

GAME, SET, UNMATCHED

story by **HAYLEY ROBB**

He lay face down with a gun to his head. Golf clubs swung to meet his flesh — one pound in his back after another. They demanded answers he didn't know. Bandanas covered their faces, and the sound of his apartment being torn apart faded in the background.

"I heard the bang, saw the flash and immediately thought to myself, 'they just killed the other guy,'" Phillip Cole II said. "That was the first thing that popped into my head, and then a millisecond right after that I felt this jolt of electricity go from my back all the way to my toes."

That's when Cole realized they had shot him.

Cole, a WKU alumnus from Bowling Green, was paralyzed from the waist down 10 years ago on Oct. 5, 2007. He was violently attacked and robbed in his Louisville apartment, and in a matter of 24 hours, Cole went from living a fervid, active lifestyle to spending each day in a wheelchair.

His dynamic lifestyle started during his childhood, which was marked by frequent athletics, competitiveness and pride in his outward appearance.

Cole grew up in the shadow of the Hill and heard Hilltopper tales from his parents, both of whom had attended WKU. Cole started his college career at WKU, took a detour to study in Louisville at Jefferson Community & Technical College, then returned and graduated from WKU in 2011 with a bachelor's degree in accounting.

THE QUALIFYING DRAW

Before making the transition to Louisville in 2007, Cole said he changed his major at WKU three or four times without a clear direction in his life. He then decided to study radiology at Jefferson Community & Technical College. He had a stable job in sales with Anheuser-Busch and was sharing an apartment with his sister when the sound of the doorknob jiggling changed his world.

It was a Friday night when a drug dealer brought four masked men to the wrong apartment. As the men struggled to open the front door, their beating got louder. Thinking it was his sister coming back from a night out, Cole went to the door. Upon realizing it wasn't his sister, he struggled to hold the door until the hinges broke off, and the intruders flew in.

Both Cole and the drug dealer lay on the ground with the men shouting and demanding answers until the intruders realized they were not where they wanted to be. One by one they scrambled out of the apartment but not before pulling the trigger, leaving Cole helpless on the ground.

After making it out of surgery and then an intensive care unit, Cole moved to the Frazier Rehab Institute in Louisville, which specializes in care for people with traumatic injuries. He remained there until he was strong enough to return home. However, he was paralyzed from the waist down.

"One of the psychologists told me something that sticks with me to this day," Cole said. "He pretty much told me that life doesn't set in until you get home. And he was absolutely right."

Cole said he didn't want to eat. He didn't want to see friends or go outside where people would see him. He was embarrassed that he had to be retrained on how to do the simplest of tasks, like using the restroom and getting dressed in the morning. And small things that used to be important to him, like eye contact, no longer mattered.

Cole said he used to take pride in being able to get cute a girl's attention as she passed by.

"But now a lot of people try not to make eye contact with me," he said. "They don't want you to know they're staring so they go out of their way not to make eye contact."

Cole said he felt vulnerable, alone and dark for a long time. It was now a process that took time, planning and



Phillip Cole II was paralyzed in 2007. He began playing tennis in May 2017 to keep up an active lifestyle.

PHOTO BY EVAN MATTINGLY



Cole uses tennis as an outlet and doesn't let his disability affect his way of living. "Where I'm at now, and what I can do now, makes me feel pretty powerful," Cole said. "If I sit back and think about it, I have done some amazing things with the odds stacked against me."

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forethought, he said. Being spontaneous was no longer a possibility.

Brandi Cole, Cole's sister, who is now an occupational therapy assistant in the Tampa Bay area, said she struggled just as much as Cole with his incident. She said she blamed herself for a long time.

"When we were at the emergency room, he looked at me," Brandi said. "His eyes were so big and he said, 'I thought it was you at the door, and I opened it.'"

Brandi said she broke down and immediately lost control. The doctors escorted her out of the room because she began to upset other patients. She couldn't fake a smile. She couldn't cope with her guilt. She had to let her emotions go.

When the incident happened, Brandi was ready to drop everything to support her family. That's the way they were raised, she said. The helpless feeling Cole felt as he tried to turn his life around was shared by many people around him, and they all wished the pain on themselves, Brandi said. Even with the support of his whole family, Cole still deals with the haunting remnants of the encounter.

"They're in prison, and I still hear a noise in the middle of the night," he said.

Cole said he often wakes up from the repetitive nightmares of someone running into his bedroom with a gun. He can only imagine that fear increasing a hundredfold when the men who assaulted him are released from prison.

Officials gathered fingerprints on the golf clubs used to beat Cole. Two men were charged and sentenced in connection to the incident, but no one was charged with shooting Cole because he was unable to identify the actual shooter. One man is now up for parole. Although he's previously been denied parole three times, Cole said he feels his fears are much closer to reality.

From walking to wheelchair, carelessness to carefulness, Brandi said Cole had to adapt to everything. Initially overwhelmed and depleted, Cole said he didn't know how long he'd be able to keep going.

"My parents are the reason I'm probably alive right now," Cole said. "And I say that because I was in a dark spot for a long time."

OVERCOMING THE BACKHAND

Besides his parents' continuous support, it was regaining portions of his previous self through athletics and fitness that brought the independence, humor and liveliness back to him, Brandi said. Today, Cole is working toward tennis goals he has set for himself and hoping to become a nationally ranked tennis player.

Although a lofty goal, Cole said getting involved in the sport wasn't a rash decision. He invested a lot of money in paying for a specific performance chair, home exercise equipment and a personal trainer, Derek Brockman.

