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After severely injuring his knee 2 1/2 years ago, former Christian Brothers star Albert Hollis is participating in workouts for the University of Georgia football team and running track.

OVER

SHREDDED DREAMS

When Albert Hollis, a Sacramento high school football sensation, tore up his knee at the University of Georgia, he never imagined his comeback plans would be so painful

"There are times when I think, 'I don't feel like doing this,' I just wish I could wake up the next morning and be healed."

Albert Hollis

By Paul Newberry
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATHENS, Ga. - Everyone loved to watch Albert Hollis run. There was hardly a more breathtaking sight on the football field.

He'd burst through an opening in the line, reach top speed after a few elegant strides and pull farther and farther away, leaving others in futile pursuit.

"There were games where I literally stopped coaching," remembered Greg Meegan, Hollis' coach at Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento. "I'd say, 'I have to enjoy this. It might never happen again.'"

Sadly, Meegan didn't know how prescient that statement would be. More than three years after coming to the University of Georgia - which expected him to follow in the footsteps of Herschel Walker, Garrison Hearst and all those great Bulldogs tailbacks - Hollis is still waiting to run in a college game.

Two grotesque scars curve along the outside of Hollis' right knee, the result of a devastating injury that occurred before he took a snap and lingers to this day.

Hollis had every reason to give up. Nerve damage made it difficult to flex his foot. One season passed, then another, with little hope that he'd ever return to full speed.

No one would've blamed him for packing his bags and returning to Sacramento - where he gained football fame as a two-time All-City selection and capped his senior year as a member of the USA Today and Parade

The glory days...



Sacramento Bee file, 1994 and P. O'Neil

magazine All-American teams.

"There are times when I think, 'I don't feel like doing this,'" he said. "I just wish I could wake up the next morning and be healed."

But those moments of self-pity are rare as Hollis keeps pushing himself. He works out, attends team meetings and has improved enough to participate in most drills at prac-

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As a senior at Christian Brothers High School, Albert Hollis rushed for 2,053 yards and 31 scores, averaging 8.9 yards per carry.

Hollis: Injury slows college career

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tice, although he wears a green jersey that signifies he's not ready for full contact.

Hollis is hopeful of playing by midseason. No matter the timeframe, he's convinced his comeback will be successful.

"The more I do, the better it gets," he said. "More and more, I can see it coming back, although I've still got a little ways to go."

Hollis has already come so far since March 23, 2001.

After redshirting in his first season at Georgia, having been slowed by a hamstring injury suffered in the 100-meter finals at the 2000 CIF Track and Field Championships, Hollis reported to his first spring practice. At 5-foot-11 and a shade under 200 pounds, he was eager to show off his speed and find a place in the Bulldogs' running game.

Georgia already had Musa Smith, a bigger back who was part of Hollis' recruiting class. Smith had shown promise as a freshman running between the tackles. Naturally, the coaches were looking forward to teaming up these contrasting backs.

"Musa was a rugged, downhill runner," said Rodney Garner, Georgia's recruiting coordinator. "Albert was more of a perimeter, get-on-the-edge speed guy who could take it to the house. They were both very intriguing. We thought they would be very complementary of each other."

Then it happened.
On the second day of practice, Hollis took the ball and headed outside on a routine sweep. As he made the cut upfield, his right leg collapsed beneath him. He wasn't even touched.

"I didn't see when he cut, but I saw him laying there," said former Georgia wide receiver Terrence Edwards, now with the Atlanta Falcons. "It was ugly."

Not only was his knee ripped to shreds, Hollis also damaged the nerves that control the foot. This wasn't an ordinary injury. When Edwards' brother, Robert, did much the same thing to his knee, doctors actually considered amputation as an option.

Hollis was a bit luckier - Edwards also damaged some arteries - but the prospect of a long, grueling comeback was the same for both.

"I didn't know much about the injury," Hollis said. "They

didn't tell me I messed up the nerves until later."

At least he had Edwards as a guidepost. The former Georgia star missed three full seasons after his injury, finally returning to the NFL with the Miami Dolphins in 2002.

