

## James Conner takes first practice snaps in Pitt return

By John Dudley

Posted Aug 9, 2016 at 2:00 AM

Updated Aug 9, 2016 at 3:03 PM

PITTSBURGH -- An air horn's blast signaled a change of periods Monday, sending players scrambling from one spot to another on Pitt's practice field.

A few seconds later, redshirt junior running back James Conner was back in a familiar spot, dotting the 'I' at the tailback position in the Panthers' offensive backfield behind quarterback Nathan Peterman and a gargantuan offensive line.

After several passing plays, Conner took a handoff, made a cut and burst into the clear.

There were no defenders, and the Panthers wore helmets and shorts. But that didn't detract from the moment for Conner. Monday morning's 2½ hours at UPMC Sports Performance Complex represented his first meaningful steps on a football field in nearly a year -- before he blew out his knee, ending his 2015 season, and before the cancer diagnosis that, for a time, clouded his future.

"Waking up (Monday morning), I was real excited," Conner said afterward. "I knew it was going to be a great day."

The past 11-plus months have been a whirlwind for the former McDowell star, who suffered the first major injury of his career in last year's season opener. Then came a battle against Hodgkin lymphoma that landed him on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" and saw him write an intensely personal account of his chemotherapy treatments for an article appearing in "The Players' Tribune" in July.

On Monday, he was finally back home, where he feels most comfortable, most secure, most in control.

"It's easy when we're here to stay focused and locked in," he said, gesturing to the manicured grass field in front of him. "When we're here, it's all football."

Conner's workload will increase as Pitt moves through camp, and the first hits are still to come. But he called his surgically-repaired right knee "great," and added he has been given no limitations by medical staff as a result of either the surgery or the chemotherapy.

He said his conditioning is good, and he provided a nimble response to a question about whether it's fair to expect him to be at his 2014 level -- when he was named ACC Offensive Player of the Year after rushing for 1,765 yards and 26 touchdowns -- by the time Pitt opens its season Sept. 3 at Heinz Field.

"We've got 20-some days until the season starts," Conner said. "And I'm going to use all 20 days to get prepared for it."

His return dominated the morning, which kicked off head coach Pat Narduzzi's second season at Pitt. Teammates said they felt Conner's presence on the field immediately.

"He brings all that energy to practice every day," said sophomore safety Jordan Whitehead, who frequently accompanied Conner to his cancer treatments last spring.

Narduzzi answered two general questions about the workout before the subject turned to Conner and stayed there for several minutes.

“He’s never going to limit himself, but as coaches we’re going to have to limit him,” Narduzzi said. “He’s over there throwing shoulders into people with shorts on, so we have to slow him down.”

But not for long, if things go according to plan.

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