

Santa Rosa woman defies the odds after debilitating accident

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"Molly! Molly! Hold on!"

Through a fog in her head, Molly McKenna heard the cries of her friends in the boat. But she was stunned, floating in water red with her own blood, and her only thought was her life was about to end.

At 18.

"Molly! Molly! Hold on!"

And then the cloudless blue sky above her faded to black.

These days, the Santa Rosa resident still vividly recalls the voices calling her name almost nine years ago, the day she wasn't supposed to survive. It's in the back of her mind with every workout she sweats and grunts through at the gym. It's in each step she takes.

And she's grateful for every one.

It was August 2005 and McKenna was near Discovery Bay in the Sacramento River Delta, wakeboarding with high school pals Matt Triassi and Alissa DeFreitas. DeFreitas and McKenna were the best of friends and this was their last weekend together before heading off for college, parting for the first time since they met in middle school in Pleasanton. Molly was enrolled in junior college in San Diego and had just that week put a deposit on an apartment there. Her first place away from home.

The tall, athletic blonde with a bright smile, a tight-knit family and an ex-San Francisco police sergeant for a father, wasn't just starting her future, she was sprinting ahead at full speed.

And then in a moment, she was suddenly fighting with every fiber of her being to hold on to the present.

"Molly! Molly! Hold on!"

Everybody remembers it as a great day, perfect. The start of something big. It was the last run of the day.

But as McKenna waited in the water for her friends to bring the boat around, another boat was heading her way. It was going too fast and the 25-year-old driver didn't see her in the water.

He ran over McKenna, the props of his motor cutting up her torso and right leg and nicking her femoral artery.

It was a catastrophic accident. They were in the middle of a popular channel, at least two miles from the dock and 40 from the nearest trauma hospital. By all rights, McKenna should not have survived.

But the worst day of her life also contained flashes of good fortune. The propeller missed cutting open the femoral artery, which would have caused her to bleed to death. Two of the people in the boat that hit her were paramedics and they knew exactly where to put pressure on her wounds, to tie off that critical artery.

In her boat, DeFreitas called 911, and Matt, who had tragically lost a friend in a boating accident the previous summer, jumped into the blood-filled water, yelling "Not again! Not again!"

"She was lying in the water and the look in her eyes was distant, like she wasn't even there," said DeFreitas, an elementary school teacher in Pleasanton. "My first thought was I was going to lose my best friend."

"Molly! Molly! Hold on!"

Emergency dispatch told DeFreitas to get McKenna to the nearest dock where a helicopter would meet them. Before getting her out of the water, they had to get her wakeboard off. It was a process made almost impossible by her injuries.

Meanwhile, DeFreitas said her friend was drifting in and out of consciousness, crying out in pain. But as those precious minutes unfolded, it was McKenna herself who demonstrated a kind of courage her friends and family will never forget.

As the realization about what had just happened to her set in, she stared at the bloody mess of bone and muscle, and for the first time since she was struck, felt pain. Deep, searing, impossible pain. And she knew.

"I'm going to live," she said. "I'm going to make it."

McKenna was airlifted by helicopter to John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek where she was in such bad shape, her father, the veteran police sergeant who had seen everything, was in shock.

"That was my child's blood all over the floor," Joe McKenna said. "When we got to the hospital, I thought it was over."

"Molly! Molly! Hold on!"

The 3,000-pound ski boat was going 30 mph when it struck McKenna. The impact fractured her pelvis, broke her femur in six places and caused compound fractures in the tibia and fibula in both legs. It tore or destroyed muscles in her right quad and shin.

That summer night as they gathered at the hospital, family and friends were bracing for the worse — leg amputation possible, lifelong pain likely, life in a wheelchair probable — no matter how they looked at it, the future for McKenna looked impossibly bleak.

"I thought her life was going to be in a wheelchair, living at home," Joe said. "I thought our lives were going to be changed forever. In a bad way but you know what? It didn't turn out like that."

