

Harvey, Nancy

From: Brittingham, Shelley
Sent: Monday, January 09, 2012 7:57 AM
To: Haaseth, Robin; Soriano, John; Chapman, Jason
Cc: Harvey, Nancy
Subject: RE: Bellevue Reporter article

Great story – congratulations John and Jason and all! Nancy, will you please include this in the next Park Board packet? Thanks –

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From: Haaseth, Robin
Sent: Friday, January 06, 2012 5:02 PM
To: Foran, Patrick; McVein, Shelley; Brittingham, Shelley; Smith, Terry; Soriano, John; Grant, Bonnie M.; Grant, David
Subject: Bellevue Reporter article

<http://www.bellevuereporter.com/sports/136832628.html>

FYI—this is a story in today's paper about an athlete who competes in a wheelchair against able-bodied competitors at our Robinswood Tennis Center.

Tennis gives new life at Robinswood | Community sports feature

By **JOSH SUMAN**
Bellevue Reporter Staff Writer
JANUARY 6, 2012 · 1:07 PM

On a tennis court inside Robinswood Tennis Center, Anthony Anderson is seething.

His last volley sailed long and wide and a sore mood is etched across his sturdy, earnest face as he returns to fire his next serve. Anderson and his partner eventually drop their friendly doubles match and when it ends, the other three head to the water fountain and restroom. Anderson stays on the court, obviously still displeased with the result.

The 42-year old Anderson is as fiercely competitive a person as one will find on any level of athletics; even despite the fact he sits in a wheelchair while his opponents do not.

As a youngster, Anderson couldn't have imagined playing tennis, opting instead for baseball, basketball and football, which he starred in through his prep days. He would drive to school in a custom hot-rod, sporting a decorated letterman's jacket, holding the world firmly by the tail. He was as popular off the field as he was dynamic on it, being named homecoming king in addition to his exploits as an all-league athlete.

Then in a heap of twisted metal and broken glass, it was all lost.

Anderson and some friends were on an otherwise routine car ride that ended in a horrific accident, altering his life forever. At age 17, he was told he would never walk again.

"It was devastating," Anderson said. "There was not a lot of positive energy."

Despite the influx of conflicting emotions, Anderson quickly came to the realization that while life in a wheelchair would not even resemble the life he knew before the accident, it was now the only life he had.

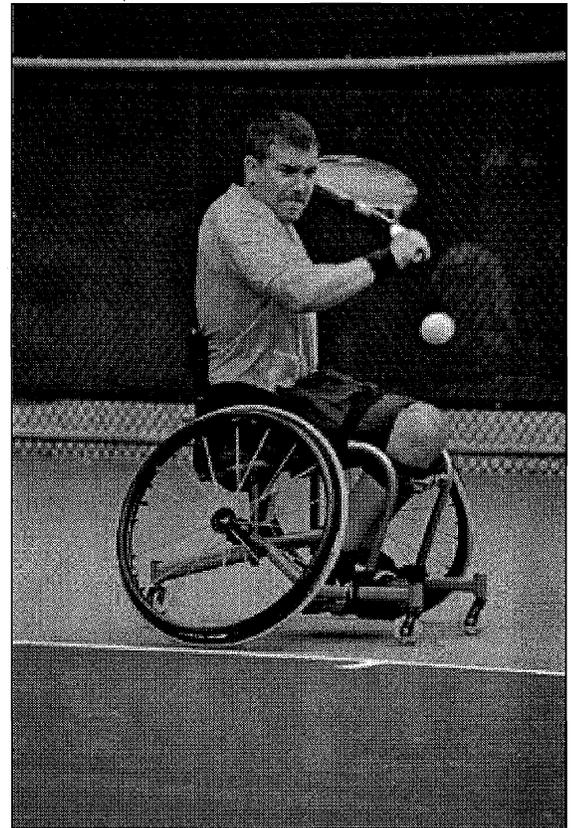
"I pretty much said, 'I have to deal with this and move on,'" Anderson said. "I accepted it pretty well."

More than the confinement of the chair, or the painful and trying rehabilitation process, Anderson worried about the often patronizing (though well intentioned) way people would treat him as a paraplegic.

