

Ken Kunken: The Way Back

"WE'D NEVER heard of him when he came out his sophomore year. He was a 145-pound butterball; he was soft. He never said a word, but soon we began asking, 'Who's that kid at the bottom of the pile?' It was Kenny. His instinct began to work for him, and we began to work him in at the end of games, as a linebacker. Wherever the ball was, he was."

Bob Cullen, coach of Cornell's 150-pound team for thirteen years, took Kenneth Kunken '72 aside at the end of the 1969 season and told him, "Kenny, you've got the instinct, damn it, but you're not strong enough." What should he do? Kunken asked. "Get on a weight program," the coach told him, and Ken went straight to Alf Eckman, an assistant trainer in the athletic department. "I'm sure Ken was on it every day," Cullen says today.

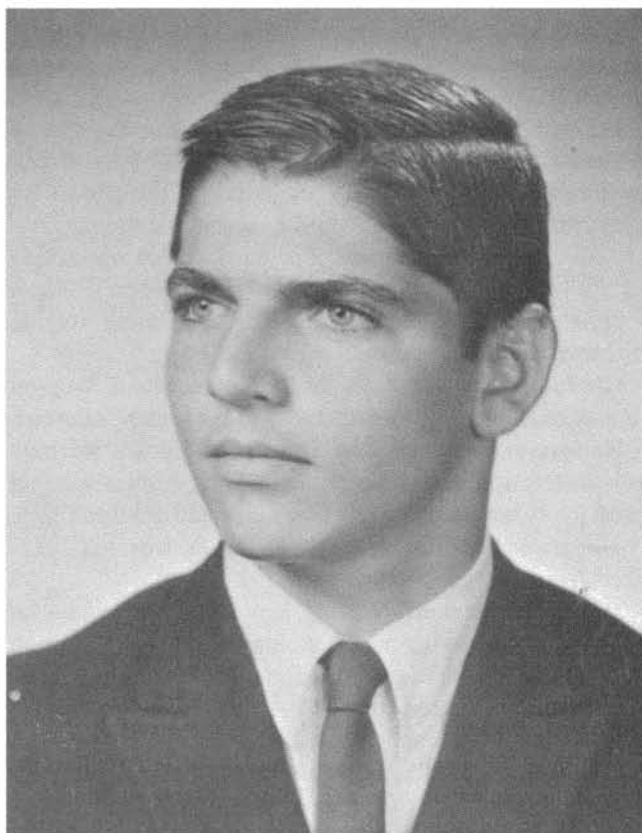
"When Kenny came back in the fall and stripped down he was not the same guy," Cullen recalls. Hard work with weight lifting had produced a lean, muscled 155-pound body that earned him the first substitute spot at three or four positions on the varsity.

But it was three games before he played. An injury to a starter put him in line for a starting spot against Rutgers in the opening game, but it fell on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur. "The day is just too holy," he explained to his coach, and became the first starter in Cullen's recollection to miss a game because of religious belief. The next game was against Army, and this time he was away at the funeral of his grandfather.

The injured player ahead of him was back in playing shape for the Columbia game, October 31, and Ken was first substitute again, with a spot on the special teams that are in for punts and kickoffs—dubbed "suicide squads" by sports writers. More injuries occur in such wide-open, faster action. Because of this, starters are often held out and the best subs used.

Rain was coming down steadily on Lower Alumni Field. Kunken had been in before, and now in the second quarter, after Cornell's second touchdown, he was racing down the field straight at the Columbia receiver on the 25 yard line.

Ken hit him head on. "He put the ball carrier right on his back," a coach observed. "Suddenly it was like



At high school graduation. Cornell coaches might not have heard of Ken Kunken, but he was a good enough athlete at Oceanside High School on Long Island to wrestle at 130 pounds and play regularly as a defensive end on the varsity football team.

His older brother Stephen had applied to Cornell but wound up at the University of Vermont, where their father and mother had studied before. Ken tried five colleges for engineering—"math had always been my best subject." He made his last application to Cornell. "After seeing the campus I had no trouble deciding" when Cornell accepted him in the spring of 1968.

Ken was hoping to go out for sports but freshman year was a tough one academically. He joined Sigma Nu, known as an athletes' fraternity, when several others on his corridor did, and he played intramurals.

