

## The Winner Takes It All: A Redemption Story

It took Marshall Harkrider eight broken tennis rackets to recognize his inability to cope with defeat.

“I had pretty bad anger management,” said Marshall. “My mom made me quit tennis because she kept paying for my tournaments and I kept breaking my rackets.”

Before tennis, it was golfing that he had to part from.

Being the oldest of three children, he notes the constant presence of sports throughout his childhood.

“I wouldn’t say I was ever forced to play sports because I love them, but not playing sports was never an option,” said Marshall. “When I was really young, my dad wanted me to be a pro golfer.”

Unfortunately, this was a short-lived dream for Marshall’s dad, Robert Harkrider, as his son couldn’t help but make a scene on the golf course. He had to switch to tennis, which wasn’t much better.

“The other kid’s parents, when they were watching our matches, I would tell them that their kid cheated and shit like that,” said Marshall.

Some might’ve viewed the young Harkrider as a sore loser; others might’ve acknowledged his determination to be the best.

There was one sport, however, that was an exception to this athletically induced attitude problem: soccer.

“I played offense, so I didn’t really care if we won or lost,” said Marshall. “I only cared about scoring, which is kind of lame– I know.”

“A team sport was nice because I could blame other people,” he said. “It wasn’t always my fault if we lost.”

Growing up in Knoxville, Tenn., Marshall began kicking a soccer ball at around 3 years old. By age 8, he joined his first club team, the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO). He played on three more club teams over those next 10 years: Crush Football Club, Emerald Football Club, and the Knoxville Reds Football Club.

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“He is a natural athlete,” Marshall’s mother, Ashley Harkrider said. “As a soccer player, he was aggressive, and fast. He could pass to any player with precision. He was exciting to watch.”

It wasn’t until reaching middle school that Marshall realized how much he loved soccer. This was partially because of their back-to-back victories in Knox County’s soccer tournament, as well as the opportunity to play with his best friends on two separate teams: Bearden Middle School and Emerald FC.

He started as a striker: the furthest player forward in the middle of the field and one of the main goal scorers.

“After a while, I was a lot faster and I had pretty good endurance,” said Marshall. “So, I got moved to winger.”

The winger’s role is to run the distance of the field, playing both offense and defense. Marshall stayed on the left side of the field, as he is left-footed.

He was on Bearden Middle’s junior varsity team for his first year but quickly moved to varsity in his second year. Marshall experienced the same sequence of events at West High School– making the varsity team once he entered his sophomore year.

“Freshman year of high school, I was on JV,” said Marshall. “That was probably my favorite season of soccer ever. It was really fun, and we were really good. We didn’t win state, but we had a good season.”

“Summer before sophomore year, I was one of the best on the team,” he commented. “Or at least that’s how I remember it.”

In just a matter of time, Marshall would be starting for West High’s varsity soccer team. Except, it took much longer than he could’ve predicted.

After Marshall’s involvement in a tragic vehicular accident, his life was turned upside down. However, his competitive mindset powered through, yet again.

Marshall refused to settle for any less than what he knew he was capable of.



Every Christmas, the Harkrider family reunites with some extended family to celebrate the holiday season. They alternate their winter break destinations between Texas, where Robert’s family lives, and North Carolina, with Ashley’s parents.

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For a week in late December 2018, the Harkriders stayed on their family’s ranch in Wylie—middle of nowhere—Texas. The trip went smoothly, until the last day.

“We had a great trip, I mean, I shot my first deer the day before everything happened,” Marshall said. “I don’t really want to do that anymore, though. That one time was good enough.”

On Dec. 28, the Harkriders packed up their suitcases to go back to Knoxville. Because of the ranch’s graveled roads, the easiest way to get around is by riding in an ATV.

Marshall sat in the passenger seat, while a friend of his family’s drove. In the back seat was Marshall’s brother, Travis, and another family friend. This was Marshall’s first time meeting the driver and the other passenger.

When driving out of the ranch, a sharp turn was made, flipping the ATV onto its right side, as it continued to slide through gravel. The vehicle finally came to a stop and Marshall’s right leg was caught underneath it.

“Immediately I had so much adrenaline that everything was pretty numb,” Marshall said. “I was definitely freaking out a bit, but it took me probably a minute or two to realize that I came out of it the worst.”

Once his leg was out from under the ATV, he realized he couldn’t stand up or move his leg.

