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MUD HENS MANAGER INSPIRES CRASH SURVIVOR

By Dana Wakiji

Former Detroit Tigers player Phil Nevin now serves as the team's Triple-A manager, helping a new generation of players follow his path to the major leagues. His helping hand isn't restricted to the players on his roster, either.

Jon Wilhite knows this. Out of tragedy, he has forged a friendship with the Toledo Mud Hens' manager.

In April 2009, Los Angeles Angels pitcher Nick Adenhardt and two others were killed in a car crash, just hours after Adenhardt made his season debut, his fourth major-league start.

Only Wilhite, a fourth passenger in the car broadsided by a drunken driver, survived the accident. With the injury he sustained, he was very well could have been killed, too.

Wilhite, now 26, suffered an internal decapitation, meaning his neck ligaments were torn and the bone connecting his spine and skull was fractured. When paramedics reached him, only his skin and muscles were keeping his head in place.

Dr. Nitin Bhatia of the UC Irvine Medical Center performed a five-hour surgery to fuse Wilhite's neck and head together with a titanium plate, rod and screws. About 95 percent of those who suffer a similar injury die, and most who survive are permanently incapacitated. Bhatia said only four other people are known to have recovered.

"You know when you go to the medical people and they're saying miracle, they don't use that term much," Wilhite said before the Mud Hens game Tuesday night. "The injury I had, for my spinal cord to be exposed like it was and for them to cut the roof off the car without moving my head, because if they moved my head, I was told a centimeter or something, I'd be paralyzed.

"It still sort of seems like a story to me because I don't remember that day, and a month after. I never had a doubt that baseball helped me deal with the adversity, and I think that's what baseball does. It's a game of failure. Somehow I remained positive through it all."

Nevin was one of the people who helped Wilhite remain positive. They both played baseball for Cal State Fullerton and had a met before the accident.

"When the accident happened, I was flying back from somewhere," Nevin said. "We landed, and I got a text, somebody saying something sad about the Angels pitcher. It was weird. I went online and read it: three other passengers, one survived, a Fullerton baseball player.

"So now my mind is racing. I called the baseball coach, and he told me it was Jon."

Wilhite had made a big impression when Nevin was working for ESPN doing regional college baseball games. After Fullerton was

knocked out by Stanford, Nevin watched as Wilhite spoke to the team in the outfield. A fifth-year senior, Wilhite had played in his last game.

"Basically, he was telling them how upset he was to have to take off the jersey and how much they should respect Fullerton and the uniform they were wearing, however many years they got to play," Nevin said. "He said, 'This is the last time I'll ever wear the baseball uniform as a player,' stuff like that, kind of a moving thing for the players.

"I thought, 'Wow, I gotta meet this kid.' "

The next time Nevin saw his fellow Titans alumnus, Wilhite was in a coma in the hospital, his head supported by a halo brace.

"He was at the hospital for the whole day, chatting with my dad and my brothers and my uncles," Wilhite said. "The relationship just sort of went from there. He's always there for me, giving me calls of support, and he's just been awesome."

Although Wilhite doesn't remember Nevin being there, he carries a picture in his wallet of Nevin at his bedside that day.

Nevin even invited Wilhite and his whole family to his home for a big dinner over the winter.

The two stay in regular contact, and Nevin invited Wilhite to visit him in Toledo. The Mud Hens were playing the Louisville Bats on Wednesday and Thursday, which gave Wilhite an opportunity to meet up with one of his former Fullerton teammates, Daniel Dorn.

Nevin said the Mud Hens have all benefited from hearing about Wilhite's recovery.

"Heck, he's in there talking to some of my

players, and they're just wide-eyed," Nevin said. "You think you've got problems? It's an amazing story. It really is."

Like anyone who has been through a near-death experience, Wilhite says he is a changed person.

"I just feel like people always say live like there's no tomorrow or whatever. That's sort of lip service," Wilhite said. "I feel like I have the healthiest outlook on life that anyone could have.

"People always say, 'Don't sweat the small stuff.' I really don't. A lot of people say a lot of things, but I'm living that. I'm blessed with that, and I'm blessed to still be here and doing as well as I am. But I'm missing my friends."

Although Wilhite doesn't intend to be a professional motivational speaker, he does want to share his story with kids in the hopes of preventing accidents like the one that took his friends' lives. He spoke to students at the high school he and Pearson had attended.

"They had to turn kids away from asking questions because they were that riveted," Wilhite said. "FOX Sports has the video they did. It's a 30-minute thing and had the Q&A, and the principal was way excited on the reaction from the kids.

"It was right before prom and he said it was very impactful, and I felt really good when he said, 'You saved a life today.' I feel a little bit of an obligation to do something."

Wilhite has just started working full time for his father, Tony, in his logistics business. He and his younger brother, Chad, 24, are hoping to learn the business and eventually take over in a few years when their father retires.

Since he has a nice boss who let him take off a few days, Wilhite said he has been enjoying his time in Toledo.

"It's cool to be around the game and stuff again. It feels like I'm playing ball again," Wilhite said. "It's been real cool, just being one of the guys, chilling in here and hanging out with Phil in the manager's office, getting to shoot the stuff with other coaches and players.

"It's awesome. The ballpark and the fans, it's a good atmosphere for baseball."