



## Part IV "HIS HEAD WAS THE SIZE OF A BASKETBALL"

**Part I** "Allah be with you"

**Part II** "Get the hell out of my room"

**Part III** "That game's for sissies"

**Part IV** "His head was the size of a basketball"

By **William Nack**, Special to ESPN.com

So Billy Bartlett started something out at Olney Golf Park last year. He has brought out a small parade of wounded Iraq War servicemen to learn and practice golf as part of their rehabilitation, and the park's reputation as a haven for disabled golfers grew when a local TV station featured Jim Estes giving Sean Lewis a lesson.

Sgt. Paul Statzer found out about the golf park this summer and started coming out with his father, James. Paul was surely the most accomplished athlete to pursue rehabilitation through sports this year out of Walter Reed. At one time a world-class, 148-pound weightlifter who nearly made the U.S. Olympic team in 1988 -- "I was six pounds short of going to Korea for the Olympics," he says -- Statzer ultimately became a world champion powerlifter in 2000 when, in the 198-pound class, he squatted 800 pounds, benched 480 and dead-lifted 525 more. In a way, as he works to come back, his struggle is all the more poignant.

By all medical accounts, James Statzer says, his son should not have made it out of Iraq alive. On the morning of March 29, while Statzer was checking the crater made by an explosion earlier in the day, insurgents set off a 155mm shell just three feet away from him. A piece of shrapnel sheared off the left side of Statzer's skull, taking part of his frontal lobe, and drove his left eyeball deep into his head.

"His left eye got blown back into his brain," James says, as they stand behind a green practice mat at the golf park.

Paul smiled faintly. "It's still there," he says.

Michael Temchine  
Special to ESPN.com



Though he needs a foam helmet to protect his injured head, Paul Statzer otherwise needs little help hitting golf balls with his father at Olney Golf Park.

It's a wonder he made it through the first 24 hours. When Paul's parents first got word that he had been injured, the news could not have been graver. From Iraq, the doctor who had done the first surgery called to inform them of the extensive injuries Statzer had suffered, to his brain and eye and neck. "I don't know if he's going to make it through the night," the doctor told them. When Statzer did make it, doctors flew him to Germany, and from Frankfurt in a rush to Washington.

"There was only a 50-50 chance he would make it to the United States," James says.

Survive he did, if barely. But nothing could have prepared the Statzers for the sight of their son in bed at Walter Reed.

"I told my wife, 'Be prepared for his head to be swollen.' But I wasn't prepared for what we saw," James says. "His head was the size of a basketball. He didn't look like a human being. The left side of his head was like hamburger meat. There was nothing there."

**"I TOLD MY WIFE, 'BE PREPARED FOR HIS HEAD TO BE SWOLLEN.' BUT I WASN'T PREPARED FOR WHAT WE SAW. ... THERE WAS NOTHING THERE."**

Doctors had removed a shard of his skull, to give his head room to swell, and implanted the bone in his abdomen to keep it supplied with blood. Every day, even on weekends, his plastic surgeon would come to sit by Paul and peel away the bits of black blood that scabbed on his head, at one point saying, "We're getting skin! We're getting skin!"

Gradually, Statzer's head returned to its normal size and his strength and energy came back. And, this summer, he and his

dad started going out to Olney Golf Park to hit buckets of free balls. Paul is awaiting a cranioplasty, in which surgeons will insert a plastic skull in the precise shape it was before the injury. (They do not plan to use the shard that was implanted in his stomach.) They also plan to fit him with a glass eye.

Statzer lost the trapezius muscle on the left side of his neck, a loss that leaves him incapable of competing again as a powerlifter, but he still might take up lifting as a recreational exercise. "Lifting was everything to me," Paul says. "I was always lifting. But I won't ever lift like I did. Only for fun." For now, the only sports he does are fishing and golf, both of which he pursued before his reserve unit was sent to Iraq on Dec. 15, 2004. Paul does not think as quickly as he once did, his father says, and James figures that golf will help him where he needs it most.

"What's good about golf is it is good for concentration," James says. "His mental process is where the problem is. Golf helps him to concentrate."

"It gets you out," Paul says.



Michael Temchine  
-Special to ESPN.com

He'll never be a competitive powerlifter again, but Statzer can flex his muscles. After hitting another long drive off the practice tee, his father can't resist stating the obvious: "That ain't bad for a guy without a trapezius muscle."

So here he is, on the driving range at Olney, swatting balls into a warm blue sky early one autumn day, concentrating as he stands over the ball in his foam-rubber protective helmet, slowly taking his driver back, hitting southpaw.

Thwack! The ball rockets out about 220 yards, low and straight. "You're hittin' good today," James says.

Thwack! Another bullet straight and true, dropping next to the green some 215 yards down range. "That ain't bad for a guy without a trapezius muscle!" James says.

Or for a guy nearly dead earlier this year.

Of course, they all start their rehab at Walter Reed, the

venerable institution to which some of the worst casualties of this war go to get their lives back again. Its physical therapy center has become a hive of soldiers, working to reclaim as much as they can of what the war has taken from them.

One day this summer, working at one end of the room, was Spc. Jerrod Fields, who was spinning and dancing on his C-shaped prosthesis with all the dexterity he once brought to the basketball court as a kid growing up on Chicago's South Side. On Feb. 21, Fields was driving a Bradley armored vehicle on a reconnaissance patrol in Baghdad when it was hit underneath by a roadside bomb. "It opened up the bottom like a can opener," Fields says. "Shrapnel was going everywhere."

