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Severely-injured Buffalo wrestler graduates as inspiration to others

Story Highlights

Senior Dan Bishop is recovering from severe injuries suffered two months ago. The wrestler was paralyzed from the neck down, but now can walk on his own. Bishop's recovery is regarded as remarkable since he landed headfirst on the mat.

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AMHERST, N.Y. (AP) -- With the neck brace partially hidden by the collar of his bright blue graduation gown, Buffalo wrestler Dan Bishop wondered why every college graduate across the country shouldn't deserve this type of attention.

That's when Bishop was reminded not everyone has endured a life-threatening trauma that's turned into a life-altering experience over the past two months. The senior went from being paralyzed from the neck down, after sustaining a severe spinal cord injury during a wrestling meet, to being able to walk on his own.

"Well, I wouldn't change anything, really," Bishop said Sunday. "It's a blessing, honestly. It's a blessing in disguise. It's a new path in my life and a better one."

The sociology major took several memorable steps down that path by crossing the red carpet at the school's commencement ceremony without the aid of a wheelchair or walker. That was exactly what Bishop had vowed to do shortly upon waking up in a hospital bed after having emergency surgery to repair a fracture between two vertebrae and damage to a major artery.

Bishop walked confidently -- and without any sign of a limp -- down the aisle and across the floor in front of the main stage, with his parents, friends and teammates cheering him on.

"Oh yeah, it was great," Bishop said after receiving his graduation pin and shaking hands with University at Buffalo president John Simpson. "It's hard to put into words. I'm so emotional."

The only thing missing were the tears he expected to flow. But Bishop joked that he was more worried about having to go to the restroom after sitting through the two-plus hour ceremony.

Bishop's speedy recovery is regarded as remarkable since he landed headfirst on the mat while competing in a 125-pound semifinal match at the Mid-American Conference championships at Central Michigan University on March 6. Attended to immediately by team trainers and emergency officials, Bishop lost feeling in all of his extremities before he was loaded on the stretcher.

Bishop was taken to a hospital in Mount Pleasant, Mich., before a decision was made to transport him to a regional trauma hospital in Saginaw, where the wrestler received specialized treatment. It just so happened that elite neurosurgeon E. Malcolm Field was on call that night.

Upon reviewing test results, Field ruled that Bishop required immediate surgery. He drove to the hospital to lead the operation, during which the two vertebrae were fused together and a metal plate and permanent screws inserted to support the wrestler's spine.

Following surgery, Field told Bishop's parents that their son would likely get 95 percent of his motion back.

No one ever predicted Bishop would be on his feet so quickly.

"We didn't know if I'd be walking at all within a year," Bishop said, recalling what he was told when he first began therapy at a rehabilitation center in Schenectady, N.Y., near his home in Whitehall.

"I said, 'I'm going to do it, you watch,'" Bishop said of walking at graduation. "I got rid of the walker and here we are."

Bishop is not fully recovered. He's still attending intensive therapy sessions and will learn in a few weeks whether he'll have to continue wearing the neck brace for another three months. Bishop's right side is still weak and he has difficulty writing or holding a pen. There are also issues with some internal organs.

Bishop remains upbeat, believing he has a second chance at life. Rather than pursue a lucrative job in New York City, as he was planning to do after graduation, he intends to return to Buffalo and mentor athletes and speak to high school students.

"Before the injury, it was all about myself. I had to get a good job. I had to make money," he said.

And now, it's his goal to help youngsters by showing them "the opportunities they have and appreciating the little things they have in life," Bishop said. He's particularly been touched by the tremendous amount of support he's received from friends and people from around the world who have sent messages through his Facebook page.

"Everywhere you look nowadays, you see the negative of people ... and to actually see the good side of people, it's life-changing," Bishop said. "It's beautiful. There's so much good in the world today, and a lot of it doesn't get exposed."

Norm Bishop wasn't surprised by his son's determination or his new take on life.

"Thumbs up," said Bishop, who manages a marina in Whitehall. "He's always gone in the right direction."

Dan is the second oldest of Bishop's four children, two of whom are adopted. And Norm and his wife Kathy have served as foster parents for dozens of others.

It hasn't been lost on Bishop that his son's recovery might be some type of karmic payback for the people his family's helped.

"I've always believed in a higher power," Norm Bishop said. "What goes around, comes around. Yeah. Absolutely. Thank God."

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