



FULL THROTTLE

FROM SEA-DOOS TO MARITAL ARTS, INJURED NFL GREAT MIKE UTLEY GOES ALL OUT AT LIFE

BY KATY KHAPOUR
PHOTOS BY GRANT HALLER

After a routine play ended his blossoming NFL career with the Detroit Lion 15 years ago, Mike Utley took on the challenges of his spinal cord injury the same way he played pro football: “Mano-a-mano.” And from being unable to even use his hands, Utley has driven himself to an astonishing recovery while living life to the fullest – even zipping over the Columbia River on his beloved Sea-Doo.

As for most pro ball players, football won Mike Utley over early. “I just loved the physical contact,” he says. “Win or lose—there is no in-between. I enjoyed being able to look across the line and it’s either him or I. There’s a winner and a loser, and I just seemed to find winning much more enjoyable. I paid the price to get to where I wanted to be through nutrition, through weight training, through running, conditioning, and just basically sacrificing for what I wanted to do – and that was to play ball and win.”

Utley’s talents and dedication earned him a trip to the gridiron promised land: the NFL. He was a third-round draft pick by the Detroit Lions and became the team’s starting right guard in his rookie season (1989).

In Utley’s third season, he was involved in a play that altered his life. The 6th and 7th cervical vertebrae in his spinal column were fractured and suddenly he was paralyzed.

Life changed for him, as it often does, in a blink of an eye.

As he was taken off the field on a stretcher showing his trademark Thumbs Up sign; Utley would soon start a foundation (www.mikeutley.org) to help others overcome the limitations of spinal cord injuries and to help find a cure for paralysis.

Does he think about that moment?

“No. There’s nothing I could have done to prevent it,” Utley says. “Well, except to have a little hangnail before the play and get out of that play.”

“I’ve trained myself; I’ve developed my body, my mind to be a professional athlete, to be a pro. When I do corporate speaking, I flat out tell them that there were 28 NFL football teams when I played, there were 28 starting right guards and Mike Utley was one of the 28 best men in the world for three years of his life. I’ve earned the right to get out there and give 100% when I do things. I’ve earned that right. I’m just earning it today by doing what I’m doing.”

Today, Mike Utley is doing what he did when he was on the football field. Pushing himself, driving himself to succeed.

“There’s two kind of living with spinal cord injury; those that are waiting for a cure, and those who are living for one. Mike Utley is living for one. He is not wasting a split second to sit there and get something done today because he doesn’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

“I have no idea if I am going to get anything back more tomorrow or the next day, if I am going to walk, I don’t know that, but, what I do know is that this functionality that I have right now, I will make it the most productive that I can today,” Utley says. “Now tomorrow is a new day and so I will go out, and tomorrow, I will be able to get out there and make myself more productive, tomorrow.”

Dr. Bernard Brucker, director of the Biofeedback Laboratory at the University of Miami’s School of Medicine/Miami Jewish Home and Hospital, has seen Utley’s productivity firsthand.

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“The important thing to understand here when people get disabilities — brain injury, strokes, spinal cord injuries — the injury doesn’t change the person,” Brucker explains. “So people have what we might say is a ‘pre-disability’ personality. We all have our own individual personalities and different types of stressful events occur in our lifespan. And how we are going to deal with these events has a lot to do with what our coping style is, what our personality is and the like.

“So to understand how Mike has responded to his injury and what he’s done is to understand Mike from before his injury. He was the kind of person who would strive for perfection. But, actually, as long as he was doing the best job he could to make himself better at whatever goal that he had set before him, that is his whole nature.

Dr. Brucker says that most people assume it would be more difficult for an athlete to cope with a spinal cord injury, but not in Utley’s case.

“For him, this was just one more challenge that occurred in the continuation of his life...he loves sports, sports are what he was about. So, he has his spinal cord injury and he still does sports,” Brucker says.

