

An iron will to survive

After his accident, Paul Hebert felt he had nothing to live for. Now he has found passion in his golf game

CURTIS STOCK
Journal Sports Writer
EDMONTON

Wet flakes from a freak September snow storm hissed as they landed on Paul Hebert's body, sprawled in the mud alongside a deserted two-lane northern Alberta highway. Only a few seconds earlier, he had been holding on to a downed power line he had been called in to repair. Now he was in a ditch, his blood boiling after 14,000 volts had coursed through his body, burning and searing him from his chest through his toes, tossing him 20 feet through the air. Hebert felt like he was in a vise, stuck inside his own body, struggling to breathe, certain he was going to die. Beside him, motionless and face down in the mud, was another lineman.

Hebert tried to move, but couldn't. He called to a third lineman asking if he knew first aid or CPR. In shock, the third lineman shook his head no.

Somehow, Hebert managed to give out directions: lift the unconscious lineman's arms above his chest; cross those arms; press down three times; then pound three times on the man's chest.

"It's not working. He's not breathing," Hebert heard the man, now close to panic, yell.

Despite the almost unbearable pain, Hebert directed the man to keep going. Push three times. Pound three times. Push. Pound.

Eventually, a spasm of a breath. Then another. Panting, the third lineman grabbed his two-way radio and yelled "Mayday. Mayday. Two linemen electrocuted."

From the other end, someone asked for their location.

"I, I, I don't know," the third lineman sputtered.

Hebert knew. He lived not far from there in Falher, a small town just south of Peace River.

Fortunately, only a few minutes later, Hebert saw a red and white pickup truck belonging to a farmer he knew, making its way along the highway.

With all the strength he had left, Hebert hollered; the farmer stopped.

An ambulance on its way for the other man, Hebert was loaded into the back of the pickup and sped to a hospital in McLennan. From there he was airlifted to the burn unit of the University of Alberta Hospital.

All Hebert could think about was Lorraine, the woman he had married only a week earlier.

That's as much as Hebert remembers. It would be three days until he would wake up again.

"I think I died," Hebert says almost 17 years later. "I remember it going grey and dark and then seeing white specks, like the snow that was still falling."

"When I woke up they told me my left foot and two fingers from my left hand had been amputated."

At first he remembers thinking maybe it was all just a bad dream. White pain told him otherwise.

It would only get worse. Two weeks later, Hebert's right hand had to be amputated as well. Another two weeks later, 15 hours of surgery attempting to save his right foot with a muscle flap transfer from his back would fail. His right foot had to be severed as well.

"All of a sudden, I realized it's done. There was no more left.

They couldn't cut any more off."

Hebert wanted to die.

"Every time they cut off another limb I lost part of my life. When there was nothing left for them to take, when all the surgeries ended, I thought my life had ended as well."

Hebert had every right to be angry, to rail loudly against all the circumstances that had conspired to leave him with no legs and only three fingers on one hand.

He could have blamed the lineman who had told him they were clear to go, that everything was all right. He certainly could have blamed the person who told a fourth lineman that it was OK to energize the line, that Hebert and his men were 40 kilometres away instead of close by.

Instead, Hebert blamed himself so unmercifully the condemnation quickly fanned into loathing.

"I hated myself for making such a stupid mistake. I felt I had thrown my life away."

"I should have asked more questions. I didn't ask what procedures he had done."

"It just didn't feel right. I had a strong doubt, a gut feeling about the whole thing. But I went ahead anyway. My instincts told me something was wrong. But I didn't listen."

Hebert spent seven weeks in the U of A's burn unit, seven more weeks in the Glenrose. Only 29 days after the last amputation — fitted with two artificial legs and a prosthesis for his right arm — he walked.

But he was far from healed. Soon he tumbled into a severe depression, a black hole so deep it felt bottomless.

"I hurt so bad that I couldn't cry anymore and I had done a lot of crying."

Not knowing how he could go on or how he was going to survive, it was left to a child to show him the way.

"I was going to rehab. They were doing some construction so there was a detour. It was the last thing I felt I needed that day."

The detour took Hebert and his wife through the Cross Cancer Institute.

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Paul Hebert, who lost both legs, one arm and two fingers off the other hand.

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"He just kept staring. I finally asked him if he wanted to touch what I had left for legs. He said

yes. Then I asked if he wanted to touch my hook. Again he said yes.

"I let him use my hook to pinch himself. He laughed. Soon there were a whole bunch of kids around me."

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“A little boy, maybe three years old, blue eyes and no hair was staring at my prosthetic legs and the prosthetic hook on my right arm. One side of the boy's cheek was puffed out. One of his eyes was bulged out. Probably leukemia. He just kept staring. I finally asked him if he wanted to touch what I had left for legs. He said yes. Then I asked if he wanted to touch my hook. Again he said yes.

I let him use my hook to pinch himself. He laughed. Soon there were a whole bunch of kids around me. When I was leaving, a nurse thanked me. She said they didn't get many laughs around there and that it was very unlikely any of those children were ever going to get out of the hospital. That's when I started living this thing called life. That's what saved me. As bad as I felt for myself, I realized I was going home.”