His grades picked up, he was encouraged by Bob Cullen, coach of the 150-pound team, to apply himself, and plotted an industrial engineering program that included two psychology courses for the fall of 1970—one elective and one to satisfy a science requirement—as well as his regular engineering courses.

Words by the Editor

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an electric shock ran through my body,” Kunken remembers. He fell and lay on his side, doubled in the fetal position.

Any movement of his head and he might have died on the field. “I thought the shock would wear off,” but it didn’t. Teammates ran by shouting congratulations. He couldn’t move, finally calling for help. The team doctor and the physician father of one of the players ran to him.

Kunken stayed conscious throughout, waiting in the continuing rain for what seemed to him like half an hour until an ambulance arrived. He was slid onto a stretcher; a friend from freshman year rode with him to Sage Hospital on East Hill where his neck was X-rayed immediately.

He had fractured the fourth and fifth vertebrae in his neck and injured his spinal column. Had the break been one vertebra lower he might retain the use of his arms; one higher and he would have died instantly.

“They cut off my uniform. The hardest part was taking off my helmet. It took a long time. Five nurses. I asked a nurse at Sage, the fiancée of a friend of mine, to ride in the ambulance with me to Elmira.”

His father, Leonard, an insurance salesman, was on his way to Elmira within an hour, and his family followed.

He was in Arnot-Ogden Hospital in Elmira for nine days in traction before doctors cut bone from a leg and fused the two broken vertebrae so his head wouldn’t flop. The operation stabilized his neck, but he was still paralyzed from the neck down.

“We had somebody visiting Ken every day while he was in Elmira trying to keep his morale up,” Coach Cullen said at the time. “While we’re there he’s fine. But the boy is scared to death. He can’t do a thing. If his nose itches he can’t scratch it. Like his father said, all he could do is talk; he couldn’t commit suicide even if he wanted to.”

His bodily functions, the automatic ones, went on. He was fed intravenously. He ate for a few days, but went back to being nourished from a needle. “There’s one advantage,” he says now. “You don’t feel those needles.” To save his circulatory system and prevent bed sores, he was rotated from his stomach to his back at regular intervals, strapped to a pivoted bed. He blacked out at 30 degrees from horizontal.

As he was to do many times later, he asked the physicians around him if he could expect improvement. None would encourage him. The question was still whether he would live.

On November 28, he was moved by ambulance to South Nassau Community Hospital near his home in Oceanside, Long Island.

Ken was back among those he had grown up with. Students from his high school and others came to spell the nurses who had to be with him twenty-four hours a day. It was easier for his father, his stepmother, his 10 year-old sister Meryl Sue and other relatives to see him, and for his brother Stephen to come down from

law school in Boston.

Nor did those in Ithaca forget him. Coach Cullen started a fund drive in Ithaca; the Oceanside community started another. The 150-pound alumni, fraternity brothers, and others at Cornell contributed a tape recorder and other equipment so he could continue taking two lecture courses in psychology he had started. Profs. James Maas, PhD ’66 and Urie Bronfenbrenner ’38 sent tapes each made of their psych courses. Ken read the book *2001: A Space Odyssey* using splints, braces, and other devices, including an electronic page turner operated by moving his chin.

The walls of his private room filled up with messages from well-wishers. A story in the ALUMNI NEWS in January was picked up by the *New York Daily News* where Jim Hanchett ’53 launched publicity that brought word of hope from unknown admirers of the courage they saw in Ken Kunken.

His weight dipped below 100 pounds and he could drag no hope out of the answers to questions he put to the doctors. Therapy—manipulation of his arms—began at South Nassau. His case was still considered acute; he was not out of danger of death.

He could shrug his shoulders, which shifted his limp hands about, “but there was a good chance that was all I could ever do” is the way he remembers the winter now. Then in late December he had some arm movement but no feeling. At first there came feeling in the top of his shoulders, then about three inches down his shoulders, where it stopped.

The doctors refused to give him false hopes. “Still, always there was ‘Rusk’ to come to as a last chance. I’d heard such great things about it.” “Rusk” is the name attached to NYU Medical Center’s Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in Manhattan, whose director is Dr. Howard Rusk and whose alumni included Joseph P. Kennedy and the paralyzed Dodger baseball catcher Roy Campanella.

On March 1 Ken entered Rusk institute.

By now he could stay conscious when 80 degrees from the horizontal, sit in and operate an electric wheel chair for short periods, and endure the wearying hours of arm manipulation that are part of Rusk’s therapy. Doctors worked with him, therapists, nurses, and other hospital staff members.

