

Former CU Buffs athletes Ed Reinhardt, Tony Bruno still courageous after brain injuries

By Terry Frei The Denver Post The Denver Post
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LONGMONT — The four golfers finished up on Lake Valley Golf Club's ninth green Thursday morning. In his wheelchair, in the shade beneath nearby trees, Ed Reinhardt lifted his hand in the air and called out: "Pictures!" The golfers jumped in their carts, motored over and greeted the 6-foot-5 Reinhardt and the diminutive Tony Bruno, who like Reinhardt suffered a near-fatal and ultimately life-changing traumatic brain injury (TBI) while a University of Colorado student.

Aligned with Reinhardt and Bruno between them, the golfers smiled as Floyd Edward Reinhardt, Ed's father, took pictures to serve as souvenirs of their participation in the 18th annual Ed Reinhardt-Tony Bruno Tournament. Since 1995, the tournament has been a fundraiser for scholarships to the Brain Injury Alliance of Colorado's camps for TBI survivors.

In a time of heightened awareness of brain injury issues because of American military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and because of concussions and long-term tolls resulting from playing sports, most notably football and hockey, this is one of the most striking things about the two young men the tournament honors.

The two graduates of Denver-area high schools — Ed attended Heritage in Littleton, Tony went to Wheat Ridge and played wide receiver for the Farmers — suffered their brain injuries nearly 30 years ago.

Nearly 30 years ago ...

Reinhardt, a sophomore tight end who was hurt when tackled in Colorado's Sept. 15, 1984, game at Oregon, and was in a coma for 62 days, now is 47 years old.

Bruno, injured on April 7, 1983, while sparring in preparation for a boxing "smoker" exhibition at CU, is 49.

With their families supporting them, they have battled on — into middle age.

Miracles are possible

Living with his father and mother, Patricia, in Centennial, Ed is using a wheelchair much of the day after suffering a fractured and displaced hip in March. When he fell, he was preparing to go on stage during the annual "Magic Moments" revue, in which theater professionals join disabled and special-needs performers to raise consciousness and money. Ed was wearing a U.S. military uniform, and his assignment was to enter, talk to a "bartender," deliver his lines and sing. His memorization often is painstaking and difficult but ultimately flawless. Spontaneous reaction is more difficult.

When he was in obvious pain that night in March, he was asked: What do you want to do now?

His father, telling the story in the family's home last week, prompted Ed. "And what did you say? Do you remember?"

Ed snapped: "Get on stage!"

"Do you remember your lines?" his father asked.

Ed brightened. He began speaking in a tone Sir Laurence Olivier would have saluted. "You know, men and women of all walks of life have it tough and they go on, often to great success," he declared. "The men and women of the veterans' hospitals don't have failure in their vocabularies!"

And then it was as if the orchestra had just started playing from the pit.

Ed was singing.

"I'm proud to be an American

"Where at least I know I'm free..."

And when he finished the last line — "God bless the USA!" — it wouldn't have been shocking if four F-15 fighter jets suddenly roared over the Reinhardt home.

Ed got a standing ovation that night at "Magic Moments." Those standing knew what he had been through for over a quarter century, but not what he had been through that night. Soon, a doctor manipulated his hip under anesthesia, and the plan now is to let that settle and possibly perform additional surgery this fall.

He again is visiting Englewood's Craig Hospital for rehabilitation sessions two to three times a week. He can get out of the chair for long walks, using a walker. He has started going up and down the stairs at home on his own. And that speed punching bag over in the corner? He pointed to it and said: "Thousand punches a day. Boom! Boom! Thousand a day!"

He proudly pointed out his glasswork decorations. "Me!" he declared. "Pretty good!" He asked his visitor to read the piece of paper stuffed in one of the vases. It said, "Fine art by Edward ReinArt."

"Ed Rein-Art!" he said, chuckling.

He said he also likes to go to movies. "Scary," he said. "Funny guys. Classical."

Compared with what he went through in the aftermath of that tackle in Eugene, Ore. — actually, a routine and clean collision, harmless-looking until his helmet banged on the artificial turf — this latest rehab is easy.

Sharing his experiences, he and his father have made more than 400 appearances at civic groups and other organizations. "It's fun," Ed said. "Good times!"

