

Chad Defeats Brain Trauma, Is Returning To Normal Life

A year ago Chad Francour, at age 16, had it all.

A sophomore at Marinette high School, he was looking forward to a college scholarship based on his native intelligence and outstanding athletic abilities.

Athletic talent. Stellar performer in three sports - football, basketball and hockey. Other interests included snowmobiling, hunting, fishing, dancing, hanging out with friends, and whatever else came along.

Intelligence. First rate scholar. Ranked 16th from the top in a class of 200. Straight "A" report cards came naturally, without a struggle. Homework was rarely necessary.

Popularity. That came naturally too. Chad loved to joke, could be a terrible tease, radiated self confidence. Described by some as "self confident and cocky", he admits to being "just a tiny bit conceited." If he was, it didn't seem to affect his public image. He had tons of friends, a regular girl friend and a couple of life-long "best friends".

Plenty of pocket money supplied by a part-time job at Marinette Farm and Garden.

Wonderful family. Mom Lynn teaches science at Marinette Middle School. Dad Dave is an elementary phy ed teacher for Marinette School. Brother Brian had started college at Oshkosh. Sister Angela, 23, was completing nursing studies in Minneapolis, Minn. Sister Katie, 12, was eagerly waiting for the horses she loved to be moved into the barn at their new home at the end of Lietzow Road in the Town of Peshtigo.

Then, at 4:34 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 28, 2004, everything changed. A split-second misjudgment, possibly caused by blinding sunlight, caused an accident that cost Chad his old life. The snowmobile he was driving shot in front of a pickup truck as he crossed Hwy. 41 at Country Meadows Road near Marinette.

His brain injuries were so extensive that doctors didn't expect him to live. When they decided he might survive, they cautioned he might never be able to think, move or function normally again. He has proven them wrong. It's been a long, hard haul with a long, hard way still to go. But with his plucky attitude and continued support from family, friends, and community, Chad will go the distance and probably beyond. He's a fighter.

After a year, he is finally able to walk unassisted. With assistance, he is keeping up with his classes and recently completed his SAT tests. He will be carrying a 5-subject class load this semester, in addition to daily physical therapy sessions, a part-time weekend job, and occasional outings with friends. He still loves to joke, but his humor is perhaps a bit kinder now. He wants to drive a snowmobile again, but his Dad says not for at least a year. He will never be allowed to play contact sports again, so his goal is to compete as a member of the Marinette High School Cross Country team next year. He wants to drive a car. To regain use of his left hand. To walk totally without assistance. And then go to college. And then, who knows?

Chad seems able to deal with life as it is, without wasting a great deal of time and energy pining for what might have been. "What can you do?" he asks with a shrug, indicating he will do what he can do, instead of worrying about things he can't. He often wears a T-shirt of his own design. On the front is emblazoned, "I got hit by a truck. What's your excuse?" On the back is a stern order: "No



Chad Francour

sympathy!"

But he admits to being angry with God, to the point that he sometimes questions his faith. Any counselor will tell you that is a normal reaction for a young man in Chad's position.

While Chad's life hung in the balance, while they waited at his bedside for fate to decide if their son would live or die, Chad's parents created a web site where family and friends could track his progress at www.CaringBridge.org/wi/chad. The record is still there. They updated it religiously, each day's entry concluding with a request for prayers. It appears the prayers helped. Surely something did.

The entry for Jan. 28, 2004: "Usual Wednesday night snowmobile trip with the boys - Dad, Chad, Ryan, Big John Corwin, Joe Wilke, and Uncle Paul. At 4:34 p.m. on Highway 41 and Country Meadows Road. Chad was driving the snowmobile and was struck by a pick-up truck. The truck hit the front of the sled and the mirror knocked his helmet off. He was stabilized at Bay Area Hospital and flown to St. Vincent Hospital, Green Bay, on the Eagle III, flight for life. Chad was diagnosed with severe head trauma and possible spinal cord injuries. Internal injuries and broken bones were ruled out, the 3" gash on his head was stapled shut. After several cat scans, spinal cord injury was not likely."

"Thursday - Friday (Jan. 29-30) "Doctors told us that Chad was not likely to survive the trauma to his brain. With the prayers and support of many family and friends, Chad remains in guarded condition."

"Saturday - Wednesday (Jan. 31 - Feb. 4) "Doctors are saying he is not out of the woods yet, and may not come out of the coma."

"Thursday - Friday (Feb. 5-6) "Chad remains in a coma and on the ventilator. He is making baby steps to recovery each day. The family sits and waits for Chad to open his eyes. He is a fighter and will beat this. Continue to pray for a speedy recovery!"

The days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, and the bedside vigil and the entries continued.

Chad remained in a coma for 6 weeks, and was hospitalized a total of 115 days, moving gradually from intensive care to intermediate care to the rehab unit, weeks before he was fully out of the coma.

The damage was to all parts of his brain, most severe on the right side, which affects left-side motor skills. His balance was gone, but is back now to the point he can now stand and walk a bit without even the aid of a cane. His left leg is pretty much functioning again, but the left arm lags behind. He's told that's usually the case, for whatever

the reason. Doctors are good, and they sometimes work miracles, but there are still giant gaps in the medical community's knowledge of brain functions and recoveries.

