



Saturday, Apr. 25, 2009

James Burns: Buhach Colony's Baker on road to recovery after diving accident

They told his mom it was close to impossible. That her son, Eric Baker, had a 3 percent chance to recover fully, to really be Eric again. "Six months ago, the doctors told me he'd have no movement from the neck down," said Michelle Hafer, whose cheerleader spirit belied her tired eyes. "They told me that he was a quadriplegic."

Indeed, recovery seemed out of the question.

Not after the spill Eric took into the pool at the DeLong water polo tournament at Johansen High, crashing uncontrollably into its cement bottom during warmups, landing squarely on his head.

And certainly not after breaking two vertebrae in his neck and shattering his skull as if it were made of porcelain.

"Of course, all of this would happen to me," the Buhach Colony senior said from the comfort of his living room, six months after the horror show.

"I'm kind of accident-prone, so, yeah..."

"It had to be me."

ERIC CRADLED the silver Ibanez guitar under his right arm, positioned his fingers along the strings and began to pluck slowly.

Three percent chance, huh? Whatevah!

He played a small sample of a tune he had memorized, before gushing over the axe he had window-shopped at Ingram's for months.

"I would go there so much just to play this guitar that the dude working there knew me. He remembered who I was," he said, pulling on a black hat -- bill tilted up and to the side -- to complete the alternative rock look.

"The frets on this guitar are smaller, which is perfect because I have small hands."

He paused, repositioning his fingers on the neck. He started to pull a string and then stopped...

"This guitar is freaking awesome."

Before his accident, Eric would lie in his bed and play himself to sleep, staring at musical notes as they danced across his ceiling.

These days, his fingers don't move fast enough for his brain. Or his liking.

"I still remember how to play, but I can't get it all down yet," he said. "I remember so many songs. I can't wait until I get to play again."

They said it couldn't be done. That Eric Baker had a 3 percent chance to recover fully, to really be Eric again.

HE SAT there in his living room, dangling his left foot in mid-air, grunting as it twitched and moved maybe a half-centimeter.

See, he says.

Did you see that?

You did, or at least you thought you did, because medical miracles like this are rare in this sometimes cruel and unapologetic world.

So he shakes it again.

"The surgeon couldn't believe I could feel and move my toes," he said. "He had to call the other doctors in to see it."

Eric surprised even himself. In January, he was sitting in the shower after weeks of no progress, lamenting his condition when...

The hamstring in his left leg began to twitch. He could feel it. This was real.

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HE GRABBED a sprinkled donut off the kitchen counter, dunked it in a glass of milk and wedged it into his mouth.

"Cinnamon rolls are good," he said, "but I really love donuts."

As he craned his head back to take a bite, you could see the four-inch scar that runs vertically along his throat -- one of many keepsakes from that fateful October afternoon.

Doctors used the opening to place a plate and four screws in his neck. The hardware holds together the C6 and C7 vertebrae. An additional three plates and 12 screws were also inserted on the right side of his head, the scar hidden by his skater-boy haircut.

"My friends say I'm part robot now," he said.



Merced Sun-Star

SUN-STAR PHOTO BY MARCI STENBERG Baker broke his neck after a diving accident in October.

It was feared he might be paralyzed, but in recent months has shown signs of progress. He can wiggle his toes, move his arms, but more importantly, his spirit and wit have made a full recovery. He loves to play the guitar.



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NEWS FLASH: Six months after his horrific diving accident, Eric Baker is still Eric Baker -- witty and sharp, funny and charismatic.

The only difference in Eric now is physical. Purely physical.

The Buhach Colony senior is a slightly thinner version than the one grinning from ear-to-ear in the family photo hanging above the mantle.

He's the tallest and youngest of four sons; the only one left in the Hafer household.

"My brother Chris comes over to mow the lawn for me," Eric noted. "I told him I'll push the lawn mower ... if he pushes me."

Hilarity on wheels.

Eric is confined to a wheelchair as he works to regain the strength and range in his lower extremities.

"Right now, this is temporary. I'm not handicapped -- I'm injured," he said, moments before he'd pop a wheelie in his backyard.

"People look at me like, 'Oh, what the heck?' or 'He's so brave.' I don't care about any of that.

"I know I'll be walking."

You'd be a fool to bet against him, too.

Baker has made amazing strides since leaving the care of the University of California, San Francisco medical staff in November.

With the help of Anberry Rehabilitation Hospital, Project Walk -- a spinal cord injury recovery center in Carlsbad -- and a swimmer's pedigree, Baker's body has bullied through that 3 percent barrier.

"They said he'd never walk again, but he's already exceeded most of the goals I had for him," said Jessica Cahill, a doctor of physical therapy at Anberry.

"When somebody has an athletic mindframe, a competitive spirit, it pushes them to do more.

"You can tell the athletes from the nonathletes. Eric has a goal and he's shooting to get there."

His major breakthrough came on Feb. 24, after a full day's worth of exercise with Project Walk therapists.

Suddenly, he could wiggle his toes and move his legs.

Baker will make two more trips to Project Walk over the summer -- after he graduates with his classmates -- and has already consulted his neurosurgeon about a new diagnosis.

Suffice to say, the outlook isn't so bleak anymore. There are preliminary plans to put Baker back on his feet in braces and crutches.

"His plan is to stand up and accept his diploma at graduation," Cahill said.

Three percent chance?

Ha!

"They told me he'd never walk again," Michelle said. "It's going to be a long road. We've got a lot of work ahead of us, but we'll get there.

"Anything he wants to do, he can do it. Just right now, he has to do things a little differently.

"The end result is happiness -- happiness with himself and where he's at. But I know he'll be walking again. And we won't give up."

They said it couldn't be done. That Eric had a 3 percent chance to really be Eric again.

But with a twitch here, a melody there and donut crumbles on his lap...

Eric is proving that he hasn't gone anywhere.

James Burns is sports editor of the Sun-Star. He can be reached at jburns@mercedsun-star.com.

Timeline of Events

Oct. 18, 2008

4:30 p.m.: Accident at Johansen High School during DeLong Tournament.

7:30 p.m.: Rushed into emergency surgery for a epidural hematoma in his frontal lobe.

1:00 a.m.: Out of surgery and admitted into ICU at Memorial Hospital.

Oct. 20-23, 2008

Heliflighted to UCSF and admitted to ICU. Surgery on his C6-C7 fractured vertebrae.

Oct. 24, 2008

Left lung collapses. Remains inabated with max oxygen.

Oct. 25, 2008

Right lung collapses. Antibiotics administered.

Oct. 27, 2008

Hours away from having to do a trach when right lung starts to clear.

Nov. 5, 2008

Transferred to Valley Children's Hospital.

Dec. 19, 2008

Discharged. Home after two months in the hospital.

Jan. 6, 2009

Returned to Buhach Colony to finish his senior year.

Feb. 4, 2009

Started physical and occupational therapy with Anberry Rehabilitation Hospital in Atwater.

Feb. 23, 2008

Went to Project Walk in Carlsbad for five days.

To Date

Remains in physical therapy at Anberry, where Jessica Cahill is incorporating the TYT program he learned at Project Walk into the therapy that Eric does three times a week.

Up next

Another Project Walk visit, scheduled for June 15-19.

Forever Walk

WHAT: A cinnamon roll fundraiser to help Eric Baker with medical costs. You can buy a dozen rolls for \$15, two dozen for \$25 and three for \$35. To place an order, call (209) 384-1234.