

“Doctor on the Mend: Faith Defines Recovery for David Wolf”

Story by Pat Andrews, Courtesy of *The News-Herald*

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When bad things happen to good people, it can test the faith of all of us. What possible reason could there be that David Wolf, described over and over by patients and friends as one of the most caring of physicians, would suddenly have his working world as he knew it come to a sudden and shocking end in July on a go-kart track in Ohio?

It took but a split second last summer to take Wolf, a prominent obstetrics/gynecology specialist who has delivered more than 10,000 babies, to be in a desperate fight for his own life.

The question, “Why him? Why Dr. Wolf?” was echoed from his birthplace in Indiana to his practice in Trenton and back down to Toledo.

Surprisingly, he blames no one but himself.

The accident that rendered him a paraplegic, unable to move from the waist down, was, in a way, fate. He is the first to say it was the result of his passion for a sport he enjoyed in his youth and took up again two years ago at the age of 52, over the strong objection of Anita, his wife of 30 years.

“I’ve always been adrenaline-charged and when I decide to do something, it is fully and completely,” he said.

Wolf said that a friend, Danny Doyle, was the instigator in getting him back in a racing mode—something he had not done for nearly 40 years.

“My wife was not for it, not in the least,” Wolf said, jokingly. “I found ways, speaking engagements and lectures to pay for my hobby so she would allow me to play.

“The very first year I was semi-successful, but I wanted more, naturally. I bought my own kart, got a first-class paint job, and the next year I was leading the division almost to the end.

“Now, you must realize that I was 53 at the time and the average age of the drivers was around 25.”

Wolf might have captured the top trophy prize in his division that year had it not been for a family crisis. His mother, living in another state, required emergency surgery and he flew to be with her rather than on the track.

When the 2001 season rolled around, Wolf had added two seasoned mechanics to his team and he was going for gold.

The July 29 race was a test of sorts for a more grueling 500-mile endurance race later in the season. No points were involved—it was strictly for practice.

Wolf was, quite frankly, the leader of the pack.

“I never once went out on a track to lose,” he said. “I always wanted to be No. 1. But I also

knew the dangers.”

That particular race on asphalt was in an alcohol-powered kart, rather than gasoline-fueled—the same format expected for the 500-mile race.

“I remember being third back when the two drivers in front of me began spinning,” he said. “I had to make a quick and critical decision.

“Going an estimated 70 miles per hour, my only chance was to go to the outside of the cars. I hit the cement retainer wall.

“As I look back at it now, I feel that if I had not taken that course, I probably would have killed one or both of the other drivers, or severely injured them.”

Wolf’s back was broken when the brake rotor behind him punctured his seat. He also suffered extensive spinal cord injuries and broke eight ribs.

Track officials instantly went into action and the ambulance on site transported the doctor within a matter of minutes to the emergency room at nearby St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center in Toledo.

Wolf’s wife was spending the afternoon at home and received a call that her husband had been injured and taken to the hospital. Because their son, Brad, 20, was using one of the family cars, she suddenly found herself without transportation from their residence in Trenton.

A family friend, Dr. Robert Sauter, was called. He drove Anita Wolf to Toledo.

Wolf said his wife was unprepared for what she was told.

“I’m thankful every day that Bob was with her,” he said. “She imagined that I had a broken bone or two.”

Brad Wolf arrived a few hours later, as did the couple’s daughter, Raquel, 23.

“I’m told that my daughter fainted at the news and my son just beat at a wall,” Wolf said. “They were filled with such emotion at what had happened to their father. I cannot imagine the pain I caused them.”

The physician was on a respirator and his lungs were filling with blood. It was two days before surgeons were able to put their skills to the test to begin to repair their colleague.

A six-hour surgery placed a titanium rod from his shoulders to his waist.

When word of the accident reached patients—current and former—the phone calls and letters began flooding the family home and the office.

Wolf estimated that he received more than 1,500 expressions of cheer.

“How do you thank that many people?” he asked.

The doctors at St. Vincent determined that Wolf could be released after a two-week stay. But the facility had been his comfort zone, where his needs were taken care of by staff, not family.

Now, he had to face a new challenge.

“I knew that I had the courage to press on and I did,” he said. “I chose the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan in Detroit for what would be four weeks of intensive training.”

One of the main reasons Wolf selected that facility was the reputation of one of its staff members.

“Another physician—Dr. Edward Nieshoff—is a quadriplegic,” Wolf said. “Not only could he relate to me and answer more personal questions that I had, he demonstrated a symbol that there is hope.”

Each day brings a new experience and a new facet to Wolf’s life. It takes him more than 2½

hours to get up from his bed, shower and shave.

“I was the ultimate workaholic, putting in days that extended well past midnight in an effort to see patients and give them my full attention,” he said.

“I can remember one instance where I almost missed an early morning surgery that my daughter was having on her knee. I had completely worked through the night. At that point, my staff and my wife said the after-midnight hours had to stop except in an emergency.”

Wolf said he always has been the type of person who is adrenaline-driven and requires little sleep, sometimes less than four hours a night.

“That has all changed,” he said. “Everything is an effort, but I feel there are reasons for everything, and mentally I want to be the positive person I was before the accident.”

Wolf returned Jan. 14 to a practice he shares with two other physicians, just blocks from Riverside Osteopathic Hospital.

He saw eight patients that day—all current—and it brought him great satisfaction.

“Yes, I already miss the exuberant feeling one gets when a delivery is imminent, and I used to race down the alley behind the building to get to the hospital,” he said.

Wolf has made a decision not to take a paycheck from the practice.

“I have disability insurance and I don’t feel that it is fair to my fellow doctors at this point,” he said.

Whether or not there will be new patients in Wolf’s future is an unknown. He said that when an individual calls the office, the staff explains his limitations.

