



IMPOSSIBLE IS NOTHING

By Amy Whitesall

Elliott Mealer was a big Ohio State fan. Offensive lineman big, at 6-5 and 280 pounds, but also as scarlet and gray as any kid in Wauseon, Ohio. But by his junior year of high school, amid the emotion vs. reason swirl of recruiting, he knew he needed some unbiased guidance. He wasn't especially religious, but his girlfriend encouraged him to let God into his life.

So Elliott prayed.

God, where do you want me to be?

He was as surprised as anyone when one sign after another pointed to the University of Michigan.

C'mon God, I'm being serious.

Elliott committed to Michigan, his football scholarship the realization of a dream he'd had since second grade. The future was a broad, shining horizon.

And then on Christmas eve 2007, everything changed.

The Mealers were on their way home from a family gathering when an elderly driver broadsided the SUV carrying Elliott, his older brother, Brock, their parents Shelly and David Mealer and Elliott's girlfriend, Hollis Richer. Richer and David Mealer died at the scene. In one terrible swipe, Elliott lost his two best friends.

Brock's injuries included two shattered vertebrae that left him paralyzed below the waist. Doctors told him that there was a 99 percent chance he'd spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

But people like the Mealers are the reason for that one percent.

Almost a year ago, Brock started supplementing his hospital rehab with a workout program designed by Michigan strength and conditioning director Mike Barwis. In the months since then, he's gone from feeling random muscle twitches in his thighs to standing up on his own power. From walking on a treadmill with significant mechanical assistance to walking in leg braces with the help of forearm crutches, to walking with nothing but a pair of simple drugstore canes.

Today Brock, 25, will lead the Wolverines onto the field for their season-opener against Connecticut. For the Michigan football team he has become the embodiment of what's possible.

Rich Rodriguez had been Michigan's head coach for just a few weeks when he heard about the Mealers' accident. He didn't really know Elliott, who'd been recruited by Lloyd Carr, but reaching out to the family seemed like the right thing to do. Elliott had torn his rotator cuff trying to free Brock from the SUV; Rodriguez assured him that regardless of what happened with the shoulder, Michigan would honor his scholarship. Almost three years later, the coach remains amazed by this family that stays so strong and positive despite all that it's lost.



Elliott (left), Brock (center) and mom Shelly during the practice run for today's pre-game recognition.

"I think anytime you see somebody overcome what they've overcome, when you think you're having a bad day and then you look at how they've responded - it puts a lot of things in perspective," said coach Rodriguez.

ONE PERCENT

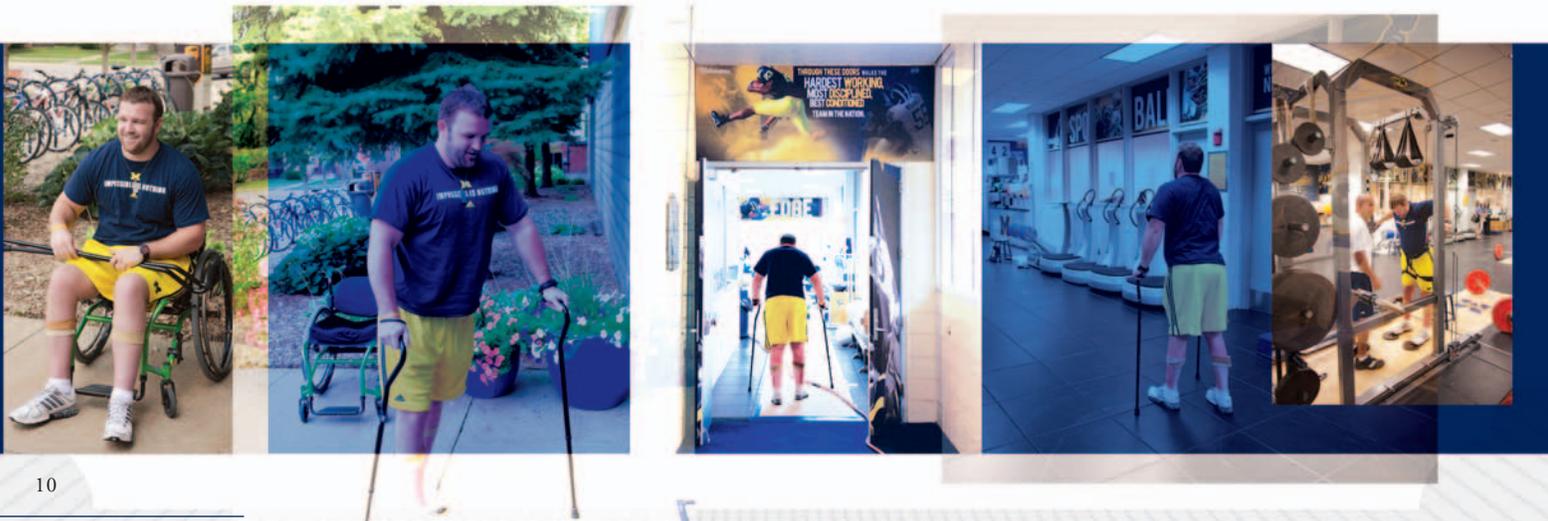
Brock Mealer has never lacked fight. The smallest of David and Shelly Mealer's three sons — a 6-foot-2 "runt" — he's always been willing to outwork anyone. His older brother, Blake, was the star athlete of the family, and by sixth grade Elliott — four years younger — was bigger than Brock. Brock couldn't control those things, but his effort has always set him apart.

