

## Matt Henderson



On the morning of 14 August 1999, I woke up in the back of my van to the sound of a two-stroke motor and the smell of high-octane petrol. At the time I was working full-time in a construction job and studying to be a pilot. In the little spare time I had, I was an amateur motorcycle road racer at some of the circuits in the United States. It was nothing spectacular, but I won a handful of races that year. Occasionally I even made enough from sponsorship and prize money to actually pay for a weekend's racing – what a dream!

On that day my race was off to a rough start on a rainy track, but I had clawed my way up to first place by lap 17 of 20. It was then that things started to get dodgy. My tyres were overheated and the grease on the track was causing me to slide around. With about two laps left, I slid feet-first into a retaining wall at about 150 km/h. I looked down and knew that something was very wrong. My right knee was pointing up and my toes were at a 90° angle. An ambulance rushed me to hospital where I was treated for several minor injuries and what appeared to be a broken ankle.

My team mates and friends visited me in hospital. They had planned to give me a hard time about my 'little fall' and to figure a way to get a race boot over my cast for Sunday's races. When they arrived they realised how seriously I was injured. They were told I had fractured and dislocated a bone in my ankle 180°, and that I would probably lose my foot because the rest of my ankle was so badly damaged.

Unfortunately the hospital I was being treated at was a rural one, about eight hours' drive from home. The nurse very quietly told my team that the doctor there was not particularly competent, and suggested that I might receive better care closer to home. My team mate immediately rang my father, and he and my brother came to drive me home. I remember bits and pieces of the accident, but the pain and concussion caused me to continually pass out. I have limited memories of the hospital and of the long trip home in the back of Dad's van, and they are not very good ones.

At home in Baltimore, Maryland, I was taken to a hospital in the city where a four-hour surgery was performed almost 40 hours after my accident. It was decided that I could keep my foot, but only time would tell if it would heal properly.

Over the next two years I underwent treatment for two impacted discs in my lower back and six surgeries including reconstructions, treatment for a bone infection and two failed ankle fusions. The doctor suggested attempting another ankle fusion, but I had been through enough. I finally opted for an elective amputation of my right leg below the knee.

It might sound strange, but after two years of not walking there was an amazing sense of relief after the amputation. I was upset, of course, but after being bound to a wheelchair and crutches I felt that any progress was positive. I was excited about getting on with my life again, even if that meant doing it with prosthesis.

Prosthetic care was a challenge at first. I was in my prosthetist's office three days a week for months attempting to get a comfortable fit. I was slowly coming to terms with the fact that being an amputee would have limitations, but for some reason I just knew it could be better. Eventually, I sought out another prosthetist and started to see improvements in my comfort and mobility. Since then I have found that the relationship you have with your prosthetist is incredibly important. The good ones truly understand how much their handiwork can directly influence your quality of life.

There is an organisation in the United States called the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) that offers peer support for amputees – not unlike Limbs 4 Life. Unfortunately I did not find out about them for more than a year after my amputation. I had never met another amputee, and neither had my physiotherapist. It was a challenge, but the people at the sports medicine clinic I attended for rehab were very creative and determined to help me to get my life back together. Meanwhile, I learned what I could from the internet and contacted other amputees for advice. The peer support I found was quite helpful, and I am still friends with some of those initial contacts.

Throughout this experience I am not sure how I would have coped without the tremendous support of my family and friends. It would also be remiss of me not to say that I learned to put more faith in God than ever before. Prior to the accident I was an out-of-practise Catholic – a loud knock on the door like that certainly got my attention. After my accident I lost my job and dropped out of school. I could no longer fly or race bikes, and I had to give up my apartment and sell everything I owned that was worth something. I was suffering tremendous physical pain and undergoing repeated surgeries. It was obvious that I had control over very little, and I learned to let go of many things. Trusting that there was another plan for me that would work out was a tremendous leap of faith.

Eventually I got back to work doing some odd jobs, and I moved to California where I met another prosthetist from a component manufacturer called Ossur. I did some product testing for them and was occasionally allowed to keep a leg – huge bonus! In 2003 the testing turned into a real job; I began working in Ossur's technical and customer service departments full-time.

In 2004, lightning struck a second time when complications resulted in a revision of my amputation. I didn't plan on having my leg cut off once, let alone a second time, so this was particularly difficult. Recovery from that was another turning point in my life.

I became a certified peer visitor for the ACA, meeting new amputees and those contemplating amputation. I also worked with a group called the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF) that supports people with disabilities in their return to sport. Their biggest fundraising event is a half Ironman distance triathlon, consisting of a 2 km swim, 90 km cycle and 21 km run. I did the swim in 2003 as part of a team, and I was determined to complete the entire race myself in 2004, which I did just six months after my re-amputation. The event was the key to my recovery, keeping me going mentally by being focused on a goal. I continued to pursue all types of sport. I focused on triathlon and while competing with the USA Disabled Triathlon team, I earned a bronze medal and finished 4<sup>th</sup> at the 2005 and 2006 World Championships respectively. I also volunteered as a spokesperson at fundraising events for CAF.

These experiences opened my eyes to what can be achieved with prosthesis and a bit of determination. Perhaps that is what motivates me to do what I do now. I still work for Ossur, and in July 2007 I relocated from the North American office to the Asia Pacific office in Sydney with my new wife, Rebecca. I travel throughout Australia and New Zealand educating prosthetists about the clinical application of Ossur components, and providing technical solutions where possible. This job gives me the chance to blend what I call my 'involuntary' passion for prosthetics with my customer service and mechanical backgrounds.

With a move 'down under', a new job and a new marriage, my extracurricular activities with the ACA, CAF and USA Triathlon have taken a back seat to practical ones for now. However, I see the importance of staying fit both as an amputee and as someone with a foot in the grave at 31! The idea of having a family motivates me to maintain my best possible health so that I can be able and active for them.

For now, I hope to be more involved during my time here with groups such as Limbs 4 Life in order to give amputees the support I struggled to find during my initial rehabilitation. That type of service is so important and can greatly benefit those travelling the road that most of you have already been down.

I am sure that you all have a journey of your own, and I would encourage you to share it here or with peer support groups in your area. Don't underestimate how powerful your story might be to someone with no experience as an amputee. I still find hearing the experiences of other amputees helpful and inspiring. So get out and live a little. Live a lot! Then share it with someone. They might really appreciate you giving them a hand....or a leg.

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