The first month was a discouraging time. “I got depressed quite often, particularly seeing halls lined with wheel chairs. I always pictured not reaching this state for many years. The first day I got here, I saw people who had been hurt with the same injury but had not even improved to the point I had.”

By this time the *Daily News* and ALUMNI NEWS reports and other efforts were bringing a flood of calls and callers. His relatives and close friends from high school were the most regular, along with Coach Cullen, teammates, members of Columbia’s 150-pound team. William Fuerst ’39 of Ithaca, a close follower of Cornell sports and a father of sorts to the 150s, was generous

with his time and other resources.

Jim Quinby, a freshman, saw him too. Jim's father, J. David Quinby '53, had been a varsity football player who suffered a more serious accident than Ken when he fell on a rock while diving. He had been through Rusk and now lives in a community of 300 similarly afflicted men and women in central Mexico, Coach Cullen reports, trying to learn to drive a car and offering by his example some glimmer of hope for quadraplegics.

However, after a month Ken could still sense no improvement, and asked to see one of the head doctors. "I had hoped to strengthen, maybe type, possibly feed myself. I didn't see any reason for working so hard if there was no change."

He was told he could expect no more muscle return. Rusk's goal was only to strengthen the few muscles he had, and to fit him with braces and splints. At this point, in April, Ken's morale was at its lowest. He could see no sense in going on.

Then, gradually, his attitude began to change.

Even Ken Kunken isn't sure just when, but he gives major credit to a visit from 23-year-old Stephen Kunken. "I had a long talk with my brother. Steve told me when I first was hurt, they had said I wouldn't live, not even sit in a wheel chair. I've been proving them wrong. 'Keep at it,' Steve said.

"With everybody from Ithaca, it got to the point where I thought I'd be letting them down.

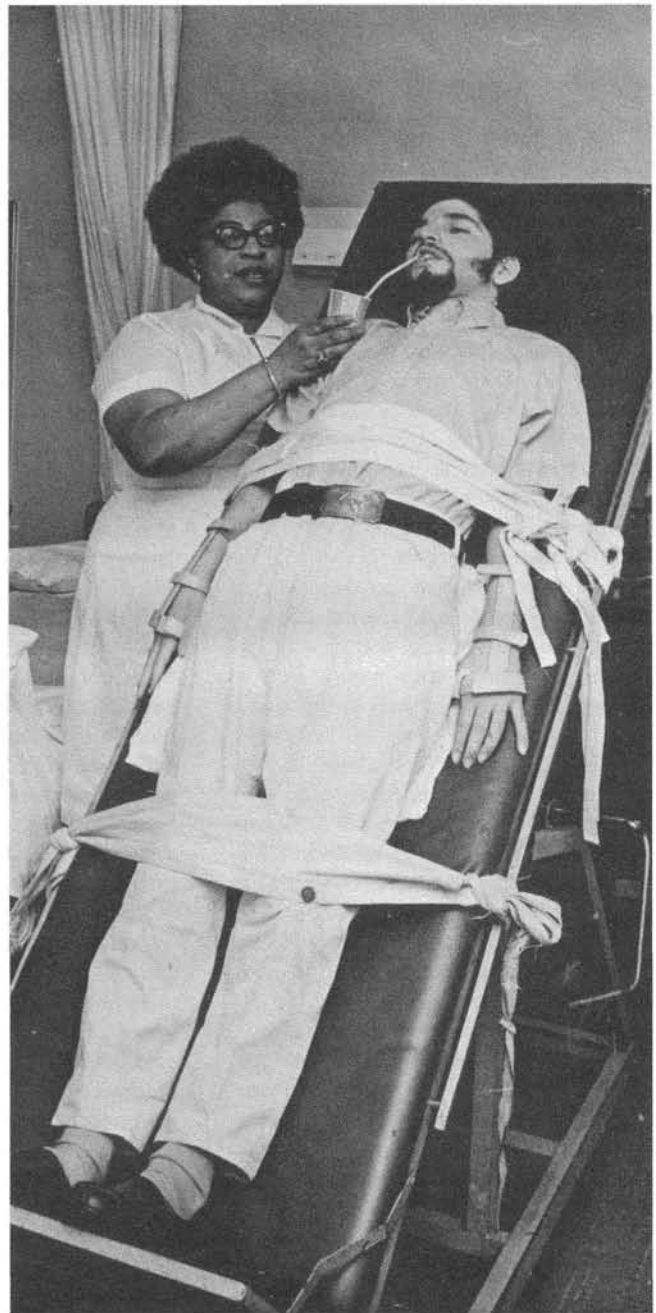
"Coach Cullen and Bill Fuerst have been the most interested. They aroused the interest of the Cornell student body as well as Ithaca and the surrounding community. Their letters of encouragement have meant a lot to me."

