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## BIONIC BILL FALL AND LEG AMPUTATION CAN'T KEEP O'FALLON TEACHER DOWN

by Jaime Ingle

On a rainy day, Bill Matzker looked out his living room window through the trees.

"That's it," said Bill, pointing to a pignut hickory tree. He doesn't blame the tree, even though falling from it changed his life.

"That limb cost me this limb," Bill, 53, said jokingly, rolling up his pant leg and setting a crutch made from a limb from that tree next to his new artificial lower left leg.

His wife, Cheryl, shook her head and laughed. She's used to Bill's humor and bulldog tenacity. The O'Fallon couple have been married since 1975 and have two grown sons.

"You have a warped sense of humor," she teased Bill, a stocky guy who coaches wrestling and teaches driver's education and health at O'Fallon Township High School.

Because of extensive injury from the fall on Memorial Day, doctors amputated his left leg below the knee. Since then, Bill has learned to walk again, first with a walker, then with crutches, and now with a cane and a computerized artificial knee and leg.

Now, 5 1/2 months later, he's back to teaching classes at O'Fallon High (his school ID reads "Bionic Bill"), coaching wrestling, driving his pickup --- and even hunting.

Though he likes to joke, Bill is serious, too. Serious about his love for his family. Serious about his recovery. Serious about his students. Serious about not chopping down that tree.

"No," Bill said, without hesitation if anyone mentions such a thing.

### The accident

It was May 31 when Bill set out to prune the pignut hickory.

"When each of my sons was born, I bought a tree," Bill explained.

The Matzkers planted both trees at their first home in O'Fallon off U.S. 50. When they built a new home eight years ago off Seven Hills Road, Bill dug up the trees and transplanted them in their new woody back yard.

The unruly hickory was growing into the European beech tree he planted for their son Mark, 24. Bill planted a shag bark maple when son David, 19, was born.

Bill, an avid outdoorsman, had climbed plenty of trees. He had attached a climbing stand 14 feet off the ground near the unwanted branches, climbed onto it and started trimming.

He cut a couple of branches and slipped.

"I stepped too close to the tree, there was slick bark," Bill said. "I tried to grab the tree, but I had no chance. I went straight down. Everything went flying past me."

What happened next is a blur.

Bill doesn't remember feeling pain, though his left foot was stuck in the climbing stand when he hit the ground.

"I don't remember hitting the ground hard, but I remember looking over at the leg. It looked like a dog's back leg. There was no resemblance of straightness."

By that time, neighbors Ken Pinzke and Kevin Kellerman, who had seen him fall, were at Bill's side, freeing his leg from the stand.

"I heard someone yell `Kenny, get 9-1-1,'" Bill said.

Cheryl was inside, unaware of what had happened.

"Ken rang the doorbell and said `Bill fell. Bill's hurt, or something like that."

Cheryl didn't panic.

"I wasn't rattled," Cheryl said when she saw Bill lying on the ground. She knew help was on the way. And there would be time to deal with emotions later.

The paramedics took Bill to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Belleville.

The real problem was internal bleeding, but doctors hadn't discovered that yet. At first, Cheryl thought the leg was broken. Instead, it was dislocated and causing circulation problems.

A helicopter flew Bill to Barnes Hospital in St. Louis. Even on lots of pain medication, Bill tried to be funny.

"I asked them to turn (the helicopter) on its side so I could see the river."

Doctors at the hospital gave Bill blood and grafted a vein from his right leg to replace the ripped artery in the lower left leg.

On June 4, doctors noticed the first complication.

"It was like a garden hose. They had to get the kink out," Bill explained. The next day they discovered a leak. Bill was bleeding again.

The doctors repaired the leak, but it ruptured again the next day.

Bill remembers waking for a couple of seconds during this emergency surgery.

"I knew I was bleeding to death. I heard a doctor say, `Who's the biggest guy in here? Get on that leg and push as hard as you can.'"

Remembering that experience is tough. Bill looked away, removed his glasses and wiped away tears.

"I just turned to the Lord and said, `If you want me, it's your decision, but I think I can do some good here.'"

Doctors repaired the leak but had warned the Matzkers they may need to amputate the leg to save Bill's life.

When it ruptured a third time, the doctors had to amputate.

Though groggy when he woke from surgery, Bill knew what had happened.

"There's enough of the old practical German in me to realize the leg's gone, it won't come back," he said.

Always a team

Cheryl wasn't fazed by the missing leg. She didn't cry. She was just happy her husband was alive.

She had been scheduled to lead a group of O'Fallon students on a trip to France. But Bill needed her more. So a colleague and her husband went on the trip for her. She was there for him --- just like always.

Bill and Cheryl met at O'Fallon High as young teachers in 1974. At first, Cheryl admits, she wasn't fond of him.

"He was persistent," said Cheryl.

Bill kept asking her out on dates.

"We had our first date January 20 and by February we were talking about marriage. We got married in August."