The daily log went on, detailing painfully slow steps to recovery. The entry for Thursday, March 4 reads in part: "Chad has reached a new level of therapy, the therapy crew stuck him in a walker to see if some of his brain cells could remember how to move. He took a few steps with assistance, the first sign of getting his legs underneath him and moving! This was his third time, a little tired, but moved eight steps with some help."

"To Chad's utter surprise he had some familiar faces cheering him on at a therapy session of looking around and identifying familiar things in his surroundings. His expressions were a Kodak moment when he saw Marinette School district's Mr. Steve Motkowski, Mr. Corry Lambie, Mr. George Hayes and Ms. Wendy Dzurick, all principals from his schools. He had this look of WHAT! are you doing here."

"It seems like only yesterday it was January, a time when we would hear the complaints of Chad the tease, Chad the tough guy, Chad the kind hearted! As he works very hard to reach a level of consciousness, it reminds us of how much we take for granted. It is very confusing to everyone, how a person can open his eyes, but can't really see. Coma - a state of unconsciousness from which the patient cannot be awakened or aroused, even by powerful stimulation; lack of any response to one's environment. Defined clinically as an inability to follow a one-step command consistently."

"To learn more about the levels of a coma you can go on the following site: <http://www.waiting.com/rancholosamigos.html> Chad is at a level 4, but making progress that only one can do with the support of family and his friends."

"Continue to pray, lots of power in prayer!" Friday, March 5: "Chad is still some where between awake and asleep, won't respond to command, but is starting to get some simple things. He still can't walk, talk, stand, feed or dress himself, the list is long. So much he has to learn! He has some very dedicated friends and hospital staff that will help him. Another good day..."

Saturday, March 6, visitors included Coach Stauss and Coach Berg. Family web page comment: "First it was all those principals on Wednesday, now it's the coaching staff! Another good day to be a Marine!" "The first thing Chad remembers after his coma is going with his father to watch his hockey team play in the state tournament in Green Bay, but it's a fuzzy memory. "I was still out in space," he says.

The good days alternated with bad days, and the long, slow recovery continued. Though he had, and still has, some problems with his eyes, Chad was able to start reading again, and finally was ready to become a student once more. Leif Berg started traveling to Green Bay to resume Chad's education. In April Chad was occasionally able to go home for brief visits, and spent one weekend at the family cabin in Twin Bridge.

They learned his collar bone had been broken, and recovery was proving painful. But it was recovery. Discharge was scheduled for May 14.

On Monday, May 10, Chad wrote: "I have been here at St.

Vincent Hospital in Green Bay since January 28, 2004 and can't wait for May 14 to come. I came out of the coma on March 15, in just under two months I am going home! I now know what true courage and strength is. There isn't a day that doesn't go

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by that Chad doesn't ask the difficult question "WHY ME?" The hardest thing to deal with is the healing process of the brain. My parents and the doctors keep telling me that it takes a long time for the brain to heal. I am at great risks of falling back into a coma or dying, should I injure my head again before it has time to heal. I am only about 1/3 of the way healthy and there is so much more that I want to be able to do. I haven't learned patience yet and probably won't either. After being away from home so long, I can't explain how well my own room will feel. I often have bouts of depression over the fun times that I have missed and the sports that I can't play right now. I don't miss a day of reading the supportive messages on the website, they make me homesick in a good way. I have awesome friends and families; can't wait to get home! - CHAD"

Finally, on Thursday, May 13, Chad was released from the hospital, still mostly confined to a wheelchair, still needing help to get in and out of it. He had to return to Green Bay for 3-hour re-hab sessions five days a week, a grueling schedule for Chad and the parents who had to do the driving. Between therapy, resuming his education and simply savoring the comforts of home Chad led a full, full life.

"The school has been fabulous," says Lynn. They hired very good assistants who helped her son physically and mentally. During the summer Chad had homebound instruction two hours daily from Doris LaCourt, with Roxanne Carlson as a fill in. The school assigned Connie Stauss as a full time aide. During the summer he caught up on Biology and English under the tutelage of Mr. Berg, and completed Honors Geometry with the help of Dave Veith who taught him on a volunteer basis. Chad also completed the Spanish II work left from his sophomore year.

"I was pretty smart before the accident," Chad says modestly. Despite his disclaimer and his remaining physical limitations, Chad seems to still be "pretty smart".

When school resumed on Aug. 30, 2004, Chad returned with his Marinette High School junior class. He expects to graduate on schedule next year.

The first semester his doctors allowed only three classes a day, but for the second semester they have allowed Chad's workload to increase to five classes. A full load would be six. He's not taking the easy courses either. Studies will be English, U.S. History, Economics, Trigonometry and Chemistry. He is still doing honors work.

"The school has been fabulous, but these people (teachers, aides and therapists) do far, far more than they're paid for," Lynn declares. "Dave and I

couldn't have done it ourselves." She said the teachers and aides who work with Chad treat him like their own child.

