

# “ENTERING THE GAME”

Chapter One from *GETTING BACK IN THE GAME: HOW TO  
REGAIN YOUR LIFE AFTER DISABILITY*



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Entering the Game

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*“A man begins cutting his wisdom teeth the minute he bites off more than he can chew”*

—Herb Caen

## Entering the Game

To begin to understand disability let's start from *your beginning* in the game. You know *your story*....the one everybody in your immediate family knows, all your friends have heard and that you have likely told *ad-nauseam* to anyone who would listen. Anyone with an acquired traumatic disability has *a story*. Believe me, I have heard hundreds.

### || *The Defining Moment*

This defining moment in your life establishes you in the game. As a starting point, it is the easiest reference point from which to begin. It is likely an instant that you'll rarely forget, and often dwell upon during the initial phases of your physical recovery. If your disability resulted from an immediate traumatic accident, it is indelibly etched into your subconscious memory like a burn scar. If it was presented to you in the form of diagnosis, it likely took your breath away. In either case, it changed you forever.

If you have other emotional issues that were pending before the

onset of your current disability, they'll wait. Put them aside for now. I know this is easier said than done. But let's tackle one thing at a time. It is important to begin to understand the emotional aspects of your current disability by compartmentalizing from a new starting point. So, let's begin.

The emotional and physical references associated with *your story* are defining moments of your *new* life. They will certainly clarify the physical reasons of your newly inherited circumstance, but they will never reveal or solve the *why*. Unfortunately, determining the *why* can only be determined in the abstract, and that takes time and introspection. In some cases that understanding will never be clear. So, rather than initially fumble with that aspect, we will begin from the onset of your personal physical change.

For the sake of simplicity, close your eyes. Think back for a moment and attempt to recapture *your story*. Fast, rewind. Re-live it if only momentarily.

Open your eyes. That blur that changed your life forever is recent history. Where are you now? What has changed?

As you recapture this moment alone, try to relax, and evaluate

your current situation. Unfortunate as your immediate circumstances may be, considering what you've been through, your situation could doubtless be worse. You could be six-feet-under. I would consider that an unattractive option. So should you. Most importantly, you're alive.

In the metaphor of sport, welcome to the game. Unfortunately you weren't given a choice about whether you wanted to play or not. You've been drafted! It matters not whether you're a first-round or tenth-round draftee, you've made the team. So it is important that you begin to understand what's in store for you as a player in the game.

### || *What's In Store For You*

You are now disabled. Let me repeat. You are now disabled! This reality hasn't likely sunk into your subconscious yet. It is a pretty tough pill to swallow. To briefly offend your sensibilities even further you are now a gimp, cripple, or whatever other negative moniker you choose to coin. It is a nick-name; no more, no less. It is important that you learn to live with the inappropriate references that the term *disabled* generates, however it slaps you in the face presently. And, don't be offended by what your personal image of disability means. You will

find it all to be incorrect. Moreover, they are the least of your worries right now.

Surprisingly enough, things will continue to improve as you slowly become acclimated to the deep water you now find yourself in. It will take time and more patience than you've allowed yourself in the past to cope. It will take additional time to come to grips emotionally with all that's happened. It's natural. Try not to panic. Rest assured, everything and everyone has been put on hold.

You, my friend, have begun the game like most of us—by accident or fate given your preference for terms. If any comfort can be drawn from association, understand that you're not alone.

All who enter the game come involuntarily. Whether you acquire cancer and are told by the physician in a sterile white room, or you awaken to find yourself busted up in a hospital bed, it's done.

None of your teammates chose the playing field or were given options about the equipment they'd be lacking or furnished with at the start of the game.

So, whatever disability you have been diagnosed as having now, you're here. Like it, or not. I don't mean to sound uncaring or unsympathetic, but neither do I wish you to turn your circumstance

into a never-ending melodrama. The bottom line is this: you're newly disabled. That can range drastically in complexity or functionality. But you're alive, likely depressed, probably extremely irritated, and greatly confused. It is how all members of the team started the game.

|| *You Are Going To Survive!*

By now you realize that you are going to survive! It is possible that you must undergo further treatments, operations or therapies. But from the game's perspective, you are a freshman in need of a seasoned veteran to show you the ropes and prepare you to win in the game.

