

The long road back

Steve Streater vows victory

By JOHN DRESCHER
DTH Staff Writer

Steve Streater's most triumphant return to his hometown of Sylva didn't occur after a game-winning punt, tackle or interception, but after a victory of a much larger and deeper type. On Aug. 7, Streater wheeled himself out of Charlotte Rehabilitation Hospital, flashed a smile and a "No. 1" sign and headed home two months ahead of schedule.

For Streater, the former UNC football star paralyzed in a car accident on April 30, his stay at the Charlotte hospital was the beginning of a battle against paralysis and not only its effects on the body, but perhaps more importantly, its effects on the soul. It is a battle fought on two different fronts, a battle Streater refuses to lose.

In his two months at the hospital, Streater displayed an enthusiastic determination to improve his body and an endearing personality that made him a favorite of both hospital personnel and patients. The day before he left the hospital, Streater was, as usual, in good spirits as he went through his daily routine of therapy and counseling designed to help him adjust to life in a wheelchair. Streater, paralyzed from the chest down, has good use of his arms and shoulders. His hands, although still improving, are the part of his upper body most affected by the paralysis.

The accident, which broke his sixth cervical vertebra — in effect, a broken neck — leaves doctors with little hope that Streater will walk again. They say the odds of him walking again are a million to one. Steve Streater says he is that one.

"It might be a million to one but there is that chance," Streater said. "I respect what they say — whether I'm going to walk or not — but I will."

That determination isn't just a matter of words. Streater worked hard and often in his two month stay in Charlotte and has taken an upbeat approach to his therapy. "I don't have time to sit around and get down on myself," he said, his fiancée Andree Wilson, a UNC junior from Charlotte, sitting on his lap. "I've got a lot of things to do, a lot of hard work to do."

Streater wants that hard work to lead him to the goal that appears to be unattainable.

"I've only got one goal and that's to walk again," he said. "After that there may be more but I don't want to take it past there now. . . I've made up my mind, I'm going to do it, whatever it takes."

He has put no time schedule on that final goal. He is taking life one day at a time, feeling the improvement each day brings. He is bench pressing 150 pounds now — only a few weeks ago he could do only 125 pounds. His improvement, which has surprised even his therapists, has come quickly. He realizes he will reach a point where

that improvement will slow, when each gain in strength in his hands or arms will become more and more difficult to acquire.

"I can tell each day that I'm getting stronger," he said. "The progress is there, I can feel it every day."

"The stronger I'm getting, the more I'll want to do. But I think I'm in a limit. I think I need to rest awhile, then start again."

has shown much improvement in his arms and hands.

Brinker and others who have worked with Streater attribute much of his quicker-than-usual improvement to his athletic past and his ability to work hard. Even more importantly, though, is Streater's attitude. Joking and laughing, dishing out one-liners and listening to them too, Streater has a charismatic personality that draws

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There's no rush, he said. He plans to attend UNC this semester, move into an apartment with friend and former teammate Tyress Braton and finish up his last nine hours to get his degree in education. After graduation, he wants to stay in Chapel Hill and possibly become a high school football coach.

"I've thought about driving an 18-wheel truck, too," he said with a laugh. "Just traveling across the country. And the marriage is on the list. And play ball."

And play ball. The childhood dream of the only player in Atlantic Coast Conference football history to be named all-conference at two positions is still the dream of the quadriplegic now sitting in a wheelchair. Only hours before his car accident, he had signed a free agent contract with the Washington Redskins. Only hours after he left the Charlotte hospital, the Redskins opened their 1981 exhibition season.

"I've got all the time in the world," he said. "I'm glad it happened to me when I was young. Life is going to be a challenge."

Yes, life certainly will be a challenge. But Streater seems to like challenges.

"We have one motivated young man on our hands," said Madelyn Brinker, a therapist who has worked closely with Streater and has become a friend. "He's really something."

He has shown rapid progress in some areas. After having surgery in May on his neck to stabilize the area, he was forced to wear a halo: a cumbersome 25-pound stainless steel and plastic brace that rose from his chest over his head and kept him from moving his head. He hated it. But he got it off two weeks earlier than expected, then adjusted to his new center of gravity much quicker than most patients. Even with the halo on, he did things the therapists did not think he could do. With it off, he is far more mobile and

people to him and then inspires them. Those that know him, and even those who have just had some contact with him, realize that Steve Streater has something inside of him that most people just don't have.

"He's a very positive and optimistic person," Brinker said. "He inspires it in others too. I've seen him motivate other patients. He'll challenge other patients to do their best. He is a leader."

