

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

BOSTON Weis' malpractice suit scheduled for trial

Notre Dame coach Charlie Weis' medical malpractice lawsuit against two doctors involved in his near-fatal gastric bypass surgery is scheduled to start next month.



WEIS

Weis had the surgery in June 2002 while he was still offensive coordinator for the New England Patriots after unsuccessfully battling chronic obesity for years. He has said he weighed about 350 pounds at the time.

Weis alleges in the lawsuit, scheduled to go trial Feb. 12, that Massachusetts General Hospital physicians Charles Ferguson and Richard Hodin acted negligently and left Weis so close to death that he received the Roman Catholic last rites.

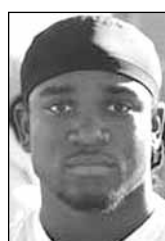
Weis began bleeding internally soon after the operation and was in a coma for two weeks.

"It was probably the biggest mistake of my life," Weis wrote of the procedure in his book, "No Excuses: One Man's Incredible Rise Through the NFL to Head Coach of Notre Dame."

Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, who sat at Weis' bedside when the coach was in a coma, is expected to appear as a witness.

SOUTH BEND Chicago running back commits to Notre Dame

A Chicago high school running back has announced he will attend Notre Dame in the fall.



HUGHES

Robert Hughes, a 6-foot, 235-pound power runner, said he made his decision after tailback Darius Walker announced he was leaving Notre Dame after his junior year to enter the NFL draft. Hughes said Walker also gave Hughes his opinion of the school.

"He said, 'I have no regrets, and I had a great time here,'" Hughes said Tuesday.

Hughes, who also considered Illinois, said he didn't make up his mind until Tuesday afternoon.

Hughes, ranked the No. 50 player nationally by CSTV analyst Tom Lemming, enters a backfield that could be dominated by underclassmen. The Irish have returning backs James Aldridge and Munir Prince, both sophomores, and Armando Allen, who enrolled in classes this month.

Hughes is the 19th player to verbally commit to Notre Dame's recruiting class of 2007. National signing day is Feb. 7.

By DOUG FERGUSON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SAN DIEGO

As many times as Tiger Woods has played and won at Torrey Pines, he has never figured out the patchwork shades of blue in the Pacific Ocean below the cliffside course. Looking out from the fourth green Wednesday morning, his New Zealand caddie told him the darker the shade, the colder the water.

It was a fitting start to his 2007 season, starting at segments that represent old and new but blending.

The Buick Invitational is his first tournament of the season, but Woods carries over from last year a PGA Tour winning streak that dates to July. He is going for his seventh in a row on the PGA Tour, and odds are in his favor as the two-time defending champion. "It is meaningful because it's not easy to do," Woods said, and he should know because he won six straight PGA Tour events at the end of 1999 and beginning of 2000, the second-longest streak behind Byron Nelson's 11 in a row in 1945.

But he also doesn't consider it a real streak.

That ended at five in October when he lost in the first round of the HSBC World Match Play Championship in England. Throw out match play, and Woods was runner-up consecutive weeks in Asia.



Golfer Tiger Woods, right, talks to caddie Steve Williams during practice Tuesday for the Buick Invitational golf tournament at Torrey Pines in San Diego.

"It's a PGA Tour streak," Woods said. "It's not really a win streak because, obviously, I lost at Match Play, I lost at the Ryder Cup, I finished second in China, I finished second in Japan. I was on a losing streak for a bit."

Also in transition are his emotions.

Gone is the dread Woods felt at Torrey Pines last year when he knew his father had only a short time to live, replaced by the excitement of his wife being pregnant with their first child, due sometime in July.

"I'm looking forward to the

year and what's going to transpire," Woods said. "Last year, I was not looking forward to the year and what was going to transpire. One is just praying and hoping, and the other is pure excitement and enjoyment. So it's two totally opposite ends."

He was lively during his program, talking about the changes to Torrey Pines for the U.S. Open next year, his dinner Tuesday night with San Diego Chargers running back LaDainian Tomlinson and his wife's plans to finish out her spring semester in college.

The first step in his new year starts today against a 156-man field that is not as strong as recent years but looks stacked at the top with Woods, Phil Mickelson and Vijay Singh.

And while there is much talk about a streak, that tends to shift some attention to Mickelson.

Woods won the final four PGA events in 1999 (he finished sixth at the Johnnie Walker Classic in Thailand in November), then won the first two events of 2000 to raise remote possibilities that Nelson's untouchable record might be within reach.

The next stop was Torrey Pines.

"He didn't get it, did he?" Mickelson said, trying to fool his audience with a quizzical look. Lefty knows better, having pulled away over the final six holes to end Woods' streak at six.

"He's on a remarkable tear," Mickelson said. "He's obviously an incredibly talented player, but when he gets on runs like this, it's very difficult to stop him. But I know a lot of guys in the field are going to be doing their best."

Not many of them are as fresh — or maybe rusty — as Woods.

He took a five-week break after his Target World Challenge, skiing in Colorado and going back to the practice range two weeks ago. It was long enough to make him miss the competition, although that has been lacking since July.

