



# Along

**{SAUL RAISIN'S STORY}** by Kristi Daughtridge

“Profite de la vie” – that’s French for “profit from life.” And that’s exactly what Saul Raisin is more determined than ever to do. The 23-year-old professional cyclist was building a reputation as a strong force in the sport when one race changed everything. It was early April of this year, during the first stage of the Circuit de la Sarthe race in western France, that the Dalton, Georgia native took a hard fall, striking his head on the pavement.

“I just remember the morning of the race,” Saul says. “I went to say hi to friends and teammates, that’s all I remember. The next thing is waking up in a hospital in Angers, France.”

Doctors there took hourly CAT scans and each grew more and more disturbing. A hematoma had formed in Saul’s brain, and within two days it burst. Saul’s parents Yvonne and Jim rushed to France to be with him and were met with the news no parent wants to hear.

Saul says, “Doctors told them, ‘if he lives through the next hour, it’s good.’”

A neurosurgeon operated on his brain to relieve the pressure and had to remove part of his right temporal lobe. The doctors then told Saul’s parents, “If he makes it through the night, it’s good.”

Not only did Saul survive the night, he eventually woke up from his coma and improved enough to return to Atlanta. He immediately went to Shepherd Center.

“We didn’t know how extensive his brain damage was until we got to Shepherd Center because the doctors in France spoke broken English,” Yvonne recalls. She says the staff at Shepherd made an immediate impression.

“The first day we walked in and people said, ‘hi, hello, come in, we’re gonna get him started.’ Smiles everywhere. People introduced themselves, they were friendly, upbeat.”

Saul spent about four weeks at Shepherd relearning the basics.

“I had to learn to walk again, to eat again, everything,” he

says. “I had to start over from scratch, my vocal cords were swollen so they had to teach me how to use my voice again. I worked on everything.”

“My emotions were up and down the whole time. First I thought, ‘why me?’ Then, I was glad to be alive. So I felt everything; every emotion, happy, sad, depressed. I felt good some days.”

His parents had told him repeatedly that he had been injured in an accident, but the reality of the situation didn’t sink in until Saul had been at Shepherd awhile.

“I was on the internet at Shepherd,” he says. “I searched for my name and saw it come up, ‘Saul was injured, in a coma.’ Up until then, I had known that something was majorly wrong but I didn’t really understand what. I started crying because I knew then what I had put my parents through,” he recalls.

The seriousness of his situation also hit home when he saw another patient who was admitted to Shepherd in a coma. Saul followed his progress.

“I felt like that was me, like I was looking at myself,” he recalls. “It just hurt, because you could see the stress on his parents’ faces. It’s like that was my family, but seeing his progress has made me feel great, like looking at a smaller version of myself.”

Saul spent several weeks at Shepherd Pathways, and is now back home in Dalton, still making significant progress. He’s back on a bike – a stationary bike – on rollers, which means he’s gotten his balance back. Saul is riding 21 hours a week, along with swimming and jogging, to get his body and mind back to pre-accident form.

He says he notices improvement every day. “Physically, it’s been remarkable. And thinking-wise, when I was in Shepherd’s outpatient program at Pathways, if they asked me ‘what is 5 plus 2?’ I couldn’t tell them. Now my math fires off. I think quickly and respond more quickly. Little things like that are coming back.”



# road

Saul Raisin during a therapy session at Shepherd Pathways with Occupational Therapist Niki Ward.

{ “I feel like I’ve been given a second chance now to profit from life with the gifts I’ve been given, to come back and show people you can overcome situations like this.” }

Saul says his graduation from Pathways was a major triumph. “That diploma means more to me than a college diploma,” he says. “The personal accomplishment is just so huge. That means more to me than winning a bike race.”

And that’s saying a lot. Saul began racing at age 13, and quickly showed promise. Today, he is one of cycling’s top young riders, ranking in the top three in several races the last few years. He is a member of the professional Credit Agricole team.

“I am a climber and a stage racer, so I do most of the big races like the Tour de Italy, Tour de Spain, Tour de Germany, things like that,” he says. “This year I won a race - a stage in the Tour de Langkawi in Malaysia. Last year I was 9<sup>th</sup> overall in the Tour de Germany, so I’ve had good results since I’ve been pro.”

Saul is determined to race again. He’s continuing therapy in Chattanooga, with the goal of eventually getting back on the road.

“I want to one day do the Tour de France, that’s my ultimate goal. When I start that race, that’s when I’ll know I made it. That will be a tremendous day,” he says.

His mother and father want to see that happen too. They are cautiously optimistic.

“We know it’s a long road,” Yvonne says. “His doctors have told him he can’t ride on the road again for at least a year. Competitive cycling could be 1.5 to 2 years, because his brain has to heal. We tell him every time he starts complaining, ‘hey,

you’re alive and doing great, we’re not gonna risk it.”

Another goal for Saul – regaining his independence.

“I lived and worked in Europe, and I lost all of it. I am trying to get back to where I can one day live by myself again,” he says.

Yvonne and Jim understand. They want him to get his life back. That means returning to Europe, starting with a significant visit.

Yvonne says, “We’re going back to France this fall to take pictures with his team. They want him to be in the 2007 team pictures. And we’ll take him to his home there to visit his friends and do little things.”

And as Saul keeps training, hoping to get back to his sport, he’s giving back to the facility he credits with his amazing recovery. “Raisin Hell” wrist bracelets are being sold for \$3 each, with all proceeds going to Shepherd Center. They’re green and white – his Credit Agricole team colors. Saul wants the wristbands to bring attention to the rehabilitation efforts underway at Shepherd. He says several thousand have already been sold.

Saul also plans to visit camps for children who have brain injuries. His big message: “Stay positive and strong. Things do get better.”

In essence, “Profite de la vie.”

“I feel like I’ve been given a second chance now,” he says. “To profit from life with the gifts I’ve been given, to come back and show people you can overcome situations like this.”