She admires his drive to solve problems. For example, he put a hook on the end of a tree limb that allows him to remove bird feeders from tall trees.

Cheryl also appreciates little surprises. Like the time last year he painted the family room walls apricot while she was away at a teaching conference.

And there's always that sense of humor.

"My son had just talked me into parachuting at 14,000 feet," Bill said. "Fourteen feet did me in."

Getting on with life

Bill's lower leg is gone, but his upper leg is healthy. Doctors told Bill he could learn to walk with a prosthetic limb. So Bill planned to make the best of it.

He jokes that he had to get back to coaching when he began seeing flashes of maroon before his eyes while sedated in the hospital.

"That was (Belleville) West maroon," said Bill. (Belleville West rivals the O'Fallon Panthers at wrestling matches.)

He spent three weeks in the hospital.

After he was off pain medication, Bill began two weeks of intensive physical therapy at the Rehabilitation Institute of St. Louis.

He came home on Independence Day, and Cheryl was determined they'd celebrate by going to a St. Louis fireworks display.

"She wasn't gonna miss 'em," he said.

They spent the night at a hotel with a great view of the sky.

"We're both fireworks junkies," she said.

He wanted to be back teaching in August.

"There's no reason not to be back," Bill said. "You don't quit."

Bill initially walked with crutches. Now he uses a cane and the computerized, hydraulic C-Leg Unit, which he got earlier this month. The leg was fitted to match Bill's natural stride.

Certified prosthetist Mark Wilson said the leg should last Bill about 6 years. It costs \$80,000.

At a recent rehabilitation session, Wilson hooked the leg up to a computer to program its computer chip. A special hard plastic shell fits over the end of Bill's upper left leg. The knee unit is attached to this shell. It's what allows Bill to walk.

"You don't really respect your body as an incredible thing God has created until you have to start over," Bill said.

Then he started walking, holding onto a set of parallel bars.

"Think about pushing off the ball of your foot," Mark said, as Bill walked about 20 feet. "It doesn't need a lot of swing from the hip."

Bill nodded and did it Mark's way.

"Right now, I feel like I could take off and walk a mile, but I'd be creating a lot of bad habits," said Bill.

He had a pronounced limp with an earlier prosthesis, but has a more natural gait with the C-Leg, which bends right below the knee.

Bill says going slow has its benefits.

"It will make me a better hunter."

Coach Bill

Coach Bill had his first wrestling practice last week.

He had to raise his voice to be heard over the thunder of feet running in place during a practice drill.

"Everybody up," Bill yelled. "Let me hear 'em."

Next, it was on to "mountain climbers."

Students got on all fours and alternately bent each knee, jumping each foot forward toward their hands. Using his cane, Bill navigated his way through rows of athletes.

"Get those feet up to your hands," he said.

Then it was time for push-ups, Coach Bill's way.

He can't get down with the young men so he chose senior wrestlers to get up front and demonstrate proper form.

"Toes, knees, belly-button, chin, nose --- they should all be an inch off the ground," Coach said.

Some wrestlers grimaced as they lowered and raised themselves in time to Bill's urging, "Up! Up!"

Seniors Kyle Surber, Erik Elsasser and Jeremy Anderson are glad to have Bill at practice.

"He's the best coach I've ever had in any sport. He has faith in all the kids here," said Erik, as he waited to wrestle during a practice drill.

Erik also wrestled with what to say to his coach after he learned the leg was amputated.

"You don't really know what to say. ... I said, `I can't wait until wrestling season."

Kyle visited his coach at the hospital shortly before the amputation.

"I had never seen (coach) with a beard before," said Kyle.

Kyle focused on the healthy coach, the one who also taught him to drive at school.

"I had him for behind-the-wheel. We'd go out in the country and he'd say. `I want to buy that land and that land for hunting."

Coach says he takes students to the areas they frequent --- country roads that lead to friends' houses and McDonald's.

"We'd go to Eckert's and he'd let us buy pie."

Step by step

Watching the students grapple on the mat helps Bill put in perspective all he's wrestled with in the last few months.

Bill has been out hunting a few times and drives his pickup. His right leg works fine for driving. He just needs to be patient as he gets out of the truck. There are a few seconds of lag time from the time he straightens the leg to the time it bends.

He's almost finished with the hickory cane.

He still takes medication three times daily to cope with phantom pains caused by irritated nerves just below the knee.

Neighbor Marsha Duffield said he's anxious to help others and recently trimmed limbs from one of her trees --- while standing on solid ground.

"That's just Bill. I've never seen him depressed," she said.

He's glad to be back at school and wrestling practice and anxious to get on with life.

When he's better able to bend at the knee with his C-Leg, Bill wants to resume gardening, pulling weeds and hopes to be able to go and up and down stairs more easily.

He's thankful for family, doctors and friends who helped him recover.

"God finds a way to work things out," said Bill.

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