LACROSSE

RALEIGH, N.C. More charges filed against Duke prosecutor

The North Carolina bar lodged new and more serious ethics charges Wednesday against the district attorney in the Duke lacrosse case, accusing him of withholding evidence from the defense and lying to both the court and bar investigators.



NIFONG

Mike Nifong, who withdrew from the case earlier this month, could be disbarred if convicted by a disciplinary board.

The bar previously charged Nifong with making misleading and prejudicial comments about the athletes under suspicion.

The new charges are tied to Nifong's decision to use a private lab for DNA testing as his office investigated allegations three men raped a 28-year-old woman at a team party in March.

Those tests uncovered genetic material from several men on the woman's underwear and body, but none from any lacrosse player. The bar complaint alleges that those results were not released to the defense and that Nifong repeatedly said in court he had turned over all evidence that could benefit the defense.

"If these allegations are true and if they don't justify disbarment, then I'm not sure what does," said Joseph Kennedy, a law professor at the University of North Carolina. "It's hard for me to imagine a more serious set of allegations against a prosecutor."

Nifong's trial on the ethics charges is set for May but could be delayed until June.

Nadal bounced from Australian Open

By JOHN PYE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MELBOURNE, Australia

Rafael Nadal limped out of the Australian Open complaining his leg was too sore to challenge Fernando Gonzalez in the quarterfinals.

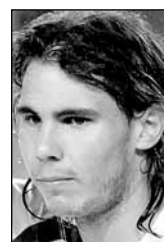
With Gonzalez stinging winners past him from both the forehand and backhand sides, though, even a fit Nadal might have struggled.

The 10th-seeded Gonzalez had 41 winners in a 6-2, 6-4, 6-3 upset over the second-seeded Nadal on Wednesday, earning him a semifinal spot along with top-ranked Roger Federer, Andy Roddick and Tommy Haas.

In the women's semifinals later Wednesday, the unseeded Serena Williams was to continue her



GONZALEZ



NADAL

unlikely quest for an eighth Grand Slam title. Limited to only four tournaments last year by recurring knee problems, Williams was not expected to be a serious contender at this year's Australian Open.

But she was one win away from the final, as was top-seeded Maria Sharapova, who reached the semis with a 7-6 (5), 7-5 win against Anna Chakvetadze, a fellow 19-year-old Russian.

Williams was to face 17-year-old Nicole Pietrangeli of the Czech Republic in the first semifinal, followed by Sharapova against fourth-seeded Kim Clijsters.

Gonzalez, who will be playing in the semifinals of a Grand Slam tournament for the first time, will get a day off to watch today's semifinal between defending champion Federer and sixth-seeded Roddick. Gonzalez will face Tommy Haas on Friday.

French Open champion Nadal was the only player to beat Federer at this stage of a tournament last year, doing it four times in finals. Federer was 91-1 against everyone else, his only other loss an upset to Andy Murray at Cincinnati.

It was a five-setter against Murray on Monday that Nadal

thinks derailed his prospects of making the Australian Open final.

"I can't run a lot," he said Wednesday. "It was difficult to play one match like this, quarterfinals of one Grand Slam, with pain. If I am playing bad, well, you can go home and say disappointing. But today I just say, 'Well, I can't do more. I try my best.'"

He called for a medical timeout in the third set and had to go to the locker room to remove his long, green shorts for treatment on his upper left leg and buttock.

Roddick is only 1-12 against Federer, but the 24-year-old American had match points against Federer at the Masters Cup in November and beat him in the final of an exhibition tournament at Kooyong on Jan. 14.

Junior defends stepmom from criticism

The Associated Press

CONCORD, N.C.

After a rival driver called Teresa Earnhardt a deadbeat owner, Dale Earnhardt Jr. was put in the uncomfortable position of sticking up for the stepmother he's often at odds with.

At a Tuesday media session designed to outline Dale Earnhardt Inc.'s 2007 season goals, Junior was asked to respond to comments Kevin Harvick made earlier in the day about the perception that Teresa Earnhardt is an absentee team owner.

"It's hard when you have what I call a deadbeat owner that doesn't come to the racetrack," Harvick told reporters during a stop at Richard Childress Racing.

"You always see Richard Childress. You always see Chip Ganassi. All these owners, they all come to the racetrack. It's not just a money pit that somebody says, 'Well, I can make money off of Dale Jr. I can make money off of Dale Earnhardt.'"

Earnhardt, in the final year of his contract at DEI and in negotiations for a new deal, squirmed as he was asked to respond.

Junior attempted to defend Teresa Earnhardt, who took over the company after Dale Earnhardt Sr.'s 2001 fatal accident on the final lap of the Daytona 500.

"Like I said in the past, with everything that's happened, not just to the company but to the family over the past five years, she's had a full plate," he said. "The things that she's responsible for, willingly and unwillingly, are very important. For a long time, the battle with (Earnhardt's) autopsy photos, all those things, that's just the tip of the iceberg of things that she's been responsible for."



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