



Faith, family keep UT's OL in the flow

Injury jeopardized his playing career, but Hills never gave up hope

01:28 AM CDT on Monday, October 2, 2006

By CHIP BROWN / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – Teammates call Texas junior left tackle Tony Hills "Beetlejuice" because they say his head is disproportionately small compared to his hulking 6-6, 300-pound body.

So you know Hills must be confident to keep doing the things he does.

Like getting a teammate to work the hotel lobby piano on a road trip, while Hills belts out his best Luther Vandross, serenading every woman who walks by with his hand over his heart.

On the bus from the Rose Bowl back to the team hotel after last year's national title victory over USC, Hills led a freestyle rap (or flow session) that lasted the entire 40-minute ride.

"He's making up lyrics about players, coaches, everyone," right tackle Justin Blalock said. "I was laughing so hard, I was exhausted just listening to him."

Cracking a joke in the huddle to ease a tense moment or rapping and dancing in warmups, Hills is the unquestioned flow session leader for the Longhorns now that quarterback Vince Young is gone.

"VY kept us loose," Hills, 21, said. "And if you know anything about me, I talk a lot, so people are either going to have to get in and join with me or just listen to me go on forever."

Bigger than life on and off the field for as long as anyone can remember, Hills was rendered silent in the fall of 2002.

Considered the best tight end prospect in the country at Alief Elsik near Houston, Hills caught a 15-yard pass against Converse Judson in a Class 5A state semifinal game in San Antonio.

He was hit high and low by two defenders. His upper body went one direction. His left knee went the other.

"I was in shock because the doctor told me I probably wouldn't play football again and that I might not even be able to walk normally," Hills said.

Hills had a fairly routine tear of the lateral collateral ligament. But he also had sustained damage to the

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peroneal nerve, which controls the ability to lift the foot and toes. He could not flex his left foot at the ankle.

With no feeling, the foot hung at the end of his leg like a wet sock. Hills went on his official recruiting visit to Texas in a wheelchair. Because he had committed early, coach Mack Brown promised to honor his scholarship, even if Hills couldn't play.

"Tony was devastated," said Bill Barron, his high school coach. "You're a *Parade* All-American. You've been recruited by everyone. You're expected to play on Sundays, and then you're told you may not play football ever again. I think the credit probably goes to his mom for getting him through it. She is the Rock of Gibraltar."

Hills' mother, Mary Lemons, had a problem with the doctor who gave her son the initial diagnosis. A deeply religious woman, Lemons didn't feel the doctor's faith was strong enough.

After doing research on the Internet and meeting with several doctors, Lemons and Tony bonded with Dr. Bruce Moseley, an orthopedic surgeon at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

"We have the power of prayer and faith as a family," Lemons told Dr. Moseley. "So just do what you can do naturally and then let the Lord do the rest."

Moseley has been the Houston Rockets' team doctor and has worked on Hakeem Olajuwon, Clyde Drexler and Steve Francis. He also happened to be a graduate of Texas. But after one surgery, Hills still couldn't flex his left foot.

"When the nerve didn't come back and things weren't looking good, I called around to a lot of experts across the country," Moseley said. "Most said it was a bad problem and probably wouldn't come back.

"I wasn't optimistic there was anything I could do to make it better. But two things stood out. Tony was still a very positive, upbeat and enthusiastic young man, and regardless of whether he ever played football again, he was going to be successful. He and his mom also repeated over and over again that the nerve would work. I said, 'I hope so.' "

Moseley operated on Hills again a month later to remove some scar tissue. That's when the hoped-for miracle occurred. When Moseley attempted to stimulate the nerve before the surgery, he said, "It was totally dead."

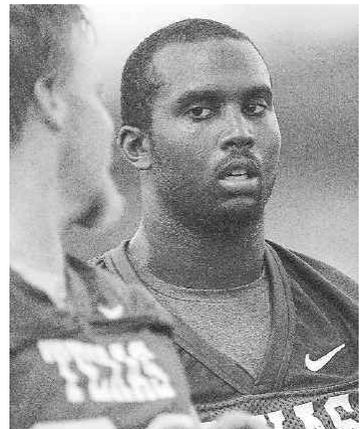
But to Moseley's surprise, he was able to stimulate the nerve during the second surgery.

"I'm a religious person myself, but as a medical person, I'm also a realist and pragmatist," Moseley said. "But once every so often, something different from the norm does occur. And given the circumstances, this was pretty miraculous.

"When I told his mom during the surgery that I thought the nerve would work again, she thanked the Lord and thanked Jesus and said she knew it."

Hills did not enroll with the rest of his recruiting class at Texas in the fall of 2003. He stayed in Houston

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Associated Press

and spent countless hours in a pool, doing water-aerobic rehabilitation and listening to his mother and 17-year-old brother, Jeremy.

"It was hard. It was very hard," Hills said. "I got a little depressed. But the thing that kept me grounded was my mom and my little brother telling me not to give up and to keep on going."

Hills enrolled at Texas in the spring of 2004. When training camp opened in the fall, he had full feeling in his left leg and wanted to show what he could do at tight end.

"That didn't last long," said offensive coordinator Greg Davis. "Tony took a couple passes that nearly broke his nose and said, 'The ball gets here a little faster than in high school.' "

Davis had thought about having Hills play offensive tackle from the time he recruited him.

"You say it if you need to. You don't if you don't," Davis said, smiling. "Situation ethics."

Hills easily bulked up and has taken off as a left tackle. Having played in an option offense in high school, Hills' run-blocking is strong, Davis said. The Longhorns are No. 14 nationally in rushing, averaging 205.2 yards per game.

Coaches say Hills' pass protection is not yet as good as his singing and freestyle rapping. But they see progress.

"I didn't even know if I'd be able to play football anymore," Hills said. "Just being able to put on a University of Texas uniform is a blessing."

E-mail chipbrown@dallasnews.com

TONY HILLS

Class: Junior

Position: Left tackle

Height, weight: 6-6, 300

High school: Alief Elsik

Notable: Replaced All-American Jonathan Scott at left tackle. "We haven't missed a beat with Tony in there," said left guard Kasey Studdard. "Tony's got long arms and good feet, and I'm making sure he has a mean streak." ... A three-year starter at tight end in Alief Elsik, he averaged 17.9 yards on 28 receptions his final two seasons.

Quotable: "We didn't know if Tony would ever play for us. What a great story to go from being in a



FILE 2005/Staff photo
Mack Brown stood by Tony Hills (79), even though a leg injury put Hills' playing career in doubt before he made it to Texas. Hills, a highly recruited tight end at Alief Elsik, was confined to a wheelchair when he made his official recruiting visit.

wheelchair for your recruiting visit and graduating from high school on crutches to where he is now. He's worked so hard." – Texas coach Mack Brown

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