

Puk quits Warriors; Griffin out 4-6 weeks

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Cedar Rapids Washington football team has suffered two serious setbacks this week with the loss of quarterback A.J. Puk and tailback Will Griffin.

Puk quit the team Monday to concentrate on his promising baseball career. Griffin had surgery on Tuesday to repair his ankle and will be sidelined four to six weeks.

"It's a whole different team than I had 48 hours ago," Washington Coach Tony Lombardi said Tuesday after practice.

Puk was Washington's starting quarterback last year as a sophomore when he completed 43 of 89 passes for 599 yards and four touchdowns. Lombardi kept him mostly under wraps as a sophomore, but planned to turn him loose this year.

Griffin rushed for 452 yards and six TDs last season as the No.2 tailback behind Alex Carr. An outstanding sprinter, Griffin appeared on the verge of becoming the next star tailback at Washington.

Puk practiced with the Warriors last Monday and Tuesday, then left last Wednesday (with permission) for a national baseball showcase in California. Lombardi expected Puk to rejoin the team this week, but Puk called Monday and said he was done.

"It's completely a shock," Lombardi said.

Puk, a 6-foot-4 lefthander, played first base and pitched for the Washington baseball team this season and has been playing for the varsity since he was in the eighth grade. He hit .436 with two homers and 26 RBIs this year and was 1-5 with a 4.90 ERA as a pitcher with 58 strikeouts in 30 innings.

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There were rumors earlier this summer that Puk would not play football, but Lombardi said Puk assured him that he would play.

"I asked him at that time what he was thinking, and quite frankly to let me know either way so we could prepare accordingly," Lombardi said. "At that point there were absolute assurances that this wouldn't happen."

Braedon Tovey, a senior who threw one pass for the Warriors last season, is the new starting quarterback.

Griffin injured his ankle in practice last week, but at the time Lombardi thought it was a sprained ankle and he'd miss a short period of time. Now Griffin could miss half the season after having surgery to repair a damaged ligament.

Griffin had surgery at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinic in Iowa City. The operation was performed by Dr. Ned Amendola, who is the team physician for the University of Iowa football squad.

"Now it's a question of healing time," said Lombardi. "Four to six weeks, somewhere in that range."

Lombardi said Griffin's injury is similar to an injury suffered by former UI quarterback Ricky Stanzi as an underclassmen a few years ago.

Griffin is the fastest football player in the Metro area and one of the strongest. He finished second in the Class 4A 100-meter dash this year and appeared poised for a breakout campaign.

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Lombardi said JoJo McBride, Mitch Bredeson and Walter Short will get snaps at tailback. "Between those three kids, we'll try to offset Will being gone for a few weeks," he said.

McBride, Bredeson and Short have never carried the ball for the Warriors in a varsity game.

Puk called Lombardi on Monday to tell the coach he was leaving the team. Later that day, Puk appeared at practice to explain his decision to his teammates.

"The news got around Monday morning at weightlifting," said Noah Dostal, a reserve quarterback. "And then before practice, he came over and apologized to us and told us his deal and that he was going to go play baseball.

"He just said he's sorry, and that he had opportunities in baseball to go play on a travel team and he was going to do that, because baseball is his favorite sport and he wants to play baseball in college and see how far he can go with that."

Tovey said he was surprised by Puk's decision.

"He was here this summer. He missed some weeks for baseball things, but he came to our 7-on-7 tournament in Chicago and did well, so I had no idea," Tovey said. "It came as a shock to me.

"He's got good opportunities in baseball, and that's what he wants to pursue. We're all there for him. I'm going to support him in what he does, because that's his passion."

Puk's father, Dr. Dave Puk, said last week that his son was beginning to receive interest from some of the top college baseball programs in the country, although no offers had been made at that point. Dr. Puk also said last week that his son planned to rejoin the Washington football team once he returned from California.

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A.J. Puk could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

Lombardi said Tovey is more mobile than Puk, making him more of a threat running with the ball, and said his new quarterback is "relatively effective" as a passer.

Tovey said he had trouble digesting the news Monday when Puk made his announcement, leaving Tovey as the new starter. "I was nervous, because it took about a day to set in," he said. "We play in the hardest conference in the state. Every week is going to be a battle. Every team can make the playoffs."

Tovey did extra work on his conditioning after practice Tuesday, running with the linemen at one point. He thought he'd play as a defensive back and perhaps a slot receiver this year, but now he's the man in charge.

"I need the conditioning so I can play both ways and help out the team," he said, catching his breath.

"It's coming along," he said about being the No.1 quarterback. "I'll be ready by Prairie."

The Warriors open the season on Friday, Aug. 26 at Cedar Rapids Prairie.

Tovey thinks McBride, Bredeson and Short will be able to replace Griffin until their top tailback returns.

"They've all been here. They know the plays," he said. "And our offensive line (is) about 260 pounds average. So you can have an average running back and they'd still do great, but I think our running backs can be great."

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The Warriors appeared in good spirits in practice Tuesday as they continued preparations for the new season.

"We'll just have to find a way to win ballgames somehow. Seven-to-six, I don't care. We'll figure it out," Lombardi said.

"If we can get ourselves through that early stretch and steal some wins along the way, then we'll get kids back healthy and eligible and hopefully we can make a little run towards the end."

Ryan Cain, a defensive back and receiver, broke his collarbone in practice last week and will be sidelined about six weeks. Lombardi also said a couple of players have eligibility issues.

2011 WASHINGTON FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Friday, Aug. 26 - at Prairie, 7:15 p.m.
Friday, Sept. 2 - vs. Jefferson, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)
Friday, Sept. 9 - vs. Kennedy, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)
Friday, Sept. 16 - Dubuque Wahlert, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)
Friday, Sept. 23 - at Dubuque Senior, 7:15 p.m.
Friday, Sept. 30 - at Iowa City High, 7:15 p.m.
Friday, Oct. 7 - vs. Linn-Mar, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)
Friday, Oct. 14 - at Iowa City West, 7:15 p.m.
Thursday, Oct. 20 - Waterloo West, 7:15 p.m. (Kingston Stadium)