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Tragedy and a Dream Reunite Ex-Basketball Buddies



By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer
CHICAGO December 29, 2010 (AP)

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A Chicago doctor is teaming up with a paralyzed ex-pro basketball player who dreams of ditching his wheelchair and walking again. With cutting-edge bionic legs entering the high-tech medical device market, his goal may be within reach.

It's not the first time "Big" Dan Ivankovich, who is nearly 7 feet tall, and "Massive" Mike Williams, who is 6'9, have crossed paths.

The two played hoops together 30 years ago as high school basketball stars in the Chicago area. They were in different leagues but played on the same summer team.

Then they went their separate ways, Ivankovich to medical school, stints as a disc jockey and blues guitarist, and finally a career as an orthopedic surgeon. Williams stuck with basketball and was a standout player at Bradley University in the mid '80s. He made it to the NBA, with stints with the Atlanta Hawks and Sacramento Kings in 1989-90, and for several pro teams overseas.

Now, Ivankovich is helping Williams rebuild his life after a near fatal shooting last year. They're hoping to outfit Williams with robot-like legs that used to be the stuff of science fiction, but now are being made by a handful of biotech companies, and they say Williams could serve as a symbol — not only of senseless violence but of resilience and determination.



AP

The bionic devices are sort of like strap-on leg braces with sensors and input devices to help orchestrate a walking stride. It sounds cool, but could be humbling for a guy whose real legs once put him up against NBA legends but now barely function.

"Going against Michael Jordan was tough. Larry Bird, Dominique Wilkins, that whole crew was tough,"

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Williams said. But, he added, "that was gravy" compared to what he's going through now.

Williams, 47, had been working as a bodyguard and security guard since he retired from basketball in 2000. Shortly after midnight on Nov. 29, 2009, he was working security inside a suburban Atlanta nightclub when a gunfight broke out and he was shot four times, in the jaw and shoulder.

He was rushed to a hospital, underwent hours of surgery, then slipped into a coma for two months. He lost a kidney and part of his liver and jaw, and bullet fragments lodged in his lower spine left him mostly paralyzed from

the waist down.

He went home to live with his mom on Chicago's far South Side, in the crime-plagued Roseland neighborhood where he grew up. He figured he'd be stuck in a wheelchair forever.

Then, last summer, Williams was watching TV when he saw a news report about a nearly 7-foot-tall Chicago doctor helping a paralyzed Haitian earthquake victim relearn to walk.

"It hit me about an hour later — "That's Big Dan!" Williams said, thinking his old friend might be able to help him, too. He got Ivankovich's e-mail address from the TV station.

Ivankovich didn't recognize the name at first, nor the man he knew as "Massive Mike," now 100 pounds lighter. But Ivankovich signed him up for Medicaid insurance and got him admitted to Chicago's Schwab Rehabilitation Hospital for six weeks of physical therapy. By about the third week, Ivankovich watched as Williams stood up with assistance and took a few halting steps with a walker.

"I cried, he cried," Ivankovich said. "He still hadn't totally processed the extent of all the loss."

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