What about my credentials to coach? I got in the game after my auto accident in 1986. It was unexpected and instantaneous. I broke my back and suffered a spinal cord injury that left me with permanent paralysis. I have been disabled for more than 23 years.

I was a cop at the time. I served on the SWAT Team and considered quite an athlete. I had the world by the tail, and like you, most likely, I thought I was immortal. I learned, as you have, that I was as fragile as everyone else. It took all of about three seconds to render me permanently disabled for the rest of my life. How about you? Does it really matter? Does anyone really care?

If comfort can be found in association, you are not alone.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2005 more than fifty-four million had a disability. That represented 18.7% of the population.

Thirty-five million were categorized as having severe disabilities.

Approximately three-and-a-half million citizens use wheelchairs in the US.

Roughly one out of every six people in the United States has a disability. This is an incredible figure. So, to whatever group you fall, you belong to the giant melting pot of disability. You and I are now a part of this statistic. Over time you will learn to distill this figure to more accurately recognize your specific demographical group. It is important to understand that it doesn't matter to which group you fall, or the type of your immediate disability. Some are more drastic than others, but all face similar obstacles connected to personal and social acceptance.

Notably, some of us are unfortunate victims. But again, does it really matter? You are here. It matters not on whom or to where we focus the blame for our circumstances.

Blame will not rectify the situation. Sure it may lighten the guilt we place upon ourselves or others. Or we might place the blame on a

tree, like my quadriplegic friend of mine who became disabled after falling out of one trying to retrieve a lodged Frisbee.

But it's done. The game has begun. Like it or not, it's time to pick up a helmet or bat or ball and get ready to play. It's the only *game* in town.

I realize that I've made the immediate situation sound quite simple and uncomplicated. But I did it for a reason. Right about now, I'm sure you would rather take your ball and go home while hoping that this is all a dreadful dream. Unfortunately you will not awake to another day of the old you. Sorry, that's not going to happen. Like it or not, here you sit—either figuratively or quite literally. The fragility of life has caught up to you.

|| *Elements Of Despair Will Occur.*

My approach to waking you may seem a bit discompassionate. But it's extremely important that you begin the transition from hopeless to hopeful as soon as possible before you start down a negative emotional path.

Believe me when I tell you, elements of despair will occur periodically regardless of your initial resolve. That is part of the learning cycle.

By the time you pick up this book, you're probably through the initial acute trauma phase and are past the immediate injury. You may be in physical rehabilitation. Or you may have arrived home. So now it's time to regroup and begin to move on.

With any recovery, you need to be a quick study. The longer you wait to re-engage yourself in life, the more confused and apathetic you'll become. The only way you will once again control what's happening in your life is by reclaiming it. That, my friend, requires a re-investment in your life by you regardless of what you feel you have lost.

Life is a series of transitions. How you identify those changes and resolve them determines your travel map on the road of disability.

How successful you are at adapting will define your ultimate success or failure along the way. This ability to change is a truism for life in general.

|| *Don't Waste Precious Time Living In The Past.*

The initial transition strategy in learning to play the game is for you to recapture control of *your* life. To do this, you must take an active role in your rehabilitation process and the future direction you wish your life to take. It does no good to fight it or yearn for the old

you. Realize the stark reality that life goes on and yours has changed. As a good coach would say, “Suck it up, get a grip, and get on with it.” Don't waste precious time living in the past. It will only mortgage your future.

Realize this truth. Reluctance to accept today will only forestall the inevitable and shortchange what you are prepared to make of tomorrow. Believe me, you can shape a wonderful life in spite of any disability, but only if you're strong enough to get off the pity pot and embrace the life you have in front of you right now.

Acceptance won't be easy at first. But I assure you that the new game will be as exciting as the old one and adventurous as you make it. But you must be willing to play. Taking your ball and going home isn't an option. Neither would it postpone the inevitable frustration and angst you will encounter in the transformation process.

