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Notes: Palmer has neck surgery

Injury could end guard's career

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Posted: Oct. 12, 2007

Green Bay - Guard **Tony Palmer** of the Green Bay Packers underwent a cervical fusion operation last month for a neck injury that threatens his football career.

The operation was performed Sept. 28 by **Bob Watkins**, a Los Angeles-based neurosurgeon who also performed a cervical fusion on Packers linebacker **Johnny Holland** in January 1993 for a neck injury in the C2-C3 level of the spine that ended his career.

"There's cautious optimism," general manager **Ted Thompson** said Friday. "This will take a little time. The main thing is to make sure the kid's all right."

Palmer, 24, was injured Sept. 16 blocking on a kickoff return against the New York Giants. He suffered no loss of feeling in his arms or legs. At the time, coach **Mike McCarthy** described the injury as "a small bone fracture" in his neck.

"They are extremely optimistic that not only will Tony have a full and complete and healthy life but that he will have a long and successful National Football League career," said **Peter Schaffer**, the agent for Palmer.

Mark Klion, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in sports medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, said it probably would take at least three months before the doctors could begin to determine Palmer's football future.

A posterior fusion, such as the one that Palmer underwent, is a common procedure for football players suffering fractures in the cervical region (C1 to C7) of the spine.

"The posterior arches that hold the spinal cord have joints between them," Klion said. "When you break that posterior ring the spine can be instable. When they are instable, they usually fuse them."

Wide receiver **Sterling Sharpe** suffered damage in the C1-C2 area of his spine in December 1993 and never played again.

"The higher up it is, the potential for a much more severe complication is obviously there," said Klion, emphasizing that he had no knowledge of Palmer's case. "If you fuse a level, potentially you lose mobility at that level. Those levels above and below become more arthritic because you're asking them to do more.

"Now you've got somewhat of a rigid segment within the spine. And you ask someone to become 320-pound lineman where there is constant battering against them?"

"Cautiously optimistic? I'm not sure there are many spine surgeons in the world that would actually give their blessing to clear him. You have to look at what he has at stake and what the benefits are. He could certainly die from another injury to his neck.

"There are no hard and fast guidelines with us. This is a very big gray zone. It really is based on the level of the injury. What the rest of the makeup is in his body. And how he responds to surgical intervention."

Among the Packers' players who have suffered career-ending spinal and cervical injuries in the last two decades are wide receiver **Terrence Murphy** (2005), safety **Gary Berry** (2000) and cornerback **Tim Lewis** (1986).

Palmer was claimed on waivers by Green Bay in September 2006 after being drafted in the seventh round by St. Louis in '06 out of Missouri.

This summer, the coaches regarded him as the team's best run blocker.

Line moves: Already missing center **Scott Wells** (eye), the offensive line might be without right guard **Junius Coston** Sunday against Washington.

Coston didn't even attend practice Friday after suffering a sprained ankle near the end of practice Thursday in a goal-line drill. Listed as questionable, Coston's status will be determined on game day, according to McCarthy.

Jason Spitz, the backup right guard, is starting for Wells. That means **Tony Moll**, who sat out all four exhibition games with recurring stingers and played right tackle when healthy, would start for Coston. After missing about five weeks, Moll returned to full practice Sept. 19.

"I'd like to see him (Coston) able to come back," said Moll, who started 10 games, including five at right guard, as a rookie. "But if he can't I'm very confident we'll be able to get our best five in there."

Since returning last month, Moll said he has been 100% free of the stingers that plagued him.

If Coston can't play, the Packers would be down to seven offensive linemen. McCarthy said either **Mark Tauscher** or **Daryn Colledge** would have to play center if Spitz went down.

"It's a challenge a number of teams go through week in and week out," McCarthy said. "We expect them to go in and play at a high level."

Injury list: Wide receiver **Greg Jennings** (shoulder), tight end **Bubba Franks** (knee), tackle **Chad Clifton** (knee) and cornerbacks **Al Harris** (back) and **Charles Woodson** (foot) practiced fully and will play.

In Washington, defensive end **Phillip Daniels** (shoulder) and cornerback **Fred Smoot** (illness) returned

to practice and will play.

Wide receiver **Antwaan Randle El** (hamstring), listed as questionable after not practicing all week, has never missed a game in any sport at any level and plans to play.

Linebacker **Marcus Washington** (hamstring) sat out all week, was listed as doubtful and probably will be replaced by **Randall Godfrey**, 34.

Staying the course: McCarthy implied but wouldn't categorically say he had been notified by the league that referee **Larry Nemmers'** crew erred Sunday by penalizing defensive tackle **Corey Williams** 5 yards for lining up over Chicago's long snapper.

"We'll continue to use the formation or alignment of Corey, and we are correct on his alignment.... as long as his helmet is outside the shoulder pad," McCarthy said.

The penalty prompted the Bears to take the fourth-and-3 penalty, wiping out a successful field goal. Two plays later, the Bears scored a touchdown en route to a 27-20 victory.

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From the Oct. 13, 2007 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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