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## Seeing Things in a Different Light

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# Georgia Southern University Athletics



## Seeing Things in a Different Light

Drew Wilson thankful for second chance at football

Bryan Johnston

Football

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**STATESBORO** - [Drew Wilson](#) has heard the jokes. They come with the territory when you've been through what he's been through. He's been called a pirate by his offensive line coach. The staff playfully jabs at him about having one working eye. The other offensive linemen never miss a chance to rib him. But they sure are glad he's back.

A year after being told he would probably never suit up again, Wilson is back running with the No. 1 offense after an unfortunate injury to right tackle [Brian Miller](#).

"The first time Coach made a joke about it, I was a little irritated since I had been through so much," Wilson said. "But I know they love me and they are playing and joking around."

Wilson, who hails from Bamberg, South Carolina, doesn't remember how it happened, but remembers the concern when his vision began getting blurry in the spring of 2018. What the athletic trainers thought may have been an onset of pre-diabetes because the onset was so quick without a trauma turned out to be a detached retina in his right eye after specialists in Charleston, South Carolina, diagnosed the condition. How it happened remains a mystery, but was no laughing matter at the time.

According to the Mayo Clinic, "retinal detachment describes an emergency situation in which a thin layer of tissue (the retina) at the back of the eye pulls away from the layer of blood vessels that provides it with oxygen and nutrients."

The plan was to get the retina repaired and get him back, even if it took a few months. Playing in 2016 and 2017 in his first two years on campus, he had the luxury of a redshirt year in his back pocket, which was made more convenient with the new four-game redshirt rule.

But then the retina detached three more times. Wilson has now had four surgeries to repair that torn retina.

"They thought they fixed it, but it didn't stick, then it didn't stick and it kept happening, so it was frustrating," he said.

Wilson ended up missing the whole year and had limited contact with his team as sensitivity to light and the surgeries limited what he could do or where he could go. He ended up taking the fall off from school because even doing online courses would be a strain on his eye.

"When this incident first happened, I didn't know if I'd be able to come back or not," Wilson said. "It's just a blessing. God has a plan for all of us and his plan is good

for me. I just had to keep the faith because there were some really dark times. With all the doctors who told me I was out, I started to accept that I needed to start looking toward life after football. But my parents wouldn't let me give up even when I thought about hanging it up. My body was tired, I was tired of having surgeries and I was a little depressed. But if it wasn't for my family, I wouldn't be back out here playing today."

Wilson says it was really just bad luck but he's confident that the injury has been fixed and he's back as good as new. The redshirt junior wears a visor on his helmet and wears goggles to protect the eye when doing non-helmet drills, but his peripheral vision has improved tremendously thanks to the work of the athletic trainers and the team eye doctor Dr. Horace Deal, who he meets with once a week to continue the rehabilitation. Dr. Deal and the athletic trainers had to come up with sport-specific drills both in the lab and on the field to help him get ready. He was sent to Emory University to see another eye specialist for a second opinion on playing football.

This past spring, Wilson started back with weights first, running, and then non-contact practice. Wilson made the decision to return in May and was cleared medically by team physicians and the specialists at Emory and in Charleston he had seen. The goal then became to be ready to be cleared by summer and that meant upping the vision training and making sure he did activities the retina repair could handle.

"I didn't think it was possible to get my peripheral vision back because everyone told me it was gone. But [head athletic trainer] [Brandy Clouse](#) got me hooked up with Dr. Deal and we set out to prove them wrong. He works with me and helps me get better in areas that need improvement and I know he's had a big hand in me proving everyone wrong."

How rare is it to come back from an injury like this, much less four of them? According to recorded data, only two boxers have ever returned to the ring from multiple detached retinas. No other sport has any sort of documented return from something like this. It's that serious of an injury. One poke to the eye could be detrimental both short and long term for Wilson, but he says he's so grateful and excited to be back with his teammates that it's something he's willing to risk. Doctors told Wilson there is a 10 percent chance the retina detaches again at rest, and a 15 percent chance it detaches again playing sports, so Wilson is really only taking a 5 percent chance by playing the game that gives him so much joy again.

"It's just such a blessing to be back in the meeting rooms and around my brothers again. I'm just trying to block for the backs and make my brothers proud. As a competitor, it was terrible to have to sit out, and I hit some dark spots. Coming from starting games as a true freshman and sophomore and then having to sit out and not being able to be around the team was really hard for me."

Wilson has plenty of experience for the Eagles, playing in having played in 22 games with 16 starts while seeing action on 1,126 offensive snaps. That experience will be called upon when the Eagles line up against nationally ranked LSU in the season opener on Aug. 31.

"Those 16 games Drew has started for us will be big because starting isn't anything new to him," said head coach [Chad Lunsford](#). "But more importantly, I'm glad to have Drew back with this team. He personifies the Georgia Southern Man mantra we preach and he loves Georgia Southern. I'm happy for him that he's getting this opportunity."

And his coaches and staff are equally happy to have him back.