"When people treat you different or think you're not capable, that's a big hitter," Anderson said. "A lot of my friends didn't know how to act around me, I'd sit in the cafeteria by myself."

With the help of family and friends, Anderson eventually adapted to life in a wheelchair. The first few months back at school were the roughest. Teachers came to the hospital to ensure he would be able to eventually graduate on time with the rest of his class. When he did return to campus, he did so in a full body cast.

"The moment I got home, I had to lay down the rest of the night," Anderson said. "I did all my homework laying in bed."



Anthony Anderson has competed around the world, including in Canada, where he is pictured here.
Courtesy Photo
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After a senior year full of frustration and solitude, Anderson was accepted into the University of Washington, which he hoped would offer a reprieve from his increasingly lonely existence. The change of scenery turned out to be just what he needed.

"Once I got out of high school and got into UW, I knew I was going to be living on my own," Anderson said. "It was a big shift because I had to make new friends."

A major part of that process was getting involved in wheelchair athletics. He started with wheelchair road races and 10Ks, eventually finding his way to a wheelchair tennis clinic he read about in the newspaper. He went to the clinic with an open mind, planning on observing and possibly making some new connections.

But Brian Larson, the man running the clinic, had other ideas.

"He (Larson) gave me a racket and said, 'you're not just going to watch, you're going to play,'" Anderson said. "It really opened up a whole new perspective."

After one match, he was hooked.

Playing tennis gave Anderson a new outlook on what life in a wheelchair could amount to and more importantly, it helped him to recover the zeal for living that defined his character before the accident.

"Playing wheelchair tennis wasn't like focusing on the things you can't do but focusing on the potential in life," Anderson said. "That was a big shift right there."

Getting back into an active lifestyle did wonders for Anderson's mindset and opened many more doors, including the opportunity to become a mentor to young people who have suffered similar injuries and have been forced to adjust to life in a wheelchair.

Years after the accident that would change his life forever, Anderson is giving something back.

He holds wheelchair tennis clinics just like the one that introduced him to the game to show people in wheelchairs that their life does not have to be defined by their limitations. His hope is help give hope to someone who is in the same position he once was. One of Anderson's pupils was a collegiate level tennis player before breaking his back on vacation.

"He never thought he could play again," Anderson said. "But someone told him about a tennis clinic I was running and he showed up."

Watching the former college star now humbled by injury get back on the court was a type of catharsis for Anderson. Eventually, the young man not only learned he could still play, but has been flying around the world to compete, recently playing a tournament in his native Turkey, where family and friends were there to watch with pride.

"I saw some potential in him and I took him under my wing," Anderson said. "I realized how important it was for people who are newly injured to connect with people who have that experience in their life."

Along with becoming a role model and inspiration for young people who have suffered similarly devastating injuries, Anderson also founded the wheelchair tennis program at Robinswood. For many years, the USTA would not allow people in wheelchairs to compete against others who were not, citing safety concerns and a competitive disadvantage. Athletes like Anderson were relegated to playing exclusively against other wheelchair players before the governing body of tennis came down with a new ruling on the issue.

"I was just trying to figure out how to get my wheel in the door," Anderson said. "A guy named Steve Bergquist let me on his team. That opened another avenue for competing and having a great time."

Anderson has since become an advocate for wheelchair players competing with and against those not in a chair. His partner at Robinswood, Kevin Regan, said he has learned countless lessons from Anderson.

"It wasn't until playing with Anthony did I really know what 'competitor' really meant," Regan said. "He's taught me more about teamwork and competing in a different arena and understanding your opponent than anyone."

Aside from his incredible skill level on the court, Regan said he is most impressed by Anderson's willingness to take a chance on himself. For Anderson, that chance is at a renewed outlook on himself and the reality that even from a wheelchair, he can impact countless lives.

"It really gives me the motivation to stay in shape and gives me a common communication with other people," Anderson said. "It has nothing to do with disability or ability. It's part of my identity and has been for most of my life now."

Josh Suman can be reached at 425-453-5045.

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<http://www.bellevuereporter.com/sports/136832628.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.