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Two months after he was gravely injured wrestling, Dan Bishop will attend his UB graduation. He says the experience has given him new perspective. "I just appreciate the little things in life," he says.

Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News

UB wrestler gains new hold on life

Critically injured student-athlete will meet his goal of walking across stage at graduation

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When Dan Bishop was in the hospital after breaking his neck during a wrestling match in March, he was asked what his goal was for rehabilitation.

"Walk across the stage at graduation," the University at Buffalo student replied.

What his second goal was?

"That's it," Bishop responded. "Walk across the stage at graduation."

He'll get that chance today.

Bishop will walk across the stage with his UB classmates during commencement today, a remarkable feat for someone who was this close to being paralyzed for life — or dead — just two short months ago.

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Bishop, 23, was competing in the Mid-American Conference Tournament at Central Michigan on March 6, when a move by his opponent dislocated his C5 and C6 vertebrae.

Bishop thought it was just a stinger, a pinched nerve that gave him temporary loss of feeling in his arms. But it was much more.

Not taking any chances, UB trainer Allison Gammel and medical staff kept Bishop still and treated him at the scene until the 5-foot-4, 125-pound wrestler could be transported to a nearby hospital.

As inflammation around his spinal cord worsened, Bishop was flown by helicopter to St. Mary's Hospital of Michigan, a top trauma center in the Midwest, which — luck would have it — had one of the top neurosurgeons living nearby.

Dr. E. Malcolm Field and his team fused the vertebrae and inserted a plate with titanium screws to support Bishop's spine.

If medical staff had waited to act until the next morning, as originally planned, Bishop may have suffered irreversible paralysis and spent the rest of his life on a ventilator.

"I didn't think he had much of a chance," Field told The Buffalo News in March. "Our impression was that here was a kid that we either do this now, or you might as well never do it. It was very close."

A few days later, Bishop slowly recovered feeling and movement in his upper body, then movement in his left hand, then movement in his foot. On March 18, he was taken to Sunnyview Rehabilitation Hospital in Schenectady, about a 75-minute drive from his family in Whitehall, near Lake George.

Bishop threw himself into rehab with the mentality of a wrestler against his opponent.

He said he woke up each morning with the same determination: "Bring it on."

"I pushed myself as hard as I could, and the therapist was like 'You're going too hard,' " Bishop said this week during an interview in the UB wrestling room. "It was a fun challenge. It still is, as odd as that sounds."

Bishop gradually moved from wheelchair to walker to taking steps on his own. Only once did he feel a little down, he said. That was when he saw a video of himself walking and realized how far he still had to go.

But Bishop persisted and was discharged from the hospital on April 13, about three months ahead of schedule.

"They said I'm the poster child of Sunnyview now," Bishop said. "They're just shocked I'm even walking again."

But not those who know Bishop.

"He's got a huge attitude for a little guy," said his wrestling coach, Jim Beichner. "He's got something to

prove, and he's not afraid to mix it up."

Bishop surprised all his teammates when he showed up to the wrestling banquet last month. It was an emotional return.

"He's got a job to do, and he's got to get it done," Beichner said. "It's pretty amazing."

The experience will forever change Bishop's perspective.

"I just appreciate the little things in life," he said. "I just appreciate waking up and doing whatever you want everyday, being independent. It makes me want to help people more, and it got me to be more religious. I wasn't religious before, but it got me to believe in something."

Bishop is going to stick around Buffalo for a while.

In fact, before he can officially graduate, he still needs to complete two papers for one of his classes. But that's a far better alternative than withdrawing for the spring semester and earning his sociology degree in December, which was what he originally thought he would have to do.

His doctors caution him that his recovery could hit a wall.

Bishop still walks slowly and deliberately, and he must wear a neck brace, at least for a little while longer. (He plans to keep it, because it seems to get him some attention with the ladies.)

"The biggest thing we're working on is my hand. It's weak," he said as he tried to flex his right hand. "At first, I couldn't even hold a pen."

Bishop still can't do much of any work, but is hoping to receive disability, and help out where he can with the UB wrestling team.

If anything, he can be the team's motivator, its inspiration.

Will he ever wrestle again?

"It's a question I've been asking the doctor at every appointment," Bishop said. "But I think I will. That's one goal of my goals. I won't be able to go live or as hard as I could, but I'll be able to show some moves."

But for now, he'll just be thankful to be walking across the stage today at graduation.

His parents, Norm and Kathy, will be there. So will his sister, April.

"I love UB," Bishop said. "It was one of the best decisions I made to come here, and it was my goal to make it to graduation. I'm so excited."

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