



TOUCHED BY FATE

**THE BRAD HURTIG STORY
BY WAYNE DREHS**

THE CRUSHING BLOW

Nearly every day, Kreg Culler walks by the rusting, blue power press, feels the horrific flood of memories rush back and has to look away.

It's been almost two years now. Two years since he heard the kids screaming and hollering at the other end of his factory. Two years since he sprinted to the chaos and found his son's best friend walking like a zombie, helplessly holding out his two crushed arms in front of him.



"I couldn't believe what I saw," Culler said. "His one arm was missing at the elbow. Just gone. And his other hand, he still had his work glove on, but it was mangled -- in a bad, bad way."

Midway through the first day of what was supposed to be a lazy summer job for twin brothers Brad and Chris Hurtig, Culler's worst nightmare as a factory owner came true.

Brad, a 17-year-old high school junior, a kid Culler coached back in Little League, inserted a sheet of metal into the giant stamping machine, noticed a part that didn't look quite right and, after yelling "clear," instinctively reached back into the machine to adjust it.

At the same time, Culler's son Keenan pushed the button to start the press. He didn't know Brad's hands were in danger.

"We always said, 'clear.' We always made sure we were back," Keenan Culler said. "That time, I pushed the button, looked back and Brad was stuck in the machine."

A light curtain should have sensed Brad's hands were in harm's way and stopped the press from collapsing. It didn't. In part because his hands were so skinny, slipping through the laser beams that crisscrossed like a chain link fence. And in part, as an investigation would later discover, because the safety device was incorrectly installed.

"There was a set of freaky circumstances," Kreg Culler said. "And they all happened the wrong way."

The results were gruesome. Five-hundred tons of pressure, the equivalent weight of 245 Ford F-150 pickups, pulverized Brad's right forearm, leaving only flapping skin below his elbow. On his left side, the press had crushed half of his hand. All that remained were his thumb and index finger, though barely attached.

The devastation flattened the veins and arteries in Brad's arms, limiting blood loss and possibly saving his life.

"It felt like a fire," Brad said. "Like my blood was boiling or my skin was melting away. I kept thinking it was a bad dream. And I wondered when I was going to wake up."

Brad was dazed but still conscious when Kreg grabbed him by the shoulders, threw him into the front seat of his Jeep and, at 2 in the morning, raced through the moonless night to the hospital. Along the way, he gently rubbed Brad's leg to keep him calm. When Brad finally began to speak, all he could talk about were sports.

He was a three-sport athlete: The starting middle linebacker on the football team. The starting right fielder on the baseball team. And the starting shooting guard on the basketball team.

Now, he figured, that life was over.

“I’m never going to play sports again. I’m never going to play sports again. I’m never going to play sports again,” Brad insisted. “This is not good.”

“I didn’t want to say, ‘You’re right. You’re not going to do that anymore,’” Kreg said. “But he was right; it didn’t look good.”

Left behind at the plant, Keenan and Chris waited in silence, the horrifying scene replaying in their minds over and over again. After speaking with a nurse from the emergency room on the phone, Chris went back to the machine to see if any body parts could be saved. Keenan watched from a distance.

“It was the worst night of my life,” said Keenan, the twins' best friend since they were in first grade. “I didn’t know what to do. My mind just couldn’t process what had happened. All I remember thinking was, ‘He didn’t have an arm. He didn’t have an arm.’”

The receptionist shrieked when Kreg and Brad walked into the hospital. Doctors didn't like what they saw either, and soon Brad was life-flighted 60 miles to Toledo’s Medical College of Ohio, a Level 1 trauma center better equipped to handle the most serious of injuries.

Chris and Keenan, by then back at the Cullers' house, say they remember hearing the helicopter fly over. “I had no idea what was going on at that point,” Chris said, “but I knew it was him.”

Once Brad arrived in Toledo, doctors rushed him into surgery, cleaned up both wounds and attempted to save what little remained of his left hand. They had no use for the finger that Chris had recovered from inside the machine.

In the days that followed, Brad struggled with phantom pains. Although the ends of his limbs were gone, the severed nerves continued to send pain signals that made him believe the limb was still there. He writhed in agony. His stomach resisted the pain medication that doctors gave him, causing him to vomit as many as 10 times a day.

In the first days after the accident, there was hope that Brad would be able to keep his left thumb and index finger. It would, they were told, make his life infinitely easier.

