

# Everett valiantly returns to playing grounds

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. (AP) - For a few fleeting moments it seemed like nothing had changed in Kevin Everett's life.

The 25-year-old tight end walked through the Buffalo Bills locker room on Sunday, greeting his teammates one by one, and made them all smile.

"He gave me a big hug," said receiver Roscoe Parrish, who played with Everett in college at Miami. "Seeing how strong he is and where he's at. It was a good feeling."

Added wideout Lee Evans: "It was a tremendous sight to see him for the first time just up walking around with a smile on his face, like he was here before. That certainly, I think, touched everybody's heart before the game. It's something that I don't think I'll ever forget."

Neither will any of his teammates. Everett's triumphant return to Ralph Wilson Stadium came less than four months after he sustained a severe spinal cord injury there in the season-opener against Denver.

"I couldn't stop looking at him. I was speechless, on the verge of tears," rookie quarterback Trent Edwards said. "He got out of his wheelchair and had a smile on his face. I remember the last time I saw him; he was out here on the field with his head down getting in an ambulance, and we were all gathering around saying a prayer for him."

Everett's appearance marked the latest step in a remarkable recovery. Doctors initially feared he would never walk again after what was described as a life-threatening injury suffered while making a tackle on Domenik Hixon on the second-half kickoff Sept. 9.

Everett's helmet struck Hixon's helmet and shoulder pad, and Everett immediately collapsed face-down on the turf, remaining motionless for several minutes while medical personnel worked furiously to ascertain what was wrong.

Everett was paralyzed from the neck down when he arrived at Buffalo's Millard Fillmore Gates Hospital and spent the first few days on life support. He underwent four hours of surgery as a team of doctors realigned his neck and stabilized it with screws, rods and a titanium plate.

The prognosis was far more positive a few days



Buffalo Bills' player Kevin Everett, left, is driven in a cart by an unidentified person, right, in the stadium tunnel before the NFL football game against the New York Giants at Ralph Wilson Stadium in Orchard Park, N.Y., on Sunday.

later when Everett showed movement in his legs and arms and was sensitive to touch. He improved so steadily during the first two weeks he was transferred to Houston for the next stage of rehab.

Bills punter Brian Moorman learned after practice just over two weeks ago that Everett was walking again, and actually seeing him in person was that much more reassuring.

Everett addressed his teammates about two hours before their afternoon game against the New York Giants, going locker to locker to begin an emotional day along the blustery southern shore of Lake Erie.

"If you look at it, it's really a walking miracle because he was so close to not walking again or not even making it," Bills safety Donte Whitner said. "And now he's walking a couple of months later. That's a miracle in itself when doctors were saying, 'We don't know if Kevin's going to do this.'"

After meeting with his teammates, Everett left the locker room in a wheelchair and, on his own power, climbed into a covered electric car. He was driven to team owner Ralph Wilson's suite at midfield.

When he arrived at the suite, Everett was immediately recognized by fans and concession workers, who began applauding as he exited the vehicle. Everett smiled and waved but didn't say anything.

That Everett's improbable return came just two days before Christmas made the moment even more poignant.

"I think it's wonderful," said Holly Lopez of Orchard Park, who volunteers with her husband Richard in concessions for St. Bernadette's Church. "I'm amazed."

Everett, accompanied by family and friends, parked at

one end of the box's front row and watched the pre-game festivities from a wheelchair, acknowledging fans with a wave.

A smile creased Everett's face when Rick Rosenswie of nearby Olean walked past and gave him a thumbs-up before taking his seat overlooking the 20-yard line at the west end of the field.

"Everybody wants to see him and welcome him back. It's absolutely amazing that he's back. Anybody that's ever played knows injuries like that are catastrophic,"

said Rosenswie, who played offensive line in college at St. Leo's in the 1970s. "We saw him go down. We heard the hit from up here."

Everett, who hasn't spoken publicly except through news releases and in a videotaped statement that was broadcast before Buffalo's home game against New England on Nov. 18, was not available for interviews and did not go on the field to address the fans during halftime because of inclement weather.

Ironically, the 23-year-old

Hixon was waived by the Broncos after three games and later signed with the Giants. He played primarily on special teams Sunday against the Bills, then met with Everett after the game.

"It's a blessing," said Hixon, who admitted to being edgy about returning to the scene where Everett's football career ended in the blink of an eye. "I just want him to make a 100 percent recovery. I'm going to continue praying for him, and he's going to make it back 100 percent."

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