

ROAD TO RECOVERY

A miracle comeback

Former Hamilton Junior Red Wings player Riley Dinda suffered a debilitating stroke. Defying odds, just three years later, he's back on the ice

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AT ONE POINT during the first couple days, doctors told his devastated family there was an 80 per cent chance things wouldn't get much better. The stroke had simply been massive and debilitating. As a result, the young man lying in the medically-induced coma that spring morning in 2014 would almost certainly be facing monumental physical challenges for the rest of his life.

Any hope that this was an overly pessimistic diagnosis and everything would somehow snap back to normal once he woke up and his brain fired up again was quickly crushed. He couldn't move his right arm. When he tried to speak, his words came out slurred and mangled. And his right leg was useless.

"IT WAS SHOT," Riley Dunda says. "It was done."

The whole thing was stunning. This was an incredibly fit hockey player with the Hamilton Red Wings. Inexplicably --- and unknown to him --- he'd somehow suffered a tear in his carotid artery, which fired a blood clot that worked its way into his brain. It happened on that May morning. He stood up to go get some cereal at his Grimsby home and simply collapsed.

The truly shocking part of all this? He was just 18. Honestly, who has a stroke at 18? The answer is, more people than you think. But that's another story for another day.

After an experimental surgery saved his life, Dunda set about rehabbing himself. Every day he'd grind away at the gym in hopes of seeing small, incremental improvements. It was never fun --- truth is, it was often awful --- but he kept at it. His hand started to work again. His speech returned. Soon he was walking. With help at first, then without.

Call it a miracle, call it force of will or maybe call it a bit of both, but within a year you wouldn't have instantly known what he'd been through if you saw him walking toward you.

There were hints of a limp, but that's it.

In the process, he became something of a spokesperson for stroke recovery, leading fundraising walks, spending time with other young people who'd gone through a similar thing, and

appearing as the poster child for what's possible. With #fightrileyfight all over social media, his comeback was followed and cheered on by people everywhere.

Especially in the tight-knit hockey community. All of this however, was just the appetizer.

THE OTHER DAY, a buddy at Niagara College, where he's studying broadcasting, asked if he wanted to join the intramural hockey team. Dunda's not sure if the guy knew his background and he didn't raise it.

"I just said OK and showed up," he says.

He'd been on the ice a few times since as an assistant coach with the Glanbrook Rangers and a couple times to join NHLer Brian McGrattan for a careful skate, but he hadn't pulled the equipment on for a game since the stroke. Tying his skates was tough since his hand is still not 100 per cent. He got it done, though.

As he put on the rest of his stuff he was freaking out. He's played hundreds of games in his life and dressed for hundreds more practices. For this one, though, his nerves were crazy. Back when things were really bleak, he'd insisted he'd return to hockey someday. He says he truly believed it even if few others held the same level of optimism.

Yet here he was.

When he stepped onto the ice, his amazed dad hit record on his phone camera. Then started crying.

"Yeah, I did," Richard says. "He didn't see me."

Almost immediately, it all started coming back to the now 21-year-old. His stickhandling was OK. His shooting wasn't bad, thanks mostly to the fact that he has been shooting at a net in his basement twice a week for a while now.

If anything, skating was the challenge. Dunda still doesn't have full strength in his right side, so pushing off was a challenge. One side was full power and the other was about 60 per cent. That equation doesn't lead to a straight line or good turns. Yet within a couple shifts he'd made some adjustments to deal with it.

"I fell twice the entire game," he says. "I was pretty impressed by that."

Before long he was caught up in the game, not thinking about anything but the flow of the action. He's been back several times since. Today it's just hockey. Not as competitive as what he was used to in his old life, but hockey.

He says his mom had been a little concerned about him playing again until she was told it was a no-body-checking league. Then she was OK.

He, on the other hand, was a little disappointed.

"I wanted to play hitting," he says. "Who doesn't?"

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