The academic work is in addition to grueling physical therapy 4 days a week with Kim Barrette; occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech therapy through the school, and occupational therapy, speech and work-outs in the pool at Bay Area Mobility Center on a regular basis.

Dave says Chad and physical therapist Kim Barrette "are made for each other." Chad declares Barrette "is a genius". Chad has progressed to where he can walk briefly without a cane, when doctors originally didn't think he'd ever walk again. He believes the fact Chad was young, fit and athletic made his recovery possible, and that Barrette's skill maximizes Chad's progress.

Doctors at the re-hab center warned that the transition back to normal life could be difficult, particularly the social aspects. Young people are often almost afraid to associate with someone with brain damage.

Doctors warned the family that most brain trauma patients lose most of their friends, because part of them died and now there is "a new Chad". That did not prove to be the case. The great majority of young people who were friends of the old Chad remain friends of the new one.

Deserving of particular mention are lifelong friends Ben Oleson, Chad's best guy friend before and after the accident, and Jeri Stauss, his best friend forever. She is the one who "makes sure Chad stays included." Stauss brought him to dances, coordinated reunions and took him to leadership camps. And she is still there for him, still his best friend.

Some old friends have strayed away, but others have become close. Among them is Matt Klegin, a neighbor who formerly was an acquaintance, but now is a close, close friend. Klegin picks Chad up for school each morning and brings him home again at night. He takes him to sports events, and together they go out to eat, to shop, whatever. "If Chad needs something, Matt is there," Dave says. He feels both boys have grown as a result of their new friendship.

A new girl friend has taken the place of the old one. Chad enjoys board games, music, movies, and playing cards, especially Texas Hold 'Em. He goes to sports events and urges his former teammates on to do their best. He admits sometimes it's hard not to be out there with them. He was good, really good. He says he kept the record as his hockey team's top scorer last year, even though he only played half the season.

Pastor Keith Kolstad continues to visit once a week.

Chad is and was an avid bow hunter and fisherman. Thanks to some special friends, he got a doe this year with his brand new cross bow, a gift from U.P. Whitetails. Ken Vieth gave him a crash course in special weapon, and Tim Stauss took him out hunting. Jerry Plansky and UP Whitetails, with help from Chad's baseball teammates, planted 20 apple trees for Chad on the family's property. Chad plans to go ice fishing this winter, and enjoyed some bass fishing last summer with bass pro Mark Soletski.

Pete and Connie Hass, owners of Marinette Farm and Garden Center, kept Chad's job for him.

He works the cash register on weekends, and earning his own spending money gives him the independence he cherishes.

Lynn and Dave say Chad received excellent care at St. Vincent Hospital. They expressed particular gratitude to Dr. Walesh and Dr. Mark Gardon, a family friend who stopped daily to check Chad's progress, review test results, etc. "It was comforting to have him around," Francour said of Gardon. "He opened his home to us, shared his family time. He put explanations in our terms and told us what to expect."

"I always believed the old saying, 'It takes a community to raise a child,'" Lynn says, "but now I realize just how true that is." Family played a huge role. Older brother Brian, who had been a student at UW-Oshkosh, took a year off from college to stay home and care for Katie so their parents could stay with Chad in Green Bay. Just last week he went back to school, this time at LaCrosse. Angela, a recent graduate of a nursing school in Minneapolis, made long and frequent trips home and has been Chad's biggest advocate, Lynn says.

Chad says it's hard to sit on the sidelines as a spectator and not as a participant at sporting events. It's hard knowing he has limitations now. He says sometimes while he was in the hospital depression would set in and he wanted to kill himself. He thought that would be easier. He was afraid of losing friends. People are sometimes afraid of people with brain injuries, "they don't know what to expect."

"When a part of you dies, it's very hard," aide Roxanne Carlson agrees.

"It's only as difficult as you make it," says Chad. He is working on making it less difficult.

The accident has changed Chad in many ways. Asked what he considers the biggest change, Chad says in addition to revising some of his self esteem, his previous goals were all about sports, but now he realizes you have to rely on what you have and build on that. In the past school was just something to get through, but now he works hard to get there. His vision remains blurry at times, but his senses of hearing and smell have become stronger, more intense, Chad says.

Dave thinks his son is a better person for what he has been through. He says Chad was often described as "self confident and cocky". He was very stubborn, and now he's more pliable and willing to listen. He used to sometimes be mean to people and poke fun at them, but not any more.

Chad jokes. He says, only half joking, "Before the accident I thought my s--- didn't stink, but now I realize it kind of did."

"I miss the old Chad, but you're a keeper," his mom says.

"It doesn't only change him, it changes the whole family," Carlson comments.

Chad plans to pass along some of the things he has learned to help gain understanding for others who suffer brain injuries. He attended a Peshtigo High School class recently with Eric Lengas, who used him as a live exhibit for a report on brain injuries. He is working on a book. During first and second hour Friday, Feb. 18, Chad and Heather Bruemmer of Peshtigo will lecture Peshtigo High School students on brain injuries. Bruemmer, 37, had a brain stem injury when she was in high school.