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After undergoing surgery, Damone Clark is content to wait for chance to shine with Cowboys

Clark suffered a similar injury to Leighton Vander Esch but doesn't have a timetable for his return.





Dallas Cowboys linebacker (53) Damone Clark during a Cowboys rookie minicamp at The Star in Frisco, Texas on Friday, May 13, 2022. Clark underwent spinal fusion surgery and will start the season on the injured list. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

By [David Moore](#)

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FRISCO — Damone Clark was at the combine in Indianapolis when he got a call to return to the medical area.

Clark wasn't concerned. The LSU linebacker felt great. He just figured they were going to tell him he was cleared to take part in all the sessions.

He got a much different message. Clark was told an MRI revealed a herniated disc that would require surgery.

“I was shocked,” Clark said. “I was like ‘whoa, maybe you all got the wrong person.’”

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They didn't. An athlete who never missed a game in his football career, a player projected to go in the second or third round, was suddenly dealing with a much different reality.

Clark spoke about that day and the ensuing weeks after the second day of the Cowboys rookie orientation at The Star. [Dallas took Clark in the fifth round](#) of the April draft and is content to wait for his contribution. The path traveled by Cowboys linebacker Leighton Vander Esch gives the club, and Clark, confidence that he'll return.



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“That’s what made me even more comfortable is because I know Leighton had the same injury and Leighton is back on the field playing, and still playing at a really high level,” Clark said. “My confidence level is just so high.

“If you have someone like Leighton who had the same, exact injury and he’s back on the field, why wouldn’t I be back on the field, too?”

The injury isn’t identical to Vander Esch, who missed 13 games over the course of two seasons, but it’s comparable.

Both men underwent what is called an anterior cervical discectomy and fusion (ACDF). The only difference is the level of the herniated disc on the spine where the surgery took place.

Vander Esch had the surgery after the 2019 season. He played in 10 games the next season — missing six games after breaking his clavicle in the opener — before returning to play a full, 17-game this past season.

Clark deflects attempts to place a timetable on his return, saying it doesn’t make sense to “think too far down the line.” Club officials haven’t ruled out that he could be activated before the regular season is done.

But it will proceed with caution.

“I understand the excitement and all of that, but I think learning from Leighton’s situation, there’s a timeline,” head coach Mike McCarthy said. “He won’t play too early, I’ll say that.

“Dealing with rehab and the recovery, it just doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to try to go too fast. He’ll be getting plenty of time to heal.”

Doctors and surgeons from around the NFL are invited to the combine to offer opinions in their specialties. Dr. Andrew Clavenna, one of the Cowboys team physicians, was one of three spine specialists asked to participate in February.

Clavenna discovered Clark's condition. That meant the Cowboys were responsible for letting the LSU defender know what he faced.

"My family is big on faith and big on Christ," Clark said. "Everything happens for a reason.

"When I found out I was shocked, but I couldn't even cry. I couldn't even be mad about it because I know everything happens for a reason.

"I'm happy they did find it."

The next step was a second opinion. That came from Dr. Robert Watkins, the son of renowned spine surgeon Bob Watkins.

Bob Watkins was the doctor who operated on Hall of Fame quarterback Troy Aikman during his Cowboys career.

Robert Watkins was also one of the specialists invited to Indianapolis by the NFL. He concurred with Clavenna's findings and performed the surgery on Clark a few weeks later.

The fact it was a member of the Cowboys medial staff that first recognized the condition convinces Clark this is where he's meant to begin his professional career. He has complete trust that the organization has his best interests at heart.

"I know they won't put me in harm's way," he said. "Whenever they tell me I can go and if I feel good, I can go."

Clark doesn't view this as being dealt a blow. He believes having this surgery now extends his career rather than shortening it.

There's no sense of frustration.

“Nah, I mean, everything happens for a reason in life,” Clark said. “I’m not mad about it. I’m just happy they found it and Dallas still picked me.

“I’m happy to be here.”

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