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Bionic legs may help ex-basketball player walk again

Chicago doctor hopes to help paralyzed player with cutting-edge, robot-like legs

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CHICAGO — 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.

Stuff of science fiction?

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



Nam Y. Huh / AP
In this Dec. 16, 2010 photo, former NBA basketball player Mike Williams, bottom, reacts as he stretches while Dr. Dan Ivankovich, right, and Arnel Cordero help Williams during his physical therapy session at Glencrest Nursing and Rehabilitation Centre in Chicago.

By **LINDSEY TANNER**

 Associated Press

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companies, and they say Williams could serve as a symbol — not only of senseless violence but of resilience and determination.

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," 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."

Ivankovich checked in on a recent session at Glencrest Nursing and Rehabilitation Centre on Chicago's far northwest side, where Williams was on his back on a workout table, struggling to toss a 16-pound exercise ball with a therapist and complaining of nerve pain. The former teammates engaged in some trash-talking, just like the old days, but it masked the tough obstacles both men know Williams faces.

"Mentally, the hardest part is looking in that mirror," Williams said, "and looking at what I am now."

Testing the boundaries

Though he has regained some feeling in his legs, and can take about 30 steps with braces and a walker before tiring, Williams knows his dream to walk again unassisted is a long shot. For that reason, he's interested in the bionic legs, which would let him walk without holding a walker or crutches.

The devices cost six figures, and ones made by Berkeley Bionics, eLEGS, likely won't be sold

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commercially until 2013, after scientific testing is finished. An Israeli company, Argo Medical Technologies Ltd., makes a similar version called ReWalk; its devices are set to go on sale in January to rehabilitation centers worldwide.

Ivankovich and Williams both think and dream big. Williams would like to become a role model for young kids, using his battered body to show them consequences of guns and senseless violence. Ivankovich has been in talks with the Chicago Bulls and a local radio station to get Williams a stint as an anti-violence ambassador. The doctor is also trying to persuade Berkeley Bionics to create and donate a set of bionic legs for Williams, who could provide free advertising for their brand.

"We're excited to work with someone like Mike and test the boundaries," said Berkeley Bionics CEO Eythor Bender. "Wheelchairs have been around for 500 years. We're kind of breaking into a new chapter."

He said the talks with Ivankovich and Williams are in the very early stages. Williams is about half a foot taller and more than 50 pounds heavier than eLEGS are designed for, so they'd have to be customized, Bender noted.

But used to getting his way, Ivankovich is thinking of flying out to Berkeley with Williams, figuring a personal visit with the company would be persuasive and "expedite the process."

Williams "is an extreme, which is the best way to make your device better," Ivankovich said.

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