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Gronkowski to redshirt after surgery



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Rob Gronkowski said he's "definitely going to redshirt" the 2009 season after undergoing surgery to fix a herniated disk and repair nerve damage in his back.

Whether he'll need the extra year of eligibility or not - well, that's a different question.

The Wildcats tight end said Wednesday that he plans on testing the NFL draft waters this spring, and would consider leaving school if he is a projected first-round pick. Gronkowski caught 75 passes for 1,197 yards and 16 touchdowns in his first two seasons with the Wildcats, an NFL-caliber resume provided he's healthy.

"You've always got to look at that option, if it's there. It's a big career opportunity," he said. "If I don't like that I get back, then I'm going to definitely come back. If it's looking solid, like I would hope to, you definitely have to look, weigh your options, and go."

Gronkowski, 20, covered a wide range of topics in his first interview since early-August, when he was shelved with the back injury.

The typically easygoing Gronkowski choked back tears when talking about not being able to play the season with his teammates - especially his brother, Chris, a senior H-back. The last few months have been "brutal," he said, in part because he couldn't contribute to the team. Arizona (3-2 overall, 1-1 Pac-10) hosts Stanford on Saturday.

"I thought this was going to be my season and the team's season," he said. "I was preparing myself in the summer really hard. I was ready to get out there and lead the team. Then I took a big hit.

"People don't understand and I might not show it, but it's been brutal on me. It's hard to watch the games. It's hard to be with the team because I want to be out there (playing) the whole time, especially with my brother. It's his last year, and I wanted to play with him. I wanted to be out there."

The injury, and subsequent surgery, scrapped his plans.

Dr. Robert G. Watkins of the Marina Spine Center (Marina Spine Center) in Marina del Rey, Calif., performed a 3 1/2-hour microsdiscectomy on Gronkowski's back on Sept. 24. He removed a small portion of Gronkowski's spine to relieve pressure on his sciatic nerve.

It was the sciatica - leg weakness and pain brought on by a pinched nerve - that first gave Gronkowski an indication that something was wrong with his back.

With his parents' urging, Gronkowski sought out some of the nation's top back and spine specialists. He traveled to Pittsburgh and Los Angeles for consultations, and met with the best doctors in Tucson.

Most doctors urged him to undergo surgery immediately, while a few believed that he could play nine or 10 games following a monthlong, nonsurgical rehabilitation. Gronkowski felt better when he returned to practice Sept. 14; by the next day, however, the pain and weakness was back.

"After that practice, I went in and was like, 'I want to get the surgery done, get it over with, get to my future and be healthy.' "

Three weeks into his recovery, Gronkowski can't bend over to tie his shoes or twist his torso to turn around. He can stand and walk for extended periods of time, but is otherwise forbidden from [physical activity](#).

"I sit at home eight hours a day playing video games in the recliner," he said.

Gronkowski will begin rehab in another three weeks, and should be cleared to run in a few months. If everything goes according to plan, Gronkowski could be 100 percent by Christmas.

Whether Gronkowski's health translates into an NFL contract, or another year at the UA, won't be known until well after then.

"I have no clue what's going to happen," he said. "I'm just trying to [get healthy](#). It all depends on if I recover well or don't recover well."

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AP Photo/Greg Wahl-Stephens

Arizona's Rob Gronkowski (48) battles for yardage against Oregon's Spencer Paysinger (35) and Jairus Byrd (32) in Eugene, Ore., Nov. 15, 2008.

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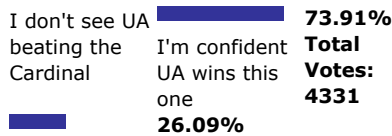
Saturday's game

**Who:** Stanford (4-2 overall, 3-1 Pac-10) at Arizona (3-2, 1-1)  
**When:** Saturday, 4:30 p.m. | **Where:** Arizona Stadium  
**TV:** Versus-HD (not carried by all TV providers)  
**Point spread:** UA by 6 | [More odds](#)  
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the question

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