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# LYNNFIELD

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# WEEKLY NEWS

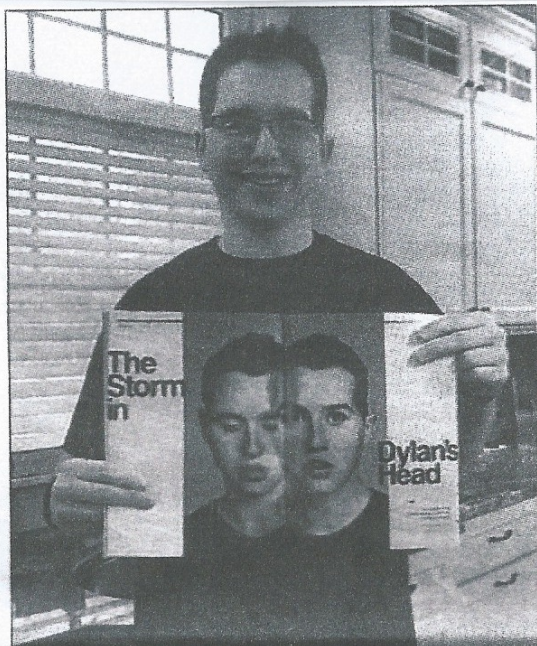
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Lynnfield's Dylan Rizzo displaying a New York Magazine article written about his recovery.

Photo: Anne Marie Tobin

## Re-thinking brain injuries

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LYNNFIELD – Dec. 28, 2010.

That was the day when Dylan Rizzo's life was turned upside down.

Just minutes after dropping off his sister at home, the 19-year old Rizzo was seriously injured in an auto accident. His car hit a patch of black ice and slammed into a telephone pole just a couple of hundreds of yards from his Salem Street home.

When emergency responders arrived, they found Rizzo's SUV wrapped around the pole with Rizzo slumped in his seat, unconscious and covered with

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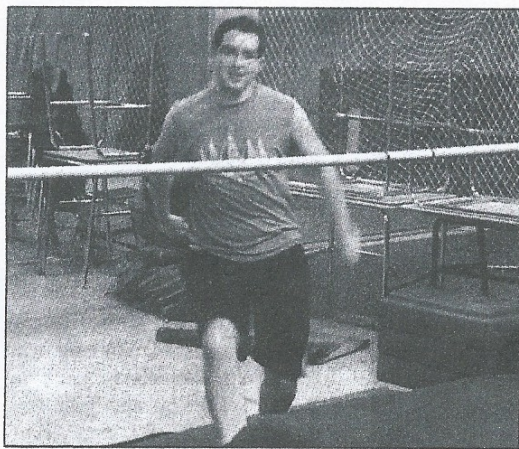
# Remarkable recovery puts Lynnfield's Rizzo back on track

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lacerations and blood, so much so that medics could not insert a breathing tube.

He survived the 25-minute ambulance ride to Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) and was rushed into emergency surgery where surgeons removed the left side of his skull and part of the right to stop multiple brain hemorrhages. By the time he was transferred to the neuro intensive-care unit, Rizzo was unrecognizable. His head was wrapped in heavy bandaging, his face had been shattered, his left leg was broken and he was in a deep coma from which he would not emerge for what seemed like an eternity.

An MRI taken eight days after the accident revealed devastating news; the damage to Rizzo's brain was far more extensive than first thought. In addition, he scored only one out of 23 on the Coma Recovery Scale Assessment test. One of the tests used involves opening the patient's eyes to see if there is any sign of visual activity. There wasn't, according to Joseph Giacino, director of rehabilitative neuropsychology at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital who conducted the bedside test. He said the best-case scenario was that Rizzo would be severely disabled and unable to function on his own the rest of his life. Rizzo's family learned the news in a team meeting held 10 days after the accident and were devastated.



Dylan Rizzo attempting a high jump last year.

"They told us he would be unable to live at home, that he would have to be institutionalized and might have moments of clarity when he would recognize us, but they didn't even think he would have that," Rizzo's mom, Tracy, recalled. They basically said they were giving us a day to think about discontinuing treatment, about pulling the plug so to speak.

"We just said, no, we couldn't do that to him or to everyone who was praying for him and coming to see him," Rizzo's dad Steve said. "They said that in his condition he would probably live only 10 years at most before his organs would shut down due to being in a vegetative state, but we didn't believe that."