“We spent a lot of time praying that he wouldn’t lose that hand,” said Kim Hurtig, Brad’s mom.

Though good news came one morning when Brad moved his left thumb, it was short-lived. A month after the accident, the thumb turned black and Brad was back in an operating room, where doctors “shaved off” what was left of his only remaining hand.

“That’s the pain I remember the most,” Brad said. “I remember being at home in tears from the pain. It just hurt so bad.”

In all, it would take four surgeries before Brad would move on to recovery. When the procedures were finally done, when doctors left him to heal, Brad’s right arm would stop just below the elbow. His left arm would end just above his wrist. He was now a bilateral amputee. And life would never be the same.

“If someone were to tell me I was going to lose my hands tomorrow, I couldn’t face that day,” Brad said. “There’s no way. But until it happens to you, you never know how you’re going to react. And I decided in that hospital room -- I wasn’t going to spend life as a spectator.”



ELIMINATING THE GUILT

It was chaos. Doctors rushing him to a helicopter. Morphine speeding through his veins. Everyone yelling to work faster, move quicker.

But Brad Hurtig didn't notice. It was his body doctors were working on. His life they were fighting to save. Yet all he could think about was the look on Kreg Culler's face.

Culler, the owner of the factory where, a half hour earlier, a 500-ton stamping press had crushed Brad's arms, looked miserable. Shoulders slumped. Head down. Skin a bloodless white. It was his son Keenan, Brad's best friend since first grade, who had pushed the button that sent the machine crashing down.

“I kept thinking that [Brad's] parents had trusted me with two healthy boys to take care of,” Kreg Culler said. “And I didn't have two healthy boys to send back.”

While doctors and nurses hurried to pull him out of shock, stabilize his vitals and get him into an emergency helicopter, Brad saw only the guilt on Culler's face.

“This is not your fault,” he said. “Tell Keenan it's not his, either.”

It hardly made the pain go away. Kreg and Keenan would battle sleepless nights and emotional pitfalls in the months ahead. But Brad's two simple sentences helped.

When they couldn't get out of bed in the coming days, when they couldn't shake the nightmarish replays of that fateful night, Kreg and Keenan would think about Brad, lying on that gurney, his life forever changed ... worrying about them.

“When my dad told me what Brad had said, I was blown away,” Keenan said. “It had to be the worst day of Brad's life, but here he was worried about how everyone else was holding up.”

That included Brad's family.

Brad and Chris are identical twins and seemingly inseparable. In every photo of Brad, there's Chris. When Chris refused to budge from the couch that summer, unable to stomach the thought of swimming or playing baseball while Brad struggled to eat, Brad insisted that Chris get out of the house and leave the pity behind. When Chris struggled on the basketball court or the football field, unable to perform without his brother by his side, Brad shook his head in disgust.

“On the field, I felt lonely,” Chris said. “Obviously there were 36 other guys out there, but I had this empty feeling that he wasn't there with me. I couldn't keep my mind straight. Brad wouldn't allow that. He was more worried about what he was putting everyone else through than he was himself.”

When his parents rushed into the emergency room to find their son a bilateral amputee that fateful night, Brad said he thought not about the comfort they provided, but how hard it must have been to see their son so helpless. In the months ahead, when his father would struggle with guilt of his own, Brad wiped it away.

“I would look at other kids that weren't as athletic and I'd find myself thinking, Why not them?” Jim Hurtig said. “I'd see this other kid, he don't mind sitting around and doing nothing, Why not him? But the way Brad handled this took all that pressure off us.”

In a split second, he had gone from a 17-year-old teenager who rode motorcycles and excelled at three varsity sports to a physical oddity, the person everyone couldn't help but stare at or, worse, the person they couldn't bare to look in the eye. In the weeks and months ahead, he'd have to learn how to do everything without hands -- from eating, drinking and getting dressed to shaking hands, brushing his teeth and driving a car.

Yet ask anyone close to Brad to pick a moment when they remember seeing him down, when they remember him asking, “Why?” and they can't. Instead, he always held his head high. He always smiled.

“Had he gone in the tank, had he taken a better-off-dead-type attitude, that would have made it that much harder,” Kreg Culler said. “But here was this 17-year-old. He's the one going through this. He's the one whose life is going to never be the same. And he's the one showing all these adults how to handle it.”