That possibly is the only thing that has brought a touch of sadness to the doctor. He readily admits to being patient-motivated and to providing the ultimate in care.

Other than that, his family and friends say, he has been the strong one throughout the last six months.

Wolf, who grew up in Kokomo, Ind., and did his undergraduate work at Manchester College and Indiana University, said he has always been a religious person.

When his present office was constructed the plan included a chapel in the basement area and a plaque at the entryway that dedicated the structure to the unborn child.

It is that personal faith that not only has given him the will to go on, but also has supported his family, friends and staff.

Just recently he completed a driver’s training course at the Rehabilitation Center.

“The instructor said it would take five complete days of class time to become certified,” he said. “The old competitive feeling in me kicked in, and on the first day, I had aced the hospital parking lot and had persuaded my instructor to let me go up and down the main streets. By day two, I was going up and down the expressway.

“She just couldn’t believe that anyone could learn the hand/brake coordination process that quickly. But I was determined.”

A specially fitted van on order will allow Wolf more mobility in his life. He must, however, use a very rigid wheelchair, and he is searching for ways to be able to use the vehicle and be able to get that chair or another model in and out by himself.

A one-level condominium has been purchased and the bathroom and garage have been modified for his needs.

The Wolf family has a condo near a northern Michigan ski resort and that, too, has been made

barrier-free and a shower installed that will allow him easy access.

“We are still working on our lake home in Indiana,” he said. “You just don’t realize how costly these changes are, and I feel very lucky that I have been able to afford what I need.”

Wolf must watch his weight, especially in the midsection where he has no feeling.

He has taken a liking to Slim Fast and he works with a personal trainer several hours each week.

Skip Bunton at Body Specs in Wyandotte has trained many Olympic athletes during his 20-year-plus career.

“I see that intensity to succeed in Dr. Wolf,” Bunton said.

Bunton works with the doctor for an hour three times a week and said the most difficult part has been preparing his client physiologically for what was going to be a new lifestyle.

“He didn’t know what to expect or the strength it would take to be what he expected of himself,” Bunton added. “He is one amazing man.”

Wolf also believes that he has a positive message to convey to others. One that attests to his belief in God no matter what occurs in one’s life.

He has spoken several times at a local church and found the audience to be very receptive.

“If the minister goes on for more than an hour, people seem to grumble,” he said, laughing. “I’ve had people stay to listen for more than 90 minutes.”

The world is not barrier-free, as Wolf has learned. He is making do, but wants to be part of changes.

“I’ve been getting my hair cut for years and years at the same place in Wyandotte,” he said. “After the accident, I discovered there were no curb cuts. The handicapped parking was at the rear and you had to bang on the back door.”

On a recent Sunday, Wolf and his wife went out for lunch after church services.

“It was fine and the manager found a spot that my wheelchair could maneuver,” he said.

“When we were ready to leave, I think that 10 people had to get up and move their chairs so I could get out. For a moment, I was embarrassed . . . but I knew that it was just a test of faith. I think I passed.”

Sport is for all ages

What used to be a fun sport for youngsters has become a high-tech competition for adults. The world of go-karting has taken off across the country and novice drivers are sharing the pits with almost pros.

The small one-seater vehicles can cost several hundred to several thousand dollars and are designed to attain speeds of 55 to 75 mph. Briggs and Stratton and Yamaha are two popular manufacturers.

The Premiere Karting Association hosts weekly asphalt oval kart races on Sundays at Toledo Speedway in Ohio. Drivers, as well as spectators, are welcome.

World Karting Association rules and regulations are used in the races.

Described as safe, competitive, wheel-to-wheel racing, it is an enjoyable sport for a growing audience.

An accident in July involving Dr. David Wolf of Trenton has ensured that even more rules of

safety are enforced.

Later in the year, Greer Racing Karts & Parts of Luna Pier began to market a new safety device to prevent the brake rotor from becoming detached and ramming the driver's seat.

Wolf was paralyzed from the waist down after the brake rotor from his kart punctured the seat, injuring his spinal cord.

The simple part developed by Green Racing Karts retails for \$14.95 plus shipping and the designers are donating 50 cents from each sale to spinal cord research.

The designers, Scott Nuss and Roy Arblaster, have named the brake rotor protector "The Wolf Plate."

FOCUS • B

Call Pat Andrews: 335-08-9933

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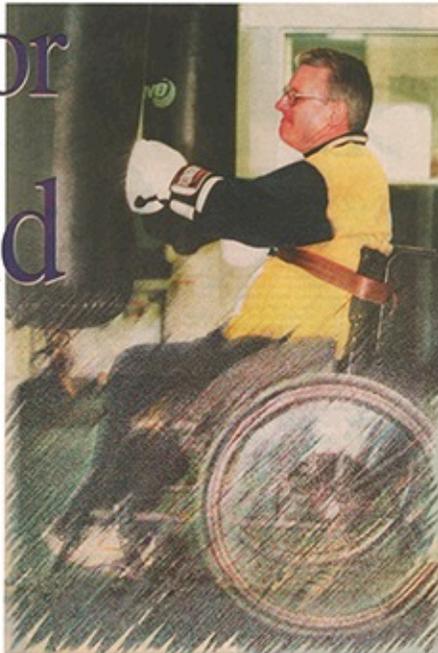
A family friend, Dr. Robert Haines, was called, the driver Asha Wolf to Toledo.

Wolf said his wife was surprised for what she was told.

"I'm thankful every day that Bob was with her," he said. "She imagined that I had a broken knee or leg."

Brad Wolf arrived a few hours later, so did the couple's daughter, Marjorie, 28.

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Photo: Larry Caruso

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Dr. David Wolf examines Regina Kasse, while Terri Loeckner assists.