

## Amputee finds himself on the field

**Shelton Mobley lost a leg six years ago. This weekend, he's playing in a wheelchair softball tournament.**

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TAMPA - The pitcher was hit by a rifle grenade in Vietnam. The first baseman's leg was lost when a forklift fell off a trailer. The rightfielder was shot in the spine during a carjacking a few years ago.

And here comes the pitch, in a parking lot behind the Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, beneath a cloudless sky, like it was that morning.

May 13, 2000.

Shelton Mobley was on his water scooter off Gandy Beach. The 24-year-old had been out a few times but wasn't an experienced rider. He and a buddy were speeding side by side. The buddy pulled off. Mobley spun circles.

"Shel!" Mobley heard. Then a collision. Then nothing.

No pain. Not yet.

His life jacket held him on the surface. He saw people on the beach running into the water. He tried to swim and couldn't.

The kid who played linebacker in high school and bench-pressed nearly 400 pounds reached for his left thigh. All he felt was bone.

He was pulled to the beach and rolled onto his back. He stared at the sky and apologized to God. His consciousness faded in the ambulance and woke in the hospital, with his legs in bandages.

Days became weeks. Surgeries followed surgeries.

The doctor told Mobley of his choices. More surgeries, skin grafts, moving muscles from his back to repair his left leg. Or amputation, a prosthetic leg, an end to the hospital stay.

He fell asleep.

He woke with a foreign string of thoughts.

I'm a cripple.

I'm going to park in handicapped parking.

I'm going to be fat.

A few days later, he sat in a wheelchair outside Bayfront Medical Center. A little girl, maybe 8 years old, couldn't stop looking at the big man with a stump where his left leg should be.

She looked at him like he used to look at people in wheelchairs.

Don't stare, her mother said.

I'm that guy now, Mobley thought.

He pushed away the woman he had been dating. He told his mother he didn't want anyone to see him. He isolated himself at home, alone with his doubt.

Weeks slipped by. Then months.

A man called. Ronald Richardson, a long-haul trucker disabled in an accident in 1993. He said he had a basketball team, and did Mobley want to play?

Maybe I'll watch, Mobley said.

Watch, hell, Richardson told him. You'll play.

He was slow at first, and clumsy in a hospital-issued wheelchair. The other guys were quick with cuts and behind-the-back passes. His competitive nature kicked in, and he became familiar with playing the game from a seat.

Soon, he went back to college to pursue a career in sleep studies. He began touring area schools with The Wheelie Team, disabled athletes who teach kids about people with disabilities.

He moved from basketball to sled-hockey to the Tampa Bay Devil Rays wheelchair softball team, where he quickly became one of the best, playing left field and batting cleanup and teaching kids in wheelchairs to do the same.

He met guys who were making it, like Jerry Smith, who was shot during a carjacking, and Dennis Mason, who lost his legs in Vietnam, and Brian Trueschel, who has spina bifida.

On Saturday afternoon, during the first day of a tournament hosted by the Devil Rays, in the first inning against the Nebraska Barons, six years and seven days after Mobley crashed his water scooter, he squeezed the bat and swung on a perfect pitch.

The ball flew over the head of the centerfielder, bounced off the asphalt and didn't stop rolling until it hit the outfield fence.

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