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Story Giants' Kiwanuka out vs. Bears

By MARK HALE
Last Updated: 8:32 AM, October 2, 2010
Posted: 12:18 AM, October 2, 2010
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Justin Tuck's shoulder has been hurting and Osi Umenyiora's knee has been banged up. But Mathias Kiwanuka now has the most problematic issue among the Giants' defensive ends.

In what could be a gigantic hit to their defense, the Giants revealed late yesterday afternoon that Kiwanuka has a bulging cervical disc and won't play tomorrow night against the Bears. The Giants have no idea how long Kiwanuka, who leads the team with four sacks, will be out.

"If you give it rest, it should heal. The thing that might bring it to surgery would be pain or neurologic deficit or a bulging disc that progresses to a disc herniation," Jeff Goldstein, director of spine service at NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases, said in a phone interview.

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"Generally a period of rest and some short-term medication will let an injury like this heal, and he should be able to return to full play once he's feeling better."

But there are no guarantees. The Giants said Kiwanuka should "avoid contact with his head and neck" and said recovery time is on a case-by-case basis. Last year, middle linebacker Antonio Pierce required surgery for a bulging disc in his neck, and yesterday safety Michael Johnson had surgery for a bulging disc in his back. According to an ESPN report, Kiwanuka will get a second opinion and the Giants fear he could miss two or three months.

Giants GM Jerry Reese did not return a message, nor did Kiwanuka's agent, Tom Condon.

"It's disappointing. It just feels like a stiff neck," Kiwanuka said in a Giants release. "The pain is not intolerable, but I want to make sure that I will be OK down the line."

The Giants do not know how Kiwanuka was hurt. They won the Super Bowl without Kiwanuka three years ago after he broke his leg during the season. But this year, Kiwanuka has been the key to the team's pass rush, already racking up four sacks -- nobody else on the Giants has more than one. The Giants are tied for 13th in the NFL with six sacks.

"Obviously Kiwi is a big part of our plans, he's had a very good season," coach Tom Coughlin said. "He's very flexible, he's a versatile athlete who can be used in a lot of different ways. So now we have to regroup and try to figure out how we're going to utilize our personnel for this game."

As the Giants try to adjust to Kiwanuka's absence, they still will be able to start Tuck and Umenyiora at defensive end, and their depth chart at the position includes rookie Jason Pierre-Paul and veteran Dave Tollefson. Umenyiora missed practice yesterday with swelling in his knee, but Coughlin believes he will play tomorrow.

Kiwanuka, who is in the final year of his contract, practiced all week, but said before practice on Thursday that he had a stiff neck. He went for an MRI exam Thursday night, then practiced again with the stiff neck yesterday, purposely keeping his head and neck away from contact. He had a CAT scan after yesterday's practice at the Hospital for Special Surgery.

"If he did have a progressive problem that required surgery for a one-level disc herniation, that would probably put him out for the season," Goldstein said.

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