Tom Sheninger, one of Brad's high school teachers and an assistant coach on the football team, said he believes Brad's ability to accept his disability and his determination to overcome it stems deep from within. There, Sheninger says, was a desire to return to normalcy, so Keenan, Kreg and everyone else could put that horrible night behind them.

“Brad was not going to have anybody carry the guilt with them that they ruined his life,” Sheninger said. “He wasn't going to stand for that.”

This past football season, after each of his 111 tackles, Brad would motion to Keenan in the stands. He'd wave with his stubs. And he'd smile. Keenan, meanwhile, was Brad's biggest fan. He wore a gold T-shirt with big black letters that read, “Brad Hurtig is a True American Hero.” And on the back, “Chris is pretty good, too.”

“I didn't like to see people upset,” Brad said. “I'll never forget, laying on that gurney that night and seeing that expression on Kreg's face. That bothered me. I wanted to show I was strong, that I could handle it and things were all going to be OK. There was no sense in making everyone more upset than they already were.”

That includes proceeding with any litigation. An investigation by U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration found five “serious” violations at A-Stamp Industries, Culler's factory, ranging from improperly installed machine guards to inadequate training procedures. Personal injury attorneys still harass Brad and his parents with unwanted solicitations, insisting there's money to be made. But the Hurtigs continue to ignore them, and say they've never even considered a lawsuit.

Kreg Culler did. And came to one lasting conclusion.

“There's no question,” he said, “if sacrificing the business would put Brad's arms back together, I'd do it in a heartbeat.”

Instead, he promises to never forget.

Recently, during a school fundraiser, there was Culler bidding up to \$400 for what would become his most prized piece of sports memorabilia. The football helmet that Brad wore this past season now sits in an acrylic case atop a credenza in Culler's office at the factory.

“For me, it's an indication of what he accomplished after the accident,” Kreg Culler said. “His odds were a lot bigger than most of us will ever face and he made it, so keep chasing life.”

EMBRACING A NEW LIFE

Shoes shined. Hair gelled. Tuxedo pressed to perfection. Brad Hurtig looked like Oscar de la Renta himself. But he was already an hour late -- too late for pictures, too late to meet the parents -- and had begun to wonder if he'd ever make the prom at all.



He was waiting for the smoke to stop. The smell to go away. For wires to be soldered together in his hands. Then he'd be on his way.

“I wasn't sure how it was all going to turn out,” he said.

The day before, Brad's \$25,000 mechanical hands quit working. Without them, he couldn't pin his date's corsage. He couldn't hold her hand. He couldn't pull her close on the dance floor.

Worker's compensation officials moved quickly to approve the new prosthetics in time for the prom. But while everyone else was schmoozing with parents and smiling for pictures, Brad stood in a garage and waited for his prosthetist to put his new hands together. Eventually, some workshop ingenuity mixed with modern technology sent Brad on his way. Two hours late.

“I never got to meet her parents,” Brad recalls. “Still haven't. But I guess they understood; I told her I was late because I needed to pick up my arms. Tough to argue with that one.”

Brad would be the first to tell you that his life has never been the same since an industrial accident left him a bilateral amputee two years ago. But he'll also tell you that “99 percent” of the things he used to be able to do, he can still do. Thanks to modern-day technology. And perhaps the most twisted of fates.

Because Brad's accident happened at work, all his medical expenses and the cost of purchasing, repairing and replacing his fragile prosthetics are covered by the Ohio Bureau of Worker's Compensation. He also receives a weekly check that covers lost wages.

“In a way, that was a blessing,” Brad said. “If this would have happened falling off the back of my ATV, we never would have been able to afford any of it.”

Representatives from worker's compensation also ensured that Brad had everything he needed to function in high school. It meant making lockers and classroom doors easier to open. Getting Brad a laptop so he could do his homework. And hiring an assistant to carry his books and take notes in class until Brad could do those things himself.

Next year, Brad plans to attend nearby Northwest State Community College and, already, worker's compensation representatives are meeting with school officials to brief them on Brad's situation and the special needs he requires.

"It takes a lot of teamwork," said Jan Burch, a catastrophic nurse advocate for Ohio's worker's compensation division. "The school, the managed care organization, the doctors, the family -- everyone working together makes this a success. And Brad's so highly motivated. He sees a challenge and immediately says, 'Let's get going.'"



