

Griffin cleared to play football for Warriors

Written by Jim Ecker

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Cedar Rapids Washington tailback Will Griffin has not played football all season due to ankle surgery in August, but he's still being recruited by Drake, South Dakota State, Winona State, Eastern Illinois and possibly the Iowa Hawkeyes.

Just think what might happen if he ever carries the ball.

Griffin was supposed to be Washington's featured tailback this year, but he injured his right ankle during the first week of training camp and has been reduced to a cheerleader and informal coach ever since. That could change soon.

Griffin has been cleared to play in Friday night's game at No. 2 Iowa City High, but Washington Coach Tony Lombardi said Griffin is not ready to carry the load.

"He is not at full speed. Not even close," Lombardi said after practice Thursday.

Lombardi wants to give Griffin a few snaps, if possible, to get him back in the swing of things after missing the first five games of the season. He thinks Griffin needs to play in a game to accelerate his recovery, as long as he doesn't overdo it.

"When you play in that competitive environment you get better quicker, because you compete rather than thinking about the injury," Lombardi said. "As I told him, if I can find situations where I think you can contribute, we'll try to play him.

"He's got to play," Lombardi said. "He's not going to get healthy waiting to get healthy. This isn't a good week to get him acclimated, but I think any reps I can get him in the game will help the healing process."

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Lombardi does not want to give Griffin more than he can handle or put him in danger.

"If he looks like he can't protect himself out there as far as changing direction and running well enough that he can't be effective, I'll get him the heck out of there," he said.

Dr. Ned Amendola, the head physician for the University of Iowa football team, performed the surgery on Griffin and cleared him to play this past Monday. Griffin was happy to hear the good news.

"He said it's going to hurt but it's all mental, pretty much," Griffin related Thursday. "It's how much you want it."

He wants it, but knows the team comes first. "If he (Lombardi) decides I don't play, then I don't play. Then I'll wait until next week," he remarked.

But make no mistake, he'd like to play against Iowa City High.

"I'm not going to get better sitting on the sidelines," he said. "I have to get a couple of snaps in. I'd like to get back to playing."

Griffin is a 5-foot-8, 200-pound package of speed and power. He finished second in the 100-meter dash at the Class 4A state track meet last May and is one of Washington's leaders in the weight room.

Iowa assistant coach Reese Morgan visited Griffin in the Washington weight room two days after the state track meet and invited him to a Hawkeye camp this past summer.

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"He wrote me a letter (after the camp) and said I did really well, and the running backs coach was impressed with me," Griffin said.

Griffin carried the ball 55 times for 462 yards and six touchdowns last season as the No. 2 tailback behind Alex Carr. Carr graduated and joined the Northern Iowa football team as a defensive back, giving Griffin a chance to become the featured tailback at Washington. Then came the injury.

"Yeah, I'm disappointed that I haven't been able to get what I expected out of myself, but I've tried to help the backs out," he said, determined to stay positive. "Either way I'm going to be out. If I think negatively it's going to take even longer, and if I think positively about it I'll be ready to go."

Lombardi said Griffin has been a tremendous teammate this year, despite his personal setback.

"He went through about a two-day mourning period where he was irritable, and that was completely understandable," Lombardi said. "And then he embraced this role that he was going to be a running backs coach and get in there and help those kids and support them."

Washington has done a good job of running the ball this season, even without Griffin. Mitch Bredeson (433 yards), David Tann (357 yards) and Walter Short (305 yards) have carried the load and the Warriors are averaging 238 yards on the ground per game.

Griffin has been doing his rehab work and physical therapy at the University of Iowa, visiting Iowa City three or four times a week, with his mother doing the driving. He said Dr. Amendola inserted a band into his ankle during surgery to promote healing, similar to treatment former UI quarterback Ricky Stanzi received a few years ago.

Griffin has lost muscle tone in his right calf, but is working to get it back. "Right now my left calf is super-buffed, but my right is not as buffed," he said.

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He cannot crack 11 seconds in the 100-meter dash yet, but he's working on it. "Hopefully by track season I'll be able to," he said. "The way I'm at now, I think I'm at average speed."

Griffin might have been one of the premier tailbacks in the Mississippi Valley Conference this season, but Barkley Hill of Cedar Falls and Ronald Thompson of Iowa City High have shared top billing. Hill has rushed for 1,135 yards and 21 touchdowns in five games, while Thompson has rushed for 1,068 yards and 14 TDs.

Griffin might have produced numbers like that himself, especially behind Washington's talented offensive line.

"He could be really good," Lombardi said. "He's got good power, he's got good vision. But sadly this happened, and we just don't know. But I'm excited to get him back.

"He's not going to help us win this ballgame," Lombardi said. "Maybe that sounds terrible, and I don't mean it to. He's just not at that point yet, but I have to help him get to that point.

"I really think it's in his best interest to play a little bit. He'll push it a little over his comfort zone because he's in a competitive environment."

Washington (3-2) has four games left in the regular season and probably needs only one more victory to qualify for the playoffs. That means Griffin could still make his mark this year.

"That's the way I'm thinking about it," he said. "You never know what God has planned for you."