His spirits began to improve, although according to his father, his actual physical condition had not changed since the time of the original accident. With his left arm in a sling, and an arm support known as a BFO, he could now shrug his shoulders accurately enough to move around some in an electric wheel chair. He appeared in a wheel chair to testify before a US Senate subcommittee hearing on Long Island.

A week or so later he had learned to type six words a minute with the BFO and a wrist splint that held a pencil upside down. The eraser end punched out a message to Coach Cullen which was reproduced in last month's NEWS, and elsewhere, telling how he caromed around the halls in his wheel chair, "It almost makes me feel like I am back on the football field," the letter reported.

In mid-May he got the first trace of feeling in the tricept muscles on the outside of his left arm (he's been a southpaw all his life). This major turning point led to his being able to wield a fork attached to his wrist splint in such a way he can now spear food against a bar that curves around his plate, and move the food surely if with difficulty to his mouth. He is usually fed by an attendant.

By early May he was encouraged enough to think of



In early April 1971, Ken Kunken is fed by his nurse's aide, Mrs. Mary Malloy, while strapped to an inclined table, shortly after entering Rusk institute in New York City. He was about to start intensive rehabilitation therapy at the world-famous center.

returning to school when he was through at Rusk, to become a clinical psychologist and help others with disabilities like his. He was unable to continue studying because of the lack of privacy in his four-man room at Rusk and the effort of four hours of therapy a day.

He went home one night in April for a Passover seder, and by early June was going home regularly on weekends. A visitor to his room, 415 in Rusk, is surprised to find him dressed not in the white clothes of a patient but a peach colored shirt, striped bellbottoms, and shiny loafers—clothes he wears for special occasions, ad-

mitted, but the dress of a man and not a clinical case. "That's the way I like to feel."

THAT'S A PIECE of what's been happening to Ken Kunken that he knows about; elsewhere his violent injury has touched the lives of others close to and far from him, some of them people he doesn't even know.

The impact on the life of his father, Leonard, is traced on page 16. The lives of others have been unalterably changed, as well.

Coach Cullen has devoted enormous amounts of time and travel to staying in touch with Ken Kunken, his family, and others who might help. It has been a lonely exercise for him, but one he assumes with the intense drive of a father for another of his children. One to whom he feels a very special responsibility.

From the day of Ken's injury, Coach Cullen has been the one person in Ithaca in touch with most parties to the case, but as a staff member he is neither in a position to exact university decisions, nor to speak for it. It had appeared to Mr. Kunken and to the outside world that, aside from Cullen, university involvement in the rallying of support and money was very nearly non-existent.

As time went on, fraternity brothers, 150-team alumni and teams at other schools, Ken's teammates, and many others became involved.

Nearly everyone who has visited or treated Ken has been affected, in many cases deeply.

The family is reluctant to single out individuals.

Others identify a grandmother, an aunt, and his brother Stephen as being particularly influential. People mention a nurse at Oceanside, Barbara Cook; his present day nurse's aide, Mary Malloy; and a therapist at Oceanside, Yvonne Tideman, who left Nassau County just as Ken was being moved to Rusk, she to marry a graduate student at Cornell, Arthur W. McDonald.

