

# Sources: Tragic death of former teammate keeps Cole Madison away from Packers

By Michael Cohen

Feb 11, 2019

Packers offensive lineman Cole Madison has been away from the team since the conclusion of the offseason program in June. His absence has been shrouded in mystery, and now a return to football seems uncertain.

*The Athletic* Wisconsin has learned that Madison's absence can be linked to emotional distress brought on by the suicide of a close friend and former teammate. Four sources said Madison has been deeply affected by the tragic death of Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski, who took his own life on Jan. 16, 2018, two weeks after playing in the San Diego County Credit Union Holiday Bowl.

And while Madison attempted to move forward with his professional career, sources said he eventually decided to separate himself from the game that left his friend with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, better known as CTE.

"The death of Tyler is in his head," a source familiar with Madison's situation told *The Athletic* Wisconsin. "I don't think he's coming back. At least he's not showing signs of it right now."

General manager Brian Gutekunst selected Madison in the fifth round (138th overall) of the 2018 NFL Draft and had visions of him becoming a starting guard. Madison, 24, signed a standard rookie contract worth \$2.78 million over four years, and the only guaranteed money came in the form of a \$324,332 signing bonus. Thus far, the Packers have not attempted to recoup Madison's bonus, a source said.

At the Senior Bowl, Gutekunst would neither confirm nor deny that fallout from Hilinski's death was keeping Madison away from football when asked by *The Athletic* Wisconsin. He simply reiterated that Madison is dealing with a "personal matter" for which the Packers have offered their full support.

Gutekunst did acknowledge, however, that the team won't receive an additional draft pick if Madison chooses to retire or never plays for the organization.

"He's still dealing with some of the things that he was dealing with at the beginning of the season last year," Gutekunst told *The Athletic* Wisconsin. "Obviously we wish him the best and

we'd love to, at some point, get him out there on the field to help us. But when that time is going to be, we're not there yet."

Attempts to reach Madison through his agents were unsuccessful. Calls and messages to the Madison family went unreturned.

Madison cut a friendly and affable figure during his brief appearance in Green Bay, which stretched from rookie orientation in early May through the conclusion of mandatory minicamp in mid-June. He described the moment he was drafted as "the greatest experience of my life" and looked the part of an NFL offensive lineman: 6 foot 5, 308 pounds and with a lumberjack beard that nearly reached his chest. He joked with reporters about his aversion to haircuts and Twitter.

"I'm just kind of an old-school guy," Madison said on draft weekend. "I've not really dabbled in the social media stuff. Don't need to look at people's food they post and all that stuff."

A source said Madison had seemed genuinely excited about embarking on his professional career. He was eager to compete for immediate playing time as a rookie, and teammates spoke favorably about his addition to the locker room. Madison had even outlined his goals for the NFL and for life at large before sharing those plans with people close to him, according to a source.

But there was a five-week respite between the end of minicamp in June and the start of training camp in July, a time in which players and coaches tend to relax before the grind of a new season begins. And it was during that window, sources said, that something changed. It's possible Madison's state of mind was influenced by test results revealing Hilinski had been suffering from CTE, with news of the diagnosis made public in late June.

When the Packers reconvened on July 25, a day before their first practice, Madison wasn't there. By that time, a source said, he had already shared the details of his situation with the organization and expressed his uncertainty about the upcoming season.

The Packers maintained rights to Madison by placing him on the reserve/did not report list at the start of camp, which meant he didn't count against the active roster. Since then, members of the organization have clung to the party line regarding Madison's situation: that he is dealing with a personal matter in his native Washington, that the Packers respect his right to privacy and that they hope he can eventually return to the field.

In August, Gutekunst told reporters the Packers are in constant communication with Madison but that they didn't expect him to return "any time soon."

"This will take a little bit of time to deal with," Gutekunst said that day.

The relationship between Madison and Hilinski was strong. Just a few days after Hilinski's death, Madison interrupted his combine training in Florida and returned to WSU's campus for a candlelight vigil, which his parents also attended. He and teammate Luke Falk, another

quarterback, wore No. 3 helmet stickers honoring Hilinski during the week of the Senior Bowl and brought extra decals for the other players.

On the internet, where dozens of articles have been written about Hilinski's death, there are photos of Madison and his former quarterback celebrating together at practice. Hilinski was quoted as saying he tried to follow Madison's style of enthusiastic leadership.

"They were just absolute best friends," said Whitney Thornton, a photojournalist for Coughfan.com, in an article published by 247Sports last January. "Tyler would come from across the field, or wherever he was coming from, and Cole would be waiting for him. And Cole would just scream out (his number) 'Threeeeeee!' at the top of his lungs.

"And of course Tyler would run over to him and jump into his arms. They were just so funny together."

The Packers believed Madison was in contention for the starting right guard position as a rookie, the spot left vacant by the departure of veteran Jahri Evans, whose contract expired last March. Though Madison had played exclusively right tackle in college, where he started 47 games in four seasons for coach Mike Leach, scouts in Green Bay saw a prospect with three-position flexibility: left guard, right guard and right tackle.

His shorter arms (32¼ inches) meant Madison was probably better suited for guard, but the footwork he developed as a high school basketball player gave him a chance on the edge. The coaching staff rotated him through several different positions during the offseason program last spring.

"He's a big man," said Jon-Eric Sullivan, then the Packers' director of college scouting, during an interview on draft weekend. "He has good instincts for the position. They play in a pass-happy offense out there (at WSU), so you know, we like his feet.

"We think he's a guy that has some positional versatility. He'll probably line up first at guard, but if needed (he) can slide out to tackle."

Later that day, Gutekunst described Madison as a "versatile inside guard/tackle swing type of guy."

It's the type of player the Packers could use as questions about their offensive line still linger. They have yet to identify a quality backup at tackle, where former second-round pick Jason Spriggs continues to struggle, and their guard play on either side of center Corey Linsley left much to be desired last season. Madison could have offered valuable depth at multiple spots along the line.

Instead, the Packers are navigating the offseason with an understanding that Madison won't be part of their plans — at least not right now. They have to move forward without him unless Madison expresses a desire to return.

“If that happens, it’s great,” Gutekunst told *The Athletic* Wisconsin. “And if it doesn’t, it doesn’t.”