Joe McKenna said the doctors at John Muir saved her life and then her legs, but her fight for survival was only the beginning. In the first month, most of which she was kept in an induced coma, she had 10 surgeries, where doctors implanted 18 screws, three rods and three cables. They used nearly 400 staples to close all her wounds.

"We had to carry her around like a bomb," said her father. "One wrong move, if one of the wounds opened ... she didn't have enough skin left to repair it all as it was."

When she woke up, doctors laid out a road to recovery that was daunting as it was depressing:

She would be in pain for the rest of her life.

She would never walk without a cane.

She wouldn't run or jump or dance.

"She was the girl in high school who always wore these really high high heels when the rest of us were in sweats," said DeFreitas. "She loved fashion and she had like 90,000 shoes — I mean she had a lot. To hear she could never wear them again, that she might not even walk — it was tough on her."

McKenna made peace with letting go of her high heels but not the rest. She got back on her feet, withstood nine more surgeries and an ugly and painful skin graft on her thigh, and got back to living.

Within a year, she was in college, eventually attending and graduating from the Fashion Institute of Design in San Francisco. Still, she couldn't walk far or without help or pain in her nerves and joints.

"This was my new normal," she said. "I was pretty much resigned that I was going to be limited physically for the rest of my life."

Until the day she met a CrossFit trainer named Kelly Starrett. McKenna's mother had heard about this guy who was having success with people with physical disabilities and told her daughter to call him.

"He said he had to meet me," McKenna said. "He was very persuasive, but I admit I still didn't believe what he was telling me."

McKenna said she walked into CrossFit in San Francisco a couple days later and "within five minutes, I knew my life had been changed forever. Again."

It was nearly six years since that day in the Delta when McKenna began a workout program at CrossFit,



which offers a high-intensity exercise regimen mixing weightlifting, gymnastics and cardio in varied combinations each day. Her recovery and transformation are so compelling she is being featured in a story on the June 4 episode of the Showtime series "60 Minutes Sports."

"If you saw her before and after, you wouldn't believe it," said DeFreitas. "She dances now. Just like she did the night before the accident."

McKenna said she was walking and, remarkably, mostly pain-free within six weeks of starting at CrossFit. Shortly after, she was running — and jumping.

McKenna moved to Santa Rosa last year and has continued working out at the Santa Rosa Strength and Conditioning on Donahue Street. She's a sales rep for clothing company Quiksilver/Roxy Sales. With a partner, she started her own company last fall, an online clothing shop called Whiskey and Lace.

She says doesn't blame the boat driver for her accident and has tried to reach out to talk to him about it but he hasn't responded. No charges were filed in the accident although McKenna's family sued the driver, eventually settling out of court.

"From the very beginning, I couldn't go to that dark place and be the kind of person who could never forgive," she said. "I wanted to move on."

Friends and family said McKenna's attitude has inspired them, especially her refusal to let the tragedy define her life in negative ways. Despite the visible scars on her right leg, they said, she has never shied away from wearing short shorts or bikinis, even when the injuries were new.

"I don't think I ever heard her complain once," said DeFreitas, who said the two friends have become closer than ever.

But friends and family said they remain most in awe that the girl who wasn't supposed to live is dancing again.

"I knew she was tough and I knew she was strong but I had no idea how tough and how strong," her father said. "I'm her father. I'm supposed to say she's amazing, but this kid ..."

He paused, gathering himself. Even now, nearly nine years after the accident, Joe McKenna still tears up about it.

"This kid, this kid she's special," he finally says. "You have no idea."

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MOLLY MCKENNA

Molly McKenna has been training at SRSC for a year, but just recently the spotlight has shined on her. She'll be part of a story in a [60 Minutes Sports](#) segment set to air on Wednesday June 4th at 9 pm on Showtime, and she was also featured in a front page [Press Democrat article](#) earlier this month. If you've missed any of Molly's story, it's incredible and inspirational, and here is it in her own words.

The 60 Minute Sports film crew at Santa Rosa Strength and Conditioning taped a segment for this week's episode airing Wednesday, June 4th. The narrative is below.