Hope is fine. But it is important to differentiate between reality and false hope. False hope should not consume your existence and become all that you are. Actor Christopher Reeve, following his spinal cord injury, claimed that he would walk in five years. At the time he said that, my disabled associates and I made a different forecast. We felt that Chris would succumb to his disability before that goal ever

materialized. Notably, Christopher Reeve died 9 years after his injury in 2004. Although he did not accomplish his unrealistic goal of walking again, Chris accomplished a great deal for the disabled community by educating many about our circumstances. I don't discount his contributions. But after being in the game for more than 23 years, I am a bit more pragmatic and realistic about disability.

My friends and I were not being insensitive or cynical. Chris was a ventilator dependent quadriplegic with other complications. Therefore, we looked at his situation from a more practical perspective. Again, Christopher Reeve's contributions to societal change and spinal cord rehabilitation were remarkable and should be lauded. But those with disability live on.

Sitting around waiting for the miracle cure, is *false* hope. Pursuing cure is reasonable. But you must also accept the likelihood that your disability is permanent. Accomplish as Chris did in spite of the practical limitations disability imposes. But also learn to become a realist. It will help limit your frustrations.

Conversely, it is important that you do all that you can within reason to regain the most your life has to offer. But ultimately, you must learn to accept that you have irrevocably changed, period.

Without that acknowledgement you cannot begin the healthy transition necessary for your psychological and emotional recovery.

To begin the positive process of recovery, become as active as possible given your limitations. Live in the here and now. What remains of your life is exceptional and will be full if you want it to be. That doesn't mean you must forfeit your recovery goals. But the unending search for a cure isn't life, it's a dream. It can become a nightmare if not placed in proper perspective. Ultimately, these pursuits can become a never-ending and sustained rehabilitation venture with few benefits.

|| *Be Pragmatic In Your Quest.*

Again, I am not asking you to disregard opportunities to make your condition more acceptable. Rather, I'm suggesting that you be pragmatic in your quest. Inside of the broken shell, you remain who you were. You can likely still taste good food, enjoy music, get aroused by the opposite sex and enjoy many of life's wonderful gifts.

In contrast to a more dire demise, you have for whatever reason been spared. And, it is time to be thankful for that and get started with the rest of your life. You cannot do that if you remain locked in an unending idealistic pursuit of *a return to the old you*. You must learn

to be thankful. Take a moment to count your blessings. A psychiatrist friend told me when I was wallowing in self-pity one day, “Walking is not a prerequisite to life.”

In those few words lay a very distinct message. Although her point was not the one I wanted to hear at the time, it clarified a painful truth. My disability shouldn't define me, nor should it you.

Becoming disabled is a circumstance we endure and grow past, nothing more. Picking up this book is a step in the right direction. Your journey to emotional recovery and personal re-examination has begun. Before you're through you'll likely want to throw it in the trash. If you are that weak, you are not ready for what's in store anyway.

Get angry, that's okay. But don't give up. Giving up lets disability dictate what you are, instead of you deciding what limitations you will allow disability to play in your life. Consider honest understanding and self compassion to be what you need to move on.

|| *Here are Mark's Three Points to emotional survival:*

- 1.** Forgive yourself or others if by chance your disability came via the hands of someone else.
- 2.** Love yourself in spite of the changes now confronting you.
- 3.** Keep fighting and don't ever give up.

At first, we all get mired in emotional baggage. It is expected; it's normal. But if we dwell on our unfortunate circumstances, it can overwhelm us and lead us to depression and its aftermath. Initially, it is important to focus on the positive things that keep you going—your family and friends. So, from now on, no more whining.

On a daily basis, you will define your own acceptance methods – methods best suited to your needs and personality to survive. At first, it pays to examine all that you can and educate yourself about your disability. It also helps to utilize counselors, (peer and professional), psychologists, clergy and any others who can give you honest answers to your tough personal questions. The distinctions you make will help you determine your direction. Now let's start your journey by getting a closer look at the game.

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