Up every day at 4 a.m., Utley takes his medications, eats his breakfast (oatmeal and hard-boiled egg whites) and starts his exercise routine. He uses an EasyStand 6000 Glider, a Bodyblade, does floor work with an exercise ball, weight training, and then heads off to the gym four days a week. Utley also trains in martial arts four days a week.

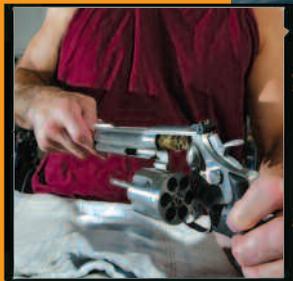
“People just want to put you in a stable position and that’s not the way you get better.” Utley says. “You get better by getting out of your comfort zone; that’s what athletes do; they go from one level to the next by getting out of their comfort zone.”

What Mike Utley does is actually get out of anybody’s comfort zone. How many people — with two good legs — can you name who sky dive, scuba dive, ride PWC, kayak, go boating and cycling?

About seven years ago down on the Columbia River in Washington State, at Crescent Bar Utley and some friends were cruising around on Sea-Doos.

“I was going 40, 45 mph and I did a spin and fell off,” Utley says with obvious delight at the memory of his dunking. “I came up out of the water saying ‘Oh, my, Gawd. I gotta have one of these.’ The next

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day I went over to the Sea-Doo shop and bought two of my Bombardiers. I just right than and there I said, “This is for me.”

But it wasn't initially for him because of the injury. “He didn't have any use of hands,” Brucker says. “As a matter of fact, eating had to be done with assisted devices because he couldn't close his hand around the fork.”

“If you've ever rode on a PWC you can realize how difficult it is to keep your balance at first as you're learning to do that, but you need control of your paraspinal muscles to be able to put your body in certain positions, especially as the PWC is moving, turning, twisting. Well, he didn't have that capability previously because he didn't have control over the trunk (of his body).”

Through the biofeedback work he does three weeks a year each February with Dr. Brucker in Miami, Utley has been able to develop the use of his hands and thumbs.

“It has gotten me signals back in parts that I had no signal into before,” Utley explains, “and that's what's so great about riding the Sea-Doos is because my hands, my thumb have to work independently.”

That's not the only challenge with Sea-Doos according to close friend, Tim Patterson, who was paralyzed 26 years ago in a motor vehicle accident.

“Getting on and off of them, putting them in the water—it's kind of tough to do it by yourself,” Patterson says. “And when you do fall off, trying to get back on that thing because they are a little tipsy”

Still, riding Sea-Doos and going boating were the ways that Utley romanced his wife. Now married five years, Dani Utley, a former fire fighter, paramedic and flight medic, says they go out on the water once a week from July through August. Even though they live next to the Columbia River in the Eastern Washington, Mike's speaking engagements and their Foundation work dominate the schedule.

“Mike might contact somebody initially right after their injury, but everybody's kind of in a state of shock and where Mike really does his best work is maybe a year after the injury,” she says.

“After everybody has gone back to their jobs, are resuming kind of their lifestyle, Mike is the one that comes in and says ‘Okay, now get off your butt; this is it; start getting into the gym, do what you gotta do ... no whining’,” Dani says with a laugh.

According to Dr. Brucker, Utley's mental toughness is what has helped him most in the recovery process.

“The fact that he actually has gotten use of his arms and hands to that degree and trunk and can even move some of the muscles of the legs—this is like a medical miracle already,” Brucker says.

“So, we haven't reached a plateau, we're not doing this work with the hope something's going to happen, with the hopes that we'll find a miracle. He continues to get better.

“Mike's always the one who takes up the challenge, which is the other part of his personality. So tell him can't or tell him won't or there's a world class record that nobody's broken, that's it—he sets his sights on that goal. So, in a way, very ironically, you might say that the constraints of traditional medicine and how the clinical data tell us, that people tend not to get better has to him been the gauntlet that's made the challenge for him to beat that record and certainly he's risen to that challenge.” *Ride*