

## INSIDER MICHAEL BRADLEY



Sorry, Donovan, but you won't be feeling better anytime soon.

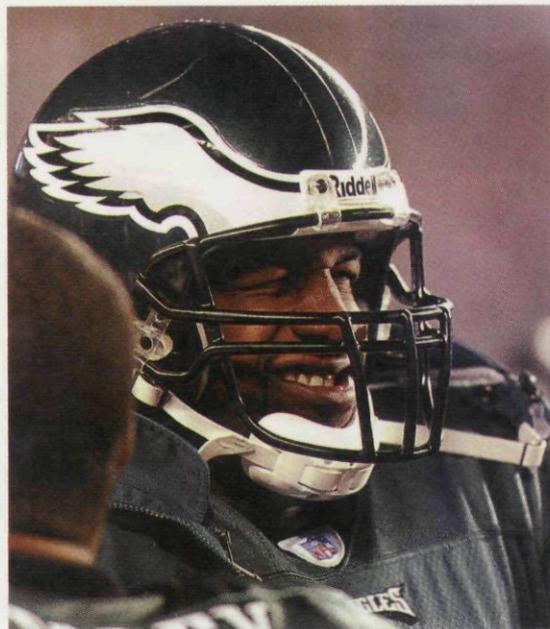
## A sports hernia is a major pain, and it only gets

**M**att Birk no doubt is polite when he encounters fans who wonder why he's on injured reserve for the 2005 season because of lingering repercussions from his sports hernias. After all, they were up and around just a week after their hernias—note the absence of the word *sports*—were repaired.

"I want to ask them, 'What do you do for a living, sell insurance?'" Birk says, laughing.

Instead, the Vikings' Pro Bowl center smiles and heads back to rehab the torn left hip labrum on which he had surgery in the summer. He also is working on the right hip labrum, which was repaired in May. And on the sports hernias that plagued him last season and required three operations. That's five surgeries, all because of an injury that largely was absent from the sporting vernacular until it was revealed last month that Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb has one.

Everybody knows about torn knee ligaments and rotator cuffs. But the sports hernia, or *athletic pubalgia*, as it is known clinically, is far less understood than it is widespread. And it's painful. "It's no joke," Birk says. "It's at your core, your power source. Everything comes from the center. If something's wrong there, you can't do anything."



Better get used to seeing this look on McNabb's face. His injury won't heal without surgery.

RUSTY KENNEDY / AP

Actually, "sports *hernia*" is a bit of a misnomer. With a typical hernia, there is a bulge resulting from the protrusion of an internal organ. But a sports hernia involves a partial or complete tear of muscle from the pubic bone.

The two pubic bones are the hub of a network of muscles, tendons and tissues at the base of the pelvis. They have important roles in daily life, aiding in bending and twisting. The fusion of the two bones is a joint that "forms a fulcrum around which everything rotates," says Dr. William Meyers, chief of surgery at Drexel University and one of the nation's foremost experts on sports hernias. He's the physician treating McNabb.

When a tear occurs, there is considerable pain and a limitation of mobility and flexibility. As a result, the body begins to protect itself. Other muscles tighten, the better to assume the burden. That's why Birk's labrums tore. "You get pain from the injury itself and pain in other locations as the body tries to compensate," Meyers says. How much pain? That depends on the extent of the injury. Former NFL lineman Brian Baldinger suffered a full tear in the mid-1990s. "The pain is like a serrated knife going up through the pubic bone and into the lower stomach," he says. Ouch.

The onset isn't nearly that painful. When Birk was first injured, during training camp in 2004, he had trouble exploding out of his stance after the snap. He was diagnosed with a sports hernia and underwent surgery. A mesh screen was attached to the muscle and bone to help bond the areas together. He returned to action at the start of the season but started noticing similar pain on the other side and tried to play through it, with mixed results.

