

# Hitting the Wall

Rich Sprenkel, Jr.  
Chico, California

It was April 17, 1989, near the end of the twenty-six and one-half mile Boston Marathon; my body had "hit the wall." But somehow, the combination of cheers from the million and a half plus crowd and the atmosphere of energy that knifed the air made my spirits soar with the glitter of holiday balloons, buoying me over the agony. Usually about two miles from the finish, muscles and mind refuse to cooperate and many athletes simply keel over.

But I was flying! I had fulfilled the unreachable, had experienced the impossible dream.

For a brief flash I thought of the "carbo party" held the previous evening at the Black Falcon Terminal, overlooking shimmering lights on the Bay. Munching on tasty dishes of rice and spaghetti, in awe of mingling with professional and Olympic runners, I chatted with a distinguished gentleman sitting in front of me.

"Say, Rich, tell me about your accident."

I stared at him! How could he know? "The scars! I couldn't help but notice the little scars on your forehead. You have been in a halo. You see, I am a surgeon.

Of course, a doctor would notice. "Yes, that's right. It happened five years ago."

He handed me his card. Dr. Bradley C. Borlase, M.D., Harvard Medical School. Memories surfaced as I told him my story.

It happened on April 4, 1984, while I was returning from a drinking party near Chico State University, in Chico, California. I was nineteen years old and life was a party! I had rebelled against the God of my parents and against the beliefs that had been instilled by a childhood of studying the Bible. That stuff was for old fogies! Not for me! Dad had tried to reason with me many times but I refused to listen.

I slammed on the brakes of my soft-top CJ5 to avoid hitting a dog. The jeep rolled two times then landed on me and another passenger, a buddy. The back of my neck hit the curb, and a wrench pierced my side, leaving a deep hole. My skull took quite a beating from the impact leaving a crack from my ear to the top of my head. My pelvis was broken in four places. I had turned blue when a bystander, who had heard the crash and rushed to the scene from his comfortable house, revived me with artificial resuscitation.

The shrill ringing of the phone reached Mother and Dad at one-thirty in the morning. "There's been an accident. Rich is in the hospital, in a coma and not expected to live." Fighting panic, they raced to the hospital and inadvertently walked into the emergency room to see their son comatose, body broken and bleeding. The wrench had left an ugly gaping hole, my head was bloodied and misshapen, my ear hanging by a thread of skin.

My parents were asked to leave, but Dad insisted, "All we want to do is pray." He reached out his hand toward me and said, "Rich, we're praying for you." Funny! Dad says my head swung over when he said that. Anyway, after Dad prayed the nurses ushered my parents into the doctors' lounge to wait

The attending neurosurgeon was gentle as he spoke to my parents, "The X-rays show no spinal chord in the injured area, which indicates that it is severed there. His neck is broken in four places and the vertebrae are separated. He could slip away at any moment. We are doing our best, but I doubt if we can save him. I'm sorry. But if he does survive, he will never function as a normal person."

Temporarily shaken, my father's strong faith would hold him steadfast throughout the ordeal. A family friend arrived and began to pray. Pastor Gaylord Enns arrived. Members of my family came and the group began a prayer vigil. Several churches had been alerted and a chain of prayer began.

With my life hanging in precarious balance, my condition was monitored but the doctors did not begin treatment. Toward morning the neurosurgeon spoke to my parents, "These X-rays are beginning to look better; whatever it is that you're doing, keep it Up.

Miraculously I survived the night. At about eight o'clock the next morning, I was moved to the trauma unit for treatment. The night watch of prayer warriors, greatly encouraged, began to leave. By that time churches throughout California and Washington State had been alerted and prayer continued. Those prayers sustained my parents.

My life hung on a thread during the days that followed. Alarm lights flashed as doctors and nurses battled for my survival. I had been placed on a breathing machine and developed pneumonia, a major crisis for one in my condition. At one point a high fever developed and the doctors thought it was the end. Time and time again God intervened.

