

VISION MINDSET GRIT

How to Stand Up When Life Paralyzes You!

S C O T T B U R R O W S



**PEARHOUSE
PRESS**

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Published by Pearhouse Press, Inc., Pittsburgh, PA 15208
www.pearhousepress.com

First Printing: January 2013

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-98867-210-9
LCCN: 2012922184

Cover and Book Design: Mike Murray

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July 1984: My last kickboxing fight, broadcast on ESPN, at the West Palm Beach Florida Auditorium. I won a unanimous decision.

CHAPTER 1**IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE**

On the morning of November 3, 1984, I awoke having no idea that before the day's end everything about my life would change catastrophically in mere seconds. I was just 19 years old, on top of the world and believed I was invincible. One year before, I had made the Florida State University (FSU) Seminoles football team as a "Walk-on" wide receiver. I also was ranked #1 in the State of Florida's Light Heavyweight Kickboxing Division, having had my most recent fight at the 5,000-seat West Palm Beach Auditorium broadcast on ESPN. I was dating my high school sweetheart and had been selected by my college peers to appear as "Mr. September" in the Men of FSU calendar. Most importantly, I had a wonderful, loving family and the best friends of my lifetime.

In Mere Seconds...

In the handful of defining days of your life, personally or professionally, certain details have a tendency to become etched in stone, don't they? That particular Friday afternoon in Tallahassee, Florida was beautifully sunny with temperatures in the mid-70s and crystal clear blue skies. After class, I spent much of that afternoon playing co-ed pickup basketball with friends. Then, in our characteristic spontaneous nature, we decided to

go on a quick getaway weekend to the gorgeous, white sand beaches along the Gulf of Mexico. Our excursion from FSU began around 6:30 p.m. We loaded our gear into the car and began the 90-minute drive south to a stretch of beach on pristine St. George Island.

We arrived around 8:00 p.m. just as the moon was rising above the eastern horizon. We set up camp, built a fire and nestled around it for hours on end telling story after story with our best teenage, hormonal sense of humor. That's when a friend, Ed, challenged me to an impromptu foot race. Being just a little competitive, I welcomed the challenge by taking off my tennis shoes, bending down and leaning forward into my running stance waiting to hear "Go." Imagine hearing that word echoing through the air, and within seconds all you can feel is the cool night air blowing through your hair. With each step you feel sand gritting between your toes and, as you cross that imaginary finish line, you can even taste the salt in the ocean air. It turned out to be one of my best runs ever, and at that moment I did not realize it would be my last.

Once we caught our breath, we walked back to camp, where another friend asked Ed and me if we would take a ride down the beach to find more firewood to keep our bonfire burning through the night. We willingly agreed. I jumped into the passenger side of Ed's car and off we went. Finding some firewood, we headed back to the campsite.

On our way back, speeding along on a dark, lonely road, Ed lost control of the wheel and veered sharply. He was able to recover and get us back into our own lane. "Are you okay?" I asked. "Put your seatbelt on," he yelled, but before I could, he lost control again and the car once more veered off the road.

Ed tried to recover a second time, but as he was making his way back onto the surface we hit a mound of sand, projecting

the car into the air in ski-jump fashion. It nosed over and fell back to earth, then tumbled end over end. In that brief instant, now frozen in my mind forever, I sensed there would be an impending, horrific outcome. For a split second, I could see our headlights shining in the sand. "Oh my God," I cried out, "we're rolling!" A fraction of a second later, I was unconscious.

Unknown to us at the time, two other friends, Scott and Charlie, had also gone on a firewood hunt. They came upon our accident and found me still seated in an upright position in the passenger's seat, with blood running from the top of my head down my face and onto my clothes.

Miraculously, Ed had not been injured and had exited the car to help Scott and Charlie rescue me. In 1984, the drinking age in Florida was 21. We were underage and had started drinking when we arrived at the beach. To top it off, seatbelt usage was not mandatory in the state, and I foolishly had not been wearing mine.

Dark Road, Dark Times

No one knew I had broken my neck or sustained a very serious spinal cord injury. Their hearts were focused on getting me to emergency care immediately. There were no homes, hotels or stores close by to call for an ambulance and, of course, back then no one had a cell or smart phone to call, text or tweet for help. As carefully as they could, my friends extracted me from Ed's car and transferred me into their vehicle.

They drove to the closest hospital, George E. Weems Memorial, 50 miles away. I recall waking up once. I was sitting up in the back seat, contorted, my head and torso facing slightly to the left and my legs pointed 45 degrees to the right. I had intense neck pain and tasted iron—blood was running down my face into the

corner of my mouth. I could not move my legs and had no control over my hands or fingers. In my state of half-consciousness, I was groping for answers, trying to get a grip on the situation.