At the cost of a new, fully loaded Honda Accord, Brad's limbs are among the most technologically advanced in the world. They operate with the use of tiny sensors that rub against the muscles in the remaining parts of his arms. Flex those muscles by making an imaginary fist and then bend that fist upward, and the hand opens. Bend the fist down, and it closes. Clench a quick fist, and the hand rotates counterclockwise, 360 degrees, so he can pick up a stack of books from below, then lift them above. If Brad fills a jug with water, the hand senses the change in weight, adjusting its grip as the jug becomes progressively heavier.

Six months after the accident, when Brad first picked up his new arms, it took him only five minutes to get the hang of it. He grabbed a copy of *The Crescent News*, a local newspaper that had a story about him on its front page, and autographed it for everyone in the office.

Sam Santa-Rita, the prosthetist who fits Brad with his artificial limbs, said he has never seen anyone become acclimated to his new hands so quickly.

"He acted as if he had worn them for a year," Santa-Rita said. "I think he was so tired of depending on people, he just took off. It was pretty amazing."

Visually, they seem almost lifelike, with their flesh-like coloring and the folds of skin painted on them to look like knuckles. If not for the muffled grinding sound the motor makes when the hand moves, like some sort of real-life robot, nobody beyond an arm's length could tell he has artificial limbs.

"We were at a banquet the other night and Brad shook this guy's hand and the guy about fell over," said Bob Olwin, the head football coach at Fairview High. "He didn't know about Brad's accident. He nearly jumped out of his shoes."

But reliability remains a problem. Under the strain of Brad's active lifestyle, the prosthetics break down every few weeks. He's bent the aluminum frame, pushing the gears out of alignment and killing the motor. He's crushed the microprocessors in the fingertips, crippling the device.

Even with a backup at the ready, Brad can sometimes find himself without a working prosthetic. Santa-Rita has ordered a new model made of stainless steel, which he hopes will prove more durable.

“He's the most active amputee I've ever seen,” Santa-Rita said. “And the technology sometimes can't keep up.”

A person missing one limb opens and closes a mechanical hand 5,000 times every two weeks. Someone who has lost both limbs will perform five times as many "cycles." And an active 19-year-old teenager like Brad can really give the motor a workout.

“So that's the challenge,” Santa-Rita said. “For these companies to design something that can cycle 1.2 million times a year.”

When the hands are working, there isn't much Brad can't do. He can squeeze toothpaste from its tube. Grab a bottle of water off the ground. Hit the cutoff man from the outfield. Or clutch the accelerator on the handle bars of his ATV during a wild escape through the farm fields.

It was a little more than a year after the accident that Brad was knocked out of his arms when he jumped a pile of brush on his four-wheeler. With his artificial limbs still squeezing the accelerator, Brad hugged the seat with his legs. Seconds before crashing into a tree, he managed to slam his foot onto the brake. Then he slipped back into his arms, took a deep breath and drove home.

“I don't think I told my parents about that one,” he said.

The only thing he says he can't do, the only thing he truly misses, is the ability to feel. To touch. Yet it isn't uncommon to see him lift his mechanical hand to scratch an itch on his nose. He deftly uses his elbow to control the touch-pad on his laptop. And when it comes time to tie his shoes, a friend suggests a creative tip: Ask a cute girl.

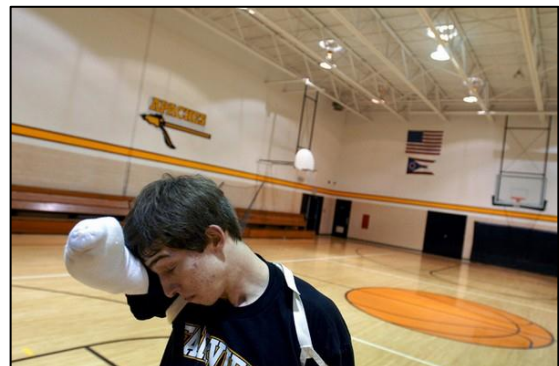
"I go through life now and many days, I don't even think about it," he said. "I feel like the same Brad before the accident."

FIND A WAY

Rolling back and forth, the water bottle picked up blades of grass and specs of dirt from the ground, its sloshing contents an unlikely source of motivation.

“You thirsty? You want something to drink?” the football coach yelled before throwing the container onto the field. “There you go. Find a way.”

It was another grueling practice in the heat of an Ohio summer. Brad Hurtig hadn't participated in any drills, but like his sweaty teammates, he craved a drink of water. Only a month earlier, a factory accident had crushed his arms, leaving him with a pair of stubs. Still dazed from the trauma and groggy from the medication, he needed every ounce of energy just to watch practice. And now he had to work for a simple sip of water.



