



BRIAN'S CURVE- BALL

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

NOTHING'S TOO
HARD
FOR GOD

AS Brian Stewart drove to his home in Naperville, Ill., from classes at the College of DuPage on May 11, 2004, he felt a sense of accomplishment. The baseball season had ended the day before, and Stewart, as a freshman relief pitcher, helped the team advance to within one game of the community college national championship.

Stewart, a southpaw with a mean curveball, entertained notions of turning pro after college.

But as he drove along at 45 miles per hour, a minivan suddenly swerved into the intersection and hit Stewart's Mitsubishi Eclipse virtually head-on. The car's hood crumpled like an accordion. The seat belt locked up. Stewart's head and neck whipped back violently.

God is in control

After the impact, Stewart tried to reach down to open the door — but his hand wouldn't budge. In fact, he couldn't move anything.

Immediately, Stewart wondered whether he had suffered permanent paralysis. But rather than panic, the



Brian Stewart will marry fiancée Brytne Hunter, who stayed by his side throughout his ordeal.

lifelong churchgoer sensed God's calming presence.

"Sitting in a car paralyzed from the neck down as a 19-year-old student is not something I had dreamed about," Stewart says. "But I had faith to know God was in control and He would continue to work through any circumstances."

Paramedics extracted Stewart from the wreckage and transported him to a nearby hospital. Dr. Michael Caron, one of the foremost neurosurgeons in the nation,

performed two operations the day of the crash.

Family, friends, church youth, deacons and pastors gathered in the intensive care unit waiting room throughout the day as Stewart endured a six-hour surgery, then a five-hour procedure. Caron skillfully rebuilt shattered bones, inserted a metal plate and relieved the pressure on the athletic youth's spinal cord. Around 100 people came to pray for Stewart's recovery, so many that some had to stand outside.

Brian's pastor, Randal Ross



Brian Stewart had high hopes of a professional baseball career before the crash. But with the support and prayers of family members and friends, he amazed doctors who didn't think he would walk again with an amazing rehabilitation schedule. Stewart (left) even returned to the mound to pitch another game for his college team.



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of Calvary Church (AG) in Naperville, walked the emergency room halls and shared encouraging words of faith and God's miracle-working power with Brian's parents, Bill and Betty.

“Why shouldn't a miracle happen to us?” Ross asked Betty, his assistant at the church. “God loves Brian as much as anybody else.”

After the second surgery, Caron emerged around midnight with bleak news for Bill and Betty: Brian had broken vertebrae in his neck and a bruised spinal cord. The doctor predicted the honor student faced the rest of his life as a quadriplegic.

“It was as if an earthquake hit his neck,” Caron told the Stewarts. “If you want to pray for a miracle, pray that Brian will be able to move one finger so he can maneuver a wheelchair.” Caron estimated

Brian had only a 5 percent chance of even being able to lift a finger to operate a joystick on a mobilized wheelchair.

“Our God only needs a 5 percent chance,” Bill Stewart, a field representative for the Christian Broadcasting Network, told the neurosurgeon.

Waking up the next day with his body connected to an intensive care unit respirator, Stewart methodically manipulated a pointer between his nearly motionless fingers on an alphabet chart before him, spelling out PARALYZED in a question to his parents. Betty relayed the doctor's grim prognosis. Letter by letter, Brian slowly spelled out GOD'S WILL and smiled at his mother.

One foot in front of the other

Although expectant of a miraculous healing, Stewart nevertheless had peace about his present condition. He trusted in God's sovereignty, and felt confident he could face life whether he walked again or not.

That day Bill walked down a hall at the hospital with Brian's girlfriend, Brytne Hunter. As

Brian lay motionless in the intensive care unit, Bill told Brytne she shouldn't feel any obligation to remain committed to a quadriplegic.

Brytne vowed to love Brian no matter what, and began a vigil at his bedside that stretched from days to weeks to months.

Four days after the collision, Stewart began to sense his muscles twitching again. Caron quickly summoned a couple of physical therapists to help Stewart sit up. Six days following the crash, with two therapists supporting him, Stewart stood up, and promptly fainted from the experience.

For the next three months, mostly at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, Stewart learned how to walk again. For eight hours of intense therapy every day, he had to consciously think about each step, calculating how much weight to put on each foot.

The life-changing wreck scuttled Stewart's dreams of being a professional baseball pitcher. His damaged right ankle won't allow him to lift his foot as high as he should, his right hand has limited mobility and he's lost temperature sensation on much of the left side of his body.

Yet his miraculous recovery has amazed medical personnel. Therapists couldn't believe his rapid progress. Stewart not only walks without the aid of a walker or cane, he can even run a few yards.

Last summer, Stewart fulfilled a quest by returning to the mound to competitively throw

a baseball one more time. He defied the diagnosis of medical professionals by pitching four innings of a game for the College of DuPage team. The gutsy performance earned Stewart the Amateur Sports Comeback Player of the Year Award from the Hit and Pitch Club of Chicago.

Stewart is now a junior at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Following the crash, he switched his major to physical therapy from journalism. Eventually Stewart wants to obtain a doctorate in physical therapy and help treat people who have

suffered sports injuries. The accident also has inspired Brian's older sister, Becky, to work toward a doctorate in physical therapy.

The defining moment of Stewart's life came as he sat in a crumpled automobile, unable to move. His faith tested, he optimistically determined to walk by faith, if not by legs.

“I didn't have to worry about the future — either the next day or 10 years down the road,” recalls Stewart, now 22. “I could entrust my entire life to God. God is more powerful than any accident.”

“Our son didn't hear the devastating news from the doctors and nurses describing the sad future for his life,” Betty Stewart says. “He didn't read the charts that labeled him a quadriplegic. He believed in God.”

Brytne Hunter has remained by Stewart's side. She no longer is his girlfriend. Now she is Stewart's fiancée. They plan to wed July 7. **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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