

Waterbury Hospital for surgery. His parents had to wait almost seven hours to see him.

Now Linda's eyes filled with tears at the sight of her son in the hospital bed. Bob, a Torrington letter carrier, took Chris's hand. "Dad, I lost my leg," the young man said softly to his father. Bob nodded and squeezed his hand tighter. After a brief silence, Chris added, "What's going to happen to my basketball career?"

Bob Samele struggled to control his emotions. The game had been Chris's passion since early childhood, and already he was becoming a local legend. The previous season, as an eighth-grader at St. Peter's, he had compiled a remarkable 41-point average. Now a freshman at Torrington High, Chris had scored a total of 62 points in two junior-varsity games. "Someday I'm going to play at Notre Dame in front of thousands," Chris would say to his parents with a grin. "And you'll be there to watch me."

Looking down at his crippled son, Bob Samele searched for words. "You know, Chris," he managed at last, "there's a big group of people in the waiting room, including Coach Martin."

Chris's face brightened. Then, with a determined voice, he said, "Dad, tell Coach I'll be back next season. I'm going to play basketball again."

Chris underwent three more operations on his leg in seven days. From the start, his surgeons saw that the jumble of torn nerves, arteries and muscles made it impossible to reattach the severed limb. Chris would need a prosthesis.

During his three-and-a-half-week hospital stay he had a steady stream of visitors. "Don't feel bad for me," Chris would say whenever he sensed pity. "I'll be just fine." Behind his strong spirits lay an indomitable will forged by religious faith. Many of his doctors and nurses were uncomprehending.

"How are you dealing with all this, Chris?" a psychiatrist asked one day. "Do you ever feel sorry for yourself?"

"No," the boy replied, "I don't see where that is going to help."

"Don't you feel bitter or angry?"

"No," Chris said. "I try to be positive about it all."

When the persistent psychiatrist finally left his room, Chris told his parents, "He's the one that needs help."

Chris worked hard in the hospital to recover his strength and coordination. When he was strong enough he would flip a Nerf ball through a hoop that a friend had attached to the wall alongside his bed. His demanding therapy included upper-body exercises for crutches and workouts to improve his balance.

Two weeks into his hospital stay, the Sameles gambled on an additional therapy: They took Chris in a wheelchair to a Torrington High basketball game. "Keep a close watch on him," the nurses warned, concerned about his reaction.

The boy remained unusually quiet when he was wheeled into the noisy gym. As he passed before the bleachers, however, friends and teammates began calling out his name and waving. Then Frank McGowan, Torrington High's assistant principal, announced over the public-address system, "We have a very special friend here tonight. Everyone, please welcome back Chris Samele!"

Startled, Chris looked around and saw that all 900 people in the gym had risen to their feet, cheering and applauding. Tears welled up in the boy's eyes. It was a night he would never forget.

On January 18, 1989, not quite a full month after the accident, Chris was able to return home. To keep up with schoolwork, he was visited each afternoon by a tutor. When he wasn't studying, he was being driven back to Waterbury Hospital for more therapy. Physical pain—sometimes searing—was part of his daily life. At times,

watching television with his parents, he rocked back and forth in silent reaction to the ache radiating from his stump.

Then one frigid afternoon, Chris struggled onto his crutches and hobbled around the corner to the old garage where he had learned to shoot. Putting the crutches down, he picked up a basketball and glanced around to make sure no one was watching. Finally, hopping about on his right leg, he began tossing the ball at the hoop. Several times he lost his balance and slammed down on the asphalt. Each time he picked himself up, hopped over to retrieve the ball and continued shooting. After 15 minutes he was exhausted. *This is going to take longer than I thought*, he said to himself, as he began the slow walk back into the house.

Chris got his first prosthetic device on March 25, Good Friday. Excited by the new limb, he asked Ed Skewes, director of the hospital's prosthetic and orthotic department, whether this meant he could begin playing basketball right away. Surprised to see Chris serious, Skewes replied, "Let's take this a day at a time." The doctor knew that it's usually about a year before a person can walk comfortably with a prosthesis, let alone play sports.

In the basement at home, Chris spent long hours learning to walk with his artificial leg. Hard as it was to shoot baskets on one leg, he found it even more difficult with the prosthesis. Most of his shots were way off the mark, and he often crashed to the pavement.

In his darkest moments, Chris remembered a conversation with his mother. After a particularly discouraging day, he had asked if she really thought he'd ever play again. "You'll have to work even harder at basketball now," she replied. "But, yes—I think you can do it." She was right, he knew. It all came down to hard work—and refusing to give in.

