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Will Break for Prosthetics

One amputee seamlessly combines prosthetics with break dancing, and uses his talent to benefit others.

By Stephanie Z. Pavlou, ELS

In the center of a packed gymnasium, two groups of young men compete to the heavy beat of hip-hop music. One comes forward, twists his legs back and forth before hurling himself backward to land on one hand, legs crisscrossed above his head. A young man from the other group spins on the floor, first on his back, then his shoulders, until he swivels just on his head.

Another comes to the center of the circle where he twists and swivels and spins. When his lower right leg falls off, he simply adjusts his footwork and keeps dancing.

This minor inconvenience happens regularly to Harley Jackson, but he never breaks his stride.

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Damped plans

Jackson was just 10 years old when he was in an accident in his uncle's wrecking truck, which caused him to fly out the door and underneath the vehicle. He crushed three lower vertebrae and suffered third-degree burns on his arm and leg. The injuries to his leg were so bad that, after about 6 months of limb salvage measures, his physicians decided it was best to amputate.

Although he had been a physically active child, being in the hospital for so long put a damper on his Little League and martial arts interests.

"For the next year or 2, I was not bedridden, but I didn't leave the house a lot," Jackson said.

He received his first prosthesis shortly after his wounds healed, but it was not the cure-all he expected. Because he was still growing at the time, and the technology was not as advanced as it is today, it was difficult for his prosthetist to find the right fit. For more than a year, he struggled with learning to walk again.

Despite all his trouble, he found a support system. Teachers and friends at his small Catholic school helped out when necessary and paid special attention to his needs. Although having a prosthesis made everyday activities more complicated, he used this assistance to find his own way of dealing with his difference.

"I'm not going to say I didn't get teased ... but life wasn't unbearable," he told *O&P Business News*.

Little encouragement

He slowly returned to physical activity, beginning with gym class. In high school gym, Jackson swam for the health benefits, and his teacher persuaded him to join the swim team. That little encouragement was all he needed to get involved and get into shape.

Once he enrolled in Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., he revived his interest in martial arts, which prompted him to study abroad at Waseda University in Tokyo. It was there that he discovered break dancing.

"I was walking through the campus and I saw some guys doing it out on the street," he said. "I went and talked to them, and tried to do what they were doing. They taught me."

He continued learning when he returned from Japan. Because he was one of only a few people in his small town with interest in this type of dance, he spent most of that time practicing alone.

Larger community

Now 27, Jackson spends his days as an information technology consultant in software development in Washington, D.C. In his spare time, Jackson, whose stage name is Halfstep, is a b-boy in a crew called the Counter Attack Breakers, which helped form Urban Artistry, a larger dance group that holds performances, competitions and events. Along with b-boying, or break dancing, the group also does other urban dances such as house dancing, popping and locking.

No one else on the dance team is disabled, but it was not hard for the members to accept him. They treat him just like everyone else, and he helps bring a meaningful message to their dancing.

"A lot of people get inspired when they see me dance," he said. "One time I was practicing in a college building, and I didn't think anyone was



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watching. After about an hour, a security guard came down and said he'd been having a rough time and seeing what I do inspires him and shows that what he was worrying about is not a big deal."

Break dancing is about more than self-expression to Harley Jackson who also performs at charitable O&P functions.

Gratitude is a common response from his spectators, but expressions change a bit when first-time spectators watch as his leg falls off and he continues dancing.

"I'll be dancing normally, and no one can tell the difference until something happens and my leg falls off or I have to change it," Jackson said. "People's eyes just get big."

Prosthetic breaks

This intense movement puts a strain on the body, and even more so for Jackson, who must use more durable legs and feet for dancing. Still, he wears out his foot and components almost every 6 months because the optimal thicknesses for his height and weight simply are not sturdy enough to stand up to his abuse. He credits Mid Atlantic Prosthetics & Orthotics with addressing his frequent breaks and modifications.

He even injures his sound leg by hitting it into his prosthesis, so he wears long pants for dancing.

As he dances, Jackson must make additional adjustments to his style. Originally, much of the footwork involved in breaking was difficult for him because this type of dancing is done in a squatting position with knees in front of the body and feet under the buttocks, and many prostheses are not built to move that way.

"It also doesn't help that I have big feet," he said.

Because of this, his moves always look a little different, but not so much so that spectators notice.

"When I'm down like that, I have to change the shape of everything I do. Learning things can be more difficult, and I have to add my own touch to everything," he said.

Future plans

Break dancing is not the only way Jackson expresses his interest in music. Since joining Urban Artistry, he has begun to dabble in the other forms of urban dances the group performs, as well as hip-hop choreography. He also occasionally plays guitar and is learning to disc jockey.

"My goal is to keep dancing, keep getting better. Not get too old, too fast," he said.

He hopes to continue building the dance community in Washington, D.C., and remains active in local charities. One group he works with is Limbs for Life's Kicking for Kids Who Can't, an event held on the National Mall to raise money for young amputees. He performed at the Kicking for Kids event last year, and wants to include the organization in Urban Artistry's upcoming event, Soul Society, which takes place April 18 in Silver Spring, Md.

Since performing at the Extremity Games in 2007, he has added the event to his list of charitable organizations.

"I love that event and what they do," he said. "I've been trying to convince them to have a dance competition."

In addition to his work, his dancing and his charity, he also looks forward to traveling to Germany to train with another dance crew, and to experience another part of the world.

Jackson's hope for other amputees is that they find support teams to boost their confidence in the way his coaches, prosthetists and friends have helped him.

"Encourage people to do what they want to do," he said. "Don't let them limit themselves."

For more information:

- www.urbanartistry.org

Stephanie Z. Pavlou, ELS, is a staff writer for *O&P Business News*.

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