In addition, there would be a seemingly endless list of other medical procedures that Rizzo would have to endure — multiple plastic surgeries to repair his face, new bone "flaps" to replace the parts of his skull that had been

removed, and after that, a long and painful rehabilitation. He would be treated with painkillers and sedatives and had a shunt inserted to drain off cerebral fluids. He had a feeding tube, a tracheal tube and a Gore-Tex skullcap to conceal his exposed brain. He suffered a myriad of complications including fevers, seizures, infections, dangerously low blood pressure spikes and an irregular heartbeat.

Through it all, however, Rizzo defied all odds and proved the experts wrong.

Rizzo's recovery story began on the 17th day after his accident when he opened his eyes. Doctors said that meant that Rizzo had passed from a coma into a vegetative state.

Doctors and family members observed increased eye movement over the next 10 days, yet when a doctor or nurse conducted the Coma Recovery Scale assess-

ment, Rizzo still remained in a vegetative state.

On Day 27, something remarkable happened. As Tracy Rizzo was wiping the sweat off her son's forehead, he raised his arm. Tracy put the cloth in Dylan's hand and told him to wipe it himself. He did.

"The doctors said it was just reflex, but I had felt that he was beginning to do weird things and that he was in a lot of pain, so I believed he meant to do that," Tracy Rizzo said. "I knew my son."

Rizzo soon began to show eye movement and reactions to being pinched.

On Day 44, a second MRI revealed that Rizzo's damaged wiring had begun to show signs it was healing.

On Day 60, while still in a minimally conscious state, Rizzo was transferred to Spaulding, where he would stay for 148 days before spending two months at a rehab center in New Hampshire.

The day he left Spaulding, he spoke his first words since the accident. He said it was the first time since he became of what had happened to him that he felt alive.

"I felt like I was frozen in time, that I was stuck somewhere," Rizzo said, his parents adding that it was the first time he actually acknowledged he was aware that something had happened to him.

Rizzo's road to recovery continued. At the New Hampshire facility, he began using a walker and was able to climb a few stairs. He returned home to Lynnfield in September, 2011. Upon entering the house, he looked around, smiled and said, "I'm home."

A little over a year after the accident, another MRI confirmed that some of the damage to his brain would be permanent and never recover, nonetheless, nine months after returning home, Rizzo was able to walk up the stairs into his bedroom for the first time.

Rizzo lost nearly a year of memories. He does not remember anything from six months before the accident to seven months after. He continues to need speech and cognitive therapy, but has resumed much of his life he enjoyed prior to the accident: going out with friends, working out with weights and on the elliptical, helping his father Steve on construction projects and USA hockey, enjoying an occa-

sional beer or two, helping out as an assistant coach of the Lynnfield boys' and girls' track teams and even doing what he loves most — being a DJ.

"This year, we had triple the amount of high jumpers as we did last year," Lynnfield track coach Liane Cook said. "I'm confident



that Dylan's presence made more kids not only try the event but also stay with it. Every day at practice he would set up the high jump standards, mats and bar for us and would lead the high jumpers through their workouts. At meets he helped the athletes get their marks set up at the begin-

ning of the meet so they knew where to start their approach, he helped them run through some warm up jumps, and he gave them pointers during the competition, telling them things like "jump higher" or "arch your back more" or "lift your knees up", all the while, he brought his encouraging sense of humor to the table."

He is even considering getting back on the ice and has even attempted a high jump under his father's guidance.

"I did okay without the bar, but once the bar was there it must have been a mental block," Rizzo said. When looking at the video, Rizzo burst into a big smile, saying, "I was a little tubby back then, 184 pounds, maybe that didn't help being able to get over the bar."

Throughout Rizzo's ordeal, his family adopted the phrase "Jump High - Live Strong" as a testament to Rizzo's will to live and love of high jumping, which he excelled in at Lynnfield High.

When asked what the secret of mastering the high jump, Rizzo said "jump high and get over the

bar. It's easy. You just have to learn how to be a good leaper."

Right now, Rizzo is contemplating going back to school. At the time of the accident he had just completed his first semester at Southern New Hampshire University.

Rizzo's recovery, according to Dr. Giacino, is unprecedented, and has been the focus of at least three major research studies. He was also featured in a lengthy New York Magazine Science article last year.

Recently, a camera crew from the CBS Sunday Morning television show filmed Rizzo in action working out with the track teams

at Lynnfield High. The air date for the segment has yet to be determined.

"Looking back, I don't know how he did it but we always knew that he would be coming home even when the experts said that would never happen," Steve Rizzo said. "We saw Dr. Giacino recently and he told us that he has yet to see another story like Dylan's. When we were in that ICU, at least three other people in conditions similar to Dylan's didn't make it, they basically pulled the plug, but we always knew there was hope, and there was."