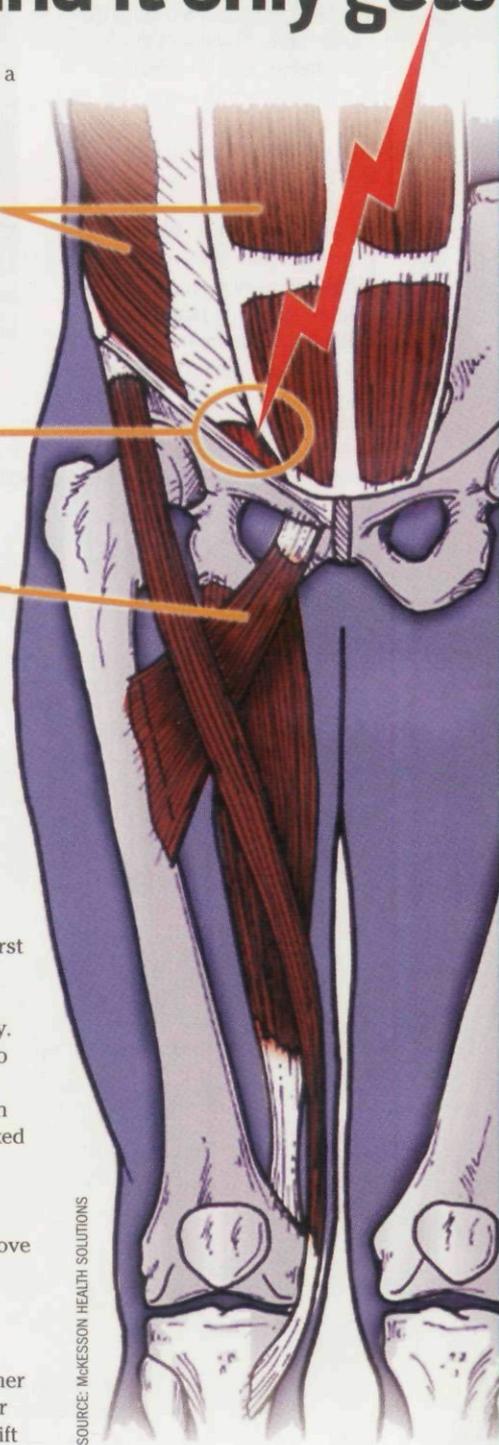
"When you snap the ball, you have to roll your hips and push against the guy in front of you," he says. "I couldn't do that. I didn't have any pop and couldn't move laterally."

Eventually, Birk had surgery on the other side and missed four games. But that didn't solve the problem. When the season ended, he had another operation to repair both sides. Then came the labrum repairs. Former Vikings running back Robert Smith experienced similar misery in 1999 before undergoing surgery. "I couldn't lift

Abdominal muscles

Injured tissue (sports hernia)

Hip flexor muscle



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# INSIDE DISH

by Dan Pompei

## WORSE

my legs to full height or get into full stride," he says. "It would start to pull and be extremely painful."

What does all this mean for McNabb? Meyers won't discuss McNabb's situation, but it's apparent that his tear is not complete because he continues to function at a high level. But the injury could get worse, like a rope that frays until it breaks. Rest, however, is not an option. "Resting gives you a lack of tone in other muscles, which you need to compensate for the injury," he says.

Ultimately, McNabb's injury will require surgery. Meyers, who uses a series of precise sutures rather than the mesh, insists that the outcome will be positive, no matter the degree of the injury. But surgery by Meyers likely would keep McNabb out at least six weeks, so he'll try to tough it out. He may take anti-inflammatory IVs or some pain blocks, as others have. But they help only with the pain, not the stability of the muscle.

This is not a doomsday prophecy, but McNabb's sports hernia likely will get worse. "It takes a toll, physically, mentally and emotionally," Birk says. "It beats you down."

That makes it hard to do anything—even sell insurance.

TSN

## speedreads

Vinny Testaverde is about five years away from getting revved up about early-bird dinner specials, and he leads the Jets past the Bucs. That 4-0 start was nice, but real contenders must beat teams with 60-year-old quarterbacks.

That's five games and five teams held to 10 points or fewer by the Colts. It doesn't matter if the 49ers would struggle to contend in the SEC; limiting an NFL club to 177 yards of offense is impressive. Keep it up, Indy, and you won't have to worry about playoff snow in January.

Lions fans shouldn't start saving up to buy playoff tickets, no matter how bad the NFC North is. Detroit's win over the Ravens came courtesy of Baltimore's inept play (21 penalties), which allowed the Lions to overcome another poor performance by Joey Harrington (10-for-23, 97 yards, two interceptions).