"I WANT GUYS TO TAKE ME SERIOUSLY. ... I DON'T WANT NO PITY. I WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THAT I CAN STILL PLAY. THAT WE, ALL DISABLED SOLDIERS, CAN STILL PLAY."

Fields had always dreamed of playing professional basketball, and when he was faced with the choice of living the dream or keeping his left leg, he did not hesitate. "They tried to save the leg," he says. "but they had to fuse my ankle. They said I couldn't run. I wanted to play basketball." The only way he could play, they said, was with a prosthesis. So Fields told the doctors, "Cut it off."

Now he has a leg on which he can run and play basketball again. "Basketball is my life," he says. "If I can't fulfill the dream of playing in the NBA, then I'm gonna stay in the service. The next step would be to make the All-Army team. I want guys to take me seriously. I will slip by you, and I will get you. I don't want no pity. I want people to know that I can still play. That we, all disabled soldiers, can still play."

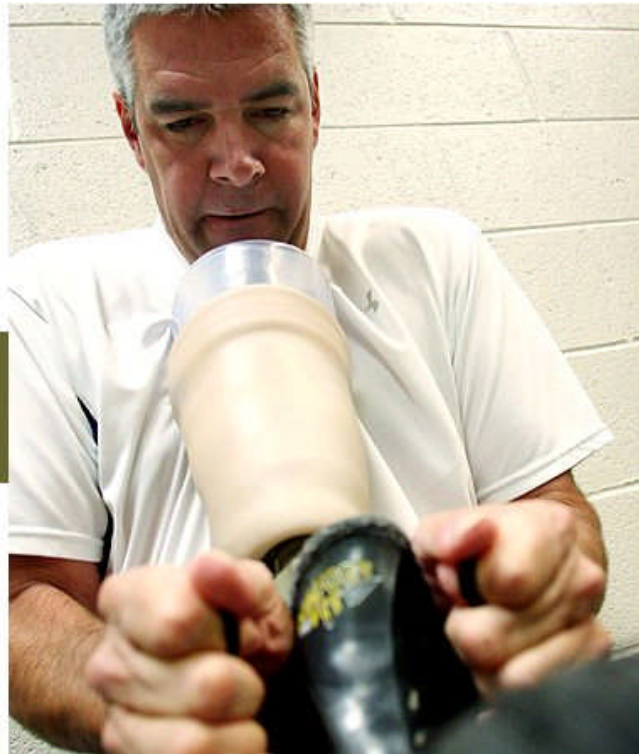


Michael Temchine  
Special to ESPN.com

**Left:** It's been a while since he's been on the ice, but Joe Bowser hasn't forgotten how to handle the stick.  
**Right:** Jerrod Fields opted to play with a prosthetic leg, but he isn't giving up a step on the basketball court.

On that same summer day at Walter Reed, Joe Bowser was on the other side of the room from Fields, learning how to walk again. He had lost his right leg after a 122mm Chinese rocket came flying into the phone bank in his base camp north of Baghdad, where he was talking to his fiancée in Georgetown, Ky. Doctors tried to save his leg -- he hung on to it for two weeks -- but Bowser finally ordered it cut off after they told him the mangled appendage would cause him pain the rest of his life.

"I had it amputated so I could do everything I used to do," says Bowser, a former mailman. "I played ice and street hockey all the time. I was in a men's league. Hockey is my love. Is there any other sport but hockey? Oh, I ride a bike to strengthen my leg. I lift weights to strengthen my upper body. I hand-cranked a bike through the New York City Marathon last year in two hours and six minutes. I'll be here two or three more months. I just have to get this leg squared away. Then I'll be ready to go -- to play hockey and get back to everyday life."



Michael Temchine  
Special to ESPN.com

For the first time in his life, Bowser doesn't have to bend over to tie his skate.

Right in the middle of the therapy room that day, stretching on a bench, was Ramon Guitard. Sports has transfigured his life. He has been traveling the country competing in events he never dreamed of doing before his injury: throwing the javelin, trapshooting, playing table tennis and 9-ball, shooting an air gun.

"I bowled a 261, the best I've ever bowled in my life, out of a wheelchair!" Guitard says. "It has changed my perspective on life. It's made me realize that, while I'm injured, I'm not giving up. Even when I get old, I'm not giving up. Sports have taught me to be a hell of a lot stronger than I ever was."

He called upon that strength when he climbed aboard the handcycle. Churning the pedals with his arms, he navigated the cycle the 26 miles and 485 yards of the Marine Corps and New York City marathons on successive Sundays in November.

"This makes me feel like a whole person again," he says after completing the double marathon. "If you don't go out today and you are not sore tomorrow, then you haven't done anything. You haven't pushed yourself.

"It is all about taking yourself to the limit."

Allah be with him.

*William Nack, a former writer for Sports Illustrated, is a contributor to ESPN.com.*

[<<](#) ) ( [Part I](#) ) ( [Part II](#) ) ( [Part III](#) ) ( [Part IV](#) )



[E-ticket Archive](#) ) ( [ESPN.com](#) ) ( [Print](#) ) ( [Send to a Friend](#)