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A Passion for Life and the Race Track

By
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WILMINGTON – In the hospital, after his spine had been shattered, Jerome Bouvier got two quadriplegics for roommates.

“They had to wear halos,” he said. “Harnesses that screw into your head to keep you completely immobilized. The only way one of them could communicate was through a hole in his throat. He made clicking sounds.”

“One was married. His wife left him. Took their 6-month-old child with her. She just couldn’t take it – the thought of having two babies on her hands, one of them for life.”

“All of a sudden, my situation didn’t seem so bad.”

Jerome Bouvier’s situation is total and irreversible paralysis, from the chest down. It is a situation that could be expected to leave a man in anguish, bitterly depressed, soured forever on life.

What Bouvier has become, instead, is a relentlessly upbeat, incessantly cheerful horseman who has come to terms with his catastrophe and has gotten on with his life.



This summer marked the fifth anniversary – “8pm July 24th, 1983, at Discovery Park in Sacramento, I’ll never forget it” – of the water-skiing accident that, bound him forever to a wheelchair.

A man could be forgiven to want to brood alone on such an occasion. It was typical of Bouvier to host a party instead, to celebrate the moment.

It was a celebration of life. "What matters is that I'm alive and I'm doing what I love the most," he said.

What he loves the most is the racetrack. He has three horses stabled at Brandywine Raceway. He owns them and trains them, and were it not so dangerous, he would drive them as well.

In the barn, in the early morning before the sun has broiled another day into hissing submission, he is at work. From his chair, he mucks the stalls, feeds and grooms his horses. He wheels himself over to a platform, then slides into a special rig and takes off for the training track.

He jogs his horses every morning, brings them back to the barn, hoists himself back into his chair, unhooks the horses and then bathes them, wheeling in and out between their legs. It is a poignant sight, Bouvier hosing and squeegeeing thousand pound speedballs who stand there patiently, docilely. They will lower their heads onto his lap. It is almost as though they can sense his condition.

"Oh, I know they can," he said. "They're intelligent, aware, sensitive. They never kick, never run away. One of them walked out of their stall the other day. I didn't yell. Noise only startles them. I just said to him, 'Kizzy Dee, where you going? Get back in there.' He looked to the left, then to the right, and then he turned around and went back into his stall."

"The way I figure it, he decided where would he go and have it better? He gets room and board, and I don't abuse him. Animals are like kids. You get back what you put in. You yell and scream and lose your temper, that's what you will get back."

"I lost all my anger a long time ago, anyway. Three months, it took in rehabilitation. I think everyone ought to come to a therapy room, spend an afternoon. There would be a lot less shouting in the world."

Was he always so gentle, so at peace.

"I always thought I was a pretty good person," he said. "But I'm a better person now. That's the upside of what happened."

What happened was that in the summer of 83, Jerome Bouvier, then 24 and young and full of himself, a Canadian from a horse-ranch family who had quit school at 16 to spend all his time with horses, a kid driver who everyone agreed that had that magic touch with the reins, went water-skiing.

Without knowing that the driver of the boat was drunk.

The driver made an abrupt U-turn, at top speed. Bouvier was on one ski. It got caught in the water. He pin-wheeled through the air, crashed on the beach, on sand that was hard and unyielding.

“It was like someone just took scissors and cut all the nerves in my spine,” he said. “Two weeks out of intensive care, the doctor told me I’d never walk again. It devastated my parents. I was feeling sorry for myself too, until they put me in with those roommates.”

“The scariest part of it all was the day I was released from the hospital. I didn’t have a job. No place to live. The world looked kinda big. And a lot of the world doesn’t know how to handle people in wheelchairs.”

“One track I was at, I had to get in my car and drive clear downtown to go to the bathroom. The track didn’t have one restroom that was accessible. Another example – you see apartment complexes with all those signs for handicapped parking. But then they don’t have ramps. How do we get in and out of the buildings?”

You suspect that Bouvier would find a way. He is resourceful and persistent and enviably resilient.

After Brandywine closes, he plans to be at the Garden State Park meet beginning next month. There also may be a job as assistant race secretary at Sports Creek Raceway in Flint, Mich. And his long-range ambition is to own a nightclub. “I love to dance.” He said.

But you suspect there is something even more special for Bouvier, a higher calling. His story is being told around the country, and last week he got a call from Vermont, from a young man who had been paralyzed in an automobile accident, who had read about him.

“We talked for an hour and a half,” Bouvier said. “I think I got as much out of it as he did.”

“I always liked life, always had a good time. I still like it, even more now. And am still having a good time.”

Our society describes Jerome Bouvier as handicapped. Our society has got that backwards.