"When I met him, he was having trouble doing stuff around the house," Brockman said. "He told me he was afraid to lift certain things over his head because of the stability issue. I just wanted him to be able to go through a day and it not be a hassle."

Cole said he wanted to better his overall health, and tennis happened to be the motivator.

While working out at Cole's home, Brockman pushed Cole to get out out of his chair. Brockman challenged him with exercises on the ground like push-ups and lifting weights over his head.



Eventually, Brockman convinced Cole to start working out at the Preston Center, a location which was easier on Brockman’s schedule. However, Cole said he was very reluctant to do so at first.

“He talked me into coming to Preston,” Cole said. “And I’m not going to lie, there are some people that are intimidating.”

Cole said that even in an uncomfortable situation, Brockman made him feel confident and would make sure Cole knew that he was accomplishing things a lot of people could never handle.

“He was just very reassuring,” Cole said.

Through their time together, Brockman said Cole’s continuous dedication to embrace every challenge inspired him.

“If Phil taught me one thing and one thing only, it was that life isn’t about analyzing the cards you were dealt, but rather learning how to play those cards to the best of your ability,” Brockman wrote in a text message.

Cole said Matt Davis, assistant director of Student Services within the Student Accessibility Resource Center at WKU, was also a monumental figure in getting back to a good place.

Cole met Davis through a neighbor. Davis has been in a wheelchair his entire life, has competed in 65 marathons, and through his shared interest was able to introduce Cole to the adaptive sports offered nearby in Nashville. Adaptive sports are sports played by those with disabilities, which can be physical or intellectual.

Cole later became involved in tennis at a wheelchair symposium in Nashville when he met a woman who suggested he try the sport. However, both tennis and tax season are in the spring, and this conflict with his work as an accountant just made tennis infeasible — until this year.

Cole connected with an adaptive sports organization in Nashville called the National Wheelcats, and from there he discovered his passion.

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“When you’re playing tennis it’s all on you, and I think it creates a bigger drive,” Cole said. “I get out there, and I get my butt kicked, and I’m the only one out there. It’s my fault.”

Tennis encompasses so many challenging facets, Cole said. It challenges the body physically but also tests his mental capacity.

“Tennis is making him feel and getting him out there,” Brandi said. “I truly believe this is something for the better.”

Tennis has given him something to feel excited about, Cole said. However, with this passion comes a drawback. The availability of adaptive sports in the Bowling Green area is limited. Nashville is the closest city where the culture around organized adaptive sports is truly developed, Cole said.

“Especially in a town that’s limited on resources, this community has a long way to go,” Davis said. “Where there’s a wheel, there’s a way.”

EXPANDING THE COURT TO BOWLING GREEN

Bowling Green’s Parks and Recreation Department has formed a committee, which Cole serves on, intended to create a more accepting culture for the disabled. In May, the department purchased adaptive sports equipment.

“The culture in Bowling Green is not there just yet,” Cole said. “But maybe that’s why I’m here — to make it more accepting.”

Cole said he found power by connecting with others who could truly understand what he was going through, even though Davis’ situation differed from Cole’s in the sense that he had been in a chair his whole life. Davis said he tried to pass on what he’s learned from his experiences.

“Now I’m in that role of passing on what I know about sports to other people and that’s powerful in itself,” Davis said.

Davis’ knowledge and insight is what enabled tennis, confidence and happiness to be introduced back into Cole’s life again, Cole said. Unfortunately, Cole said his life is so busy now that he does struggle to balance time for himself with a 40-plus hour work week at BKD, LLP, a regional accounting firm located in Bowling Green.

“Where I’m at now, and what I can do now, makes me feel pretty powerful,” Cole said. “If I sit back and think about it, I have done some amazing things with the odds stacked against me.”

Smiling softly in his black Nike work polo, Cole said his future is full of tennis. After being humbled by his 10-year journey through paralysis, he has added getting married to his list of goals for the future, but until then, he plans on taking one thing at a time.

Cole’s journey also impacted those who have been with him through it, such as Brockman, who said he grew as a person just by knowing Cole’s story and his character.

“Even though Phil had physical limitations that a lot of people I have never worked with had, he had no mental limitations,” Brockman said. “He never held back because he wanted to take control and he wanted to get better. That was the biggest difference in anyone that I’ve ever trained — he wasn’t afraid to try.”

That same mindset has led Cole to play tennis year-round. And though his incident was devastating, Cole said he eventually came away from it with more modesty, maturity and responsibility.

“I can’t reiterate how humbling it is to go from trying to be the center of attention to not wanting attention at all,” Cole said. “I used to be a very materialistic person and looks were very important to me. But all of that has changed now.”

Cole said he wonders what his life would be like if he had never been injured. He said he’d like to think he’d be married with kids, and that is what is the hardest for him to deal with.

“With his past and his determination and his career goal orientation, there’s no doubt in my mind that he is going to succeed through life,” Brandi said.

THE ACE

A decade later, he’s face down, this time at the gym with his hands gripping the ground, pumping out one push-up after another.

“I used to think that if I could go back in time and do something differently that I would be better off for it, but I don’t really believe that’s true,” Cole said. “As bad as that night was, at the end of the day, it has made me who I am. And I’m pretty proud of where I’m at.

Cole spends an afternoon playing tennis at Bowling Green High School, where he works up a sweat and remains active after his accident. “When you’re playing tennis, it’s all on you, and I think it creates a bigger drive,” Cole said.

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