## **VISIT WATKINS SPINE.COM**

September 23, 1992

## **HOCKEY**; Gretzky Is Sidelined Indefinitely

## By MICHAEL MARTINEZ,

Wayne Gretzky did not retire today, but the announcement by the Los Angeles Kings that he will be out indefinitely -- possibly the entire season -- because of a herniated disk in his upper back could be the first step in that direction.

Gretzky, hockey's career-leading scorer and the Kings' captain, will not undergo surgery at this time, according to Dr. Robert Watkins, the team's spine specialist. But Watkins did term the injury "one in a million" and said that Gretzky would be treated with medication and exercise.

Watkins would not say how soon the 31-year-old Gretzky might return, although he indicated that a complete recovery was possible.

"There's a chance he could return this year, depending on his response to treatment," Watkins said at a news conference today at the Forum. Rumors Abounded

There had been rumors circulating throughout the National Hockey League that Gretzky, hospitalized since last Wednesday after complaining of chest pain, might announce his retirement. But Gretzky said that he had not given consideration to leaving the game.

"The only thing I'm dealing with now is getting rid of this pain," said Gretzky, who was accompanied by his wife, the actress Janet Jones. "I haven't thought of anything past that."

Watkins said the injury was a herniated thoracic disk at around the level of his shoulder blades, an uncommon location for that type of injury. He said the disk was protruding into the spinal canal and putting pressure on a nerve that runs between the ribs.

"It's a most unusual spinal injury," Watkins said. "I've probably never treated a lesion exactly like this."

Asked at what point surgery might be required, Watkins said: "Right now, surgery is not being contemplated. To analyze what surgery might be done is not appropriate."

About the possibility that Gretzky might never return, Watkins said: "It has the possibility of being a career- ending injury, but we're optimistic that the prognosis is good for his recovery." He also said there was nothing regarding the injury that would rule out a comeback. Started Training Camp

Gretzky took part in the first two days of training camp at Lake Arrowhead, Calif., earlier this month, apparently recovered from the discomfort he said he experienced as far back as last March. He returned to Los Angeles for the birth of his third child, born Sept. 14, when pain began again.

Gretzky said he was told that stress relating to the birth might have caused renewed muscle

strain in his back.

Gretzky could not point to a specific incident as the cause of the injury, but he indicated that he began to experience discomfort near the conclusion of last season. He also suffered an injury to his lower back a year ago during a Canada Cup game. Watkins said it could have been the result of either a single hit to the back or wear and tear over a number of seasons.

"For those people who say that Wayne Gretzky never gets hit, I guess I'm living proof that that's not true," Gretzky said.

The news conference was attended by two other physicians in addition to Watkins, Dr. Michael Mellman and Dr. Ronald Kvitne, plus the Kings' owner, Bruce McNall, the club president, Roy Mlakar, and General Manager Nick Beverly.

"From the franchise standpoint, obviously you can't replace Wayne Gretzky," said McNall, who obtained the superstar in a megatrade with Edmonton four years ago. "I hope the team will rally around it. I hope we can still be very competitive."

Watkins would not compare Gretzky's injury with that of the Pittsburgh Penguins' Mario Lemieux, who missed a portion of the season two years ago after back surgery but made a successful return.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company | Home | Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | XML | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Back to Top