

Learning to Live With Paralysis For Paul Hopkins and His Family, It's a Whole New World

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It was as satisfying a win as a football team could hope for. On Sept. 30, the junior varsity team at Fairfax County's Hayfield Secondary School beat rival West Springfield 53-20, the most points the Hawks scored in a game all season.

But Hayfield's players will remember that clear, warm night more for a loss they suffered. Linebacker Paul Hopkins, a 16-year-old sophomore from Lorton, tackled a West Springfield player helmet-first, then dropped to the ground and did not get up.

"I remember running down the field during the third quarter, and I hit this kid who fumbled the ball," Paul said recently. "After that, it felt like somebody took a blowtorch from my neck right down my back."

Paul was taken to Inova Fairfax Hospital, accompanied by his mother, Tammy Hopkins, and his stepfather, Anthony Jordan. Both parents had been at the game, celebrating Tammy Hopkins's 45th birthday. She did not see what happened, but Jordan saw the tackle and watched Paul go down, then try unsuccessfully to move.

"The hospital ran tests," Hopkins recalled, "and then they came back and told us he broke the C-5 vertebra in his neck. Then and there they called in surgeons. They told us that Paul had injured his spine, and he would be paralyzed."

Since that September night, Paul Hopkins has not been able to stand, let alone walk. He spent weeks at a rehabilitation hospital in Atlanta until coming back to Lorton to spend the holidays with his family. He begins the new year facing an uncertain future, returning to Atlanta for additional weeks of therapy that will help him adjust to physical as well as mental challenges. Meanwhile, Paul's injury has been felt deeply in the Hayfield community.

"What happened to Paul shook up the football program tremendously," said Billy Pugh, Hayfield's football coach. "I don't think you [the community] ever recover from something like this. During the moment of silence [at school] every morning, the first thing that pops into my head is that the good Lord will take care of him and he'll improve."

A handsome, self-possessed young man, Paul has lost nearly 50 pounds since the accident and now weighs 135. But his therapists said his athletic training and competitiveness have given Paul the mental toughness that is his best and most needed asset right now.

"He knows how difficult it is to get ready for practice, for the game," said Cheryl Linden, Paul's counselor at the Shepherd Center in Atlanta. "He knows how his body moves because he has spent most of his life doing athletics. The discipline it has given him provides that extra edge."

He is, as his therapists and family describe him, a talker and someone who likes to joke around. Seated in a lightweight titanium wheelchair, he is dressed neatly in a white T-shirt, blue jeans and new black Nikes. The sport gloves on his hands prevent calluses that could develop from pushing his wheelchair. A timer resting in his lap rings every 30 minutes to remind him to shift his weight.

"It's to keep me from getting sores on my butt," he said. "One of the things I've learned is that my skin is really sensitive. I also can't control my body temperature any more. I get very cold."

His arm is frequently draped around his mother's shoulder, as she is never far from his side. Both wear yellow "LIVESTRONG" wristbands, the motto of the Lance Armstrong Foundation for cancer survivors.

"This has been a whole new world for us," said Hopkins. "I've never been around so many people in wheelchairs in my life. But this happened, and we're going to deal with it. In my heart I believe Paul will walk again."

Frightening First Days

A helmet-first tackle like Paul's is the most common cause of spinal cord injuries in a football accident. Wise Young, chairman of the Department of Cell Biology and Neuroscience at Rutgers University, said Paul's injury could have occurred because he lowered his head while making the tackle, hitting the other player with the top of his head.

"When that happens," said Young, "the player's full body weight compresses his spinal column, or backbone, causing one of the vertebrae to fracture. If the broken bone protrudes into the spinal canal, it can crush the spinal cord and stop all communication between the brain and any part of the body below the injury site."

Paul's neck injury to the fifth cervical vertebra, as Hopkins and Jordan learned, meant their son retained movement in his biceps, along with the ability to breathe, shrug his shoulders and turn his head. All other movement in his trunk and legs was gone.

Following surgery at Fairfax to stabilize Paul's neck, a social worker recommended transferring him to a rehabilitation hospital. Hopkins chose the Shepherd Center, a catastrophic care hospital that treats spinal cord and brain injuries, multiple sclerosis and other neuromuscular illnesses. The center also has a large adolescent therapy program.

"The goal at Fairfax was to get him stable and to get him to rehab immediately. Otherwise, with this type of injury, they were worried his arms would lock up like this," Hopkins said, crossing her arms over her chest and clasping her shoulders. "We had to get him out of a trauma unit and into rehab right away."

Hopkins said the early days were terrifying. "Paul knew the night he got to the hospital that he couldn't feel anything. He asked if he was ever going to be able to walk again. We said, 'We'll have to wait and see.' "

Paul said his grandfather, Frank Gibson, "cried until there was no more salt in his tears" when he learned the extent of his grandson's injuries.

After that first night, Paul lost track of everything for more than three weeks. He didn't know he had been moved to Atlanta on Oct. 8, or that he had a second surgery so that he would be able to hold his head upright. For nearly a month, he was on a ventilator and needed a feeding tube.

"He was so full of medicine and so sick," said Hopkins, who slept in a chair next to Paul's bed during those first weeks. "Being on a ventilator, he was unable to talk. It was frustrating because we couldn't understand him. And he's a talker."

