

Amputation Renews Zest for Living

(WAKEFIELD, MA) A seemingly innocuous accident at work in 1997 changed 53-year-old George Hinckley's life. A fire at the Gillette plant in Boston, Mass., brought the manufacturing manager into work after hours. Coming in from his boat, the burly 6'3" Hinckley was dressed in shorts and boat shoes when he was assessing the source of the fire with firefighters. With a breathing apparatus throwing off his balance, he slipped on water and fell, severely tearing the ligaments in his right leg.

Surgery following earlier basketball and bike riding injuries had weakened his knee. After the accident and a series of operations and knee replacements, the knee never fully healed. The pain became so bad, Hinckley lived on morphine and OxyContin.

In 2001, tired of the pain and his lack of mobility, he searched for options. His choices were amputation or having his knee fused with pins. The surgeons recommended fusion, which he says has a 50 percent success rate but takes six months before the outcome is known.

A Corvette enthusiast, Hinckley asked how he could drive a car with a fused right knee. How could he sit in an airplane or a movie theatre? The surgeons had no good answers. Hinckley chose amputation.

"It's hard for surgeons to realize that amputation can improve the quality of life for some people," says Hinckley.

On July 1, 2001, he had a through-the-knee amputation. A prosthetist had recommended amputating a couple inches above Hinckley's knee for a better prosthetic fit, but the surgeon ignored the recommendation, making prosthetic alignment with Hinckley's left knee more challenging.

Just days after the surgery, Hinckley stopped the pain medication. Not realizing how the medications had affected his personality, he was surprised when his older son Christopher told him, "It's really great to have you back, Dad."

Because of scar tissue from all the operations, it took nearly six months before Hinckley's residual limb healed enough to be fit with a prosthesis. After five months with his prosthesis, he complained to his prosthetist about the fit of his new limb, which he had a hard time keeping on. He didn't even feel secure enough to walk across the room while holding Andrew, his new grandson.

The prosthetist's response was, "You're just too darn tall to be an amputee. This fit is the best you're going to get." Hinckley didn't believe it. Instead, he did a lot of research and started talking to as many amputees as he could to find a new prosthetist.

The name Peter Couture, C.P., president and clinical director of Next Step Orthotics and Prosthetics in Manchester, N.H., kept coming up, so Hinckley drove the 50 miles to interview him. "His first question to me," says Hinckley, "was 'What do you want to do with your prosthesis?' I told him I wanted to climb a ladder." Couture told him that shouldn't be a problem.

After being fit with a computerized C-leg and undergoing a series of adjustments, Hinckley says, "I noticed the difference right away. The leg gives me a lot of confidence because it doesn't have

the giving away motion.” The first year he had the older-style prosthesis that didn’t have the control of the C-leg, he says he damaged his good leg.

In September 2002, Hinckley took early retirement from Gillette after 30 years and job restructuring. Since then, he has been climbing extension ladders at Christopher’s house, helping him put in new windows, re-side the house and paint. He is also enjoying biking again with his wife, Maria. Before his accident, he used to ride 200 to 300 miles a week for exercise.

Now, he is trying to make up for the five years he lost after his accident. He volunteers his time, talking with amputees referred to him by physicians and participating in amputee research at MIT. He’s also shopping for another Corvette.

When asked how he adjusts his C-leg to accommodate all his activities, he demonstrates the basic walking mode, describes how he steps on his toe three times to switch into lock mode for climbing ladders and then moves into free-swing mode for riding a bike. He says the leg has an infinite number of adjustments between flexion and extension.

He notes that Next Step made adjustments to his leg and put in certain components so he can fit comfortably in his Corvette. “A lot of people think they just bolt the components together,” he says, “but it’s really how they fit the socket that makes the difference.” As a result of all his activities in the amputee world, Hinckley has decided to pursue training and a second career as a prosthetic technician.

In thinking about the activities he still wants to do, he adds, “I’m still striving. I would like to do better, have my leg become more natural. But it becomes less of an issue every day.” And he can’t wait until little Andrew is old enough to be strapped into the Corvette beside him, so they can head off for an adventure.