So even though the surgeon told him the best he could hope for would be that the few nerves that were still firing randomly would eventually desensitize, the injury stoked the fire that had always burned in him.

"I think for the first year people thought of me as being in denial," Brock said. "I can definitely understand that a lot of people probably do go through that denial ... But I never really saw it as denial as much as keeping an open mind about possibilities and opportunities.

"Even if I didn't walk, it was just a matter of convincing myself I'd done everything I could to do it. If it didn't happen, it didn't happen. I just didn't want to have that regret of not knowing whether or not it could have."

By late 2009, he'd started to come in for an occasional workout with Barwis





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and strength and conditioning coordinator Parker Whiteman when his physical therapy brought him to Ann Arbor. One day Barwis asked if he was ready to get out of the wheelchair.

Barwis is tough, intense, perpetually hoarse — every inch the hard-nosed strength coach. But he's also smart and creative — a mad scientist of human performance. He originally studied medicine and hoped to become an orthopedist, but realized his explosive, high-energy personality made for a poor bedside manner. He switched to exercise physiology, where it's OK to yell at the people you're trying to help.

He created a plan for Brock based on medical principles of adaptation, with exercises designed to reawaken and recruit neurons and muscle fibers that hadn't been called on since the injury. It's tricky business, building something from nothing, but Barwis is always optimistic.

"It's up to God and Brock to make it work, and I have faith in both," he said.

He and Whiteman set short-term goals for Brock, and once Brock started hitting them his confidence soared. Since January, Brock has worked out with Barwis and Whiteman in the Michigan football weight room four days a week, often wearing a navy blue adidas t-shirt that reads "Impossible is Nothing." He believes it; he lives it. But he also understands impossible doesn't turn to nothing without a price.

Barwis rigged a climbing harness to one of the weight room's squat racks to help Brock learn to stand on his own power. They started with 240 pounds of assistance and gave him a bar to hang onto, so he could use his arms. When he no longer needed help from the harness they took the bar away and started over, forcing him to re-learn the subtleties of balancing on two feet.

"I'm not supposed to be able to do this," Brock thought, and in that moment's distraction he almost lost his balance.

Today he can rise from a stool, squat to a sitting position, rise again.

Barwis croaks encouragement with his raspy voice; Brock does squats until he sweats the blue t-shirt to black, fighting for every rep. Then he pauses to vomit in a trash can.

"His faith and his mentality and his family have brought him this far," said Whiteman. "He's made the decision along with his family that he's going to get past this point in his life and make better of it."

Afterward, as Brock sits in a wedge of shade outside Schembechler Hall, every player and coach who passes greets him by name with a smile, a wave, a handshake.

"A lot of the guys see him at the beginning or end of his workouts and have gotten to know him," said Rodriguez. "He's a great kid; they're a great family. ... I think it all starts with his attitude — he was so positive from the start. With his



Elliott, Shelly, Brock and Blake in front of Elliott's Schembechler Hall locker.

attitude it makes you think, 'Boy if there is one percent (who could overcome this injury) he could be the guy.'"

One day, not long ago, Brock caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he walked across the weight room using nothing but his two canes.

"I'm not supposed to be able to do this," he thought, and in that moment's distraction he almost lost his balance.

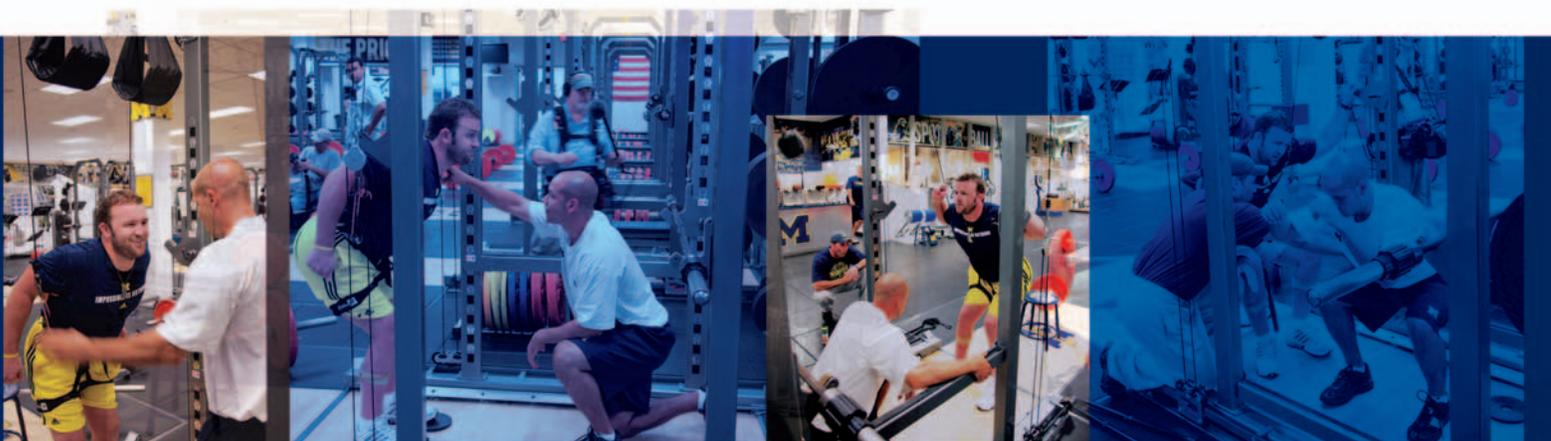
"I caught myself and I thought, 'Okay, I am doing this,'" he said. "Constantly in my head I'm always focused on that next step. At this point it's not hard to take just one step."