Ed has an eloquent two-minute summary memorized for the presentations. It's about how doctors believed he would be in a "vegetative state" for the rest of his life, if he survived, and the agonizing work, including crawling, he put in to be able to walk and speak again. Also, he and his father show a five-minute tape that includes footage of the hit, the frantic aftermath at Autzen Stadium, and his grueling physical rehabilitation in the ensuing months and years. His audience can compare what they see on the tape to now, noting his amazing improvement, but also realizing his right side remains partially paralyzed and weakened.

As the Reinhardts showed that tape again last week, Ed sat impassively.

Does it bother him to see it?

"No," he said simply.

Appropriate when he is part of fundraising for special-needs camps, Ed also can sing "Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh," the 1960s Allan Sherman hit song satirizing youth summer camp. Actually, Ed gets so much enjoyment from singing it, it's impossible not to laugh with him.

During the course of the visit last week, with few words but obvious meaning, he made it clear he has great pride in his former teammate and fellow Buffs tight end, now CU's football head coach. "Jon Embree! Pretty good!" Ed said.

Amid his genial, but sparse, answers, he occasionally volleyed back with questions of his own. He is capable of a conversation, of challenging, of wanting to know.

Does he ever ask: Why me?

"Yes," he said simply. "Twenty-five years, 26 years. Not married. Discouragement."

His memorized speech for presentations concludes with the claim that miracles are possible. Is he one?

"I don't know," he said.

His father interjected: "We think so. We believe it."

Accepting reality

In Tony Bruno's downstairs room at his parents' home in Arvada, pictures on the wall show a smiling, bushy-haired, skinny young man in the Wheat Ridge Farmers' blue and gold. He is in varsity football team pictures for 1978 and 1979, and in the sort of individual shot all Jefferson County players of his generation in all sports posed for and then purchased (very cheaply) from legendary Bill Worthen, "The Friendly Photographer."

Tony didn't continue with football at CU, where he was in the business school, but he decided to give boxing a shot in the CU boxing club's "smoker." His precompetition sparring session in the Recreation Center was almost fatal. He underwent three surgeries that night, and, yes, it's amazing he survived.

Tony is more independent than Ed, mainly handicapped by cognitive issues and the lack of short-term memory. It is stunning what he can recall from before his injury. For example, a reference to his father, Pete, who was born in Italy and came to the United States in 1946 when he was 7, brought this from Tony: "James Dean, 'Rebel Without a Cause.' "

Tony can respond to questions with his thoughts at that moment, yet he has trouble storing anything new. He has learned "tricks," though, summoned from his pre-1983 memory. Introduced to a Terry, he blurted, "Terry Bradshaw." Not because he thought his visitor was the Steelers quarterback, but it was his way of trying to remember as long as is possible for him. "Word association," he explained.

So who would he use in that association game if he were introduced to someone named John?

"Olivia Newton-John," he said.

Significantly, when he was injured, it was a month before the Baltimore Colts traded John Elway's draft rights to the Broncos.

Or maybe it's just that Tony still can be a 20-year-old with a crush.

He has managed to learn a brief explanation about his weekly routine he repeats often, including about his life and the circumstances of his injury. He writes poetry, says he reads three large-print books a month, and goes to the Jeffco Recreation Center once a week. He does part-time work at Shalom Industries, a workshop for the disabled, and he plows on.

"I have to accept it," he said flatly. "It's something that happened, you know? It changed my life a lot, but you can't release it, you can't get away from it. It was bad luck."

Raising money, awareness

The Bruno and Reinhardt families came together for unfortunate reasons — the similar injuries suffered by their sons while CU students. In the mid-1990s, when Tony attended one of the annual "Adventure Camps" for brain-injured adults at a ski area, his sister, Julie, picked him up and came back with the message that camps might not continue, or at least would have to be curtailed, because of financial issues.

The Brunos came up with the idea of a benefit golf tournament, and years later, Tony's family — including his parents and four sisters — essentially run the event, even donating the food. The Reinhardts signed on right away

and the Brain Injury Alliance became part of it too.

Eighteen tournaments later, it still is going strong in its quest to ...

Let's have Tony Bruno take it from there.

"It's very important because I am financially fit to pay for my camp fee," Tony said. "But some people want to come to the camp who can't afford it, and it's important to have a good time and meet other people in the same position they are."

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When Dathan Ritzenhein arrived in England on Tuesday -- 17 days before the Opening Ceremonies for the Summer Games -- it took only moments for him to feel the excitement.

