Injured football player makes strides at Sac State’s Physical Therapy Mock Clinic

Will Barker, 19, gets around quite ably in his wheelchair; so well, in fact, that when no one is available to drive him to the gym, he sets off on his own – a journey that takes almost two hours from home.

In 2009, Barker was a junior at Sacramento’s Valley High, playing defensive back on the football team. He broke his neck and suffered an incomplete spinal cord injury while making a tackle on a Davis High player.

He can move his arms and has some feeling in his legs since undergoing spinal surgery. But he can’t walk. Not yet.

“His initial performance on the treadmill is promising, and this is the best treatment to try to regain his walking ability,” says Michael McKeough, a professor in the Department of Physical Therapy. “Next semester, we will do concerted gait training, which is an effort to see if he can learn to walk on his own.”

McKeough is the director of Sacramento State’s Physical Therapy Mock Clinic, which provides free rehabilitation services to area residents with neurologic damage who are unable to afford treatment. The clinic also gives Physical Therapy graduate students the chance to gain real-world, hands-on experience.

Barker’s first year as a Mock Clinic client was dedicated to improving his wheelchair skills. In his second year, he’s working on getting stronger. PT students Kylee Keck and Steven Sylvester built a mini gym at his home, complete with a weight bench and a pull-up bar.

“He can use the bar to stand independently,” says McKeough. “We will try to use that strength to get him to once again walk.”

One day in the Mock Clinic, Barker grasps a parallel bar and, twice, slowly pulls himself up and out of his wheelchair. It’s the warm-up before he attempts his longest walk yet on the treadmill. Sylvester, Keck and fellow PT student Chris Bartkowski secure his upper body in a harness, which is attached to a suspension system and a hydraulic lift. The apparatus will take some of the body weight off his legs.
“I’m nervous,” Barker admits shyly.

As the treadmill rolls ever so slowly, Keck and Bartkowski pick up and place Barker’s feet one after another onto the rubber belt. Three minutes into the experiment, they’re all sweating. Barker is beaming.

“That was an unbelievable success for a first effort,” McKeough says. “We will increase the amount of time he walks on the treadmill with weight support and eventually give him back some of his body weight as he becomes stronger. If the treadmill training goes well, the next step is to try over ground with weight support and see how far he is able to progress with that treatment.

“It’s uncommon to get a return this long after an injury, but Will was very young (when injured),” McKeough continues. “This is very hopeful, that he is able to do this much on his own and be able to tolerate it.”

Barker’s progress doesn’t surprise Assistant Professor Katrin Mattern-Baxter. “He’s an athlete, and he wants to be pushed. It’s an important lesson for students that someone can be injured and then reach this level of achievement,” she says.

Barker visits the Mock Clinic once a week for treatment. He repays his mentors by serving on patient panels to talk about his injury and by allowing PT students to move his limbs for practice.

“The progress I’ve made, from being a quadriplegic to being able to use my legs, is such a blessing,” Barker says. “The goal might be too big, but when I’m blessed with this opportunity I’ve been given, I know that God has given me a second chance. I do this all out of hope and faith. I’ve come this far. There’s no telling how far I can go.”

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156.

– Dixie Reid
dixie.reid@csus.edu

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