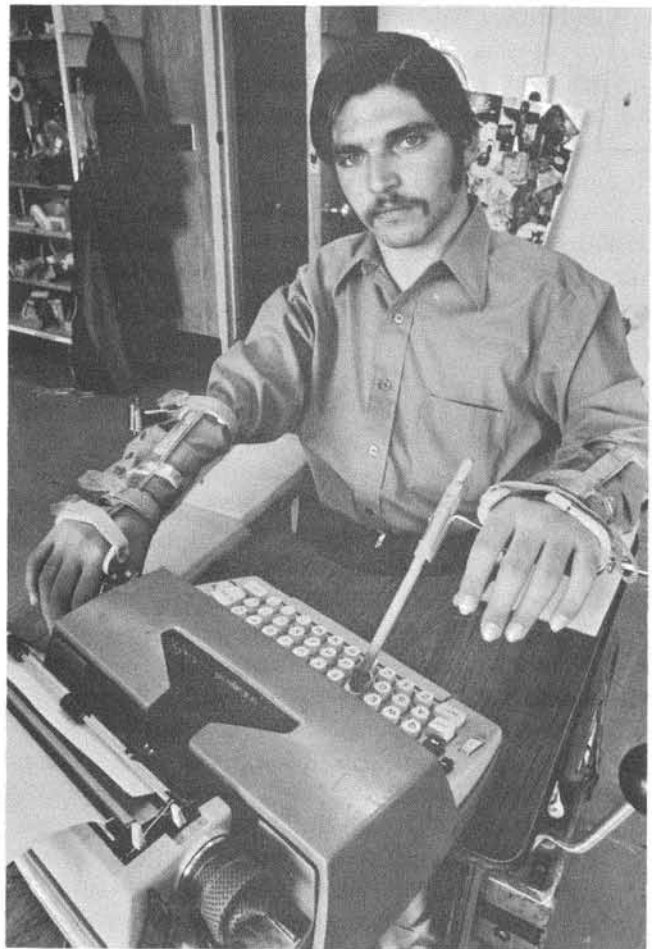
And his fraternity brothers—"There's a special spirit in that house," it is said. "They have a great brotherhood and Ken is in that brotherhood and it has meant a lot."

And friends from high school, regular visitors although attending college elsewhere. The people of Oceanside, young and old, some of whom knew Ken Kunken before and many of whom did not. "He is such a vibrant person," one hospital person said. "You cannot be with him without loving him. There is so much to him."

The many who visit Ken regularly do not come out of maudlin sympathy, one concludes. A single visit is enough to connect a person to him for good. Not very importantly because of his present condition, although that adds an urgency to the relationship.

This writer and photographer Dan Hightower '70, who was to graduate from Cornell within two weeks, paid an apprehensive visit to Ken Kunken at Rusk on May 28, only to find a person far more "together" in spirit, as the current slang puts it, than they had expected.

We had suggested he wear a 150-team T-shirt he had worn earlier for newspaper photographs. Instead, as



In late May, Kunken types at Rusk with the aid of a BFO (balanced forearm orthosis) brace and wrist splint. At first he could type six words a minute. By this time he was up to ten. The other arm is braced for therapy.

indicated earlier in this article, he was dressed smartly. He had a big smile and strong, easy answers to the questions he was asked. He blinked at none of them. Breakfast was late because he was to get a blood test. He was temporarily dizzy when lifted into his wheelchair, but recovered quickly after it was tilted back slightly. "It happens sometimes when I get up."

His arms hung limply at his sides, his legs similarly from the bottom of his trunk. Once he was in the wheelchair, his improving left arm was fitted with a brace and a fork was affixed to his wrist splint. He ate, talked, and answered questions. After the editor left, Ken talked with Hightower. Another patient in the room commented on having trouble sleeping at night, and Ken offered some encouragement. Hightower began talking man-to-man with a fellow undergraduate and had trouble remembering when to take pictures.

The editor had another story to follow elsewhere in the city. A day later he realized he too had lost track of his story in the immediacy of talking with Kunken, had only scratched the surface of information needed to establish the chronology of Ken Kunken's effort to stay alive. Would his nurse's aide see if he could take a phone

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call and answer some fifty unanswered questions? Ken was at the nursing station on the fourth floor just at 9 the next morning and filled in the needed details in thirty-five minutes, ending by saying, "I know a lot of Cornell alumni have read about me. I love getting mail. I really appreciate what they are doing."

There were more calls to be made, and a fuller picture to be gotten from others: details to be learned of things beginning to happen that could mean a fuller life than anyone had realized Ken's will and body could make possible.

