligent in his rehab as Kailee Wong was last season when the veteran linebacker underwent two major knee surgeries that threatened his career. Wong beat the odds, returning midway through this season.

"We didn't know Charles well when he had surgery," Lowe said. "He was a young guy, and he's very quiet. But after working with him the past three months, he is every bit as motivated and in tune to his injury as Kailee was.

"Because of that, he has such a better chance to overcome this and return to the field, hopefully in time for the regular season."

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