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Marlins' Willingham has herniated disk

It could be another month or more before left fielder Josh Willingham is back on the field. Willingham, who has been on the disabled list since May 2 because of a strained lower back, traveled to Los Angeles on Sunday to see renowned orthopedic surgeon Robert Watkins, who specializes in spinal surgery.

"He's the Dr. James Andrews of backs," said Willingham, who had a magnetic resonance imaging test Monday. "He told me it was a herniated disk, which is the same problem I have had [since last year]."

"But I felt better seeing him. He has a core program of measuring strength, and I am at Level 1. I won't resume baseball activity until I reach Level 5 of his core program."

Willingham said Watkins "did not rule out surgery" but said that option would be a last resort.

"My back has been feeling better the last three days," Willingham said. "But I have to build the strength back up."

PRESSURE? WHAT PRESSURE?

Hanley Ramirez, who has seen his batting average drop 26 points in the previous nine games, doesn't believe his new contract, or hitting third in the order, has added any pressure.

Kansas City Royals manager Trey Hillman said Sunday that he thought Ramirez was pressing a bit.

"I think he's putting a lot of pressure on himself right now," Hillman said.

When Ramirez was told of Hillman's remarks, he said, "I'm going to go home and get a dictionary, because I don't know what that word is."

Ramirez also was asked if he thought the Marlins, who had lost five of six games before Tuesday, were under pressure.

"Yeah, we're under a lot of pressure," Ramirez said in a sarcastic response. "We don't get pressure. That's why we are in first place."

Ramirez remained in the third spot in the batting order, where his numbers have slipped since he left the leadoff spot. Entering Tuesday's game, he had driven in only four runs in 52 at-bats. Marlins manager Fredi Gonzalez didn't rule out a change.

"I think what's best for the club right now is him to hit third, and we'll see what happens four or five days from now," Gonzalez said.

"Nothing is written in stone."

-- MIKE PHILLIPS

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