

# From running on the field, to walking off it

Nov 26, 2014 9:24 PM

SHALLOWATER — Becky Black and Jarek Black had lunch plans this fall.

Yes, there was a follow-up doctor's appointment that the former Shallowater running back had to squeeze in before his mother arrived on the West Texas A&M campus to pick him up, but it was supposed to be quick.

Black had hurt his back weight lifting — he felt a pop as he was front-squatting 385 pounds and had to drop the weight because of numbness in his legs — but was still able to walk, albeit in pain.

"He called me, and I asked, 'Are you done (at the doctor)?,'" Becky Black said. "He said, 'No, do you think you could find your way over here?'" He said, "It's not good, mom. Do you think you can come?"

She did.

And it wasn't.

"They didn't understand how I was still walking when I showed my doctor the MRI and the X-rays," Black said.

That doctor's visit was the one of several, including a meeting with a surgeon in Lubbock, that revealed two things to the Blacks: Jarek had a weak spine as a result of a birth defect and the weight lifting accident, which was a result of the defect, broke a vertebrae in his lower back and effectively ended his college football career.

As Black visited Shallowater's practice Wednesday, he was embraced by many of the current Mustangs helping Shallowater to an 11-1 record and a berth in the Class 3A regional round.

Last season, during a 13-1 year, they were merely spectators in Black's senior season in which he ran for 3,034 yards and 35 touchdowns.

"When I come to Shallowater games, it's hard being on the outside looking in," Black said. "You add the injury to that, and it makes it even more difficult. I love football period. If I had never played, I would still love football. Watching it doesn't bother me as much as being up at (West Texas A&M), where I should have been playing. That's really hard."

Wes McCutcheon joined Shallowater before the start of Black's senior season as a transfer from Plainview and although he was friends with Black from playing basketball together as children, had never played football with him.

"He was an animal," McCutcheon said. "In the weight room, on the field. I wouldn't want to tackle him. He was a beast. He was so strong and he had the body, but yet, he could move, too."

Heading into his freshman year of college, in which Black was redshirted, his most serious injury was shattering his hand during his junior year of high school.

In diagnosing his back injury, the process became a little convoluted.

"The first doctor told me, 'Take some Advil, you'll be fine,'" Black said. "And I was like, 'I can barely walk.' That's not a good answer. I'm one of those people that wants a straight answer. Don't sugar coat it. Don't lie."

It was a second opinion that revealed the injury to his back and the knowledge that playing football had compounded the damage to an already weakened spine.

“There are multiple times when I go back and I think after a hit, my back hurt,” Black said. “Oh, wow. I understand’. There was a play my sophomore year, catching a slant across the middle, I got hit and my legs went numb. It wasn’t the same as the weight lifting injury, but same area.”

West Texas A&M would not comment on Black’s status with the team, citing student privacy laws, and Black is still listed on its football roster.

He said that he has received a medical release from the team and plans to withdraw from the school after this semester and transfer to Texas Tech to study business.

Moving forward, Black has been permitted to exercise lightly to lose muscle he put on in college so he’ll be lighter for a surgery in which a rod will be fused with his spine to strengthen his back.

“I think I’m taking it harder than he is,” Becky Black said. “It’s his passion. He’s loved it for always. But, I’d rather have my son walk. Walking is more important. I want him on the ground Christmas Eve putting together train sets. And I want him carrying his kids down Carlsbad Caverns on his shoulders. That’s more important to me. His nerve surgeon told him he never should have played a down of football. Ever. He played 13 years of it. One significant injury? We’re blessed.”

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