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"That's when I started living this thing called life. That's what saved me. As bad as I felt for myself, I realized I was going home."

"The other thing I realized was that my situation was not going to change. That I was going to be disabled for the rest of my life."

"Accept the things you cannot change, courage to change the things you can," he says, paraphrasing the Serenity Prayer.

Hebert, 56, is sitting inside the clubhouse of the Links golf course in Spruce Grove. He has just returned from hitting balls on the driving range. Soon, as a steady rain falls but deters no one, he will tee it up with several other disabled people — either also missing legs, arms and fingers or deaf — in the annual EmployAbilities golf tournament, of which Hebert was this year's honorary chair.

"What I needed was to get my passion back; my passion for life," Hebert says. "If you don't do things for passion, you wouldn't do very much, would you?"

The passion, he says, came after the detour — one he can't help but think was fated — through the Cross Cancer Institute and then a poster of Bob MacDermott he saw on a wall at the Glenrose.

"Bob inspired me," Hebert says of MacDermott, a scratch golfer who has won two Belvedere club championships against able-bodied opponents despite losing his left arm below the elbow, left leg below the knee and right thumb. Like himself, MacDermott was also electrocuted.

Hebert, who moved to St. Albert with his wife nine years ago, played golf before his accident. He has become almost fanatical since, playing two or three times a week when his public speaking engagements don't get in the way. His handicap was as low as 8.5 but he says it has "ballooned" all the way to a 12.

"That kid was my miracle; hitting a golf ball again is another miracle."

Sometimes Hebert plays with disabled people like Braden Hirsch, a paraplegic who was in a car accident when he was 19 years old in 1977 and now plays golf strapped into a power cart, with a seat that swivels so he can hit shots. Sometimes it's with Rod McKay, who had both legs amputated below the knee when he contracted a rare virus, streptococcal pneumonia.

And sometimes it's with the kind of people that more often frequent golf courses. "We call it Crips against Norms. There's not much self-pity here."

For the longest time Hebert wondered why he didn't die that day he lay in the mud in that ditch. Perhaps now he and everyone else knows. Spared to be a storyteller, Hebert is constantly relaying his mission of hope and perseverance, telling people who have become disabled to go forward and reclaim their passion.

"There's no magic. It takes great effort to survive a disability. But you know, today, I don't feel I'm that different anymore."

estock@thejournal.canwest.com

EMPLOYABILITIES

- EmployAbilities, formed in 1972, is a non-profit charitable provincial organization governed by a volunteer board of directors.
- Located in Edmonton, EmployAbilities is dedicated to promoting and enhancing employment and learning opportunities for people with disabilities.

LOCAL HOLES IN ONE

- Corey Burke joined the Lancaster Park club June 12 and one day later celebrated with his first hole-in-one, using an eight-iron on the 169-yard 16th hole.
- Colin Bentley of Sherwood Park aced his ninth hole at Coloniale on June 18, using a three-wood on the 160-yarder.
- Jim Roth smacked a six-iron 142 yards to get a hole-in-one on the fourth hole at the Camrose golf club.
- Also at Camrose, Wilma Shields used her nine-iron to ace the 100-yard ninth hole in the ladies' league play.
- Lorraine Breitreuz used a wedge to ace the 95-yard 14th hole at Coloniale last week.
- Brady Whittaker aced the 158-yard eighth hole at Northern Bear, using his nine-iron.

Sturgeon's Belbin tops in Top Flite Assistants Series

Mike Belbin of Sturgeon Valley continues to dominate the Top Flite Assistants Series, winning his third event of the year at Mill Woods. Belbin earlier won at Woodside (Airdrie) and Indian Lakes. He shot a 6-under-par 66 at Mill Woods to beat Troy Golden of Fort McMurray and Duncan McGillivray of Sandpiper by two shots. Belbin won \$880, Golden and McGillivray \$525 each. Chris Toth of Riverside finished fourth with a 3-under 69.

Tough finish for Team Canada

Mitchell Fox of Okotoks shot a four-day total

6-over-par 294 and Team Canada was a combined 7-under 857 to finish seventh at the 2006 Toyota Junior Golf World Cup in Japan.

Team Norway won the team event with a 32-under-par 832, one stroke better than Sweden. Eugene Wong of North Vancouver was the top individual Canadian, finishing 18th at 286.

Funk and juniors in New York

Andrew Funk of the Petroleum Club and three other top Canadian juniors on the Maple Leaf Tour Team Canada are in New York this week for the 54th annual East Auroa International Junior Mas-

ters tournament. Funk, 17, is joined by Zach MacDougall of Coquitlam, B.C.; Ryan Terdik of Mt. Pleasant, Ont.; and Josh Bamberger of Waterloo, Ont.

Tee it up for charity

Bev Facey Falcons will hold their fourth annual golf tournament Sept. 6 at Belvedere with proceeds going towards the school's football program, including the Millennium Leadership Scholarship Fund. Honorary chair is CFL hall of famer Tom Wilkinson. To register call Gord at 467-8100 or email him at g.kagel@openborderlogistics.com.