“I knew it was a challenge. I knew I had to do it,” Brad said. “I just didn’t know how.”

So he fell to his knees. Bent over the bottle. Squeezed it between his stubs. Lifted it to his mouth. Pulled away the cap with his teeth. And let the cool water pour into his mouth and over his face.

“We wanted to push him to see how far we could,” said Tom Sheninger, Fairview High's assistant football coach. “Could he do this? Could he do that? We wanted to see how bad he wanted it. If something didn’t work, we’d try something else. It was an experiment.”

The results weren’t fully revealed until the next season, when Brad, playing with specially designed pads that wrapped around his stubs, started at middle linebacker and led the 5-5 Apaches with 111 tackles. After the season, he was named first-team All-State and the district co-defensive player of the year.

“If you didn’t know his number and didn’t know his story, you never would have guessed he didn’t have arms,” said John Downing, the head coach at rival Archbold High, which beat Fairview 38-26 this past season. “Every Friday night, he was a guy you had to account for.”

This was the same kid who, after doctors cleared him to play months after the June 2002 accident, needed Sheninger and assistant coach Dave Robinson to dress him from head to toe. The same kid who everyone figured would be a football sideshow. A nice story, they thought, how he came back after losing his arms to kick a field goal or make a tackle on special teams. But nothing more.

“I hate to say it, but [football] was one goal I didn’t think he’d be able to do,” admitted Jim Hurtig, Brad’s father. “I didn’t know how it would be possible.”

The road from bilateral amputee to star linebacker started with Brad’s prosthetist, Sam Santa-Rita. Unable to find anyone in the country who had lost both hands and was playing football, Santa-Rita designed a pair of custom pads from scratch for Brad. A plastic, shoulder pad-like shell on the inside and foam padding on the outside protected his limbs.

“The concern was that if he suffered a forceful hit, the bone might go right through the skin,” Santa-Rita said. “But nobody was going to tell him he couldn’t play because he might get hurt. He needed this.”

On the field, Brad’s comeback fell to the shoulders of his coaches. They had to teach him how to play with his new body. Every day for a month, they covered a corner of the field in padding so that he could get used to falling and getting back up. They would purposely throw him footballs that were out of reach so he’d tumble to the ground as he tried to catch them. Day by day, it eventually became easier.

“It had to hurt,” Sheninger said. “But he’d never say a thing. He was willing to go through a lot of discomfort -- physically and mentally -- to get what he wanted.”

The first season after the accident, Brad struggled as the team’s kicker, at one point booting a ball off Sheninger’s head in practice. It took him five games before he finally converted his first extra point. Once it was just easier to run the ball into the end zone for a two-point conversion. By the final game of that season, though, coaches got a glimpse of what Brad’s senior year would bring.

The game was a blowout so coaches put Brad in at middle linebacker, just to see how he’d react. On the first play, the opposing team ran a swing pass to Brad’s side. Instantly, his football instincts returned.

“I just saw the guy, he had the ball, it was my job to stop him, so I did,” Brad recalls. “It all happened real naturally. After the game, I couldn’t believe what happened.”

The crowd and his teammates roared. And Brad's confidence soared.

The following summer, he became a gym rat, working out every day with pliable rubber balls to strengthen his upper body. Still, in the back of his mind, he wondered.

“Can I really do this every week?” Brad said. “I don’t have hands.”

It wasn’t easy.

When a blocker got his hands on him, he was done. Several times he’d have a quarterback all but wrapped up for a sack, only to watch him slip through his grasp. More times than not, though -- 111 to be exact -- Brad did just fine, regaining his role as the team’s best player and its quiet leader.

The season highlight came on offense, when coaches put Brad into the game toward the end of a lopsided victory against Ayersville, hoping he could catch a touchdown from his twin brother Chris.

First down. Second down. Third down. Three times they tried and failed to execute the same, simple play. “Get in the end zone, turn around and look,” Brad was told. The opposing defense, though, wasn’t helping.

“They were complaining that I was pushing off,” Brad said. “A guy with no hands was pushing off.”

On fourth down, Chris fumbled the snap. With a sea of defenders converging, he recovered the ball, scrambled to his right and, on his back foot, lobbed the ball into the end zone. Brad knocked the ball back up into the air, fought off a defender, then cradled his arms to make the catch. Touchdown.