In the late summer of 2005, I had just graduated from High School. I was wakeboarding with friends on the Sacramento Delta. It was the week before I was scheduled to leave to go to college down in San Diego. The sun was setting and it was the last run of the day. I was down in the water waiting for my boat to come pick me up when a drunk driver pulling a wake boarder was following too closely and didn't see me go down. I was run over by a 3,000-pound ski boat traveling 30 MPH.

Was this it? Is this where it ends? It can't be, I am so young. I have so much more to do. I've only just begun. As the blue sky faded in and out I came to for a brief second and the realization of what had just happened started to sink in— I faded away once again.

Was this what it felt like to be dead? Was I never going to hear my mothers soothing voice, feel my father's scratchy forehead kisses or see the ones I loved again? I awoke the second time to distant familiar voices yelling my name: "Molly! Molly! Were coming, Molly! Hold on!"

I began fluttering my arms in a sea of red reaching down in the murky water for my legs. I couldn't feel anything and my breathing began to get heavier. The urge to give into the pain and sink down, way down, began to take my mind over. I started to feel the hot summer sun fade away and my world went dark yet again. Thank god! They are here I thought. I was being pulled out of the water by what felt like angels and it was in that exact moment I realized fully what had just happened. [pullquote]"Don't let anyone dictate your future. Only you have the power to do so...Each and every one of us experiences great pain in life. Some let that pain define them. Some use that pain as an excuse. I CHOOSE to use that pain as my strength, everyday. You can find power and strength in tragedy. It doesn't always present it's self from the beginning but if you look for it within—you'll find it."[/pullquote]

As my wounds were exposed to the sun light- I saw what it looked like for a human body to go through a metal prop and come out alive, barely. The right side of my abdomen was split open from my rib cage to my pelvic bone and the only thing keeping it together was a shredded life vest. My right upper thigh was completely gone and only fragments of chopped bone were sticking out like puzzle pieces. They gently laid me down on the back of the boat where I was able to rest my head for a moment.

I looked up and tried to focus on the clear blue sky which kept getting interrupted by the faces of my best friends leaning over me, crying, yelling and pleading for me to stay awake. It was oddly quiet inside my head and although I could see the pain in their eyes I myself began to feel nothing. I felt myself wanting to close my eyes to fall asleep and wake back up hoping this was only a bad dream.

Just as a warm rush of calm started to cover my body like a blanket an intense jolt of pain shot through the lower portion of my legs. That is when I realized for the first time since the impact that my legs were still attached. They were trying to pull my wakeboard off. I yelled with every ounce of energy I had left, arching my back and begged them to stop. If they had gone any further the bottom half of my legs would have been ripped off with my board.

That jolt of pain is what I needed to stay alive- to be able to feel again. As long as I was awake to feel- I was alive. I held on to that pain like a life preserver. Almost praying it wouldn't go away. It was about a 5-minute boat ride to the dock where I heard the sirens in the distance; it was the sound of help. As I was loaded into the helicopter I wasn't scared, I knew I wasn't going to die. I knew I'd see my family again and that's all I was worried about. I was in good hands now and the rest was up to them. We took off for the nearest trauma hospital and the only thing I asked the paramedic on the way wasn't if I was going to die or what was happening to me. I asked him if I'd ever walk again. He said: "without a doubt" and smiled slightly as he looked into my eyes freshly glossed with tears. It was the best straight-faced lie anyone had ever told me.

I woke up 10 days later in the ICU and would spend the next month in and out of surgeries fighting to stay alive and fighting to keep both my legs. I [had gone] through the prop of the boat from my rib cage to my toes. My pelvis was fractured. My femur was chopped in 6 places. I had lost most of my quad muscles on my right side. Both my tibia and fibula was compound fractured on both legs and I lost all the muscles in the front part of my right shin. I had 19 surgeries, 18 screws, 3 rods, 3 cables and a month in the ICU. I had a long road of recovery ahead of me.