It seemed the strength I had from my shoulders allowed me to twist my body back and forth. When I twisted, my legs did not respond. In the back seat on a pitch black night, speeding down a lonely road, with friends desperately transporting me to a hospital, I grasped my worst nightmare. I yelled out, "Oh my God, I'm paralyzed!" Within moments, I blacked out.

Immobile and Unconscious

When we arrived at the emergency entrance of Weems Memorial Hospital, I was unconscious. My friends lifted me out of the car, carried me in to the building, set me down in a chair in the waiting area and frantically sought assistance. I was later told I woke up briefly complaining of neck pain. Hospital staff scurried in with great urgency. Before being X-rayed, they stitched up an eight-inch laceration on the top of my head. The X-rays confirmed I had broken my neck. Weems Memorial did not have the facilities for my type of injury, so they quickly secured me on a gurney and transferred me into an ambulance to be rushed to Bay Medical Community Hospital in Panama City, Florida, 100 miles away.

After arriving at Bay Medical, I awoke on the emergency room table with a special team of doctors standing over me. In a whirlwind, my favorite tee shirt and pair of blue jeans were cut off with scissors. As my clothes were removed, I could see they were covered in blood. Then I was asked all kinds of questions: "Son, can you move your arms? How about your legs? Can you feel us touching your toes?" Each time, my answer was either "No" or "I'm not too sure."

A Terrible Nightmare

Minutes passed, but seemed like hours. I was terrified. I wished I could close my eyes and wake up from the nightmare. Then, without warning, I felt the most excruciating sharp pain coming from both sides of my head, close to my temples. It felt as though my head was caving in, as if someone was crushing it in a giant vise.

What I did not realize was that my doctors were placing me in spinal traction, a Gardner-Wells tong. It was performed by screwing two metal bolts, stainless steel screws a quarter of an inch in diameter, into my skull to stabilize my neck while attaching 40 pounds of weight to hold it securely in place. The pain was unbearable and I screamed at the top of my lungs, pleading for it to stop. As my vision dimmed, I remember thinking “This is it!” All I could do was pray and hope I would survive as I slipped back into dark unconsciousness.

The Nightmare Continues

Around 2:00 a.m., my parents received the most unimaginable phone call that left them paralyzed in their tracks. Dr. Stringer, my neurosurgeon, told them what had happened and announced my grim diagnosis. He said, “Your son was involved in a serious automobile accident. He is currently stable and in intensive care. He broke the cervical 6th and 7th vertebrae in his neck and has sustained a severe spinal cord injury, leaving him paralyzed from the chest down and diagnosed a quadriplegic.”

On November 5, 1984, at Bay Medical Community Hospital, during my parents’ first visit, Dr. Stringer said he was going to perform cervical spine surgery. The surgery would involve removing bone fragments from my neck and then taking one of my rib bones from my lower back left rib cage and fusing it to

my neck. The justification for surgery, described in my doctor's notes, was as follows:

Various risks, possible complications; operation will not help recovery of neurological function. Primary for stabilization of cervical spine. Also, possibility of further neurological injury which may occur either during surgery or thereafter.

From that point forward, my dad felt compelled to begin chronicling the entire ordeal through diary posts and Kodak pictures. After the first day, my mom, Joan, took a picture of him leaning over me and holding my hand. That day he wrote in his notes, "Joan and I are almost at the point of collapse."



Dad and me two days after my accident.

When I was fully awake several days later, Dr. Stringer walked into my room, introduced himself and gave me the bad news. He said, “Scott, you were involved in a serious car accident a few days ago. The driver, I am told, is a friend. He survived with minor bumps and bruises. However, you have broken your neck and have sustained a severe spinal cord injury, leaving you paralyzed from the chest down and diagnosed a quadriplegic.” It was not long thereafter I was told I would never stand, walk or run again and that I might be dependent upon family, friends and caregivers for the rest of my life. At that moment I thought, “How do you go from having the time of your life to being told that, if you are going to survive and make the best of your new situation, you need to start dreaming new dreams and setting new goals?”

In seconds, all of my plans and dreams were hijacked by the ordeal of simply trying to stay alive. I was terrified. My body was now a public spectacle. I had no privacy. Water, sustenance, basic bodily functions—all were out of my control and handled by strangers. In spite of my new set of circumstances, I remember feeling blessed to be alive. I am a Christian and believe, even to this day, that things happen for a reason.

I was strapped to a rotary bed designed to move very slowly from one side to the other to prevent bedsores and pneumonia. If not turned while on your back for a period of time, your heels, tailbone and shoulder blades do not receive adequate blood circulation, causing your skin, tissue and muscle to break down. Unfortunately, over the coming weeks, bedsores developed on both of my heels, eventually exposing bone. Those open sores did not heal for an entire year.

Tight stockings were placed on both of my legs to prevent blood clots, which are all too common among quadriplegics. As the days passed, a steady parade of doctors and nurses came