“I don’t even know how to describe it,” Marshall said. “It’s like the numbness when you are going into surgery. Honestly, my heart rate wasn’t super crazy, but I could tell that I probably needed to go to the hospital quickly.”

His family showed up in their GMC within a few minutes, lifting Marshall into the van.

“He was clear-headed and calm throughout the aftermath of the accident,” said Ashley. “He was more worried about his little brother than he was himself. He kept apologizing to me and his father for scaring us, even though things were not his fault.”

With Marshall’s uncle behind the wheel, they rushed to the nearest emergency room, going over 100 mph through dirt roads.

Marshall sat in the back seat with his mom and dad, and dared to ask the question racking his brain: “Do you think I’ll have to miss this year’s soccer season?”

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Quickly when reaching the emergency room, it was apparent that Marshall's case was out of their expertise. He was airlifted to Cook Children's Medical Center. Marshall's parents weren't allowed to ride with him, so they had to drive a few hours to meet him.

"My mom said it was the longest car ride she's ever had," recalls Marshall.

"It was the worst day of my life," said Ashley. "Before he boarded the helicopter, he smiled and said he was going to be okay."

At this point, Marshall's bone was showing in two spots, and there was a scar up the entirety of his leg.

"Someone said something about how the way his heel looked, and how it made him wonder if Marshall would have to lose his foot," said Ashley. "I remember walking out calmly, past our family in the waiting room, and out the door where I bent over and threw up."

Nobody else in the accident was affected as much as Marshall. Travis had a concussion, while the driver and other passengers made it out with just a few scrapes.

"He never held the driver of the ATV accountable," said Ashley.

Marshall, to this day, has never spoken again to the driver.

Marshall was then moved to Scottish Rite for Children, a pediatric hospital in Dallas that specialized in orthopedic conditions and sports injuries.

His first two surgeries consisted of gravel and dirt being cleaned from his leg, allowing his doctors to get a better idea of what needed to happen. It was revealed that his Achilles tendon—the back of his heel— was completely gone. There was no longer blood flow in the bottom part of his leg.

"The surgeon took me and Marshall's father aside and said there was a possibility that amputation was going to be necessary," said Ashley.

It was just Marshall and his mother who stayed in Dallas for the entirety of his treatments, as his younger siblings had to return to school. Nonetheless, while undergoing these surgeries and taking these strong medications, he continued to stay up to date on his schoolwork.

The doctors suggested that Marshall stay inpatient for a month to see if there would eventually be any blood flow gained back to his leg. He underwent several more surgeries to try to fix his condition, but nothing drastic changed throughout that period.

After a month, a big decision had to be made.

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“The decision was basically, we could probably save your leg, but it's going to take maybe 11 or 12 more surgeries and you're going to limp for the rest of your life,” said Marshall. “Or you can do this alternative, which is get a prosthetic leg.”

For him, there wasn't much of a decision to be made.

“We probably couldn't have afforded 12 more surgeries, and limping forever is not something I was gonna accept,” said Marshall.

“When we told his little brother and sister, all three of them cried,” Ashley said. “Marshall joked with them that when he had a metal foot it was going to hurt worse when he kicked them. I think that was the moment that they knew he was going to be okay.”

He notes a funny story that initially made him rethink his decision to get his amputation: “My doctor at the time was a double amputee, and I didn't know this because he always wore pants. And so like, when they came into the hospital room to make this decision, he like came in, showing both his legs... This dude wasn't necessarily good-looking, or like, what I wanted to see. So, when he came in and told me that this was my option, I'm like, freaking out because I do not want to look like that guy... I probably started crying when he walked in, which was kind of fucked up.”

Despite the jump scare of his doctor, Marshall continued with his choice of amputation. The surgery was scheduled, and there was no going back.

“I don't remember much about that day,” Marshall said.

“I remember everything about that day,” said Ashley. “Waking up in Marshall's hospital room, determined to be strong for him. Walking with him to the pre-op area where they administered the anesthesia. Marshall taking my hand and saying not to worry, and that everything was going to be okay. He was more worried about me than he was himself during his surgeries. Once he disappeared into the OR, I cried and cried.”

“When he came out, I remember worrying about how he would feel emotionally,” she said. “He was calm, resolved, and so incredibly brave.”

“I do remember the day after, waking up in my hospital bed with a blanket over me so I couldn't see anything,” said Marshall. “I don't think I even took the blanket off that day because I didn't want to see it.”

Although he might not have shown it, he was terrified, as he had no idea what his future would hold.

