

‘CONSENSUS FRUSTRATION’

Tigers’ Shipley talks about hits to head

By Ian Taylor
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CLEMSON — It’s understandable for any football player to have concerns about helmet-to-helmet hits and the resulting head injuries that often come with them. But for Clemson star running back Will Shipley, he’s just as frustrated that for the second time in three weeks, he felt he didn’t get the help from the referees that he felt he deserved during the Tigers’ win over Georgia Tech on Saturday.

Early in the third quarter, what looked to be a routine run ended with a furious Shipley and irate fans after what they felt was an uncalled targeting penalty on a hit from Yellow Jackets linebacker Kyle Efford.



Clemson running back Will Shipley (1) looks to get past Georgia Tech defensive back LaMiles Brooks on Saturday at Memorial Stadium in Clemson.

Photo by Caleb Gilbert

“Looking back at it and talking with everybody, it’s kind of consensus frustration that it’s not even being reviewed for a targeting call,” Shipley said on Tuesday. “I think that everybody has a role to play, everybody has a responsibility and I absolutely love the refs and the work that they put in, but I believe it’s their responsibility to keep the players safe. I was frustrated just because I didn’t think that they were doing their part in that degree.”

He added that he is well aware that football is a “violent game” and that things happen. But given his recent history, Shipley was not in the mood for a helmet-to-helmet hit. Just two weeks earlier, he suffered a concussion at N.C. State that kept him out of the Tigers’ win over Notre Dame the following week, and it stuck with him and his teammates.

On a run near the goal line, Shipley tried fighting for extra yards and potentially a touchdown before he was brought down. As soon as he was on the ground — sitting up and facing away from the end zone — Wolfpack cornerback Shyheim Battle’s diving tackle attempt turned into a helmet-to-helmet shot to the back of Shipley’s head.

He was knocked out cold.

“It was loud, and it was scary,” Clemson tight end Jake Briningstool said of the hit. “I was the first one to run over to him, and I was like, ‘Get up, Ship. Get up, Ship,’ but I could tell something wasn’t right. I’m glad he came out OK, but he definitely got banged up there.”

Clemson wide receiver Beaux Collins, who Battle had been guarding on the play, said that looking back, he wasn’t sure why Shipley even tried to gain more yards.

“He came crashing down, I was standing right there and it was a tough thing to watch, seeing my brother laying down and hurting,” Collins said. “It was one of those plays that’s like, ‘Dang, why do I play this sport? Football’s one of the most dangerous sports out there! So, it was tough to see.”

Shipley’s memory of the hit was a bit different.

“Don’t remember too much from the N.C. State play,” he said. “Definitely a little scary, but like I said, it’s part of the game — something I signed up for.”

He added that it was a surreal experience going back and watching the film.

“Sometimes you watch other players and you grimace and you think, like, ‘What if that was me, how would I feel?’ But when you’re actually watching yourself in that position, it’s definitely a different perspective,” he said. “Something that goes through your head is, ‘What if this happens? What if it was a little worse? What will my life be like after I’m done playing ball?’”

For Shipley, it was the first time he had been knocked unconscious like that, and he said it put head injuries at the forefront of his mind, leading to the outburst when he felt the referees let him down against Georgia Tech.

“First game back, just being a little timid, little hesitant going into the game — as I think any athlete would in my case. So yeah, I think it definitely stemmed from (the N.C. State hit) a little bit,” he said.

Adding to the frustration in-game was all of the frustration that came before it. Along with the concussion, Shipley suffered a neck injury from the hit in the N.C. State game, piling on to an already difficult situation.

“I think the most difficult part for me was understanding whether a headache was coming from tension issues, or if it was actually from head issues,” he said.

Shipley added that by midweek, it was clear he wasn’t going to be able to play against Notre Dame and he shifted his focus to Georgia Tech.

When he did, his teammates saw a different version of the running back — one Collins said only comes out in games.

“Ship’s a fighter. He ain’t going to back down from anything,” Collins said. “I could tell the week after he was cleared and came back to practice, he was on a mission to get back in that mode and show people he’s not going anywhere.”

