

Once a prisoner in his own bed, Packers tackle  
**CHAD CLIFTON** has made remarkable progress  
 in his recovery from a career-threatening  
 injury and is focused on becoming  
 the player he used to be

BY TOM SILVERSTEIN

# and running

Six months ago, Chad Clifton lay on a table with a 5½-ounce hockey puck on his navel and had barely enough strength to lift his midsection an inch. The thought of being able to run a simple straight line wasn't even on his radar.

So when the Packers' left tackle recently walked down to one of the team's practice fields with assistant conditioning coach Mark Lovat and ran some sprints, it was a significant day in his long journey back to being whole again.

Not only was Clifton on even ground with Mark Tauscher, the other half of the team's rehabbing tackles, he was doing something that football players do. It was a moment of rebirth for someone who had suffered a career-threatening pelvic injury.

Typically reserved and soft-spoken, Clifton bubbled inside, much like Tauscher did six weeks earlier when he ran his first sprint after seven months of rehabilitation from a torn ACL. "I don't think we're that excited about running," Clifton says. "We're excited about being able to run."

Some wondered if Clifton would run the same again after a devastating block by Buccaneers defensive tackle Warren Sapp drove him into the turf at Tampa's Raymond James Stadium last November 24. The force of the collision was so fierce that when Clifton landed he ruptured the muscles and ligaments that surround the front of the pelvic ring and affect almost all of the vital core muscles in an athlete's body.

For almost a month after the injury, Clifton was a prisoner in his own bed, able to get up only with the assistance of his wife, Candy, and an overhead sling that he could grab. His first steps were made with the aid of a walker and ones after that with crutches.

He had to re-train his middle body muscles to accomplish the simplest of tasks, starting with lifting that hockey puck on his belly. The journey was slow and

painful, interrupted twice when Clifton had unrelated minor surgeries on his right knee and right elbow.

"To get him from that to squatting, which is where he's at now, it's amazing to see," Lovat says. "You have a guy with an injury like that and you're starting from scratch. Little by little, step by step, that's what it's about—progression."

Save for a couple of weeks he needed to recover from the surgeries, Clifton has been at it five days a week for five months. He advanced from simple stomach movements to leg and groin stretches, one-legged squats, lunges and myriad exercises aimed at strengthening the middle of his body.

Tauscher has been Clifton's workout partner throughout most of the rehab. One day a week, Lovat takes them into one of the team's racquetball courts and puts them through a grueling set of exercises designed to emphasize movement. The pace is fast, and the workouts change every week.

As tough as the sessions are, Clifton doesn't miss any because he knows he's on track to return for the start of training camp in mid-July. He probably won't take part in two-a-days right away, and he might not play in the early preseason games. But he intends to be on the field for the start of the regular season September 7.

In the dark recesses of his mind, where players facing career-threatening injuries travel when they need to go an extra mile on the exercise bike or do an extra rep at the squat rack, Clifton might see Sapp running in front of him, vulnerable and unprotected—just like Clifton was that afternoon last November.

But chances are Clifton won't seek out Sapp any more than he will Simeon Rice or Anthony McFarland when the Packers and Buccaneers play again November 16 in Tampa.

If Clifton had his way, he would return to the rather

anonymous existence he enjoyed despite being the Packers' best left tackle in nearly a decade. He no longer would be the poster child for what can happen when you turn your back on Sapp.

"He's put that way behind him," Packers guard Marco Rivera says of any bitterness Clifton might harbor toward Sapp. "He doesn't even talk about it. He accepts the fact that he got hurt. He's turned the page now. He's not even worried about that anymore."

But as he lay on the ground, Clifton had no idea whether he'd be ready for training camp this year, or any year.

"That was the most intense pain I've ever felt," Clifton says. "It lasted a good two to three weeks of real intensity, lying in a bed, not really being able to move. That was rough."

Everybody saw the hit—a full-force, blind-side shot from the 303-pound Sapp—but few knew the severity of the injury Clifton suffered.

The force of the collision coupled with the force in which Clifton landed on his back resulted in a rupture of the pubic symphysis, a collection of ligaments and muscle that support the pelvic ring in the front. Clifton was lucky that the separation he suffered was only three centimeters wide; had it been much more, he would have suffered significant damage in the back of the pelvis as well and faced a much bleaker future.

"Typically, you see this type of injury in high-velocity car wrecks, motorcycle accidents and snowmobile accidents," says Dr. Greg Schmeling, associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the Medical College of Wisconsin. "I've been in practice since 1990, and I've never seen an athlete with this injury."

Clifton's injury resulted in a massive amount of blood collecting in his groin and complications that forced him to be hospitalized for three days in Tampa. During that time, he never received a visit, a call or even a card from Sapp. Clifton figured it was part of the athletic code that when one player injures another, he at least calls to see how the other is doing.



Clifton has regained most of the strength in his midsection.

## Brothers in rehab

When Chad Clifton suffered a severe pelvic injury last November 24 that confined him to bed for more than a month, he was lucky to have Mark Tauscher, his teammate and best friend, to help him through the rough patches. Tauscher, who had blown out his left knee 10 weeks earlier, had nothing but time to devote to his buddy.

When the rest of the Packers offensive linemen were in meetings or at practice or on the road for a game, Tauscher stopped by Clifton's house with bags of fast food and enough conversation to keep both sane.

"I understood what he was going through," Tauscher says. "Just so his wife could get out of the house, I'd go over there and stay for a couple hours. I said to his wife, 'You're a saint for doing this,' and she said, 'Well, I'll either be a saint or a murderer.'"