In the best-case scenario, he could be an athlete again—like he was a little over a month before. However, that scenario wasn't promised; in fact, it was unlikely.

Two weeks post-surgery, Marshall had around 80 stitches removed from his leg, beginning his healing journey.

Once he gained a bit of strength in his right leg, they began fitting him for a prosthetic. The process is like creating papier-mâché, as they mold paper onto his leg to design the socket for his new prosthetic– taking nearly a month to make.

During this time, Marshall was working with a recreational therapist; trying out crutches, playing basketball in a wheelchair, and taking part in any other activities that would allow him to gain a bit of strength back after losing 60 pounds while inpatient.

“The first time they were fitting me for a prosthetic I remember standing up and forgetting that I didn’t have a foot,” said Marshall. “I took a step and just fell over because it was muscle memory.”

“That was the only time I made that mistake,” he said. “After that, I knew I couldn’t do that anymore.”

When having an amputation, surgeons take the nerves in your leg and wrap them into the rest of your leg. For many amputees, this can cause phantom limb pain– pain signals from nerves that originally carried impulses from a missing limb.

“For me, it's never been painful,” said Marshall. “To this day, I still feel like I can wiggle my toes and move my ankle, which is kind of crazy.”

However, he did experience some initial pain when trying out prosthetics early on.

“My leg would feel like it was getting shocked if that makes sense,” said Marshall.

“Especially my first prosthetic, it felt like my leg was getting tased.”

His first prosthetic was made of metal, so it was extremely heavy– especially for someone who had just been bedridden for a month.

“I was like damn, I am never going to be able to use this for sports,” said Marshall. “I think they were just trying to make one quick so I could start getting on my feet. I knew I was going to get another one soon, but I didn’t realize how different the next one was going to be.”

“I really didn’t like it at first,” he said. “Like, I didn’t want to wear it at all.”

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It took a while for Marshall's doctors to find the right prosthetic for him, as he has tried five different prosthetics since 2019. He tried traditional prosthetics that were designed for day-to-day usage, as well as designs made for athletics.

"I got a blade prosthetic and hated it," said Marshall. "That one is made for sprinters, but I absolutely hated it. So, I never used that."

"They got it thinking I could use it for soccer," he said. "This one was a little different where it had the blade, but it also had a foot. It was too light to kick a soccer ball though, which was the issue."

Marshall is a special case, as the prosthetic that he chose could be used in his daily activities, as well as in athletics.

"Some people have multiple ones that they change throughout the day, but I've never liked that," Marshall said. "I just wanted to have one and use it for everything, and I've never had an issue with it. So, that's kind of what I've stuck with."

Once Marshall found the right fit, the next step was to get as comfortable with it as possible.

"I began with walking through gates and supporting myself," Marshall said. "I would try and walk upstairs very slowly. As I got stronger, I was using a crutch to walk. Eventually, I got to the point where I was dribbling a basketball with nothing supporting me."

"I remember they said I was probably the fastest person they had ever treated to ever walk without crutches," he said.

He underwent physical therapy 2-3 hours a day over the month that he was inpatient, and he continued to have regular appointments for over two years.

Two months and nine surgeries after his accident, Marshall was finally released from the hospital. He left Dallas with a completely new look: 30 pounds skinnier with a new attachment on his body.

"I started going out in public with a crutch," Marshall said. "They didn't want me to wear pants because they didn't want people to bump into me, even if I was on a crutch— I mean, you never know."

He had to relearn numerous things that once came easy to him, such as driving, showering, kicking a soccer ball, etc. He also had to learn a new skill: ignoring the stares.

"What happens is people look you in the eyes and then they look down," Marshall said. "Even still, it's every person I see."

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With a completely new persona at the peak of his teenage years, Marshall was forced to return to high school. Needless to say, getting back to a state of normality was going to be difficult– but somehow, he did it.

“I guess I was a little bit worried about it,” Marshall said. “I was really lucky because I had a really great friend group at school that had my back.”

“When we returned to Knoxville,” Ashley said, “he went to his high school team's soccer practice on crutches with his leg amputated, and his teammates and the baseball team all ran up to him, surrounded him, and hugged and cheered.”

Slowly but surely, Marshall’s confidence was built back. This was especially the case once he was able to play soccer again.

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Marshall’s goal of returning to the soccer field was within his reach. He just had to do his part to get there. He wasn’t just pushing himself physically, but also mentally.

“For me, I’d never even thought about not playing sports ever again,” Marshall said. “One way or another, I knew I just had to get back to that point.”