"My nurse Deedee told me where I was," Paul said. "She asked me what month it was, and I didn't know. Then she asked me what year it was, and I thought it was 2005. I was kind of scared because I didn't know how I got there."

A Rigorous Rehabilitation

"There" was the Shepherd Center, a push-the-limits intensive rehabilitation hospital that says its

goal is "propelling [its patients] back into a productive, fulfilling life." Being in a wheelchair is no impediment or excuse.

"We break the norm," said Matt Edens, the recreation therapist on the 10-member adolescent team, who worked with Paul and five other wheelchair-bound teenagers. "We're very goal-oriented. We ask them, 'If you weren't at the hospital, what would you be doing?' We take the kids camping, fishing, hunting. We go swimming, to the mall, to movies and restaurants. We take them to Atlanta Falcons games. We even went to watch the Falcons practice and then ate lunch with them. There's no outing we haven't done. We have specialists who find ways to adapt everything."

"The only reason anyone spends time in bed here once therapy begins is if they're sick," said Laurie Cramer, Paul's occupational therapist. "Our goal is to get them up and out for eight hours a day."

"When I first got to Shepherd, I wouldn't talk," Paul said. "I was in what they call a 'first week depression.' Then I started making friends."

"He's a character," said Sue Sheehy, the nurse who evaluated Paul and made the admissions arrangements to move him to Shepherd from the hospital in Fairfax. "He is so spunky, a wiseguy, giving everybody a hard time, but I love him to death. He is the kind of kid who is going to do well, because he deals with a lot of situations with humor, and that's great. He has become very endearing to every one of his therapists."

Paul and I have a very good relationship, because I would tell him, 'Be ready for me, because I am going to kick your butt tomorrow,' " said Cathi Dugger, his physical therapist. "A lot of the kids like that kind of tough-love attitude."

Dugger and Paul's doctors and therapists worked aggressively to help him strengthen muscles he could still use, but also looked for new signs of recovery.

"We play a waiting game to see what's going to show up," said Linden, Paul's counselor. "The more you get back soon [after your injury], the better your prognosis. Paul can't make anything come back faster, and we can't give him back something that's not there. But even if we see a little bit of movement, we can capitalize on it and make it work better."

"It's a good sign that his doctors are seeing movement below the injury site," said Young of Rutgers. "If he has some C-7 movement, this controls his triceps, meaning he can lock his elbows. That will allow him to transfer from his bed to a wheelchair. C-8 controls his wrist flexors, so while he may not have good finger movement, he will be able to hold a cup or type."

'Nobody Signs Up for This'

Four days before Christmas, Paul left the Shepherd Center and returned home in a wheelchair. Hopkins said her son was ready to go, both mentally and physically. One of the last hospital outings before leaving Atlanta was a visit to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport to practice boarding a plane.

According to Paul, the trip back to Northern Virginia went smoothly. He and his parents moved in temporarily with his maternal grandparents, Frank and Joan Gibson, whose Lorton home is more wheelchair-accessible. He sleeps in a basement suite whose walls his grandparents have covered with photos of their athlete grandson, who joined ROTC and played basketball and football for his school and in the Fort Belvoir youth sports program.

"We're going to have to find a new place to live," Hopkins said. "We want to stay in the same school district."

A visit to Hayfield was number one on Paul's list of things to do. He had been in constant contact with friends and also kept up with schoolwork, earning good grades while at Shepherd.

"We have an academic coordinator who requests work from the school," said Sheehy. "We fax class work back and forth. Most kids are right on target when they go back to school."

"The first night I got back, I went to a basketball game," Paul said. "A couple of kids cried. They said it was hard to see me like this."

Linden said: "It's a really hard situation, particularly when you're talking about a level of injury such as Paul's. You've got to hang on to hope as the cushion that gets you through this. My job is to weave some realism into the situation without taking their hope away. Disability changes a life, but it doesn't mean a life can't be lived. What is Paul going to make of his life now? He gets to decide that -- they, as a family, get to decide that."

It is his strong and united family, according to Linden, that is another of Paul's greatest assets. "It's an important key to how successful he'll be in getting through something like this," she said.

Paul's mother moved to Atlanta and his stepfather and grandparents went for extended visits and for training to help them learn to care for him.

"I felt like I lived down there," said Gibson, his grandfather.

"I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me," Paul said. But he said he has been horrified at what he called the "rude treatment" he has received since being in a wheelchair. "I hope people read this story. They need to learn. We can do as much as people who are walking."

Linden agreed with Paul and admired his gutsy attitude. "What does feeling sorry for him get him? I told him, 'If I feel sorry for you, I end up pitying you.' His disability is part of him, but it is not all of him."

Though the initial stages of his physical rehabilitation are under his belt, the mental and emotional aspects will continue and, said Linden, are the most daunting challenges he will face.

"Nobody signs up for this," she said. "You don't get to practice. I spend a lot of time with kids like Paul. The hardest part of his rehab hasn't even begun. It's doable. But that doesn't mean that 20 years down the road that he's not going to say, 'This really stinks.' "

On Tuesday, Paul will return to Atlanta with his mother for four to six weeks as an outpatient learning more about adapting to daily living. "This gets him ready to go home for the long haul," said Sheehy. "He'll set his own goals, decide what he wants to achieve."

"What I'd like right now more than anything," Paul said, "is to be able to stand up."