Once Clifton was back on his feet, the two players were able to train together. They are a long way removed from those painful early days of rehab, but their work isn't close to being done. The plan is to have them ready for training camp, whether it's the first week or the fourth week.

"If we have to wait a little bit, we have to wait a little bit," offensive line coach Larry Beightol says. "But we'd like to have them back because I think it's important for the rest of the guys, too, for the rest of the team's confidence to see them out there." —T.S.

Somebody would have been injured in Green Bay hospital for three days, I definitely would have seen and checked on him," Clifton says. "Not necessarily say, 'I'm sorry, I apologize' because it was a mistake. But just to say, 'I'm keeping you in my prayers. I hope you have a speedy recovery.' That type of thing."

Most conciliatory Sapp has been was in a recent interview when he said that he hoped Clifton's rehabilitation was going well and that he was looking forward to facing him next season.

Though he regarded the block as "unnecessary," Clifton insists that he holds no bitterness toward Sapp. When Sapp hit him, Clifton was trailing well in the pursuit of cornerback Brian Kelly, who had intercepted Brett Favre's pass and was heading for the end zone.

It came neither after the whistle nor outside the law as far as the NFL is concerned. Clifton was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

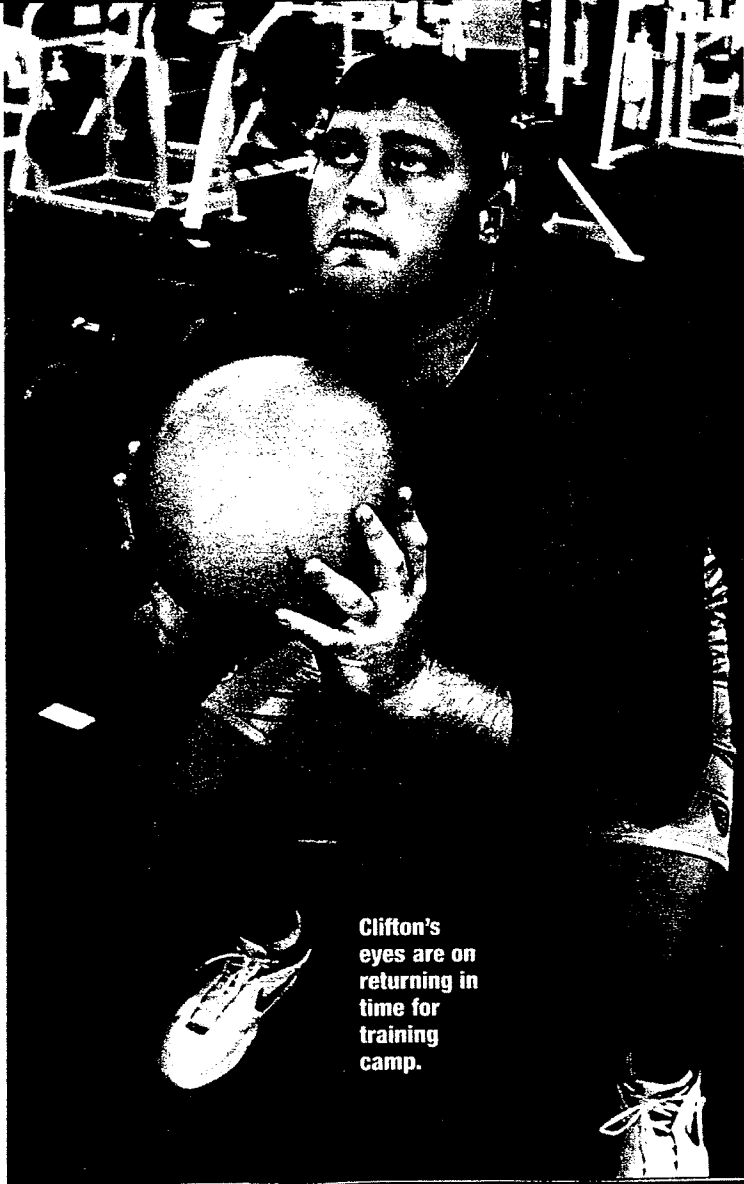
During the month or so he spent at home, Clifton spent a lot of time to think about his career. After the Packers' starting left tackle seven games in the 2000 season, his rookie year, and in 37 regular-season games he has allowed just six sacks.

Now that he's closer to being a complete football player again, he is focusing on becoming the performer he was seven months ago. There are hurdles to overcome, but he has an idea when he'll know he's back.

"The first one, it will probably be the pass set, being able to get off," Clifton says. "Going straight ahead, I'll be fine. I feel like I'll be able to come back and get a full recovery. I just (want to) go out there and play and play well."

What he wants is to be that will make other people forget what happened to him already has put behind him. Maybe that's all Clifton needs.

TSM



Clifton's eyes are on returning in time for training camp.

MIKE ROEMER / AP (2)

<sup>1</sup> Silverstein covers the Packers for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Up and Running

1. Who hit Chad Clifton when he was injured?
2. What part of his body was injured?
3. Chad's goals is to be on the field for the start of the regular season?
4. Warren Sapp visited Chad at the hospital? T or F
5. Who was Chad's doctor?
6. What year was Chad drafted into the NFL?
7. How long was Chad confined to bed after the injury?
8. What player is helping Chad rehab?
9. Who is offensive line coach of Green Bay?
10. Does Chad hold bitterness toward Asp for the hit he put on him?