

You Can Call it a Comeback

By Jonathan Avella

Editor's note: Jonathan wrote this story about his father's comeback to triathlon. Enjoy!

John Avella is a walking miracle. On April 26, 2009, John was biking along Hudson Terrace in Englewood Cliffs, N.J., when he was struck by a driver turning off Kahn Terrace. John, a 69 year old triathlete was training for his favorite race held yearly in St. Croix. His flight for the island left four days later. In an instant John went from preparing for a race in paradise to fighting for his life.

Hudson Terrace is a hot spot for bicyclists and as soon as he was hit John found himself surrounded by on-lookers. Luckily two doctors drove by, who upon seeing the crowd stopped and got out of their cars. They both knew instantly from his breathing patterns that John had a collapsed lung. John wanted to pick himself off that pavement, but knew there was no way he could. He had no idea then how long it would be before he could do anything on his own.



The crash left John with a collapsed lung, five broken ribs, a fractured femur, a broken elbow, a broken clavicle and ruptured tendons in his pinkie. John was rushed to Hackensack University Medical Center where he underwent major surgery, which included the placement of a metal rod in his right leg where he'd fractured his femur. There is a titanium attachment that now holds his femur and hip in place. They also put a metal plate in his broken elbow. He spent a day in trauma care and five more days in intermediate care. From there it was off to Kessler Rehabilitation Center in West Orange, N.J., where over the next 19 days John started physical therapy. The hope was that one day he would be able to walk again. John never once doubted himself.

His rehab began in the hospital. It went for three hours a day, half in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. When John arrived at Kessler, they began with the basics. The focus was on him learning to walk, being able to get dressed or shower and how to get in and out of a car as well as other simple tasks. John was getting around in a wheelchair and had not been allowed to put any pressure on his right leg.

John's road back to walking started with a walker. At first he could only go ten feet but slowly increased his distance as time passed. One of John's earliest goals was to not leave the hospital in a wheelchair. He didn't. With the help of a four prong cane, John used his legs not wheels to leave on his own terms.

Each step brought him closer to walking free of any aid. His recovery was miraculous. After leaving Kessler, John began his outpatient physical therapy. He immediately knew it wasn't for him. Not because it was too hard, but because it wasn't hard enough. John deemed it, "Physical therapy for old people that involved a lot of massaging and electrical pulses."

After three sessions John switched therapists. Allison Lind, a trainer at New York Sports Medicine, had come highly recommended by one of John's trainers at Kessler. The one credential that convinced John that Allison would be the right fit was her being a fellow Triathlete. Who would better know what his body needed to recover than someone who understood the physical condition he'd been in before the accident? He wanted someone that would test him almost as hard as he used to be tested by his triathlons. It may seem extreme to others but not to John whose goal had never been just to walk. His goal was to race again.

When John first arrived at NY Sports Medicine he had zero range in his right elbow. His healthy left elbow had a range of 138. John's physical therapy would start with a ride on the stationery bike and then he would move to the bed. While that may sound comfortable, it couldn't be more the opposite. Allison measured the range of his elbow and worked the leg where his femur was fractured. While he pulled forward on that injured arm or leg, she pulled back providing the resistance necessary to build John's muscles back up. During the treatment John's face was a portrait of extreme pain mixed with unwavering determination.

Allison and John worked as a team and through all the pain she inflicted upon him John still trusted and respected her. They worked mostly on his walking and 30 days after leaving the hospital John walked with a single prong cane. At home he walked on his own and used the cane only in public so he would not get knocked down. In September John got back into the pool, but took it very easy.

John's physical therapy ended in October. At home the work had just begun. John was up to a half mile in the pool by November. John hooked his bike to an indoor trainer and worked toward getting his legs used to pedaling again. He began to run sporadically at the indoor track at Columbia University, but there was something wrong and when he ran he knew it. He'd lost his stride.

Despite running up to a mile in February, his stride was still off. The injury, while physically devastating, was a mental pain as well. Thoughts of staying healthy and not overdoing his training affected the way he ran. It took him two months to overcome his mind and run free like he always had. Once he did he couldn't stop. Approaching the year anniversary of his accident John was running hard with one singular goal in mind, to return to St. Croix and finish the race he loved so dearly.

One year and two days after John was knocked nearly into oblivion he stepped off a plane in St. Croix. It was hot and humid a recurring theme of the island, but to John the sunshine had never felt so invigorating. He was halfway to achieving the unbelievable. This initial exhale of arriving in paradise passed and was replaced by nerves. His training had been sparse as he was limited for so long by his injuries. Three days before the race and he still hadn't ridden a bike outdoors on the road since the accident.

A veteran of the race, John knew what a hassle getting a bike to the island could be. Sometimes the bike arrives two days after the person. With enough stress already John arranged for a rental bike to be picked up once he got to the island. He got it two days before the race. The gears were different than the one he had at home. He would have to get used to the nuances of the new bike. John knew that it was finally time to return to the road.

When he got on the bike for the first time he was scared. There was a level of uncertainty he felt about the road. His fear caused him to wobble and he had to strain to maintain his balance. The last time he'd biked on a road he'd nearly been killed and learning a new gear system on the fly two days before the race was not helping to fill him with confidence. He went out the next day and felt a little better, but deep down he accepted the fact that he still wasn't quite there even on the eve of the race.

John tossed and turned all night until 6:00 a.m. when he joined the other racers as they swam from the dock across the harbor to the beach where the race is started. After arriving at the beach, John stood alone, focused on the challenge ahead. The wait was tortuous.

They finally sent off and as soon as John hit the water his nervous mind gave way to instinct. The water was rough, as always, yet John didn't even seem to notice. He was in a daze of determination and finished the course strong. All the extra time spent training in the pool helped John finish the swim faster than he'd expected.

He changed quickly and walked his bike out to the start of the course. He took it easy at first but found a slight rhythm once he got going. From there it was a smooth ride up until he went to hop off the bike in the transition area. His shoe got stuck on the pedal. He twisted his knee. He grimaced in pain as he parked his bike.

With his body still not fully recovered from his accident, running on a gimpy knee was not just painful, but dangerous to his permanent health as well. Accomplishing what he had already was an amazing feat that made giving up not just acceptable, but logical. The thought never crossed John's mind. Not when he was on the ground clutching for his life, or laid up in some hospital bed wondering when he would walk again, and most certainly not now when he was on the brink of finishing a dream he'd fought to reach for so long.

"There's no way I'm not going to finish. Even if I have to walk," John told himself as he took off on the run course. Just like he had on the bike he took it easy at first. As his stride returned he picked up the pace. He walked some hills when he had to, saving himself for the last mile which is run right through downtown Christiansted.

The locals lined the streets cheering on the racers as they approached the finish line. John entered town running stronger than he had since before his accident. He heard the applause of the crowd, but his mind was elsewhere. His thoughts were focused on the power of his recovery. It was the strength he drew from what he had overcome in his past that allowed him to triumphantly cross that finish line. As he did a voice told him, "This is good. This is good. I did it."

He did it. From the cold concrete of a New Jersey street to the sunny skies of the majestic U.S. Virgin Islands, John had replaced obstacles with goals, meeting every one of them. When life tried to limit his ability to do what he loved he worked twice as hard to get it back. He is a survivor who used his injuries not to mope but to do the impossible and in doing so he has set a noble example for many.