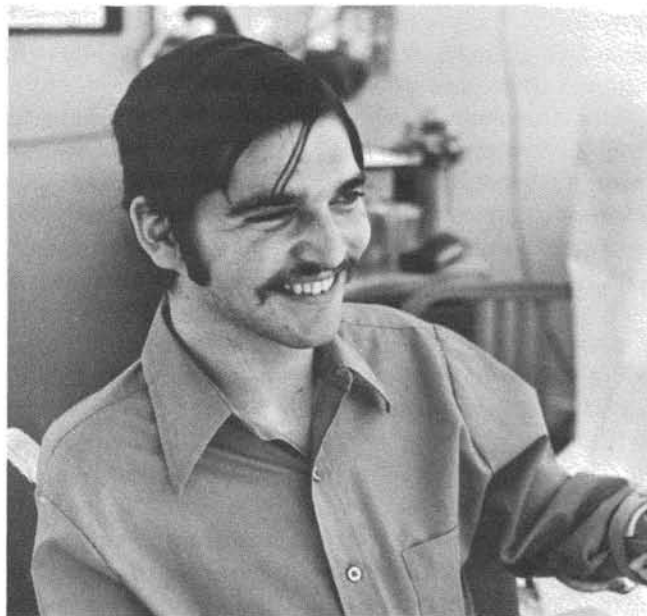
Harvey Silver, coach of the 150-pound team at Columbia, had word from the engineering admissions people at his school that Ken would be admitted in January or February 1972 if he was ready. (Cornell's climate and its lack of ramps or elevators would make schooling an almost impossibility in Ithaca.)

"If it's possible. I'd really, I'd definitely like to go back," Ken had said in late May. He was still hoping to take the final in Professor Maas's psych course. "I had to listen to each tape several times." Maas had been in touch with him, which Ken appreciated. When he was ready to take the test he could, but not now.

His career was "very much up in the air. I'd like to help out in a lot of different ways. A Mr. Mahling [from England] demonstrated all sorts of engineering devices for the severely handicapped here the other day. If I could help out people in that way I'd really enjoy it."

He didn't know at that time of Columbia's wish to admit him. With its relatively flat campus, and elevators, it was a more likely place to continue schooling. His father describes his prospects as appearing very dim; he hopes the Cornell administration will do "everything necessary to help in this endeavor."

Columbia alumni contributed several thousand dollars worth of merchandise to be raffled; they had other Kunken benefits in mind. Oceanside High School students played a benefit marathon seventy-two hour softball game



through night and rain, charging participants, to raise \$1,500. "When the weather got really bad, we put in the lacrosse players . . . they don't care what the weather is like."

The Cornell Glee Club sang a benefit for him Senior Week in Ithaca, and raised \$2,000. The *Daily Sun* decided to forego its annual athlete-of-the-year trophy, instead sent a special citation to Ken for his courage, and the money for the trophy went to the Kunken Fund.

The university began to clarify its relationship to the Ken Kunken case in early June, when a university official was assigned to meet with Mr. Kunken after he wrote President Corson in late May. The President was due to go on leave to Europe for the summer, and the university counsel met with Mr. Kunken in early June.

Acting President Robert Plane wrote Mr. Kunken in mid-June to offer the university's assistance in helping his son find a way to extend his education. Plane also asked Mr. Kunken to meet with the university's vice president for medical affairs, Dr. Hugh Luckey, at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, to talk about future ways in which Ken might seek rehabilitation.

The father was still concerned at the limits (page 16) the university placed on financial help, and the university appeared reluctant to offer further help until it knew if this would establish its liability for still further claims.

The university's Board of Trustees was to consider additional ways to help at its meeting on July 21.

Still, there is Ken Kunken '72, alive, with a life he very much wants to live. Against odds others can only faintly imagine. Experiencing sensations even he cannot describe except to "know I have stomach aches, almost as if you have something deep inside you cannot feel . . . deceiving feelings, hot and cold in your hands."

"Going to sleep, nothing happening and the mind starts to wander." Where he carefully does not say. "When I did fall asleep it was a natural dream. I'd be swimming or running out there on the football field. I was well and thought I'd jump out of bed." Then he'd wake to find he couldn't roll over, let alone make any jump.

None of us can visit that world, his world. It is frightening to try to imagine. Then Ken smiles and it seems to disappear. "Tell Coach I keep getting his letters and tell him I'm going to be very careful what I write from now on" (a reference to the wide distribution his first typed letter received).

What can he do with that device attached to his wrist splint? His deep voice assumes a wicked tone. "Look what I do with people who give me trouble." He swings his left arm with the fork attached through an upward arc and stops it just where it might prod an unwary person. His leer turns into a big smile and he laughs.

So does everyone else in the room.