

Standing Tall

Regaining the use of his legs after a near-fatal shooting, **Steve Palermo now inspires others** to reach their full potential.

by Don Yaeger

Steve Palermo had it all. Professionally, he was one of the most respected umpires in Major League Baseball. Personally, he was a newlywed, full of dreams.

In an instant, everything changed. Just before 1 a.m. on July 7, 1991, a few hours after umpiring a game between the California Angels and the Texas Rangers, Palermo and some friends were at a Dallas restaurant when they heard two waitresses were being assaulted in the parking lot. As the group rushed to help, a bullet ripped into Palermo's spine, leaving him paralyzed.

"Here I was, supposedly at the top of my career, at the top of my personal life—I had been married for just five months—and a doctor comes in to tell me two days after I had been shot that I am never going to walk again," Palermo tells *SUCCESS*. "I was stunned. I said, 'Wait a minute. I have a career and I have to get back on the field. I have things to do.' He shook his head. It took my heart and soul away when I heard that one.

"I felt sorry for myself for a little while; then I asked myself, 'What are you going to do next?' I let the doctor and everyone know that, first of all, not walking again was not an acceptable prognosis."

Even with that determination, Palermo still needed inspiration at times. He found it in two boys,

Still in the Game

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Mitchell and Cody, who pushed and prodded him in their own way and reminded Palermo just how lucky he was.

Mitchell, from New Orleans, suffered a head injury after a fall from his bicycle. Doctors weren't sure he'd survive the night. Cody, from Texas, was riding a horse when he was thrown and dragged into a fence post, causing a traumatic brain injury. Like Mitchell, Cody also hadn't been expected to survive. But both boys ended up at Dallas Rehabilitation Institute, the same hospital as Palermo, and the three—some became fast friends and competitors.

"I was on a treadmill putting one foot in front of the other and going at an ever-so-slow pace," Palermo says. "Cody got on the treadmill next to me and he had them turn up the speed, and he was walking fine and walking better. I told the therapist, 'Turn my speed up a little please,' and now it was a contest between me and Cody who was going to go the fastest. He looks at me and says, 'Steve, I'm going to beat you,' and I said, 'Oh, no you're not. Here I am, racing on a treadmill with a 6-year-old. It was just amazing.'"

Mitchell also faced verbal challenges since his brain injury left him unable to speak. Palermo communicated with Mitchell by saying 'At a boy' and giving him a thumbs-up. Palermo then took Mitchell's thumb and worked with him and showed him how to stick his thumb straight up in the air.

"We would pass each other in the hallway—I was also in a wheelchair—and we'd stop and give each other a thumbs-up like *way to go* and then just keep on moving. Mitchell was incredible," Palermo says.

At night, Mitchell and Cody met in Palermo's room to watch baseball on television. Palermo's wife, Debbie, brought cookies and ice cream from the nurses' station and everyone watched the game until the kids had to go to bed. "The kids would come to my room because they knew that I worked with baseball, and my wife would get them into bed with me, and one would be on one side of me and the other would be on the other side of me," Palermo says. "They'd ask me to tell them stories about players and the game. It was the best therapy."

After six weeks of treatment, Palermo began to regain the use of his legs, and for the next seven years, he underwent physical therapy daily. Today, Palermo walks with the use of a small leg brace and a cane

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despite chronic pain and difficulty. *But he walks...* and he encourages others through his motivational speeches around the country never to admit defeat.

"My physical therapist would teach me how to wheel through a door or get upstairs or get into a pool and I would do it differently," Palermo says. "She would say, 'You know what, Steve? The end result is what I want. You just do whatever it takes to do it. You figure it out on your own. I think you're going to do fine when you get into daily living and with all of the obstacles in front of you. We consider them opportunities, not obstacles. You just figure out how to do it.'"

Today, in addition to his work with the Steve Palermo Endowment for Spinal Cord Research, Palermo serves as a major league supervisor of umpires, traveling to major league games and reviewing and grading his colleagues' performances. These past two years, he's also worked for six weeks with Triple-A umpires in the Arizona Fall League.

Ranked No. 1 among American League umpires for overall performance by *The Sporting News* the same year he was shot, Palermo still dreams of crouching behind home plate or lining up on base paths again in the major leagues.

"One day I was on the treadmill and walking, and I asked my therapist, 'Why does my left foot splay a little bit when I walk?'" he recalls. "And she said, 'Steve, first of all, we can't even understand how you're walking, so we have no idea about your foot. We can't explain how you're putting one foot in front of the other to start with. This is something we've never seen before.' For me, this was part of the process. This was another step in getting to where I want to get to, which is walking, and running and getting back on the field and doing what I was doing before."

Palermo, now 60, credits his wife for helping him during his recovery. He specifically remembers her reaction as he learned how to cross a busy street in his wheelchair. Palermo's mother-in-law couldn't watch, turning away and saying, "Here he survived a gunshot and he's going to get killed by a truck." While Palermo made it across the street, and also learned how to jump curbs and pop wheelies, his wife had seen enough.

"Debbie said, 'Wait a minute,' and we all got together—me and my wife and all of the therapists," Palermo recalls. "My wife says, 'Let's teach him how to walk, and if he can't walk, he'll be the best wheelchair patient—I promise you. But let's teach him how to walk first, and then we'll teach him about the wheelchair.'"

The doctors may have underestimated Palermo, but his wife understood his temperament and mentality. And those qualities drive Palermo to this day—he continues to figure out how to live life to its fullest and to inspire others. **S**



Courtesy of Steve Palermo

One Step at a Time

Steve Palermo's

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Take action. Steve Palermo never regretted rushing to help a pair of waitresses, although he was seriously wounded in the attack. And when his prognosis looked bleak, he vowed to do what it took to defy the odds.

Be inspired—and inspire others. When his spirits flagged during his rehab, Palermo found inspiration in two brain-injured boys. Today he shares his story to inspire others.

Never admit defeat. "Not walking again was not an acceptable prognosis."