It helped that Shipley wasn't going into the Georgia Tech game worried about getting hurt again. He said that while concerns over injuries can be a big mental factor, he's confident that as long as he's on the field, he's healthy enough to be there.

"I'm going to give it 110 percent every time," Shipley said. "I understand the implications that come from that and arise from that, but when I get out on that field knowing that I'm cleared by the training staff, cleared by myself, making sure I feel good, I'm going to lay it down all on the line for the people beside me."

Adding to his confidence is a new accessory he debuted against the Yellow Jackets, the Q-Collar, a horseshoe-shaped silicone collar that is worn low on the neck. The collar is designed to slightly restrict blood flow leaving the head, giving more cushion for the brain. It received widespread attention in 2017, when then-Carolina Panthers linebacker Luke Kuechly started wearing one after suffering his third concussion in as many years.

Shipley said his brother, James, had a lacrosse teammate at Pennsylvania whose father was involved with the product on the business side, who in turn suggested the product to Shipley's father. While the Q-Collar has received criticism over the years — its design is based on a disproven belief about how woodpeckers avoid concussions — it received FDA approval last October. In the agency's decision, it noted that data sourced from studies does not demonstrate an ability to prevent concussions and that the data sourcing method the company used has not been validated.

However, it gave Shipley a much-needed boost of confidence.

"It was something I didn't really want to do, but taking into consideration the head injury from N.C. State, it was something I wanted to try out," Shipley said. "It felt really great. I think it's a great product, and if it gives me any sense of protection out there, then I'm willing to try it. I think that it paid off well against Georgia Tech.

"I definitely see myself wearing it for the foreseeable future, unless it poses any challenges. It didn't during practice or the Georgia Tech game, so we should be good moving forward."

And while he has a plan about what he'll wear moving forward, he said that his recent injury troubles have helped him put more emphasis on the present. Having missed one game and come off the bench in another — the first games he hadn't started since his freshman year — he said that starting the game from the sideline has been an eye-opening experience.

"I want to be out there first, but also understanding that this is such an opportunity for me to grow and just be able to use this opportunity to cheer (teammate Phil Mafah) on and be side-by-side with him, with (running backs coach C.J. Spiller) and help this team win in any way that I can," Shipley said.

As for how long he'll be helping the Tigers win, Shipley said he's not thinking about it. Asked if he's given any thought to his future beyond this season — and whether he'll be playing for the Tigers next season — the junior said he was following head coach Dabo Swinney's lead and focusing on the present, including the home finale for the Tigers (6-4, 3-4 ACC) against No. 22 North Carolina (8-2, 4-2) on Saturday (3:30 p.m., ESPN) at Memorial Stadium.

"I've definitely thought a little bit about it. It's something that is inevitable — just the opportunities that are there after this season — but I haven't put enough thought into it. So, I wouldn't be able to give you a great answer right now, but it's definitely something that's going to be weighing on me," he said. "My team deserves my full attention and my full preparation to go out here, win these last two regular-season games and then see what comes after that."

Swinney brushes aside any A&M talk

Just two days after Texas A&M paid more than \$70 million to dump head coach Jimbo Fisher, Swinney downplayed any idea that he could be looking for a move to College Station, Texas, during his weekly news conference on Tuesday.

"I'm just focused on this job — always have been," he said. "Just trying to find a way to beat North Carolina."

Venables close to return

Veteran safety Tyler Venables could potentially see the field on Saturday for the first time this season, Swinney announced Tuesday.

The former Daniel High School star tore the labrum in his hip right before the start of fall camp, and Swinney said at the time that the plan was for Venables to redshirt this season.

“He’s excited, and he’s worked really, really hard to get back,” Swinney said. “He’s been through a lot with his labrum in his hip and his groin and his torn hamstrings and all that stuff. So, we’ll have him available and see how it goes.”

Also in the secondary, Swinney said that safety Jalyn Phillips is still out but cornerback Sheridan Jones could return after missing the last two games.

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