

# independence



Our mission is to empower people with physical disabilities to reach for their full potential in every aspect of life.

## DON NOVAK

Flying over the snow straddling hundreds of horsepower is undeniably exhilarating. Unfortunately, it's also dangerous. On Feb. 8, 2003, Don Novack found out *how* dangerous. He fractured six vertebrae and injured his spinal cord resulting in paraplegia.

"I was 38 at the time," he says. "Following hospitalization and a stint at Sister Kenny Institute for acute rehab, I returned home and immediately began work with the rehab experts at Courage Center St. Croix. I didn't want to waste any time. My doctors had told me I'd never walk unaided again, and I simply wouldn't accept that." With a grin, he adds, "Still don't."

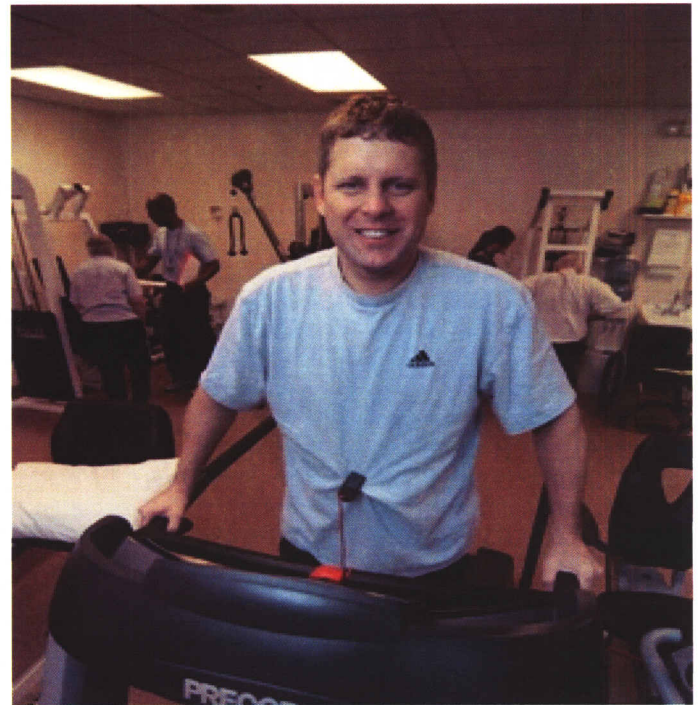
Since his snowmobiling accident five years ago, Novack has been participating in a number of Courage Center programs in Stillwater, including physical therapy, therapeutic swimming in the warm water pool, exercise in the accessible physical fitness center, and Watsu, a type of massage and relaxation done in a warm water pool. "This past winter I also learned how to ski on a mono-ski, thanks to Courage Center's Adaptive Ski & Snowboard program. That's *huge*, given that I'd been told I'd be wheelchair-bound the rest of my life."

Novack credits "the three F's and an E: family, friends, faith and a wonderful employer" for his successful transition. "All have supported me, including my mother, who has driven me literally hundreds of miles to and from rehab appointments, and Great Clips, my employer, where I was the development manager. Not only did this company and my co-workers encourage my return to work, but they remodeled my home to accommodate my wheels."

Yet, on his long road to recovery, nothing's been free. Although he's remained close with many past co-workers who are now friends, he had to give up work in 2005 because of pain and spasms.

Even so, Novack is still pursuing his goals. "Rehab is work," he admits. "But because of Courage Center's caring and encouraging people, I'm now walking with forearm crutches. Along the way, I've exceeded countless goals, starting with basic goals like being able to stand in the pool, to exercising my legs in the pool, to recently exceeding 50 minutes on a treadmill! I'll never give up the goal of again walking unassisted – that's the *ultimate* goal. Between now and then, I'll continue to set smaller goals, and, with the help of Courage Center experts, I *will* succeed."

Few can doubt, in the face of such resolve. In fact, Novack shares his beliefs as an ambassador, promoting Courage Center



### BIO – Don Novak

Diagnosis: Spinal Cord Injury

Age When Started Services: 38

Years at Courage Center: 2003 - present

Current residence: Hudson, WI

Services received at Courage Center: Physical Therapy, Aquatics, Fitness Center, Watsu, Adaptive Ski & Snowboarding

Made gains towards independence: Walking with forearm crutches; totally independent in self-care

and its services. He has presented his first-hand account at several United Way fundraising events at corporations such as 3M and Andersen Windows. "I'm happy to have the opportunity to say thank you to Courage Center by doing this," he says. "And it's important to inform others of the tremendous work Courage Center does. It's important to give others who are going through difficult times a connection and a positive focus. Courage Center is both.