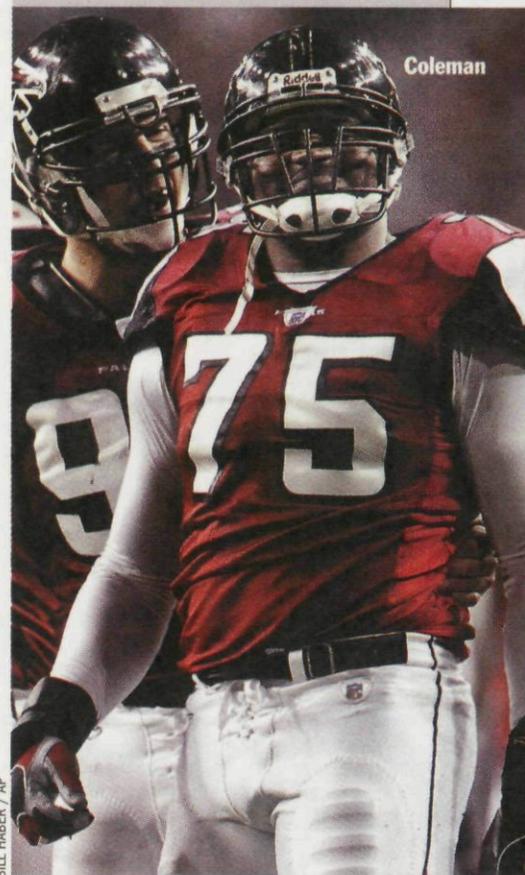
Yes, it was a very rough start for rookie Alex Smith. But if 49ers coach Mike Nolan is patient, such experiences could be a steppingstone in Smith's long-term development. That seemed to be the case for Peyton Manning after some tough moments early in his rookie year, and little brother Eli looks OK after making seven mostly rough starts as a rookie.

**Charles Woodson** could have a future at safety. Woodson's playing time has been divided almost equally at three positions this season: safety, outside corner and slot corner. Woodson has tackled well in recent years—that has always been his top

skill—but he has had some coverage problems. The onetime Heisman winner has the size (6-1, 200) and temperament to make the position switch, and his versatility would be valued if he were a full-time safety. His contract is up after this season, so other teams will be evaluating him at both positions. ➤ **Chargers LG Tonlu Fonoti** developed into a dominating run blocker last season, but his days as a starter may be over in San Diego. Fonoti originally decided to play with a broken hand in Week 2, but after he was replaced during the fourth quarter of that game because of missed assignments and a lack of intensity, he elected to have surgery on his hand. He missed the next two games, then had further surgery last week and could miss at least two more. Fonoti has been replaced in the lineup by **Kris Dielman**, who has impressed coaches and teammates with his accountability. The Chargers took a chance on Dielman as an undrafted free agent three years ago at the urging of offensive coordinator **Cam Cameron**, who coached Dielman at Indiana. Now it looks like they found themselves a starter. ➤ Two recent Saints first-round picks who were drafted as juniors finally might be starting to get it. **WR Donte' Stallworth** still drops too many passes, but he

stepped up recently when **Joe Horn** was injured. Stallworth runs with power and is the fastest player on the team, and for the first time in his career, he isn't bothered by nagging injuries. The Saints won't be surprised if he becomes the team's lead dog at receiver this season. And DT **Johnathan Sullivan** could become a starter soon. As the third tackle, he is coming off the ball well and playing effectively. Sullivan dropped 45 pounds—to 310—so he has more energy. The Saints

Falcons DT **Rod Coleman** is tearing up interior lines this season. One reason: Coleman has been fresher. Because of the emergence of second-round pick **Jonathan Babineaux**, the Falcons have been able to cut Coleman's plays to about 40 a game, so all of his snaps are quality snaps. Coleman also has reached a comfort zone in his second year in the Falcons' scheme.



Coleman

BILL HABER / AP

still can't be sure Sullivan will maintain his consistency throughout the season. ➤ That groan you heard last week was the collective response of NFL teams to commissioner **Paul Tagliabue's** declaration that he wants an annual game on foreign soil. There are two big problems with this. First, any trip overseas takes a heavy toll on the participants. Going to Europe or Asia isn't practical in the middle of a 17-week grind. Games in Canada or Mexico are more palatable. Second, almost all teams have leases with their stadiums that specify they must play a minimum of 10 home games. Breaking those leases could be cost-prohibitive. Most teams have no interest in giving up a home date for a game in which they are aliens as well as visitors.

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