The following Sunday morning Dad attended church where the congregation had been praying. An elderly woman greeted him and quoted Psalm 117, "He shall live and not die." Greatly comforted Dad accepted the words. Later that night he would need that scripture.

That evening the doctors informed my parents that a blood clot had formed on my brain and was expanding. Without an operation I would surely die but I was not expected to survive an operation in my condition. Again I surprised the doctors when I did live.

The doctors prepared my parents for my recovery and suggested they attend classes for parents of the brain impaired. "He will be nothing more than a vegetable, unable to walk or talk." Mother and Dad continued to pray.

Twenty-eight days after the injury I came out of the coma. "He's talking." The news circled throughout the hospital. My room quickly filled with doctors in white coats, curious, concerned, questioning me.

"Say, Rich, how do you spell Cherry Street?"

They were amazed that I could talk! But spell correctly? That was unbelievable! Medical science could not explain why I had such a recovery. Again, a time to celebrate.

When I entered the Therapeutic Treatment Center at Chico Community Hospital, the sincere sympathy of the nurses incensed me: "Rich, you must accept what is. You must learn to adjust to accept your condition, your limitations." What? Live like this? Oh, no! Not me! Not on your life! Their words angered and challenged me, spurring me to activity. I worked diligently during (countless hours of) therapy. Determined with the help of Almighty God to walk.

In the beginning, I could not stand without assistance. I tottered and hobbled, staggering around my room without the nurses' knowledge. In three or four weeks I could walk alone.

Two months after the accident, the doctors wanted to remove the "halo" (a device screwed into the head, with a circle that goes around the head to prevent movement of the vertebrae) but they were concerned because one of the vertebrae was out of alignment. So they scheduled an operation on my neck.

The night before the surgery I attended a prayer meeting and was anointed with oil and baptized in the Holy Spirit. I actually felt a surge of power through my neck during prayer. I just knew God touched me. The next morning when the doctors X-rayed, they discovered the vertebrae were in position. I was elated to have that operation canceled and breathed a prayer of gratitude to God. I did not deserve this mercy, this great love of a forgiving God. But He had bestowed it on me!

Who was this God? I wanted to know more about Him, to know Him for myself. Why had He spared me? It would take time to come to a fuller understanding; time to give my life to Him. But God was real! Real!

One year after the accident the doctors allowed me to run again. It was like setting fire to a furnace. It seems like I haven't taken my running shoes off since that time.

I competed in a triathlon four months later while the nurses from the hospital cheered from the sidelines. Since that time I have competed in triathlons, marathons, 10Ks and sometimes long distance bike races. In the spring of 1989 I placed eleventh overall in the Chico Bidwell Classic Marathon, and was first in my age division, with a time of 2.59 which qualified for the Boston Marathon.

As I raced the last few yards down Boston's Boylston Street, beyond exhaustion, drenched, each step a creation of agony, I barely heard the sounds that enveloped me. TV cameras hovered like whining hummingbirds overhead; video and still cameras clicked from the sidelines.

I knew this was a time to remember.

I savored the moments, drinking in rays of the penetrating sun for which I had prayed. I wanted to etch this moment into my mind forever. The 8,000 runners surrounded me like teeming molten lava pouring through the streets of this historic New England city that claimed the ship Columbus sailed in and the statue of Paul Revere. Each runner stretched beyond endurance trying to make the finish

line.

After I had nearly collapsed across the finish line I was amazed to discover that amid the competition of Olympic and professional runner I had finished in the top twenty percent. Receiving that medal that was placed around my neck, I sent a prayer of thanks heavenward. Tears ran down my face for quite awhile. Is there anything You can't do, my Father in heaven?

What next? The Olympics? A big dream, yes. But because of the grace of Jesus Christ, Lord and Master, I have hit the wall before and survived, reaching impossible dreams.