"You see it on TV back home, and every time you open up a magazine, but to be here right now is awesome," the Rockford native said by phone Wednesday from London. "Even at the airport there were people greeting you."

Ritzenhein, 29, is a three-time Olympian, thanks to his magnificent performance last month when he raced under the Olympic "A" standard and placed third in the men's 10,000 meters at the U.S. Olympic track trials in Eugene, Ore.

In the rain, Ritzenhein worked for the first 5,000 with Galen Rupp, who won the race in Olympic trials record time (27:25.33). Matt Tegenkamp was second (27:33.94), followed by Ritzenhein (27:36.09).

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Dathan Ritzenhein shows three fingers after earning his third Olympic berth at the U.S. track trials last month in Eugene, Ore. / Eric Gay/Associated Press

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Ritzenhein and Rupp are teammates at the Oregon Project in Portland, where Ritzenhein lives with his wife, Kalin, and their two children.

The finish was sweet redemption for Ritzenhein, who said he was fortunate to have been able to get another shot at making it to [the Olympics](#) after his failed attempt in the marathon at the U.S. trials in January in Houston. (He was fourth.)

Ritzenhein, who qualified for his first Olympic team in the 10,000 at the 2004 Athens

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Games, was the top American men's marathoner in 2008 in Beijing (ninth).

He arrived in Europe before many of his U.S. teammates in order to race the 5,000 at Friday's Diamond League meet in London. Ritzenhein placed fifth (13:15.91) in the tune-up race and planned to head to France after the event for altitude training.

The date of his Olympic 10,000 race is Aug. 4. His family will be arriving from Michigan on Aug. 2, he said.

"It's hard enough to make one Olympic team, let alone three, so to make three, I'm blessed," Ritzenhein said. "I'm looking forward to it. I'm healthy, and being back on the track again has been really terrific for me."

He'll hit the road, though, a couple of months after London: In October, Ritzenhein will run his first marathon since the Olympic trials -- in which he ran in a personal best 2:09:55 --

at the Bank of America Chicago Marathon.

GOOD DEAL: Supporters of three-time swimming Olympian **Peter Vanderkaay** of Rochester are selling Olympic shirts, with all proceeds benefiting the "Swim Detroit" initiative at the Boll Family YMCA. Adult and youth sizes are available at prices from \$10 to \$12.

Underground Printing in Ann Arbor will take Vanderkaay shirt orders until Tuesday. Call Seth Greene at 734-929-6648 for more information.

You'll be reading a lot about Vanderkaay in the coming weeks during the London Games in the Free Press. The three-time

Olympic medalist will be one of our "Postcard from London" contributors, joining 110-meter hurdler **Jeff Porter** of Canton; **Rita Wieber** of DeWitt (mother of gymnast **Jordyn**); and brothers **Kevin** and **Keith Hanson**, coaches of women's marathoner **Desiree Davila** of Rochester Hills.

OLYMPIC RESOURCE: **Jim Constandt** has been working press rooms at Michigan State and as a volunteer with the U.S. Olympic Committee for the past three-plus decades. So it came as no surprise when I learned that he had just published an Olympic resource book called "[The Complete Book of the United States Summer Olympics](#) 1896-2008" (2 Moon Press, \$22.95).

The book concentrates on the performances of Americans during the modern era of the Summer Games, primarily in list form. Constandt, a resident of Eagle, is a member of The International Society of Olympic Historians. The book can be purchased at www.800publishing.com. For more info call 269-781-8125.

HELPING HANDS: A group of local skaters, led by ice dancers **Meryl Davis** and **Charlie White**, will perform in a pair of skating shows July 24-25 in northern Japan. The event will benefit residents who are still rebuilding in the aftermath of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Joining Davis and White -- 2011 world champions and current world silver medalists -- will be siblings **Maia** and **Alex Shibutani**, their training partners at the Arctic FCS in Canton. **Jeremy Abbott** of the Detroit SC is also making the trip. The skaters will also be giving free skating lessons.

Contact Jo-Ann Barnas: 313-222-2037 or jbarnas@freepress.com. Follow her on Twitter @joannbarnas.

U.S. Olympic gymnast Sam Mikulak of the University of Michigan will answer fans' questions about the upcoming Games at 5:30 p.m. Monday at freep.com/sports. [Submit early questions here](#).

More Details: Summer Games

What: Games of the XXX Olympiad.

Where: London.

When: July 27-Aug. 12.

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