"I like to see how he's doing," Hollis said. "We'll get together from time to time, kind of compare notes. I'll ask, 'Where were you at after this amount of time?' It helps a lot. You know you're not in it alone. Somebody had the same injury and came back from it."

Hollis also has a good attitude.

"You can't say enough about how mentally tough he is and how hard he works," Georgia coach Mark Richt said. "The good thing is he's getting better and better. It's not like he's been stuck for six months with no progress. It's been a gradual process. That helps him to stay focused and motivated."

Hollis already returned to the Georgia track team in a limited role this season, running on the 400-meter relay team.

"With my foot, it's hard to push off," he said. "But when I'm up and running, I can run with anybody. It's just those first couple of steps that are shaky."

Meegan isn't surprised by his former player's perseverance. It sounds just like that little fifth-grader who mailed the coach his class picture.

"I'd never met this kid before in my life," Meegan said. "But he tells me he's going to come to Christian Brothers and be the best football player Christian Brothers ever had. I've still got that picture. He's in a little blue sweater. Just a typical little kid."

But not the typical athlete.
"When he showed up the first time, here's this 14-year-old in a man's body," Meegan said. "He was a pretty impressive physical specimen. For lack of a better phrase, he was a speed machine."

As a junior at CBS, Hollis rushed for 2,224 yards and 28 touchdowns. As a senior, he ran for 2,053 yards and 31 touchdowns, averaging 8.9 yards every time he touched the ball.

When Meegan traded film with opposing schools, especially those out of state, he always pointed out that Christian Brothers was then playing in D-I,

California's top classification.

"With Albert, it looked like we were playing junior high teams," the coach said. "Often times, he would be the only guy on camera, he was so far away from the competition."

Hollis was also one of the nation's top high school sprinters, earning The Bee's Performer of the Year honors as a senior.

After easily winning Sacramento Section titles in the 100 and 200 meters, Hollis was expected to become the first Sacramento-area athlete to win both titles at the state meet. But Hollis pulled up lame in the 100 finals because of a torn hamstring 20 meters from the finish line. He didn't compete in the 200 finals.

Hollis ranked eighth nationally in the 100 with an official best of 10.43 seconds, and he was even quicker in some wind-aided meets. Hollis' best time in the 200 (21.06) was the sixth-fastest in the country.

All the top schools recruited Hollis, who narrowed his choices to Texas, Nebraska, Notre Dame, UCLA and Georgia.

The Bulldogs, who have always done most of their recruiting within the state, didn't pursue Hollis at first. But Meegan, who had coached in Atlanta in the early 1980s while Walker was at Georgia, knew the school had a reputation for producing top running backs. He sent some film to Garner, who was immediately impressed.

"The one thing that stood out on film was pure speed," Garner recalled. "All I knew was he could go from point A to point B very fast. There are other intangibles that go along with it, but we thought he had a chance to be a very good player."

Hollis was actually rated higher than Smith by most recruiting services, but the other freshman wound up winning the job. Last season, Smith rushed for more than 1,300 yards, helping Georgia win its first Southeastern Conference title in 20 years and was named the Sugar Bowl's Most Valuable Player.

Smith gave up his final year of eligibility to enter the NFL draft and was a third-round pick of the Baltimore Ravens.

"I'm happy for him," Hollis said. "Everything happens for a reason. I'm sure something positive has got to come from this."

• Notre Dame coach **Charlie Weis** didn't just stop by Nevada Union to scout the football talent last week. He also appeared at Natomas to look up Zach Nelson, a 6-foot-6, 230-pound linebacker/tight end with skills. Notre Dame usually checks this region for tailbacks, but about only once a generation. The Irish courted Cordova's Kevin Willhite in 1981 and Albert Hollis of Christian Brothers in 1999. Willhite eventually chose Oregon, and Hollis went to Georgia, where a knee injury stalled him, though he graduated last spring.

Willie Clark of Wheatland - the state record holder for yards per carry in the late 1980s - had a scholarship to Notre Dame, where he played in the secondary.



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