



Big 12 football: Hills sets sights on next level

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In a state renowned for churning out talent, Tony Hills towered above his peers in the class of 2003.

Packing 260 pounds onto his 6-foot-6 frame, with soft hands and speed to burn, Hills was arguably the top tight end prospect in the country as a senior at Alief Elsik.

There was seemingly little he couldn't do — until a devastating knee injury in the final game of his high school career put his future at Texas in doubt before he had even enrolled.

"I heard (the ligament) snap. I understood what it was," Hills said. "I was shocked at first, then upset. I'd never been hurt like that before."

Yet if it wasn't for that very injury, Hills might never have been converted to offensive tackle, the position at which he's projected as a first-day pick in this year's NFL draft.

"It ended up being a blessing in disguise," said Hills, who is rated the 12th-best tackle prospect by NFLdraftscout.com. "I'm still young at the position. I'm excited. I can't wait to get to the next level and compete."

Hills would undoubtedly be rated higher were it not for his medical woes. In addition to his knee injury, he is recovering from a broken fibula that curtailed his senior season.

He recently shed his crutches a little more than two months after being hurt, so the leg has proven far easier to heal than his left knee, which he hurt at the Alamodome in a 2002 playoff game against Judson.

The damage required multiple surgeries and more than a year of rehabilitation. Even after he was cleared to play before the 2004 season, Hills said it took months to shake off the psychological damage.

All the while he was adjusting to a new position.

The switch from tight end to offensive tackle was necessitated by numerous factors, including a drop in foot speed and the need for depth behind All-American Jonathan Scott.

Blessed with quickness and a huge wingspan, Hills embraced the move. But it wasn't long before daily schoolings from the likes of Brian Robison and Tim Crowder made him pine for his old position.

"The run blocking was fine," said Hills, who has added more than 40 pounds since joining the Longhorns. "But I hated pass protection because I was getting killed. Nobody likes that. At that point, I was having second thoughts."

Gradually, however, Hills began to hold his own, then excel. By the end of his senior season, he had earned a spot in UT's pantheon of elite offensive tackles with his selection to the Walter Camp All-America team.

A 300-pound offensive tackle wasn't quite what the Longhorns envisioned when they recruited Hills. But in the end, they were hardly complaining.

"I've had a lot of challenges in the past five years," he said, "but it's been great. I got to play at Texas. I went to four bowl games, including the national championship.

"Now I have the chance to live a dream. I think I've had a successful career."

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