



Hard yards: Josh Clift does the work at the Shepherd Centre in Atlanta and (right) as a groomsman at a mate's wedding, eight weeks after the car accident



An unbreakable spirit

Two accidents in the space of a year robbed Josh Clift of his ability to walk ... but nothing can crush his will to overcome, writes **Jenny Ringland**

JOSH Clift believes challenges are put in front of people who can overcome them. His is no minor challenge: The 28-year-old must learn to walk again. Clift's story is extraordinary. Two serious but completely separate accidents in 2008 have left him an incomplete quadriplegic.

Initially he broke his neck playing rugby union and underwent two operations that successfully corrected the damage.

Then three months later he was involved in a car accident that left him with head injuries, a broken neck and a severely damaged spinal cord. His doctors told him he would never walk again. He didn't believe them.

He is currently in the US undergoing treatment at one of the leading spinal rehabilitation centres in the world, the Shepherd Center in Atlanta, where he spends six to eight hours a day in treatment and every other waking hour re-learning the skills most people take for granted.

After seven months in America, the former NSW Country rugby union player has progressed from not being able to move his legs at all to transferring himself in and out of his wheelchair. He has also regained feeling in his abdominal muscles and three weeks ago was able to move his legs in a walking motion for the first time while in a walking harness.

"I put all the weight on my left leg, bring my right leg forward and then take my left leg forward and straighten it," Clift says.

To most of us, these actions sound simple enough but for someone who 14 months ago could only lick his lips, they are awe-inspiring.

Clift's determination is incredible.

"In most people's eyes, this year would be a nightmare — and at times I would agree. Yet, on the flipside, the past year of my life has easily been the most rewarding year I have ever had and I would never replace it," he says.

His shocking run began when he was playing fly-half for his home town of Scone. He was tackled by four opposing players and heard an "almighty crack".

"I knew straight away I'd broken my neck. One of the officials wanted to roll me over but I wouldn't let them touch me because I knew there was something very wrong," he says.

Clift was flown to Royal North Shore Hospital for treatment. After eight days and two operations he walked out of hospital in a neck brace with limited arm movement, under strict instructions to rest for 12 weeks.

Just 10 days after receiving the all-clear, the second accident occurred. Clift fell asleep at the wheel of his 4WD when he was 2km from home. The car rolled several times and he was found by a truck driver about 15m from the vehicle with severe head injuries.

"I don't know whether I was thrown there or I crawled there," he says.

Clift has little recollection of the first week after the accident, when he was in intensive care at RNS for the second time.

"Apparently I woke up and all I could feel was my face. I didn't know what was going on. Mum and Dad said they were touching me and I couldn't feel anything," he says.

That he woke up at all is something of a miracle. The Clift family were warned he might not survive and, if he did, he would be left with a brain injury. He remained in intensive care for a week before being moved to the spinal unit, when he was told he had been left an incomplete quadriplegic.

His injury is at C6 of his spine, which means he has lost movement in his triceps, hands and half his wrists and from his stomach down.

"To be told you will never walk again is one of the worst things. It's a very bitter thing to swallow," he says.

But it's something he has chosen to ignore. "I wouldn't accept it; I've never envisioned myself not being able to walk," he adds.

Clift's view on his situation is so pragmatic that when speaking to him it is easy to forget the magnitude of what he faces.

Sarah Bebe-Webb is a clinical nurse specialist and was ICU team leader at RNS on both occasions Clift was admitted. She says he had such an impact on her life that she calls him regularly in Atlanta to check his progress.

"Every now and then you come across a patient who knocks you for six. I will never forget looking after Josh. He refused to feel sorry for himself, which is really unusual for a young male with that kind of injury," she says.

"He just laughs at himself. I think that Josh is an exceptional human being."

She believes that after Clift "gets through this, he will be remarkable". After a week in intensive care and another two in the spinal



Looking ahead: Clift using state-of-the-art rehab equipment

unit at RNS, Clift was moved to the spinal injury unit at Royal Rehabilitation Centre in Ryde. For the first month there he couldn't pick anything up. Even simple tasks such as brushing his teeth were impossible for him to complete on his own.

In addition to the daily one-hour sessions of occupational therapy and physiotherapy that are standard at Ryde, Clift would do several hours of his own rehabilitation.

"After I was there for a week they put me in a manual chair, which I couldn't really operate but I started to try and push myself around because I was determined not to be in an electric chair. I was really slow, like a turtle going up and down the corridors," he says.

"We worked more and more with my OT, learning how to pick things up with limited movement and slowly my arms got stronger and stronger. We just went from there."

Clift says after two months at Ryde, he realised that achieving his goal of walking again wasn't possible there.

"The staff there were wonderful. But it's a government-run institution ... they lack the financial support to keep up with the rest of the world," he says.

Extensive research led him to the Shepherd Center in the US. It is a private spinal rehabilitation facility that would allow him access to equipment not available in Australia. However, the decision to relocate was difficult.

"I was leaving all my friends and family. No matter how strong you are between the ears, I think everyone needs a shoulder to lean on," he says.

Eventually, though, he boarded the plane — a decision he believes has already paid dividends. After four weeks at the centre, Clift had made more progress than he had in six months in Sydney. He has now been there for more than seven months and has every reason

to be optimistic about the future. Most of his rehabilitation exercises take place on machines holding him in an upright position.

He also cycles 17km twice a week on a special exercise bike fitted with electrodes.

Today, his leg muscles have returned to the same size they were before the accidents and his shoulders have started to fill out, giving him the best chance possible of learning to walk again. However, the cost of relocation to another country — and the fees of a private institution — are huge.

To raise funds for his rehabilitation, his relatives and friends have helped him to establish the Kiss The Frog Foundation. In the short-term, donations will be channelled into his rehabilitation and the equipment he needs to achieve a successful recovery.

The long-term goal of the foundation is to assist in the upgrade of Australian spinal rehabilitation facilities.

"[The name] Kiss The Frog came from a Chinese therapist I was seeing in Australia. He was the first person to say I would walk again. He said, 'To walk again, you'll have to kiss 1000 frogs'. What I'm chasing is a fairytale and I'd kiss a million frogs if it meant walking again," Clift says.

On January 20, he returns to Australia for a month and will attend a fundraising ball to be held on his behalf. He plans to return to the Shepherd Center and continue rehabilitation until he has no more improvement in him.

"Occasionally you lie in bed and cry and go, 'This sucks, why didn't I die?' [and] occasionally you go, 'This is just unbelievable'. You just kind of ride it out and focus on the end of the journey."

The Kiss the Frog Ball will be held on February 6 at the AJC. Tickets are available at kissthefrog.org.au



Top sport: Josh Clift (above) with mate Will Kelly at Derby Day 2007, (from left) on the field for Randwick and his other social pursuits

