

Crucial stops

Goalie Hilaire revisits scenes from accident



James Hilaire greets Boston Medical Center RN Marie Anacacis a year after the hospital's doctors and nurses helped save his life. (Stan Grossfeld/Globe Staff)

By Stan Grossfeld
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NORTH ANDOVER - Just before game time on the day he nearly died, James Hilaire knelt in the goal and said a prayer, then kissed each goalpost for good luck.

Now, more than a year later, the University of New Haven goalie still doesn't remember the second half of a soccer game against Merrimack College Sept. 24, 2008.

With Merrimack holding a 2-0 lead, speedy forward Robbie Sabadoz bore down on Hilaire on a breakaway. Hilaire made a split-second decision to accelerate full speed to beat him to the ball. He had made this same play hundreds, maybe thousands of times. But this time, everything went horribly wrong. As Hilaire dived for the ball, Sabadoz kicked it, and his knee connected with Hilaire's jaw. The collision sent Hilaire airborne, bouncing along the turf. He never moved a muscle after coming to rest.

As trainers rushed to Hilaire, he was gurgling blood. If the team trainer hadn't cleared a passageway, Hilaire would have died on the field. His jaw was shattered, and the impact of the blow exploded a vein in his brain. An ambulance rushed Hilaire, who was in a coma, to a Lawrence hospital.

"Three doctors told us they didn't think he was going to make it," recalls New Haven assistant coach David Faugno. "Our head coach was like, 'Can you get him to a place where he has a fighting chance?' So they med flighted him to Boston."

Hilaire, 25, was operated on immediately and remained in a coma for eight days. He believes an angel came down and gave him a break. Hilaire stayed nearly a month at Boston Medical Center and spent three months in a rehab hospital in Connecticut. So many people inquired about his condition that the college posted a page on its website, giving updates.

Last week, a triumphant Hilaire visited the hospital's intensive care unit, where giddy nurses and doctors marveled at his condition. He left in a wheelchair, his right side paralyzed, his jaw healing after being wired shut. He returned walking unassisted and beaming, with his fiancée, Lindsey Fox, at his side.

"This is a joy for me, to see the doctors and nurses," Hilaire says, although he remembers little of his time spent here.

Nicole Dimon, an intensive care nurse, gives him a bear hug, which Hilaire returns, although his right arm remains 50 percent paralyzed. Doctors expect him to regain 90 percent of his movement. Hilaire says he won't settle for anything less than 100 percent.

"I was your nurse when you first came in," says Dimon. "I thought you were going to die. That's how sick you were. Now you're so handsome."

Faugno lugs nine gift bags of Ghirardelli chocolates as presents to the staff. Calories are not a problem for Hilaire, who dropped more than 50 pounds during his ordeal.

Honored guest

There is an Obama-like charisma to Hilaire, a muscular native of Haiti. He recently shook hands with the President at the White House, after he was selected by ABC News to attend a program on health care reform.

"I want to say to all of you, thank you, thank you very much," he says to a dozen staffers in a conference room off the intensive care unit. "If it wasn't for how professional you guys are, I would not be here . . . the love that I was around was great."

Sister Maryanne Ruzzo is thrilled to see him so healthy because she administered the Sacrament of the Sick to him.

"It's a real gift to us because we don't see people leave and come back to us," she says. "It gives everybody an opportunity to look and relearn why they do what they do."

Another nurse, Patty Whynot, joked that they gathered to give him his bill. Then she got serious.

"I remember it was a big thing when he opened his eyes and then he had a blank stare for a long, long time," says Whynot. "I thought I'd never see this. You're a miracle."

Hilaire told them how he shocked his teammates by showing up unannounced, in a wheelchair, at a Senior Day rally honoring him Oct. 25.

He also surprised his therapists at the Connecticut rehab hospital. "Everybody was shocked," he remembers. "I don't use the brace for my leg. I don't use the brace for my hand."

University officials had a plan for Hilaire to return to classes.

"They said, 'OK, James, we will get you someone who will take notes for you,' and I said, 'No, I can take them myself,' " he says. "I had to retrain myself. I'm sure there are others that are worse off than me. They can use the help."

Several nurses ask about his family, which kept a bedside vigil. His sister, who is also a nurse, pushed for the CT scan that discovered a blood clot in his lung.

“I don’t want them to keep thinking about it,” he says. “So I didn’t tell them I was coming.”

Dr. Peter Burke, chief of trauma services, hugs Hilaire and grabs some chocolates. “We are privileged to take care of people like you. This is why we do what we do. We expect great things from you in your career.”

Great things are already happening.

Emotional healing, too

Hilaire plans to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice in December. He is back on the field as an assistant coach and is starting a nonprofit foundation to assist others injured in sports.

“I’ll raise the money from holding soccer camps and tournaments,” he says. “I think I can finally help other kids that were injured but can’t afford the transportation to the doctor or the medication if they do not have insurance.”

As he tours the intensive care unit, room 11 is closed. “I remember the beeping, the machines,” he says.

One of the nurses asks Hilaire about the other player, Sabadoz. “He must have so much guilt,” she says.

Hilaire heard Sabadoz was having problems coping with the accident, so he asked New Haven coach Josh Krusewski to contact Merrimack coach Tony Martone to arrange a meeting between the hard-nosed players.

“Robbie took it extremely hard, he was pretty devastated,” Martone says. “He’s a very good player, but after the accident he was pretty much useless.”

So in February they all met at an Irish pub and restaurant in Worcester and posed for pictures near a sign that read “Thou Shalt Not Whine.”

“He was scared,” says Hilaire, who gave him a big hug and broke the ice by joking about recruiting him for New Haven. “I told him it was absolutely not his fault and gave him a copy of the tape. I gave him my cellphone number and now we are friends.”

Says Martone, “That went a long, long way to help heal my kid.”

Last week, Sabadoz was the Northeast-10 player of the week and is leading the conference in scoring.

Hilaire tells the nurses he’s en route to the soccer field at Merrimack College. The room becomes quiet; the nurses are too polite to say they don’t think this is a great idea.

“My coach didn’t want me to go,” Hilaire acknowledges. “He thought it was not a good thing. I’m just going to go bring the moment back.”

In North Andover the soccer field is empty, except for three bikini-clad students soaking up the last of the warm sunshine.

Hilaire walks on the field, goes to the exact spot of the collision, and reenacts the play he’s seen on tape. A sadness comes over him and his eyes well up.

“I did not want to cry,” he says later. “Every night I used to lay in my bed and cry, cry, cry. I’ve been trying to get over this, but when I’m watching a soccer game on TV or my school losing games, I cry.

“It’s time to get over it.”

The last thing he does before leaving is he returns to the net and kneels in prayer, then kisses the goalposts. He calls over Fox - whom he proposed to in February after six years of dating - and softly moves the windblown hair from her face and kisses her. Together they walk off the field. There are no new memories unlocked here, just the promise of a bright future.

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