



First Team All-Ohio Division 5 Linebacker, Hurtig, practices football drills at Fairview High School.

Positive coaching is the key

All-Ohio athlete still has game

by Suzanne A. Brown

“Don’t look back. Just look forward.” That’s how injured worker Brad Hurtig, 19, of Sherwood in northwestern Ohio, said he copes with the catastrophic industrial injury that resulted in the tragic loss of his hands in June 2002. Hurtig may have lost his hands and his lower right arm, but he hasn’t lost his determination, dreams and lifetime goals to play high school football and succeed in life.

Life-changing accident

Hurtig’s life changed forever when he went to work the second shift on the first day of his summer job at a local automotive stamping company. The power press he was operating severed his right arm below the elbow and left his left hand with only a finger and a thumb. “I was moving parts from one station to another when the press came down on my arms,” he said.

“You can’t expect too much too fast. I know the support of my friends and family especially my twin brother, Chris, by helping me on and off the football field — makes the difference. No one ever gave up on me.”

— Brad Hurtig

The company’s owner rushed him to a local hospital, but he was soon lifeflighted to The Medical College of Ohio in Toledo where his family, friends and high school coaches kept round-the-clock vigils for almost a month. Unfortunately, the physicians had to amputate his left hand.

BWC learned about the claim immediately from a *First Report of an Injury, Occupational Disease or Death* application that the hospital staff completed and sent to the company’s managed care organization (MCO).

BWC’s customer service team in action

Terry Gaberdiel, a claims services specialist; Jan Burch, a catastrophic medical specialist; and the claims team leader, all of BWC’s Lima Customer Service Office, visited Hurtig and his family at the hospital to explain the workers’ compensation process.

He underwent physical and occupational therapy to regain his upper and lower body strength. To ensure Hurtig had a smooth



Brad Hurtig, right, with twin brother, Chris.

transition when he returned home, Burch visited Hurtig and his family in Toledo and at his home, and coordinated needed home adaptations and modifications.

After requesting an occupational therapy evaluation, BWC provided the following modifications and equipment to make Hurtig’s life easier:

- Modified equipment on his truck to enable Hurtig to drive;
- Levers on door handles and shower to enable Hurtig to open them;
- Touch-pad mouse to enable him to use his laptop computer;
- Light-pad switches to enable him to turn lights on and off;
- Myoelectric prostheses for both arms that help Hurtig operate a computer and perform daily activities.

When Hurtig returned home, Ruby Schindler, BWC’s disability management coordinator, contacted him to discuss his return-to-school plans. She also arranged a team meeting with high school officials and the MCO’s case manager to develop an individualized education plan that’s provided under the Education of Children with Disabilities Act. “This meeting was a pivotal point in his attempt to return to normal life activities,” Gaberdiel noted.



Hurtig drives his truck using modified equipment.



Fairview High School's Bob Olwin, left, head football coach and athletic director, talks strategy with Hurtig.

Hurtig's education plan included the use of a laptop computer with hands-free software; an aide to assist, as needed, with personal hygiene, writing and class notes; adaptations to sports equipment, such as specially designed football padding and baseball prostheses; and modified door handles at school.

"Brad was sure he wanted to return to his high school and play football," Schindler said. "His coaches used football to help him learn how to adapt to a new life by providing daily physical and emotional support. They were the best rehabilitation advocates Brad could have had."

Fairview High School's Bob Olwin, head football coach and athletic director, explained all of the students were excited to have Hurtig back at school. "I visited Brad when he was in Toledo, and we (the coaches) decided we would do whatever was necessary to get him back on the football field," Olwin said. "We decided we wouldn't give up on him, and we would continually challenge him daily. We don't treat him any differently than other players."

H. Tom Shining, assistant coach and math teacher, mentors Hurtig on the



Hurtig on practice field.

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BWC's disability management coordinator

field and in the classroom. The coach keeps a daily diary of Hurtig's challenges and accomplishments to share with him as motivation to meet his next goals. "He was our best tackler last season, and he's getting A's in the majority of his classes," Shining said.

Last year, Hurtig's school aide, the coach's son, Tom H. Shining, took notes for him in his classes and offered him social encouragement with his classmates.

According to Dave Robinson, assistant coach, you can't use the word can't with Brad. "He'll find a way to do whatever he needs to do," he explained. "You would have thought that Brad was born without arms because he's adapted so well with what he's been dealt. I never see him without a smile on his face when he's on the field."

Bright future for Hurtig

Hurtig didn't always feel like smiling after his injury. And if he thinks about it long enough, he'll experience phantom pain or a strange sensation that his arms are still there.

He offered encouragement to those facing similar challenges. "I would tell other injured workers to take it one day at a time and be patient," Hurtig said. "You can't expect too much too fast. I know the support of my friends and family — especially my twin brother, Chris, by helping me on and off the football field — makes the difference. No one ever gave up on me."

Chris said his brother's injury had influenced him to try harder to reach his goals. They both succeeded when Brad



Brad Hurtig.

caught a game-ending pass from Chris, the team's quarterback.

Since Hurtig doesn't have any transferable work skills, Schindler is now working on Hurtig's future training plans with the Ohio Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation. After his injury, Hurtig wondered what type of job he could perform. Based on the educational team's recommendations and his job interests, Hurtig may pursue a career in engineering.

Hurtig's varied sports interests include water-skiing and riding a dirt bike with adapted equipment. Since his injury, Hurtig hasn't missed one day of school or a high school sporting event.

Because we care

"If employers would take the role of the injured worker's coach — like the Fairview High School coaches did when working with Brad — and if the injured worker's co-workers would respond like Brad's family, fellow students, team members and the community, injured workers would have an easier time transitioning back to their jobs," Schindler said. "Injured workers often need encouragement during the recovery and rehabilitation process. After an industrial injury, BWC provides many services to assist injured workers."

Hurtig's amazing transition back to school is due to teamwork from a caring community — family, friends, employer, educators, and health-care and workers' compensation professionals — who helped transition an injured worker back into life and onto the playing field.

Working as a team, BWC shows what it means to say because we care about Ohio's injured workers. ❖



Hurtig, pictured above in standing position, assists teammate in stretching exercise.