Doctors told me I would never walk again without the assistance of braces or a cane. I was told I would never run or jump again. Being told that at 18 years old was a game changer. Somehow, I always knew that wasn't my reality and although I didn't have control of what happened to me, I most certainly had control of my recovery. I was going to walk again. I made that choice. I was in control now.

For the next year I went to physical therapy twice a day to learn how to walk again. A year after the accident I had learned to walk with a walker and later a cane. Slowly but surely, after a ton of hard work, support, determination, failure and triumph, I was back to walking and driving on my own. For the next 2 years I went to college and tried to shape what my “new normal” was going to be. I went from being a high school athlete and someone who loved any kind of action sports to just being happy to walk from A to B. [pullquote]”When I began working out at SRSC I felt like I picked up right where I left off. So many wonderful trainers who weren’t intimidated by my injuries but intrigued. Everyone was so eager to help.”[/pullquote]

I fulfilled a life-long dream of moving to San Francisco in 2011 and was ready to start a new chapter of my life and start my dream job. Although I was up and walking around, it didn’t come without a price. I dealt with paralyzing daily nerve and joint pain. I remember telling myself that the pain was worth being able to walk and to have my independence back. I told myself that this is how it was going to be for the rest of my life. I was just grateful to be here and I was willing to accept the pain.

After my big move to SF I met with my doctors at John Muir one more time. I had decided I was going to take some time to myself and not move forward with any more surgeries. They reassured me that there was nothing more they could do for me to help ease my daily pain aside from a total hip and knee replacement or monthly knee injections.

I was out of options. So I thought. My mom, a physical therapist for 20 years, had been telling me for months to check out this guy named Kelly Starrett. He was a CrossFit guru who had been known to work miracles. After putting it off for some time, I figured I had nothing left to lose and everything to gain. It was time to reach out to this Kelly guy. I reached out to him through an email and told him about my story and a few lines describing my injuries. A foot drop, lost 3 out of 4 quad muscles on my right side. Cables, screws, femur broken in 6 places and was being held together by rods and cables. As I sent it off I remember thinking, who would want to help this mess?

Sure enough a few days later I got a voicemail from Kelly saying he HAD to meet me and was positive he could help. A couple days later I “walked” into San Francisco CrossFit. After 5 minutes with Kelly, I knew I was changed forever and that I had A LOT of work to do. The work began immediately. This was it. This was my chance to make a difference in my life and get back a part of myself I thought I had lost forever. This is what I had been waiting for. Kelly assured me if I trusted him and dedicated myself to CF that there was NOTHING I couldn’t do. Six weeks after I started training with Kelly and Roop (another extremely talented trainer at SFCF) I was virtually pain free and feeling better than I ever had even before the accident.

I walked a little taller and started to really believe there was so much more to my journey and recovery than I had previously thought. Within 6 months I was running. Yes, running! I was jumping, flipping tractor tires, climbing ropes and doing things I never thought were possible. It was working and I was hooked. For the next year I continued to dedicate myself to Roop and Kelly and the results were more than magnificent—they were what some had told me—impossible. I created a true bond and friendship with these guys. They gave me a second chance at life. They believed in me even when the odds were against us. For that, I’ll be forever grateful.

A move to Santa Rosa was necessary in 2013 for personal and professional reasons. After such an incredible and life changing experience at SFCF it was hard to leave.

When I began working out at SRSC I felt like I picked up right where I left off. So many wonderful trainers who weren't intimidated by my injuries but intrigued. Everyone was so eager to help. I still make time to visit my pals at SFCF but am so proud of the relationships I have created at SRSC. I know I have some lifelong friends there and a community I am still so excited to explore and get to know.

What do you want people to take away from your story? Don't let anyone dictate your future. Only you have the power to do so. If I had listened to the doctors that told me I would never walk or run again, I don't know where I would be today. Each and every one of us experiences great pain in life. Some let that pain define them. Some use that pain as an excuse. I CHOOSE to use that pain as my strength, every day. You can find power and strength in tragedy. It doesn't always present itself from the beginning but if you look for it within—you'll find it.