

Sun Devil Rises

BY JEFF COMMINGS

Despite suffering a brain injury from being hit by a truck, Arizona State University swimmer Stephen Estes still realized his dream of competing in the U.S. Olympic Trials a little more than eight months after the accident.



Stephen Estes woke up the morning of Oct. 10, 2011, excited about the possibilities of the day as a senior at Arizona State University, where he was an honors student and Olympic Trials qualifier.

Later that afternoon, he was unconscious in an ambulance. Paramedics were attempting to assess the full scale of damage Estes had sustained when a truck hit him while he was helping another driver in distress. The blow from the truck propelled him 15 feet before his head hit the asphalt road, putting his future as a standout swimmer and excelling student in jeopardy.

But against all expectations, Estes was back in the water six weeks after that traumatic day, and he realized his dream of competing in the Olympic Trials.

THE FUTURE WAS BRIGHT

Stephen Estes won the Arizona 5A state high school championship in the 100 yard breaststroke in 2008, the result of four years of hard work and sacrifice. His next big goal—competing in the 2012 Olympic

Trials—was not going to be as easy. After his first year as a walk-on student-athlete at Arizona State in 2009, his best time in the 100 meter breaststroke was 1:09.32, about five seconds slower than the Trials qualifying time.

Estes would drop four seconds in the long course 100 breast in 2010, down to 1:05.25. The following year, at the summer nationals, his dream had come true: the 1:04.45 next to his name on the

scoreboard meant he was going to be a part of the Olympic Trials.

"I was at a high before the accident," Estes said. "I had dropped three seconds in my 100 (short course) breast and five in my long course 100."

Estes poured every ounce of energy he had into training for the Olympic Trials. As happy as he was with a 1:04.45, he wanted to see "1:03" next to his name on the scoreboard in Omaha, Neb., at the CenturyLink Center.

In the hours and days after that accident in October 2011, it was doubtful that Estes would see his name on the scoreboard at all.

Estes was driving on Loop 202 in Tempe, Ariz. with his twin brother, Nathan, when a car in front of them hit the median after swerving to avoid another car. The Estes brothers stopped in front of the damaged car to check for injuries in the stranded vehicle.

While Stephen was checking on the car, a pickup truck stopped on the highway, halfway in the high-occupancy lane and halfway in the median, presumably to create a barrier between Stephen and speeding traffic. It didn't work.

The last thing Stephen remembers about that day was walking back to his car to make sure his brother had already dialed 911. In a matter of seconds, an oncoming car slammed into the back of the truck, sending it spinning toward Stephen and striking him in the back. The force of the impact sent him flying through the air, landing on his head with a thud. In a seemingly unconscious move, he immediately stood up, but was not upright for long. Stephen's brother, a shot put thrower at Arizona State, carried him away from traffic and tended to him until the paramedics arrived.

For the next few hours, Estes said, "It was as if I was in a dream. I remember small photographic instances of people standing over me, a picture of being in the ambulance and it being really bright."

Given that the truck hit Estes in the back, it's a miracle that he didn't suffer any spinal injury. He had a damaged shoulder and a broken nose and wrist, but the most concerning issue was his brain, which had helped him to a 3.9 grade point average as a mechanical engineering major. CAT scans showed the possibility of his brain swelling to the point that surgery would be needed to remove parts of his skull. But after five days, doctors allowed Estes to leave the hospital on the condition that he remain bedridden for two weeks while the swelling subsided.

Telling a swimmer training for the Olympic Trials that he could not exercise or start physical therapy can be distressing news, and Estes said he did not take it well.

"The way I look back on it now—and this is heavily altered because of the amount of medication I was on—is that it was the most stressful two weeks of my life," he said. "All I did was sleep and watch TV and sleep some more. I knew I was going to have to redshirt

the season, and the only thing I was worried about was getting back in and being ready for Trials."

Recovery was not speedy. Every time Estes stood up, he would get dizzy and have to sit down again. The energy it took to heal the brain swelling made him tired easily. And with the doctors keeping him from any strenuous activity, his injured shoulder was not healing quickly.

The week after Thanksgiving—six weeks after the accident—a neurologist cleared him to swim and do physical therapy, but the physical trauma from the accident meant Estes didn't have the strength to do much exercise.

One of the bright spots of Estes' recuperation came in mid-March during a set of eight fast 50 yard breast-stroke swims on a two-minute interval. His times on the first three or four swims were in the 28-second range, a superb average for a college swimmer.

"By the end, though, I was more than 30 (seconds)," he said. "I was so surprised I was going so fast, but I realized I was so out of shape."

The rate at which Estes was progressing was mostly hampered by the residual effects of the brain injury, specifically mental focus and concentration. Estes was frustrated that his brain wasn't operating the way he knew it could, especially when it pertained to his classwork. When an honors student such as Estes is having trouble with school, it affects his extracurricular activities.

"When I'm in class, I feel like I have a harder time paying attention, and I have a hard time doing homework, which affects me in the pool because I'm so tired," he said. But like any swimmer with a goal, he had to fight through the hardships. He started doing double workouts in May, with the Olympic Trials 10 weeks away.

"YOU HAVE TO HAVE A GOAL"

As Estes laid in bed for two weeks in 2011, unable to stand for more than a couple of minutes, he swatted away any notion that the accident was going to take away his one chance of swimming at the Olympic Trials.

"I never thought about not swimming at Trials," he said. "I knew I wanted to have the experience. There were times that I didn't think people would care how (fast I went), that I would still get to go, but then you get your head on straight and think, 'Wait, it does matter how I do.' You don't want to be that guy who gets last place."

Estes finished in 121st place out of 139 swimmers with a 1:05.56. He wasn't happy at the time with the swim, but the perspective changed six months later.

"I still wish I had gone a little faster," he said while sitting on a bench after a recent workout, the only visible mark from the accident a faded scar on his left cheek. "Thinking back on how my body was dealing with doubles, it was good to be pretty close to where I was. It definitely was very good for what happened." ♦