Last winter Rodriguez noticed the progress Brock was making and asked if he was going to be ready to lead the team onto the field on Sept. 4. Brock smiled the broad smile that rarely leaves his face and quietly took up the challenge.

On the last day of spring drills, Rodriguez told the team. Then he turned toward the endzone and said, "Let's see how he's coming along."

Up stood Brock, walking with the help of leg braces and forearm crutches. He was ready to go 50 yards. He made it 25 before the team mobbed him.

"You don't hear people speak out loud about it," said junior tight end Kevin Koger, Elliott's roommate since freshman year. "But when you feel down or get tired or feel sorry for yourself, when you look at Brock and see him in there working, it picks you up every day."





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DREAMS

When Elliott decided as a seven-year-old that he wanted to play Division I football, most people figured he was just a little kid dreaming. David Mealer told him he could do it.

“Elliott, if you don’t have good dreams, you’ll have nightmares,” he said.

“That’s still my favorite quote,” says Elliott, now a towering young man with a maturity beyond his 21 years.

He redshirted his freshman year, healed his shoulder and played in 11 games last fall. Like his brother, he has a gracious, genuine, glass-half-full way of looking at the world.

ESPN’s E:60 featured his family’s story during the 2009 season. And as much as he wishes he could go a day without thinking about it, he’ll tell it again if it will help another person persevere. If it will help them remember to be grateful for every day.

“I think we realize that with me being up here at Michigan, our story has gotten more publicity, but we realize too that we’re not the only ones with the story,” he said. “Nobody’s tragedy is worse or easier than the next person’s. That’s why God still has us all here, to encourage each other and to spread the good news. We’re all here to help each other out.”

The accident changed a lot of things, but it didn’t crush the Mealers’ capacity to dream.

Before the accident, Brock was an Ohio State economics student who seemed destined to follow Blake into the family concrete business. But now he’s had the chance to share his story — sometimes face-to-face- with people who may need just a little more fight for their own struggles.

“After being able to reach out to people like that it’s hard to find something that really feels as good as helping people out,” said Brock, who finished his bachelor’s degree in economics in 2008 and is halfway through a master’s in public affairs.

“I’ve been fortunate to have the right people around me, and to have an atmosphere like this. It’s just been awesome being around the coaches and players. It inspires me every day and gives me a lot of confidence. It does a lot to silence the negative thoughts in my head.”

He and Elliott — each doggedly pursuing their dreams — draw inspiration from each other and spin it off to everyone around them. And it doesn’t hurt that demanding, all-consuming activities like football and college and learning to walk again are blessedly exhausting. They leave less time in the day to dwell on the past.

Elliott and Hollis dated for two-and-a-half years, but he’s become even closer to her family since the accident. The Richers, his own family and his coaches and teammates keep him going. Nighttime is always hard, when the day is done and he’s alone with his thoughts. But the sun keeps coming up.

“This whole Michigan family is just amazing,” he said. “They’ll probably

“If you don’t have good dreams, you’ll have nightmares.”

— David Mealer

never know how thankful I am for them. This whole football team has really done more for me than I can ever say.”

Hollis was the one who nudged Elliott’s faith, the one who pointed him toward God in a substantial way. When he was worried or discouraged, she always had a bible verse for him.

One was Proverbs 24-25: “The Lord directs our steps, so how can anyone understand his own way?”

Good question. And then Elliott thinks of Brock.

Who could have known?

Who could have known that the accident would happen, or that Rodriguez would end up at Michigan, or that his staff would challenge Brock to walk and then help make it happen? A one-percent chance. Who could have known?

“When I was being recruited I used to joke about it; I used to tell people it’s not that I want to go (to Michigan) it’s that I have this gut feeling. I knew that I needed to be here,” Elliott said. “... Obviously I want to accomplish my dreams and all my goals at Michigan, but I do look at it and say, ‘If me coming to Michigan meant Brock walking, then that fulfills my reasons for being here.’”



Blake, David, Brock and Elliott.