"When you know somebody is giving his best, it makes you want to give your best. We're going to miss him."



Streater talks to therapist Madelyn Brinker before his release to go home ... over the months the two have become good friends

DTH/Scott Sharpe



One of the most difficult tasks for Streater (left) so far has been getting his chair in the back seat of the car. With determination, in a little less than 30 minutes he had the chair in the car.

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DTH/Scott Sharpe

Reto's condition "fair" but doctors are gloomy

By KIM ADAMS
DTH Staff Writer

UNC baseball star Joe Reto is due to be moved from intensive care and is in fair condition according to a hospital spokesman. The All-Atlantic Coast Conference first baseman-designated hitter was paralyzed July 26 in a traffic accident.

Reto underwent a tracheotomy almost two weeks ago and team physician Dr. Joseph DeWalt said that Reto was doing fine in response to that operation. But, right after the accident, doctors said that Reto's chances of walking again were one in a million and DeWalt said that that prognosis still stands.

"Joe is never going to be a whole lot better as far as his paralysis goes (Reto is paralyzed from his chest down)," DeWalt said. "His path will be almost the same as Steve Streater's in that he will stay in the hospital until he is able to be moved to a rehabilitation hospital. It is almost certain that he is going to remain a paraplegic."

Assistant baseball coach Mark Scalf said that Reto is "hanging in there" and that the baseball team has gotten a lot of letters and cards concerning Reto.

"A lot of people who didn't know Joe have written us from all over the country," Scalf said. "They are just concerned about him and interested in how he is doing."

Scalf saw Reto last Sunday and said that he was in good spirits even though he has a temporary loss of speech due to the tracheotomy. "They let him sit up in a wheelchair when he wants to get out of bed," Scalf said. "His family is staying in town with another family and the players are getting back into town so they are going to see him."

The 20-year-old Brielle, N.J. native suffered anterior subluxation of the sixth cervical vertebra. Immediately after the accident, Reto was in a coma but regained consciousness a week later.

On July 28, doctors performed a successful operation to stabilize his neck in the area of the fracture. "Slivers of bone from his pelvis were wired to either side of the spinal column in his neck, bridging the area of the fracture," Broom said.

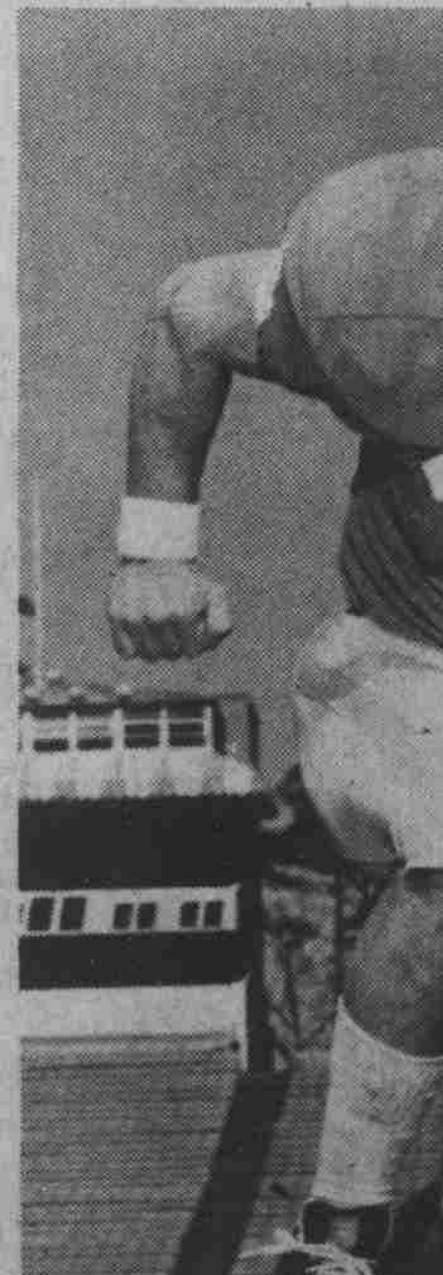
"This will eventually become fused to the spinal column and give some stability to the spinal column," he said.

Reto, a junior at UNC, was a first-team All-Atlantic Coast Conference selection as a designated hitter last spring. He was a second-team selection at first base and was the Tar Heels' leading hitter with a .392 average, the fourth best single-season figure in school history. He also hit 13 home runs and drove in 46 runs. His home run totals were the second highest total ever at UNC.



Reto trots to home and offers a hand to coach Mike Roberts after home run ... homer was a thrill because it was against N.Y. Yankees in exhibition

DTH file photo



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