



## A RETURN TO CYCLING

# and Life

Former patient and professional cyclist offers hope and inspires another cyclist to return to the sport he loves.



By John Christensen | Photos by Leita Cowart

On the first Saturday of September, more than 200 people gathered on a farm outside the town of Dalton, Ga., along with their bikes – road bikes, mountain bikes, hybrids and even recumbents – checking the chains, brakes and gears to prepare for the 60-mile Raisin Hope Ride to raise awareness about brain and spinal cord injuries.

One of the riders was a tall, slender middle school guidance counselor named Paul Battenfeld, 55, of Waynesville, N.C., who arrived with his wife, Lisen Roberts, and their 11-year-old daughter, Marina. Among the first to greet them was 28-year-old Saul Raisin and his parents, Jim and Yvonne, who hugged Paul and congratulated him on his sensational comeback from a spinal cord injury.

In August 2010, Paul had an accident when his bicycle struck a dog. He sustained an incomplete C-5 to -6

spinal cord contusion that paralyzed him from the shoulders down. His spine was surgically fused, and there was some hope of recovery, but how much was uncertain.

Twelve days after surgery, Paul was transferred to Shepherd Center for rehabilitation, and that's where they found hope. "Their attitude was: 'Get out of bed; you're not sick,'" Lisen says. "That worked for us. We have to live our lives. We didn't want to wallow in it. We wanted to move forward."

Paul discovered the best way to eliminate doubt was not to indulge it. "I just mentally put everything outside my mind and concentrated on day-to-day activities," he says. "I didn't think about what life was like before the accident, and I didn't put any pressure on what I needed to do to be at a certain point a year from now. I just focused, and that

helped me a lot. I took it one day at a time, and some of the activities almost hour by hour, because the physical therapy at Shepherd is exhausting. And that helped me not to think about things."

It also helped that he is an athlete. Cycling is a grueling sport, and in every race there is a point, he says, "where you hit your limit and your muscles are maxed out. But you've got to push through. I did therapy the same way."

Paul slowly regained the use of his limbs, and when he got on a stationary bike for the first time, he outraced the stimulation unit attached to his legs – even though he had no sensation in them. When the same thing happened on the treadmill, indicating that he was gaining strength without sensation, his Shepherd Center physician, Gerald Bilsky, M.D., was pleasantly surprised.

"Dr. Bilsky told me this was not in any textbook," Paul recalls. "He said, 'You're really gonna rock this place.' From then on, I knew I could definitely do this."

Dr. Bilsky recalls: "Paul was lucky enough to have an incomplete injury, and he worked hard. People who are athletic – and cyclists, in particular – seem to push themselves very hard."

He also had the encouragement of former Shepherd Center brain injury patient and professional cyclist Saul Raisin.

In 2006, Saul was riding for the French cycling team Credit Agricole when he crashed in southern France and sustained a brain injury that left him in a coma. When he awoke, Saul learned he had a broken collarbone and scapula and that the left side of his body was paralyzed. Thirty days after his accident, he was flown back to the U.S. and admitted to Shepherd Center.

"We were very pleased with the care he got in France, but at Shepherd, he got the best care I've seen in any hospital," says Saul's father, Jim Raisin. "The biggest thing is that everyone, from the employees to the patients, are upbeat and always smiling. If they've had a bad day, you'd never know it. Everyone was so positive."

"I'll never forget the first day on the ward after Saul got out of ICU," says Saul's mother, Yvonne. "They said 'We're gonna get him well. Enjoy him today because tomorrow it's boot camp.' On the third day, Saul was in a wheelchair, and we were going to the cafeteria, and one of the therapists said to me, 'If you push his chair, I'm gonna make you go home. Don't baby him.'"

Saul was confused and so weak during the first few weeks that he could only whisper. "But he had a strong will," Dr. Bilsky recalls. "He didn't want to stay in bed. He wanted to walk, he wanted to do this, he wanted to do that. He had tremendous drive and motivation."

Saul not only embraced Shepherd Center's rehabilitation program, but also resolved to create a foundation to raise awareness about brain and spinal cord injuries. "There's no answer why

I'm here today," Saul says. "When it comes to brain and spinal cord injuries, there's so much that's unknown."

At the very the heart of Saul's drive to recover was the desire to get back on a bicycle again. But it was a terrifying thought to his mother, and she said so.

"I didn't want him to do it," Yvonne says, "but Dr. Bilsky said: 'You can't take away his love, his passion; it's not your life.' He said if I told Saul he couldn't do it, it would have killed him. And after seeing Saul on his bike and the joy on his face, I realized Dr. Bilsky was right."

Four and a half months after his injury, Saul rode 35 miles at 18 miles an hour. Five years later, he has run two marathons, competed in five half-Iron Man triathlons (cycling, swimming and running), does motivational speaking and is taking college classes. He still has difficulty opening and closing his left hand and limps slightly when barefoot, but doesn't let that hold him back.

He also started the Raisin Hope Foundation ([www.raisinhope.org](http://www.raisinhope.org)), which hosts the annual Raisin Hope Ride, and Saul visits Shepherd Center to share his story with other patients. On one of those visits, he and his parents met Paul and Lisen.

"It was a beautiful thing," Lisen recalls. "The five of us sat in the cafeteria for a couple of hours and talked. It was the first time I'd seen somebody walking and functioning in a way that was different than what I thought we might face. And that's the thing about Shepherd. We all arrive with such devastation and hopelessness, and it's incredible how positive and hopeful it is. It completely changed our lives. We realized that we can deal with this. It was great to be there."

Saul encouraged Paul to make the 2011 Raisin Hope Ride one of his goals, and Paul agreed. Like Yvonne, Lisen cringed at the thought of Paul riding again, but says: "Paul's a cyclist, and Saul talked about it that day at Shepherd. It was always about getting back on the bike for Paul, too."

Walking slowly with a cane, Paul went back to work at the start of the 2011-12

school year. Two weeks later, wearing a black and green Raisin Hope jersey, he rode 30 miles on a hot Saturday morning through the scenic north Georgia countryside instead of the 15 he'd planned on, as he told a friend, "to show people they don't have to quit."

As a counselor, Paul says his injury has helped him understand the children he works with. "I've had the experience of trying to do almost impossible things, like taking 30 minutes to button my shirt," he says. "I know kids go home and have a terrible home life, and I have new eyes as to what they're facing."

*Left: Former patient Paul Battenfeld gets some encouragement from his daughter. Below, Top: Paul worked hard in rehabilitation to return to cycling. Below, Bottom: Former patient and pro cyclist Saul Raisin, left, encouraged Paul to ride again.*



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