And as he lay in the end zone, his teammates piling on top of him and celebrating the improbable, a series of thoughts flashed through Brad’s mind. There was his family. His friends. His coaches. And that day with the water bottle. Without all of it, he says, life would have been “ruined.”

“Football helped me realize that no matter what had happened, life was still normal.

“Well, sort of.”

THE ELUSIVE GOAL

Click.

He couldn't feel it, but mid-swing he heard it. And the noise wasn't good. It told him the metal hooks on his hitting hand had opened. It told him that anything they had been holding -- in this case a 28-ounce Easton baseball bat -- had just become a projectile.



There was enough time to look up, but not to look away. There went his bat. End over end. Cutting through the air. Smacking off the wall. Crashing off the bleachers. Almost nailing a teammate in the head.

What was a blur for everyone else was a slow motion hell for Brad Hurtig.

Click. Thud. Ping.

His mouth opened. His eyes widened. The rest of him froze.

"I think I'm done now," he said.

He was merely trying to hit off a tee. Just trying to accomplish something else that would blow everyone away. Instead, it backfired. And he wouldn't pick up a bat again for a week.

"It scared everyone to death," Fairview baseball coach Andy Singer said, "Brad included."

That was three months ago. Brad still can't consistently hold a baseball bat. He still can't climb into the batter's box, take a rip at a belt-high fastball and know full well that he won't take the pitcher's head off.

Yet before he walks across the stage and receives his high school diploma next month, that's the lone goal that still remains, the one thing that drives him athletically. He wants to get a hit in a baseball game.

It might not seem that important, considering all the 19-year-old has accomplished since a factory accident in June of 2002 left him a bilateral amputee. But he remains driven by the unfulfilled.

He can catch a touchdown pass. He can kick extra points. He can wrestle down running backs. And with the help of a customized lacrosse net that fits over the end of his left arm, he can catch, throw and play the outfield. But the season is nearly finished. Time is running out. And he hasn't even had an at bat.

"It might not be something that happens," Brad said. "But I'm going to do everything I can to see that it does."

The problem is this: A cable and harness that wraps around his shoulders is connected to the hooks that extend from Brad's arms and grasp the bat. When he stretches his shoulder blades, the cable tightens, opening the hooks and releasing the bat.

It's supposed to happen after he's made contact, when he wants to put the bat on the ground and hustle to first base. Too often, it happens mid-swing.

"There aren't many people in baseball who have attempted anything like this," said Sam Santa-Rita, the prosthetist who obtained the device from a Texas company, then modified it in his office workshop. "Most of the people have lost only one arm. That's a big, big difference."

Think former major league pitcher Jim Abbott. Or Chad Bentz, the Expos' reliever. Both were born with deformities, forcing them to pitch and catch with the same hand, hurriedly switching their glove back and forth during the action.

But while they've had their entire lives to learn how to play with their disabilities, Brad has had only 22 months. While they focused solely on pitching, Brad wants to hit. While they were able to field with one hand, Brad has none.

The head of a lacrosse stick is screwed into the prosthesis at the end of his left arm. The mesh webbing allows him to catch and throw like a game of backyard Jai-Alai. It's hardly conventional, but the Ohio State High School Athletic Association has allowed it.

Under OHSAA baseball rules, Brad can play the field and have a designated hitter bat for him. So that's what he's done, roaming the outfield for much of the year without making an error and occasionally appearing as a pinch runner, when he has stolen five bases.

"I'm not afraid, by any means, to put Brad in a situation with a tie ball game or something," Singer said. "There's no reason to be. Fielding-wise, he's done a great job. He can always steal a base. But his hitting we hope to get better."

After the bat-throwing incident during off-season training this past winter, it was back to the drawing board. Santa-Rita tightened the rubber bands that hold the hooks together. He asked a local welder to meld the hooks so they would better wrap around the bat. And he stressed to Brad the importance of not flexing his shoulder muscles until he had completed his swing.

There's been improvement. Brad can hit off a tee and hit a soft-toss without flinging the bat through the air. But he still can't hold on against live pitching. Without hands, he can't feel the bat. He can't sense when it's slipping. He can't feel when things are going wrong.

Instead, he listens for the click.

"It's a difficult process," Singer said. "But we're working on it. He'll get there."

And if not, Brad is prepared.