“He was determined to overcome this life-altering injury and get back to the things he loved,” said Ashley.

“I ran all the time, was eating a ton, and was doing a lot of physical therapy to get stronger,” Marshall said. “I was doing small drills in my backyard, trying to reteach myself how to kick a soccer ball. I was learning how to cut, and move in different directions, dribbling up and down my yard–things like that.”

He was invited by his Knoxville Reds coach to start coming to practices for their season in the fall. He would participate in the drills that he was physically capable of and watch for others.

“I wasn’t exactly scrimmaging or playing with everyone,” Marshall said. “I was just happy to be back around the team.”

With every practice, Marshall began participating more and more. He would dress up for each game and cheer on his teammates from the bench. For him, all that mattered was being there.



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Almost a year after Marshall's accident, he entered the field for the Knoxville Reds' last game of the season.

"I was probably on for maybe two minutes," said Marshall. "It wasn't anything crazy. I did complete a pass. It was a pretty big deal for all of us, it was awesome."

Marshall's family and friends all celebrated from the sidelines, as they were overcome with joy to see him back in his natural state.

"Without being too corny, it was probably the best day of my life," said Ashley. "He had worked so hard."

After a season full of excitement, Marshall was eager to begin playing in the spring for the varsity soccer team at West High. Unfortunately, he barely played throughout the season.

Despite the progress that Marshall had made, he was still struggling. His mobility still wasn't where he wanted it to be, especially for someone who used to be one of the fastest on the team.

It wasn't until Marshall received a new prosthetic that everything changed.

With the prosthetic that Marshall was wearing at that time, the leg itself was attached to the socket—the part around his knee—using a pin. This was a problem when playing sports because of how loosely attached the two were, and how little weight it could hold—shifting most of his weight onto his left leg.

"You can't put all your weight on your prosthetic all the time, so your knee on your other leg is taking a lot of impact," said Marshall. "Especially for that year, I was still pretty weak, so my knees were bad."

Marshall's new prosthetic was air-sealed to the socket, which made for a completely different ball game.

"I could hang upside down on one leg with this seal, it's super strong," Marshall said. "It was so much lighter than my other foot. It made me so much more mobile, and I was much quicker after that. I could run and jump, and it wasn't as hard on my knees."

"This is the one I've had since then," he said, pointing to his current prosthetic. "It has this tiny blade, and it's the one I use for everything."

This was when everything started to fall into place. By the time the Knoxville Reds' season started in the fall of 2020, Marshall was back and better than ever. He played the entire season.

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“I was pretty fast and definitely strong enough to play,” said Marshall. “I was much more comfortable with my new prosthetic.”

He switched from winger to striker, which was much easier on his endurance. He wasn’t starting throughout the season, but his progress was visible.

Marshall was prepared to return to West High’s varsity tryouts and prove his position on the team. He wanted to earn his spot as a starter, rather than a benchwarmer.

He claims his season senior year was the best he’s ever been.

“I was better at soccer than kids who, you know, had two legs,” said Marshall. “You kind of get confidence from that.”

Marshall got to a point where he was starting each game. He ended up scoring five goals throughout the season.

“He’s got one of the best shots on the team,” Marshall’s former coach, Alex Walls said. “I think he’s very aware of his body now, and he has his fitness and ball skills back.”

“I remember scoring my first goal,” said Marshall. “These are probably my favorite photos I’ve ever had taken. It was just the craziest moment.”



“Three years out, it’s amazing,” said Walls. “He’s a hard worker. Everybody is super proud of him, but I think they’re amazed at his level of play.”

After Marshall’s stellar senior season, he received a lot of praise from the media and his city. He was even inducted into the Knoxville Hall of Fame for his athletic achievements.

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Today, Marshall is about to begin his senior year at UNC-Chapel Hill. He doesn't play nearly as much soccer as he used to, but the passion that he once had for the game hasn't gone away. He recognizes that the sport was what made him push through.

Marshall continues to give back, as he regularly hops on phone calls with children who are in the process of receiving a prosthetic.

"I had this really nice kid talk to me when I was in that position, so I try to do it whenever I can," said Marshall. "I recently talked to a baseball player at Wake Forest who lost his arm in a shark attack. I just told him what it's been like for me and, this is cheesy, but to not limit yourself."

"You really can do whatever you want to do," he said.

Marshall speaks from experience, as he truly achieved everything he wanted and more. He consistently refused to settle for what was expected of him.

He won, for once and for all.