

Ohio State LB Justin Hilliard Opens Up On Achilles Injury, Recovery Timeline

During the third practice of spring camp March 19 at the Woody Hayes Athletic Center, Justin Hilliard first thought his ruptured left Achilles was nothing more than a kick in the calf.

In a pass-rush drill against junior running back J.K. Dobbins (5-10, 217), he felt a whack.

As he looked back, the fifth-year senior linebacker assumed running backs coach Tony Alford was messing around.

“My Achilles was sore for probably two weeks and I’m thinking — I mean, that’s a common soreness around the Woody,” the 6-1, 235-pound Hilliard said Friday during Ohio State’s seventh annual job fair at Ohio Stadium’s Huntington Club. “So I’m thinking nothing of it. I asked (junior linebacker) Tuf (Borland) one day, like, ‘What did it feel like when you tore your Achilles?’ He literally described it as someone smacking you with a bat in your calf. And then I was doing pass rush against J.K. and I pushed off on it, and I literally thought Coach Alford kicked me in the back (of the leg). And on film, I turned around, like, ‘Why did you kick me?’ It was just crazy.”

After the Buckeyes made the March 26 announcement of an undisclosed injury to Hilliard, who reportedly had surgery on the Achilles the previous week, the latest recovery process started for the veteran.

Originally a five-star recruit in OSU’s 2015 class as the 247Sports composite’s No. 35 overall prospect, No. 3 outside linebacker and No. 1 player from Ohio, the Cincinnati St. Xavier product started slow when he came to Columbus after separate biceps injuries in 2015 and ’16 limited him through his redshirt freshman season.

Following three games in two years, Hilliard made 28 straight appearances for Ohio State on defense and special teams, recording 20 tackles and cracking the rotation of linebackers.

“When I first got my injuries — every single one — it’s like, ‘Why me?’” Hilliard said. “Like, ‘What am I going to do after this, football?’ It’s like, ‘Is football even still an option for me?’ That obviously went right through my head after the injury. But just being around the team, being around the guys, those thoughts don’t last long.”

Borland has helped Hilliard keep his spirits up as he aims for a return in 2019. Both middle linebackers, Borland suffered Hilliard’s injury last March and remarkably recovered in time for the Buckeyes’ 2018 campaign. The 6-1, 232-pounder practiced during fall camp last August and returned Sept. 1 for the opener — a 77-31 win over Oregon State at Ohio Stadium.

“I’ve talked to him so much — he’s probably the first person I talked to when I tore my Achilles,” Hilliard said of Borland. “He’s like the gold standard of a guy you want to look at, as far as coming back from an Achilles. He came back from an Achilles rupture in, I think, six months — probably six-and-a-half months, between playing in games — so he’s someone I’ve definitely leaned on and kind of competing with, trying to beat his time to come back.”

Hilliard attacks his rehabilitation process the same way he approached practices and games. The mentality has helped Hilliard make optimistic strides. Three months in, he has his next big step on the horizon.

“Physically, I feel great,” Hilliard said. “I wouldn’t say back to, obviously, my playing days ... but it’s a process. I feel good.

“We’re running, jogging in water right now. Hopefully, look forward to jogging and running on land in the next couple of months.

“With an injury like this, the timeline’s so vague. If I keep progressing on the trajectory I’m on, I feel that I’ll be back, really successful.”

Hilliard completed his undergraduate degree in marketing after he graduated from the Fisher College of Business and walked May 5 at spring commencement inside Ohio Stadium.

With connections made and internships gained, the foundation has been laid out for a future in a brand development program when life after football begins.

But at the same time, he still has his eyes set on the NFL, with unfinished business left for the fall.

“You know the way we’re always competing,” Hilliard said. “Why not do it in rehab?

“That’s obviously the main driver of the injury (recovery), because I only have so much time left.

“I feel like I can contribute, hopefully, as fast as I get back. The new defense is, I think — I love the new defense. Guys are playing fast. There’s so many different variables, so many ways you can make an impact in this new defense. I think there’s a lot of ways.”

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