

'Diehard' Sports Fan Survives Gunshot to the Head

Written by Arizona Foothills Magazine

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Blasted through the back of his skull with a hollow-point bullet, Jason Taylor, 33, crumpled to the ground, unconscious, in a pool of blood outside a Glendale bar. Paramedics feared the comatose man might not make it, as they raced him to the Level I Trauma Center at John C. Lincoln North Mountain Hospital.



But Taylor surprised everyone, including his neurosurgeon, Paul LaPrade, MD. Today, Taylor can walk, talk and function almost normally, thanks to the remarkable care he received after the bullet tore into his brain.

It all began on March 25, 2011, as a married couple's special date night, thanks to a relative's gift of courtside Phoenix Suns tickets that came with free food, drinks and valet parking. Taylor and his wife, Mandy, got a sitter for their 18-month-old daughter, Alivia, and headed downtown.

Offhand Comment

After the game, the couple met Taylor's cousin at a Glendale bar where a friend was playing in a band. Sometime after midnight, Taylor decided to play it safe and call a cab for the short ride home. He went outside to wait for the taxi.

He overheard two men talking about the military and commented that if he were younger, he'd probably join the Marines. One of the men, an Army veteran, apparently took offense. Without warning, he pulled out a .45-caliber handgun and shot Taylor in the back of the head.

Taylor never saw it coming. The hollow-point bullet entered Taylor's neck and penetrated upwards into the skull, flattening on impact and tearing into his brain, where it lodged.

Inside the bar, his wife heard the shot and ran toward the door to see what was happening.

"It was like an out-of-body experience," Mandy said. "Somehow, I had the presence of mind to call 911. Then a couple of people took me back inside because they didn't want me to see Jason like that."

Comatose on Arrival

Taylor has no memory of the incident, or of arriving at the hospital. What he knows he has pieced together from information provided by others.

When the ambulance reached the trauma center, Taylor "was still alive so they called the surgeon." Neurosurgeon Paul LaPrade, MD, who was on call, arrived at 2 a.m. and began to assess the situation.

"A gunshot to the brain is always life-threatening," Dr. LaPrade said. He later told Jason that "92 percent of all people shot in the head at that proximity die. The other 8 percent fight infection or are wheelchair bound their entire life. You've experienced none of that. It's truly a miracle!"

Dr. LaPrade also said "Jason's case was puzzling. The CT scan of the head showed that the bullet went into the cerebellum (the part of the brain that controls coordination and balance as well as some memory and speech functions), but the rest of the brain looked normal."

Because of the bullet's location, Taylor should have been able to survive. But Dr. LaPrade and the trauma team were worried because Taylor had almost no neurological activity. He was in a deep and unresponsive coma with no motor movement at all.

"I'd never seen anything quite like that," Dr. LaPrade said, "where a patient with an apparently non-lethal gunshot wound is in a deep coma. A gunshot wound to the head that causes such a severe neurological injury as to produce a comatose patient... those patients hardly ever survive."

Concussive Injury

But Taylor surprised them all. He suddenly opened his eyes and began to respond. Dr. LaPrade's explanation is that Taylor's coma was not caused by brain damage from the gunshot wound.

The coma was caused by a concussive blow to the brain stem, a transient, reversible neurologic deficit. Just as concussion can cause temporary blindness, a concussion also can cause a temporary coma.

During a three-and-a-half-hour brain surgery, Dr. LaPrade and his team meticulously debrided the wound, removing indriven bone fragments and blood clots.

"Our goal was to stop spinal fluid from leaking and prevent an abscess from developing," Dr. LaPrade said. "We didn't go after the bullet because, generally speaking, the bullet isn't the problem. The problem is damage cause by the bullet."

Dr. LaPrade replaced the shattered pieces of Taylor's skull with an acrylic and titanium plate.

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After the surgery, Dr. LaPrade told family and friends who had gathered at the hospital, "Now, all we can do is wait and see what happens."

Because the bullet had exploded in Taylor's cerebellum, the question throughout the procedure was how much permanent damage the bullet had done and how debilitating it would be.

Taylor was in a coma for seven days. "I opened my eyes," Taylor said, "and at that point I couldn't walk, talk, sit – anything. I could barely move my hand, but I wrote on a white board they gave me, asking what had happened." His family filled him in, including the date of the shooting.

When Taylor, always the sports fan, realized what day it was, he wrote on the white board: "My Cardinals season tickets are due April 15... Make that payment!"

His wife immediately said, "He's going to be just fine."



Dedicated to Recovery

The following 20 months have been dedicated to recovery. "At one point, I was doing therapy five days a week, six hours a day," Taylor said. During that time, he had regular follow-up office visits with Dr. LaPrade.

"Paul LaPrade is amazing to me," Taylor said, "He saved my life. I'm forever indebted to him."

Taylor's mother, Grace Gregory, said the hospital staff made what was a very traumatic time for the whole family easier to bear. "They took excellent care of Jason, and they relayed information to us. Really, I have nothing but good to say."

Dr. LaPrade speaks with almost an offhand confidence when talking about the skill and capability of the John C. Lincoln trauma team. "North Mountain is an excellent Level I Trauma Center, and anyone who comes in with a severe, life-threatening injury is immediately attended to by top-rate doctors and nurses who see and deal with that type of injury all the time."

Looking back, Taylor said the experience "has changed me, but not in the way you would think. I don't look over my shoulder; I'm not afraid to go out; I'm not afraid of anything or anybody. But now, I have such a sense of gratitude and humility about the fact that I'm alive, that I'm here. It's not all rainbows and butterflies, but the way I see life is just totally different now."

The young man said that he struggles every day with balance and coordination issues as a result of the damage to his brain. His speech is generally clear and fluid, but he has moments when he slurs his words or gropes to remember something. Recently he has been suffering from increasingly severe headaches.

"These are issues," he said "but they are issues we are working on. Meanwhile, I'm just overwhelmingly grateful to be here, to be Alivia's father, to have a chance at a full life."

Life is Worth Living

Taylor is an inspirational speaker to seniors at Maricopa County high schools west of Interstate 17. At the end of his presentations, students often ask about his experience. His goal is to inspire students to go to college; his hope is that he will inspire them to see that life is worth living.

"I'm really, really happy just to be alive, but I'm not going to settle for just pulling through this accident. I don't want to be known as the guy who survived a gunshot to the head. I want to do amazing things. I want to be known as a great father, a great man, worker or whatever," he said.

Taylor could easily have died that night. Instead, he was able to return to work on June 18, 2012. He continues to do therapy, noting that he's doing extremely well and going in the right direction. In spite of what those free Suns tickets led to, he remains a diehard sports fan and is devoted to his Arizona Cardinals.

If his survival is a miracle, maybe it's due to Dr. LaPrade and the skill of the John C. Lincoln trauma team. Or maybe he simply didn't want to miss out on the upcoming football season.

The truth is, Taylor is grateful for both.

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