"There was a time when my wife had to roll me over in bed because I couldn't do such a simple thing. Today, I'm very independent. Next year, I plan to be walking unaided. That's not a done deal, but I'll tell you what is: I *will* be at Courage Center regularly trying to improve my health and help others get through difficult times. I can't imagine having gone through my situation without the help of the people at Courage Center. The service they provide is incredible. They have, can, and will continue to change the lives of those they touch."

# Wellness and Fitness Outcomes, after 3 Months of Exercise

*A Better Life for Minnesotans with Disabilities*

*A Better Deal for Minnesota Taxpayers*

Individuals with disabilities have an increased rate of development of secondary conditions, such as high blood pressure, obesity, and fatigue. Because of this increased rate of development of secondary conditions, this group has been referred to by researchers as having a “thinner margin of health,” meaning that they are more susceptible to these health complications.

In a group of 46 individuals with a wide variety of disabilities who had already been exercising for an average of 6 to 12 months, we saw the following changes over a 3-month period of exercise in the Fitness Center at Courage Center. These individuals ranged in age from 22 to 81, with an average age of 44 years.

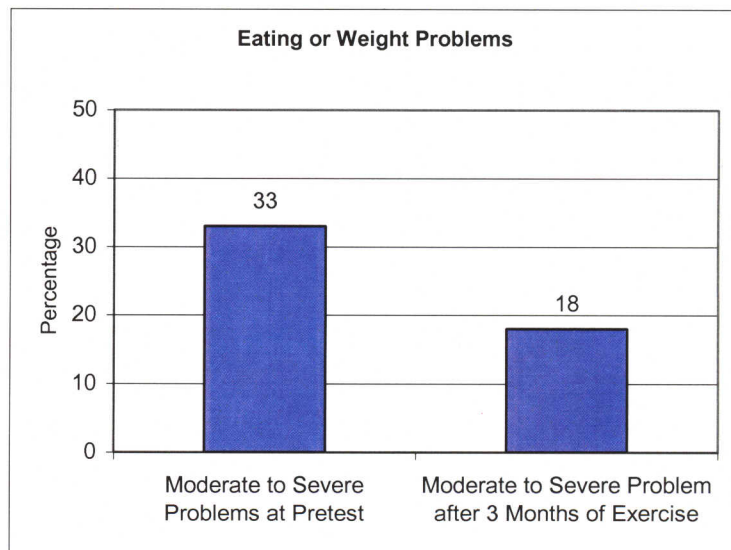
In our sample of already-exercising adults with disabilities, we saw a statistically significant decrease in injuries due to loss of sensation and circulatory problems (swelling of legs or feet and occurrence of blood clots). In addition, there was a trend toward a decrease in problems with weight control and regulation of eating. These changes after a relatively short time of exercising are important because they relate to short-term cost changes, but also to long-term effects on health.

- **Decrease in problems due to loss of sensation** refers to a decrease in the occurrence of skin problems due to loss of sensation, such as skin breakdown or decubiti, which can be very expensive to manage, with costs ranging from \$2,000 to \$30,000 per wound. The cost can go as high as \$200,000 if surgical repair and hospitalization is necessary. In our sample, we saw a decrease of 8% in moderate to severe problems in this area.
- **Decrease in circulatory problems** relates to a decrease in both swelling in the legs and in the development of blood clots. Swelling in the legs can predispose a person to developing skin problems, and the occurrence of blood clots is a life threatening condition and requires carefully monitored medication, with frequent lab work and clinic visits. In our sample, we saw a decrease of 12% in moderate to severe problems in this area.
- **Decrease in problems related to weight control and regulating eating** are important because

obesity is a common secondary condition for individuals with disabilities, and is related to decreasing independence in transfers and self care and increased problems with blood pressure and diabetes. In our sample, we saw a decrease of 15% in moderate to severe problems in this area.

- In this sample, we saw an overall trend toward a **decrease in the severity of secondary conditions**, and expect to see a larger change over time. Specifically, we saw a decrease in severity in **arthritis, isolation, and problems with access**.
- While we did not see a significant change in fatigue severity scores, we did see improvements in some items, including **increased ability to carry out sustained physical activities** and a **decrease in difficulty in carrying out certain duties and responsibilities**.

This outcomes study of already-exercising adults with disabilities and complex health conditions demonstrates continued gains from regular exercise. The decrease in secondary conditions and in the severity of those secondary conditions translates to real improvements in health for these individuals. Support for fitness services for individuals with physical disabilities is an effective way to promote health and fitness in a population at risk.



COURAGE CENTER is a nonprofit rehabilitation and resource center that advances the lives of children and adults experiencing barriers to health and independence. At Courage Center, we specialize in treating brain injury, spinal cord injury, stroke, chronic pain, autism, and disabilities experienced since birth. Founded in 1928, Minneapolis-based Courage Center offers advanced technologies and innovation provided in part through the efforts of thousands of volunteers and donors.

For more information about Courage Center, visit [CourageCenter.org](http://CourageCenter.org).