Chris returned to Torrington High in early April and was immediately one of the gang again—except on the basketball court. After school, Chris's friends would play on an outdoor court. For several weeks, he watched from the sidelines as they flew past. Then one afternoon in early May, he went out suited to play. His surprised buddies made way as he came unhesitatingly onto the court.

From the first, Chris began shooting from the outside, and he felt a thrill whenever the ball swished through the net. But when he tried to drive, hop-skipping toward the basket, or leap for a rebound, he fell to the ground. "Come on, Chris, you can do it!" his friends shouted. But Chris knew the truth: he couldn't do it—not as he used to.

In a game during a summer tournament, he went up hard for a rebound and broke the foot of his prosthesis. As he hopped off the court, he thought, *Maybe I'm just kidding myself. Maybe I'm not up to this.*

Ultimately, however, he told himself there was only one thing to do: push himself even harder. So he began a daily regimen of shooting, dribbling and weight-lifting. After each workout, he carefully removed the artificial leg and four sweat socks he wore over his stump to cushion the prosthesis. Then he showered, groaning slightly as he rubbed soap over the blisters. Before long, the pain was eased by the sense that he was seeing flashes of the old self. *I'm going to do it. And not next year. This year!*

The Monday after Thanksgiving, jayvee head coach Bob Anzellotti called together the crowd of boys, all nervous and expectant, who were vying for a spot on the Torrington High junior varsity basketball team. His eyes stopped on Chris Samele.

During the two days of tryouts, no one had pushed himself harder than Chris. He dribbled through defenders, dived after loose balls—whatever it took to show everyone he could still play. He even took 10 laps around

the gym each day with the others—moving far slower than everyone else, but never failing to finish.

The morning after the last practice, Chris joined the rush to check the roster. *You've done all you could*, he told himself as he peered over the shoulders of others at the list. And there it was—*Samele*. He was back on the squad!

Later that week, Coach Anzellotti called his players together for a team meeting. "Each year's squad has a captain, who is selected for the example he sets. This year's captain will be . . . Chris Samele." The players erupted with cheers.

On the night of December 15, just eight days shy of a year since the accident, 250 people settled into their seats to watch the game that would bring Chris back to the basketball court.

In the locker room, Chris's hand trembled slightly as he pulled on his maroon jersey. "You're going to be all right, Chris," Coach Anzellotti said. "Just don't expect too much the very first night." Chris nodded. "I know," he said softly. "Thanks."

Soon he was running with his teammates onto the court for pre-game practice. Nearly everyone in the stands stood to cheer. Moved by the sight of their son in a Torrington High uniform once again, Linda and Bob fought back tears. *God, Linda prayed silently, please don't let him be embarrassed.*

Despite his efforts to calm down, Chris carried his nervousness onto the court. During warmups, most of his shots clanged off the rim. "Take it easy; relax," Coach Anzellotti whispered. "Don't rush it."

When the players finally came out to the center of the court for the tip-off, Chris was starting at guard. With the opening jump ball, he began playing a tight and awkward game. He managed to keep up, but his movements were jerky, his rhythm off. Several times when he shot the ball,

it failed even to touch the rim of the basket. Usually when that happens, kids in the stands taunt, "Air ball! Air ball!" This time, they were silent.

After playing eight minutes, Chris was given a long breather. With two minutes left in the half he was put back in. *Come on, Chris*, he told himself, *this is what you've worked for. Show them you can do it.* Seconds later, he worked himself free 20 feet from the basket, and a teammate whipped him a pass. It was a tough range for anyone—a long three-pointer. Without hesitation, Chris planted himself and launched a high, arching shot. The ball sailed toward the rim—and swished cleanly through the net.

The gym erupted in shouts and cheers. "Thatta way, Chris!" Bob Samele yelled, his voice cracking with emotion.

A minute later, Chris grabbed a rebound amid a tangle of arms. Muscling up, he flipped the ball against the backboard. Once again, it sliced through the basket. And again cheers exploded. By now, tears were streaming down Linda Samele's face as she watched her son hop-skip down the court, his fist raised in triumph. *You did it, Chris*, she kept saying to herself. *You did it.*

Chris continued to go all out, to the delight of the crowd. Only once did he lose his footing and tumble to the floor. When the final buzzer sounded, he had scored 11 points, and Torrington had won.

At home later that night, Chris broke into a wide grin. "I did okay, Dad, didn't I?"

"You did just great," Bob answered, giving his son a big hug.

After chatting briefly about the game, Chris, still wearing a look of joy, made his way up the stairs to his bedroom. In his mind, his parents knew, this night was only the beginning.

As Linda turned out the lights, she recalled an afternoon shortly following the accident when she was driving her son home from therapy. Chris was quiet, staring out the car window; then suddenly he broke the silence. "Mom, I think I know why this happened to me." Startled, Linda replied "Why, Chris?"