"I'll have to move on, I guess," Brad said. "What else is there to do?"



PAY IT FORWARD

The ceiling fan just kept spinning. Round and round and round it went, not once giving any answers, not once offering any solace.

Carol Kurivial couldn't look away. As the blades rotated monotonously, all she could think about was that teenage boy, lying in intensive care some 60 miles away, fighting for his life.

She had never met him. Yet there she was, on the eve of her 20th wedding anniversary, in a quaint bed-and-breakfast with her husband, lying there horrified by a stranger's tragedy.

Fear. Anxiety. Chills. They all converged as she tried to fall asleep that night.

"I was in a complete panic," Kurivial said. "I didn't know him from Adam, but I just kept watching that fan go around, overwhelmed by what had happened."

Earlier that day, Kurivial was picking up photos she had planned to add to an anniversary scrapbook when the clerk answered the phone and shared the news. The details were blurry, but the bottom line wasn't: Seventeen-year-old boy. Factory accident. Amputated arms.

Kurivial could barely function. Maybe it was because she has three teenagers of her own. Maybe it was because she's always had a fear of amputation. Or maybe it was, as she says, because God was trying to send her a message. Whatever the reason, she couldn't shake the picture of what life was going to be like for Brad Hurtig. Her sleepless nights continued for months.

"I don't think I've ever mourned so much for someone I didn't even know," Kurivial said. "I was constantly waking up, saying every prayer I could muster.

"I kept thinking, 'His life will never be the same. How will he cope?'"

At first, he didn't. Not because he didn't grasp the fact that he'd need \$25,000 prosthetics to grab a pencil. But because he never imagined complete strangers losing sleep over his plight. Never thought he would stand in front of a group of people, tell his life story and, in doing so, change theirs. He never thought he'd become an inspiration.

He's the quiet, sports junkie from middle of nowhere, Ohio. Never heard of "The Sopranos." Doesn't know Chili's is a restaurant. His first flight, ironically, was the emergency helicopter ride that carried him from Bryan to Toledo.

Getting him to speak in front of an audience was like getting him to sit still on the bench. But now, the story of his tragedy, his comeback and the way he's touched others has made him an unlikely hero.

Only a week ago, he was even elected prom king.

"He doesn't think what he does is a big deal," said David Robinson, one of Brad's high school football coaches. "But we do. We've tried to tell him his life is never going to be normal again. He's going to be the person people look to for answers, for inspiration. And I can't wait to watch."

Not long ago, Brad gave a speech at a local junior high and touched a 13-year-old girl to the point that she sent a letter to her older sister who has diabetes. Stop complaining, she wrote, and start living. If Brad can live without arms, you can handle insulin shots.

Almost a year to the day of Brad's accident, Kurivial was going through a difficult time of her own. Her doctor was concerned about a lump in her breast. Her children were struggling with personal challenges. Life was overwhelming. But then, at a graduation party for a former student, the two finally met.

"I was shaking," she said. "I didn't know what to do with myself. [The graduate's mother] said, 'Just go ahead and hug him, Carol.' So that's what I did. On this day that I was so desperate, had so much despair, I became overwhelmed with excitement. He must have thought I was nuts."

Though doctors failed to find cancer, Kurivial said she relied on Brad's courage as inspiration to pull her through the process. A few months later, she invited him to speak at a spiritual retreat. More than 100 people showed up. Too many to fit in the barn turned revival center.

Many walked in sad, she said. All left inspired.

“Here's this young, unassuming man and look what he's done to change the world,” Kurivial said. “I can't imagine how many people his life has affected. And it's just the beginning.”

Kurivial now calls those sleepless nights "spiritual fate." That God put Brad's burden on her heart so that it would help her and, more importantly, help others down the road.

The whole story still makes Brad blush. His coaches and teachers are pushing him to pursue a career in communication, but he isn't sure that's what he wants to do. He'd rather spend college developing the next generation of artificial limbs or becoming a mechanical engineer.

Still, talking to curious crowds and sharing his story may be inevitable. Especially since it means so much.

“I'm coming around better to it,” Brad said. “The coaches keep telling me, everyone keeps telling me I'm an inspiration. I see it now. I think it does impact people and affect their lives. But for me, it's a little strange. I'm just Brad. This is just my life.”

Wayne Drehs is a staff writer with ESPN.com. [He can be reached at wayne.drehs@espn3.com.](mailto:wayne.drehs@espn3.com)